Media Freedom and Responsibility in South Korea:
The perceptions of journalists and politicians during the Roh Moo-hyun Presidency

Abstract

This paper analyses the perceptions of media freedom and responsibility by journalists and politicians in South Korea during the Presidency of Roh Moo-hyun (2003-8). It draws on in-depth interviews with ten journalists and ten politicians with different political affiliations and interests. Findings suggest that both groups had positive appraisals of the country’s media democratisation. For them the media could function as a watchdog on political power without having to fear direct political reprisals for doing so. However, the political press remained partially shackled to specific legacies and economic conditions. The most pressing example is the way the paternal power of conservative media owners challenged the editorial independence of journalists. While the internet media offered some hope to re-balance the power relationship between the conservative and progressive forces, the sensational and hyper-adversarial media motivated by market and political competition emerged as more worrying concerns for the consolidation of democratic political communication in post-transition South Korea. Setbacks in press freedom since 2008 have undermined some of the positive evaluations of the political communication in South Korea, suggesting that the democratic transition in this country resembles ‘a circle rather a straight line’.

Key words

Journalist, politician, media freedom, responsibility, new democracy, South Korea
Introduction

South Korea’s transition from an authoritarian and military to democratic and civilian political system is recognised as a successful example of ‘Third Wave’ processes in East Asia (Huntington, 1991; Chu et al., 2001; Brazinsky, 2016). Constitutional revisions in 1987, generally considered as the beginning of democratisation, permitted free and direct Presidential elections that paved the way for conservative Kim Young-sam’s victory in 1992. In 1997, the election to the presidency of liberal Kim Dae-jung marked the first peaceful transfer of power from the dominant conservative forces to progressive political parties. Kim was succeeded by Roh Moo-hyun (elected in 2002), and both presidencies were confronted by stalled economic growth, unemployment and social inequality. In 2007 the electorate chose the conservative former mayor of Seoul, Lee Myung-bak as President. Lee was a hugely unpopular President, with ratings that tumbled to just 20 percent after he was accused of corruption. In December 2012, South Korea’s democracy passed yet another significant milestone when conservative party candidate Park Geun-hye, daughter of former dictator Park Cheung-hee\(^1\), was elected as the country’s first female President, with a vote share of 51.55 percent of the vote – the highest share won by any candidate since 1987.

With political power shifting first from the military to civilian government, and from conservative to progressive parties, and then from progressive parties to conservative parties, the consolidation of South Korea’s democratic political culture continues. Assessing the current political landscape, Brazinsky (2016) concludes that South Korea’s democracy is imperfect but continues to evolve. This imperfection, common in juvenile democracies, provides the context for understanding the issues confronting political journalists and their relationship with political elites in the Roh (2003-2008) era. This
timeframe is chosen because it sheds light on how structural instability (e.g. economic fragility) and the turnover of power between conservative and liberal forces and the inner power struggles of both forces can impact on the way journalists see their own role and their relationship with political actors, processes, institutions, and culture. Recognising the role of political journalism in consolidating South Korea’s democracy, this paper analyses the perceptions of journalists and politicians about the democratic transition to arrive at a more nuanced, comprehensive and balanced understanding of the political communication system in this country.

**Theoretical foundation**

Political communications are central to both the development and sustenance of a democratic culture, processes, and institutions. In competitive democracies, journalists and politicians are two sets of mutually adaptive and dependent actors working in a framework of political communication marked by both conflicts and co-operation (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). Within this system, the practices of these actors are regulated by a set of orientations, values, attitudes and role expectations (Pfetsch, 2004; Pfetsch and Voltmer, 2012). These orientations and attitudinal underpinnings of journalists and politicians constitute the cultural dimension that ‘complements the structural conditions and constraints in which political communication actors operate’ (Pfetsch and Voltmer, 2012: 390), and govern the everyday interactions between these two groups. These informal but complex values and expectations are constitutive of a ‘political communication culture’, which is defined as:

the empirically observable orientations of actors in the system of production of political messages toward specific objects of political communication, which
determine the manner in which political actors and media actors communicate
in relation to their common political public (Pfetsch, 2004: 348).

Pfetsch and Voltmer (2012: 390) also argue that the understanding of political
communication culture as the orientations and mutual expectations of politicians and
journalists needs to be contextualised in specific political and media backgrounds (Pfetsch
and Voltmer, 2012: 390). Therefore we further draw on Hallin and Macini’s (2004) work
that proposes to examine four main aspects – state, market, pluralism and professionalism –
to study media transformation. We investigate the democratic transition of the media system
in South Korea by analysing the attitudinal and perceptual indicators of journalists and
politicians including their evaluation of attitudes towards media independence in relation to
government and market, their perceptions/expectations of own professional roles and of roles
of the opposite group, and their assessment of the relationship between the two groups.

While in established democracies the understanding of the news production processes, the
perceptions of professional roles, and the relationship between the two groups are relatively
stable based on predictable expectations, in new democracies the expectations are less
certain. This is not surprising given that communications have performed an assortment of
roles in authoritarian political systems, and that the transition may occur at an unexpectedly
brisk pace, leaving communications requiring time to rebuild and negotiate new social and
political roles. As there is a lack of clarity of the ‘degree of collaboration and autonomy,
publicity and secrecy, or advocacy and detachment’ (Pfetsch and Voltmer, 2012: 392), all
parts of the rules of political communication culture are open to conflict and uncertainty. The
understanding and expectations of Korean journalists and politicians towards various aspects
of the media system outlined above reveal their attitudinal and perceptual underpinnings that
help them negotiate old and new rules, norms and routines of the news-making as well as their daily interaction after the democratic transition, all of which are key to understanding the state of the political communication and its wider implications for the democratisation processes in South Korea.

**Media development in South Korea after democratic transition**

While the democratic transition in South Korea did not take place overnight, its media certainly proliferated at a remarkably fast pace after the introduction of democratic reforms (Kwak, 2012). Between 1979 and 1993 the number of published daily newspapers increased three-fold from just 26 to 112 (Korean Press Institution, 1994). The broadcast media likewise expanded with 24 television channels and 50 regional operators in 1997 (Lee, 1997). At the time of writing, 111 national daily newspapers are published; there are 121 television stations comprising national, cable and digital satellite channels; 209 radio stations, and 6,500 periodicals published weekly, monthly and quarterly – all within a society enjoying a 98 percent literacy rate. By far the most striking development is the growth of Information Communications Technologies (ICTs). In terms of Internet access, South Korea is ranked number one in Asia and 17th internationally, with 97.4% of the population having Internet access at home (International Telecommunication Unit, 2013).

On the other hand, oligopolistic ownership remains one of the main challenges to Korean media and their contribution to the democratic society (Lee, 1997; Park et al., 2000). In the broadcasting sector, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) account for more than 80 percent of the market share; while three conservative newspapers – the Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo and Dong-A Ilbo –
dominate 74 percent of the total daily newspaper market (Kim and Johnson, 2009) with a combined circulation of 6.9 million copies. The development of new technologies (Internet) together with aggressive competition between the three major newspapers to capture a share of the same general readership and advertising revenue (income from advertising accounts for 70 percent of revenue for newspapers) has led to a loss of subscription and readership in the newspaper industry (Kwak, 2012: 74).

The developments that feature market liberation as well as concentration have created conditions for journalists to re-negotiate their professional values. They question their purpose and responsibilities in the political arrangements of a new democracy, and consider how their professional obligations and practices correspond to both the expectations of the market, audiences and political sources, and the specific socio-cultural context in which they work. The consequences of market competition, restricted ownership patterns and media competition, together with a decidedly partisan and therefore adversarial press often result in a ‘journalistic culture of scandal’ (Voltmer and Rawnsley, 2009: 245). Such conditions can provoke highly charged debates about public trust in, and the authority of political actors, institutions and the media. This is particularly so in new democracies where the media may encourage a greater identification with, and civic participation in, political processes; but when they question the media’s commitment to professional values of objectivity and detachment, voters and political actors may also observe the press as a powerful negative influence in an otherwise democratic culture (see analysis of Bulgarian media, Pfetsch and Voltmer, 2012).

**Research design**
This research is based on twenty in-depth interviews. Ten interviewees are described as mid-career and senior journalists/editors from national newspapers representing the conservative-neutral-progressive political spectrum, as well as the online news media, the broadcasting industry and the Korean news agencies. A further ten interviews were with early/mid-career politicians from the dominant political parties (five from the Conservative party and five were from the progressive parties). The interview schedule is informed by Hallin and Mancini’s analytical framework for comparing media systems, focusing on three main aspects: the political economic context of the media system including media-market/state relationship, professional norms (perception of the actors’ own role and of others and standards of news production), the relationship between the media and politicians (mutual perceptions and evaluation and rules and experiences of interaction). Both journalists and politicians were included in this study based a framework of interactions conceptualised by Blumler and Gurevitch (1995). The interviews were conducted between March and May 2008 by a Korean-speaking research assistant who had established social network in the Korean government. A snow-balling technique was used to recruit politicians. Journalists were recruited with interview requests, delivered to them via post, email or telephone. Interviewees were asked to evaluate the Korean media system based on their evaluation of three aspects: the processes and outcome of media democratisation (press freedom and media responsibilities), professional norms (perception of the actors’ own role and of standards of news production), and relationship expectations (understanding of rules of interactions and experiences of cooperation and conflict). With their permission, the interviews were recorded and all personal details anonymised. The data was translated into English and coded thematically using qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. In the following section, we consider how journalists and politicians chose to judge various aspects of political communication, such as freedom of expression
and media responsibility, which are acknowledged as elemental features of a developing
democratic political and communications culture (Pfetsch, 2004).

Democratic Change and the Media’s Watchdog Role

The first questions asked in our interviews focused on the understanding of South
Korea’s political system and especially the successful transition to democracy. It is
important to recall that these interviews occurred in 2008 after an election that transferred
power to a conservative president during a time of economic fragility, and after President
Roh’s impeachment. The journalists and politicians were unanimous in expressing
support for the idea of democracy, as well as the institutions and processes of democratic
politics, though they expressed scepticism about several specific features of the political
system. In particular, both sets of actors identified the introduction of civilian-led
government as the most prominent development. They also discussed their views of other
aspects of democratic politics, including free elections, human and civil rights, economic
growth and cultural diversity. Although critics argue that the election system was later
distorted by the Lee Myung-bak government (Haggard and You, 2015; Jonsson, 2014),
democratic institutions were positively considered in early 2008:

Military intervention in politics has completely ceased and civil control over the
military is ensured. I think it is the most significant achievement. Also, a liberal
and fair election system and culture has been established. … [T]he
establishment of a liberal and fair election system also makes government more
attentive to the people and respect their opinions. Furthermore, another achievement is freedom of expression – *which can even be considered too excessive* (J1, emphasis added).

This journalist’s final sentence is revealing. As we shall see presently, freedom of expression and its relationship to media responsibility emerged at this time as a contested arena among politicians and journalists. Moreover, a range of dissenting voices questioned the democratic expansion of the media space.\(^5\) For example, Lee (1997) is critical of the prevalence of pre-democracy values, cultures and hierarchies that shape practices in newsrooms, as well as the relationship between political elites and the media. Lee concludes that ‘the perceived freedom has not fundamentally expanded from the days of the pre-democratization era’ (Lee, 1997: 145). Nevertheless, the current research reveals a broad consensus among both sets of actors that democratisation encouraged the development of a more open and inclusive media system. This historical perspective provides the context for the narratives offered by journalists and politicians:

In the past the media in South Korea was under dictatorial government control. The military governments limited the number of newspapers to one per province. Furthermore, they introduced a licensing system. So, during the days of the license system, the government’s permission was required to set up a newspaper outlet, whereas today only registration is required (J2).

Some politicians highlighted the free legal framework for media institutions (P3) and the role of the independent media as public watchdogs, emphasising their power in providing balances and checks. P9 said ‘compared to the past, the media now are doing relatively a good job in
monitoring the government...Admitting that some media have agitated the government, I would say the media have also contributed to making the government more reliable by monitoring it’. The comment reflects the interviewee’s evaluation of the role of the media in 2008, but Freedom House (2014) argues that the Lee Myung-Bak government (2008-2013) posed considerable threat to press freedom through its censorship of online content and news from North Korea for ‘national security’ reasons. Others also value the watchdog role of the media, considering even the opposition between conservative and progressive newspapers as a contribution to a ‘better society’ because each group are ‘holding each other in checking, presenting different opinions respectively’ (P8). Here the interviewee perceived the existence of ideological confrontation in the media system as a progress of South Korea’s democratic change. As we will demonstrate in the next section, distorted media practices generated by such ideological competition were perceived in a negative light by other interviewees. The above evaluations show that the interviewees oriented their attitudes based on their judgements of the past, and they evaluated the media landscape in democratic Korea against the political system’s transformation.

Moreover, the historical perspective also helped influence perceptions of the media as agents of social change. In particular, the media’s support for the opposition movement in the 1970s and 1980s was cited as evidence for their contribution to democratisation. One journalist described how in the 1970s the press were a ‘positive influence on democratisation’ by exposing daily the abuses by the authoritarian government (J6). A politician claimed ‘democracy in Korea would have been impossible without the assistance of the media,’’ and disclosed the way Korean people trust the media (P5).

In the meantime, perceived editorial control exercised by media proprietors continued to influence political journalism (Youm, 1994; Lee, 1997; Sa, 2009; Woo-Young, 2005).
Many interviewees in the present study observed structural constraints on the democratic performance of the media, including their funding mechanisms, the oligopolistic structures of ownership, party-press parallelism and the way some owners and editors insist on interfering in editorial decisions:

The monopoly of the media market by the conservative media can be a threat to the freedom of expression. Another threat is the heavy dependence of the media on advertising revenue. … It is not easy for them to survive without advertisements from large companies … it is not easy for the media to keep their editorial freedom from the influence of capital (J3).

Others highlighted ownership control (‘It is the owners or editors who choose what to publish, how to publish’ P2) and identified a close relationship between business, advertising, and the structure and performance of the Korean news media. Journalists described how the conservative newspapers, especially JoongAng Ilbo and Munhwa Ilbo, were reserved in their reporting of the large corporations:

The power of capital is threatening the freedom of expression in Korea more than political pressure. … [T]he voice of advertising clients significantly influences the media… instead of performing their role as a guardian of public good, the media are now being put in situations where they have to seek profit by producing and selling their product [the news] (J5).

At a time when the President of South Korea was a former CEO of Hyundai Engineering and Construction, marking the return to a more conservative attitude to economic
management, politicians from progressive parties also criticised conservative newspapers’ alliance with big capital, thus representing the interest of the ‘privileged’:

We still remember the ways in which the conservative newspapers reported Samsung’s illegal convertible bonds acquisition … Far from reporting the issue in a fair manner, they tried to protect and save the interest of the financial conglomerate either by not covering the issue or by writing articles about the economic contribution of Samsung to our country. It is a good example to show that the conservative media speak for the interest of privileged class, rather than the interest of the public (P3)⁶.

Politicians from conservative parties also recognised the pressure that the media received from influential advertisers:

Under the situation where the power of capital has a great influence on the media and where the media market has been dominated by a few major newspaper conglomerates with specific political and ideological tendencies, the media at present tend to fall short of fulfilling its fundamental role as society’s watchdog (P6).

One journalist reflected on his own work and connected the prevailing economic constraints to his ability to do his work: ‘I don’t think I am doing a good job,’ he confessed. ‘The number one obstacle is the need to make a living. Because I am the breadwinner of my family … it is difficult for me to act freely and with conviction as I did in the past when I
was younger’ (J7). The influence of capital on print media in post-transition Korea is widely recognised, and the alignment between corporate power and the three dominant conservative newspapers became more noticeable after the economic recession of the 1990s when the overall media market suffered from shrinking advertising revenues (Kwak, 2012: 70-90; Sa, 2009). Progressive newspapers and local media in particular faced financial difficulties due to the lack of advertising revenue from big businesses:

The mainstream media that have a greater number of journalists and have sufficient financial support tend to get the scoop…On the other hand, it is difficult for the local papers or radios, which are struggling economically, to get the scoop…The Internet media have emerged recently, there are a growing number of cases in which Internet media are providing articles that represent alternative views [to those represented in the mainstream media] (J7).

P1 gave a specific example of Kyunghyang Daily, which was separated from a conglomerate (Hanwha Group) in 1990s but has been in financial difficulties ever since. While some of our interviewees considered the lack of funding for progressive newspapers as a drawback for the media’s responsibility to be representative, the online media, as mentioned here, were ‘less dependent on capital’ (P1) and were perceived as the greatest opportunity for democratic political communication in South Korea. The growth of online platforms with their smaller running cost provided new channels for progressive voices to challenge the domination of conservatism in the media; while the expansion online of interest groups and civil society activity provided new platforms for popular political participation and engagement (Kim, 2006; Kern and Nam, 2009; Leung and Lee, 2014). This was most noticeable during demonstrations held to protest President Lee’s decision to overturn restrictions on American beef imports. The Internet and mobile telephone text
messaging were used to help organise the demonstration and facilitate civil participation, which was not adequately supported by political parties or mainstream media (Oh, 2016: 191).

Freedom of expression has greatly expanded. Each individual in our society is actively expressing her/his views… since 2000, as a solid Internet infrastructure has been built, people could easily enjoy freedom of expression (J3).

The online media have also reshaped the offline media environment. This is most visible in the online news provider, OhmyNews, which defies the conservative bias found in the offline media with its army of volunteer reporters and its operating slogan, ‘All citizens are reporters’ (Kim, 2006).

Chosun Ilbo has held a pride in that “anything not written by the Chosun Ilbo is nonexistent.” However, following the advent of the Internet-mediated information circulation, newspapers can no longer monopolise the circulation of information, Chosun Ilbo’s position is becoming debilitated (J9).

The Internet is wielding great influence over the younger generations. That’s why each newspaper company also runs an Internet homepage and delivers information through it (P7).

Another example often cited by our interviewees to demonstrate the power of the Internet in representing progressive forces was the 2002 presidential election when Roh Moo-Hyun received wide support from middle-class, progressive Internet users (P9). In this way it is possible to argue that the social media have made political processes more accessible and
transparent while encouraging both horizontal and vertical interaction among users and consumers.

The Internet media with their instant and real-time updates of new information are also in competition with mainstream media for speed. One journalist conceded that the offline media ‘have already given up’ competing with the internet for speed of publication. ‘Now [they] consider … accuracy, depth and public interest to be the only way of surpassing the internet’ (J10). Most of Korea’s media – broadcast and press - now offer online versions of their output and are accessible free of charge. The interviewees for the present study concurred that the Internet has become a new influence in political journalism and democratic politics:

Compared to the past, the function of the media as the watchdog has improved greatly. It is partly due to the development of the Internet. I think the Internet has helped the media develop into a public sphere where citizens can exchange their concerns and thus form a public opinion. And the public opinion formed on the Internet has stimulated the media to gear up to perform their role as the government’s watchdog (P6).

Hence there is evidence of a growing consensus that the Internet helped reinforce the importance of public opinion, as one journalist noted: ‘These days, besides public opinion surveys, it is possible to assess public opinion by reading the comments on the internet’ (J3). Another explained how the Internet contributed to a more plural media sphere and therefore challenged the conservative media’s domination of information flows (J9). Moreover, politicians habitually use the Internet – emails, websites and online discussion forums – to
communicate with their constituents, and release news and information:

Once the issue attracts the attention of the people, and more and more users become involved in online discussions, we can lead them to … form their own opinions… It takes time to share and encourage discussions about the issues, but once they [the discussions] appear, the effect can be great. … [T]he power of the Internet to spread [opinion] is incredible (P9).

One of the most interesting dimensions of our interviews is that both sets of actors representing all shades of political opinion started to evaluate the performance of Korea’s Internet-based political journalism by the criteria used to assess the efficacy of offline reporting: objectivity, impartiality and accuracy. This new situation raised a number of important issues that are now prominent in all democracies, namely how to define a journalist, and is it possible to apply to the Internet news media the regulations and laws that control offline media? One journalist noted in interview: ‘There were many cases in which reports [on internet news sites] not based on facts … were spewed out indiscriminately, thereby pushing public sentiment in an awkward direction … ’ (J2). Another journalist (J4) maintained that the Internet media that engaged in so called ‘exposé journalism’ should be restricted. The reservations expressed in our interviews about the Internet media as impartial, independent and objective agents of political communication are also relevant to the discussion of freedom of expression and media responsibility. We will return to this point in more detail in the next section.

Contested Freedoms of Expression and Media Responsibility

Notwithstanding the largely positive attitudes that reflect support for South Korea’s
democracy and media freedoms, our interviews reveal that political change opened new areas of contestation. The discrepancies between the aspirations and the performance of democratic journalism correlate with the gap that Youm (1994) observed between ‘press freedom’ and ‘journalistic freedom’. The former is unchallenged; as we have seen, the new liberal democratic culture imparted a commitment to the idea of press freedom. However, ‘journalistic freedom’ refers to the routines and practices that inform the day-to-day work of reporters and their interactions with political institutions and actors. The interviews reveal that the concerns of journalists and politicians in South Korea echoed at the time those voiced in the more established democracies. Both sides worried about the boundaries of acceptable criticism and intrusion, and how the media’s performance help or hinder the ‘public interest’; politicians and journalists, like their counterparts throughout the democratic world, worried about the media losing sight of their professional responsibilities and being more concerned with trivial and sensational news stories that satisfy commercial interests. The difference, however, is that in new democracies like South Korea, the debates are sharpened by the history of authoritarian politics and a sometimes violent transition to more democratic forms of government; the legacy has shaped and influenced how politicians and journalists see their functions and their interactions with each other:

In the past … the media had a tendency to ruthlessly criticise and argue against the government. It was, at the time, an obvious and an absolutely necessary thing to do. Yet, there are some media groups that consider it to be valid even today, as if it represents freedom of speech. The habit of being trapped … to recklessly criticise the nation and government is a convention of an undemocratic past (J1).

The media can often be over-enthusiastic to prove that freedom of speech and of the
press must be absolute, while in more mature democracies the norms and routines of journalists and their relationship with their political sources have benefited from the passage of time and continuous negotiation. One Korean politician claimed that the media ‘enjoy too much freedom…the media seem to think that they even have the right to infringe one’s private life and to deliver information no matter it is true or not. I think the media need to be more responsible’ (P8). This is certainly a reflection one journalist (J4) agreed with, deeming some online ‘exposé journalism’ undignified, concluding that freedoms to publish such stories should be restricted. While J3 noted how the media ‘tend to be too sensational, inflammatory and excessive in monitoring the government’s performance’, other concerns were more serious with some interviewees suggesting that the media often fabricated their stories to follow a particular political agenda:

[XX] nominated me as [YY], but the National Assembly did not endorse the appointment. I think it was because the media distorted some facts. They distorted my image by spreading misinformation about my real estate deal and my oldest son’s US citizenship. The media reported that I made false residential registration and engaged in speculative financial practices. … Although in the end all accusations were proved to be false, I had long ago lost my honour and ended up being remembered by the public as an immoral person (P5).

Previous research on the media in mature liberal-democracies suggests that there is a strong correlation between sensationalism and market competition (Sparks and Tulloch, 2000). Our research on the relationship between journalists and politicians in Taiwan, an East Asian society where the transition to democracy occurred at almost exactly the same time as in South Korea, demonstrates how fierce competition in a highly saturated media market can result in rising sensationalism and a marked deterioration in the quality of
political journalism (Authors). In South Korea too, both sets of actors cited media commercialism and competition as key explanations for the structural problems facing the media at the time of the interviews:

The newspapers sometimes criticise politicians … to increase the number of subscribers. They know that is the easiest way to attract the audience (P4).

[Democratisation] allowed for the uncontrolled birth of many newspapers and a … fierce competition for survival. … the newspapers freely criticise the government without appraisal. However, as the newspapers became more and more sensational due to the fierce competition among them, people seem to feel that the information provided … was less and less reliable (J2).

Clearly both politicians and journalists believed that the expansion of sensationalism in South Korea’s political journalism, including the mounting emphasis on drama, personality and emotion, damaged the public’s trust in the media. While more mature democracies are accustomed to such claims and have established formal and informal mechanisms to deal with them, this is unfamiliar territory for South Korea and was not identified by previous studies (Lee, 1997). This situation raises important questions about the sustainability of serious political journalism in juvenile democratic societies (Tsai et al., 2008; Authors). More notably, claims about media sensationalism reflect contested norms and routines of journalism, including the commitment to objectivity and impartiality:

The media tend to make someone a star and another a total fool. They don’t
focus on whether a politician is a true servant, that is, [they don’t ask] what are his political beliefs, whether he is going down the right path and such, but the media tend to depict politicians as gossips. I think that kind of media practice will only result in distrust of the media … Sometimes it is not easy for the media to be fair and impartial, as each media outlet is also an organisation that must pursue its own benefits and interests. However, such practices … just degrade [the media’s] authority (P5).

These comments suggest the influence of a wide range of interconnected factors on the practices and performance of political journalism. Although all of the interviewees supported the changes to the media environment made possible by the transition to democracy, they nevertheless expressed serious reservations about the presence of media bias; and while they all noted that the growth of a more progressive and middle class voice in the media challenged the prevailing conservatism (Han, 2000), most interviewees were critical of the way a small group of conservative media still appear to dominate (notably JoongAng, Dong-A, Chosun and KBS). Citing high-profile reports about imports of US beef that was alleged to contain Mad Cow Disease, our interviewees once again raised the problem of media ownership control, this time highlighting the relationship between media responsibility and issues of public interest:

The conservative newspapers, such as the Chosun Ilbo, the JoongAng Ilbo, and the Dong-A Ilbo, insisted that the arguments were made by anti-American groups and radical leftist groups. While people were concerned about whether the US beef were safe enough to eat, the conservative media made this issue into a political one and argued that all the protests were stirred up by the leftists (P2).
Recently, almost all of the media seems to be focusing on the Korea-U.S FTA and on the beef market issue...I think conservative newspapers, however, are releasing articles that only speak for the government, whereas progressive newspapers are doing the opposite, but only to incite anti-government sentiment through exaggeration. It’s a pity that there is no media that stands between these two extremes (P6).

However, we must note that political bias is not confined to either the left or the right, as we see from the above quotes. Rather, the new ‘marketplace of ideas,’ representing the ideological confrontation between both sides of the political spectrum, is considered a potential threat to Korean democracy by politicians from both sides:

The … conflict between the left and the right is … an obstacle to healthy debate in our society. The conservatives label the progressives Red; the progressives blame the right as old guard arses. Such an unproductive confrontation between them just devastates our society over time, resulting in the exhaustion of national power and interference in healthy communication … (P4)

People are tired of seeing the inter-party confrontation, partisanship, and the paralysis of national assembly. They are also having hard time surviving economic recession (P7).

Some interviewees (for example, J2) claimed that media partisanship was more pronounced during elections when the progressives and conservatives face each other at the ballot box, as happened during the period under examination; others (P2) believed that polarised media – conservative and progressive media forcing the public to choose sides – constituted the
biggest threat to the freedom of expression in Korea. Again, this is not unique to Korea or to other emerging democracies, since media partisanship is a feature of elections throughout the democratic world. Indeed Hallin and Mancini’s study (2004) concluded that objectivity and impartiality are not at all the defining universal norms for journalists working in the democratic context. However, when partisan practices motivate the media to distort the facts to serve a particular class or other interest, then the presence of bias in political journalism becomes a problem. One Korean politician (P3) believed that ‘some media … have just served to widen the gap between classes and amplify conflicts in our society by distorting facts in support of a certain class. By distorting their reports on the goals of government policy [the media] have also prevented effective [state] administration.’

The political competition that is generated by such distorted media practices has been labelled ‘hyper-adversarial’ (McNair, 2009). McNair (2009: 244) describes how hyper-adversarialism is represented by an ‘aggressive, confrontational stance increasingly adopted by journalists allegedly seeking not elucidation and clarification of the pertinent facts of politics, but dramatic and crowd-pleasing contests.’ The interviewees for the present project worried that such hyper-adversarialism, signified through the increasingly hostile and abusive language and practice of both media and politicians, replaced the possibility of the media playing a responsible role in facilitating the reconciliation of interests through debate. Others feared that hyper-adversarialism provokes mistrust between the media, politicians and the Korean public, and therefore threatens the stability of a democratic system:

There is a tendency to split sides, for example, between progressive and conservative camps. Your side and my side … I feel compelled to take one side or another. Existence of a diverse spectrum … may mean that society is viable and healthy; but the conflict and confrontation based on the mentality, ‘you
should die and I should live’ can be negative (J3).

The problems appear to have escalated after South Korea entered the economic recession in the late 2000s under President Roh Moo-hyun. One politician conceded that the ‘nation is in a shaky situation,’ and believed that ‘the people are tired of seeing the interparty confrontation, partisanship and paralysis of the National Assembly’ (P7).

Popular support for democracy in South Korea has been shaped by the country’s economic performance and by political scandals. Survey results reveal that the 1997 financial crisis and corruption allegations against the then President Kim Young-sam have ‘taken a visible toll on public support for democracy’ (Chu et al., 2001: 130). Further survey data highlight that in 1997, Koreans had low levels of trust in Parliament (22 percent) and political parties (20 percent), and that this is in marked contrast to the levels of popular trust in the courts (57 percent) and the military (72 percent). These levels of trust can be explained by a range of factors: political scandals and internal conflicts with political parties may be reasons to be suspicious of politicians and political institutions (Baek et al., 2016), while the presence and behaviour of North Korea may contribute to relatively high levels of trust in the military (Chu et al., 2001: 130). In 2015, the trust in Parliament and government reached lower levels at 17.4% and 33.2% respectively (Jung, 2015: 30-31), possibly due to a public perception that insufficient government efforts were made in sustaining economic growth and reducing poverty and inequality. However, it is essential to note that distrust of political actors and institutions does not imply a rejection of democratic processes. Rather, it may reflect popular unease with the performance of democratic institutions (Chu et al., 2001: 131). This is consistent with the results of the present study: both journalists and politicians supported the idea, ideals and principles of democracy, but were less content
with the way it works in Korea.

Conclusions

The political press in all democracies – juvenile and mature – share similar concerns about their responsibilities, professional routines and obligations, and also question their interactions with political sources. In new democracies like South Korea, these concerns are magnified by the ambiguity of media norms and the continuous re-negotiation of roles and positions of the press and politicians towards each other and the news-consuming public. For Korean journalists this is particularly challenging since polls reveal that the popular evaluation of their accuracy, fairness and credibility is at an all-time low (Korean Press Foundation cited by Kwak, 2012: 9). The interviewees for this project referred many times to ‘western’ news media, especially the BBC and CNN as model broadcasting systems to emulate. Hence, while the interviews reveal that politicians and journalists in South Korea may understand how the media can assist the evolution of political society and culture, they are also aware of the current system’s shortcomings. It is widely recognised among our interviewees, regardless of their political affiliations, that the post-transition media challenged the intervention of the military government, and that the media now enjoy much more press freedom, performing a watchdog role in political society. Their views, usually shaped by a historical perspective, support the findings of earlier studies on media and democracy in South Korea (Heuvel and Dennis, 1993; Youm, 1994). However although the political influence from the military government has declined, pressure arising from funding mechanisms and ownership control was increasingly acknowledged as a major threat to freedom of speech and media pluralism in South Korea, a view particular articulated by interviewees supporting the progressive party. Following our interviews in 2008, the Lee
Myung-bak government (2008-2013) exerted considerable pressure on the state media via funding and personnel control (Haggard and You, 2015), and reinforced the domination of conservative forces in the public domain.

With regard to the new media, the Internet provided platforms for progressive voices with their smaller running costs, reconfiguring the power imbalance between the conservative and progressive forces to a certain extent. Moreover, as the politicians and journalists across the political spectrum interviewed in this study routinely used the criteria of professional journalism to evaluate the Internet media as part of the political communication, the ‘new’ media seem to have become a formal institution of South Korea’s political processes. The ‘institutionalisation’ of the internet is further supported by recent developments: registered internet newspapers grew considerably in size from 286 titles in 2005 to 5,950 titles in 2014, and are now formally regulated by the Newspaper Law (Korean Press Foundation, 2016: 13). While the new media were mostly positively evaluated by our interviewees in 2008, critics have pointed out that the Lee Myung-bak government imposed censorship on the internet media by filing defamation lawsuits against journalists, requiring real-name registration, exercising content regulation in the name of national security (Haggard and You, 2015; You, 2015).

Our interviews also reveal that distorted media representation and hyper-adversarialism motivated by political bias and competition considerably undermined the possibility of establishing a settled politician-journalist relationship governed by mutually accepted norms and routines (e.g. balanced media coverage for journalists and daily management of negative media coverage for politicians) in South Korea. The circumstances worsen with the media’s increasing sensationalism developed in a market environment, resulting in increased political
news coverage in political scandals, corruption charges of politicians, and party in-fights (also see Baek et al., 2016). While sensationalism and political partisanship are common across the democratic landscape, embedded political cultures and cleavages have made it much more difficult for South Korean journalists and politicians to modify their behaviour to accommodate the new circumstances.

Our research indicates that during the difficult 2007-8 period the political press remained partially shackled to specific legacies and economic conditions. The interviewees believed that the media could function relatively freely as a watchdog on political power, adding strength to a system of checks and balances without having to fear direct political reprisals for doing so. For them the sensational and hyper-adversarial media motivated by market and political competition emerged as more worrying concerns for the consolidation of democratic political communication in post-transition South Korea. However, political interference into media freedom between 2008 and 2013 have brought back the issues of direct government influence and control that challenge the editorial independence of journalists. Moreover, although our interviewees believed that the internet offered some hope to re-balance the power relationship between the conservative and progressive forces in 2008, the internet media, now institutionalised in the mainstream politics, are increasingly subject to government control. Recent developments in the media landscape in South Korea suggest that structural instabilities – in this case economic fragility and social inequality, the brief impeachment of a president – destabilise the domination of the conservative forces, demonstrated by the recent surprise victory of the liberal Minjoo party in the National Assembly election. Although the victory can be considered as progress given our interviewees’ shared concerns about the domination of the conservative media and limited representation of the progressive forces, the media coverage of the election is still marked by media sensationalisation with primary foci on political scandals, inner-party power struggles.
and personalising political leaders (Baek et al., 2016). While the setbacks in press freedom experienced during Lee Myung-bak’s presidency undermined some of the positive evaluations made by our interviewees in 2008, previous achievements in consolidating South Korea’s democracy cannot be overlooked. The achievements as well as the setbacks suggest that South Korea’s democratic transition resembles ‘a circle rather a straight line’, as the transitional trajectories observed by Voltmer in other new democracies (Voltmer, 2013: 220).

Notes

1 Park Cheung-hee engineered rapid economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s, but was accused of suppressing in a brutal fashion dissidents and human rights.

2 In this paper, we follow Pfetsch and Voltmer (2004; 2012) to use ‘orientation’ to refer to understanding, perceptions and role expectations of politicians and journalists regarding democratic institutions and processes; and we use ‘political affiliation’ to refer to ideas, values and beliefs associated with political groups based on different ideologies, for instance the conservative or progressive parties.

3 For the list of interviewees please see appendix. The names of some parties have changed since then, but we use their original names in the appendix. The average working experience of journalists and politicians was 15.9 years and 9.2 years respectively. No incentive was provided but interviewees were thanked for their time and effort.

4 In the data analysis, we tried to maintain a balance by using quotes of politicians from both conservative and progressive parties. However, as this is a small qualitative study aiming to provide an in-depth analysis of the views of the interviewees affected by political, economic, socio-cultural and professional factors, we make no claim that the sample is representative of all Korean politicians during the Roh Moo-hyun presidency. We believe further research on statistical analysis of the relationship between political affiliation and views of elemental features of media democratisation (e.g. media freedom and responsibility) is an important one, and this merits further investigation with a large-scale quantitative method.

5 The effects of political change on the media and freedom of expression was further probed in the interviews by the questions: ‘What changes have there been in terms of freedom of expression and the media?’; ‘Do you think that the media have played mainly a positive or a negative role in consolidating South Korea’s democracy?’
The word ‘privileged class’ was used by the interviewee to mainly refer to corporations as well as social groups with considerable political and economic resources.

They point out that previous progressive government also used state power to control the media (Haggard and You, 2015).

The corruption investigation of the former South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun was linked to his suicide in 2009.
**Bibliography**

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International Telecommunication Unit. (2013) *Core Indicators on Access to and Use of ICT by Households and Individuals*. Available at: http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-


## Appendix: List of interviewees

### Politicians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anonymised code</th>
<th>Party/Job title (or role)</th>
<th>Date (in 2008)</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>DLP/a leading figure</td>
<td>May, 23</td>
<td>60min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>UDP / MP and Spokesperson</td>
<td>May, 13</td>
<td>45min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>UDP / MP</td>
<td>May, 7</td>
<td>50min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>UDP / MP</td>
<td>May, 6</td>
<td>60min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>UDP/ a leading figure</td>
<td>May, 9</td>
<td>60min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>GNP / MP</td>
<td>May, 21</td>
<td>45min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>GNP/ MP</td>
<td>May, 5</td>
<td>50min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>GNP/ MP</td>
<td>May, 8</td>
<td>60min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>GNP/ MP</td>
<td>May, 7</td>
<td>50min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>GNP/ MP</td>
<td>May, 13</td>
<td>40min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Democratic Labour Party (DLP)
Grand National Party (GNP)
United Democratic Party (UDP)

### Journalists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anonymised code</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Date (in 2008)</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J1</td>
<td>JoongAng Daily / Political Editor</td>
<td>May, 12</td>
<td>50min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J2</td>
<td>Chosun Daily / Political staff writer</td>
<td>May, 14</td>
<td>50min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J3</td>
<td>The Korea Times / Political Reporter</td>
<td>April, 3 / May, 4</td>
<td>60min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J4</td>
<td>KyungHyang Daily / Political Reporter</td>
<td>May, 4</td>
<td>80min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J5</td>
<td>HanKyureh Daily / Political Reporter</td>
<td>March, 25 / May, 20</td>
<td>45min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J6</td>
<td>Ohmynews Internet newspaper / Chief Political Reporter</td>
<td>March, 24 / May, 10</td>
<td>40min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J7</td>
<td>MBN news / Political Reporter</td>
<td>April, 2 / May, 3</td>
<td>60min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J8</td>
<td>Yonhapnews / Reporter</td>
<td>March, 10</td>
<td>60min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J9</td>
<td>MBC / Reporter</td>
<td>March, 11</td>
<td>50min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J10</td>
<td>KBS / Reporter</td>
<td>March, 12</td>
<td>80min</td>
</tr>
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