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Regionalisation: The Impact On Thai Media

By

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Regionalisation: The Impact on Thai Media

A recent Business Week article listed Bangkok, along with Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai, and Taipei, as fierce competitors with Hong Kong in becoming the business centres of the region (April 24, 1995). The importance of media and communications in this trade rivalry in East Asia is central. As Dan Schiller points out (1993, 84), control over international communication is now a prime determinant of political-economic and military power in general. Though I agree two qualifications are needed. First, trade issues are of greater concern to business people than communication per se. It is not so much that trade follows the satellites, but that satellites follow trade. Second, the Business Week perspective is to some extent a journalistic convenience that ignores the millions of people in the region not in capital cities.

In this context, the present paper will consider the use of the media by Thailand in its international communication policies and practices. Thailand's rapid economic growth since the mid-1980s has meant that it has become increasingly active in its foreign economic policies, especially in Indochina. Since the launch of the THAICOM1 satellite in December 1993, the impact of the Thai media in Southeast Asia has become more apparent. Thai foreign policy is now increasingly concentrated on economic growth through foreign trade and investment as opposed to its earlier security orientation (Surin 1994). It has followed Japan's example in pursuing a 'constructive engagement' policy with Burma, and encouraged its other regional partners to permit the Myanmar military regime to join ASEAN.
However, as we shall see, Thai policies in this regard have been criticised both internally and externally as opportunistic.

**Broadcasting and East Asian Regional Rivalries**

To appreciate the significance of Thai media initiatives in regional broadcasting, some reference must be made to the broader competitive context. The parameters for trade and communications rivalry in East Asia are set mainly by the two economic super-powers, the USA and Japan. Their complex bilateral trade rivalries and their multilateral relations with the region have been studied in considerable detail (e.g., Johnson 1992). To simplify the issue with respect to communications business rivalry, there in effect is a division of labour between the two - Japan is the dominant supplier of electronics hardware (with the exception of US-built satellites), while the US is the primary provider of entertainment software.

As Schiller points out (1993, 49), despite Japan's drive to economic dominance in East Asia, its activities in international communications have been strikingly absent. Three obstacles remain in the path of Japan becoming a major regional broadcasting centre. The first is the strength of American global communication industries, primarily through its interests in Hong Kong's Star TV content. Star is owned by the Murdoch group, which the FCC recently has determined is Australian owned, but the majority of its English language programming remains American. Also there is the presence of major American satellite and cable broadcasters such as CNN, ESPN, MTV, HBO, The Discovery Channel, and Asian Business News, based regionally in Singapore, with branches in Bangkok, Taipei, and Hong Kong (BT Feb 6 1995).
The second obstacle to the regional expansion of Japanese international communication is Japan's record of colonialism and military aggression that has left a significant, if diminishing, historical legacy of distrust. This is most notable in South Korea, but remains a factor in China, Taiwan, and the ASEAN states. Thirdly, despite the theme of a 'return to Asia' in some current Japanese foreign policy rhetoric, there remains an apparent inability to promote Japanese cultural exports through the media because of its insistence on the uniqueness of its own culture (Iwabuchi 1994). With the exception of some activity by NHK and large Japanese animation and karaoke exports, only a few television programs, such as *Oslibin* in the 1980s and now the Singapore co-produced pop show *Asia Bagus*, have succeeded as pan-Asian programs. The Japanese seem more concerned still with hardware, particularly HDTV.

Because of these limitations on Japan's regional media role, it is Hong Kong, and to a lesser extent Taipei, that has emerged as the Northeast Asian centre for regional broadcasting, with Hong Kong's Star TV and TVB as the dominant players. In Southeast Asia, however, as clear a pattern of regional broadcasting leadership has not yet emerged. Singapore probably has the lead, in terms of its being the regional head office of many major US program suppliers, yet it does not have its own communication satellite, as do Thailand, Indonesia, and Australia.

An important precedent here for regional media broadcasting rivalry is the development of special economic zones to promote regional trade. One of these is the SIJORI triangle, including Singapore-Johore (Malaysia)-Riau
(Indonesia), initiated by Singapore in 1989 (Kakazu 1993). A second and more recent growth zone (GT) involves Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand (IMT), and a third is a quadrangle with Thailand, Burma, Laos, and China (TBLC). Each zone was created primarily for regional trade promotion, yet the role of communications and media has become an important part of their operation.

In the SIJORI triangle, for example, FM radio stations Coast 100 and Zoo 101.6 began several years ago on Batam Island, aiming at the Singapore market. They use Bahasa Indonesia language, but Zoo 101.6 plays mainly Western pop music to appeal to young Singaporeans. Then in August 1994, Malaysia and Indonesia approved a US$1 million TV relay station for Indonesian stations RCTI and SCTV, to cover the Riau islands, Singapore and Southern Johore. The Ministers concerned, Datuk Mohamed Rahmut and Mr Harmoko, claimed it was time to develop an ASEAN television network to counter foreign satellite broadcasting in the region (ST Aug 31 1994). Similarly, in December 1994, a regional television service was proposed at the fourth tripartite meeting of the IMT-GT. This consortium consisted of Medan Mas (Malaysia), Shinawatra (Thailand), and PT Medanmas Andalas and PT Indomatha Inti Media (Indonesia). It aimed at future regional centres in Acheh and Medan (North Sumatra), Haadyai (South Thailand), and Langkawi Island (Malaysia) (Reuters - Far East Service Dec 16 1994).

Although the rapid growth of broadcasting and telecommunications in Malaysia is also notable, Singapore presently appears to be the leading regional player. Singapore itself tends to consider Hong Kong, rather than KL, or Bangkok, as its main regional rival. There are several examples of Singapore's communications success. In February 1995, Viacom's MTV
Asian branch decided to make Singapore its regional headquarters instead of Hong Kong. One Mandarin MTV channel there will target Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and China, while another English language channel will aim at India and Southeast Asia (BT Feb 6 1995).

Also, on January 1, 1994 an international television program service SITV, controlled by the Singapore International Foundation, was launched via the Palapa B2P satellite. Singapore also appears to have more communication industry links with Bangkok than with either KL or Jakarta. As well as the involvement of Singapore Telecom with the Thai Shinawatra group since 1990, in January 1995 Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) had a 35% share in the new Thai English-language paper Business Day, in alliance with Thai Premier Publishing (ST Jan 10 1995). The Star Network, another SPH subsidiary, also has announced a new Thai-based video and film post-production venture with Loxley Video Post (ST May 7 1994).

These Singaporean initiatives tend to have been overlooked both because of their recency, and because of Western preoccupation with Human Rights issues in the region (Birch 1993). Yet there seems to have been a gradual, if slight, liberalisation of Singapore broadcasting practices and a more commercial orientation to its communications policies, as in the recent privatisation of Singapore Telecom (now TAS) and Singapore Broadcasting in December 1994 (now TCS) (Hukill 1994). The cultural strategy these trends relate to were articulated by Singapore Information Minister BG George Yeo back in 1992. Yeo argued that Singaporeans had to balance two kinds of regional interests - their predominantly East Asian Chinese heritage, and their geographical and historical position in Southeast Asia. The solution
was not to look beyond Southeast Asia, but to look at East Asia from Southeast Asia (ST July 2 1992).

The Shinawatra Group and Thai Regional Communications

Great emphasis is now being placed on Thailand becoming a rival to Singapore as an information hub for South-East Asia. Although this slogan about Bangkok becoming the communications hub of the region is new, there are Thai territorial ambitions here which have deep historical roots (Reynolds 1995). The new frontier that this Thai version of the information superhighway aims at is towards the north - especially towards Southern China (Buszynski 1994) via Laos and Burma, and to a lesser extent the north-east, towards Vietnam - not to the south. One clear aim is to make Thailand a communications gateway to Indochina.

Like Taiwan, Thailand has been successful in reducing its dependence on foreign television imports. Currently the ambitions of Thai companies to produce regional media cultural exports derive from the its cultural policy of 'Being Thai'. Thai broadcasting regulations stressed the need for national development of an economic and a cultural kind. The royal family, the nation, and the Buddhist religion were made legally immune from criticism, while an ideology of 'Being Thai' was promoted (Pradee 1990). This remains as important an aim of Thai broadcasting as the promotion of Pancaśāla is in Indonesia, or Rukunegara in Malaysia (ASEAN 1983,150; Hamilton 1993). Although concerns were expressed about the large amount of foreign programming in the early years of Thai TV (Boonrak 1977, 102), in 1991 imported programs were only 14% of total broadcasting (AA&M Feb 1992).
All free-to-air programs are broadcast in the Thai language. The much larger amount of foreign programs on pay-TV since 1991 are either dubbed or subtitled in Thai, except for the specifically English language channels.

The company that has become the flagship for Thai regional media expansion is the Shinawatra group, which began as a distributor and service company for IBM mainframe computers in North Thailand in 1983. Under its Sino-Thai family manager, Chairman Thaksin Shinawatra, Shinawatra diversified into telecommunications and broadcasting in 1988. Then in 1989 it won rights to become a cable broadcaster through IBC. Subsequently in 1991 it won a thirty year licence to operate THAICOM satellites from the MCOT. As well as operating its satellites through its Shinawatra Satellite Coy. (SSC), and cable-TV through IBC, it has three other major companies. Shinawatra Computers and Communications (SCC) is involved in computer and telecommunications sales; Advanced Informatics Systems (AIS) operates a paging system and other value added telecommunications services; and Shinawatra International (SI) has broadcasting and telecommunications projects in Cambodia, Laos and the Philippines (Shinawatra 1993).

Shinawatra is the Thai communications group with the biggest regional ambitions and the largest number of international links, followed by the CP’s Telecom Asia/UTV and Jasmine International. Singapore became an important institutional investor in Shinawatra in September 1990, when Singapore Telecom acquired a 9.8% interest for S$46 million in its Datanet and Digital Paging Services. Together with Mtel (Mobile Communications Corp of America), Singapore Telecom held 40% in Shinawatra’s Phonelink nationwide paging project (BT Sep 12 1990; Apr 13 1991). Shinawatra’s
domestic original financial backer was the Thai Military Bank (BRW Sep 6 1991), then subsequently it acquired 18% of International Trust and Finance, and purchased three million shares in the Bangkok Metropolitan Bank (BT Feb 3 1992). Most recently, the new Exim bank, established to enhance Thailand's export competitiveness, assisted Shinawatra with loans to support its Laotian telecommunications projects (BP Nov 3 1994).

Shinawatra has pioneered television and telecommunications services in Laos and Cambodia, though not without difficulties. Based on a December 1993 agreement with a 15 year concession from the Lao government, operating as IBC Lao and 70% owned by Shinawatra Computer and Communication, it began broadcasting in April 1994. However in February 1995 the Lao government moved to reassert control by renaming the service Lao Television, replacing the Shinawatra Chair of the Board of Management with a Lao official, and taking charge of domestic programming. Its aim was stated as screening out information which was detrimental to the 'Lao way of life'. This meant the removal of Chinese action movies that were considered a moral threat to young Lao viewers, and more translation of programs and advertisements into the Lao language (BP April 4 1995).

The national prominence of the Shinawatra group in Thailand was highlighted in October 1994, when, at the same time as THAICOM-2 was successfully launched by Arianespace, Thaksin Shinawatra was nominated as Foreign Minister by Palang Dharma Party leader Major-General Chamlong Srimuang. Thaksin's unusual period of office - the equivalent of which in Australia would be an unelected Kerry Packer being appointed Foreign Minister - is an index of the importance of communications in the new
internationalisation of the economy. Chamlong's surprise nomination of Thaksin as an extra-parliamentary appointee arose from his twin concerns to improve the government's administrative efficiency and to better attract financial support (BP October 9 & 12 1994). Thaksin lasted as Foreign Minister from October 1994 until February 1995, when he stepped down to forestall any prejudicial findings against his holding the position by a pending Constitutional Commission report.

Even before Thaksin had been appointed as Foreign Minister, one of his IBC Cambodia company employees had been implicated in a failed coup attempt in Phnom Penh against co-Prime Ministers Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen in July 1994 (Business in Thailand Sep 1994, 11). Thaksin and IBC were subsequently cleared by the Cambodian government (BP Nov 6 1994). The enduring criticism of Thai foreign policies here is that the Thai's interest in the economic development of their neighbours has been limited to that of 'baht fellowship' (Weatherbee 1993) - that Thailand is seeking to exploit the economic leverage it has over its neighbours by assisting their economic growth to its own advantage.

IBC's major future rival, however, is likely to be the Universal Television Coy. (UTV), the first Thai fibre-optic subscription cable service. UTV is owned by Telecom Asia (TA), a subsidiary of the Chearavont family's CP group. Meant to begin in early 1995, it aims at providing five to eight channels, and recently has secured exclusive rights to CNN programming. It is planning a joint-venture with Viacom (a subsidiary of the Nynex group, TA's strategic partner in telecommunications) to co-produce and distribute programs (N Feb 22 1995; BP Nov 30 1994, March 10 1995).
contentious issue now is whether pay-TV stations will be allowed to carry advertising. The IBC group has been lobbying strongly for this, but is equally strongly opposed by the free-to-air broadcasters.

Recently Shinawatra has announced plans for doing new business in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines as well as consolidating its stakes in Indochina. Paging services were targetted through a joint-venture with Indian company Himachal Futuristic Communications (HFC) in West India via Micro Wave Communications, in which Shinawatra held a 40% 400m baht equity (BP July 8 1994). In early 1995 Shinawatra also was bidding jointly with an Israel company, Bezeg, for mobile phone contracts (BP Apr 27 1995). In Indonesia, Shinawatra International was competing for a two million line telephone concession against a rival Thai-Indonesian group consisting of TT&T and PT Globel Intinsu. Jasmine International, the major shareholder in TT&T, already had secured rights to construct an Indonesian national trunk mobile phone system through its 61% owned company Mobilkom with a paid up capital of US$10 million (BT July 12 1994). In the Philippines, Shinawatra’s equity partner was Isla Communications, and was building a 700 000 line telephone system, as well as the first phase of a global system for mobile communications for US$37 million (BP July 8 1994).

Thai Debates about Transnational Broadcasting

Foreign media and communications ownership in Thailand itself is relatively limited, except in telecommunications and advertising. Telecom Asia (TA) - a subsidiary of Thailand’s largest agribusiness the CP group, which is one of the largest single foreign investors in China - is in partnership with
British Telecom, Nynex Network Systems (US), and Siemens (Germany). TA has the contract for building two million new telephone lines in Bangkok. The Thai Telephone and Telecommunications group (TT&T), responsible for providing new telephone lines in the provinces, also has Japan's NTT as a 20% investor and strategic partner (Market Report 1994). Lastly, Shinawatra's minority partners include Singapore Telecom via their paging company and Nokia (Finland) mobile phones. In advertising, the presence of transnational advertising agencies is much stronger. The local offices of agencies such as Lintas, Ogilvy & Mather, Leo Burnett and Dentsu account for some 60% of the entire Thai marketing communications industry (Chalinee 1994).

The major current discussion about the use of the media to promote Bangkok as a regional media and communications hub concerns Thailand launching its own television overseas service, as Australia and Singapore did in 1993 and 1994. Thai satellite dish owners now can receive Star TV from Hong Kong through AsiaSat, ATV from Australia via Palapa, and Asian Business News from Singapore, also through Palapa.

There are a number of variations on this theme. For example, the chair of Media of Medias Coy., Kosit Suvinijit, claimed that Thailand has great potential to become the center of television production catering to all Asian countries. "The television market is like a cultural war zone", he said. "It takes some time to build up a viewer base in each country...We have a competitive edge over Indonesia and Malaysia where religious rules are rigid." (N March 15 1995). Media of Medias programs are successfully broadcast in Laos. The group is also entering the Burmese market in a joint-venture with the 'Today Media Group' with TV dramas.
However Saengchi Sunthornvut, the Director of the MCOT, has claimed local Thai television is hampered by domestic regulation that disadvantages it against foreign broadcasters. In June 1994, Saengchi argued that Thailand should launch its own international television English language service based on the Thai National News Agency (BP June 2 1994). Subsequently, in November, the MCOT and the CP’s Telecom Asia formed a joint-venture to begin a Pan-Asian regional satellite service. This is to be targeted at Chinese and Indian audiences, as well as Thai and English-speaking markets, and broadcast five to twelve channels. The CP group’s established links with China are important here, as CP is a co-investor in the Apstar satellite intended to be the signal carrier, and also has an agreement with China Central Television to exclusively distribute its programs in Thailand (BP Nov 21 & 24 1994).

This initiative has been delayed, both by Shinawatra’s objections that THAIICOM should be the sole carrier of Thai-originated signals, and also by the failure of the Chinese Apstar2 satellite launch in February 1995. However the MCOT’s grand vision about Thailand taking a leading role in Pan-Asian satellite television is still very much alive. Saengchi has described the Pan-Asian initiative as a “national” project, not just one for the MCOT and TA (BP Nov 29 1994). The MCOT subsequently began an English language satellite FM radio service to Los Angeles, home to Thailand’s largest expatriate community (BP October 24 1994).

Saengchi also has suggested a regional Asian News Network, including Singapore and Indonesia, in cooperation with Japan’s NHK and Dentsu.
Considering the well-established economic and cultural links between Thailand and Japan (Yoshihara 1990), a Japanese role in any such future venture seems likely. However the proposal for Thailand to develop its own regional TV news service is probably too ambitious. The Thai National News Agency is understaffed and under-resourced and Thai language papers are much more concerned with domestic than foreign news (Boonrak 1982). The keen interest shown in foreign news by the English-language dailies The Bangkok Post (circulation 52 000) and The Nation (46 000), does not carry over either into Thai television news or the Thai language press. A more realistic move - given the greater appeal of Thai TV entertainment programs, such as its well produced ads, soaps, serials, and pop concerts - could be the extension of Thai entertainment programs to Burmese, Lao, and Cambodian audiences, where they are already popular.

'Thainisation' and Transnationalisation

The Thai difficulty with being seen as a predatory cultural influence by its neighbours through the expansion of its communications and trade interests also has a reverse side. That is, the growing links of the Thai media with foreign broadcasters, telecommunications groups and advertisers is placing growing pressure on traditional notions of Thai identity. Although the rhetoric of some Thai politicians and administrators (e.g. Chatchai and Saengchi) identifies Western broadcasters as the main threat here, Thailand's close trading links with Japan, and its joint ventures with foreign Chinese business groups - notably Shinawatra with Singapore, and the CP's with the PRC - are arguably as much of a threat to Thai cultural independence as American communications dominance.
Thailand's broadcasting and media links with Japan as yet are relatively limited. NHK programming is shown on IBC through CNN, and Japanese animation programs are shown on pay-TV and free-to-air broadcasts. Leading Thai video stores such as Mang Pong retail a wide range of Japanese karaoke material and distributors such as Media of Medias have franchises for Nintendo games that are now more binding under Thailand's new intellectual copyright laws. The Bangkok Post also prints a weekly four page insert direct from the Asahi Shinbun, and there is a weekly Japanese language paper for Thai expatriate business readers. Yet the real weight of the Japanese presence in Thailand is in industry, especially the auto industry, but also in electronics manufacturing and in Japanese-Thai joint ventures for resource development in Burma and Cambodia.

However the future development of the information technology sector of the Thai economy may be a likely site for increased direct Japanese investment. The Mitsui group, one of Japan's largest companies, has planned investments of up to US$800 million in Thai multimedia projects. The President of Mitsui (Thailand) has described his company as a mini-Mitsui (Japan) and acknowledged the need to culturally integrate Mitsui's operations with its Thai host. "The key word", he says, "is 'Thainisation"' (BP Nov 21 1994). This hybrid term, sometimes referred to as 'Thainisation', is the portmanteau word that increasingly recurs in Thai discussions about corporate image and major product advertising. Toyota (Thailand's) public relations chief has said that the creation of a Thai identity for his company had been a priority for a decade (BP May 1 1995).
Similarly, local Thai products, such as Singha beer and its manufacturers, the Boon Rawd Brewery, have traded heavily on 'Thainisation' by using classical Thai music, arts and culture, and cuisine in their advertising campaigns. It is relevant to note here that one Japanese scholar’s discussion of Japan’s efforts to become a major international communications player has highlighted the Sony group’s strategy of 'global localization'. This is meant to create standardized global markets while remaining sensitive to the peculiarities of local markets (Iwabuchi 1994).

Similarly, in a more critical manner, a Thai scholar has listed a multiplicity of examples of how the idea of 'Thainess' is used in contemporary Thai advertising to mix together traditional Thai culture with the appeal of foreign products and lifestyles (Kasian 1994).

Thai television programming, despite its high level of local content, is sometimes a bizarre mix of the old and the new. The prime time period seven to nine pm begins with the news, including the traditional broadcast of items about the Thai royal family, then follows a range of popular soaps, dramas and serials. Some are traditionally Thai, set in village locations, but others centre around the affairs of middle class urban families with Western lifestyles and concerns. A few convey a notable sense of geographic and cultural dislocation. *Hmern Kon La Fak Fahl* (Living Under Distant Skies), for example, is set in Sydney, Australia, concerning the sad love affair of an expatriate Thai student. The actors are in Australia, yet Australians have no part whatever in the story.

This projection of Thais as in the West, but not part of the West, is emblematic of the confusion transnational television values may create.
Significantly, some of the most popular Thai TV and film stars and models are *luk krung*, i.e., Thais who have one Thai and one *farang* (foreign) parent. These tendencies may be seen positively, as examples of what James Lull (1995, 157) terms 'transculturation', i.e. the breaking down of traditional cultural categories that leads to a synthesis of new cultural genres. On the other hand, as Kasian (1994), Boonrak (1992), Ubonrat (1992) and other critics have suggested, this process may also be seen negatively. The incorporation of Western consumerist values into Thai notions of personal identity in transnational media formats may be a fundamental challenge to traditional Thai culture.
References


Newspaper Abbreviations

AA& M - Asian Advertising & Marketing, Hong Kong
BI - Bangkok Post
BRW - Business Review Weekly, Sydney
BT - Business Times, Singapore
N - The Nation, Bangkok
ST - Straits Times, Singapore