Modern Korean journalism began after the opening of Korea in 1876. The Korean press had a strong reformist and nationalistic flavor from the beginning but faced efforts at political control or outright censorship during most of the twentieth century. Many Korean journalists established a tradition of remaining independent. They were often critical of the government, zealously protesting any attempts at press censorship. At annexation in 1910, the Japanese governor general assumed direct control of the press along with other public institutions. Following the March First Movement in 1919, Japanese authorities loosened their overt control over cultural activities and permitted several Korean newspapers to function while maintaining some behind-the-scenes direction over politically sensitive topics. During the 1920s, Korean vernacular newspapers, such as Tonga ilbo (East Asia Daily), and intellectual journals such as Kaebyok (Creation), conducted running skirmishes with Japanese censors. Japanese authorities prohibited sales of individual issues on hundreds of occasions between 1926 and 1932. Japan's war mobilization in the ensuing years ended any semblance of autonomy for the Korean press; all Korean-language publications were outlawed in 1941.

Following the period of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (1945-48), which saw a burgeoning of newspapers and periodicals of every description as well as occasional censorship of the media, almost all subsequent South Korean governments have at times attempted to control the media. Syngman Rhee's government continued the military government's Ordinance Number Eighty-Eight, which outlawed leftist newspapers. Rhee also closed moderate newspapers and arrested reporters and publishers on numerous occasions between 1948 and 1960. On taking power in 1961, Park Chung Hee's Supreme Council for National Reconstruction closed all but fifteen of Seoul's sixty-four daily newspapers and refused to register a comparable percentage of the country's news services, weeklies, and monthly publications while using its own radio and news agencies to promote its official line. The Park government also used the Press Ethics Commission Law of 1964 and, after 1972, emergency decrees that penalized criticism of the government to keep the media in line. In 1974 the government ordered a number of journalists fired and used the KCIA to force Tonga ilbo to stop its reporting on popular opposition to the Park government by intimidating the paper's advertisers.

During the Park and Chun years, the government exercised considerable control and surveillance over the media through the comprehensive National Security Act. In late 1980, the Chun government established more thorough control of the news media than had existed in the South Korea since the Korean War. Independent news agencies were absorbed into a single state-run agency, numerous provincial newspapers were closed, central newspapers were forbidden to station correspondents in provincial cities, the Christian Broadcasting System network was forbidden to provide news coverage, and two independent broadcasting companies were absorbed into the state-run Korean Broadcasting System (KBS). In addition, the Defense Security Command, then commanded by Roh Tae Woo, and the Ministry of Culture and Information ordered hundreds of South Korean journalists fired and banned from newspaper writing or editing. The Basic Press Act of December 1980 was the legal capstone of Chun's system of media control and provided for censorship and control of newspapers, periodicals, and broadcast media. It also set the professional qualifications for journalists. Media censorship was coordinated with intelligence officials, representatives of various government agencies, and the presidential staff by the Office of Public Information Policy within the Ministry of Culture and Information using daily "reporting guidelines" (podo chich'im) sent to newspaper editors. The guidelines dealt exhaustively with questions of emphasis, topics to be covered or avoided, the use of government press releases, and even the size of headlines. Enforcement
methods ranged from telephone calls to editors to more serious forms of intimidation, including interrogations and beatings by police. One former Ministry of Culture and Information official told a National Assembly hearing in 1988 that compliance during his tenure from 1980 to 1982 reached about 70 percent.

By the mid-1980s, censorship of print and broadcast media had become one of the most widely and publicly criticized practices of the Chun government. Even the government-controlled Yonhap News Agency noted in 1989 that "TV companies, scarcely worse than other media, were the main target of bitter public criticism for their distorted reporting for the government in the early 1980s." Editorials called for abolition of the Basic Press Act and related practices, a bill was unsuccessfully introduced in the National Assembly to the same end, and a public campaign to withhold compulsory viewers' fees in protest against censorship by the KBS network received widespread press attention. By the summer of 1986, even the ruling party was responding to public opinion.

The political liberalization of the late 1980s brought a loosening of press restraints and a new generation of journalists more willing to investigate sensitive subjects, such as the May 1980 Kwangju incident. Roh's eight-point declaration of June 29, 1987, provided for "a free press, including allowing newspapers to base correspondents in provincial cities and withdrawing security officials from newspaper offices." The South Korean media began a rapid expansion. Seoul papers expanded their coverage and resumed the practice of stationing correspondents in provincial cities. Although temporarily still under the management of a former Blue House press spokesman, the MBC television network, a commercial network that had been under control of the state-managed KBS since 1980, resumed independent broadcasting. The number of radio broadcast stations grew from 74 in 1985 to 111 (including both AM and FM stations) by late 1988 and 125 by late 1989. The number of periodicals rose as the government removed restrictions on the publishing industry.

There also were qualitative changes in the South Korean media. The Christian Broadcasting System, a radio network, again began to broadcast news as well as religious programming in 1987. In the same year, the government partially lifted a long-standing ban on the works of North Korean artists and musicians, many of whom were of South Korean origin. A newspaper run by dissident journalists began publication in 1988. A number of other new dailies also appeared in 1988. Many of the new weekly and monthly periodicals bypassed the higher profits of the traditional general circulation magazines to provide careful analyses of political, economic, and national security affairs to smaller, specialized audiences. Observers noted a dramatic increase in press coverage of previously taboo subjects such as political-military relations, factions within the military, the role of security agencies in politics, and the activities of dissident organizations. Opinion polls dealing with these and other sensitive issues also began to appear with increasing regularity. Journalists at several of the Seoul dailies organized trade unions in late 1987 and early 1988 and began to press for editorial autonomy and a greater role in newspaper management.

In 1989 South Korea's four largest dailies, Hanguk ilbo, Chungang ilbo, Choson ilbo, and Tonga ilbo, had a combined circulation of more than 6.5 million. The antiestablishment Hangyore simmun (One Nation News), had 450,000 readers--less than the major dailies or smaller papers like Kyonghyang simmun or Soul simmun, but larger than four more specialized economic dailies. All the major dailies were privately owned, except for the government-controlled Hanguk ilbo. Several other daily publications had specialized readerships among sport fans and youth.
Two English-language newspapers, the government-subsidized Korea Herald and the Korea Times, which was affiliated with the independent Soul simmun, were widely read by foreign embassies and businesses. A Chinese-language daily served South Korea's small Chinese population.

The Yonhap News Agency provided domestic and foreign news to government agencies, newspapers, and broadcasters. Yonhap also provided news on South Korean developments in English by computerized transmission via the Asia-Pacific News Network. Additional links with world media were facilitated by four satellite link stations. The International Broadcast Center established in June 1988 served some 10,000 broadcasters for the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The government's KBS radio network broadcast overseas in twelve languages. Two private radio networks, the Asia Broadcasting Company and Far East Broadcasting Company, served a wide regional audience that included the Soviet Far East, China, and Japan.

The South Korean government also supported Naewoe Press, which dealt solely with North Korean affairs. Originally a propaganda vehicle that followed the government line on unification policy issues, Naewoe Press became increasingly objective and moderate in tone in the mid-1980s in interpreting political, social, and economic developments in North Korea. Vantage Point, an English-language publication of Naewoe Press, provided in-depth studies of North Korean social, economic, and political developments.

Except for two newspapers (one in Korean and one in English) that the government owned or controlled and the state television network, ownership of the media was for the most part distinct from political or economic power. One exception was the conservative daily, Chungang ilbo. Under the close oversight of its owner, the late Samsung Group founder and multimillionaire Yi Pyong-ch'ol, the paper and its affiliated TBC television network generally supported the Park government during the 1970s. Its relations with the government became strained after 1980, however, when Chun Doo Hwan forced TBC to merge with KBS. A journalists' strike at Chungang ilbo in 1989, in one of many similar incidents at the major South Korean newspapers, won even greater management and editorial independence.

Most of South Korea's major newspapers derived their financial support from advertising and from their affiliation with major publishing houses. The Tonga Press, for example, published not only the prestigious daily Tonga ilbo, but also a variety of other periodicals, including a newspaper for children, the general circulation monthly Sin tonga (New East Asia), a women's magazine, and specialized reference books and magazines for students. Throughout the postwar period, Tonga ilbo has been noted for its opposition sympathies.

South Korea's principal antiestablishment newspaper, Hangyore simmun, began publication in May 1988. It was founded by dissident journalists who were purged by the government in the early 1970s or in 1980; many of the paper's reporters and editorial staff left positions on mainstream newspapers to join the new venture. The structure and approach of the paper reflected the founders' view that in the past the South Korean news media had been too easily co-opted by the government. The paper had a human rights department as well as a mass media department to keep an eye on the government's press policy and to critique the ideological and political biases of other newspapers. The paper's nationalism and interest in national reunification were symbolically represented in the logo, which depicted Lake Ch'onji at the peak of Mount Paektu in North Korea; in the exclusive use of the Korean alphabet; and in the type font in which the paper's name was printed, which dated from a famous Korean
publication of the eighteenth century, before the country became divided. The paper was printed horizontally, rather than vertically like other Seoul dailies. In other innovations, the Hangyore simmun relied on sales revenues, private contributions, and the sale of stock, rather than advertising from major corporations, in line with its claim to be "the first newspaper in the world truly independent of political power and large capital." The newspaper came under increasing government pressures in 1989.

South Korea also had extensive and well-developed visual media. The first Korean film was produced in 1919, and cinemas subsequently were built in the larger cities. The result of the spread of television sets and radios was the dissemination of a homogenized popular culture and the impingement of urban values on rural communities.