

How ECFA threatens Taiwan news freedom

Written by Taiwan News Editorial
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Taiwan will face greater challenges in defending existing hard-won levels of news freedom in the wake of the signing of the controversial "Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement" with the authoritarian People's Republic of China.

In stark contrast to the Pollyannaish attitude of President Ma Ying-jeou's rightist Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) government, a new report by the Legal Research Bureau and the Budget Center of the Legislative Yuan on the impact of ECFA on Taiwan warned that Taiwan's government and citizens cannot ignore the "contradictions" between the broadcasting and news media systems of Taiwan and the PRC especially since "news freedom is an important index in evaluating the degree of national democratization."

Moreover, full news freedom and freedom of expression and freedom of access to news and information is vitally critical to both the functioning of our democratic society and the global competitiveness of our knowledge and innovation based economy.

Hence, we should take seriously the warning of this study that the experience of Hong Kong and Macau after "closer economic partnership arrangements" were signed with Beijing on June 29, 2003 gives ample cause for concern that methods used by the Chinese Communist Party-ruled PRC to rein in news freedom and freedom of expression in the two "special administrative regions" will be employed in Taiwan in the wake of the ECFA.

Such concerns are even more worrisome in the light of the resumption of power in Taiwan of the "former authoritarian" and increasingly overtly "China - centric" KMT, which has already shown that its commitment to news freedom is far short of "100 percent."

Naturally, news media freedom in Hong Kong and Macau was tempered by the status of both territories as colonies before the transfer of control over Hong Kong from Britain to Beijing on July 1, 1997 and the transfer of Macau to Chinese sovereignty in December 20, 1999.

In addition, during the run-up to the transfers and afterward, the PRC, mainly acting through "patriotic" business interests, expanded its indirect ownership and control over most of the Hong Kong media and fostered a growing mentality of "self-censorship" among local

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journalists.

Nevertheless, as the Legislative Yuan report notes, the signing of the CEPA between the PRC Central Government and the HKSAR and the Macau SAR, both on June 29, 2003 made it easier for Chinese capital to invest and thereby exercise even greater influence over Hong Kong broadcast media, to use its controlling interests in news media organizations to constrain freedom of expression and to use advertising funds and market access to reward obedient and punish the remaining dissident media, notably the free-wheeling Apple Daily.

The erosion of news freedom in Hong Kong since CEPA is reflected in its decline from "Free" in the annual global ranking for freedom of the press issued by Freedom House in 2005 to a ranking of "Partly Free" in April 2010.

Taiwan's vulnerability and choices

The Legislative Yuan Legal Affairs Bureau report cautioned that "various signs indicate that mainland China will gradually use the Hong Kong model for dealing with broadcasting media to Taiwan."

Such signs include the takeover of the China Times print and broadcast media group by China-friendly Wang Wang Group Chairman Tsai Eng-meng, personal attacks in pro-KMT print and broadcast media against the Dalai Lama during his visit to Kaohsiung after the August 8, 2009 flooding in the wake of Typhoon Morakot and a similar flurry of attacks on the Kaohsiung City government for showing the "Ten Conditions of Love" documentary about Uyghur rights activist Rebiya Kadeer in the Kaohsiung Film Festival and adulatory descriptions of the militaristic parade of PRC military might in news broadcasts last October 1.

Moreover, examples of massive PRC "purchased news," which evade the letter if not the spirit of the legal ban on Chinese advertising in Taiwan media, can be seen on a daily basis in the China Times and other pro-KMT daily newspapers and media.

As in the case of the Hong Kong CEPA, the ECFA may well open more channels for such

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indirect infiltration and influence buying in the Taiwan media.

However, the Legislative Yuan report also noted that while Hong Kong had "no choice but to accept 'one country, two systems,'" Taiwan possesses sufficient capability to make its own decisions" and urged the government and citizens to "cherish" our freedoms and resist "pressure" from China and refuse to engage in self-censorship.

Moreover, given the scant hope of reciprocity in "cross-strait media cooperation" of the most important aspect of the expansion of news freedom in the PRC, it would be unwise for Taiwan news media to restrict themselves to playing on the PRC's "bilateral" game board.

Instead, Taiwan media and journalist organizations should push to structure in the expansion of free access to news, free publication of newspapers and free expression of views in the PRC in any "cross-strait media cooperation" programs and internationalize such exchanges in order to avoid providing more channels for the PRC to engage in "asymmetric" political warfare against our democratic freedoms.

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