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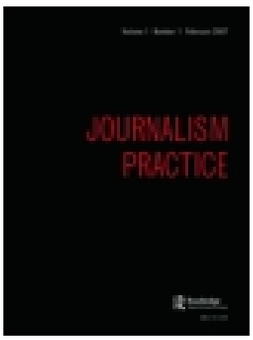

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# South Korea's Watergate Moment: How a Media Coalition Brought Down the Park Geun-hye Government

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**ABSTRACT**

South Korea had a Watergate moment in 2016, when a corruption scandal led to an impeachment of the president. Two media outlets in particular, the progressive newspaper Hankyoreh and JTBC, a TV station with roots in Samsung, first broke and then sensationalized the scandal that motivated the candlelight protests. Using textual analysis and oral history interviews, this article critically examines news institutions and journalistic culture to derive three main findings. First, the democracy movement of the 1980s provided institutional and cultural foundations. Second, commercial desires facilitated higher-quality journalism, rather than undermining it. The economic liberalization and the precarity of the economy as a whole influenced both the media industry at large and the specific business strategies that motivated JTBC. Third, there is an Americanization of journalistic norms and culture. While the two outlets were outnumbered by better-funded pro-government outlets, the duo ultimately prevailed with an irreverent culture of truth-seeking.

**KEYWORDS**

Commercial media; democratization; investigative journalism; journalism history; media system; news culture; scandal; South Korea

## Introduction

South Korea had its Watergate moment in 2016. After journalists uncovered massive corruption and graft involving President Park Geun-hye,[1] citizen protests successfully ousted her from office. This marked a major turning point for the young democracy, which, despite a tumultuous history of dictatorships and assassinations, managed to weather the crisis peacefully.

A string of extraordinary events took place from the time the scandal emerged in the summer of 2016 to Park's impeachment and arrest in the spring of 2017. Most visibly, millions turned out to the weekly Saturday protests, a series of well-organized, peaceful demonstrations which spread to the entire country. At the peak on 3 December 2016, an estimated 1.7 million people—about 3.4% of the South Korean population—took to the streets, making for the biggest protests in South Korea since 1987 (Lee 2017). The former college students of the 1980s were back on the pavement, this time with their children. Unlike in the 1980s, the police did not use force. Many felt that history was coming full circle. In 1972 Park's own father, then-president Park Chung-hee, had revised the

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constitution to cling to power only to be assassinated later. In 2017, South Korea's highest court charged with interpreting the Constitution was able to dispense of the daughter through the rule of law rather than a bullet.

At the center of these developments stood the press, whose investigations played a crucial part in the scandal's unfolding. Rumors initially thought by many as too outlandish proved to be true. Park's friend and confidante Soon-sil Choi (Choi Soon-sil) *did indeed* wield significant influence on major policy decisions. Choi's daughter *did indeed* receive astronomical sums from major corporations to buy horses. While the conservative newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* and its TV channel broke some of the earlier stories, the most substantial scoops came from two outlets: *Hankyoreh*, a progressive newspaper, and JTBC, a TV subsidiary of JoongAng Media Network, which is related by marriage to the corporate giant Samsung. The rest of the Korean press—dominated by conservative media moguls and government-influenced public media—kept largely silent for months, until the two outlets produced enough coverage to make for a full-blown scandal.

In some ways, what happened is counterintuitive to those with knowledge of South Korea and its media system. Why did a conservative, Samsung-family news outlet play a proactive role in a scandal that would lead to the arrest of Samsung vice chairman Jae-yong Lee? How was it possible for journalists from left and right to form an unlikely alliance that brought down a conservative presidency? What does the scandal reveal about journalism in this young democracy? These are the questions guiding this research.

Using textual analysis and oral history interviews, this article will first introduce the major developments in the months leading up to the impeachment, identifying the two biggest outlets. It will demonstrate how each outlet was shaped by the legacy of the 1980s, and show how market structures led to competition and pursuit of prestige. The article will also analyze political history and journalistic culture. Overall, I will show that an increasingly commercial and professional South Korean media with activist roots facilitated coverage.

## Background and Research Questions

This article builds upon several different bodies of literature: theories of national media systems, research on sociology of news, and historical research on modern South Korean journalism.

In *Comparing Media Systems*, Hallin and Mancini (2004, 2012) propose a new typology to understand variations in media in states around the world. Unlike *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956) which saw political structure as the single greatest determinant of media, Hallin and Mancini paid closer attention to the social, cultural and economic conditions supporting news media. Variables like levels of professionalism and the relationship between the media and rational-legal authority allowed them to derive three models. The liberal or North Atlantic model is noted by the high levels of professionalism as well as commercialism. In comparison, the democratic corporatist or Northern European model has a more prominent role of the state, as well as unions and other segmented groups. The polarized pluralist or Mediterranean model is marked by lower level of professionalism, market saturation and tighter control by the state. Variations, modifications and hybrid models of the Hallin and Mancini typology have been proposed to reflect the distinct situations outside the West, including the specific issues faced by

transitional democracies (Albuquerque 2012; McCargo 2012; Mungiu-Pippidi 2013; Voltmer 2012). Further, additional categories like religion and freedom of the press have been suggested (Couldry 2005; Norris 2009).

Applying the Hallin and Mancini model, South Korea would be somewhere between the polarized pluralist and liberal systems. It comes up 63rd out of 180 countries in press freedom and rule of law, comparable to the Mediterranean countries like Italy (52) and Greece (88) (Reporters Without Borders 2017). South Korea also exhibits key attributes of the North Atlantic liberal model, with a highly-developed and saturated media market. Media is highly dependent on advertisement revenue. Newspapers are mostly commercial and lean conservative, while a majority of TV stations are public broadcasters and tend to be more liberal (Kwak 2012). However, the picture is further complicated by the fact that South Korea experimented with the Northern European-style media reform during the Kim Dae-jung (1997–2002) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) administrations, which sought to introduce press subsidies inspired by Scandinavian countries (Kwak 2012). In the two conservative presidencies that followed, the pendulum swung the other way towards the American model with liberalization and de-regulation of the media sector.

Sociologists studying news cultures and norms have found striking similarities across the world, noting "shared occupational ideology" (Deuze 2005, 446) such as objectivity, independence and public service (Hanitzsch 2007; Weaver 1998). While this may be the case in some regions, research has found that differences persist in other places (Nielsen 2013; Weaver 1998). In new or emerging democracies, journalism is in such flux that it is difficult to apply concepts from Western democracies (Curran and Park 2000). Moreover, basic norms like press freedom and objectivity are applied differently around the world (Brüggemann et al. 2014; Voltmer and Wasserman 2014).

Existing research on South Korean media shows that that unlike in the Hallin and Mancini model—where professionalism and political parallelism have an inverse relationship—the development of the media market has not led to increased professionalism or weakening of political pluralism (Park 2015). Rather, journalists and elites form collusive networks. In these networks, journalists use the elites to get benefits like advertisement and favorable policies, for which the elites receive influence and status, to the detriment of public interest (Kang 2004). Kwak (2012) thus argues that South Korean journalists have not yet fully embraced the individualistic, liberal values crucial to journalistic independence.

Historically, modern South Korean media has been influenced much by the US, which played a leading role in post-World War II reconstruction of the country. However, journalism is one of the fields where Japanese influences—for example in the form of exclusive press clubs in government beats—persist (Glionna 2010; Kim 2015). During the 1970s and 1980s, the military regimes in South Korea quashed independent media by arresting journalists and shutting down major outlets. In the process, the government insisted that journalists remain "neutral" or "objective," introducing a distorted version of the concept widely associated with Anglo-American journalism (Nam 2010).

Based on such existing research, this article asks these questions, on the current state of the media system as seen from coverage of the scandal, determinants of journalistic professionalism, and the culture of journalists who played a central role in this case:

**RQ1**: How did the South Korean media system evolve during the Choi scandal?

**RQ1a**: Who led the news coverage and what did it look like?

**RQ1b**: What was the relationship between the two most important news outlets (*Hankyoreh* and JTBC) and the rational-legal authority?

**RQ2:** What are the sociological determinants of journalistic professionalism in South Korea?

**RQ2a**: What are the historical backgrounds at the two news outlets that spearheaded journalistic investigation?

**RQ3**: To what extent did the South Korean media system function as a context for, or is overcome by, journalistic culture?

## Method

To answer these questions, this article used textual analysis of journalistic discourse to make sense of not only what happened, but also how journalists talk about their own work and institutional, social environment that enabled it. I conducted keyword searches using terms ["Choi Soon-sil" AND "impeachment" AND "journalism OR journalist"] from April 2016 to June 2017 on KINDS (kinds.or.kr), a public news archive, and Naver.com, the most widely used Korean-language news portal and search engine (Hwang, Shin, and Kim 2012).[2] After culling duplicate wire service articles as well as editorials, I chose articles belonging to one of the three categories: scoops, in-depth features, or first-person accounts about journalistic processes. The scoops were chosen for their obvious journalistic value, and feature articles selected for their comprehensiveness, which allowed me to create a timeline (Table 1). First-person accounts were chosen because they often deal with journalistic norms, labor and professionalism. This resulted in 72 articles which served as the primary text for analysis. I examined the text using the immersive qualitative method suggested by Pauly, looking for overlapping patterns of discourse, for example with the "persistence of certain themes, phrases, rhetorical tropes, and plots" (1991, 20).

I analyzed the texts using qualitative research software *Atlas.ti*, coding the content for 14 overlapping categories derived inductively: audience reaction; *Chosun Ilbo*/TV Chosun; commercialism; *Hankyoreh*; history; ideology; *JoongAng Ilbo*/JTBC; journalistic independence; journalistic routines; major breakthrough in scandal; national media system; news culture; organizational structure; and Park Geun-hye administration. Categories like "audience reaction," "major breakthrough" and "Park Geun-hye administration" allowed me to construct a historical narrative of the scandal, for instance by juxtaposing presidential statements and approval ratings with major breakthroughs. Furthermore, the overlapping nature of the categories made it possible to triangulate claims made by different actors on key issues. By comparing references to *Chosun Ilbo* and TV Chosun made by other organizations, for example, I was able to see that *Chosun*'s early investigative work went largely unnoticed, which led to the conclusion that they played a tertiary role after *Hankyoreh* and JTBC.

In addition to textual analysis, I conducted oral history interviews with *Hankyoreh* and TV Chosun reporters who worked on the scandal. Interviews took place for a total of 5 h in 2019. The three interviewees spoke on "deep background," meaning the researcher could

**Table 1.** Timeline of the media coverage of Choi Soon-sil scandal.

| Date | Dominant press agenda | Social reaction |
|---|---|---|
| July 26–Aug. 18 | TV Chosun exposes collusion between the presidential office and two nonprofits, Mir Foundation & K Sports Foundation | |
| Aug. 21 | | Presidential office calls Chosun Ilbo "corrupt powers with vested interests," no more related stories from TV Chosun |
| Sept. 20 | Hankyoreh reports head of K Sports Foundation was ex-owner of sports massage shop frequented by Choi Soon-sil | |
| Sept. 27 | Hankyoreh reports Soon-sil Choi changed daughter's academic advisor at Ewha Womans University | |
| Oct. 13 | Hankyoreh reports Ewha changed admission criteria to accept Choi's daughter | |
| Oct. 22–26 | Hankyoreh reports presidential aides visited Choi to hold daily meetings, accessing classified material and influenced personnel decisions | |
| Oct. 24 | JTBC reports contents from Choi's tablet PC, complete with pictures of the president and earlier drafts of presidential documents | |
| Oct. 25 | TV Chosun airs video of Choi buying clothes for Park | Park issues apology to the nation |
| Oct. 29 | | First large-scale Saturday protest take place in Seoul. |
| Nov. 1 | | Park's approval ratings dips to 5% |
| Dec. 3 | | 2.3 million people turn out for Saturday protest |
| Dec. 9 | | National Assembly votes overwhelmingly to impeach Park |
| March 10, 2017 | | Constitutional Court unanimously rules against Park, finalizing the impeachment |

use the interviews for context without using their names (**Appendix A**). For JTBC and *JoongAng*, I used material from three interviews I conducted in 2014. These interviews were part of a larger oral history project to capture a snapshot of then-newly-established TV network. While the JTBC interviews took place before the impeachment, they are relevant because they dealt with issues of commercialism and journalistic independence as well as the role of CEO Sohn. These interviews were supplemented with records from visits to the Hankyoreh (2017, 2018) and other historical material, most notably memoirs by *Hankyoreh* and *Chosun* reporters (Hankyoreh Special Investigations Team 2017; Lee 2018).

## Prelude to Scandal: *Chosun*'s Early Investigations

Just as Watergate started with what seemed like an inconspicuous break-in at a Washington office building, "Choi Soon-sil-gate" also had an improbable beginning: In April 2016, a lawyer filed a police report after being assaulted by a jailed client during an attorney-client meeting. Investigation revealed that the businessman client paid an exorbitant 5 billion won (nearly $5 million) to buy the influence of the attorney, a former judge. The matter snowballed into a full-blown judiciary scandal, with the money trail leading all the way to the presidential office.

President Park was already increasingly unpopular in 2016. Two years before the scandal broke, the Sewol Ferry sank in the Yellow/West Sea. The government botched the rescue effort, leading to the death of nearly 300 young students onboard. Nevertheless, Park had maintained the approval of her base, consisting mostly of conservatives and elderly citizens, and those from her political home of Gyeongsang province. In

these circles, her father Park is revered as a hero who rescued South Korea from poverty. Even after controversies arose, Park Geun-hye's approval ratings remained a decent 40% on 16 April (Gallup 2016).

Things began to change in July, with new stories implicating Byung-woo Woo (Woo Byung-woo), one of the most powerful presidential aides. In August, the press coined the term "Woo Byung-woo-gate" to describe the widespread corruption involving him and other top officials. In this nascent stage of the scandal, the pro-government Chosun Ilbo Corporation broke important stories (Lee 2018). On July 18, *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper reported that Woo's mother-in-law had sold nearly $150 million worth of real estate to a major firm at above the market price (Lee and Choi 2016). The presidential office reacted harshly toward these stories by the conservative paper, issuing an extraordinary 21 August statement accusing *Chosun* of being among the country's "corrupt powers with vested interests" (Kim 2016b). The Park administration further upped the ante by exposing that *Chosun*'s chief editorial writer received nearly $200,000 worth of lavish gifts from a major corporation.

With mounting pressure, *Chosun* dismissed the writer and all but ceased reporting on the Woo scandal. While few people realized it, this also put an end to a different set of investigative stories by *Chosun*'s sister channel, TV Chosun. From late July to mid-August, the TV station reported that a mysterious sports foundation led by Park's friend Soon-sil Choi received billions of won from major corporations. Despite the explosive potential of TV Chosun's story, however, it was not picked up by other outlets, including the channel's mothership *Chosun Ilbo*. Other conservative-leaning press did not touch it, and the liberal press was no different. One of the reasons the story did not take off may have been the mediocre reputation of TV Chosun, a newly-created TV subsidiary. That Park's predecessor Lee Myung-bak changed the laws on cross-ownership of newspapers and broadcasting channels to approve the launch of TV Chosun and two other general programing channels (JTBC and TV Dong-A) was seen as a major political gift to the conservative media barons, shifting the TV landscape which had leaned more liberal than print (Kwon 2011).

Consequently, TV Chosun's coverage stood not only in contrast to its sibling newspaper which ceased related coverage, but also to the silence from the biggest names in TV journalism. Throughout her tenure, Park Geun-hye created a press environment which suppressed criticism. In what was seen as the biggest encroachment to media freedom since 1970s, scores of dissenting journalists were laid off from public TV stations (Reporters Without Borders 2017). Some of the newly-dismissed TV journalists created investigative news outlets like Newstapa, a Korean ProPublica specializing in investigative journalism (Shin 2015).

From the beginning, the Choi scandal was a convoluted one, implicating numerous public servants along the way but failing to grab the nation's attention. Part of the reason was that South Koreans were becoming desensitized to high-level corruption (Lee 2017). Korea is one of the countries where high-level corruption among government officials remains rampant, in contrast to the miniscule rates of petty bureaucratic corruption that rank among the lowest in Asia alongside Japan and Hong Kong (You 2017). In the early stages of the Choi scandal, few of the senior public servants being implicated had the household name status to trigger public furor. Thus, it seemed possible that *Chosun Ilbo*'s departure from the case could have left the Choi scandal as just one of the many forgotten corruption cases involving powerful figures.

## *Hankyoreh*'s Investigations Transform the Scandal

On 28 September 2016, *Hankyoreh*'s Eui-kyeom Kim, a veteran reporter who played a Bob Woodward role in investigating the scandal, published an open letter titled "Dear Mr. Bang, CEO of *Chosun Ilbo*." In it, he openly asked why the conservative media group had suddenly abandoned coverage of the Choi scandal. He lauded the paper's excellent early coverage: "I was embarrassed when I realized what a thorough job *Chosun* had done with coverage [about Choi]. I admired your doggedness, especially as a pro-administration newspaper." Kim mentioned rumors that *Chosun* had decided to withhold evidence sufficient to warrant follow-up coverage, and urged the paper to keep reporting despite political pressure from the regime. Kim ended the letter with the powerful CEO's own words from when Bang took Kim and other non-*Chosun* reporters out for dinner: "Unfortunately, ideology divides the current press. But I believe the press should transcend the ideological divide" (Kim 2016c).

In hindsight, the unusual frankness of the letter—and its open praise and critique of a rival newspaper on the opposite on end of the ideological spectrum—was a declaration of war from *Hankyoreh* (Hankyoreh Special Investigations Team 2017). Within a month of running the letter, the newspaper published 18 more scoops taking at Choi and her daughter Yoo-ra Chung. But the most explosive story did not involve politicians or chaebols, but schools. A 27 September story headlined "Soon-sil Choi Changed Daughter's Academic Advisor" revealed that a visit from Choi to the president of Ewha University led the school to dismiss the advisor overnight (Ryu, Bang, and Park 2016). On 13 October, a follow-up story reported that the prestigious university suspiciously changed criteria on sport recruits so Chung could be admitted as a recruited athlete despite mediocre grades (Bang and Park 2016).

The Chung episode proved to be a major turning point in the scandal (Journalist 1, interview, 2019). Revelations that a top school bent its rules for Choi's daughter triggered the furor of a society that valorizes meritocracy and educational achievement (Cho 2016). Before mid-October, *Hankyoreh*'s coverage of the scandal was rarely picked up by others, but with the university angle, other news outlets finally joined the media scrum. "I initially thought the Yoo-ra Chung story was a relatively minor one," Eui-kyeom Kim recalled. "But I came to realize that this had the potential to move teens and twentysomethings [who were struggling to succeed despite following all the rules]" (Kim 2017a).

On 25 October, *Hankyoreh* dropped another bombshell, proving that Choi—again, with no formal credentials and barely a high school education—was heading policy meetings with top presidential aides (Kim and Ryu 2016a). This dealt a serious blow to her legitimacy, as it demolished the president's image as a resourceful politician (Lee 2018).

## *Model Child of Democracy Movement Becomes Mainstream*

That *Hankyoreh* was central in breaking the scandal hardly came a surprise. The newspaper is a product of the democracy movement, formed by a wide civic coalition in 1988. At the time, workers, farmers, and academics launched a nationwide funding campaign to establish a progressive newspaper in a field dominated by conservative outlets. More than 200,000 stepped up to become shareholders. By charter, no single person or entity can own more than one percent of the shares, thereby insulating the paper from the

influence of businesses and politics. In *Hankyoreh*'s early days, the paper's circulation bureau in Busan was headed by a human rights lawyer named Moon Jae-in. Three decades later, he would succeed Park Geun-hye as South Korea's president.

Within *Hankyoreh*, Eui-kyeom Kim was a respected senior reporter, a former presidential office correspondent who headed the investigative unit. Kim had been a student activist in the 1980s, spending two and a half years in prison for organizing protests. He joined *Hankyoreh* in 1988. The newspaper has been a bastion of intellectuals and former activists like Kim. In a decision that reflects its editorial priorities, *Hankyoreh* recognizes such activism-related jail terms as prior professional experience when determining pay grades. *Hankyoreh* is known for a uniquely democratic newsroom culture. Staff get to elect the president and the editor-in-chief. Reporters have more autonomy over their stories than at other outlets, with a strong labor union to defend their interests (Park 2017).

For all its activist history, however, *Hankyoreh* has grown to be a mainstream outlet dominating top journalism prizes. Socialization for *Hankyoreh* reporters are similar to the rest of the Korean media. Aspiring journalists must submit test scores of standardized exams, and also pass writing tests. Once hired, cub reporters are assigned to police beats, where they spend months with little sleep. They compete for scoops, but also engage in pack journalism chasing similar stories (Glionna 2010). One outcome of the training regimen is that journalists become friends with peers regardless of ideology, having toiled away in the dingy press rooms of police beats together (Kim 2015).

The camaraderie and respect between *Hankyoreh* and TV Chosun reporters are noteworthy. In the early stages of investigations, Eui-kyeom Kim met repeatedly with Jin-dong Lee who broke the story about sports foundation at TV Chosun before being shut down by his bosses. Lee said he shared the contacts out of professional solidarity. "I made the decision [to hand over contacts] because I thought more competition would not be a bad thing. I realized that this story was going to be bigger than a scoop by one reporter or one news outlet." (Lee 2018, 230)

Such suprapartisan collaboration—akin to Fox News handing over a lead to the *New York Times*—would not have been possible if *Hankyoreh* did not have a reputation for independent, no-holds-barred journalism. TV Chosun reporters respected Eui-kyeom Kim, who had built a solid reputation as a fair and thorough reporter (Journalist 3, interview, 2019). *Hankyoreh* did not disappoint, sending reporters all the way to Europe to follow Soon-sil Choi's tracks (Kim 2017b). As competition heated up, they were joined by swarms of other South Korean reporters who knocked on doors in Germany and Denmark.

## JTBC: Station Gone Rogue or Shrewd Market Repositioning?

If *Hankyoreh*'s coverage of the Choi scandal was to be expected as a prestigious newspaper, JTBC's role was much less so. After all, this was a newly-created commercial TV station liberals vowed to stay away from. Most relevantly, it was affiliated with Samsung, the nation's largest conglomerate, or *chaebol* in Korean.

JTBC's 24 October report was the final decisive turn in the story. On that day, the TV station reported that it had obtained a tablet PC previously owned by Choi. The tablet contained drafts of presidential speeches by Park, as well as selfies of Choi, offering irrefutable proof of Choi's meddling in state affairs (Kim 2016a). Follow-up coverage on the private

lives of Choi and her daughter began to flow from other outlets. On 3 November, the moderate *Seoul Shinmun* reported that Choi roamed freely in the presidential quarters, without so much as a visitor's pass (Special Investigations Unit 2016). The same day, *Chosun Ilbo* got back into the game, reporting Samsung infused 19 billion won (about $16 million) to buy horses for Choi's daughter (Kim and Ryu 2016b). Outraged citizens took to the streets. On 5 November, Park's approval had hit a rock-bottom 5 percent (Gallup 2016).

## *A Checkered History as Samsung's News Division*

So how did JTBC manage to become a journalistic powerhouse barely five years after its launch? Many people give credit to Suk-hee Sohn, the CEO. While some view JTBC's coverage as the station going rogue against its corporate overlords, others think it is part of a careful repositioning of the channel with a complicated history (Shin, interview, 2014).

The roots of JTBC goes back to 1960s. After the military coup of 16 May 1961, one of General Park Chung-hee's first orders of business was a draconian policy of censorship, shutting down 49 out of 64 national daily newspapers and arresting 960 journalists (Kim 1996, 470–472). Hoping to fill the void with pro-regime outlets, Park encouraged major corporations to enter the press market. Already one of the country's biggest conglomerates, Samsung founder Byung-chull Lee bought the TBC news channel in 1964 and launched the newspaper *JoongAng Ilbo* the next year, instantly becoming Korea's first mass media group that encompassed print, radio, and TV (Kim 1996).

In the 1970s, when journalists at other newspapers like *Dong-A* were persecuted for pro-democracy activism, *JoongAng* was spared the rod because it was considered more docile (Song 1990). However, General Chun Doo-hwan, who rose to power after a coup in 1980, proved to be less benevolently disposed toward the outlet compared to his predecessor. That year, Chun shut down two thirds of the country's press companies, including TBC. Taking TBC was Chun Doo-hwan's way of demonstrating his power to the chaebols (Kwak 2012). The loss of what was then the most popular channel in the country demolished the centerpiece of the JoongAng media empire (Lee 2013, 217).

A decade after its broadcast wings were clipped off, *JoongAng Ilbo* still made a successful comeback in the 1990s, thanks in no small part to Samsung's money. In 1999, the media group announced it cut off formal ties with Samsung: Shares held by Kun-hee Lee or by other Samsung group subsidiaries were either bought by JoongAng Media Network chairman (and Lee's brother-in-law) Seok-hyun Hong or donated to a family-owned nonprofit. The reasons behind the maneuver were twofold. First, the group needed to comply with government antitrust policies which applied to Samsung. This encouraged chaebols to sell off or merge non-essential or less profitable businesses. Another reason behind the spinoff had to do with the recognition of mutual interests: JoongAng Media Network needed to become independent from Samsung to enhance its standing in the media realm, which would go on to benefit Samsung in the long run (Kim 2016e; Shim 2002).

## *A New Era for JTBC: Suk-hee Sohn Becomes the Walter Cronkite of South Korea*

When Lee Myung-bak, a former CEO of a Hyundai company, was elected president in 2007, he rolled back many of the decades-old chaebol reform policies of previous administrations aimed at mitigating the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few families

(Kalinowski 2009). As a result of Lee's de-regulation drive, newspaper companies were allowed to set up general programing cable channels. Given the decline of readership and ad sales, however, this realistically meant that only the three biggest newspapers—all conservative—had the resources to capitalize on the changes.

One of these three was JTBC, named in apparent reference to the old TBC taken away in 1980. JTBC came together at a propitious moment. Samsung Group's leadership transition from Kun-hee Lee to his son Jae-yong Lee was underway. The death of the father—bedridden since 2014—could result in less support for the JoongAng Media Network as a whole, as the son is being seen as more likely to value business interests over in-laws. Weakened support from Samsung means that JoongAng needs to boost its profitability, and that path lies through TV (Oh, interview, 2014).

For the first several years, the newcomer JTBC struggled in terms of ratings and influence in an already-saturated television market. That changed when JTBC chairman Hong poached Suk-hee Sohn from public broadcaster MBC. In return for Sohn taking over the news division, Hong guaranteed the high level of editorial independence that Sohn demanded (Han 2013). Sohn's move was initially criticized by liberals and progressives. But then the unexpected happened: JTBC began to diverge from the editorial line of *JoongAng Ilbo*, exhibiting an independent, even progressive streak in its reporting. Cheong-won Kim, a former reporter at JTBC, said the culture at the new station differed substantially from its sibling newspaper, much to the delight of young reporters who realized they had the support of top management: "They said Chairman Hong doesn't care about your ideology, if you are red [liberal] or blue [conservative]. As long as you can bring in the ratings, you're good," he said (Kim, interview, 2014). A prime example is an exclusive story JTBC aired in 2013, which revealed secret documents detailing Samsung's methods to fight unionization. Although the story ran prominently in other media outlets, JTBC's sister outlet *JoongAng Ilbo* refused to pick it up (Han 2013). In 2014, JTBC's ratings took off during its critical and intensive coverage of the Sewol Ferry disaster, which contrasted with the public TV stations largely avoiding the subject.

Some think Hong's long leash approach to JTBC might be part of a grand strategy to enter politics. Hong is known for his political ambitions, serving as the president of the World Association of Newspapers (WAN) from 2002 to 2004. In 2005, he was appointed South Korea's ambassador to the US, but had to step down due to a bribery scandal. At the time, he was eyeing to become South Korea's first-ever UN secretary general, but after the scandal Seoul succeeded with another candidate, Ban Ki-moon (Kim, Lee, and Shin 2006). In April 2017, Hong uploaded a YouTube video where he revealed that President Park Geun-hye had asked repeatedly for the dismissal of Suk-hee Sohn due to his critical reporting on the regime. The timing and the format of Hong's clip led to speculation that Hong was preparing for a formal political career (Hong 2017).

## Discussion: Capitalist Roots of Media's Role in Democratization

Coverage of the Choi scandal by *Hankyoreh* and JTBC was crucial in shifting the power structure in South Korea. The journalists built a strong alliance with the candlelight protestors, who organized major rallies with urgency and skill (Delury 2017). Enraged citizens hit the streets in unprecedented numbers, with the cumulative total of protestors reaching an estimated 10 million people, or one sixth of the country's population (Lee 2017). The

improbable journalistic feat also revealed a media system in flux, one that resembles the American model, but also exhibits different levels of political parallelism among individual news outlets.

Both increased competition and commercialization—strong indicators of the American or liberal model—could be clearly observed in the journalistic coverage of the Choi scandal. JTBC in particular was able to solidify its reputation and commercial success at the same time. It was not lost on the audience that the station's former owner, Samsung, saw its leader jailed for bribery because of news coverage. This marked the first time the chief of the nation's largest company was put behind bars. Images of the incarceration of individuals from Korea's top tier of political and economic power—Samsung's Lee, President Park, and her friend Choi—were indelible for the South Korean public.

The journalistic norms and values driving the coverage were also characteristic of the American model. The two journalists who led the investigations were inspired directly by the liberal American tradition, having studied in the US as midcareer journalists. JTBC's Sohn spent two years at the University of Minnesota to earn a master's degree in journalism and global communication in the mid-1990s, which he said transformed his views on his industry (Chung 2017). In an interview Sohn gave right after he came back from Minnesota, he said the main goal of his studies had been to understand American journalism. While he did not think the US model was directly applicable to Korea, it left him with a desire for journalists to become more independent of politics and money (Park 1999). *Hankyoreh*'s Kim studied political science in Indiana State University in 2006. Ironically, his sabbatical was funded by a fellowship from none other than Samsung (Kim 2017c). One of the first projects Kim undertook after returning from the US is to experiment with US-style political reporting (Kim 2007). A decade later, the two reporters employed tactics like door-knocking, shadowing, and dumpster-diving in true muckraker fashion, even as the evaporation of corporate advertising disincentivized such dogged efforts.

What the South Korean media achieved in 2016 was all the more remarkable because it happened in a post-1987 climate marked not only by increased commercialization and economic liberalization, but also by the ever-growing political clout of the chaebols. After democratization, big businesses were quick to take advantage of the newly-liberated news market. Chaebols like Hyundai (*Munhwa Ilbo*) and Hanhwa (*Kyunghyang Shinmun*) were behind many of the new additions, alongside religious groups like the Unification Church (*Segye Ilbo*) and Full Gospel Church (*Kukmin Ilbo*) (Lee and Kim 2006, 1).

*JoongAng Ilbo* is often criticized for distorting the newspaper market with its intense subscription campaign from the mid-1990s. Lavish gifts were offered in return for subscription, leading to an all-out war with competing papers. The tension culminated in the murder of a *Chosun Ilbo* distribution manager by *JoongAng* employees (Lee 2013). Although *JoongAng* claimed a new identity as independent media, one memorable event underscored *JoongAng*'s continued fealty to Samsung. In June 1999, the National Tax Service uncovered tax evasion by *JoongAng*'s CEO Seok-hyun Hong. When he came in for questioning at the prosecutor's office, 40 *JoongAng* reporters formed a human blockade near the entrance, cheering on the CEO.

The financial crisis of 1997 led to the liberalization of the economy, creating an industry context where the government deregulated and diversified the media sector. Kalinowski

(2009) points out that the South Korean reforms were also political projects which went beyond the scope of IMF and World Bank. The liberal governments from 1997 to 2007 took advantage of a momentarily weakened chaebols to build a reform coalition, implementing reforms in a temporary corporatist framework adopted from Western Europe. But even during the liberal presidencies, currents of Americanization and commercialization ran strong. A prime example is the lineup of key cabinet members during the Roh administration: its first trade minister Hyun-chong Kim was a lawyer and former Samsung executive schooled exclusively in the US. The first information communication minister Dae-je Chin was a former CEO of Samsung Electronics (Korea JoongAng Daily Reporters 2003). Hardly relegated to the back room, the chaebols emerged even stronger to undermine state power with the inauguration of President Lee Myung-bak, a former chaebol CEO.

At the same time, traditional media have seen their revenues fall dramatically with the advent of the Internet. Print newspaper readership has fallen drastically from 82% in 2002 to 17% in 2017 (Woo 2017, 73). The situation has forced newspapers to rely more on corporate ads, giving chaebols even more influence over the media. Samsung alone accounts for 10% of the total advertisement revenue of the country's news media (Song 2007). Chaebols extend their financial support in forms of sponsored stories, media junkets, and even discounted laptops for reporters. Mid-career journalists also receive yearlong fellowships, as *Hankyoreh*'s Kim did. In a national survey conducted in 2017 after the impeachment, an outright majority (74.2%) of journalists said corporate advertisers were the biggest obstacles to fair and balanced coverage (Kim 2018b). As one reporter confessed, "No [Korean] journalist these days fears political power. But chaebols are another story. Few journalists write freely when reporting critically of chaebol, and the pressure from Samsung is particularly persistent" (Cho, Lee, and Song 2008, 89).

Such explains why, during the Park Geun-hye years, only a newspaper like the *Hankyoreh* was able to remain consistently critical in its approach to major scandals implicating the major businesses. After the presidential impeachment and the arrest of its CEO, Samsung ceased all ads in the *Hankyoreh* as well as at its former subsidiary JTBC.

Such pressures by corporate advertisers—and the kid-gloves treatment they receive from news media as a result—have also been observed in other countries, including the US (Starkman 2013). However, the South Korean media deviates from the liberal model when it comes to its relationship with politics, with major outlets showing a high level of political parallelism. *Chosun Ilbo*, the conservative media powerhouse, has maintained an activist orientation in its political reporting. It should also be noted that in the South Korean context the boundaries separating the journalistic, business and political fields are often porous or downright nonexistent. A case in point is the dizzying web of intermarriage, with the major newspapers like *Chosun*, *Dong-A* and *JoongAng* connected by marriage with Samsung, LG and Hyundai group as well as prominent politicians (Shin, interview, 2014). Still, one of the things the Choi scandal demonstrated was that in crucial ways, even the most powerful businesses like Samsung and Hyundai buckled with relative ease when faced with pressure to provide money for powerful politicians. Thirty major corporations were found to have bribed 48.5 billion won (about $43 million) to Soon-sil Choi.

Given the high political parallelism exhibited by the TV stations and the activist orientation of both *Hankyoreh* and *Chosun Ilbo*, it appears that the liberalization of South Korean

media is contributing towards a hybrid model—one that retains attributes of different media systems—with strong Anglo-American undertones. Another proof of such hybridity is the strength of press unions rarely observed in liberal media systems. Suk-hee Sohn is a former labor union organizer at MBC, which boasts one of the first and most militant press unions in South Korea. In August 1988, it launched the first strike in the history of Korean TV against censorship and propaganda. Such union activism slowly won more autonomy for MBC journalists, who began to produce critical content on topics like poverty and the dictatorial history (Kwak 2012). In 1992, the government's attempt to wield influence on news and drama content was met with the longest-running strike in Korean press history. After 52 days, seven MBC journalists were arrested. Among them was Suk-hee Sohn. Pictures of the attractive young man in his jail jumpsuit, smiling in handcuffs, turned the already-famous journalist into a nationally recognized symbol of press freedom (Kang 2017).

During the Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak years, however, the very liberal reputation made MBC a target of both administrations. As many as 27 MBC press workers were laid off for strikes and other union-related activities (Kim 2016d). Although Sohn was not one of the MBC journalists penalized for activism, his departure was interpreted as a form of protest against then-management at MBC (Kang 2017).

Nevertheless, the Choi Soon-sil gate highlights media's institutional powers most compatible with the liberal model. The reporting process—building iteratively between outlets over time—as well as the way the story circulated shows the dominance of the commercial, liberal paradigm in South Korea. Post-democratization deregulation in the late 1980s and early 1990s paved the way for more media outlets. This deregulation, coupled with greater competition for revenue, motivated corporate media outlets like JTBC and gave them a reason to report on stories that they knew would be controversial, to the detriment of its allies. The back and forth between JTBC, TV Chosun and *Hankyoreh* of scoops during the Choi scandal is reminiscent of American journalism in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when journalistic competition for better stories—including stories previously considered too critical—also served to boost circulation and maximize profit (Aucoin 2007; Schudson 1978; Stephens 1988).

## Conclusion

In February 2017, *Hankyoreh*, JTBC, and TV Chosun jointly received the Korea Journalism Award, known as the Pulitzer Prize of South Korea. *Hankyoreh* won this and 20 other prizes for its work, including the top journalism award by Citizens' Coalition for Democratic Media. In a statement, the NGO lauded *Hankyoreh*'s efforts to work even with *Chosun Ilbo* in covering the scandal: "This was about the most fundamental mission of journalism, to seek the truth over ideology and power," it said (Hankyoreh Special Investigations Team 2017). As the statement pointed out, the Choi scandal was made possible because an unlikely group of journalists from left and right pieced together a gargantuan puzzle that revealed malfeasance in the highest echelons of power. Evidence unearthed by news media was cited directly in the Constitutional Court's landmark decision to declare Park's impeachment legal in January 2017.

What the impeachment and the coverage leading up to it show, first and foremost, is the legacy of 1987 in the South Korean public sphere. The democracy movement provided

both the institutional foundations as well as the individual leadership. *Hankyoreh* has always been mindful of its status as the model child of the democracy movement, employing many of the brains of democracy movement like Kim. JTBC's Sohn also spent formative years as a union activist. That two journalists who spent time in jail for democracy activism decades ago put a corrupt president and her accomplices in prison shows 1987 coming deliciously full circle.

The idiom "South Korea's Watergate"—which the media frequently used throughout the scandal—also shows the significance of the liberal-democratic context. This had not been lost on the reporters who compared themselves to Woodward and Bernstein:

> I think Choi Soon-sil gate may have achieved more than Watergate … which only led President Nixon to step down while his party kept the presidency. But our investigation did more than changing the president, as we also got rid of the ancient regime that can be traced all the way to Park Chung-hee, said Eui-kyeom Kim. (Hankyoreh Special Investigations Team 2017, 10)

Although it is challenging to broadly apply findings from a single case, this article shows how market competition—and professional norms and routines which value "scoops" challenging powerful institutions—can empower individual journalists. The hybridity of the media system—with elements of corporatism— can further help journalists overcome harsh institutional circumstances and find a catalyst for change.

This article thus calls for more research on journalism and social change in transitional democracies by looking into news norms, values and cultures. As national news media ecosystems are highly culture-specific, it would be helpful to explore possible hybridity of news norms, including how different countries weave heterogenous—and often conflicting—elements to form their own norms and values. Another potential area is political regression and the rise of populist, anti-democratic media: Because this article focused on the triumph of mainstream outlets in pre-impeachment South Korea, it was unable to look into the significant pushback from populist media in the preceding years. Some believe the public's cynicism toward democratic norms had led to the emergence of Ilbe, a right-wing, misogynist website with tens of thousands of members (Kim 2018a).

Although the media played a major role in 2016, it is important to remember that other institutions also made the peaceful democratic transition possible. Civic groups with their veteran organizers and activists played a key role, while conscientious bureaucrats and government whistleblowers also contributed to the unraveling of the regime (Lee 2017). The Constitutional Court gave the green light for the impeachment, even though the majority of its justices had been appointed by the conservatives. But missing on the list of major actors were certain political institutions, most notably the major parties which joined the movement as its popularity spread, but certainly did not lead it (Lee 2017).

The South Korean Watergate is still ongoing: One year after Park Geun-hye was arrested, her predecessor Lee Myung-bak was also put behind bars on separate charges of corruption in March 2018 and released on parole in 2019. With the progressive Moon Jae-in as the president, public broadcasters are working to restore journalistic independence and create structures to prevent political meddling in the future. Still, polls show the South Korean public remain deeply critical of news media, with only 25% answering that they trust the news they consume (Reuters Institute 2018; Woo 2017). Just as

Watergate continues to inspire scholars and practitioners the world over, research on Choi-gate could provide insights on media systems and journalism in new and old democracies alike.

## Notes

1. For prominent Korean leaders already familiar to a global public (ex. President Park Geun-hye and UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon), this article adheres to AP style for Romanization of Korean names, listing the family name before the given name. For those lesser known outside Korea, the order has been reversed to first name followed by family name per international practice, as in Suk-hee Sohn and Soon-sil Choi.
2. Because JTBC/*JoongAng Ilbo* and TV Chosun/*Chosun Ilbo* are excluded in KINDS, I conducted separate searches for the four conservative outlets on Naver.com. The two searches on KINDS and NAVER yielded over 4,000 articles.

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## Appendix A

The author interviewed the following individuals:

Hong-geun Oh, August 21, 2014. Oh is a politician and former journalist who worked at TBC and *JoongAng Ilbo* from the 1970s to 1990s.
Cheong-won Kim, August 10, 2014. Kim is a midcareer journalist at the public broadcaster MBC who previously worked at JTBC.
Hak-lim Shin, August 22, 2014. Shin is a journalist and former chairman of the National Union of Media Workers, the biggest umbrella union of journalists and media workers in South Korea.
Journalist 1, October 7, 2019. S/he worked on the Choi scandal at the *Hankyoreh*.
Journalist 2, August 29, 2019. S/he worked on the Choi scandal at the *Hankyoreh*.
Journalist 3, November 4, 2019. S/he assisted with TV Chosun's coverage of Choi Soon-sil.

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