Mediated Politics in Taiwan
Political Talk Shows and Democracy

Wei-chin Lee

Abstract

Talk show programs have been a media phenomenon in many democratic societies. This essay intends to offer an analysis of media discourse and the political deliberation process in Taiwan in the 2000s, by concentrating on the talk-show fever of the past decade. Over this period, any political issue in Taiwan could easily develop into a heavily mediated political event, attracting widespread public attention and leading to a complex, intriguing power relationship among the media, politicians, and the general public. In other words, talk shows have become a forum used by various political forces in Taiwan to compete and struggle for agenda-setting power and to try to manipulate public debates in favor of their political space and place. This study illustrates several distinctive features of Taiwan’s political talk shows, identifies how they frame and promote political issues, shows the mediated interaction among different political actors, and evaluates the contribution of talk shows to Taiwan’s democratic deliberation process.¹

Key words: Mediated politics, political talk shows, political participation, political discourse, deliberative democracy.

While Taiwan’s democratization in the 1990s successfully installed democratic elections, the demand for bargaining, compromise, and consensus among all relevant actors for a smooth transition has resulted in a weakly institutionalized representative democracy. Compounded by a historical legacy of respect for political authority and the importance of maintaining social stability, the reluctance to challenge executive power can inadvertently lead to abuses by governmental authority and policy scleroses.² As social actors that scrutinize

¹ The names and institutional affiliations of interviewees have been deliberately omitted to avoid unnecessary political controversy; the author thanks the interviewees for sharing their comments and observations, however.

and criticize unsanctioned governmental departures from institutional rules of transparency, accountability, and legal appropriateness, the media play a crucial role, particularly when legislative representatives are unable to challenge powerful executive authority or present policy options different from the governmental script to the public for consideration. In the process of generating, deliberating, and legitimizing ideas about the purpose and appropriateness of political action, the media can go through discursive interactions that reset the perimeters of political behavior, rejuvenate democratic values, and reinforce the essence of democratic citizenship.\(^3\)

Such a noble view of media as the “fourth estate,” a watchdog of society, or a guardian of democracy faces criticism as media are frequently under pressure to achieve commercial profits, increase their market share of audiences, maintain ideological predispositions, and sense the swing of public sentiment. Indeed, the media have sometimes been criticized as being lapdogs for certain socio-economic and political groups and as active propagators of specific societal thinking and political agendas.

Hence, the purpose of this essay is to examine the role and impact of media on the process of Taiwan’s democratic consolidation over the last decade, by focusing on the country’s popular but controversial political talk shows. This study illustrates several distinctive features of Taiwan’s political talk shows; examines how they frame and favor certain political issues; highlights the mediated interaction among media entrepreneurs, audiences, and other political actors; and evaluates the mixed results of their contributions to Taiwan’s democratic deliberation process and active citizenship. Due to the lack of sufficient quantitative data, such as talk-show ratings, the study relies on qualitative research for exploration, including secondary data, such as the author’s observations and interviews with scholars, government officials, and media practitioners.

**The Role of Talk Shows in Deliberative Democracy**

Different from regular television news analysis programs, talk shows usually reserve a designated time slot for hosts and commentators (called *minzui* in Taiwan, which literally means “famous mouth”) who address specific issues in a specific length of time. Some programs even solicit the audience’s participation to generate viewers’ interests and to give viewers a feeling of engagement. Through these interactions, hosts and commentators play multiple roles: first, “educating” the public about the details, intrigues, and nuisances

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of a topic; second, “engaging” in discussion among themselves and call-in viewers to arouse public attention; and, last, “entertaining” viewers with witty quips to soften the hard and dry facts.

To some extent, the inclusion of civilian experts or the public in policy debates in these forums may be perceived as buttressing elements of deliberative democracy, and resemble what Tocqueville described as the quest for “the enlightened will of the people” and “a conciliatory government under which resolutions ... are deliberately discussed, and executed with mature judgment.” The inclusion also reflects what recent deliberative democracy proponents have envisioned as “informed and reasoned judgments of the citizenry.”

Ranging from notions of the public sphere and interactivity of citizens to communicative rationality, deliberative democracy stresses the explicit and implicit reconstruction of political deliberation beyond the normative formal decision-making process. It broadens the venues of opportunity and accessibility for political participation to constituents beyond the relatively few designated representatives, enabling them to engage in self-reflection and critical analysis of a wide range of political issues in a reciprocal manner.

Public engagement in deliberation takes time and is likely to foster debates and controversies, but citizen participation provides an opportunity to converse, to learn more about policy issues, and to hold political leaders accountable. Hence, democracy may thrive with a citizenry that is educated through “deliberative polling,” which merges the ideal of direct participation with the necessities of representative democracy.

If direct participation in politics is impossible, deliberative democracy at least increases social representation by airing more voices on talk shows.

Nevertheless, it may be difficult for the ideal version of deliberative democracy to materialize fully, given commercial and political pressures and a society that is deeply divided by almost irreconcilable differences—which Guttmann and Thompson call “deliberative disagreements.” In the context of opposing political views, both sides may seek feasible solutions, but the unwillingness of either side to yield and compromise on core principles may hinder serious attempts to build consensus. Despite the fact that some talk-show hosts might prefer civility, objectivity, and fairness in issue choice and

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argumentation, they have to market their programs in order to win viewers’ loyalty. Similar to any political campaign in which each party tries to move to the center to win an electoral majority, talk-show programs may take a “close to the center” position in order to grab the attention of “swing viewers.” However, the necessity to sustain a faithful audience by demonstrating uniqueness in style and substance also becomes a force to push programs away from the center and toward one side of the political spectrum.

Taiwan’s Media and Political Development

Prior to the rise in popularity of TV news in the early 1960s, print-based newspaper journalists enjoyed ample fact-finding time. The introduction of TV news and network competition added pressures for instant and exclusive coverage of events to catch audience attention.8 Under authoritarianism, the Taiwanese government and the ruling KMT (Kuomintang, Nationalist Party) controlled Taiwan’s three network TV stations—the government-owned TTV, the military-controlled CTS, and the party-dominated CTV—and therefore were able to propagate the party-state’s political ideology and censor information that could threaten regime stability. The lifting of radio and press license restrictions in 1987 opened the market space for opposition parties and nonpartisans to publish daily newspapers and establish new cable channels, collectively called “Channel Four.”9 The 1993 Radio and Television Act released ten batches of bandwidth, totaling 151 frequencies for radio stations, and restricted governmental involvement in private radio stations. Thus, the number of radio stations mushroomed.10 Tough competition in the media industry forced state-controlled TV networks to seek revenue and news.11 The proliferation of media venues was welcomed by political parties and social activists as it facilitated dissemination of campaign messages and policy agendas for political mobilization.

Prior to democratization in the late 1980s, opposition parties had gone underground to use their mobile, low-budget, unlicensed radio stations to promote their views and mobilize their supporters. Even then, call-in radio

programs were quite successful in attracting listeners, without revealing a caller’s identity. Now, the call-in format is a crucial part of Taiwan’s media politics. With the launch of the 2100 Quanmin Kaijiang (2100 All People Talk) program in 1993, political call-in talk shows began to gain popularity among TV viewers.

Taiwan’s democratic transition opened a window for the political opposition to publish a newspaper, the Liberty Times, in support of its political agenda, and for several TV networks to move away from previously government-sanctioned China-centered political orthodoxy. These new media focus on ethnic-identity discourse to promote an indigenous Taiwanese identity and Taiwan’s independence. The advocacy of Taiwanese identity by two former presidents, Lee Teng-hui (1988-2000) and Chen Shui-bian (2000-2008), gave these new media outlets political legitimacy and support to distinguish their program content and audiences from old news media and TV networks. Some of the new media outlets, therefore, tend to be in line with the political orientation of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). They show a clear departure from the “old timers”—TTV, CTV, and CTS. By the end of 2003, roughly one hundred cable channels had claimed 72 percent of the market share in commercial advertising from the veteran stations, causing managers at those stations to watch their earnings slip.

In a cut-throat competition for survival, TV stations now explore new programs with sensational content to boost their ratings and revenues. Taiwan’s mass media are becoming more and more “mess media,” with a wide range of formats and content to meet viewers’ tastes.

Rise of Political Talk Shows

Political competition and television market fragmentation paved the way for the popularity of talk shows that cover political issues, such as electoral strategies, Taiwan’s international status and China policy, disputes over national identity, and tabloid-like political scandals. Each talk show’s visible political favoritism and ideological tilt may attract a huge amount of commercial advertising to its affiliated TV networks from likeminded corporations and political parties. For example, the DPP government had long funneled substantial budgetary resources into the pro-Green SET (Sanlih Entertainment TV) and FTV.

13 In 1998, the Public Television Service (PTS) made its broadcasting debut to compensate for the inadequacy in information distribution to the public and objectivity in coverage of the commercial networks.
15 Ibid., 2.
(Formosa TV). The talk shows might not have received direct contributions, but the profits generated from each talk show program enhanced other programs’ resources.\textsuperscript{16} Since the KMT won a large majority in the 2008 parliamentary elections, it has been reported that the KMT has followed suit and that various media agencies have tried to cultivate good relations with the government in exchange for various governmental contracts.\textsuperscript{17}

Countless political issues provide talk show programs with more than enough material for daily exploration of their implications and the maneuvers of all concerned actors. During the contentious electoral campaigns of the 2000s, political talk shows emerged as one of TV’s prime-time outlets feeding viewers’ political enthusiasm. For example, studies indicate that 59.4 percent of Taiwanese watched political talk shows during the 2004 presidential year, and that 46.2 percent of interviewees watched political talk shows weekly in 2007.\textsuperscript{18}

Public interest in political matters undoubtedly has contributed to the increase in talk-show programs. During the 2004 presidential election, there were thirty-two political talk shows on ten TV channels. Some even replayed their daytime talk shows after midnight for viewers who missed the excitement of the live shows. The failed assassination attempt against the DPP’s President Chen Shui-bian on the eve of the 2004 presidential election provided various programs with ample topics for month-long discussion, ranging from the physical characteristics of the two bullets, the mysterious death of the assassination suspect, and the chaotic crisis management of the president’s security detail, to the KMT’s responses and other matters. Talk shows painstakingly prepared minute-by-minute details of the assassination plot, in an attempt to reconstruct the incident by using various scenarios in order to attract viewers.

At the beginning of President Chen’s second term (2004-2008), his administration sought to dampen both the talk shows’ post-election relentless


\textsuperscript{17} Yingzi Chen, “Zhengmei jinqian youxi paidui, gaishache le” [Political media’s monetary game should step on the brake], \textit{Xinxinwen} [The Journalist], no. 1243 (December 30, 2010-January 5, 2011): 37, and Wenzhong Yang, “Meiti: Cong yiyantang lunwei yiyantang” [Media degenerates from a hall of diverse views to a hall of one voice], \textit{Xinxinwen} [The Journalist], no. 1243 (December 30, 2010-January 5, 2011): 39.

inquiries regarding the assassination plot and their sharp criticisms of the his government’s conservative move in Taiwan’s cross-Strait policy. The DPP government chose to employ its regulatory authority in a periodic licensing review to revoke the license of one TV station, sending a subtle message to all talk show programs, particularly those close to the pan-Blue camp, a broad political grouping of supporters favoring the KMT. Some talk shows with poor ratings were pulled from the air, most likely because audiences had become fatigued from the overabundance of talk shows and the relative homogeneity of topics that were addressed. By 2005, the number of talk-show programs had dropped to ten and has remained around that figure for several years. Meanwhile, talk-show topics have begun to branch out to cover issues related to public policies and cross-Strait relations.

Two talk show programs survived the market sifting process with considerable influence. One is the 2100 Quanmin Kaijiang (2100 All People Talk) program, which was begun in 1993 by TVBS and is considered a representative forum for the pan-Blue camp. Its counterweight is the Dahua Xinwen (Big Talk News), launched in 2002 by SET (Sanlih Entertainment TV), with a political orientation more in line with the pan-Green camp, a political grouping of supporters in favor of the DPP. Each program has its loyal viewers. Even though it was reported that the SET network scaled back the Dahua Xinwen in the wake of the KMT victory in the 2008 presidential election and the planned expansion of its media business in China, the Dahua Xinwen still hosts comments friendly toward the DPP and critical of the KMT’s performance.

In comparison with other entertainment programs, sitcoms, and regular news programs, talk show sessions demand less time and manpower for preparation and production, and benefit from cheaper production costs, averaging between $3,500 and $7,000 for a two-hour session. An invited guest usually receives an honorarium of approximately $100-$150 for hourly participation. As a result, guests with high popularity might attend two or three shows each day and receive a substantial amount in honoraria. Income, therefore, becomes an incentive for guests to make efforts to stay on the invitation lists. While logical reasoning and eloquent presentation are important traits, guest speakers’ sensational remarks and emotional outbursts prove to be one way to arouse viewers’ attention and offer entertainment value.

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Talk Your Ear Off: Politics and Talk Shows

High public interest and low program cost cultivated Taiwan’s talk show popularity in the 2000s. Because political issues are malleable as they evolve in debates, the battle over “problem definition” incorporates various tactics, including audience feedback, to shape the message. Given time and format constraints, a talk show narrows its focus to two or three issues for in-depth exploration, rather than providing a panoramic view of daily happenings. The screening job involves picking an issue from what Riker called the “misty swamp” of everyday politics, and telling viewers what and how to examine this issue in order to shape their understanding and interpretation of a particular aspect of political life.\(^\text{21}\)

Once an issue is chosen, a talk show frames it by using rhetorical tools to propagate certain implicit or hidden ideas. In essence, if politics is about persuasion, framing an issue is one way to direct viewers to certain aspects that producers believe deserve special consideration.\(^\text{22}\) Through framing, talk-show hosts, with the tacit support of carefully chosen guest commentators as collaborators, determine what angle and what content to include in political deliberation as well as what to subtly exclude. Similar to a tactic used in talk shows in other countries, talk show framing in Taiwan uses a mix of information and entertainment to elicit viewers’ attention to certain readings and aspects of political happenings.\(^\text{23}\) Both host and commentator may prepare a brief summary of topic essentials, provide a flow chart to show sequential developments, employ idioms and folk slang for mockeries, and show colorfully printed posters or dry erase boards for easy understanding and dialogue stimulation.

Sometimes, inflammatory titles or subtitles regarding the content of the program serve to evoke debatable and imagined implications. The connotations and implications of headings and subtitles implicitly highlight different perspectives of the issue at hand, guide viewers on how to approach the issue, and lead viewers to reconsider their interests, sentiments, and political values. Take the case of the debate between defenders of traditional Chinese characters in language learning and persons willing to incorporate China’s simplified characters. In 2008, in recognition of the widespread use of simplified Chinese characters, Taiwan’s President Ma proposed the principle of


*shizheng shujian* (recognize and read traditional/orthodox Chinese characters, but write simplified Chinese characters) as a practical solution for language textbooks and teaching in Chinese and Taiwanese compatriot schools abroad. The principle also intended to encourage mainland Chinese familiarity with traditional characters in order to preserve Chinese cultural heritage. Ma’s proposal drew criticisms from both sides of the political isle. Some members of his own party complained that this initiative would further decrease the number of traditional character users, whereas the opposition DPP charged that this principle was additional evidence of Ma’s eagerness to kowtow to China’s cultural, and, of course, political pressures. In debating this sensitive issue, one talk show displayed a subheading, “Writing simplified characters? Be Chinese? Ma-Hsiao [Ma’s vice-presidential candidate in the 2008 presidential election] proclaimed so?” This incited discussion and self-reflection among some viewers regarding one’s political identity and the candidate’s national identification. The subtitle could imply that Taiwan would adopt simplified characters, and Ma would love to be “Chinese” rather than “Taiwanese” in his political identity.24

Programs can serve as specific media forums to promote the dissemination of quasi-partisan discourses. Since most talk shows run for two hours, hosts reiterate a topic’s background and related issues not only for viewers who have just switched to the program but also to remind steady viewers. After repeats of stories, subtitle headings, and themes, talk shows explain the complexity of the issue as well as the standards of evaluation by which viewers can make a personal assessment. The talk show chooses to prime certain aspects of an issue by digging out some historical facts for reflection, providing explanatory comments, and offering some salient standards for a sensible deductive analysis. All dwell on specific angles, assessment standards, and selective parts of the issue that the talk-show host and commentators would like viewers to incorporate into their political calculations.25 Through the process of repetition, talk shows strengthen the weight of certain arguments and refute opponents’ issue ownership. It is a process of narrative construction and audience alignment. The delivery of chosen sets of information is intended to lead audiences to recognize the issue’s contextual meaning and political nuances, and to identify with the narrative agents’ particular solutions. In short, the commentator acts as a “sense-maker” of events, and the audience as a “sense-taker.”

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24 Di Wei, “Zhenglun jiemu zhuanxin, buzhihao huan laibin” [The transformation of political talk shows cannot depend only on the change of guests], *Pingguo ribao* [Apple Daily], Taipei, April 1, 2008.

A case in point is Taiwan’s former President Chen Shui-bian’s scandal of corruption charges starting in 2005, which attracted media attention and scrutiny. After reporting that Chen had funneled government funds to private accounts and falsified receipts for reimbursement claims, anti-Chen talk shows repetitively raised the point that the way to assess a president’s performance was to scrutinize the degree of his rectitude. The implication was that a corrupt, although effective and efficient, president is worse than an inefficient president. These talk shows continually reminded viewers of the limits of presidential authority and of the president’s responsibility in the planning and implementation of government projects. Their solution was to urge a restriction of presidential authority and the enforcement of a proper boundary between the president and Taiwan’s Executive Yuan.

In contrast, in dealing with Chen’s scandal, talk shows with a known affection for the pan-Green camp reminded audiences of Chen’s devotion to the domestic construction of Taiwanese identity and his administration’s international push for Taiwan’s independent status. The charges of embezzlement and corruption became, for these talk shows, a relatively minor defect in personal integrity in comparison with Chen’s major contribution to Taiwan’s independence. Even in the light of several criminal charges, these talk shows stood firm in their commitment to forgive Chen’s mistakes and tried to lighten the severity of the charges by arguing that Chen followed the practice of previous presidents in the use of public funding. They urged viewers to understand his intent to use his office to iron out bureaucratic wrinkles and barriers. Thus, Chen’s mishandling of funds was cast as too trivial to warrant judicial examination and public scrutiny. In sum, while arguments might not have fared well in cross-examination on the issue, and the persuasive effects might have canceled each side’s attempt to frame the controversy, such tactics at least consolidated each side’s loyal program viewers.

As indicated by both Emile C. J. Sheng and Shih-che Tang,26 a number of talk show minzuis have been veteran reporters in “print” journalism or politicians usually involved in national institutions or major municipal legislatures. Talk-show programs tend to keep several regular commentators on their guest lists, mostly former print journalists who are witty in quick responses, resourceful in filling in details of daily events, and eloquent in their showmanship and argumentation. Their journalistic training and experiences equip them well to address sudden events. They are articulate and forceful

in style and language, employing occasional vulgar expressions. Sometimes, some veteran minzuis even stage fights and deliberately exchange diatribes to demonstrate their pluralist perspectives and thus imply their “independent and objective” postures in order to gain viewers’ trust and to boost ratings.27 However, some talk-show hosts or commentators have even participated in electoral campaigns to support their favorite candidates. For instance, Li Jiannan, a regular commentator on pro-Blue talk shows, stood directly behind Ma Yingjeou, holding a poster endorsing Ma’s candidacy for the KMT chairmanship during a 2009 party gathering. Likewise, Cheng Hung-yi, the well-known host of the Dahua Xinwen, burst into foul language to criticize Ma at a DPP rally during Taiwan’s mayoral election in November 2010. While Cheng apologized to the public the next day for the use of profanity in order to minimize electoral damage to the DPP, his program rating reportedly was 50 percent higher than in the period before the incident.28

Politicians welcome the opportunity to appear on talk shows. In a symbiotic relationship, politicians court producers and hosts for communication space to boost their name recognition, while media professionals cultivate politicians for exclusive coverage and access to first-hand information.29 Talk shows run during all seasons—in political campaigning and non-campaigning periods—thus permitting politicians to bring forward and spin certain political agendas to test the water, to maintain visibility, or to confront opponents rhetorically and publically to demonstrate policy distinction, among other functions. Should an issue fail to gain attention in one talk show, another program might take the bait. Politicians as well as parties benefit from constant visibility and issue exposure in their effort to agitate, educate, and mobilize the public. In contrast, academic pundits have been less active on talk shows with heavy political tones. This partially has to do with the change of discursive style from civil and cool-headed chatting to a “free-fall and free-for-all” style to gain popularity ratings. Guest commentators with academic backgrounds have shunned confrontational talk shows because of their caution to avoid making bold, flaunting assertions, their dislike of talk shows “throwing civility to the winds,” and the norm in higher education which holds a dim view of academic professionals frequently making media appearances to build a “show-biz” reputation in preference to their dedication to promoting solid research and


29 Willis, The Media Effect, 94-95.
Taiwan’s talk shows also are a crucial outlet for breaking scandals, which are quickly publicized though TV networks’ on-site live video coverage and preliminary analyses. As long as the initial revelation seems reasonably suspicious, it can serve as bait to force concerned parties to come forward to defend and clarify any discrepancies. Some charges of suspicious political impropriety might not be solid cases when closely scrutinized in the light of available evidence. Although talk shows have been known to cut corners without complete evidence in hand, they nevertheless often roll out charge after charge as long as there is reasonable doubt, shifting the burden of proof to the accused. The hope is that some of the shocking revelations will later prove to be correct. This type of “wild bird shot” (luanqiang daniao) has been a talk-show tactic of the 2000s.30

One example is when Chiu Yi presented a series of charges against the then incumbent President Chen Shui-bian, his family members, and political associates. Accusations were of money laundering, corruption, and Chen’s inappropriate intervention in governmental policies outside his authority during the 2000s. Chiu Yi, a KMT legislator and a vocal commentator, has thus won the nickname baoliao tianwang (the King of Exposé). His initial accusation of former President Chen Shui-bian was based on receipts of Chen’s family members and friends for nonofficial matters, which were submitted for official reimbursement in June 2006. By displaying those receipts, the accusation snowballed into other charges of Chen’s inappropriate and even criminal acts. Chiu Yi also accused Chao Chien-ming (Zhao Jianming), Chen Shui-bian’s son-in-law, of insider trading in May 2006 on 2100 All People Talk.31 Another well-known case is the same talk show’s display in 2005 of a casino’s surveillance photo, revealing that Chen Che-nan, a former deputy secretary general to Chen Shui-bian’s Presidential Office, had visited a Korean casino in Cheju in 2002 with business contractors, in serious violation of laws.32 Chen Che-nan also was indicted in several scandals for embezzlement and inappropriate stock market transactions.33

Thus, talk shows are a “political court,” with commentators serving as “jury.” During times of accusations of scandal, politicians can use talk shows to divert public attention, to defend one’s positions, and to mobilize one’s political base. For example, when Chen Shui-bian faced serious accusations

31 The TVBS title, 2100 Quanming Kaijian, later changed to Taixinwen [Dig Up News] in 2010.
of corruption, in August 2006, he chose to show documentary evidence to pro-Green talk show commentators and selective DPP legislators, “for their eyes only,” instead of sharing the evidence with all of the press. These pro-Green commentators became proxy defenders, justifying Chen’s inability to explain his expenses to the public on grounds of the confidentiality of foreign affairs. The commentators were eager to vouch for Chen’s innocence. When commentators failed to find powerful arguments of persuasion, they invoked the catch-all phrase “love Taiwan” to foreclose on further debates, to minimize Chen’s “minor” scandals and ethical defects in order to protect Taiwan’s aspiration for independence, and to accuse any dissenters of “not loving Taiwan” and, thus, of weakening the effort to construct Taiwan’s indigenous identity.

The 2100 All People Talk program was a regular outlet for Chiu Yi’s charges, and its audience was anxious to hear of new daily exposés as Chen’s scandal unfolded. The talk show’s fame in exposing Chen Shui-bian’s corruption led to a series of “anti-corruption” and “depose-Chen” demonstrations, with protestors donning red shirts in Taipei in the early fall of 2006. During the “Red-shirt Army” protest, 2100 All People Talk even held a live show with some regular commentators actively involved in the organization of the protest movement. Likewise, when the KMT presidential hopeful, Ma Yingjeou, was caught in the media frenzy stemming from the DPP legislators’ accusation against him of embezzlement of government funds for personal use in 2006-2007, pro-Green talk-show ratings were elevated, as they constantly blasted Ma and the KMT, until Ma was eventually found not guilty by the Supreme Court.

**Democratic Deliberation and Mediated Politics**

As Fairclough observed, the genres of mass media do not always mesh with the genres of politics. Regardless of how many claims of objectivity and fairness a program publically enunciates, its programming relies on market share, profitability, and other means to survivability. As a result, deliberative disagreements in the mediated forums in Taiwan have proceeded to a stage of nondeliberative disagreements, with deliberation occurring only within each side’s rhetorical realm in order to consolidate one’s moral and ideological stand. Sometimes, an attempt to reach a discursive accord between two viewing groups through mutual exchanges becomes remote. Instead of reaching a consensual understanding through rigorous debate and dialogue across the political divide in a democratic society, talk shows frequently reinforce the level of nondeliberative disagreements within society.

However, the public dialogue in talk-show format partially fulfills the

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democratic procedure in policy deliberation and enhances the legitimacy of political decisions.\textsuperscript{36} Therefore, with an open-ended nature to accommodate an array of voices, deliberative democracy in itself cannot guarantee a perfectly justified conclusion. But through the various perspectives of call-ins’ and pundits’ commentaries, some political talk shows, for example, the popular \textit{2100 All People Talk} and \textit{Big Talk News} programs in Taiwan, offer multiple socio-political values and policy options as well as an opportunity to bridge the ideals of direct democracy and representative democracy by allowing the general public to air their interests, approval, and contempt. Political leaders must be sensitive and careful in formatting their political rhetoric for setting agenda, inviting public participation, and engineering consensus-building for issue deliberation.\textsuperscript{37} Yet, talk shows allow all viewers to be “communicatively present” in political talks, with diverse views expressed in debates. This does not deny the fact that political talk shows intentionally incite debates and foster disputes to attract viewers and boost their ratings. There is no doubt that some programs may take advantage of anonymity of sources to engage in \textit{ad hominem} charges and occasional vulgaries to distort and distract from the issue of concern. Still, some callers may offer relatively sensible, though brief, opinions to the debate. At a minimum, talk shows and their call-ins provide a forum for mostly unconstrained and uncensored opinions, and poll unorganized individual views. Their informal, loose, and spontaneous talk contributes a great deal to the continual interactions among commentators, viewers, and officials, when invited, in a large public space. Given time, such a communicative deliberation process full of political connotations fosters a sense of a shared identity among like-minded people. Repeated reflection through the process of “mediatization” may clarify, consolidate, or convert viewers’ long-held visions and values.\textsuperscript{38} Talk show call-ins (the audience calls in to express views), and even call-outs (the program host calls concerned parties to discuss a topic), are channels for alternative and oppositional communications—yet in a structured format—that deal with issues of a controversial, explosive, and sensitive nature.

Hence, the talk show can be a public sphere for political actors who are in dialogue that manifests the democratic ideal of equality by providing an option for public participation in the discussion of policy issues.\textsuperscript{39} Through


this social process, talk shows become a means of political mediation by weaving together an imagined constituency of multiple political actors who act in similar rhythms and tempos.  

At the same time, regular program viewers are equipped with innate knowledge of the political stand of each program and the usual discursive style of commentators. It would be uncommon to see a regular panelist in one show cross the political divide to appear in a talk show of an opposing political camp. The political divide has defined the sphere of influence of media commentators. The same applies to most viewers and callers. While it is difficult to determine the political orientation of all viewers, the overwhelming similarity in callers’ comments in each show is an indication of the general sentiment of a program’s viewers. The viewer’s identification and alignment with a commentator’s perspectives and prescriptions form a coherent narrative of self and others in a broad social and cultural frame of reference.

The willingness to make calls to express their views during a program hints at callers’ relatively high interest in political discourse. During heated elections, each political party has its “call-in squadrons” who take advantage of a talk show’s reserved time slots for free campaigning by either demonizing a party’s opponents or praising its own candidates. Still, the facelessness and namelessness of talk-show call-ins provides an outlet for those who are politically less active or usually apathetic to share their latent opinions about politics in the national media. Therefore, talk shows provide an alternative means to bond through shared interests in certain political issues and to make contributions of alternative thinking to political argumentation. Of course, one could say that talk shows do not offer much relief to Taiwan’s political polarization. Indeed, talk shows filter, sanitize, and control the flow of information, like propaganda wings of parties, to solidify partisan stands and channel anxiety, concerns, and fear to their viewers. Consequently, a program’s viewers tend to receive and respond positively to the show’s partisan cueing and political predisposition.

**Conclusions**

Over the past decade, Taiwan’s talk shows have become an important source of political information and an imagined network of political camaraderie that ignite public interest and passion for politics. They serve as platforms for viewers to share their thoughts and to vent their frustration with the discursive

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agents in the program and with countless like-minded, though anonymous, viewers. Talk shows have moved beyond the traditional media regarding information dissemination by becoming a therapeutic mechanism and a platform for action.

As a result, when politicians are charged with failings, such as insensitivity to public expectations, policy inefficiency, corruption, or abuse of power, most try to find ways to respond to talk shows’ accusations and criticisms in order to “save face” and survive politically. Information transmission is no longer an exclusive privilege of the state that proceeds in a primarily top-down, one-way pattern. The people can employ various information technologies to counter and balance state dominance of policy design and implementation. In this regard, talk shows contribute positively to Taiwan’s democracy.

With the help of talk shows, scandals and ethical improprieties in political governance during the last decade have made viewers doubt that any politician running for office will necessarily do what it is right for the sake of the public good. Talk shows’ vigilant watch and critical examination keep Taiwan’s democratic process more transparent and accountable than in prior decades. Talk shows incorporate the audience, the program hosts and commentators, policy experts, and politicians in order to consider the various interests along the path to a deliberative outcome, a process that is beyond representative democracy and the “business as usual” style of politics.

One unique feature of talk shows is that the audience can easily “cross the political isle” by switching channels to watch another program for reports and analysis from the angle of “the other side,” without fear of being accused of changing political allegiance. For example, for a period after the major typhoon, Morakot, struck Taiwan in August 2009, it was reported that even pro-Green talk-show audiences switched channels to pro-Blue programs to watch how pro-KMT talk shows conducted daily “media lynchings” of the Ma government by criticizing its disaster response management.\(^\text{43}\) Likewise, when former President Chen Shui-bian’s corruption scandal was unfolding from 2005 to 2008, pro-Blue talk-show viewers turned to pro-Green programs to see how they justified President Chen’s criminal acts for personal amusement and as a means to vent their frustrations. Such information gathering may lead some viewers to reorient their vision and reposition their political stance. Although the number of viewers who migrate between channels and reevaluate pre-held political beliefs is unknown, the anecdotal evidence at least has raised a profound sense of hope for the sustainability of Taiwan’s pluralist democracy.

In addition, the striking partisan divergence among programs does not necessarily imply that their originally hostile stands cannot achieve a quasi-

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consensual position concerning an issue in question. When media agents sense a shift in majority opinion after a series of sessions, they may change their orientation to avoid a loss of discursive credibility. Although their reasoning and arguments might be different, talk-show commentators at both ends of the political spectrum may arrive at similar policy choices. Learning that there is consensual ground across initially hostile programs, the government might feel insurmountable pressure to respond expediently. Indeed, quasi-consensus has been reached on initially adversarial issues such as the demand for more international representation and participation for Taiwan, China’s stance on the “one China” policy, the fight against political corruption, and the need for improvement of governmental efficiency.

As media technologies have continued to increase the range of content options and to multiply the delivery platforms available to information recipients, talk shows have encountered competition and challenges as information exchange formats and forums. For example, “netizens,” people active in Internet surfing, and bloggers can now make comments on talk-show video clips that counter a talk show’s dominant message. Public deliberation by free participants in a plural media environment makes room in the public sphere for many constituencies that are usually underrepresented.

Finally, an audience’s identification with the program’s host and commentators, and a show’s high ratings, almost “lend” the audience’s authorization to commentators to interview figures in public life on its behalf, which becomes a transfer of interest articulation as implied in representative democracy. Hence, the sheer existence of talk shows holds some value in democratic deliberation, though they cause uproars due to their aggressive showmanship, toxic statements, and paranoid argumentation style concerning political issues.

As a deliberative forum for civic dialogue, talk shows bring politicians, parties, media agents, and audiences together for conversations about politics. They also raise participants’ interest in and understanding of political matters, and solidify their social bonds of identity around political issues. They are part of the democratic attempt to achieve both information transparency, by

identifying the contents, sponsoring groups, and risks and benefits inherent in the issues for viewers, and information inclusiveness, by encouraging public participation.\(^{48}\)

Naturally, people may not perceive talk shows as wholly positive forces in the deliberative process. In a course of “naming, blaming, and claiming” injury or injustice to victims, attributing fault to an individual or institution, and demanding reparations or corrections, some talk-show communicative agents spin, deceive, and manipulate for self-interest, occasionally using abusive language.\(^{49}\) Still, one should not forget the political context in which the communicative agent is situated. Frequent and overheated electoral campaigns, petulant disputes over Taiwan’s national identity, and political polarization make both sides dismiss reason and rational debates in an emotionally charged political atmosphere. Each side considers itself correct to speak for the people and views the other side’s rhetoric as misguided and stupid. Given Taiwan’s polarized political environment, it seems inevitable that each media figure will consciously or subconsciously attempt to be a shaper, rather than a mere bearer, of the systemic logic of society, based on his or her vision of the future and political beliefs.\(^{50}\)

The regret is that the populist tone may undercut the attempt to have a thorough exchange of views in the democratic process. Indeed, talk-show commentators act as entertainers, information messengers, and cultivators of partisan discourse. They “infotain” and introduce audiences to “news voyeurism, the gratification of living vicariously and seemingly dangerously through the heightened lives of others very dissimilar to one’s self.”\(^{51}\)

To some, this deliberative forum may have fewer salutary effects than expected because the gifted media entrepreneurs who are the narrative agents in the political-rant racket may reinforce social and political boundaries and encourage exclusionary understandings of the political reality. Their “show-biz” style of presentation, unapologetic display of partisan discourse, intentional humiliation of interview subjects, and frequent ridicule of political leaders’ words and deeds all grind traditional mediated politics into a process of electronic “mediatization.” The media’s subordinate and accessory role to


political authority prior to Taiwan’s democratization has been transformed into an influential position in policy deliberation in the public sphere. Any serious political contender must rely on the new media to interact with supporters and opponents. In recent years, the political effectiveness of talk shows has waned somewhat in Taiwan, and minzuis have lost some of their glamour. Even so, political talk shows will continue to wield influence until viewers decide to switch channels or to turn off their TVs.

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