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COUNTRY PAPER FROM THAILAND

By

AMPORN SAMOSORN

Paper No. 21
Public Broadcasting in Thailand

Broadcasting took hold in Thailand in its early days, thanks to an innovative and technology-minded senior royal, Prince Purachatra Jayagara, the Prince of Kamphaengphet, who also introduced telegraph and rail services into Thailand. The Prince served as the Minister of Commerce and Communications in the 20s. Soon after the landmark events in the history of broadcasting, i.e. the first transmission of radio signals across the Atlantic by Marconi in 1901, the first regular radio broadcasts by stations in Detroit and Pittsburgh in 1920, and the start of the first BBC radio transmission for the London station 2LO in 1922, the Prince bought a small transmitter with his personal fund and experimented the broadcast at his palace in Bangkok, using his own voice and musical accompaniment. At the same time, engineers at the Post and Telegraph Department were instructed to carry out experimentation in broadcasting under his guidance since 1927.

The first regular radio broadcast from the Division of Radio Engineering of the Post and Telegraph Department began on May 31, 1929, under the call-sign "4 PJ", in deference to the originator of the service, Prince Purachatra Jayagara. The station was located at the Post Office near the Memorial Bridge. The short-wave transmitter used was of 200 watts, using 37 metreband. Later, an 1,000-watt medium-wave transmitter was brought in, using 320 metreband, with the new call-sign as 11 PJ.

It was not until 1929 that the general public was allowed to own radio receivers, with the amendment of the Telegraph Act that year. The Post and Telegraph Department thus set up a new radio station at the Phaya Thai Palace, now the Phra Mongkutklaao Military Hospital. The station is called, Radio Bangkok at Phaya Thai. The broadcast was inaugurated on February 25, the Coronation Day for the Seventh Reign. The nation was thrilled by the King’s voice relayed from the Amarintravinitchai Throne Hall in the Grand Palace.
King Prajadhipok, Rama VII in his address, referred to the broadcast as follows:

"Radio broadcasting which has been experimented for the past years, is meant to enhance education, trade and entertainment for members of the public. For the purpose, the Telegraph Act was amended in September. At present, a high quality transmitter has been installed at the Phayathai Radio and Telegraph Station. We take this opportunity to inaugurate the operation this moment onward."

Following the coup of 1932 and the change in the administrative system from absolute to constitutional monarchy, the radio station at Phayathai Palace was moved to Saladaeng, and became Radio Bangkok at Saladaeng, with a more powerful transmitter, under the call-sign as 7 PJ. An experiment was also undertaken for short-wave broadcast for international audience, under the call-sign of 8PJ. The original antenna remains to be seen within the Armed Forces Academics Preparatory School, near the Lumpini Park. Thus, the road in front of the station was named, Wireless Road.

In 1933, the Publicity Department was set up with the mandate to create understanding in the new administrative system and democracy among the public. It was later upgraded as the Publicity Bureau, and later changed into the Government Public Relations Department. The operation and control of radio broadcasting was transferred from the Post and Telegraph Department to the Publicity Bureau. The 7PJ station, with a 10-kilowatt transmitter began the service under the name, the National Broadcasting Station of Thailand on April 1, 1939.

Although the power output for radio broadcasting at the time was low, the broadcasts served as the main source of information and entertainment for the people.

As the Second World War loomed in Europe, the National Broadcasting Station of Thailand’s role was enhanced. On September 5, 1939, Prime Minister Field Marshal P.Pibulsonggram addressed the nation over the radio, warning the public of the possible eruption of a world war. Services in English and French began during this period. Foreign dignitaries were invited to broadcast their views on short-wave service. In 1942, four more languages were added to the service, Burmese, Hindi, Japanese and Malay.

The Department maintains two musical bands, a classical Thai and a Western one. They provided much-needed entertainment throughout the wartime years, along with drama and plays, most with nationalistic themes. Thailand was de facto under Japanese occupation during the period.

After the Second World War, the country found itself under varying degrees of authoritarian and military rules, with some brief respites at times. Radio and later television became powerful tools for those in power.
Coups are made and acknowledged only when they are announced nationally on the air. Thus, the National Broadcasting Services, Radio Thailand, and all television networks have been the prime targets for coup-makers up to the ‘90s.

However, broadcast media have been consistently developed, with the Public Relations Department playing the lead.

In the year 1952, television broadcast was experimented by engineers of the Public Relations Department. A radio studio was adapted as a television studio and a live performance of the Department’s orchestra was carried to a few television sets put up at the Government House, major theatres in Bangkok, and in front of the Department on July 14, 1952. In 1953, a bill was enacted, establishing the Thai Television Company Limited as a state enterprise under the Department’s supervision. The Department holds 55 percent shares in the Company, meant as a commercial arm in broadcasting. The first commercial radio broadcasting service under the name TTV went on air on January 31, 1954, followed by a television service on June 24, 1955, the first for Mainland Asia.

Also on July 21, 1955, the Public Relations Department started its first radio station outside of Bangkok, in Surat Thani Province in the South. A full-scale regional operation won the government’s approval in 1959, with Public Relations Regional Centres set up in the Northeast, the North and the South, operating both radio and television stations.

The Department presently operates 59 AM stations, and 84 FM stations, situated in Bangkok, Kanchanaburi, Ratchaburi, Suphanburi and Phetchaburi in the Central Region, Chanthaburi, Chon Buri, Rayong, Trat and Sa Kaeo in the East, Kalasin, Khon Kaen, Nakhon Phanom, Nakhon Ratchasima, Buri Ram, Mukdahan, Maha Sarakham, Yasothon, Roi Et, Loei, Si Sa Ket, Sakon Nakhon, Surin, Nong Bua Lamphu, Udon Thani, Ubon Ratchathani, and Amnat Charoen in the Northeast, Kamphaengphet, Chai Nat, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Tak, Nakhon Sawan, Nan, Phayao, Phitsanulok, Phetchabun, Phrae, Mae Hong Son, Lampang, Lamphun, Sukhothai, and Uttaradit in the North, Krabi, Chumphon, Trang, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Narathiwat, Prachuap Khiri Khan, Pattani, Phang-Nga, Phatthalung, Phuket, Yala, Ranong, Satun, Surat Thani and Songkhla in the South. Of the number, 12 stations are Bangkok-based, 6 AM stations and 6 FM stations, two of which transmitting English programmes. Radio Thailand also operates its World Service in 12 languages, Thai, Lao, Khmer, Vietnamese, Burmese, Japanese, Mandarin, Malaysian, Indonesian, English, French and German.
The transmission has since July 1994 been carried over the RTH-VOA Relay Station in Udon Thani Province in the Northeast, in accordance with the country-to-country agreement between Thailand and the United States of America. The programmes are transmitted to the relay station via satellite. The relay station features seven shortwave transmitters, each with 500 kilowatts output, operated simultaneously, with highly directional, high gain, and electronically slewable curtain antennas. The target area includes over 40 percent of the world’s population, including the United States of America for Radio Thailand.

Radio Thailand, Domestic Service and World Service, serves as the parent station for official newscasts and live coverages of major national events, in Thai and English, for radio stations in the country, both affiliates and others. For television, Television of Thailand Channel 11, set up in 1985, serves as the parent station for 32 stations operated by the Department in the provinces.

All broadcasting stations maintain their own editorial control, even when the country was under an emergency rule.

Meanwhile, other government agencies apart from the Post and Telegraph Department set up their broadcasting stations on an experimental basis, for inter-agency communication, and for security reasons. The Royal Thai Army has its television network set up and operated in parallel with the Thai Television and Television of Thailand Networks.

Advertising of goods and services found its place in both radio and television broadcasts, and became the mainstay of the services. Commercial radio broadcasts were at their peak, with some English services put up on a commercial basis, and attempts being made for services in other languages, when the nationalistic administration led by Prime Minister Dhanin Kraivixian clamped down on commercialization and foreign languages in the broadcasts in 1977. Several services went off the air. Foreign language services were allowed only on Radio Thailand, the National Broadcasting Services of Thailand.

Only after commercialization was allowed back that radio broadcasting came to life again. Economic boom in the ‘80s precipitated the commercialization and broadcast hours became more and more precious. Careers in broadcasting and advertising opened up for talented young people in ever increasing number. Radio and television stations, however, remained with government agencies. Private operators were invited to bid for concessions on a yearly basis. Regulations governing advertising were relaxed during the Anand Panyarachun administration in 1992, giving further incentives to the expansion of commercial broadcasts.

The fast pace of modern technologies has transformed radio and television broadcasts, with the emergence of phone-in, participatory
programmes and ever-increasing use of computer technology in the broadcasts, including the creation of media websites.

On radio, phone-in programmes now dominate the dial, with unique communities created, such as traffic reporters, emergency response network, and others.

Over the past decade, Schools of Communication Art and Journalism at leading state universities have emerged the biggest attractions, winning over top students who aim at making broadcasting or advertising their careers.

The ownership of radio and television stations has not changed, remaining firmly in the hands of government agencies and state enterprises. Among these agencies, only the Public Relations Department and the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand are mandated to operate public broadcasting services.

Broadcasting services in various government agencies are as follows:


2. The Royal Thai Navy, with 7 AM and 14 FM transmitters, operating in Bangkok, Chanthaburi, Chon Buri and Trat in the East, Chiang Mai and Phitsanulok in the North, Nakhon Phanom, Nong Khai and Ubon Ratchathani in the Northeast, and Narathiwat, Phang-Nga, Phuket, Yala, Surat Thani and Songkhla in the South, under various call - signs.


5. The Police Department, with 7 AM and 38 FM transmitters, operating in Bangkok, Rayong in the East, Kanchanaburi in the Central Region, Kamphaengphet, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Tak, Nakhon Sawan, Phayao, Phichit, Phitsanulok, Phetchabun, Lampang, Lamphun, and Uttaradit in the North, Khon Kaen, Chaiyaphum, Nakhon Ratchasima, Yasothon, Roi Et, Loei, Sakon Nakhon, Udon Thani and Ubon Ratchathani in the Northeast, Chumphon, Trang, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Narathiwat, Prachuap Khiri Khan, Phang-Nga, Phatthalung, Phuket, Satun, Surat Thani and Songkhla in the South.

These broadcasting stations are experimental, using no state budget in their operation. They have been concessioned to private operators, who offer financial returns, in cash and kind, as welfare for personnel of those agencies.

Thai Television Company Limited, meanwhile, was transformed into the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand by a royal decree issued in 1977, as a media organization, operating commercial radio and television networks and Thai News Agency, with the status as a state enterprise under the supervision of the Prime Minister’s Office.

The Organization has 2 AM and 60 FM transmitters, operating in Bangkok, Kanchanaburi and Sing Buri in the Central Region, Chanthaburi, Chon Buri, Trat and Rayong in the East, Kalasin, Khon Kaen, Chaiyaphum, Nakhon Phanom, Nakhon Ratchasima, Buri Ram, Maha Sarakham, Yasothon, Roi Et, Loei, Si Sa Ket, Sakon Nakhon, Surin, Nong Khai, Udon Thani, and Ubon Ratchathani in the Northeast, Kamphaengphet, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Tak, Nan, Phayao, Phichit, Phitsanulok, Phrae, Mae Hong Son, Lampang, Lamphun, Sukhothai, Uthai Thani, and Uttaradit in the North, Krabi, Chumphon, Trang, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Narathiwat, Prachuap Khiri Khan, Pattani, Phang-Nga, Phatthalung, Yala, Ranong, Satun, Surat Thani and Songkhla in the South.

There are other non-commercial services operated by such agencies as:
1. The Bureau of the Royal Household, using one AM and one FM transmitters, operating from the Chitralada Villa, Dusit Palace.
2. The Ministry of Education, by the Centre for Educational Innovation and Technology and various institutions specialized in technology.
Following the bloody confrontation between authorities and demonstrators in the streets of Bangkok in 1992, a call for the people's Constitution was heard, and gained strength both in and outside the Parliament, resulting in the 16th Constitution promulgated on October 11, 1997.

Professor Vitit Muntarbhorn, a strong human rights advocate, remarked in his study on mass media laws in Thailand that:

"The 1997 Constitution of Thailand is a breath of fresh air in that it is the most participatory of Thailand's sixteen Constitutions since 1932. The new Constitution was drafted in large part as a response to the public outcry to have a more people-based Charter. Due to the public mistrust of the politicians elected or appointed under the old system and under the 1991 Constitution, a remnant of the junta era. The task of drafting the new Constitution was conferred upon an independent 99-member Constitution Drafting Committee whose members were elected independently of the existing system of parliamentarians. This was possible due to an amendment of section 211 of the 1991 Constitution which permitted the formation of the Constitution Drafting Committee in this manner.

The passage of the new Constitution in September 1997 heralds a new era in which it is hoped that there will be a major overhaul of the abusive patronage system which has affected much of the political process. New mechanisms, such as the Election Commission, are intended to provide new checks-and-balances against corruptive power politics.

The Constitution is, of course, based upon compromises and has its strengths and weaknesses, but overall, it is much stronger than previous constitutions from the angle of people's participation, accountability and transparency. As an imperative, section 6 of the Constitution states that laws and regulations in conflict with the Constitution cannot be applied. For the first time ever, it is provided by section 28 that citizens can invoke the Constitution in courts if their rights under the Constitution have been violated. The right to privacy is guaranteed by section 34, while the right to communicate is protected by section 37. Most pertinent to the media are sections 39 - 41 with the following contents:

Article 39: People have the right of liberty of expression, speech, writing, printing, publicity and communications by other means.

The restriction of any freedom and liberty guaranteed by paragraph 1 is unconstitutional except when imposed under the authority of a law specifically enacted for the purpose of preserving national security, protecting rights, liberties, honour, family rights, or the privacy of others, for the maintenance of public morals, for protection or stemming from the deterioration of the moral or physical well-being of the public.

It is prohibited for the government to order a shutdown of the press, of a radio station or of a television station with a view to undermining such freedom.

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Official censorship of news or articles prior to their publication in newspapers, publications, on radio or television is prohibited except during the time of war or fighting but only through laws in accordance with paragraph 2.
Owners of newspapers or other media must be Thai as stipulated by law.

The State is not allowed to provide financial or other property to support privately-owned newspapers and other media.

Article 40: The frequency bands used for radio, television broadcasts and telecommunications are communications resources in the public domain.

An independent public organization must be set up to assign bands as contemplated by paragraph 1, and regulate and supervise involvement with radio, television and telecommunications as provided by the law.

The operation of paragraph 2 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."

Also, Article 41 adds that employees of private media involved in newspapers, radio and television have the rights and liberties in accordance with the Constitution and must not be ideologically controlled by the State or the owners of the media. This also applies to employees of state-owned media.

The Reshaping of Broadcasting By the New Constitution

It is preposterous to assume that the Constitution 1997 will bring about abrupt changes to media operations in any forms, broadcasting included, although all government agencies are reviewing related laws and activities undertaken under their supervision. Legislative process can take years, before restructuring of the broadcasting services in accordance with the new Constitution can be completed.

Meanwhile, the unprecedented financial crisis which surfaced on July 2, 1997, has necessitated rationalization on all fronts, with foreseeable lasting impacts on the electronic media as a whole.

In recent months, numerous radio programmes went off the air, while several concessionaires cancelled their contracts, due to their inability to pay for the concessioned air-time. Government agencies and state enterprises which own broadcasting stations could find them a financial burden rather than an asset. Regular spending budget faces several cutbacks as well.

Obligations imposed by the Constitution, coupled with economic necessities, can result in a whole new era for electronic media in Thailand. The ownership of radio and television stations and transmitters will change hands, from government agencies and state enterprises to the public at large. In time,
media organizations in the form of corporations can be expected. This can be realized even faster than anticipated. Such organizations, even though incorporated and operated on a commercial basis, can still perform their duties in public broadcasting, serving the public as their audiences and customers.

On the other hand, certain functions remain in the government sector. Services that cannot be commercialized such as broadcasting for audiences beyond the national borders, educational broadcasts, and pure public service broadcasts such as disaster preparedness, for instance, have to be defined and legislated accordingly.

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