

Political Unification and Independence in the Media: The Case of Taiwan

*By Jia-wei Liu**

The unification-independent issue is an important political cleavage in Taiwan, and the media is capable of constructing a reality which delimits people's imagination of unification and independence. This identity issue is a concern at the present age because democratic politics contain multiple perspectives that let the minority express its unification-independent attitude. When different attitudes appear in the majority and minority, it forms a discrepancy in identity. And undoubtedly, media information plays a discourse role in people's political identity discrepancy.

Keywords: editorial, media, Taiwan, unification and independence

Research Objectives

In the area of political attitudes, the most polarizing issue in Taiwan is without doubt that of unification versus independence for Taiwan (Chu & Lin, 2001; Hsieh & Niou, 1996; Lin, Chu, & Hinich, 1996; Wachman, 1994; Wang, 2008; Wu, 1992; Wu, 1993, 2005; Wu, 1997; Wu, 1999, 2001; Sheng, 2002; Chen, 2003; You, 1996; You, Lin, & Lim, 2013). Since 1990, attitudes among the Taiwanese public on the matter of unification versus independence has shifted between these two polar extremes. The supporters of either stance do not appear to be able to agree with the supporters from the other side of the fence. The question of whether cross-strait relations are headed for unification or further independence/autonomy, for Taiwan, has become a burning topic in political science and in politics. So the research objectives seem to analyze the role the media play in presenting and creating the independence-unification cleavage, but not how media affect people's thought.

The binary nature of the positions on the issue is highly related to the process of democratization. Following the lifting of the martial law in 1987, the topic remained confined to those in power, whose political objective was unification. This meant that despite its emergence, the Taiwan independence movement had very little room to grow and flourish. Therefore, the general public of the time identified commonly with the Republic of China (Hsu, 2009, p. 45), i.e., the national concept of a Greater China, (Shaw, 1997, p. 21) at the time. However, the lifting of the martial law brought constitutional protection for freedoms such as speech and assembly, creating more space for discourse on Taiwanese independence (Chen, 2004, p. 174-177).

As Taiwan became democratized, direct presidential elections became the key mode of power transfer in its political system. Not only do the results

* Associate Professor, Department of Public Administration and Policy, National Taipei University, Taiwan.

reflect the public opinion, but they also function, to a large extent, as a "weather vane" for Taiwan politics. In particular, the 2000 presidential elections ended 50 years of rule by the Kuomintang, with the president-elect hailing from another party, the pro-Taiwan nationalist Democratic Progressive Party, for the first time. This was a major step in the consolidation of Taiwan's democratization. In addition, Taiwan had another transfer of power in 2008, with the Kuomintang's trade and economic policies vis-à-vis China gaining the attention of the public. Ideas concerning cross-strait relations, such as the 1992 Consensus and the Taiwan Consensus, became the focus of public discourse again during the 2012 presidential elections. Overall, the topic of unification versus independence presents a key political disagreement that receives further public attention and is further accentuated during presidential elections.

This study takes the approach of analyzing the stances of four key Taiwanese newspapers on this topic across four presidential elections. Multiple papers have been selected mainly because each paper may have had a specific perspective on the issue. As the impact of the media on the public is significant, the analysis of the media content is important, particularly in the context of Taiwan's polarized political environment.

Literature Review

Media and identification have gained more attention in contemporary times chiefly because the media plays a constructivist role and delimits the imagination of identification of the ordinary person. Identification has garnered more attention in contemporary times because democratic politics are capable of accommodating an array of perspectives, allowing many who belong to a political minority to display their political identification. When identity politics occur in both the majority and the minority, a difference in identification is created. Without a doubt, media content plays a discursive role in differences in identification among members of the public. Differences in identification among members of the public will in turn lead individuals to select and consume their preferred media. If the Taiwanese media and public show high degrees of polarization on the topic of unification versus independence, how the media affects the debate and vice-versa then becomes an excellent topic of study for researchers working in the areas of media and identification.

The essence of the study of political communications lies in the study of how political information impacts the popular opinion (McNair, 1995); that is, the study of media effects. Studies in this field focus on the impact of media content on audiences, with the work of Chaffee (1980), Swanson and Nimmo (1990), Lowery and DeFleur (1994), and Perse (2006) the most representative in this regard. Among recent studies in political communication, we have seen how Njogu and Middleton (2009) have studied the impact of the media on national identification and loyalty. Lasorsa and Rodriguez (2013) regarded "identification" and "media" as new topics in modern communications studies. Their work has shown an interest on their part on the subject of media use and

identification among African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latin Americans.

Bourdieu (1991, p. 223) held that nationalism is a kind of "**performative discourse**" and that any discourse on national boundaries and the subject of national identity is a performance of delimiting power. The media often creates and propagates biases, which then become more concrete for the public through the latter's impressions of newspaper reports. These biases are then further disseminated through day-to-day discussions and complete what is a cycle of communication. Therefore, public discourse in the media is the result of the meeting of the market and the public opinion. In the course of communication and dialogue, very often only specific meanings are emphasized and transmitted through a kind of abstract process. This process is where the market and public opinion intersect (Gandy, 2001). Early on, Chang (1997) attempted to quantify newspaper narrative structures on the subject of unification versus Taiwanese independence during the 1989, 1992, and 1995 election periods (including headlines and news narratives, the distribution of news sources in news narratives, and whether terminology used in news reports carried value judgments) for further analysis. With this study, which had the tinge of a "performative discourse" study, she found significant differences in the stances taken by various papers regarding the subject, with the net result that reports by these papers lost the value of pluralistic reporting. However, as the political environment opened up and more opportunities for reporting on the values of Taiwanese independence appeared, newspaper content on the topic became more diverse.

Since nationalism is a kind of "performative discourse", the media is effectively the vehicle of such a "performative discourse" with the constructivist nature of the media showing in the process. Public discourse in the mass media is unique, because compared to other forms of public discourse, public discourse in the mass media plays the role of the media as well as an even deeper role as a public actor. The media functions as a vehicle and platform for public discourse in political and other arenas. Therefore, the mass media is also an actor in the public square. The media is not just a vehicle or platform for "imagining" but also shapes the "imaginings" of individuals with the framing created through its agency (Chen, 2004). Lefkowitz stated that the media can shape the public image of a political party through reporting (2001). Through such an influence, the media is able to influence elections, reinforce or undermine the discourse on national identification by a political party, and influence the masses. More importantly, Beeden and de Bruin (2010) have discovered that media reporting can help re-configure societies torn apart by religious and secular differences by creating negotiation and mediation effects via public discourse. This creates a dynamic balance of public opinions that does not then go out of control. Thus, the relationship between the media and identification is that of an imagined community with the media capable of shaping and reinforcing shared life experiences, culture, and so on. This in turn helps form or strengthen national identity. Therefore, the media is both the vehicle and origin of imagination.

As such, identification is the process and result of psychological imagining. The mass media helps individuals imagine and even guides the "imaginings" of individuals. Identification can also take on different orientations in response to different forces. Generally speaking, spontaneous and bottom-up forces are typically of a cultural orientation while governmental institutions and constitutional values, which are often top-down, are of a political orientation. However, both the political and cultural orientations are critical factors in the building of national identity.

Research Method

For this study, first-hand information collected was subjected to content analysis in order to interpret the editorial stands of four key newspapers with regard to the issue of unification versus Taiwanese independence. The newspapers analyzed for their editorial headlines and content on the issue of unification versus Taiwanese independence included *United Daily News*, *China Times*, *Liberty Times*, and *Apple Daily*. In this study, we selected all the news about political unification and independence in the newspaper, so we did not sample copies for this study.

For this study, presidential elections since 2000 were selected mainly because the 2000 presidential election was for the first time a transfer where political power occurred. This election was more competitive compared to the presidential elections of 1996 and before, and presidential candidates also presented varying ideologies on the matter of unification versus Taiwanese independence. The political behavior of these candidates can be attributed to the process of democratization, which has allowed for a variety of stances on the matter to surface. During the 1996 presidential election, although this was the first time direct elections were held, the Kuomintang was dominant compared to other political parties, which meant that the competitive landscape on the issue of unification versus Taiwanese independence was rather muted in contrast. Therefore, this study takes for its starting point the 2000 presidential election, during which a transfer of political power to another political party occurred for the first time.

What is content analysis? Neuman (2006) held that content analysis is a technique that collects and analyzes textual content, including written text, meanings, images, symbols, ideas, or other types of information that can be communicated. According to Manheim and Rich (1995), content analysis involves the calculation, evaluation, and judgment of the form and essence of communication. For Babbie (2001), content analysis is the study of various types of human communication records as well as of any components or collection of such records.

For this study, various stances on the issue of unification versus independence were rated from 1 to 5. These scores represented "strongly in favor of independence", "slightly in favor of independence", "neutral", "slightly in favor of unification", and "strongly in favor of unification", respectively.

The definitions of each category are as follows. The newspaper content was coded by two coders in accordance with this principle. The degree of consent was at least 0.9.

1. Strongly in favor of independence: Those who fall into this camp emphasize Taiwanese sovereignty and self-determination by residents and are opposed to the One-China policy.
2. Slightly in favor of independence: Although this group of individuals is invested in the autonomy of Taiwan, they do not emphasize the topics of independence, self-determination, and sovereignty.
3. Neutral: No particular political stance.
4. Slightly in favor of unification: These individuals are opposed to the radical positions for independence.
5. Strongly in favor of unification: Those who emphasize a One-China political structure fall into this category.

Data Analysis

Below is the analysis of how editorial stances among Taiwanese newspapers on cross-strait issues changed between 1999 and 2012 as well as the differences between each paper on the matter. First, between 1999 and 2000, 14.5% of reporting is categorized as "strongly in favor of independence". This number is lower than the 30.0% in the total. The 49.2% of editorials categorized as "slightly in favor of independence" during this period is significantly higher than the 26.5% in the total. For reporting that was "slightly in favor of unification", the percentage was 8.4%, significantly lower than the 30.0% in the total. "Strongly in favor of unification" constituted 6.5% of reporting during this period, significantly higher than the 1.5% in the total. Therefore, "slightly in favor of independence" was a more prominent style of reporting between 1999 and 2000.

Second, between 2003 and 2004, reporting that was "strongly in favor of independence" constituted 37.9% of the sample, significantly higher than the 30.0% in the total. Reporting categorized as "slightly in favor of independence" accounted for 15.8%, significantly lower than the 26.5% in the total. Reporting deemed "neutral" made up 32.8% during this period, significantly lower than the 25.5% in the total. Reporting that was "slightly in favor of unification" made up 13.5% during this period, significantly lower than the 16.6% in the total. Reporting that was "strongly in favor of unification" accounted for 0.0% during this period, significantly lower than the 1.5% in the total. Therefore, we note that between 2003 and 2004, reporting on the issue tended towards the "strongly in favor of independence" and "neutral" categories.

Interestingly, no virtual difference in reporting stances was seen between the overall figures and the 2007-2008 figures. Additionally, between 2011 and 2012, "neutral" reporting constituted 19.6%, a number significantly lower than the 25.5% in the total. Reporting that was "slightly in favor of unification",

accounted for 26.0% during this period, significantly higher than the 16.6% in the total. Therefore, we can say that between 2011 and 2012, reporting on the issue tended towards the category of "Slightly in favor of unification".

Positions on unification versus independence did vary over time. Let us now examine further the differences in the editorial stances on the issue by focusing on the four key newspapers. In the case of *United Daily News*, 0.4% of its reporting is categorized as "strongly in favor of independence" a figure significantly lower than the 30.0% in the total, whereas reporting that was "slightly in favor of independence" accounted for 2.2% of its reporting on the subject, significantly lower than the 26.5% in the total. "Neutral" reporting constituted 49.8% of the reporting on the subject in the paper, significantly higher than the 25.5% in the total. *UDN* reporting that was "slightly in favor of unification" made up 42.2% of the papers' reporting on the subject, significantly higher than the 16.6% in the total, whereas reporting that was "strongly in favor of unification" made up 5.4% of the papers' reporting, significantly higher than the 1.5% in the overall figures. Therefore, reporting on the subject at *United Daily News* tended towards the "neutral" and "slightly in favor of unification" stances.

In the case of *China Times*, reporting that was "strongly in favor of independence" accounted for 2.7% of the reporting on the subject, significantly lower than the overall figure of 30.0%, whereas reporting that was "slightly in favor of independence" constituted 12.2% of the reporting of the paper, significantly lower than the 26.5% in the total. "Neutral" reporting constituted 31.2% of editorials at the paper, significantly higher than the 25.5% in the total. Reporting that was "slightly in favor of unification" constituted 50.2% of the reporting of the paper, significantly higher than the overall 16.6%, whereas reporting that was "strongly in favor of unification" accounted for 3.6% of reporting, significantly higher than the overall figure of 1.5%. Therefore, reporting at *China Times* tended towards "slightly in favor of unification".

In the case of *Liberty Times*, reporting categorized as "strongly in favor of independence" accounted for 52.1% of the reporting on the subject by the paper, significantly higher than the overall total of 30.0%, whereas reporting that was "slightly in favor of independence" accounted for 40.2% of the papers' reporting, significantly higher than the overall figure of 26.5%. "Neutral" reporting constituted 7.3% of *Liberty Times* reporting on the subject, significantly lower than the overall figure of 25.5%. Reporting that was "slightly in favor of unification" accounted for 0.4% of the reporting of the paper, significantly lower than the overall figure of 16.6%, whereas reporting that was "strongly in favor of unification" made up 0.0% of the papers' reporting, significantly lower than the overall total of 1.5%. Therefore, reporting on the subject at the *Liberty Times* tended towards the "strongly in favor of independence" and "slightly in favor of independence" categories.

Finally, in the case of *Apple Daily*, reporting that was "strongly in favor of independence" accounted for 1.3% of the papers' reporting on the subject, significantly lower than the overall percentage of 30.0%, whereas reporting that was "slightly in favor of an independent Taiwan" constituted 13.4% of the

papers' reporting, significantly lower than the overall total of 26.5%. "Neutral" reporting at the paper accounted for 73.8% of the total, significantly higher than the overall weight of 25.5%. Reporting that was "slightly in favor of unification" made up 11.4% of the papers' reporting, significantly lower than the overall total of 16.6%, whereas reporting that was "strongly in favor of unification" made up 0.0% of the papers' reporting on the subject, significantly lower than the overall percentage of 1.5%. Therefore, reporting at *Apple Daily* tended to be "neutral" on the subject.

Conclusions

In this paper, we analyzed the editorial content of four key Taiwanese newspapers on the subject of unification versus Taiwanese independence and discovered that between 1999 and 2000, the predominant editorial stance was "slightly in favor of independence", whereas the predominant stances between 2003 and 2004 were "strongly in favor of independence" and "neutral". Between 2011 and 2012, editorials tended towards the "slightly in favor of unification" category. Interestingly, no virtual difference in reporting stances was seen between the overall figures and the 2007-2008 figures. Between 2011 and 2012, reporting on the issue tended towards the category of "Slightly in favor of unification". Why was the trend changing? The Political Environments had a transition to democracy. Newspaper had the opportunity to express the voices of independence.

In our analysis of the editorial stance by the newspaper, we found that editorials at *United Daily News* tended to be "neutral" and "slightly in favor of unification", whereas editorials on the subject at *China Times* tended to be "slightly in favor of unification". The editorial stance at the *Liberty Times* tended to be "strongly in favor of independence" and "slightly in favor of independence", whereas editorials at the *Apple Daily* tended towards the "neutral" category.

The study of newspaper editorials is a study of the process of how people imagined their identification at that point in time as reflected through the editorials of the day. The analysis of editorial stances on the subject of unification versus independence allows us to understand whether the performative discourses and constructions of these newspapers were distinctive. There is a sense of timeliness to newspapers. The daily newspapers reflect public opinion at the time and the key events that have just occurred. From a macro perspective, longitudinal newspaper analysis reveals a "textual context" that can help us understand how public opinion develops and shifts over time. This is particularly true for the development of political identification, which requires longitudinal observation to view a more complete picture. At last, we focused on the content of newspapers, so we used a content analysis. So we did not use a survey, because this study of newspaper editorials was not a study of the process of how people imagined their identification at that point in time as reflected through the editorials of the day.

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