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The Social Responsibility of News Media— the Case of Nuclear Energy News Reporting In Taiwan (draft)

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Abstract

This essay talks about the changing role of Taiwan's news media not only with less journalistic profession but also with much more superficial and sensational performance. Mainly the change of news media in the past ten years is directly caused by economic-political change, and indirectly influenced both by educational reform and by the personal influence. Besides, the education of journalism in school and the training of journalists in the press do have some "contributions" to the overwhelming unethical cases happened in all the news media, especially in the case of news of nuclear power plants or nuclear energy information. This essay is focused on the discussion of the case of nuclear energy news with the authors' long term inside observations and a short period of content analysis of nuclear energy news on a nation-wide newspaper.

The term of 'professional ethics' in this essay is confined to a well-educated professions, i. e., the active and positive role of news media with no fear from any sovereign power in a modern society. With this proposition, the social responsibility of news media is pre-requisite as the basic ethical issue of news media in a democratic society. In the conclusion, the authors argue that the professional education and training in journalism without any emphasis on ethics is the key factor to the bad performance of the nuclear energy news reporting in the news media in Taiwan. And, the double-standard-value's rationale with wrong-doing behaviors of elites and others might be able to blame to their less Chinese ethics background or a little cultivation from the traditional Chinese culture since they were raised in Taiwanese families. Taiwan was invaded by Japan during World War II and had been occupied and ruled by Japan for 50 years since 1895.

The lifting newspaper ban in 1988

In late 1987, the former President Chiang, Chin-Kuo announced the ban to new

newspaper would be lifted soon. Then, in the first date of 1988, the newspaper ban was lifted unexpectedly soon. In 1988-89, many (approximately over 100) new newspapers were in advent without a long term planning even without a personnel recruiting concern in advance. Many business people stepped into the ‘newspaper market’ with an eye of businessmen instead of from the view of traditional literary people. Before 1988, there were 33 nation-wide and local newspapers in the market. In the press, the majority of people from the management and editorial department are from liberal arts or journalism background.

As we often said in journalism school, the press is run like an education institute not like an enterprise of business, therefore, the newspaper’s owner usually is a literary person, not a business man. This is the fact written in the history of Chinese press. In brief, the Chinese press including Taiwanese newspaper has a different ideology from the American press. We always believe that the social responsibility of the press or the news media is inherited from the press itself; the role as a teacher.

There were only nine universities, or colleges having journalism programs and departments in 1990’s, but this number is increased in near one hundred schools now in Taiwan. After the death of President Chiang, Chin-kuo on January 13, 1988, the Vice President Lee, Deng-huei became as the President. Then, within his 12 years term as the President, especially in the last six years (1994-2000), he turned over most of the national economic-political policy toward anti-China and favor-Japan, also reformed the educational institution and system with an idea so-called as de-Chinalized. And, his substitute, the present President Chen, Shui-bian is like his follower, also follows his economic-political and educational policy.

After 12 years, the policy turns out a bad one and forces people to pay a high price, especially on the educational side, such as too many college students without jobs after graduation. This is the same case in the expansion of journalism schools and the flourishing numbers of newspapers; schools without enough qualified teachers from journalism profession and the press without the average expertise of news media. As a result, 98% of the new newspapers were out of business within 2-5 years and there are 25 schools remaining in mass communication, but change into communication management, visual communication or arts design majored instead of journalism majored.

The less concern on media ethics in journalism education

In the traditional school of journalism in Taiwan, ethical issues are often discussed in a variety of classes, such as reporting and writing, editing, journalism, or in a specific course like ‘media ethics,’ ‘ethical issues in the press.’ But, as previously said, the policy of educational reform did have changed the school of journalism with a strong influence on curriculum, a reform of course-design in a large scale. For instance, there is a new course called ‘Taiwanese news history,’ substitute for ‘Chinese news history,’ though the teacher is neither an expert in news history nor in journalism in his doctoral study. Instead, his expertise is in Chinese studies (from an American university) although he does not like to mention the fact that Taiwan is part of free China (Republic of China), not the present Communist China (P. R. C.). Taiwan is a place that people speak Chinese, living with Chinese culture, and ancestors from mainland China.

Since Mr. Chen became as the President in 2000, people like this professor become much outspoken in the public in many aspects even not from his profession. Most people like this professor are not qualified in his profession, but having the qualification called as ‘political legitimacy’ with a consensus shared (not in written) by the recruiting committee while recruiting a new faculty member in his department. This is very common in many national universities now. Students, especially in graduate schools, copy this case as the ideology-oriented concern (like Taiwan as the first, localism as the first, others are not favorite) is their first priority to choose these topics and advisers.

Besides, the so-called educational reform movement changes all the courses from one year term into one semester, some required courses into optional courses including ‘basic reporting and writing’ as one semester, ‘ethical issues of news media’ as option. This change for sure will make a difference on the outcome; students without good skills of professions like reporting and writing, and without a decent mind of ethics from professional concern in practice.

Ideology-oriented concern superior to unethical/law-breaking behaviors as a rationale

Politically, from the late period of President Lee to the present President Chen, both do not concern a person’s qualification for his position instead of his ideology as the priority concern. This is the same case as the recruiting new faculty at the first glance

in the recruiting committee in many universities. Therefore, new comers in journalism department may never have done anything related to journalism or mass communication, but sit in the committee of journalism curriculum. As a result, he or she gives comments on “there is no real fact in the real world, there is no fact reporting, and straight news is out of date,” instead he or she embraces the ideology of consumer-oriented, or selling and public relation, and applied into news reporting.

No respect to professions is not only happened in the politics’ arena, but also a common phenomenon in academia in the past 12 years or more. Both the President Lee and Chen have abused their power to manipulate the news media and scholars with the same ideology of theirs. However, there are lots of obvious evidences shown on the news media. The worse they did the more news published on newspapers for they cannot totally control all the news media. Sometimes, they even show the evidences of their wrong doing without self awareness in a news conference held by them.

For example, in late 2006, it was shown in the DA’s (Taipei district attorney) files that the present President Chen is involved in an embezzlement scandal that his wife (the first lady) asked the Presidential officers during office hours run an errand for herself, also of her ‘stealing’ the Presidential money for her personal use, such as buying jewelry for herself, winter coat for her daughter, and even toilet paper for her daughter, baby’s diaper for her grandson or paying the dinner bill for her son-in-law. In Chinese culture or conventions, there is a saying that her case is too embarrass to speak out in public. But, Mr. and Mrs. Chen, and his colleagues including his comrade scholars argue these unethical/law-breaking behaviors with nonsense/illogical rationale in the news conference without any sorrow, apology or embarrass. People are joking of them because they claim there are not Chinese (the de-Chinalized policy), so they don’t have to feel embarrass or sorrow toward the Taiwanese people unless the law sentences they are guilty in the misconduct.

This is very common to the officers in the Chen’s government, also true to his comrade legislators in the Parliament for supporting Chen’s position. Meanwhile, the wrong-doing rationale is also adopted by scholars/professors in journalism or other fields in a great deal in the past few years. All of these events with their rationales were covered by newsmen and newswomen, also reported in news media. Up to now, there is no theory to explain this abnormal behavior and rationale except for ‘the obstinate audience’ (Bauer, 1964:319-328) in perception theory. However, the authors think there is another explanation might be able to blame their less Chinese ethics

background or a little cultivation from the traditional Chinese culture in their childhood for their parents were living in Taiwan both ruled by Japan for 50 years under a Japanese colonialism since 1895 and later occupied by Japan through the invasion during World War II.

Neither specific news training in journalism school nor on-the-job training in the press

According to Hsieh's studies (1984 and 2006), science news has been a part of news reporting for a long time but without any attention to people both in journalism education and in media's practice. In Taiwan, journalism is in the area of liberal arts and humanities. There is no special training program of sciences or engineering offered in journalism education. In the mass media, after 1988's newspaper ban lifting, usually new comers go to work directly without any formal opening training, even no regular on-the-job training program for reporters because there is no time and money. Science news coverage in the news media is always assigned to the new comer, a general-assignment reporter. The nuclear energy news and nuclear power plants news are assigned to a general-assignment reporter or local reporters. Besides, ethical issues in practice have never been the topic of discussion for a long time if there is a seminar on news media's performance.

Before 2000, the year President Chen started his first term, journalism schools often held seminars on controversial issues on media ethics or the government's any wrong doing toward the free press. Professors in journalism who used to be very critical and cynical toward the former President Chiang's media policy keep silent on many cases of President Chen's suing the news media, also keep quiet on the case of his embezzlement scandal. It is very common phenomenon of the double-standard-value in academia; the obvious example is the former president of academia Sinica, the highest prestigious academic institution in Taiwan, Lee Yuan-Tse. With a Nobel laureate in chemistry, he stands for Mr. Chen's words and behaviors all the time even after President Chen's himself commitments to 'wrong conduct' or 'not done as he promised in presidential election,' even makes excuses or an rationale for the President. He said "the election claims are for not necessary to be done." His saying becomes a popular joke not only in intellectual society but in the general public also.

Mr. Lee is a typical example to demonstrate the down-grade of reporters in many aspects in the past 12 years since he started to be the president of Academia Sinica.

He got much exposure to news media in educational reform policy for his leading position in the committee of educational reform (from elementary to junior high), in advocating the so-called 'campus democracy' at colleges and universities (to agitate the elective process of president, dean and head by all faculties), in standing for his favorite candidate in the last day before the voting date, in criticizing the news media misquotation of his words, in fighting back to teachers groups' response to his layman's qualification in elementary or high school education, but never showed his respect to those professions, also never committed his opinion or comment to be wrong, and never say sorrows or apology in front of the media although it proved he should be responsible for the outcomes. He often said "in the U.S., it is not like this..." or "the American reporters are doing...so, so..." Gradually, most people including news people dislike him very much but with no choice to chase for covering and interviewing him because he is a controversial figure with the eye-catch news value.

His case shows that people in the news media not easy to get any respect from scientists, especially the person like Dr. Y. T. Lee, not only in scientists' expertise but also in media's profession for the superficial and sensational performance as mentioned previously.

Nuclear Energy Information Flow in Theory

The communication of scientific information including nuclear energy information to nonscientists in the field of communication studies is a specific area, i.e., so called as science communication. In the process of communication, there are scientists (in general definition, including engineers) as the key sources, public relations and science writers as the second sources, media science writers as the third sources, and media editors as the fourth sources. And, the audience is the receiver of the message. If there is any interpersonal linker between scientists and the audience or between science writers and the audience, the interaction in the process will make some changes to the effect of science communication. It is happened so often that the nuclear energy news to people is much influenced by personal influence than media's reporting according to Hsieh's study (2006).

According to science communication, the nuclear energy information flow to the general public includes three elements:

(1) Communicator: the professional community, such as academics/universities, industry, governmental affiliations, professional institutions, international groups, etc.,

and mass media, such as journalists, editors, science writers and other media people.

(2) Message: nuclear energy/atomic power information with the nature of hard science and high technology, also along with a part of unknown or rumor information.

(3) Audience/reader/consumer: the general public including higher education people with little knowledge and understanding of nuclear science and engineering.

Nuclear Energy Information Flow in Taiwan

Since the year of early 1985, one of the authors has been involved in the affairs of nuclear power plants and related events, such as a study of Taipower Company's public relations (Lee, Wong and Hsieh, 1986), giving lectures to teachers and principles from elementary or junior high schools, delivering speeches to Taipower Company's engineers of nuclear power plants, giving speeches to AEC's (Atomic Energy Council) officials and lectures to professors in nuclear science and engineering. With more than 20 years of participation in as an inspector/judge of the emergency response exercise of nuclear power plants, and as a review of the safety-culture of nuclear power plants, also with a two terms of two-year member of AEC' Safety Commission of Nuclear Facilities and Equipments, and a member for law enforcement on the regulation of the high level radwaste depository, one of the authors is familiar to people whom in nuclear family. She has been treated as one of their colleagues and friends in the family of nuclear energy for a long time. However, as a long time friend, the authors thought the nuclear people in most are still like "scientists," not as "literary people" in terms of Snow's two cultures (1980) though they have learned so much of science communication from one of the authors. More details will be discussed as follows in the nuclear energy 'community' and the nuclear energy/power 'message' itself.

The Community

"Engineers' Culture" was called as the other name of Taipower Company in newspaper in 1985-86. It has a symbolic meaning, which is represented as awkward/bad communication not only in professionals but in daily life also. The communication between Taipower people and Media people was similar to the case of Snow's literary people and scientists (1980). Snow said, "They (scientists) are inclined to be impatient to see if something can be done: and inclined to think that it can be done, until it's proved otherwise." (1980: 7) There are full of misunderstanding, distorted image toward each other though they do have some contacts for the reason

of news release or of accidental events.

A study (Lee, Wong and Hsieh, 1986) shows that Taipower Company got much coverage by reporters not only on the nuclear power issues but also on other energy topics. However, the content analysis shows that most of the news reporting and writing are aimed at the negative side with exaggeration of the danger of nuclear energy and the engineers' incapability of communication to the public. From their experience of the contact with one or few engineers, reporters tend to mix up their personal impression with only one or a few of contacts, generalize to the whole Taipower, then to the entire nuclear community.

It is partially true to some extent that engineers are like scientists tend to be "brash" and "boastful," as Snow said. In the ivory tower, scientists have the characteristics of not good at communicating with outsiders and often without paying any attention to others, especially people from the outside. Some of them even could not understand why the literary people make things complicated. To them, it is so simple to analyze things by logics with formula. Oversimplification is one trait that literary people cannot stand, neither understood by the media people.

In the Taipower case, after years of contacts with each other, nuclear engineers gradually accept the fact but not agree to that news of nuclear power plants in mass media was not covered fairly, completely, accurately, and in detail. People in nuclear community with only few exceptions including professors from Tsing-Hua University (the only university with nuclear engineering and atomic science majors in Taiwan), specialists from AEC and engineers from Taipower Company, have unhappy experiences of interviewed by journalists. They always talk about the performance of the mass media with the tone of cynical and hopeless. This is becoming worse and worse in the recent years for the overwhelming downgrade of mass media and the bad performance of President Chen's government as mentioned previously.

As a result, to compare to the period of 1985-2000, it is hard to find a visible person from nuclear area in news nowadays even though the fourth nuclear power plant (with 2 ABWR—A type Boiled Water Reactor units) is under construction. It seems the nuclear community in a large chooses to keep silent, not like the past aggressively and actively communicating to the mass media. They only do the necessary one when there is any requirement. The most influential factor is the government's energy policy is changing, uncertain, and not supportive toward nuclear energy. However, the paper will not focus on discussing this factor though it is highly related to the

effectiveness of communication of nuclear energy information.

The Message

The problem of the nuclear energy community, to a great extent, is that people in nuclear energy don't realize the information of nuclear energy/power is totally odd, strange, 'dangerous' and very new to the general public if the public cannot get from the news media, especially newspaper and television. According to Hsieh's studies (1984 & 1991), people- or policy-oriented issues are the major concern instead of technical or scientific related subjects of science news in Chinese newspapers in Taiwan. Nearly all the technical information is ignored by the mass media people while there are news-valued events covered. Inaccuracy, distortion, exaggeration, and oversimplification are the most salient criticism in science information. This is the same case of nuclear energy issue.

Nuclear scientists and engineers will find it is much difficult and complicated to engage in pursuit of the popularization of nuclear energy information than in their professions, in teaching, doing research and communicating to each other within their own community. The nature of nuclear energy information carries both the characteristics of hard science and the unknown, dangerous myth of the radiation itself. It makes the flow of nuclear energy information through the mass media has much more barriers than science information in general. Even worse, the study of Taipower's public relations (Lee, Wong and Hsieh, 1986) shows there is frequently more negative words like "radiation leak likely," "fires threatening the reactors," "potential explosion of the reactors," and "always dangerous to the workers at the power plants" reported by the mass media, but without any introduction, explanation, elaboration, or illustration of the theory, function and operation of BWR-4's (Boiled Water Reactor-4), BWR-6's (Boiled Water Reactor-6) and PWR (Pressed Water Reactor) reactors, respectively located at Chin-shan, Kuo-sheng and Ma-an-shan in Northern and Southern Taiwan.

In 30 years since the first nuclear power plant constructed at Chin-shan and the second at Kuo-sheng followed in 1976, the mass media didn't give a shot on the whole picture of nuclear power plants, not even in a series of introduction of the "new technology" to the general public. It is a pity that people living in Taiwan with an annually increasing dependence on 20% to 37.37 % nuclear energy of power since 2001 (Chiu and Hu, 2004) are without any knowledge of nuclear energy, also without an awareness of the shortage of nature sources in energy in Taiwan.

There are lots of information needed and concerned by the public, but with no coverage, including the construction of nuclear power plant, safety of the nuclear power plant, nuclear power plants, reactors, storage of spent nuclear fuel, high level radioactive waste (radwaste) depository, intermediate spent fuel storage, lower level waste disposal site, radiation protection and civilian application of nuclear energy.

Nuclear Energy As a Victim of Uncertain Policy

The President Chen claimed the policy of ‘anti-nuclear energy’ without facing the fact that there are three nuclear power plants and the fourth one was under construction in the year of 2000, the first year of his presidential term. ‘No nuke family’ in Chinese means all nuclear energy, not only nuclear power plants but also including medical treatment and research. In English, ‘nuke’ usually stands for nuclear weapons or nuclear force/power. As previously discussed, there is neither any information in detail of what the nuclear power is, how it is bad, where the substitute energy/power is from, how the industry/people will survive if without electricity/power, and so on, in the news media, nor from the government’s public relations brochure. Even the officials from AEC, the highest department in the government, did not know how to tell people what they stand for, how they deal with the affairs of the existing nuclear power plants, and where the Taipower Company (the only company to supply power for everyone) will get new energy from.

There is still no further action from the government looking for new sources of energy until now for Taiwan is a small island of 36 thousands squares kilo-meters with 23 millions of people. Water power and coal used to be the core sources of energy in Taiwan. But, the natural sources of energy have been decreased or vanished for over 40 years’ use, therefore, the import of coal and oil (petroleum) and the construction of nuclear power plants have been become the national policy of energy for a long term concern since 1970’s. There were three nuclear power plants under operation and the fourth was under construction in late 1990’s.

During the presidential election campaign, the policy of nuclear power was ‘claimed’ to be stopped by Mr. Chen. Then, the on-going construction of the fourth nuclear power plant was stop two years after Mr. Chen was elected as the new President in 1998. Now, the construction is still on going with an uncertainty of the energy policy from the Chen’s government. People in nuclear energy family do not have any faith of Chen’s government any more for the double-standard-value, unpredictable,

changeable policy without professional consults has been a nuisance of them because of an uncertainty in their daily life.

Nuclear Energy News in Fragmentation, Irresponsible

Performance

A content analysis of nuclear energy news in a national newspaper, the United Daily from November of 2005 to July of 2006 (Hsieh, 2006), shows that in a broad definition of nuclear energy news, there are 18 articles in domestic and 11 from wires services from international.

Among the 18 articles, four are talking about the Vice President Annette Lu's comments on her party's anti-nuclear energy policy including one commentary from the reporter who covered the news and three in the opinion page of readers', three are local news of a nude protest from environmental protection people toward the fourth nuclear power plant near the construction site.

According to the headlines, the rest of 11 news articles are as follows: "from anti-nuclear to embrace nuclear power...what else the DDP (Democratic Development Party, the executive party) has left?" "to challenge the unchallengeable claim! the Vice President Lu said the anti-nuclear energy is out of date for according to the Kyoto's Protocol the coal- and oil-generators generate much more pollutes than nuclear reactors do," "a regulatory law for the final site to restore the nuclear waste is enforced," "a fine to the first nuclear power plant for a delayed construction to the nuclear waste depository," "President Chen spoke to environmental protection groups not let the fourth nuclear power plants start to operate within his term," "Taipei County sets lots of fines to the delayed construction to the radwaste depository," "local people are worried about the construction of the radwaste depository in the first nuclear power plant," "the Executive Yuan will review; the added budget of 174.3 million U.S. dollars for the construction of the fourth nuclear power plant," "the joint groups of environmental protection will sue the Taipower Company for the added budget," "Y. T. Lee said, Taiwan should apply nuclear energy/power in a short term," and "Y. T. Lee said to the joint groups of the environmental protection that it should have a committee of the truth of the fourth nuclear power plant."

All of the 18 news are not complete stories, even without 5w1h (the basic elements of a news story), neither explanation of backgrounds nor depth reporting. They are not as

good as students' assignments in school in practice of straight news writing. It is astonished to the authors after the analysis. It is also similar to the previous studies done in 1984 (Hsieh), 1986 (Lee, Wong and Hsieh), 1991 (Hsieh) and 2006 (Hsieh), exaggeration, oversimplification, incompleteness and distortion of the news story are the common traits in nuclear energy news, the same as science news in general. Nevertheless, the fourth nuclear power plant is under construction (2 ABWR units) plus the three are in operation, BWR-4's, BWR-6's and PWR reactors are never covered or reported completely with any introduction, explanation, elaboration, or illustration of the theory, function and operation in the news media. So, officials in the government except the AEC people are not familiar to the affairs of nuclear power, but they did speak to the media as experts in nuclear power because the nuclear people didn't want to face the media as previously said in many reasons.

In this case, we can say that the news media is irresponsible for its role of teachers (educating), gatekeepers (informing) and decision-makers (helping people to make decision), especially in new things like high technology of nuclear energy in their living. As the authors mentioned in the abstract, the profession ethics is not only concerned on the wrong conduct/doing in a passive aspect, but also concerned on the should be done in an active and aggressive side of social responsibility.

Conclusion

This essay deals with a complicated case involved in the present special, political situation in Taiwan's history, also very unique to the world politics. We ask for the readers' with empathy in a broad sense and a critical eye of different cultural aspect to read our essay. It is a lonely sad feeling to tell you our nation's story as a tragedy to intellectual people although there is not violent revolution but a quiet cultural revolution on going by the name of 'reform' with a beautiful title of 'democracy' given by politicians, never for the people, of the people, by the people. Some conclusions for the title of this essay have been mentioned in different sections. The authors apologize for this Chinese-style writing.

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