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1995

Nantiya T. and Pana J. (1995). The influence of politics and policies on journalism values in Thailand. In AMIC Seminar on Asian Values in Journalism Seminar Nilai-Nilai Kewartawanan Asia: Kuala Lumpur, 24-25 August, 1995. Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/100270>

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On Journalism Values In Thailand**

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Paper presented at Kuala Lumpur Seminar on
Asian Values in Journalism

August 24-15, 1995

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The role of Thai newspapers in enhancing and supporting democracy, particularly against military takeover of the civilian government, is a well-established part of the modern Thai press and political development. But the role of the local broadcasting media, especially televisions, in opposing illegitimate powers is at best minimal. The government and the army still own all the TV channels and unlikely to let them go in the foreseeable future.

This presentation attempts to give a critical look at Thai journalism values with regards to changes in politics and policies after 1992 when democracy returned to the country after a brief military rule. There is a positive correlation between political development and journalism values, which like everything else on this planet, is subjected to changes and evolution.

The Thai state and press have a love-hate kind of relationship. The biggest press-control tool "Decree 42", issued in 1976 after a bloody coup, was abrogated in 1990 by an executive order issued by the administration of Premier Chatichai Choonhavan. After an intensive campaign by senior journalists, sources closed to the premier said he wanted to appease the increasingly hostile Thai press at a time when he faced tough challenges from political rivals and the military.

The newly elected government of Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa vowed on the first day of taking the office in July to be "friendly" with the media. But there are occasions that the premier himself got on different cars when leaving the Government House to fool some 200 journalists waiting to ask him fierce questions about some political conflicts such as political reform and Cabinet reshuffle.

Thailand's Constitution now guarantees that the government cannot close down publications without court ruling or orders. But the term "orders" created a controversy because it is afraid that closure court order may still come without a trial. The judiciary, however, insisted that it will not become a tool of any governments in suppressing the press.

Currently, there is no organization to oversee ethical conduct of the media. But in an effort to improve the quality of journalism and force journalists to write with responsibility, the libel law was amended to allow stiffer monetary penalty if a newspaper is sued and loses the case. However, it was analyzed that the Thais seldom seek legal assistance. Influential people have their ways to deal with the press while the weaker ones rarely dare challenging future complications.

Despite a freer working atmosphere, there is a struggle in the Thai press now how to promote and deal with democracy and liberalized information environment. The journalists seem to be facing a dilemma in weighing the interests of people in the different societal layers. The globalization of the world economy means greater absorption of capitalist system and ideas. As a result, solutions to society's ills often overlook social and cultural influences as alternative means of moving the country forward in a much complex world in terms of distribution of income, better quality of life and grassroots democracy.

One clear example of capitalism-dominated way of thinking is the proposed solutions to Bangkok's traffic crisis. All parties including the government, private sector, the media and general public have been focusing on constructing more roads for more cars. Investments from private sector in mega highways and so-called mass transportation projects are presently heavily promoted in the name of privatization. A satellite business tycoon-cum-deputy premier vowed to ease the decades-long accumulated crisis within six months after taking office last July. His methods of using high technology and cash incentive to convince traffic police to work harder are sometimes referred to by some columnists "a solution by a rich man". But neither the press nor the public directly criticized the plans as Bangkokians are desperate to be rescued from the traffic congestion hell.

However, such a single-focused solution to the problem should not be seen as a sustainable one. The majority of taxpayers residing in other parts of the country still have to pay for more road construction in Bangkok. This is because the those projects are not truly privatized without state subsidies. Moreover, the government does not pay attention at other long term alternatives such as decentralizing the capital and distributing of income to reduce migrants from flooding into the city for opportunities. In my view, the Thai press and broadcast media have too much followed the newsy current done too little to guide the society in the alternative aspect.

For historical reasons, the state and the people in Thailand have their own places. Apart from news gathering and dispersement, the press here also acts as the intermediary both to forge and break the relationship between the state and the people. Aggressive news coverage news coverage as campaigns at times riding on sensationalism can lead to actions by the government and the bureaucracy to deal with issues previously ignored or even untouchable.

The country's big scandals related former highly respected monks Phra Yantra, Phra Nikorn and Phra Powwana Putto firmly illustrated the phenomenon. These former two were forced to disrobe while the latter is now being investigated by police for alleged committing sexual harassment with female followers. Buddhism has been regarded as one of the nation's three highest symbols and refrained from being criticized. But the cases were unfolded by extensive press coverage. Never before people's respect and belief in the religion was heavily shakened by such an aggressiveness of the press.

While the press plays a public pressure group but the rationales and arguments often do not get down to the fundamentals that will promote sustained solutions. This is a weakness and limitation of any media which usually concern itself with "current and newsy issues". They do not have sufficient historical perspectives or ability to be comprehensive.

Where do Thai journalism values lie? We as cited in the above have no unified value in journalism as in a totalitarian state but a pluralistic set of values that reflect the civility and openness of the Thai society. Some newspapers are more critical and sensational than others. Some have clear cut agenda and idealism while others are more cautious. But they are generally pro-democracy, pro-capitalist and quite independent on the whole.

The pro-capitalist factors belie in the ownership structure of the media companies. The major media groups were founded by entrepreneurs. Only a handful is founded by journalists. The consistent economic growth of the country and liberalized environment, created out of greater democracy and globalization influences, have provided the opportunity for the media sector to grow reaped and bound and forced journalists to become more business oriented to ride the growth path.

My newspaper, The Nation, provides a noted example of this dual role which you might say a dilemma. We capitalize on the opportunity of the liberalized environment came with greater democracy, to start a radio news station which was phenomenally successful because the content was as objective as newspaper reporting and people were invited to phone in to speak their minds.

But there was also an investment in starting up a radio station. The financial consideration would not have become very important if the success was to continue. But after Nation Radio was born, it was banned by the military which owns the station because one invited speaker on a talk show made criticism against Thai military.

Meanwhile, we will be investing in the country's first independent TV station next year and that needs a lot of financing and reorganization. It will be a proof if we can maintain objective and independent reporting as the public has come to know.

These business opportunities are coming to the way of media organizations such as obvious as part of the information revolution that is mobbing across the globe.