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Thailand's Paper

Deutsche Welle - AMIC Workshop on:
"Management of Change for Broadcasters"

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National Broadcasting Services of Thailand

Like most of its counterparts in Asia, the National Broadcasting Services of Thailand started as and remained state-owned public broadcasting services, under the administration of the Government Public Relations Department. NBT is currently made up of Radio Thailand, Domestic Service, Radio Thailand, World Service, Radio Thailand, Educational Network, and Television Thailand, now operating 60 AM, 85 FM radio stations, and 32 television stations nationwide, with the World Service in 12 languages, aimed at various regions of the world, through satellite and shortwave transmission.

This year, radio broadcasting in Thailand marked its 68th year in operation on February 25. Television, on the other hand, will become 43 years old as a public service on June 24.

There are currently 523 radio stations, AM and FM, five terrestrial
television networks, and two cable television operators, under 19 government agencies and organizations.

Changes Imposed by the Law

The situation concerning broadcasting industry in Thailand is about to change, with the promulgation of the new Constitution, the first ever drafted with public participation, on October 11, 1997. Articles directly involved are articles 39, 40 and 41. They guarantee the right of liberty of expression, speech, writing, printing, publicity and communications by other means, prohibit censorship in the media, and limit the roles of the state in media operation. Frequencies used for radio, television broadcasts and telecommunications are considered communications resources in the public domain. An independent public organization must be set up to assign bands, as well as regulate and supervise involvement with radio, television and telecommunications. Media operation must be in line with the best interest of the people at both national and local levels and for educational, cultural and national security purposes, and with the spirit of free enterprise. Rights and liberties of personnel in media organizations are guaranteed.

At present, all government agencies are reviewing related laws and activities undertaken under their supervision. Restructuring of broadcasting services in accordance with the new Constitution has already started, although legislative process can take years, before the reshaping of the industry can be seen.

It is certain that in the future, media organizations in the form of
corporations will be in operation, most probably with a whole range of media operation, from news gathering to disseminating. The core government agencies involved such as the Government Public Relations Department and the Mass Communication Authority of Thailand will have to adapt their roles to become regulatory bodies and to take up public service broadcasting that is non-profit and necessary in terms of public information, foreign relations and national security.

Changes Imposed by Technological Development

Legislative changes aside, technological development in telecommunication and broadcasting in the past decade has been phenomenal, with fundamental changes seen and foreseen in radio and television services at all levels.

Multichannel broadcasting and digitization are being adopted by state and private media organizations at a fast pace, following the launch of Thailand’s own telecommunication satellites, ThaiCom I, II and III, and the all-out nationwide promotion of information technology with the celebration of the National Information Technology Year 1994 in honour of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, who, together with his second daughter, Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, have been at the forefront of IT development and utilization in Thailand and the region.

How Broadcasters Cope With Changes
As a career, or a way of life, broadcasting is full of paradoxes. A broadcaster works on schedule and by time-limit. He or she does the same programme each day at a specific time. Yet, the content differs everyday. A successful broadcaster feels comfortable with his or her audience, and yet the audience never stays the same. With social changes, aging, and migration, one cannot rest assured of a niche in broadcasting, nor a fixed audience for a specific broadcast.

Broadcasters frequently talk about new technologies. They interview inventors, scientists and futurists. But they are fearful of technologies and secretly opt for traditional ways of news collecting and presentation, writing down on dope sheets, recording and editing on old and outdated analog system and presenting programmes in the familiar ways. They are also bound by schedule and cannot tear themselves away from routine work for retraining.

While building up hardware and software to cope with changes in information, telecommunication and broadcasting technologies is a complex task for administrators, creating human software as agents of change is more demanding and urgent. Since changes have to be initiated and carried through by personnel in the organization themselves.
The Government Public Relations Department, the parent organization of the National Broadcasting Services of Thailand, has embarked upon its reengineering plan since 1996, in line with the government’s bureaucratic reform programme. A medium-term and a long-term vision have been formulated for the organization to become a lead agency in information policy. Reorganization has been carried out in the latter part of 1997. An ambitious plan has been enacted to train and retrain personnel at all levels.

The current financial crisis has had a significant impact on the reengineering process. Expenditure budget has been trimmed, and scholarships are cut substantially. Although personnel retrenchment has not been seen so far, procurement and research and development are significantly affected.

The government, meanwhile, has made it clear that human resources and information technology development will be seriously focussed upon, as the country pulls itself out of the crisis. The new Constitution also emphasizes the importance of public information and transparency in administration. There remain hopes that changes will be embraced by policymakers and the Thai people at large, and broadcasters as an important agent of change will play their roles in the process.

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