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Paper No. 42
"Dealing With Cross-Border Broadcasting : More Regulations"

presented by

Mr. Thawansak Sukhawun
Deputy Director General
The Mass Communication Organization of Thailand

at

AMIC Seventh Annual Conference

Novotel Hotel, Siam Square
May 23, 1998
Mr. Chairman,
Delegates,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand, I am deeply honoured to be invited at this parallelled Sessions to share my point of view and experience of a person with more than 20 years of service in this particularly field of MASS COMMUNICATIONS. My presentation will focus on the issue of "Dealing With Cross-Border Broadcasting : More Regulations".

It is evident that at present two major trends from the West have swept across the eastern world--the New World Order and the Borderless Society.

The New World Order refers to concepts that should be materialized so as to achieve their objectives. These concepts are, for example, democracy, a free economic system, human rights movement and ecological conservation. As for the Borderless Society, the emphasis is on the principle that information is power. The person with more information in his hands is more powerful than others. He is in an advantageous position when making decision, whether in his daily life or in his political judgement under the democratic system.
Standing amidst these trends is Thailand, an independent country with ancient customs and traditions as its invaluable heritage. The Thais take pride in their nation, race and social values, for example, abhorrence for violence but love of independence, peace and compromise for the benefit of the country. All these characteristics have contributed to "Thainess," and also the prestige and dignity of Thailand in international circles.

Unknowingly, the flow of information during the time of globalization has pervaded and gradually absorbed the "Thainess," the distinctive characteristics of the Thai nation and race, and the Thai way of thinking. This phenomenon has tended to spread quickly. A concrete example can be seen in so-called Titanic fever. The fact that this film is a also box-office success here in Thailand, like in other countries shows that a large number of movie-goers, especially those from urban areas have feverishly enjoyed a movie with a universal theme presented through exciting modern technology from the western world. This means that a large sum of money has had to be spent in order to fulfill the people's appetite for entertainment from the west. Music is another obvious example showing the impact of western influence in our region. The fact that Elton John's "Candle in the Wind" was televised worldwide by the major
television networks, the BBC and CNN, during the funeral of Princess Diana did not only reflect the public mood in the United Kingdom during the time of loss but also suggested the social and business implications for people all over the world. Through radio and television broadcast, they could be part of the tragic event; some of them were so moved by the song the pop-star singer performed as a royal tribute to the princess that they acquired a tape-cassette or a compact disc. The result is a multi-million dollar business. Besides affecting the taste in entertainment of the people in our region, western influence is evident in the change of people's dietary habits. Junk food and fast food from franchises like McDonald's or KFC have replaced the food prepared by eastern culinary skills that have been handed down from one generation to another. Like imported entertainment, the food business has turned out to be a big business yielding high profits, but at the expense of consumers who are unaware that their way of life has been invaded and gradually altered.

This is also true in the world of mass media. We cannot deny the fact that news broadcast by leading western news agencies—to name but a few the BBC, CNN, NBC and ABC, can reach almost every country in the world due to their technical capacity or modern technology. Their programs, especially news programs; impress viewers
tremendously because for their speed, up-to-dateness, thoroughness and their different modes of presentation. Yet, these programs are presented through a western perspective and for the benefit of those western agencies. For the countries in the Asia-Pacific region, the lack of high technology and wealth has meant that there is nothing much that we can do to counter the flow of western broadcasts. We have played the role of receiver of news and information from these international news agencies for too long. The result is an imbalance in news broadcasting, causing the infringement of public rights to receive news and information on an equal basis in a borderless mass communication society.

To give an example of how we may be affected by the one-way relation between the eastern and western mass media, I would like to refer to the report that came as a shock to us about an American teenager in the State of Arkansas, who shot his teacher and his schoolmates. The continual reporting of such news incidents has both positive and negative sides. On the positive side, the news reflects detailed and truthful coverage of the event. But it may lead other youths in other parts of the world to imitate this violent action. This might also have an impact on Thai teenagers who grow up in the society that, through Buddhist philosophy, emphasizes the significance of kindness, forgiveness, compromise and a peaceful way of living.
As well as news, other informative programs transmitted through waves, wires and satellites can, without limit and discrimination, freely reach every household. It is not too farfetched to say that freedom in mass communication can turn out to be one form of democracy in this region, and Thailand, for one, has opened the widest door to freedom in mass communication. In this borderless mass communication society, this freedom continues to expand. This can in turn have a detrimental effect. Take, for example, the broadcast of animation, which may be enjoyed by a large number of young audience in many countries. It cannot be denied that not every animation is appropriate for every young viewer for various reasons, for instance, the difference in social values in each society. The problem is that mass communication business in many countries, including Thailand, supports the presentation of animation without careful selection, expecting to gain enormous profits for its own survival. Because of this, in the world of strong competition, mass media practitioners, with conscience, moral principles and professional ethics, have to decide what is more important—the quality of public services of business profits.

All the aforementioned examples serve to indicate the direct and indirect effects upon Thailand and other countries in this region from their contact with western media, both in the form of hardware and software. This also
shows us how difficult it is to counter such influences with the strong and continual flux of western cultures that come through mass media. However, it does not mean that we totally reject western trends. Instead, we would rather find measures to select what is appropriate for us and try to create balance in this matter. One way of doing it is to educate our people so that they become knowledgeable and aware of what is going on, as well as capable of seeing the advantages and disadvantages of such trends. Yet, this takes time, and a continuous effort has to be made to develop people's ability and instill in them social awareness so that they may realize their freedom in ways they find knowledge. For this reason, this conference offers a good chance for us--media practitioners, academicians and specialists in this region, to meet and discuss issues of primary concern. We can decide together on how to oppose or to counter-balance western trends so as to be able to maintain our customs and traditions and our national identity. This is the time for us to debate how far regulations on mass media and telecommunications should be permitted to hinder or stimulate such trends. We can estimate who can truly gain advantages from the flux of western influences. We can also take this opportunity to discuss whether it is a basic individual right to be offered balance in news broadcasting and an equal opportunity to receive news and information in the way that one can see through what is being presented in the media.
Approximately twenty years ago, Thai mass media—both radio and television in particular, were controlled by the State through the National Commission on Radio and Television. This commission was responsible for issuing rules and regulations for control. Freedom of mass media depended very much upon political factors, causing uncertainty in freedom of expression and of news receiving. Such freedom varied with the type of government in power. This situation continued until after the May uprising in 1992, mass media rights and freedom, especially those concerning radio and television, were improved. At present, our new constitution, which has been in effect since 1997, states that radio, television and telecommunication frequency waves are national communication resources for public use. This means that everyone has the right to these waves if used for the benefit of the people and the country. In this matter, an independent state organization, free from political intervention or control by any government agencies, is designated to be responsible for allocating frequency waves and supervising the execution of radio, television and telecommunication services for the greatest benefit of the people on the local and national level to enhance public education, culture, safeguard the security of the state and other public interests, under free and fair competition. What is stated in our current constitution is a breakthrough in the state's mass communication business, particularly in radio and television broadcasting.
In fact, if we take a close look at state media in Thailand, the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand or the MCOT is the first agency in the country that has stipulated regulations in news broadcasting through radio and television stations as well as printed matters so that mass communication work can be undertaken within the ethical framework of mass communication professionalism. That is to broadcast news with speed, promptness, accuracy, fairness, and impartiality for the benefit of the people and the country. As a state media, it has instilled social conscience in its employers and made them aware of their social commitment; at the same time, the organization has also ensured that those who are honest and adhere to the principle and ethics of mass communication professionalism shall be protected. (This can be seen in your hand-out on Regulations on News Broadcasting of the MCOT.) In its overall image, the MCOT aims at being a state instrument that offers knowledge and unbiased news and information to the public so that people under the democratic system can use it as part of the way of making judgements or coming to decisions. The executives of the MCOT are aware of their important responsibility in human resource development through education so that people are capable of thinking and catching up with the world's events. To achieve this, continual strategic plans have to be implemented. This can be evidently seen by the fixing of a specific ratio of radio
and television programs. For instance, there should be more informative television programs even though they do not yield high business return. Community or regional radio stations are to broadcast programs that reflect the local way of life so that local people can acquire information about their own community in an equal proportion to those from Bangkok. These programs will encourage the local people to treasure their own traditions, customs and wisdom so that attempts can be made to conserve them. Moreover, during the time of economic crisis which has affected this region and, not to exaggerate, the whole world, the MCOT has laid emphasis on making people understand the situation by designing and adjusting programs that co-incide with what people do to adapt their ways of living to the crisis. These programs promote public understanding of the actual economic condition, economic measures from both the government and private sectors, solutions to unemployment, especially for rural people who constitute the majority of the population, and a co-operative spirit to lead the country through this crisis.

As a state media working for the interest of the country and the people, the MCOT may take this opportunity to present the following suggestions and recommendations for this conference:
1. Thailand, as one of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region, is sharing the future with its neighbors. May we, therefore, join forces in creating balance in news broadcasting for the public right to news and information. In this matter, we have to be unanimous in establishing principles to assure our regional standpoint to safeguard our mutual interests. This refers to the circumstance under which each of our nations is given a fair deal in obtaining news and information. Negotiations and discussions have to be carried out with dignity and prestige so that we equally achieve objectives in the allocation of the world's mass communication resources.

2. We wish to see each country establish rules and regulations that contribute to the transmitting and receiving of news and information with flexibility, and affordability for people around the world, on the basis that differences in economic status should not result in inequality in the use of media, which should be considered as properties of everyone. Each and everyone has freedom to get access to news and information both as an individual and by right in a democratic society so long as it is not in conflict with public interest.

3. To be more precise, we emphasize the significance of self-regulation. We first have to accept the uniqueness of the principles and ethics in radio and television professionalism of each country, even countries in Asia-Pacific
region. Each country has its own national identity or ethical standards in dealing with social problems, such as the problems of crimes and drugs. And it is important that differences in the national identity and ethical standards should be accepted.

This acceptance should be extended to cover the language used in the exchange of programs. English should no longer be the only language used as the medium of exchange. Moreover, social differences must not be ignored; for instance, it has to be admitted that some countries administrative systems are tied to customs and religious principles.

4. There should be additional rules and regulations in the use of news and information through satellites or internet to control what that may affect the nation's security, people's morality and social peace and order, or which may violate individual rights. At the same time, restricted rules and regulations that obstruct the transmission of news and information of the countries in this region to the world community should be relaxed. For example, Thailand is open and free in receiving news from all over the world but it has to face restrictive rules and regulations in broadcasting news via satellite to other countries. In this matter, the MCOT has played a vital role in reducing these restrictions.

5. Here we would like to assure our support to a government elected by participating democracy under the present constitution, and an equal chance to enhance the
public right to news in the way that people can see through the media, a chance for the private sector to own radio and television frequency waves, and fair and unbiased use of radio and television broadcasting by authorities for political purposes under the democratic system so as to protect the livelihoods of the country and the people.

6. Every country has to accept the Asian standard, meaning accepting that pluralism is related to the way of life, quality of life and culture in this region and it also reflects the prestige and dignity of all Asian countries.

7. To promote understanding and acceptance of the overall Asian standard in developed countries, we propose that AMIC play a vital role in monitoring that standard and make it more solid through conferences and dialogues between the government and the private sectors so that mutual understanding as well as cooperation to protect mutual interests among countries of this region and of the whole world can be created. We wish to see establishment of an international mass communication arena where all the countries worldwide can hold world dialogues so as to form centralized or collective standards in mass communication business throughout the world. This has to be done with a realization that the equal right to get news and information is a basic individual right of everyone in the world.

To cite for example, meetings of World Administrative Radio Conference (WARC) and Regional Administrative Radio Conference
(RARC) organized by the ITU (International Telecommunication Union) of the United Nations Organization could not fulfil the gap of obtaining World Telecommunication resources.

Besides, the ITU regulations have not been strictly implemented in accordance with the Convention that had been rectified by member countries whose decision making based on voluntary basis only for their national interests and not for World community.

8. The fact that modern technology has been developed very rapidly and unceasingly has caused a number of countries, especially developing countries that still far behind advanced technology and economic wealth, to unnecessarily and wastefully acquire that technology without careful planning. What we need to do is to select appropriate technology that can best serve our needs, instead of letting technology control us. This can be well illustrated in the case of digital technology.

9. We have to admit that we have paid too little attention to events or news in our vicinity and have put too much emphasis on reports of insignificant incidents in the West. We should realize that what occurs in the countries in our region will have more impact on our own country and our people. Since we are sharing our future and thus are fully responsible for it, we should strengthen our ties by sharing news with neighboring countries instead of focusing on some unimportant events that happen on the other side of the world.
10. And yet, it does not mean that we totally reject news and information from outside that might be useful for our people. We need to stir public awareness so that they become interested in all sorts of news, especially those in our region. Attempts have to be made to ensure that all parties involved can receive the news that is accurate, fair and demonstrates concern for the future of the country, the region, and of the world as a whole, since in this borderless society, no country can live in isolation. This statement can be proven explicitly by the current economic crisis in Asia.

11. The ultimate goal of the mass communication business, especially radio and television broadcasting—whether it is a state or a private enterprise, is to give immunization to our people against ignorance by means of education so that they can independently and continually develop their way of thinking and their perspectives towards the world’s current trends. We earnestly hope that every country will realize the significance of this mission so that human potential can be developed, enabling individuals to pursue their lives with happiness, and security and gain comfort for their basic needs. They will be free from the control of mass media and telecommunication resources from any country. Instead, these resources shall be allocated fairly for the common good of all the people on earth.

I hope that my point of view that I have just concluded will more less contribute to the final resolutions of this meaningful forum.

Thank you for your attention.
Closing Ceremony

Claude Ondobo