ABSTRACT. This article examines the diversification of the news media in Korea since the 1990s as a result of deregulation and democratization. It also examines the impact of media diversity on the public’s use patterns and its trust in the media, and evaluates the current state of freedom of the press in Korea. Contrary to scholarly research, which holds that freedom of the press has increased significantly over the last decade, this study found that the Korean press still faces a variety of restraints despite improvements in a few areas.

Since the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the fate of the South Korean (hereafter, Korean) press has mirrored the political changes in the country. During the past five decades, from the early days of an authoritarian regime to the more recent democratic governments in the 2000s, the path of the Korean media has been dictated by the government and various political elites.

The unprecedented political and social changes of the 1980s and 1990s have ushered in dramatic transformations in the Korean media industry. In June 1987, a series of nationwide popular movements and democratic uprisings successfully pressured the repressive, military-led government of Chun Doo Hwan into launching sweeping political reform programs. This experiment with democracy gave birth to a transition to democracy and an increasing liberalization of media activities up to the present day.

This paper traces the development of the Korean media since the 1987 democratization drive, and surveys daily media use by Koreans, as well as evaluates the extent of freedom of the press in the country, which is vital not only for news professionals, but also for the enhancement of the public’s quality of life.

EXPANSION OF KOREAN MEDIA INDUSTRY

The 1987 liberalization drive initiated by Roh Tae Woo, Presidential candidate for the ruling Democratic Justice Party and close
friend to then-President Chun Doo Hwan, transformed the Korean news media from a government-controlled enterprise to a more autonomous entity in line with the country’s changing socio-political circumstances (Yang, 1999). In their Freedom Forum survey of East Asian media, Heuvel and Dennis (1993) noted that the Korean press was living through a golden age. “The media have been freer than ever to criticize the government, address formerly taboo issues, and expand with virtually no restraint” (p. 13).

The 1987 reform, thereafter, paved the way for a significant expansion of the mass media industry, thus occasioning greater commercial competition unprecedented under the rule of the authoritarian governments of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan. During the five-year period between 1987 and 1992, the number of daily newspapers increased more than threefold from some 30 to 100. As of 2001, there are 60 daily newspapers, including 10 national, 39 local, five business, four sports and two English dailies. Yonhap News is the only national news agency. There are three television networks, five independent local television stations, and 27 smaller television stations airing programs ranging from traffic information, weather, education to religions (Newspaper and Broadcasting Yearbook, 2000/2001). In addition, there are more than 2000 weekly and monthly magazines that trumpet headlines of the momentous to the mundane. The number of people working with these media is approximately 38000 (Journalism and Broadcasting Yearbook, 2001/2002). This figure topped 42000 in 1997 before the Asian economic recession hit the media industry in late 1997, slashing more than 4000 jobs.

With the increased number of print media outlets, only a few national daily newspapers have thrived while other mid- to smaller-sized newspapers struggled to capture a slice of the market. The national dailies have engaged in fierce wars of circulation running into the millions of issues, to the extent of provoking complaints from readers about pushy vendors plying them with gifts in return for subscriptions (Lee, 2001). Seoul, the capital city, is home to almost a dozen daily newspapers, and another dozen business and sports dailies. The big three dailies are Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo and Dong-a Ilbo.