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<td>Author(s)</td>
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The Impact Of Societal Change On Thai Journalism: Changing Media For Changing Audience?

By

Sudarat Disayawattana, Peeraya Hanpongpun
The Impact of Societal Change on Thai Journalism: 
Changing Media for Changing Audience?

by
Sudarat Disayawattana, Ph.D.
and
Peeraya Hanpongpun
Bangkok University
Thailand

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Introduction

Rapid change of historic dimension has been taking place in many countries in Asia and the Pacific in the last few decades. Economic development is bringing about an improved standard of living. A trend of democratization is giving people a greater voice in the management of their own affairs. At the same time, influence of the West, not only through media, but also from the exchange of visits, and importation of Western products, is poring into the lands of Asia. Whatever the path toward development, most of these countries share common experiences that are characterized by the infusing of modern technologies, expanding urbanization, changes in the occupational structure, rising aspirations, and importantly, the outreach of mass communication, compounded by a growing population and deteriorating environment.

Yet the need for change and prosperity becomes increasingly evident. There has been a growing concern in Asia and Pacific about the potential erosion of indigenous cultural values and the loss of social and cultural identity. Social and cultural change has been an important concepts in the field of communication. Cultural context and its relationship with communication have been major concerns not only among those scholars who are working in the area of intercultural communication, but also among
those who conceive cultural change as the broadest and most comprehensive criterion of communication effects (Chaffee and Chu, 1992).

The economical, effective channel of communication with the general public is through the mass media: newspapers, magazines, trade publications, AM and FM radio, television, cable, books and so on. The mass media reach into nearly every home and work place. These media represent a means of disseminating ideas and information to the public. However, today's communicator must cope with the fact that the news media must adjust their values to society's need for new information. The new technology requires adaptation of messages to new formats and more narrowly defined publics. However, the adaptiveness of the news media is often misled to the heavy hardware investment, rather than software considerations. Following the above conceptualization, this study limits its scope to the impact of societal transformation on Journalism values in Thai society.

Cultural and Social Change: Thai Experience

The term culture, as used by scholars with different conceptual interests means everything from fashion to ancient customs, from artifacts to traditional rituals. Culture is dynamic. It is continuously adaptive to change. Cultural change, thus, refers to the process of change involving people and institutions, which are built around people such as behavioral patterns, social relations, values and beliefs.

Modernizing society has often come with the concept of economic growth rate and technological advancement. Since Thai national development programs began in the 1960s, the economy and occupational structure of Thailand have diversified greatly. With the introduction of a cash economy and commercial activity, economic development, expanded
educational opportunities, rural electrification, improved road and transportation facilities, improved mobility, pervasiveness of mass media, greater government involvement in village life through both increased number of visits by officials to villages as well as provisions of government facilities and services, all these affect traditional patterns of village life and influence the direction and rate of change in the Thai society.

Societal change in the era of globalization seems to be dramatic. While the material parts are growing continuously, the spiritual part is decaying. The warmth and unity of family that has been deeply rooted in traditional Thai culture are fading. The strong emotional support and the sense of belonging enjoyed by Thais seem to lose. New generation becomes new rich, spending more of their time working, making money and less time relaxing and appreciating natural beauty.

Considering information and communication, much of what Thailand can do with the proper use of information technology can be revolutionary in its socio-cultural results. The existing forms of communication technology have brought about substantial changes among a large portion of population. Optimistically, more access to information, better communication and increased knowledge will improve the defense of individuals and public rights and shared interests as well as will encourage full participation in democratic process. Technologies have promised lots of things to lots of people.

Society and News Media

"Early people clustered in small villages for convenience and self-protection. Enter industrial progress and the population explosion. Tribes grew bigger and bigger, jobs became more specialized, and a change in identity developed. Rivalries became more acute. People are now grouped in cities, towns and nations. Print encouraged factions to develop, because it failed to perceive the whole. Now air travel and the electronic media are
shrinking the world back to tribal size, and tribalization is encouraged by the demise of the print. Hence we are becoming once again a village, but this time a global village.”

(Whetmore, 1993, p.367)

The above statement by Whetmore shows the evolution of society and the media. The author has a strong faith in electronic media which “make possible instant communication worldwide, break down social and ethnic barriers and familiarize everyone with everyone.” (Whetmore, 1993)

However, whether we will witness the demise of the print is still doubtful.

The electronic media are claimed to take the most advantage of recent technological advancement. The recent launches of Thaicom Satellites provide transponders for telecommunications and broadcasting. The traditional mass electronic media have entered a more competitive world. They are not just competing with their old rivals, print media, but with many new forms of media as well. Cable television starts to gain popularity, followed by a new service of video on demand. Cable radio is proposed. Computer network is becoming more common to certain class of people. Print media expand their realm through both same and across product lines.

Thus, through any means of communication, the product is ultimately information.

**News Media and Newwork**

In the age of globalization, information spreads rapidly and continuously. News about new discoveries, changes, development and improvement have bombarded all beings in the society. The pressure to update, upgrade, or keep up with the fast pace of societal change is not only a burden to the people in general, but also to those who produce the news product.
Does the new type of audience, the globalized one, require different kinds of news product? Considering all available means of communication it certainly requires a large quantity of news product. With the changing way of life, it is obvious that news should be redefined, format be revised and newswork be reengineered to respond to the new needs of old audience. The main question is perhaps which means will help us reach the desirable end the fastest.

Technological investment is often perceived as the answer. The promise of technology requires the immense capital investment. It is not surprising to see the joint cooperation between media companies, or between media and other businesses. Interestingly, major Thai media companies are all listed in the stock market. The expansion of media conglomerates is partially the result of the needs for capital investment. Capital requirement, thus, ensure that media "gatekeepers" are members of the economic elite, with associated class biases (Herman, 1991). The scale of production and capital requirement have steadily enlarged as the wealth of the owners have greatly increased.

For print media in the competitive global village, the attractive physical appearance is as important as good editorial pages or innovative news concepts. Format seems to be more important than content. Main funders are advertisers who exercise its influence by their demand for "suitable program environment" for their commercial messages, including to avoid controversy and intellectual complexity, and their power to choose among media channels according to these preferences (Barnouw, 1978). The market-led media emphasize things that sell rather than things that enlight people.

Newswork is also subject to this economic framework of media system. It determines size and capacity of the system resources, division of
labor etc. Therefore, type of economic structure tends to be determinant of 'means' in news-making process, and means can simultaneously lead to a particular 'end' whether it is intended or not.

Altschull (1984) writes a concern on the effect of the paymaster on the news content while Shoemaker (1987) argues that not all paymasters hold positions in every issue. However, organizational culture is the implicit rule. The journalists, sooner or later, learn to avoid irritating the paymaster's mood, as well as the 'buying mood' of the advertisers and customers (not audience) (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The importance of newsworkers is hardly recognized as Gomery (1992) mentions, "the truth about the modern newspaper is that although reporters see themselves as the heart and soul of the enterprise, management thinks that reporters make little difference in the bottom line. One or two writers can be pampered, but the typical reporter can easily be replaced by one of the thousands of recent journalism school graduates at a rock-bottom wage."

The report on the income and additional incentives of the reporters of major newspapers, revealed in the newsletter of Journalist Association of Thailand (1995, p. 16) shows that journalist is not such a lucrative career considering the long hours of work. In the same publication, an article, titled "Journalist is not for Sale" by an unknown writer wrote that reporters often report the news about request for wage increase of government officials, laborers or any other groups, but when looking at their own request for wage increase, reporters often keep quiet (p.15). Journalism ideology perhaps keeps every mouth shut.

In heavily-invested media system, the routinized arrangement of newswork is employed to encounter both certainty and uncertainty of the nature of news event. News has been recently perceived as 'social
construction of reality (Tuchman 1978). It is the product of those who involve in the news process. Textbook news values are not totally rejected, but is not considered the major and sole factor of how the news get made like it used to be. The main concern is not with what categories are used to justify news, but how the work is done. Beat system guarantees the cheap, regular, and credible sources of information. Routinization provides guidelines in order to do the work efficiently, for example, what questions to ask, whom to ask or what to expect. In other words, it help journalistic work more accessible, easily managed, and ready for presentational form.

Some particular groups of journalists such as parliament reporters, at the same time establish their own sub-culture, besides their organizational culture such as routinization and beat system, which helps members in both socializing and functioning in their career world (Tunstall, 1971). This is a result of strategic plan in coping with uncertainties. Nevertheless, similar production method offer, more or less, similar product. We can hardly differentiate one news story of a newspaper or a television channel from the other.

Although routinization ensures maximum profit with minimum effort, innovation must be introduced every now and then to attract audience and catch up with current events. For example, Informal Education Page has recently introduced to Matichon Newspaper to grasp the social trend of impact of new telecommunication technologies on education. Once again news media have to readjust themselves, not to cope with new needs of old audience, but to compete for new customers.
Conclusion

The fast pace of societal change especially in part of technological advancement affects the people at large. The changing way of life in many different aspects assumes that the audience perhaps should consume certain kinds of information, which may be different from those of the past kind of society. It is the information at the fast rate and of large quantity. However, to keep up with it, media place their priority on heavy investment on technological foundation, hoping that it will be the key answer to the desirable end which is the product that fits the target audience.

With the requirement of capital investment, media are led by the market system. Journalism work consists of basic patterns, division of labor that minimize effort to gain maximum profit. The values of traditional journalist as well as journalism ideology are ignored. Today journalism does not respond to the needs of the changing society or changing audience because audience is seen only as potential customers.
References


