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Country Report On Thailand

By

Manit Varin
SEMINAR: MASS MEDIA AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE

MARA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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PAPER: COUNTRY REPORT ON THAILAND

by

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The Mass Media in Thailand: Their Roles in Socio-Economic Development.

This report contains the following sections and sub-sections:

I. Background

1. A Brief History of the Mass Media in Thailand
2. The Nature of Their Ownership and Government Control
3. The Nature and Scope of Their Influence in Thai Society

II. The Roles of the Mass Media in Thailand

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BACKGROUND

A Brief History

As is true with most other countries in the world, the foundations of the Press in Thailand were laid well before those of other major media of mass communication, namely, the motion pictures, radio, and television.

The first Thai Government use of the printing press occurred on April 27, 1839, when 9,000 handbills containing a royal proclamation banning opium smoking and trade were printed. The proclamation was the first government document ever printed in Thailand. Other than this, printing in the early years was confined to the religious publications of the American Christian missionaries.

Credit for starting the first newspaper in Thailand goes to Dr. Dan Beach Pradley. This American missionary published The Bangkok Recorder as a Thai-language fortnightly newspaper beginning on July 4, 1844. This first venture was not particularly successful, however, and the Bangkok Recorder folded up after one year, only to be resumed as a monthly newspaper on March 12, 1865. The next year, a libel suit was brought against Dr. Bradley by the French Consul in Bangkok. The case was found against the American missionary, who was forced to print an apology and pay an indemnity. Two years later, perhaps as an after-effect of the adverse court decision, he discontinued the publication, thus ending the short life of the first newspaper in Thailand.

Interest in publishing newspapers in the nineteenth century was largely confined among foreign interest groups and court circles. The
early years of the present century, however, definitely saw this interest expanded to other groups in Thailand -- academic, religious, business, military and others. Their publications were mainly periodicals, leaving the daily newspaper field still to be explored and utilized.

And utilized it was. During the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910 - 1925) no fewer than 20 daily newspapers -- including two Chinese and one English -- were reported to be in existence. The King, himself a literary figure of note, was keenly interested in journalistic work. In addition to his writings of purely literary nature, he was known to have contributed numerous articles answering charges his critics levelled against his administration.

The newspaper business continued to make reasonable progress until it was severely handicapped by the shortage of newsprint during the Second World War. Recovery soon followed the end of the war.

Turning to radio, we may recall that radio communication was introduced into Thailand in April 1904, to be followed three years later by two radio stations set up for official use by the Royal Thai Navy. The Royal Thai Army also introduced field radio communication units for use in the armed forces. This early beginning in radio communication was followed years later by radio broadcasting for the public.

This development reached a milestone on May 31, 1928 when the Post and Telegraph Department conducted a small experimental broadcasting station using a home-made 200-watt transmitter.

In contrast to its modest beginning, radio broadcasting in Thailand has become a somewhat gigantic and confusing enterprise.
The allied electronic medium of television soon overtook radio broadcasting in popularity, and there seems to be no doubt that the future lies in television whether one likes it or not.

As a matter of record, Thailand is the first country on the mainland of Asia to start regular television service. The first station, Thai TV Channel 4, set up in Bangkok by the Thai Television Co., Ltd., went into operation on June 24, 1955. This was followed by about two and a half years later by a second station, Army TV Channel 7, set up also in Bangkok by the Royal Thai Army.

The Nature of Ownership and Government Control

Generally speaking, the Thai Press is privately owned and operated with increasing profit motive and relatively less political backing. There are exceptions, to be sure, but with rising costs of equipment and supplies, growing competition, need to enlarge readership and get more money from advertisers, the newspapers have been forced to keep a wary but steady eye on their business side.

In contrast to the newspapers, however, radio and television stations are legally owned by the Thai Government and/or its agencies and departments as stipulated by law.

In actual practice, some radio stations and some television stations farm out their programme and business arrangements to private groups or companies. These private groups or companies get their revenues from advertisers. Portions of the earnings are given to legal owners of the radio or television stations concerned.
Government control of the Press is comparatively strict. It is known that some daily newspapers and some weekly newspapers have been ordered closed by the Police Department under the power of law. As the law stands, any newspaper publishing statements of certain character shall be warned, impounded and destroyed or punished in the form of withdrawal of the licence of its printer, publisher or proprietor. Such statements include those which constitute offences against the Sovereign or are damaging to, or cost a slur on the Queen, the Heir Apparent or the Regent; those which are insinuations against or damaging to the nation or the Thai people as a whole, or which discredit Thailand, the Thai Government or the Thai people as a whole in the eyes of other countries; those which contribute to the popularity or desirability of Communism or constitute Communist subversive tactics; whose which are vulgar, abusive, and likely to undermine the morals and culture of the nation; and those which divulge official secrets.

Although the Government has extensive power to control the Press and the country is technically still under Martial Law, no pre-publication censorship is imposed on the Press or foreign dispatches. A form of post-publication censorship exists, however, in the sense that the authorities carefully check the contents of the newspapers and hold them responsible for anything that is regarded as a violation of the law.

On the radio and television side, an Act of 1955 requires the operator of a radio broadcasting station or a television station to obtain permission from the licensing office, and so far no permit has been issued for a privately-owned station. It should be implicitly clear that the Government wishes to reserve the rights to operate the two evidently influential electronic media.
All radio and broadcasting and television stations come under the Government's Regulations on Radio and Television Broadcasting of 1975. There is a "Broadcasting Directing Board" which, among other things, specifies and enforces the conditions and procedures in setting up or transferring a radio or TV station; considers and approves or disapproves an application for setting up or transferring a radio or TV station; regulates advertising and business operations of all stations; regulates broadcast programming; specifies desirable technical requirements; specifies the conditions and requirements for stations in following the Regulations; designates required time and programmes to be relayed from the National Broadcasting Station (Radio Thailand); advises, controls, supervises and checks that stations observe the Regulations.

The Broadcasting Directing Board consists of:

1. Prime Minister or Person Designated by the Prime Minister* - Chairman;
2. Director-General of the Public Relations Department or Representative - member;
3. Director-General of the Post and Telegraph Department or Representative - member;
4. Director-General of the Police Department or Representative - member;
5. Director-General of the Department of Central Intelligence or Representative - member;
6. Secretary-General of the National Security Council or Representative - member;
7. Secretary-General of the Juridical Council or Representative - member;
8. (Armed Forces) Chief of Staff or Representative - member;

* In current and customary practice, this is the Minister to the Prime Minister's Office.
9. Two representatives of the Office of the Prime Minister - members;
10. Representative of the Ministry of Education - member;
11. Representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - member;
12. Army Commander-in-Chief or Representative - member;
13. Navy Commander-in-Chief or Representative - member;
14. Air Force Commander-in-Chief or Representative - member;
15. Chief of the Broadcasting Directing Board Division (PRD) - member and secretary;
16. Chief of the Office of Frequency Management (Post and Telegraph Department) - member;

The Nature and Scope of the Influence of the Mass Media in Thailand

Some generalizations of the influence of the mass media in Thailand, as in other countries for that matter, can be and have been made. Some of them may well be true and even self-evident, while others may be difficult to prove.
If one were to make some public observations about the mass media in Thailand, such observations might include the following points:

1. There are certain recognized and traditional differences among the printed media in regard to the quality-versus-popularity aspect.

2. The Press as a whole seems to enjoy its collective influence over the public in regard to matters that are against the Establishment. People are more ready to believe what the papers say about what is bad about the Administration and government machinery. Gossip columns and columnists are relatively influential.

3. Official news reports on radio have a very high degree of credibility as observed and often expressed by listeners themselves.

4. Television, which is controlled closely by the government, is also influential in terms of official news. Major public announcements are often made on television, simultaneously with radio — and some announcements even originate on television and the voice signals are then picked up and broadcast on the radio stations. Television's basic advantages of combined sight and sound, a sense of immediacy and involvement, and the medium's own potential are all working in its favour.

To supplement the above observations and generalizations, however, I should like to cite three studies related to the mass media in Thailand.
The first one is a study on "Thai Rural Population and Its Information Habits 1976" made by the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Thammasat University in Bangkok.

In summary, news seemed to be the only category of "meaningful" radio programmes which was liked best by rural listeners. Other useful programmes, such as those on education, health, and hygiene, and those programmes considered useful to their occupations or their "pocketbooks" did not get as much attention as they deserved. Furthermore, it was found that radio advertisements had no obvious influence over the villagers' decisions to buy goods since the goods were bought more on the basis of convenience and accessibility than on any other basis.

There seemed to be no definite pattern of the frequencies of reading newspapers and magazines by rural residents of either sex or of whatever age group. Furthermore, the characteristics of the agricultural occupation were not conducive to the spending of one's time in reading newspapers and magazines. The majority of the rural people preferred occasional buying of copies of newspapers and magazines and occasional borrowing from their relatives or other persons, to direct subscription.

As regards the categories of favourite contents, it was found that both male and female rural residents like news best; next came the contents considered useful to the readers' occupation and the earning of a living. Female rural residents also liked entertainment contents in general. Furthermore, the majority of both the groups that had not completed primary education and those that had completed primary education seemed to like the contents in the same manner or order — that is, they liked news best; next came the contents considered useful to the readers' occupation and "pocketbooks"; and then general entertainment contents.
Results were partially close to those regarding radio broadcast listening — that is, the news contents attracted the largest readership or attention. But the contents considered directly useful to education, nutrition, health and hygiene did not get as much attention as they deserved. The reason for not reading newspapers and magazines given by rural residents in the northern region, the central region and the southern region (KrabI) was the lack of time, due to one’s occupation and personal matters to attend to. The reason given by the northeastern rural dwellers and the southern (Songkhla) rural residents was somewhat different. They said they could not find reading material mainly because of transportation, communication and economic problems.

This medium had reached little of the rural population. In the areas under survey only seven television sets were found, or only about 1.34 of the total population. The majority of the rural population rarely thought of daily viewing of television as a habit — unlike the urban residents. For the rural population, viewing television was only by chance and was usually at other people’s houses. The survey results, not unnaturally, showed that the rural population as a whole and of all age groups, at all educational levels and of all occupations, viewed television only on a rare occasion.

As regards the favourite programmes on television, there were some differences between men and women. Most men liked best the sports programmes; next came the entertainment programmes, and then the news programmes. But, on the other hand, women liked best the entertainment programmes; next came the news programmes; programmes useful to their occupations and livelihood; and the sports programmes were last on the scale of preference.
In addition it was found that preferences for television programmes by rural residents of different age groups and different educational levels seemed to be nearly identical.

However, to the majority of the rural population television was a medium of entertainment more than anything else, and they were not interested in directly useful and meaningful programmes as much as they should be.

A comparative study of the use of the four major mass media by the rural population showed that radio broadcasting was used most and reached most of the people (86.64%); next came the motion pictures (70.23%); newspapers and magazines (43.70%); and television (26.34%).

Comparison of the frequencies of use of the mass media showed that in all regions of the country the rural residents, no matter if they were in farming, business or manual labour, would use the media in a similar manner. The exception was government officials who would use newspapers and magazines most; next were radio and television in equal proportion; and the motion pictures were least used.

The order of credibility attributed to the various media seemed to be the same for most rural residents of both sexes and of all age groups and occupations. The order seemed to be, from the highest to the lowest: radio, newspapers, television, and motion pictures.

In addition, most rural residents were of the opinion that radio was the best medium for information, news, programmes useful to their daily life, and entertainment. Following radio in this respect were: newspapers, television, and motion pictures (the least).
SECOND STUDY

The second study is by the Educational Research Division of the Office of the National Education Commission. It is called "A Study of the Role of Mass Media in Education of Villagers 1978."

The major points in the evaluation of the radio broadcasting programmes, television, newspapers, magazines, and the motion pictures were as follows:

1. The five mass media had significantly different values. Radio had the highest value, and was of a greater value than television. Television had a greater value than newspapers and magazines. Newspapers and magazines had a greater value than the movies. (Newspapers and magazines were not significantly different).

2. On the average, persons in different geographical areas placed nearly similar values on all media, except that people in the south valued radio, newspapers and magazines rather less than did persons in other regions, and that Bangkok's suburban residents valued the movies rather little.

3. Bangkok's outlying suburban residents both in sanitation (relatively well-developed) areas and outside sanitation areas valued all media, on the average, to the same degree, except that persons in sanitation areas valued the magazines rather more highly than did persons in other areas.

4. Both males and females placed just about similar values, on the average, on all media.
5. Persons in different age groups, on the average, valued all media differently. On the average, persons in the 20 - 24 age group valued all media more highly than did persons in all other age groups. Persons in the 50 - 54 age group valued radio, magazines and the movies rather less than did persons in all other age groups.

6. On the average, persons whose educational attainment was above M.S. 3 (equivalent to the 10th grade in the American system) valued each medium more highly than did persons of other educational levels. Persons whose educational attainment was below four years of primary education or without any education valued all media to the least degree.

7. Persons with an income of 1,501 - 2,500 baht per month valued all media, on the average, more highly than did persons with an income of 500 baht and less per month and 2,301 - 3,000 baht per month.

8. Persons engaged in agriculture valued radio and the movies a little more highly than did persons of other occupations, but they valued television, newspapers and magazines less than did the other groups.

9. Persons who had engaged in activities usually considered to be for the common good valued all media more than did persons who had not done so.

10. Persons with rather high economic and social status valued all media more than did persons with lower economic and social status. Persons with rather low economic and social status valued radio, television, newspapers and magazines to the least degree.
THIRD STUDY

The third study is by the Public Opinion Survey Division of the Public Relations Department. It is called "A Survey of Information Habits and use of Mass Media by the People in Five Southern Provinces of Thailand 1977."

The major findings as related to the influence of the mass media are summarized as follows.

In comparing the three mass media, the people in the southern border provinces believed most in radio (45.3 per cent); next was television (33.4 per cent) and then the newspapers (7.5 per cent). A group did not believe in any of them (13.8 per cent).

The residents of Muang districts believed more in television, possibly because the residents of the border districts could not get clear reception from Channel 10 in Hat Yai, and television sets were more expensive. Newspaper copies were less accessible than radio. Some villages did not have electricity or not all villagers could manage to have electricity — except village headmen or school teachers. Transistorized radio receiving sets seemed to be the only thing universally accessible to most villagers. Therefore, radio would be most popular and creditable.

In summary, a survey of information habits and use of mass media by the people in five southern border provinces revealed that the majority of people liked and believed most in radio. Out of the 12 radio broadcasting stations covered in this survey, four belonged to the Public Relations Department. These four were in Hat Yai, Yala, Betong, and Satun. But they were not as much popular with the audiences as they should be. Their programmes might be uninteresting and their transmissions might leave much technically to be desired.
The Role of The Mass Media in Thailand

The Educational Role

The results of one recent study (the second study cited earlier) showed that the entertainment contents were of the greatest interest to users of three media -- television, magazines, and movies. News and general information were of the greatest interest to users of only two media -- radio and newspapers. Items of knowledge, learning and culture were a second attraction to users of two media -- newspapers and magazines -- and were of the least interest -- less than advertisements -- in two media -- television and movies.

These results should be accepted only as an indication of how attractive some portions of the mass media contents are to the audiences, as well as an indication of the relative educational roles the mass media play in Thai society.

While it is obviously difficult to rate scientifically the degrees of importance of the educational roles played by the various mass media, it may be reasonable to observe that, in terms of educational contents, radio comes first, followed by television and then the printed media. The motion pictures seem to cater for entertainment almost exclusively.

The Social Responsibility Role

It is fair to say that each and all of the mass media have claimed at one time or another that they have a sense of social responsibility, and they will deny any accusation to the contrary.
It is a moot point whether any of the mass media has always maintained any unwavering and uncompromising sense of social responsibility beyond a shadow of doubt. Perhaps neither has any other segment of society.

To their credit, some newspapers have shown social responsibility than others, which, for business reasons or for expected financial gains, have succumbed from time to time to bad judgements or decisions.

Few, even in the newspaper circles, will deny that some newspaper reporters and editorial staff members have been known to be engaged in what is tantamount to extortion. It is to be hoped that mutual self-criticism among the Press and moral indignation, if any, will help to check these unseemly practices among a bad but sometimes vociferous minority.

It is undeniable that blatant sensationalism, distorted and exaggerated headlines, or overcommercialization or unreasonable exploitation of certain subjects can be found in certain or many Thai newspapers. Radio and television stations, which are supposedly under more strict official supervision and control, are often found to be perpetrators of commercialism, bad taste, and disregard for accepted or desirable social values.

The "Watchdog" Role

Radio and television organizations in Thailand, perhaps for obvious reasons, cannot be said to be traditionally engaged in what is described as a "watchdog role." This role is normally and sometimes brilliantly played by almost all of the Thai newspapers at one
time or another, with varying degrees of success -- or failure.

Some Thai newspapers, either in their collective editorial presentation or through their columns, have fought admirably well and much to their credit the usual social evils found in any society in the world and some other forms of social malaise found more -- much to the regret of the Thai people as a whole -- in present Thai society. Some of these crusading newspapers in Thailand have much to be proud of in their "watchdog" role.

Taken as a whole and under the prevailing circumstances; the Thai Press seems to be the only medium of mass communication on which the people can depend to point out what is wrong with their society, to spot misdeeds by officialdom, and to help in fighting the usual and perennial ills of their society.

The Developmental Role

The government of Thailand and its various agencies have often claimed that they make use of radio broadcasting and television in the social and economic development of the country. This cannot be denied.

However, the effectiveness of the relevant radio and television programmes, the efficiency in the conscious use of the media for national development, and the perception, if any, of the developmental role by some of the men who actually run these radio and television stations, are something that is for further analysis and conclusion.

It would appear to a casual observer that the need to make money, either for the sake of profit-making or to cover the relatively large
Investment and operating expenses required, has somewhat obscured the perspective of most television stations especially in regard to their expected, assigned or assumed role of agents for developments.

The newspaper Press has not done much better in this regard. Any participation by the newspapers in the direct process of development seems to be somewhat unconscious, not by choice but by necessity, and often connected with their own need for increased circulation.

It is fair to point out that at a seminar-cum-workshop on "Information Systems for Rural Development" held in Phuket in Southern Thailand during August 25 - 31 this year, the President of the Press Association of Thailand was quoted as having stated, "The newspapers have already been including contents conducive to rural development. At present many newspapers have increased the numbers of their pages and their columns which are directly beneficial in this regard. The newspapers can do better if government agencies can supply them with adequate interesting materials."

SUMMARY

It seems to be a safe generalization that modern society is inextricably involved with the process of information and communication. The mass media are deeply involved with what goes on in society. They influence it, and they are influenced by it. Socio-economic change is influenced by the mass media and the mass are influenced by and are subject to socio-economic change.
The interaction between the two is sometimes obvious, sometimes not readily perceptible. Nevertheless it is there.

It must be observed that socio-economic change can never be pinpointed to one single cause; modern society is too complex for that. The mass media are not solely responsible for socio-economic change — they are only one of the many causes contributing to such change. The role of the mass media may be very important in socio-economic change. Indeed, it is logical and effective to plan the use of the mass media as agents for socio-economic change.

As the mass media are here to stay, it is just as well to make the most of them.

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