

Press Freedom Critical Analysis The Examination of East Asia: China, Singapore and North Korea

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Abstract

This manuscript serves as a critical analysis of press freedom in East Asia, specifically examining China, Singapore and North Korea. After observing that Freedom House ratings tend to classify nations into very broad categories according to press freedom, this critical analysis will describe a new system of organization, both exceeding westernized generalizations and using the precedents of past researchers. While the government-media relationship and economic factors are crucial, this article also discusses the importance of cultural factors when categorizing press freedom. In the case of East Asia, Confucianism is a cultural legacy that is impossible to ignore when creating press freedom categories.

I. Introduction

After completing an international communications course and examining Freedom House ratings (<http://freedomhouse.org>), I have observed that this organization tends to classify nations into very broad categories according to press freedom. The organization differentiates between free, partly free and not free as its way to categorize 195 countries and territories around the world. Ratings are reached through analyzing the legal environment of each nation, the political pressure on journalists and the economic environment influencing access to information.

Western assumptions surrounding press freedom and democracy have been established and applied to nations in the non-western world through Freedom House categories and other approaches. The East Asian countries I will classify require more distinct and explanatory categories without this ethnocentric approach. To create these models, I will use the precedent of Hallin and Mancini who categorized Western Europe.

I choose to explore China, Singapore and North Korea in my attempt to create a new categorical system. Asia's large population, its emerging markets and the fact that the region exists outside of the western world with ratings of not free, has led me to use these countries for analysis.

* **Keywords:** Press Freedom; East Asia; Confucianism; Government influence and Western viewpoints, classification model.

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Before further analysis, a brief explanation of how these countries are currently rated is crucial. The next section will review existing literature surrounding East Asia and the current models used in classifying a nation's press freedom. While forming my own models, I will also employ the models created by Hallin and Mancini and other researchers to then show my analytical findings and conclusions.

II. Literature Review

Previous studies and research have been conducted to explain how political, cultural and economic factors can influence global press freedom. Researchers have even created specific categories for nations around the world in an attempt to classify press freedom. However, in "Beyond Globalization Theory," Curran and Park (2000) said "a tiny handful of countries" were made to represent the whole world's press freedom (Wasserman, 2009, p. 24).

Freedom House tends to categorize nations into very broad categories when determining individual press freedom ratings. According to Freedom House (2009), China, Singapore and North Korea are not free in terms of press freedom. China is considered one of the world's most repressive nations for both domestic and foreign journalists. Despite Article 35 of the Chinese Constitution promising freedom of speech, other articles have suppressed this freedom for national interest (Karlekar, 2009, p. 89). In Singapore, Internet access is monitored and journalists are denied from speaking out against government officials (Freedom House, 2009). North Korea represented the most repressive media environment of Freedom House ratings in 2008. Its one-party regime owns all media and every outlet reports on behalf of the regime (Freedom House, 2009).

There have been several more reports of the same three nations having minimal press freedom because of governmental and economic factors. China and its government have been added to the "worst predators of press freedom" list (Boustany, 2006). Its government is extremely sensitive of political coverage and is willing to pay the media for a political-favored story (Yin, 2009, p. 376). Next, Singapore is a developed country and uses nation-building media, has high literacy rates and the support of commercial advertising, allowing news media to be profitable (Yin, 2009, p. 338). This profit would be very unlikely in North Korea, where outside broadcasting is limited and fixed dials prevent foreign radio programs from reaching the public (Freedom House, 2009).

East Asian cultural values can also be used in creating categories for press freedom ratings. Confucianism is a major social value of present East Asian culture and has been practiced for centuries. Singapore is one of the major Eastern nations that promote these Asian values linking to Confucianism (Luwarso, 2002, p. 388). As social harmony and stability of the nation are involved in Confucian beliefs, citizens of this region may believe that the government should control press freedom and political order to ensure economic growth of the nation. However, the belief of government control also merits for and justifies why the leaders of these nations censor the media that the citizens have access to (Luwarso, 2002, p. 388).

China, Singapore and North Korea are not alone in declining press freedom ratings. A United States Freedom House study has shown a global decline in press freedom in every nation of the world including those that are completely democratic (Lefkow, 2009). In addition, the study found that only 36 percent of 195 countries examined have free press zones (Lefkow, 2009).

Other ideas have been expressed in how nations should be organized by their press freedom. As western-centered frameworks have dominated how these categories are created, we need to see non-westerner's points of view (Wasserman, 2009, p. 23). Categories should not be an absolute factor and with changing global environments, press systems can no longer be understood by these western-biased models like the government and media relationship (Wasserman, 2009, p. 23). To overcome this recurring bias, global perspectives need to be taken into account when creating an organization system (Wasserman, 2009, p.23). Furthermore, a study by the University of Maryland concluded that the majority of Chinese respondents believed press freedom existed in China and that people have different perceptions of the "yardstick" of press freedom ("Confidence," 2009). Of the respondents, 22 percent also thought less press freedom should exist in the U.S. Therefore, citizens have different opinions of what press freedom is within their country ("Confidence," 2009).

Unlike Wasserman, Hallin and Mancini have devised a three-model system for comparing media systems in Central and Western Europe. Using political parallelism, the development of journalistic profes-

sionalism, state intervention and press circulation, these researchers created their own categories. Rather than free, partly free and not free, Polarized Pluralist, Democratic Corporatist, and Liberal Model titles were used (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

While there is research and information about media systems, government structures and other factors affecting press freedom in East Asia, an analysis of these factors and how to categorize them in terms of press freedom has yet to be organized. Through an integration of existing research, this critical analysis will attempt to take previous and very broad categories and create a new system of organization, surpassing the standard western notion of press freedom. Research will be used to answer the following questions:

1. What is the extent of government influence on press freedom?
2. How do these East Asian nations compare with one another in terms of political structure, economic status and cultural values?
3. Are Freedom House ratings always accurate or do they impose a western generalization?
4. What are better ways to classify categories for these East Asian countries, inevitably relating to other regions across the world?

III. Method

In order to adopt a critical analysis and propose my own classifications of press freedom, I will review current studies and information on the topic. Sources will include academic journals, news articles, edited books and websites. From these sources, I will be able to discover what has been researched and what has yet to be examined. Using examples like Hallin and Mancini, I will investigate the media-government relationship to form my own classifications with what I believe would match East Asia and what could be elaborated on, to better create an accurate analysis. After further examination, I will use the Asian culture to draw conclusions and create my own classifications to categorize East Asian countries.

IV. Findings

Factor 1: China, Singapore & North Korea

According to Freedom House, China, Singapore and North Korea are rated not free in terms of press freedom. Before creating classifications for these countries, it is important to examine the history, cultural, economic and governmental factors that influence press freedom.

China: Background and Press Freedom

With a communist government, China has become a top global power next to the United States. Its current government system has been in place since 1949 after 20 years of civil war between the Nationalist and Communist parties ("Timeline: China, 2009). Its legal system was derived from this Soviet influence and the country currently is ranked third for its GDP at just under 8 trillion dollars. However, individual GDP was \$6,000 in 2008, making China the 133rd ranked country in the world (CIA, 2009).

China is considered one of the world's most restricted countries for both foreign and domestic journalists. The government has direct control over media coverage and journalists face strict punishments, including jailing, job loss and harassment if they speak or write out against officials (Freedom House, 2009). Furthermore, there are a wealth of Chinese media outlets, but they are all state owned and regulated. The Communist Party has also hired a committee of journalists called the "Fifty Cent Party." This group of people is used to write positive comments about the government on the Internet, in hopes of influencing the Chinese and even foreigners (Karlekar, 2009, p. 89-94). China has also experienced "media blackouts" on behalf of the communist party. If unauthorized information is released without the permission of the government and is seen by the public, the government will freeze media coverage or public access (Karlekar, 2009, p. 90). Online Chinese powered search engines like Google and MSN have also been shut down or filtered to keep information from the public. According to Yin (2000), China experiences ancient civilization media that are increasingly driven by market pressure with economic reform.

Despite this strict hold on press freedom, there has been international advertising and public relations

growth in China due to national expansion (Newsom, 2009, p.99). In addition, the commercial media are economically stable even with a repressive government (Wasserman, 2009, p. 26). Economic reforms and new governments have created a more “relaxed political environment for the media” (Yin, 2009, p. 338).

Singapore: Background and Press Freedom

Unlike China, Singapore is considered a Parliamentary Republic with a corruption-free environment. Gaining its independence in 1965 from the Malaysian Federation, Singapore has become a very successful free-market economy. With a per capita GDP of \$51,500, Singapore ranks 9th in the world. However, its per capita GDP is lower than China’s at 237.3 billion, still 47th in the world (CIA, 2009).

Singapore is very similar to China in relation to press freedom. There are several press and defamation laws that keep journalists from speaking out against the government. These firm regulations often cause working journalists to practice self-censorship in fear of being punished. Also similarly, almost all media outlets are state owned. The government places attention on keeping national interest, public order and social harmony, as seen in Confucian beliefs. The Newspapers and Printing Presses Act, Defamation Act and Internal Security Act have all be instated to ensure this order (Freedom House, 2009). Furthermore, being a more developed country with a high literacy rate, Singapore can support commercial advertising, making news media very profitable and considered nation building (Yin, 2009, p.338). Like China, public relations and advertising is also on the rise in Singapore as the government is beginning to display a less repressive reputation (Newsom, 2009, p.99).

North Korea: Background and Press Freedom

Another communist nation, North Korea experiences a one-man dictatorship. The country currently faces major economic issues and is considered one of the least open economies in the world. With a GDP of 40 billion and per capita GDP of \$1,800, North Korea ranks lower than both China and Singapore (CIA, 2009). These attributes can be contributed to the nation’s previous roots in the arms of Japan and the Soviet Union. At the end of WWII, North Korea was formed in 1948 and supported by the Soviet Union (“North Korea,” 1998). With the leadership of Kim Il-sung, economic and social reorganization were put in place, forming the split between North and South Korea. With the Communist supporting the North and the United States remaining in the South, the Korean War occurred in 1950 (“North Korea,” 1998). As a result, North Korea began its more independent economic reform lead by Kim Il-sung. North Korea has since seen economic despair and political power struggles, making it “the world’s last outpost of Stalinism” (“North Korea,” 1998).

Along with China, North Korea has been named one of the “worst predators of press freedom” (Boustany, 2006). In 2008, North Korea was also named the nation with the **most** repressive media environment. The one-party regime owns and regulates all media outlets, making journalists report on behalf of the government. Furthermore, North Korea strives to keep information blocked to the public. Foreign websites are blocked and limits are placed on what the public can access (Karlekar, 2009, p. 94). North Korea allows a small amount of outside broadcasting and only domestic radio programs can be viewed. The government has even placed fixed dials on radios to ensure that the public only listen to regime influenced news (Karlekar, 2009, p. 250).

Factor 2: Confucius and Cultural Influences on East Asia

A key factor missing in the Freedom House ratings is cultural and religious values. With its main focus on political influence, the ratings seemed to be based exclusively on the government-media relationship. Economic and political factors are important in this analysis, but values and religious beliefs are also important when analyzing press freedom. Confucianism, being a central East Asian belief, has led me to focus on its influences on East Asian press freedom.

Created and led by Confucius, the philosophy mainly include social harmony among groups, the stability, peace and prosperity of the state, and focus on education, family and individuals (Yao, 2000, p. 26). Another major aspect of this philosophy involves respect for elders, including political leaders (G. Scott, personal communication, 2009). Today, the modern East Asia still experiences these influences of Confucianism through its philosophy, religion, politics, ethics and culture (Yao, 2009, p. 4). According to Yao, present day Confucianism can even be linked to the effects of previous Western powers on East Asian nations (Yao, 2000, p. 245).

Since industrialization in the 1970s in this region, “more people, academics and politicians alike, have

come to rethink the tradition more positively and to reclaim their lost identity by asserting that cultural idiosyncrasy lies in the very heart of modernity” (Yao, 2000, p. 245). For example, in modern day China, Confucian values have been used to create social harmony in relation to the President’s decisions when addressing social issues and his “money first” approach (Asia Times, 2005). Furthermore, Luwarso adds that authoritarianism, as seen throughout these nations, interconnects with Confucianism (Luwarso, 2002, p. 388). Countries like Singapore strongly promote these Asian values where its government controls its press freedom, because they want stability among the state (Luwarso, 2002, p. 388). Likewise, the leaders of these countries are firmer on press freedom to keep with Confucian values (Luwarso, 2002, p. 388).

Another Confucian practice seen in China and Singapore is *guanxi*. In the advertising and public relations fields, professionals will use “secret personal connections in a strategy” (Newsom, 2009, p. 100). Even though this is part of the Confucian value and people see this strategy as a way to improve national communication, Westerners see *guanxi* in a negative light (Newsom, 2009, p.100). This may be interpreted in the “not free” ratings we have observed.

Factor 3: Three Models

There have been several attempts to categorize nations’ press freedom in the past. However, I will focus on Hallin and Mancini’s three distinct models relating to Western Europe. In order to create classifications, Hallin and Mancini used four different dimensions: the development of media markets and mass circulation; political parallelism; the development of journalism professionalism; and state intervention on media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pg, 21). Using these considerations they created the following models:

1. Polarized Pluralist Model - There is a high level of political and state intervention in social life and in the media coverage. A large portion of the population holds a strong loyalty to different political ideologies instead of focusing on common rules. There is also an “unequal consumption of public information” between the politically active public and those less involved in the political environment (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 298). Finally, media outlets including newspapers tend to release state influenced stories (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 298).

2. Democratic Corporatist Model - This model focuses on groups in society and supports social harmony. Rather than repressing the flow of information, the state promotes the freeness of information. The media are seen as a positive tool in circulating political information and media autonomy is valued by the state (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 298).

3. Liberal Model (Anglo-American Model) - This model is classified by low state intervention and political parallelism. Social groups are less of a concern and the media deliver to a wider mass audience. The press is seen as “watch dog” to the government and is used to distribute information to the public (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 299).

Even though these models were created to classify Western Europe, they offer key ideas for further classifications. This empirical approach can be applied to regions outside of Europe, including East Asia. For example, the first two models focus on social harmony and loyalty to ideologies. Confucianism represents the philosophy used to keep this social harmony in East Asian nations. Also, each of these models has distinct characteristics that explain China, Singapore and North Korea. However, the Polarized Pluralist Model seems to be the most applicable, emphasizing strict intervention on press freedom.

A New Paradigm for Categorizing East Asia

Using existing research and framework set forth by Hallin and Mancini, I have created three distinct categories that can be used to classify China, Singapore and North Korea.

1. Resistance-Refusal Model - This model focuses on historical roots in a nation, including previous powers and influences. Countries in this model have endured a dominant influence, affecting its modern-day freedoms, including that of the press. However, the state remains repressive and information is often filtered to a political advantage. Despite attempts of reform, internal manipulation occurs to ensure political dominance. This model applies mostly to countries with dictatorships or communist leaders. North Korea falls into this category.

2. Cultural-Legacy Model - This model stresses the importance of culture and tradition in a nation’s decision making. Citizens and leaders believe in social harmony and the advancement of their nation. Therefore, the press is monitored and used as a nation-building tool. National and historical values

are deeply rooted in the beliefs of the citizens and leaders in these nations, creating a more guided political policy. Singapore can be classified by the cultural-legacy model, especially with its deep and modern roots in Confucianism.

3. Nationalistic-Capitalist Model - This model focuses on national development and market dominance. Though state owned and monitored, these nations also focus on nation building. The media are either repressed or have some limitations in hopes of keeping the economic stability it has formed. This model is more rooted in money than culture. China can be placed in this model with its exploding economy and continued desire for market power.

V. Conclusion

After examining Freedom House ratings, I have discovered that the organization uses a broad and westernized approach in classifying each country's press freedom. Labels, such as free, partly free and not free, fail to serve as proper categories to classify these countries' level of freedom into. Unfortunately, Freedom House ratings aren't alone in their Western-biased models. John C. Merrill says "the American model of press freedom has 'enthroned itself globally' as a normative concept that is also used as an indicator of where countries rank with regard to how successfully they have conformed to a circumscribed discourse of 'freedom'" (Wasserman, 2009, p. 25).

Using Hallin and Mancini's approach based on Western Europe, along with other classification attempts, I have concluded that government-state power and economic factors have a large influence on press freedom. Asia has a very diverse economic and political infrastructure as seen through its varied GDPs and types of leadership. North Korea has an extremely lower GDP than both China and Singapore along with a strict one-party regime. These factors along with its history of Western influence make North Korea the most repressive nation in the world in terms of press freedom (Freedom House, 2009).

However, cultural and traditional values seem to be disregarded in the classification process overall. With Asia having such a historical and "diverse cultural legacy," the state-government and economic influence can't be the sole factor in determining its ratings (Yin, 2009, p. 338). Therefore, I found it essential to include core beliefs such as Confucianism in my own classifications, as they serve as a foundation for what particular regions are based on, and why particular leaders may dominate press freedom. In addition, critical in classifying press freedom is remembering that the systems are interdependent of each other. One nation may have characteristics in all three categories distinguishing its press freedom, but this is appropriate in analysis as seen in my three models: The Resistance-Refusal Model, Cultural-Legacy Model and Nationalistic-Corporatist Model, based on China, Singapore and North Korea.

With limited research and time, I was able to examine only three countries in East Asia. My analysis along with further research has the ability to present a more regional or global pattern in classifying press freedom. For instance, the United States could be classified in the Nationalistic-Corporatist Model even though it has a democracy with a Freedom House rating of "free." Despite our open media overload, the United States still has the tendency to strive for market dominance and has this nationalistic pride about it. As I did with Hallin and Mancini, my proposed categories of press freedom can be adjusted and expanded to further match nations around the globe.

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