Untangling Taiwan's Hybridity With Structural Dysfunctions

Adrian Rauchfleisch and **Jo-yao Chi**

Abstract

Taiwan's exceptionally high Internet penetration and social media adoption rates, combined with the growing centrality of digital tools and networks in shaping national politics, make it an interesting case for Internet researchers. This essay considers Andrew Chadwick's notion of *The Hybrid Media System* in the context of recent political events in Taiwan. While Chadwick's analysis is particularly useful in understanding political anomalies like the Sunflower Movement, we argue for the value of considering more substantial long-standing structural issues in attempts to understanding the political media landscape in Taiwan. Using the examples of online astroturfing during political campaigns and the spread of disinformation during the Kansai airport incident, we point out that long-standing structural factors such as the dysfunctional practices of journalists in newsrooms, the clear political slants of media in accordance with media ownership, and the traditional political power rooted in the society hold enduring sway on how politics is mediated.

Keywords

social media, Taiwan, elections, hybrid media system, disinformation

Taiwan is an ideal case for analyzing the influence of the Internet on political communication. The country has extremely high Internet penetration and social media adoption rates (L. Lin, 2019), and several incidents including two tech-savvy social movements, mayoral election victories by political outsiders with novel digital campaigns, YouTubers mingling with politicians, and a scandal involving alleged foreign influence via the Internet make it an interesting case for Internet researchers. All these developments illustrate features of what Andrew Chadwick (2017) describes as the hybrid media system.

Chadwick (2017) argues that we are now living in an era in which the rapid diffusion of new communication technologies has led to systemic change in the political communication environments and the boundaries between older and newer media are blurring with regard to technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms. He also presents the idea of dysfunctional hybridity, which describes the interdependence among older and newer media logics that may erode democratic norms. These ideas do capture many aspects of Taiwan's politics and media landscape, especially political anomalies like the Sunflower Movement in 2014. However, we argue it is important to combine an understanding of hybridity with a focus to structural forces that shape media systems according to different national/societal contexts. While the digital tools and networks in Taiwan have

created hybridity in the ways in which political campaigns are planned and media production is organized, there are enduring structural realities that wield power and influence.

Seeing Taiwan Through the Lens of Hybridity

Taiwan, a direct democracy, provides an interesting case with its semi-presidential structure (Shen, 2018) and two-ballot system that incorporates district as well as party-list seats (Stockton, 2010). Since 2014, "nine-in-one" local elections are held every 4 years to select candidates for 22 mayoral and county magistrate seats and 11,025 local offices, and a presidential election is held every 4 years between the local elections, producing a political landscape characterized by continual dramatic changes. In contrast to the social cleavages typically observed in Western democracies, national identity is the dominant cleavage in Taiwan, manifested in the Kuomintang (KMT), which leads the "Pan-Blue" pro-China alliance, and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP),

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leader of the "Pan-Green" anti-unification alliance (Achen & Wang, 2017). Taiwanese politics cannot be analyzed without considering the China factor, which again became apparent when Xi Jinping threatened Taiwan with unification by force in a speech at the beginning of 2019 (Buckley & Horton, 2019).

In addition to the intensive schedule of its electoral system, Taiwan has a highly commercialized media system in which the cable news market remains strong but the newspaper market is in decline due to increased pressure from new online media (Hu, 2017). New technologies, especially the Internet, have resulted in more intense competition and a steady growth in online advertising revenue from 2009 through 2018 (Media Agency Association, 2019). In the same period, however, TV stations, radio stations, magazines, and newspapers saw steep declines in their commercial prospects and audience reach.

The Internet plays an important role in contemporary Taiwanese politics. While some of Taiwan's politicians were early adopters of Internet strategies, with bulletin board systems (BBSs) and homepages being used for the first time during local elections in the mid-1990, the two major parties only established Internet departments in 2009, inspired by Obama's 2008 presidential campaign (B. Chen, 2018). Hybridity became most visible in the Taiwanese context between 2013 and 2014. In 2013, the networked social movement of the Citizen 1985 Action Alliance, which started as a purely bottom-up organized movement on the Internet successfully forced the government to implement institutional reforms in 2013 (Hu, 2017). Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Movement (Liu & Su, 2017) had an even greater impact on the political landscape in Taiwan. The movement occupied Taiwan's parliament (the Legislative Yuan) in March and April 2014 and concluded successfully by preventing a service trade agreement with China. Both organizational hybridity (Tsatsou, 2018) and media hybridity (Liu & Su, 2017) were important factors during the protest, and a broad range of actors from mainstream and alternative media led to a proliferation of media usage. Alternative media, such as livestreaming tools, BBSs, and Facebook, helped the movement bypass traditional media outlets, give voice to alternative perspectives, increase the efficiency of online peer collaboration, and mobilizing a highly heterogeneous group of protestors (Hu, 2017; Liu & Su, 2017).

In late 2014, Taipei's mayoral election also strongly influenced the campaign strategies of Taiwan's two major parties. The election resulted in a landslide win by medical doctor turned independent politician Ko Wen-je, who relied heavily on bottom-up, online campaign techniques (Wu, 2016). Ko continued to depend on his online efforts after being elected as the Taipei mayor, with campaigns such as promoting the 2017 Taipei Summer Universiade in cooperation with Internet celebrities and YouTubers. Ko's landslide victory made politicians and parties in Taiwan realize the importance of having their own cyber armies (網軍; Hu, 2017), and online political astroturfing (Kovic et al., 2018) has been a common practice in Taiwan ever since. This is demonstrated by a data analysis conducted by one of our students, which reveals how certain accounts on a well-known bulletin board (Ptt) in Taiwan promoted former presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu during local mayoral elections in November 2018 (Qiu, 2019). Prior research has produced strong evidence for astroturfing activities connected to Mayor Ko Wen-Je during Taipei's 2014 (Ko & Chen, 2015) and 2018 (M.-H. Wang et al., 2019) mayoral elections. These findings were later confirmed by an investigative report that included interviews with people involved in online astroturfing activities (H. Lin & Wu, 2019b).

A more recent case, which spurred media coverage and academic debate about Chinese online influence, also clearly demonstrates the dysfunctional hybridity in Taiwan's political communication. In September 2018, a Taiwanese diplomat stationed in Japan committed suicide after days of public criticism. The chain of events began with an article published by the Chinese state-funded online media outlet guancha.cn (观察者网) that was later classified as false story by the Taiwanese FactCheck Center (2018). According to the article, the Chinese embassy had sent buses to rescue stranded Chinese citizens from the closed Kansai airport in Japan after a typhoon hit the airport, and, allegedly, Taiwanese citizens were allowed on the buses if they openly claimed that they were Chinese. Information from the article was first shared on Ptt, was picked up by all major media outlets, and then entered the TV news cycle via cable news. This triggered even more public criticism and domestic political spin that potentially led to the diplomat's death. The story continued in December 2019 when an online troll and a former political online influencer involved in political astroturfing were charged with spreading disinformation of the Kansai airport incident on social media.

Beyond the Lens of Hybridity

All the above-mentioned cases, the social movements with organizational and media hybridity, political outsiders winning mayoral elections with novel digital campaigns, and the spread of disinformation jeopardizing the domestic discussion, exhibit strong elements of hybridity, but the underlying structural elements should not be ignored. Social media and the flow of information were undoubtedly important in the Kansai airport incident, but it became a major issue only after mainstream Taiwanese media outlets, such as widely read *Apple Daily* (Jiang & Wu, 2019), picked up the story and when domestic politicians spun the issue. As Su (2019) shows, the problem is not hybridity but rather the organizational structure and working practices of journalists in newsrooms. Journalists in Taiwan have keenly felt the blow of the economic recession in the media marketplace. Many have been laid off, and those who have kept their jobs face much greater demands. They have lost their bargaining power with media companies due to the social sentiment that there is an oversupply of journalists in the labor market, which exacerbates the already grim prospects of junior

journalists (W. Wang, 2013). Most media outlets prioritize rapid news production over the quality of the content, with some companies asking journalists to produce five or six stories per day (H. Lin & Wu, 2019a). With less time to verify sources, journalists acquire the habit of relying on shady online content farms, or—as in the Kansai airport incident—they simply source a story from an online forum without appropriate verification. This example shows that journalists could easily mitigate such dysfunctional hybridity but long-standing institutional failure, rather than the boundary-blurring of older and newer media logics, stands in the way.

An even more severe structural problem is the fact that in Taiwan's media ecosystem, most media outlets exhibit an obvious political slant that can be explained by the political and economic interests of their owners (Hu, 2017). In the aftermath of the 2018 local election, for example, Chung Tien Television (CTiTV) was, in a controversial move, fined by Taiwan's National Communications Commission for its extremely biased coverage of the election campaign (L. Lin, 2019). However, the accusation was later supported by an investigative report published in the *Financial Times* that revealed that the editorial managers of *China Times* and CTiTV "take instructions directly from the Taiwan Affairs Office, the body in Chinese government that handles Taiwan issues" (Hille, 2019). While the case of CTiTV represents the most extreme example of direct Chinese influence on Taiwanese media ecosystem, the journalists of various media outlets face constant pressure to censor themselves with regard to coverage of China and to align their viewpoints with those of the owners of the outlets (Huang & Lin, 2019). Again, the dysfunction is mainly rooted in the long-standing institutional problems.

In addition to the dysfunctional mainstream media, traditional political power also reigns supreme in Taiwan's political environment. Although Ko Wen-je's landslide victory in the 2014 mayoral election can be partly attributed to his novel and effective online campaign strategy (B. Chen, 2018), it is worth noting that Ko also received broad support from traditional political powers, such as those associated with the anti-KMT sentiment that culminated in the Sunflower Movement; he also enjoyed the endorsement of the DPP, which did not field a candidate who would have divided Ko's voter base. This is evident when we look at Ko's campaign for his second term in 2018, when he used similar online tactics but was challenged by candidates from the KMT and the DPP. This time, he almost lost the election, winning by a slim margin of 3,254 votes in a city with more than 2 million voters.

Taiwanese society is also an important factor when considering the dysfunction of media and political landscapes. The confluence of organized crime, politics, and business in Taiwan has always been an element of Taiwanese politics (Chin, 2003). Chin (2003) describes vote buying in rural and mountainous areas where neighbors have stronger bonds than people in metropolitan areas and where members of large families often live together and form an influential, clan-like society (see also Y. Chen, 2008). Direct Chinese influence on politicians, organized crime, local radio stations, and even temples (A. Lin, 2019) may not be the focus of social media researchers, but it is perhaps a more powerful influence over elections than disinformation produced and circulated online. Again, what could be interpreted as new dysfunctional hybridity is in fact more structural and long-standing in the Taiwanese case.

Institutional Dysfunction as Constant

These examples of the enduring force of structural influence on political coverage in Taiwan aligns with Benkler et al.'s (2018) assertion that in the case of the United States, technology is not the main driving force for dysfunctional changes in the political landscape. Technology, they argue, interacts with rather than replaces institutions to shape the way we organize our affairs in the political domain. Given this, attempts to understand the evolving political communication should include consideration of the structural, long-term dynamics in addition to novel, disruptive moments such as in Taiwan's case the Sunflower Movement (cf. Ho, 2018) or Ko Wen-je's landslide victory in 2014, which can best be described as anomalies. In the case of Taiwan, the dysfunctional newsroom, the irreconcilable political agenda of mainstream media, the established political power, and social structure are consistent and powerful factors influencing the nation's political landscape.

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