

## Does Press Freedom Come with Responsibility? Media for and against Populism in Taiwan

Lihyun Lin and Chun-yi Lee

### Abstract

On November 18, 2020, the National Communications Commission (NCC) revoked the application of cable news station Chung Tien TV (CTiTV) to renew its broadcasting license.<sup>1</sup> This decision triggered supporters of this television channel, mostly pan-Blue voters, to protest and rally. One man self-immolated to express his support for CTiTV.<sup>2</sup> This act aimed to copy a prodemocracy figure, Cheng Nan-jung, an editor of *China News Analysis Freedom Era Weekly*, who, on April 7, 1989, burned himself to death to defend press freedom. After losing its license, CTiTV subsequently accused the Taiwanese government of infringing press freedom through the NCC's decision-making body.<sup>3</sup>

Taiwan's people have fought for democracy since the 1980s; indeed, press freedom has been one of the cornerstones for which they have been fighting. Between 1996 and 2020, Taiwan experienced three shifts in governmental power. The question arises: Has the Taiwanese government censored cable television channels, forgetting how press freedom was earned over this long and hard process?

This essay aims to clarify the situation first by reviewing the theoretical discussion of press regulation and public interest. By addressing the public interest, the study enters the debate about elitism and populism. Following this conceptual discussion, the study focuses on the case of CTiTV, particularly

---

**Lihyun Lin** is a Professor in the Graduate School of Journalism at National Taiwan University. <lihyunlin@ntu.edu.tw>

**Chun-yi Lee** is an Associate Professor in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham. <Chun-Yi.Lee@nottingham.ac.uk>

<sup>1</sup> Liu Kuan-ting et al., "Non-Renewal of CTi News License Regrettable: RSF," *Focus Taiwan* (November 18, 2020), <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202011180020> (accessed December 9, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Keoni Everington, "Taiwanese Man Self Immolates to Protest Closure of Pro-China CTi News," *Taiwan News* (December 3, 2020), <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4068279> (accessed December 8, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Taijing Wu and Huizhong Wu, "Leading Pro-China News Channel in Taiwan Is Taken Off Air Citing Accuracy Issues," Associated Press (December 12, 2020), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/tv/2020/12/12/employees-supporters-rally-pro-china-news-channel-taiwan-taken-off-air/6520455002/> (accessed January 21, 2021).

regarding this TV channel's promotion of a populist figure, Han Kuo-yu, during his runs in both the mayoral election in Kaohsiung in 2018 and the presidential election in 2020. The concluding analysis revisits the essay's core question: Does press freedom come with an obligation regarding fulfillment of responsibility? The discussion aims to generate more reflection by scholars and students in media studies, politics, and governance.

**Keywords:** CTiTV, Han Kuo-yu, National Communications Commission (NCC), populism, press freedom.

---

During the past few years, Taiwan has witnessed the sudden rise and fall of a conservative populist. Han Kuo-yu, an underdog from the pro-unification Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang (KMT), won a mayoral election and ran in the 2020 presidential election. Like populists in other countries, the rise of Han as a candidate was facilitated by the media. However, while the former presidential candidate made bold promises and aroused social concerns, media professionals, citizens, and citizen groups launched fact-checking projects to examine the words and deeds of the populist. Han experienced a setback in the presidential election, and the populist wave subsided. On June 6, 2020, Han even lost his position as Kaohsiung's mayor; according to the Kaohsiung election commission, 939,030 people—a number way above the threshold of 570,000 for ousting a mayor<sup>4</sup>—voted for his removal, with only 25,051 voting for his retention in office.

This essay explores the media's involvement in the Han wave, especially regarding the licensed television outlet, Chung Tien TV (in Chinese; hereafter referred to as CTiTV). There are two reasons why this study targets CTiTV as the main media source that was responsible for the Han wave.

First, CTiTV has been called Han Tien TV, meaning the flagship news outlet for the Han wave. CTiTV belongs to the pro-China Want Want Group. It consists of several news media outlets, including two daily newspapers, *China Times* and *Business Daily*, one terrestrial television station (China TV), and, formerly, one twenty-four-hour cable news channel. CTiTV was one of the eleven twenty-four-hour cable news channels in Taiwan, among which it was the most influential. CTiTV occupied an important slot (channel number 52) in major cable television systems; cable TV (compared with terrestrial TV) is the most dominant news media in Taiwan. During the Kaohsiung mayoral

---

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Chung, "Taiwan Opposition Candidate Removed as Mayor in Recall Vote," *South China Morning Post* (June 6, 2020), <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3087861/taiwan-opposition-candidate-han-kuo-yu-removed-mayor-kaohsiung> (accessed June 8, 2020).

election, between November 17, 2018, and November 23, 2018, CTiTV devoted 62 percent of its news time to the KMT presidential candidate, Han Kuo-yu.<sup>5</sup> CTiTV presented Han as a populist figure, sensationalizing the sufferings of ordinary people, and portraying the ruling party as having betrayed the people. By such stylistic news framing, CTiTV nurtured a group of fans for Han as well as for CTiTV itself, as CTiTV's rating climbed during that period. CTiTV is a critical case that demonstrates how the media has helped to promote populism. Second, cable TV is the dominant media source for Taiwanese audiences. Statistically, the share of cable TV in Taiwan's households increased from 79.9 percent to 86.1 percent between 2007 and 2018.<sup>6</sup> CTiTV occupied channel 52 in the news block (channels 49 to 58). This range of channels is deemed the most valuable, as the country's cable subscribers consistently watch the news in this block. More than 85 percent of the households in Taiwan receive cable TV. Thus, given the popularity of channel 52 among Taiwan's cable TV channels, the influence of CTiTV's broadcasting was significant.

More controversial developments related to CTiTV occurred after Han was recalled in June 2020. On November 18, 2020, the National Communications Commission (NCC) revoked CTiTV's broadcasting license. Supporters of CTiTV protested and rallied in front of the presidential palace demanding press freedom. A seventy-year-old man burned himself to express his support for press freedom.<sup>7</sup> This action aimed to recreate the scene back in 1989, when a prodemocracy fighter, Cheng Nan-jung, an editor of *China News Analysis Freedom Era Weekly*, died from self-immolation in support of press freedom.

This essay attempts to answer a core question: Does press freedom come with an obligation to fulfill responsibility? The case study presents the rise and fall of CTiTV and the Han wave. The essay has five sections. The first provides a brief review of conceptual and theoretical frameworks and has two subsections, one of which reviews the media's role in serving the public interest and the regulation of Taiwan's media. The second subsection addresses the link between the media and the rise of populism. The second and third main sections of the essay provide the background of the rise and fall of Han and CTiTV. In the fourth section, two important questions are addressed: How can we understand press freedom? Does press freedom also demand accountability? The fifth and last section of the essay provides a summary discussion and conclusion.

---

<sup>5</sup> National Communications Commission, "Content Analysis of Television News Coverage for the 2018 Local Election in Taiwan: Commissioned by the NCC" (June 19, 2019), [https://www.ncc.gov.tw/chinese/files/19060/8\\_41512\\_190605\\_1.pdf](https://www.ncc.gov.tw/chinese/files/19060/8_41512_190605_1.pdf) (accessed March 5, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> "Taiwan: Share of Households with Cable Television Sets," *Statista* (2020), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/324742/taiwan-share-of-households-with-cable-television-sets/> (accessed December 9, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Everington, "Taiwanese Man Self Immolates to Protest Closure of Pro-China CTI News."

## Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

### *Media and Public Interest*

In any democratic society, freedom of speech is the bellwether of democratic principles. The prevailing principle of media law indicates, “Freedom of speech may be regarded as the most fundamental right which everyone should enjoy in a liberal society.”<sup>8</sup> Freedom of speech is the universal goal of consolidating democracy in Taiwan. Gary and Ming-Yeh Rawnsley detailed the media’s role in Taiwan’s regime transition.<sup>9</sup> They indicated that, although there was consolidation of democratization in Taiwan, the media’s liberalization did not provide a universal panacea. In the 1990s, the print media and cable TV still were mainly controlled by the governing political party, the Kuomintang. The fight for freedom of speech, therefore, evolved into a demand for press freedom. It was and still is taboo in Taiwan for the political ruling party to try to control, influence, or intervene in such freedom.

However, there is an important question: Is freedom of speech equal to freedom of the press? As noted, here, these two freedoms are not the same:

I believe that we have misunderstood what a modern democratic society’s commitment to freedom of the press means and should be. Unlike freedom of speech, to certain aspects of which our commitment must be virtually unconditional, freedom of the press should be contingent on the degree to which it promotes certain values at the core of our interest in freedom of expression generally. Freedom of the press, in other words, is an instrumental good: It is good if it does certain things and not especially good (not good enough to justify special protections) otherwise. *If, for example, the mass media tend to suppress diversity and impoverish public debate, the arguments meant to support freedom of the press turn against it, and we may rightly consider regulating the media to achieve the ultimate purposes of freedom of the press* (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup>

Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are not on the same page because media owners often are not ordinary citizens. They frequently are entrepreneurs with large amounts of financial or political capital; in some

---

<sup>8</sup> Eric Barendt, Lesley Hitchens, and Rachael Craufurd-Smith, *Media Law: Text, Cases and Materials*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Harlow: Pearson, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Gary D. Rawnsley and Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley, “Regime Transition and the Media in Taiwan,” *Democratization* 5, no. 2 (June 1, 1998): 113.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Lichtenberg, “Foundation and Limits of Freedom of the Press,” in *Democracy and the Mass Media: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Judith Lichtenberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 104.

cases, they are equipped with both. In a democratic society, if the government's control of the press is negated, these media owners likely are corporation owners whose concern is making profits. The tension, therefore, concerns the right of media owners to make profits versus their obligation to be guardians of the public interest. Media in a democratic society are supposedly the government's watchdogs. However, since the media, no matter in which form, tend to be owned by private corporations, it is difficult to distinguish the vested interests such media apparatuses serve—corporate or public interest.<sup>11</sup> If the media are the government's watchdogs, who scrutinizes the media? The answer is the public interest, which should be the paramount benchmark for the media to apply on what and how to report. Still, this raises important questions: How do we define public interest? Should such a definition encompass competition and diversity? Or should the understanding of public interest be defined by the principle of “supply and demand”?<sup>12</sup> If the answer is the latter, the public interest is served by unregulated, profit-seeking media that aim to satisfy public desires.

Should the government be able to intervene in such matters? The fundamental question is not whether the government should intervene, but how, as the media not only form a profit-making platform, but also shoulder social responsibility to serve the public interest.<sup>13</sup> Diversity of media content is essential to ensuring representation of the broad public interest.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in light of the demand for “press freedom,” to argue that the media should be regulated is almost tantamount to support for an authoritarian society.

As press freedom derives from the notion of individual rights, it is viewed as offering concrete benefits to society and its members. Freedom of the press consists of two levels of freedom. One is the individual freedom of the owners from any mechanism of censorship. The other is the citizenry's collective freedom to be well-informed and to have access to a diverse array of sources and viewpoints.<sup>15</sup> A central paradox in media policy is to what extent speech rights should be oriented around the rights of the individual versus the rights of the public.<sup>16</sup> Hence, in democratic societies, one of the aims of media regulations is to protect speakers' freedom. However, while there is widely shared agreement that mass media has considerable potential for good or ill, media regulations are required to restrict publishers' rights to protect the public from possible harm and to promote diversity of sources, content, and so on.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> David Croteau and William Hoynes, *The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest* (London: Pine Forge Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-71.

<sup>13</sup> Denis McQuail, *Media Performance* (London: Sage, 1992), and Philip M. Napoli, *Foundations of Communications Policy: Principles and Process in the Regulation of Electronic Media* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Barendt, Hitchens, and Craufurd-Smith, *Media Law*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> McQuail, *Media Performance*, 69.

<sup>16</sup> Napoli, *Foundations of Communications Policy*.

<sup>17</sup> McQuail, *Media Performance*, 70.

The described tension between the rights of the individual versus those of the public is particularly well-illustrated by the regulation of television. Television has been more regulated than the print media. Moreover, television stations do not enjoy the degree of freedom of publication that is granted to the print media.<sup>18</sup> Traditionally, the broadcasting media have had the fewest resources within the media spectrum. Thus, there are arguments for managing national media resources efficiently and in an equitable manner.<sup>19</sup> Also, television has been considered a great influence on society regarding the morals of the young, public decency, and the equity of political discussions. Even with the introduction of cable and satellite transmission, it is argued that market competition is inefficient regarding the provision of services that the public needs.<sup>20</sup>

Hence, television operators have been subject to strong public regulation of operation and content.<sup>21</sup> The state or a regulatory body licenses the operators for a limited period, and the licenses carry some conditions and requirements that form part of the regulatory framework. The regulations are designed to ensure that the communication needs of the public are adequately met. However, to reduce the possibility of direct regulation from a regulatory body, some broadcasters have developed mechanisms for self-regulation. These include codes concerning professional norms and ethics that specify conduct that should not be breached for personal or commercial gain.<sup>22</sup>

### ***The Role of Media and the Rise of Populism***

Suppose we accept that the media should reflect diversity and competition, which are at the core of public interest. In this case, we must acknowledge that both elitism and populism can arise under the principle of diversity.<sup>23</sup>

In explaining its rise, early literature linked populism to certain socio-economic and political conditions such as mass society, economic recession, and political scandal.<sup>24</sup> However, from an ideological approach, populism consists of appeals to the entire political community as the “pure people” against a common enemy, the unresponsive, corrupt elites.<sup>25</sup> While politicians

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>21</sup> The broadcasting model can assume either a public service or a regulated commercial form. In the public service variant, the broadcasters are supposed to deliver commercial benefits, which are thought to be in the public interest. In the commercial case, there may be editorial obligations to society as requirements of operation. See McQuail, *Media Performance*, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>23</sup> Croteau and Hoynes, *The Business of Media*, 156-157.

<sup>24</sup> Kirk Hawkins, Madeleine Read, and Teun Pauwels, “Populism and Its Causes,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 267-286.

<sup>25</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541-563, and Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso Books, 2005).

want to deliver their populist appeals (we, the pure people, versus the corrupt elites), they need to use the media because of its importance in modern society. Hence, over the last decade, growing attention has been paid to the media's role in the success of populism.

There are two main strands of literature concerning the media and populism. The first attributes the diffusion and success of populism to the logic of commercial media. Gianpietro Mazzoleni coined the term "media populism" to describe "the close connections between media-originated dynamics and the rise of populist sentiment."<sup>26</sup> According to Mazzoleni<sup>27</sup> and others,<sup>28</sup> tabloid newspapers and television channels tend to favor sensational and controversial content; populist discourses are considered to fit this media culture, which prefers sensationalism over rational debates. Moreover, politicians who articulate populist discourse can increase visibility in the tabloid media. For example, Fox News has covered the Tea Party's activities, delivered its populist claims, and even helped to mobilize populist support.<sup>29</sup> Although the elite media (such as the *New York Times*) have gained growth in subscriptions from the antipopulist camp and adopted an antipopulist editorial stance, for example, by calling Trump a "liar," they have failed to read the minds of the populists' supporters (such as the Tea Party), and therefore have underestimated the support of populist figures.<sup>30</sup>

The second strand of literature focuses on how political actors convey populist discourse directly to the public via online social media. The populist discourse is supposed to fit the culture of online communications. According to Paolo Gerbaudo, social media provides a space for mass networking and individuals to gather and form partisan online crowds.<sup>31</sup> Sven Engesser et al. pointed out that social media provides a platform for populist themes such as "advocating for the people and attacking the elites."<sup>32</sup> Because of the nature of social media, populist politicians attempt to make the most of these platforms

---

<sup>26</sup> Gianpietro Mazzoleni, "Populism and Media," in *Twenty-First Century Populism the Spectre of Western European Democracy*, ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 49-64.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Simon Cross, "Mad and Bad Media: Populism and Pathology in the British Tabloids," *European Journal of Communication* 29, no. 2 (2014): 204-217, and Luca Manucci, "Populism and the Media," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 467-488.

<sup>29</sup> Olivier Jutel, "American Populism and the New Political Economy of the Media Field," *The Political Economy of Communication* 1, no. 1 (May 16, 2013): 26-42.

<sup>30</sup> Des Freedman, "Populism and Media Policy Failure," *European Journal of Communication* 33, no. 6 (December 1, 2018): 604-605.

<sup>31</sup> Paolo Gerbaudo, "Social Media and Populism: An Elective Affinity?" *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (July 1, 2018): 745-753.

<sup>32</sup> Sven Engesser et al., "Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 8 (August 3, 2017): 1109-1126.

to mobilize support and convey consistent political slogans and themes. For example, when running for the presidency of the United States in 2016, Donald Trump made extensive use of the microblogging platform, Twitter, to exploit an incendiary and “straight-talking” public persona.<sup>33</sup>

The mentioned literature on media populism sheds light on the sudden rise of populist politicians discussed in this case study. As the literature has shown, commercial media—in need of gaining viewership and attracting advertising—have a special preference for sensationalism and tend to privilege populist actors. Even the antipopulist elite media need to cover these populists. Therefore, populist politicians can cater to the tastes or needs of commercial media. In the present study, Han’s emotional tone and simplified binary opposition fit commercial media’s disposition in Taiwan. Therefore, after the pro-Blue television channels (e.g., CTiTV) gave Han huge coverage and gained ratings, the pro-Green channels had to follow suit.

However, the existing studies belong to linear models. Previous studies of media populism mainly ask how political and media actors generate populist discourse through channels and audiences.<sup>34</sup> Thus, media populism is conceived as an integrated system, and the audience has no way to escape. Studies have largely ignored the factor of civil society organizations, which might have responded to media populism effectively.

Civil society organizations can be important agents for or against populist forces. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser has developed a framework for the study of populist responses.<sup>35</sup> In this framework, at the domestic level—in addition to political actors (political parties and government agencies)—civil society organizations that articulate their citizenry’s preferences can support or oppose populist forces. Furthermore, while foreign governments can form alliances with domestic populist actors at the international level, transnational civil society actors also can play a significant role in responding to domestic populist forces by supporting domestic civil society organizations.<sup>36</sup>

## The Media Environment: CTiTV

Based on the first strand of the literature, one can argue that there is more need for the regulation of cable television than of print media because there is easier accessibility to telecommunications media, and it has greater influence on the public. Thus, because of the easier accessibility and greater influence of

---

<sup>33</sup> Michael Higgins and Angela Smith, *Belligerent Broadcasting: Synthetic Argument in Broadcast Talk* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> Manucci, “Populism and the Media,” 468.

<sup>35</sup> Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Populism and the Question of How to Respond to It,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 489–507.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



television, television channels are more valuable than print media in terms of advertisement. Regarding conceptual discussion, if we consider the literature's second strand, it is not surprising that television is the most desirable media for the promotion of populism.

The above logic leads us to this essay's case discussion. CTiTV was one of the main driving forces of the Han wave. Even before the rise of the Han wave, CTiTV had long triggered doubts, resistance, and protest among Taiwan's NGO groups because its ownership had influenced media performance.

CTiTV, a twenty-four-hour news channel, belonged to the owner of the Want Want Group, Tsai Eng-ming. In 1992, Tsai went to China to start a biscuit business and made a fortune by benefiting from favors extended by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 2006, Tsai returned to Taiwan to buy Taiwanese media to gain more support from the CCP, which sought to influence Taiwanese politics. In 2006, Tsai acquired a terrestrial channel, CTV, and in 2008, the *China Times* and CTiTV, the latter being one of the seven twenty-four-hour satellite news channels in Taiwan's cable system. Thereafter, the Want Want Group became pro-KMT and pro-CCP, even at the cost of triggering the anger of Taiwanese society. For example, while Tsai attempted to purchase the main multiple system operation (MSO) in Taiwan in 2012, his pro-China remark, "Not that many people could really have died in the Tiananmen Square accident," triggered the biggest media reform movement against this media merge.<sup>37</sup> CTiTV still maintains its pro-CCP policy, even at the cost of the distrust of Taiwan's civil society.

CTiTV tensions with Taiwan's civil society, such as during the Sunflower Movement, continued. Beginning on March 19, 2014, student groups occupied Taiwan's legislature for at least one month in their protest against a Chinese trade deal. They accused the KMT government of forcing the trade measure without reviewing the terms of the agreement. They feared that the agreement would give Beijing too much influence over the island's economy.<sup>38</sup> Demonstrators also protested against CTiTV, displaying the posters and stickers that it used. They argued that the company portrayed the Sunflower Movement in a false light.<sup>39</sup> Some of them protested outside CTiTV's headquarters, accusing it of producing biased reports about the movement.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Lihyun Lin and Chun-Yi Lee, "When Business Met Politics: The Case of Want Want, a Different Type of Media Capital in Taiwan," *China Perspectives*, no. 2 (June 1, 2017): 37-46.

<sup>38</sup> Austin Ramzy, "Anger Grows in Taiwan against Deal with China," *New York Times* (March 23, 2014), <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/24/world/asia/anger-grows-in-taiwan-against-deal-with-china.html> (accessed March 6, 2021).

<sup>39</sup> Enru Lin, "The Sunflower Movement, Brought to You by the Internet," *Taipei Times* (April 3, 2014), <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2014/04/03/2003587148> (accessed March 3, 2021).

<sup>40</sup> Lok-Sin Loa, "March Accuses CtiTV of Biased Reports," *Taipei Times* (April 10, 2014), <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2014/04/10/2003587684> (accessed March 3, 2021).

Some of CTiTV's talk shows upset many viewers, who filed complaints with the NCC in April 2014. In the program *News Tornado*, a regular guest, Peng Hua-gan, commented on the appearance of two female participants. One of the women wore a "provocative" low-cut shirt, hot pants, and thigh-high boots, which he said made her look "super-hot." He then moved his hands over a photograph of the woman to suggest that he was unbuttoning her shirt. Rather than stopping Peng from making further comments, the show's host, James Tai, encouraged the conversation. In response, an independent content review committee viewed the episode. Of the nineteen committee members, sixteen voted to reprimand the channel, and three voted to notify the channel to address the situation. The NCC commissioners affirmed the penalty recommended by the review committee, which was to fine CTiTV NT\$500,000 for violating the Satellite Broadcasting Act by airing content that disrupted public order or adversely affected good social customs and norms.<sup>41</sup>

Because of CTiTV's performance and tension with civil society, in 2014, NGO groups did not approve CTiTV's renewal of a license. According to the satellite broadcasting act, channel operators should obtain a license from the regulator, the NCC, and renew it every six years. An external committee (composed of scholars, NGO groups, and professional groups) issues the primary verdict, while the NCC committee makes the final decision. CTiTV applied for a review of its license in 2014. Representatives of the media reform groups serving on the external committee argued that the NCC should not renew the license, as CTiTV had broadcast derogatory comments about female participants in the Sunflower Movement. Despite the disapproval of the external committee, the NCC—in consideration of press freedom—approved the renewal in 2014, with the requirement that CTiTV must strengthen its internal quality-control mechanisms as CTiTV had promised to do during the renewal process. Later, CTiTV brought prominence to Han and gave continuous coverage to him. It devoted 62 percent of its news time to Han after he declared that he was joining the mayoral election. In supporting Han, CTiTV spread misinformation in its news coverage. For example, it ran a report about Han's campaign rally, saying that a "Phoenix Spreads Its Wings Like a Cloud" over the sky. The NCC ruled that this news story breached the principle of fact verification, representing a violation of article 27 of the Satellite Broadcasting Act. The commission fined the news agency NT\$400,000.<sup>42</sup>

Other CTiTV stories depicted the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as a corrupt, elite party whose misadministration had sacrificed ordinary

---

<sup>41</sup> Shelley Shan, "CtiTV Gets Fine for Women Comments," *Taipei Times* (April 17, 2014), <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2014/04/17/2003588245> (accessed December 8, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Keoni Everington, "Taiwan's NCC Fines CTiTV for Having 50% of Headlines About Han Kuo-Yu," *Taiwan News* (March 28, 2019), <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3667786> (accessed December 9, 2020).

people's interests and lost people's hearts. For example, during CTiTV's show, *Political Gossip* (大政治大爆料), the host interviewed a pomelo farmer. The farmer said that the price of pomelo was so low the previous year that two million tons of the fruit had to be dumped into the Zengwen Reservoir (曾文水庫). Furthermore, other farmers standing near the interviewee claimed that they had not received the subsidies for which they had applied. According to the NCC, the host turned the interviewees' statements into a "news report" without verifying the information's authenticity.<sup>43</sup> The way that CTiTV reported these random opinions without providing professional journalistic review and verification correlates with Christina Peter's<sup>44</sup> argument that strong populist beliefs will rely on such opinions in place of professional journalistic reporting. In another example, CTiTV broadcast a report implying that Representative to Singapore Francis Liang (梁國新) monitored Han's movements during a trip to Singapore and made reports about him to the DPP-led government. CTiTV was fined NT \$ 600,000 for again violating article 27 of the Satellite Broadcast Act, failing to fact-check its news reporting.<sup>45</sup>

## Who Is Han Kuo-yu?

The previous section explains how CTiTV promoted Han by using fake sources and erroneous data. Nevertheless, the main framework of these CTiTV new stories was populism: "a pure people" against unresponsive and corrupt elites. Let us now focus on Han's rise. According to a study commissioned by the NCC, during the Kaohsiung mayoral election, between November 17, 2018, and November 23, 2018, CTiTV devoted 62 percent of its news time to coverage of the KMT presidential candidate, Han Kuo-yu.<sup>46</sup>

Before 2018, few people had heard of Han. He started his political career in 1990 as a Taipei city councilor. He then joined Taiwan's first democratic legislative election in 1993 under the Kuomintang.<sup>47</sup> Han was elected three times between 1993 and 2002. As a legislator, his constituency always was in Taipei County. In 2012, Han became the president of the Taipei Agricultural

---

<sup>43</sup> Shelley Shan, "CtiTV Penalized Another NT\$1m for Pomelo Story," *Taipei Times* (April 11, 2019), <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/04/11/2003713194> (accessed March 3, 2021).

<sup>44</sup> Christina Peter, "The People's Voice—the People's Choice? How Vox Pop Exemplars Shape Audience Judgments as a Function of Populist Attitudes," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 96, no. 4 (2019): 1004-1024.

<sup>45</sup> Everington, "Taiwan's NCC Fines CTiTV for Having 50% of Headlines About Han Kuo-Yu."

<sup>46</sup> National Communications Commission, "Content Analysis of Television News Coverage for the 2018 Local Election in Taiwan."

<sup>47</sup> Hisang Yu and Chiang Yi-ching, "Rise and Fall of Han Kuo-Yu, KMT's 'Fallen Star,'" *Focus Taiwan* (March 6, 2020), <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202006070008> (accessed June 9, 2020).

Products Market Corps, a state-owned company.<sup>48</sup> Between 2008 and 2016, Taiwan was a KMT stronghold under the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou, which is the reason why Han could become the president of this state-owned corporation. Nevertheless, Han worked for this fruit and vegetable company for only five years. He resigned in 2017 to compete for the KMT chairmanship, but he was defeated by Wu Den-yih in May 2017. Han then moved to Kaohsiung, where he organized a KMT branch to prepare for local elections in November 2018. From this point onward, one can say that Han had started his journey of becoming a rising star in the KMT. Although a “Taipei resident” for most of his life, Han was able to secure the Kaohsiung mayoral candidacy in early 2018. Han had not worked long and hard in Kaohsiung, yet the KMT nominated him as its mayoral candidate, a decision that soon caused much doubt.

Nevertheless, to almost the whole country’s surprise, Han won the Kaohsiung mayoral election in a landslide victory. He secured 53.6 percent of the vote in November 2018, defeating his DPP opponent, Chen Chi-mai, by a margin of around 8 percent. It is noteworthy that the mayorship of Kaohsiung had been under the DPP since 1998. Han was the first elected KMT mayor, making his Kaohsiung victory a significant milestone for his party.

What was the social background for Han’s victory in the Kaohsiung mayoral election? Han has been dubbed a populist figure because of his straightforward way of speaking. As reflected in the news, a Kaohsiung citizen said Han’s way of talking was bold and to the point. He wanted to bring about Kaohsiung’s transformation through “real efforts,” as captured in simple and pragmatic slogans. For instance, he said, “If you have things to sell, and bring in people to buy, then Kaohsiung will benefit big time.”<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, this straightforward way of campaigning is not convincing enough to explain Han’s victory. The widespread frustration with the economic setback in Kaohsiung, or even more so, with Taiwan’s overall economy, was the deeper reason explaining Han’s mayoral victory.

From the time of Lee Teng-hui’s government in the 1990s, Taiwan’s economic policy was to transform the island into the Asia-Pacific’s regional operational center (APROC), with six sub-centers, one each for manufacturing, finance, telecommunications, media, maritime transportation, and air transportation.<sup>50</sup> Kaohsiung was destined to be the maritime

---

<sup>48</sup> The Executive Yuan holds a 22.76 percent share, and the Taipei City Council also holds a 22.76 percent share, hence it is a state-owned company. Regarding the structure of the company’s shares, see a website in Chinese, <http://www.tapmc.com.taipei/Pages/About/Orgtype> (accessed June 9, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> William Kung and Roger Yan, “How Kaohsiung Got Swept Up in the ‘Han Kuo-Yu Wave’,” *Taiwan Gazette* (December 16, 2018), <https://www.taiwangazette.org/news/2018/12/16/the-anti-elitist-with-a-common-touch-how-kaohsiung-residents-got-swept-up-in-the-han-kuo-yu-wave> (accessed June 9, 2020).

<sup>50</sup> Kai Ma, “Taiwan as the Asia-Pacific Regional Operations Center: Its Significance and Prospects,” *Nomura Foundation* (September 2001), [https://www.nomurafoundation.or.jp/en/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/20000127-28\\_Kai\\_Ma.pdf](https://www.nomurafoundation.or.jp/en/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/20000127-28_Kai_Ma.pdf) (accessed June 9, 2020).

transportation center, an APROC plan that was suspended after Chen Shiu-bian entered the government in 2000. The economic development blueprint of the Chen government was focused more on developing Taiwan into a “green silicon island.”<sup>51</sup> In this blueprint, attention was directed to information and communications technology (ICT) development and green energy in the north of Taiwan. Kaohsiung, the former labor-intensive manufacturing city, has left behind this green developmental blueprint. Beginning in early 2000, many Southerners started to feel a North-South division, separated by the Jhuoshuei River.<sup>52</sup> Han’s simple slogan, to reform Kaohsiung’s economy, therefore echoed many citizens’ long-term wishes. Indeed, a strong desire to revive the economy led 53.6 percent of the voters to choose Han, an unknown politician from Taipei. The authors view Han’s victory in the 2018 Kaohsiung mayoral election as more intriguing than his later decline during the presidential election, including his removal from the mayoral post in June 2020.

Economic factors were a strong motivation for voters to elect Han. However, Han did not have local support, as he had moved to Kaohsiung only in early 2018, nor was there a strong party network behind him. Moreover, Han had never held an important position within the KMT. What produced Han’s fluke mayoral victory in 2018 was his populist blunt-language promises of bringing money into Kaohsiung, compounded by Kaohsiung’s eagerness to catch up with economic prosperity.

With the victory of the mayorship achieved, Han decided to run in the presidential election in June 2019. Thus, he took leave from the Kaohsiung mayorship in October 2019. In hindsight, Han’s decision to enter the presidential election campaign was a time bomb for his political career. Nevertheless, in February 2019, when the KMT was preparing to enlist Han as a presidential candidate, his popularity was ahead of incumbent Tsai Ing-wen’s by 29 percent.<sup>53</sup> What went wrong thereafter? Han’s populist characteristics did not change; he still talked in “simple and straightforward language.” Why could he convince most voters in Kaohsiung but not convince the majority of Taiwan’s voters?

This essay proposes two likely reasons. First, as a presidential candidate, Han needed to face the unavoidable China factor, which became the sore point of his campaign and, to a larger extent, a significant vulnerability in the KMT’s overall strategy. The China factor has been an election sticking

---

<sup>51</sup> Christopher R. Hughes and Gudrun Wacker, *China and the Internet: Politics of the Digital Leap Forward* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>52</sup> Pat Gao, “Taiwan’s Marginalized South,” *Taiwan Today* (November 1, 2007), <https://taiwantoday.tw/print.php?unit=12,20,29,33,35,45&post=22184> (accessed June 9, 2020).

<sup>53</sup> Samson Ellis, “Odds Look Long for Taiwan’s China-Friendly Presidential Contender,” *Bloomberg.Com* (December 30, 2019), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-31/odds-lengthen-for-taiwan-s-china-friendly-presidential-contender> (accessed June 9, 2020).

point since the 1995-1996 cross-Strait missile crisis.<sup>54</sup> Since the early 2000s, following China's accumulation of much more economic power, the Beijing government has tried to win over Taiwanese people's hearts and minds through various economic means, including by purchasing fruit, agricultural products, and fish.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, none of these deliberate economic state-crafts has helped gain more support from Taiwanese society for a closer cross-Strait relationship. Ma's government suffered from closer economic collaboration with China, one of the major reasons why the KMT lost the presidential election in 2016.<sup>56</sup> These past but still lingering Taiwanese memories of China influenced Taiwanese voters' preferences in choosing presidential candidates in 2020. Another external condition was the Hong Kong protest, started in June 2019, and its ongoing impact at the moment of writing, and China's proposal of a national security law in late May 2020.<sup>57</sup>

Second, as a presidential candidate, Han's talks and even the presidential debate were thoroughly scrutinized by society. Unfortunately, the monitors were not the media but civil groups, which will be addressed later in this analysis.

## **Han's Rise and Fall with the Media**

This section of the essay addresses the Han wave and its relationship to the media. It connects what has been mentioned above—the disproportionate coverage and misinformation of commercial broadcasting from CTiTV during Han's electoral campaign. According to this study's analysis, the Han wave was made partly possible by commercial media, especially the pro-Han CTiTV, which nurtured online fan clubs. Additionally, this section shows how civil society adopted strategies to counter media populism, especially by exerting pressure on regulators to curb CTiTV's delivery of misinformation.

As Han attracted a pro-Blue audience, the populist leader had formed symbiotic relations with the pro-Blue media, especially CTiTV. According to the literature on media and populism, populist figures are good for commercial

---

<sup>54</sup> Robert S. Ross, "The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force," *International Security* 25, no. 2 (2000): 87-123.

<sup>55</sup> Chi-hung Wei, "China's Economic Offensive and Taiwan's Defensive Measures: Cross-Strait Fruit Trade, 2005–2008," *China Quarterly* 215 (September 2013): 641-662; Stan Hok-wui Wong and Nicole Wu, "Can Beijing Buy Taiwan? An Empirical Assessment of Beijing's Agricultural Trade Concessions to Taiwan," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 99 (May 3, 2016): 353-371; and Shu Keng, Jean Yu-Chen Tseng, and Qiang Yu, "The Strengths of China's Charm Offensive: Changes in the Political Landscape of a Southern Taiwan Town under Attack from Chinese Economic Power," *China Quarterly* 232 (December 2017): 956-981.

<sup>56</sup> Ming-sho Ho, "Occupy Congress in Taiwan: Political Opportunity, Threat, and the Sunflower Movement," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (April 2015): 69.

<sup>57</sup> Chung, "Taiwan Opposition Candidate Removed as Mayor in Recall Vote."

media because of their inherent characteristics—they are emotional, confrontational, and atypical.<sup>58</sup>

In this case study of populism, Han reflected conservative values—to restore the glory of the old days, to show no tolerance for political protest, and to forge close economic ties with China. He gained support from the pro-Blue camp, about 30 percent of the population. Also, as highlighted in previous sections, as a populist figure, Han was noted for his straightforward way of speaking, bold remarks, and simple slogans; these populist characteristics met the needs of commercial media.

Further, Han's claim of the need to strengthen economic ties with China resonated with the inclinations of CTiTV's owner, who had interests in China and toed the pro-CCP line. During the Kaohsiung mayoral election, CTiTV devoted more time to a single politician than pro-Green news channels. On the one hand—according to a commissioned NCC study, which took place between November 17, 2018, and November 23, 2018—62 percent of CTiTV news coverage time was centered on the KMT presidential candidate, Han Kuo-yu. On the other hand, the channel gave only 7 percent of its coverage time to the DPP candidate, Chen Chi-mai. In contrast, there was more balance among pro-DPP news channels. Formosa TV, for instance, devoted 20 percent to Chen and 9 percent to Han. Era TV devoted 19 percent to Chen and 11 percent to Han. Sanli devoted even more news time (24 percent) to Han than to Chen (18 percent).<sup>59</sup> In promoting Han, CTiTV's rating climbed to the top. CTiTV was in third place for three months before the Kaohsiung mayoral election, second place one month before the election, and, finally, in first place on polling day. When Han won the election, CTiTV also won in the ratings race because of its huge coverage of Han.<sup>60</sup>

The pro-Blue news channels all gave Han coverage but were relatively more balanced than CTiTV. Because of market pressure, the former had to follow the Han wave. For example, TVBS had been in first place in terms of ratings but eventually fell to second. Thus, it had to adjust its policy due to market pressure.<sup>61</sup>

The pro-Han channels further nurtured fan groups. Members of the audience who watched CTiTV formed fan clubs. Instead of watching news programs passively, they actively formed echo chambers, sharing common

---

<sup>58</sup> Gianpietro Mazzoleni, "Mediatization and Political Populism," in *Mediatization of Politics: Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies*, ed. Frank Esser and Jesper Strömback (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), pp. 42-56, <https://www.springer.com/gb/book/9781137275837> (accessed March 5, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> National Communications Commission, "Content Analysis of Television News Coverage for the 2018 Local Election in Taiwan."

<sup>60</sup> "Reception Analysis of the 2018 Election Season, *Kaibro Weekly Report*," *Carat Media Weekly: Digital Think Tank* (November 29, 2018), <https://twncarat.wordpress.com/2018/11/30/> (accessed March 5, 2021).

<sup>61</sup> TVBS senior reporter, interviewed by Lihyun Lin, Taipei, March 11, 2019.



values and worldviews. Some joined Han's own official Facebook fan page, as Han himself had utilized streams carried live on social media. Some supporters established pro-Han clubs themselves.<sup>62</sup> Still others joined both; they disseminated pro-Han messages, including programs made by CTiTV. They also created disinformation and composite pictures. Some of these clubs remained active and supportive of CTiTV, even after the recession of the Han wave.

The above factors contributed to the spread of the Han wave by the end of 2018. However, Taiwan's civil society began to fight against media populism in early 2019. An important contextual factor was the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (反送中) movement in Hong Kong in early 2019. As the Beijing government imposed tight control of Hong Kong, Taiwanese NGO groups became worried about Han's pro-China policies, especially right after the newly elected Han went to Hong Kong to meet the CCP's leader.

The Apple Media Group, which was based in Hong Kong, began to investigate Han's fortunes. This group supported Hong Kong's democratic movement and opposed the CCP's authoritarian rule. After Han declared his candidacy for the 2020 presidential election, the Apple Media Group's *Next Weekly* discovered that Han's family ran an illegal business, made windfall profits, and owned huge properties (mansions and a country house).<sup>63</sup> Participants on pro-Green news channels cast doubts concerning Han's claims that he spoke for deprived people. They were also concerned about pro-Han misinformation delivered by pro-Han media, such as CTiTV.

Citizens and nongovernmental groups began to take action against the spread of populism, demanding that regulators such as the NCC curb misinformation delivered by CTiTV. The NCC received seventy-two complaints about television service in 2017. The number of complaints grew by 13.3 times, to 962 in 2019.<sup>64</sup> These complaints were against pro-Han channels, charging that these networks produced false news stories and violated professional norms in devoting disproportionate coverage to Han's campaign.

In response to these complaints, the NCC launched program review committees to consider such programs and decide whether news channels had violated regulations. According to article 27 of the Satellite Broadcasting Act, the produced and broadcasted news should not violate the principles of fact verification and should pay attention to the principles of fairness. Nevertheless,

---

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, the Facebook fan page, "Supporting Han's Presidential Campaign," which has 70,000 members, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/627281404381582> (accessed June 18, 2020).

<sup>63</sup> Keoni Everington, "Han's Wife in Hot Water for Illegal 'Luxury Farmhouse' in W. Taiwan," *Taiwan News* (July 12, 2019), <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3743621> (accessed June 18, 2020).

<sup>64</sup> National Communications Commission, "NCC's Decision to Reject License Renewal for CTiTV," National Communications Commission (November 18, 2020), [https://www.ncc.gov.tw/chinese/news\\_detail.aspx?site\\_content\\_sn=8&sn\\_f=45332](https://www.ncc.gov.tw/chinese/news_detail.aspx?site_content_sn=8&sn_f=45332) (accessed March 3, 2021).



CTiTV violated these regulations in its coverage of Han.<sup>65</sup> The number of violations of broadcasting laws and penalties also increased.

Some NGO groups, together with a Power Party legislator, Huang Kuo-chang, launched an anti-Red media rally, demanding that the NCC take effective action to regulate the dissemination of Red media. The organizers had been opposed to pro-China Taiwanese media that constantly promoted Beijing's political propaganda and disseminated disinformation. The rally targeted the Want Want China Times Media Group, accusing its owner, Tsai Eng-ming, of liaising with the Chinese government. Huang, an important figure in the 2012 campaign against media monopoly, argued that the NCC renewed the license of CTiTV in 2014 with four requirements. One stipulation was that CTiTV must establish an ombudsman system within three months. Because CTiTV had failed to meet this requirement, it was argued that the NCC should revoke its license immediately. However, the NCC did not revoke the license because there was no ground to do so under this condition. Instead, the NCC only issued a fine of NT\$500,000 (US\$17,241) and urged CTiTV to deliver on its promises in the next renewal of its license.

### **How Media Tycoons Hijack Press Freedom**

After the Han wave dissolved on November 18, 2020, the NCC refused to renew the license of CTiTV. Earlier, on August 21, the external committee disapproved CTiTV's application because the outlet had continued to breach media regulations and had failed to fulfill its promise to implement internal quality control. According to the NCC's regulations regarding media content, the public may file complaints about content and an independent content review committee then reviews the relevant programs. The committee members decide whether content is in violation of regulations. In 2018, after receiving numerous complaints, the NCC ruled that ten CTiTV stories had violated fact-checking principles required by the satellite broadcasting law. The NCC fined the news agency NT\$600,000 for again violating article 27. By the end of 2020, CTiTV had been fined a total of NT\$11.53 million (US\$397,586) for twenty-five breaches of media regulations, ranging from biased reporting to spreading misinformation—significantly more violations than other news channels.

Considering the suggestions made by the external committee and the evidence that CTiTV had failed to deliver on its promises, the NCC finally decided not to renew CTiTV's license. The NCC pointed out that CTiTV had continued to violate regulations since the previous license period. In 2014, the NCC had approved license renewal with the proviso that CTiTV strengthen its internal control. There was hope that, with improved internal mechanisms,

---

<sup>65</sup> Shelley Shan, "NCC Fines CtiTV NT\$1.6m for Fact-Checking Failures," *Taipei Times* (July 25, 2019), <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/07/25/2003719299> (accessed December 9, 2020).

CTiTV would reduce the number of its regulatory breaches. However, CTiTV's internal control failed to function. Further, based on evidence the commission had collected at an administrative hearing on October 26, 2020—and a meeting between NCC commissioners and CTiTV on November 4, 2020—the NCC identified the fundamental problem as the channel's largest shareholder, Want Want China Times Media Group founder Tsai Eng-ming, who had intervened directly and indirectly in the news production process. Furthermore, the channel's managers admitted that, at the height of the Han wave, Tsai's special assistant, Chiu Chia-yu (邱佳瑜), had directly supervised a news department that did not have a full-time managing director for five months in 2018. According to the NCC, as long as the owner's influence existed internally, the internal control mechanism of CTiTV would fail to function. The NCC discovered that CTiTV had failed to improve its internal control mechanisms to reduce the number of breaches to avoid daily intervention from the owner. The NCC ruled that CTiTV was unable to improve its internal mechanisms to reduce breach occurrences. Therefore, it would not be able to carry out CTiTV's public promise.<sup>66</sup>

The Want Want Media Group used press freedom to shield the channel against the NCC's ruling. CTiTV, in its announcement, called the day of the ruling “the darkest” for freedom of press and speech since the end of martial law in 1987.<sup>67</sup> Meanwhile, Tsai Eng-ming aired his grievances on Facebook, saying there was political manipulation against CTiTV's telling the truth. The next day, splashed across the front page of *China Times* were two characters, 無恥, meaning “shameless,” in an attack against the NCC that portrayed it as the DPP government's vehicle to suppress press freedom.

The pro-Blue camp also opposed the NCC decision, using freedom of the press as a foil against the NCC. The KMT opposed the decision, describing it as having a “chilling effect” and endangering press freedom. Han even compared the NCC's seven commissioners to the seven dwarfs who served Snow White, the DPP leader, Tsai Ing-Wen.<sup>68</sup> In contrast, media scholars argued that license holders should fulfill social responsibilities. Other researchers pointed out that, while license holders had been unable to improve their internal controls, news quality, and freedom from owners, the NCC had made no other suggestions to help television stations.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> National Communications Commission, “The National Communications Commission Decides to Reject the Renewal Application for the ‘Zhongtian News Channel’s’ Weiguang Business License” (November 18, 2020), [https://www.ncc.gov.tw/chinese/chinese/news\\_detail.aspx?site\\_content\\_sn=8&sn\\_f=45332](https://www.ncc.gov.tw/chinese/chinese/news_detail.aspx?site_content_sn=8&sn_f=45332) (accessed March 5, 2021).

<sup>67</sup> T. N. L. Staff, “Taiwan Shuts Down Pro-China CTi News,” *News Lens International Edition* (November 19, 2020), <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/143510> (accessed March 5, 2021).

<sup>68</sup> Wang Zixuan, “Han Kuo Yu Is Angry, Blamed the NCC’s Commissioners as ‘Seven Dwarfs,’ within Half Hour More Than 150,000 Thumbs Up on Han’s Facebook Page,” *China Times News* (November 18, 2020), <https://www.chinatimes.com/realtimenews/20201118004018-260407?chdtv> (accessed March 5, 2021).

<sup>69</sup> T.N.L. Staff, “Taiwan Shuts Down Pro-China CTi News.”

NGO groups supported the government's decision. For example, Reporters Without Borders issued a statement saying that the rejection did not violate press freedom because freedom of the press does not entail absence of oversight.<sup>70</sup> It encouraged democratic institutions to use mechanisms to ensure journalistic integrity and editorial freedom. Furthermore, it expected the NCC to review cases based on whether the application review was legitimate, adding that "rejecting a license renewal" is an extreme method. Therefore, the NCC needed to prove its rationale and apply the same standards to other application reviews.

However, since CTiTV never showed the side of the argument presented by Reporters Without Borders, audiences believed that the DPP used the NCC as a tool to suppress press freedom. Thus, dozens of CTiTV News supporters rallied outside the NCC to protest the commissioners' decision not to renew the news channel's license. Following Tsia Eng-ming's words, they called the decision political. Hence, they sprayed red paint over a DPP flag and urged public members to defend freedom of speech and press freedom.<sup>71</sup>

## Discussion and Conclusion

The previous sections of the essay present three main arguments, based on the unfolding events of CTiTV as they relate to the rise and fall of the populist figure, Han Kuo-yu, from 2014 until the time of writing. The first argument regarding the government's regulation of mass media is specifically related to television channels. Connecting this to the literature review, the question is, therefore, not whether the government should intervene, but how.<sup>72</sup> The essay has considered the media, specifically focusing on television channels. The argument is that television carries more social responsibility to serve the public interest than other media, as it is the most influential media source nowadays. A recent example of a democratic government's revocation of a television channel's license was on February 4, 2021, when Ofcom, the governmental regulator of communication services in the United Kingdom, revoked the license of the China Global Television Network (CGTN).<sup>73</sup> This provided the basis of the study's first argument.

The second argument concerns how populism thrives with media's promotion. Media owners may consider private interests rather than public

---

<sup>70</sup> Kuan-ting et al., "Non-Renewal of CTi News License Regrettable: RSF."

<sup>71</sup> Shelley Shan and Jason Pan, "Pan-Blue Groups Protest CTi News Action," *Taipei Times* (October 22, 2020), <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/10/22/2003745582> (accessed December 8, 2020).

<sup>72</sup> McQuail, *Media Performance*, and Napoli, *Foundations of Communications Policy*.

<sup>73</sup> "Ofcom Revokes CGTN's License to Broadcast in the UK," *Ofcom* (February 4, 2021), <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/media/media-releases/2021/ofcom-revokes-cgtn-licence-to-broadcast-in-uk> (accessed March 5, 2021).

interests. In this case, their right to do so resonates with the public in most democratic societies. This is because media owners in democracies are not states; but whether their code of conduct will reflect social responsibility or their own private interests is difficult to predict or to counterbalance. This argument is also connected to media populism. In the Taiwan case, certain media owners (e.g., Tsai Eng-ming at CTiTV), promoted specific populist figures (e.g., KMT candidate, Han Kuo-yu). Moreover, CTiTV brazenly and repeatedly violated broadcasting regulations, with more violations of regulations and more penalties than other news channels. Between December 2014 and December 2020, CTiTV had twenty-five violations, with the penalty of NT\$11.53 million (US\$397,586), followed by Sanli News channel with eighteen violations and the penalty of NT\$ 4 million (US\$137,931), EBC News channel with twelve violations and the penalty of NT\$ 2.93 million (US\$101,034), and TVBS News with eleven violations and the penalty of NT\$ 2 million (US\$68,965).<sup>74</sup>

There are two threads of reflection, here: First, CTiTV initiated bombastic reporting on Han, whereas other TV channels provided “follow-up” to explain the “supply and demand” phenomenon, described in the theoretical and conceptual framework regarding the media and public interest. However, because corporate media owners report populist news for commercial interest, the study asked whether the government should intervene. That said, the larger and more significant question is not whether the government should intervene but how it should do so. This second reflection centers on the party color of the media owner and the populist figure. The essay explained the background of CTiTV and indicated the owner Tsai’s investment interest in China. Hence, to serve his interest, *China Times* and CTiTV became convenient tools at his disposal.<sup>75</sup> However, because the populist figure Han became a powerful advocate for CTiTV’s Tsai, there is a lingering question concerning government intervention—and the answer, here, is negative. Any media owner has the right to use the media outlet to pursue personal interests. That said, the media owner’s interests do not necessarily serve the public interest. Indeed, more often than not, media owners use the media as tools to serve their own interests. Nevertheless, governmental regulator organizations—such as the NCC—should make certain there is a diverse and competitive media environment. A diverse media environment means that, if a particular media report contains different political views from those of the ruling government, they should not be forbidden. Thus, the NCC is committed to

---

<sup>74</sup> The figures are calculations from “Monthly Records of NCC’s Sanctions on Satellite Channels,” [https://www.ncc.gov.tw/chinese/gradation.aspx?site\\_content\\_sn=575](https://www.ncc.gov.tw/chinese/gradation.aspx?site_content_sn=575) (accessed March 3, 2021).

<sup>75</sup> Lihyun Lin and Chun-Yi Lee, “When Business Met Politics: The Case of Want Want, a Different Type of Media Capital in Taiwan,” *China Perspectives*, no. 2 (June 1, 2017): 37–46.

protecting the interests of consumers, not just those of the ruling government, as indicated on its official website.<sup>76</sup>

The third argument—addressed in the previous section—indicates how civil society implemented fact-checking. A bigger question to ask, however, is what exactly is fake news? In this case study, it was shown that CTiTV's broadcasting about Han was cited many times for false information between 2014 and 2020. Nevertheless, Han supporters might consider all these reports fake or having been manufactured by the DPP. Although CTiTV held a television license, Han's supporters also had strong netizen support from Facebook and Line, as indicated in the essay's data. All social media companies select the news to feed to their readers, which causes intensified division within the public. As Anne Schulz et al. proposed, social identity is the backbone for populists and their specific rhetorical delivery style.<sup>77</sup> Concurring with this assertion, this essay has argued that Han's supporters would not accept that CTiTV's coverage was fake because they socially identified with the content of CTiTV's broadcasts. However, this argument deserves further research.

In the fields of media and political studies, our presented case might not be encouraging. In this study, the authors have temporarily concluded that the role of the media in a young democracy, as in the case of Taiwan, is one of the crucial factors in promoting the rise of populism. The concept of media populism thus explains the rise of populism in Taiwan. This is so because the media environment in Taiwan has been partisan and commercialized into tabloid-style journalism. This commercial media landscape, which is fond of sensationalism and a simplified worldview, has been a hotbed for populism and a battleground for Han "as a hero and savior for Taiwan's future."

CTiTV is a media company that violated many regulations established by the NCC. In 2014, the NCC was about to suspend CTiTV's broadcasting license. However, in consideration of "press freedom," the NCC extended CTiTV's license in the same year. In 2020, the NCC internal committee supported the external committee's decision. It suspended CTiTV's broadcasting license. According to the NCC, the decision was not because of CTiTV's party color. The NCC issued the ruling because CTiTV had failed to improve internal control mechanisms, as promised while renewing its license in 2014. This failure of CTiTV resulted in regulation violations, especially regarding inaccurate content and undue impartiality, along with an unreasonable amount of election coverage focused on only a single candidate—Han Kuo-yu. Still, Chung Tien's supporters argued that the NCC should not

---

<sup>76</sup> About the NCC: "Introduction of the National Communications Commission," National Communications Commission, [https://www.ncc.gov.tw/english/content.aspx?site\\_content\\_sn=284&is\\_history=0](https://www.ncc.gov.tw/english/content.aspx?site_content_sn=284&is_history=0) (accessed April 23, 2021).

<sup>77</sup> Anne Schulz, Werner Wirth, and Philipp Müller, "We Are the People and You Are Fake News: A Social Identity Approach to Populist Citizens' False Consensus and Hostile Media Perceptions," *Communication Research* 47, no. 2 (March 1, 2020): 201-226.

intervene in CTiTV's Han coverage because the channel should have the freedom to decide its editorial policy.<sup>78</sup> Other media academics supported the NCC's decision. They argued that nonrenewal of CTiTV's news channel license did not go against press freedom. This is because CTiTV had violated journalistic professionalism by neglecting fact-checking and due impartiality. It also lacked control mechanisms and violated regulations continuously.<sup>79</sup>

The NCC fulfilled its responsibility as a regulator. However, the public perceived this act as a partisan intervention. In many ways, the protest against the NCC's decision—along with threats against committee members and an act of self-immolation—indicates an even more serious issue within Taiwanese society: the misunderstanding or hijacking of the very meaning of press freedom.

One can see such trends blossoming on digital social media platforms and feeds to citizens of selected news, creating even larger camps among different opinion groups. CTiTV and Han's case illustrates the situation in only Taiwan. In many democratic countries, this phenomenon has caught the attention of scholars and governments, raising grave concern. Bridging the opinions of different online media groups is a challenge for most democratic governments to consider.

---

<sup>78</sup> Chin Chugo, "The NCC Has Abandoned the Value of Impartiality," *China Times* (November 11, 2020), <https://www.chinatimes.com/opinion/20201110005385-262104?chdtv> (accessed February 1, 2021).

<sup>79</sup> Loa Chi, "Professor of National Taiwan University Says There Are Three Keys for NCC's Decision," *Liberty Times* (November 18, 2020), sec. Life, <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/life/breakingnews/3355372> (accessed February 1, 2021).