

Speech hypocrisy in CTiTV lawsuit

Written by Taipei Times Editorials
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CTiTV last week once again injected itself into the news cycle by suing United Microelectronics Corp founder Robert Tsao (蔡國雄) for defamation.

The suit references a tussle between Tsao and one of the network's reporters during the mogul's news conference on Sept. 1. Formerly sympathetic to China, Tsao has emerged as Beijing's No. 1 critic, holding flashy media events sporting bulletproof vests and helmets to speak his unfiltered thoughts about the Chinese threat. The latest news conference was held to announce his NT\$1 billion (US\$32.39 million) donation to train a 3.3 million-strong militia, as well as the resumption of his Taiwanese citizenship, which he had forfeited in 2011 for Singaporean nationality.

Whenever an opinionated voice rises, another on the opposite end of the political spectrum is sure to try to overtake it. CTiTV found an opportunity to do so with Tsao's "bandit network" comment following a question about Taiwan's COVID-19 response from CTiTV reporter Lin Chen-yu (林陳宇), who asked whether Tsao's criticism of China's "foolish zero COVID-19" policy was also an indictment of former minister of health and welfare Chen Shih-chung (陳世昌).

Upset at the "trap" question, Tsao refused to answer and launched into a diatribe against CTiTV, calling it a "bandit network" and urging people not to watch. The "bandit" comment struck a nerve, as it hearkened back to anti-communist rhetoric from the Martial Law era.

When filing the lawsuit, CTiTV chairman Liao Li-sheng (廖立昇) said that the network had "no choice but to sue," as Tsao's comments "not only harmed CTiTV's reputation, but also damaged the education of children across Taiwan, trampled on Taiwanese morals and scorned freedom of speech."

The freedom of speech argument is especially puzzling given the context. As a private citizen, Tsao has the right to speak his mind. On the other hand, CTiTV is looking to legally punish someone for speaking freely, thereby restricting his speech.

While the network is arguing that it must protect its reputation against slander, past attempts have not worked in its favor. Its parent company, Want Want China Times Media Group, has

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threatened legal action against a slew of organizations and individuals in the past — including former Democratic Progressive Party legislator Luo Wen-chia (羅文chia) — over comments that it receives funding and instruction from Beijing. Judges ruled in the politician's favor after investigations found evidence of payments to the group from the Chinese government.

The TV network knows how important it is to protect speech freedoms. In 2020, the National Communications Commission decided not to renew CTi News' license over repeated contraventions of media regulations. The decision sparked heated debate about the importance of press freedom.

CTiTV is right — speech freedoms are crucial to the functioning of a thriving democracy, but using the threat of legal action to stifle speech serves the opposite purpose. Even if optics are the point, the public can detect such blatant hypocrisy and theatrics, especially after years of trying the same gambit. Instead of wasting more judicial resources on ineffectual lawsuits, the network should push back with reasoned debate for its own and the public's sake.

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