The Rise of Media Populism in the Neoliberal Age: A Comparative Case Study of Apple Daily in Hong Kong and Taiwan

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, under the global wave of neoliberalism, media industries in Hong Kong and Taiwan have largely been driven by commercial forces and have been transformed into a landscape dominated by the market-orientated news media. *Apple Daily*, a populist newspaper that plays an important role in the public life of both societies, presented itself as a most prominent case for analysis. By adopting the populist paradigm in news production, *Apple Daily* has successfully transformed the existing media structure and traditional journalistic conventions. Meanwhile, neo-populist politics have prevailed in both social systems, in tandem with the rise of media populism.

In the last two decades, Hong Kong has undergone the political process of decolonization and reengagement with China; whereas, Taiwan, once under authoritarian rule, has emerged as a new democratic society. Populism has been the reigning culture of media and politics. By comparing the role, operation, and content of *Apple Daily* amidst the vast and rapid political transformations in Hong Kong and Taiwan, this dissertation aims to elucidate the patterns of the symbiotic relationship between media populism and political populism.

This dissertation analyzes a hierarchy of factors that range from media-politics to the political spectrum of the media landscape, organizational structure, editorial policy, routinized practice, newsroom socialization, and news content. The purpose is to understand how *Apple Daily* produced the populist rhetoric, and why it has prevailed in the current media landscape. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and content analysis of the front page stories of *Apple Daily*, this study has found that the political spectrum of news media and political parties in Hong Kong and Taiwan are differentiated by their distance from the CCP
(Chinese Communist Party), and that the disparate political stances taken by Apple Daily in Hong Kong (allies of the pan-democrats) and Taiwan (independent popular representative) reflect the very nature of media populism.

Furthermore, this study has found that Apple Daily conforms to the protocols of media populism through a hierarchy of means, including organizational settings (e.g., focus group interviews, information coordination centers, circulation of hit rate ranking), newsroom socialization, and routinized practices. In the name of market orientation, Apple Daily has geared its whole media enterprise toward catering to popular tastes. For instance, as a means of fulfilling the dire need for eye-catching news, the media has greatly celebrated news figures by imposing the minutiae of their daily lives on the general public. Additionally, by promoting muckraking journalism and forming an adversarial reporting style, Apple Daily has exerted its own influence and formed a kind of media intervention for public issues, which is exactly the problem of media populism. Finally, by taking an advocate role in news presentation, a sort of “black or white” logic has prevailed exceedingly in Apple Daily, driving reporters to construct social resentments in all kinds of news coverage to cater to popular sentiments, thus reflecting the centrality of the media in public issues and the possible abuse of media power.

This study additionally contends that journalistic professionalism is a set of floating notions raised in specific social contexts for certain purposes; a reality which has obviously failed to counterbalance media populism in the neoliberal age. The core values of journalistic professionalism have been abandoned (e.g., objectivity), constrained (e.g., occupational autonomy), or distorted (e.g., critical expertise) in the populist paradigm of media-oriented journalism. Furthermore, journalistic neutrality does not imply a lack of value judgment; rather, it is a kind of judgment based on socially accepted consensus. The neutral stance taken by Apple
Daily in Taiwan’s political spectrum is an unexpected consequence, attributable primarily to a concern for market segmentation. In Hong Kong, however, where local politics are still deeply influenced by the authoritarian CCP, there is virtually no journalistic neutrality in local media.