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Press Freedom and Professional Standards
Thailand Perspective
by Paisal Sricharatchanya
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Introduction

Thailand has traditionally enjoyed a free and colourful press. Practitioners in the Thai print media consider themselves more fortunate than their counterparts in the rest of Southeast Asia who are subject to varying degrees of government controls and restrictions. Press freedom in Thailand today has become institutionalized and the print media sector in particular is playing an influential role in shaping public opinions and thereby contributing to the national process of political, economic and social changes.

Press freedom in Thailand hasn’t been achieved overnight. It is the outcome of a lengthy evolutionary process lasting several decades. Past and present generations of Thai journalists have always been free in their professional spirit, but for much of recent history they had had to operate within the legal constraints of several restrictive laws and regulations. Freedom of expression had been won the hard way. Newspapers often had to test and expand the scope of their editorial coverage as they challenged the authority of the powers-that-be.

It was not until 1991 when a 15-year-old, press-gagging law was lifted that the Thai press became free in the true sense of the word. From then on, newspapers no longer had to be subject to the legal threat of being arbitrarily closed down. Licensing was also liberalized. By then, the print media sector as a whole had grown mature and confident. Riding on the back of a national economic boom before and after that period, several leading newspaper groups had tapped public resources from the Bangkok stock market and aggressively expanded their operations.
While Thai newspapers perform the fundamental journalistic function of serving as a medium of information, they also take it upon themselves to serve the additional role as a society “watchdog”. The rationale here is plain and simple. In a developing society like Thailand where moral and ethical standards are far from perfect, the press believes it is both necessary and beneficial to the society to expose wrongdoing in official and other circles. We are not always successful but over the years, there has been enough instances of political and social changes brought about by investigative reports, media exposes and campaign journalism to suggest that the press has developed to become a potent force behind national reforms.

Highly critical coverage in the print media against the military crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in Bangkok in May 1992 rallied public opinions against the military which prompted the downfall of the Suchinda government. Persistent newspaper digging into a scam behind the theft of jewelries from Saudi Arabia led to the arrest and prosecution of senior police officers. More recently, media exposes of a controversial land reform scheme where wealthy landlords and businessmen in the southern Thai island of Phuket were given land plots at the expense of the poor prompted a no-confidence debate in Parliament which precipitated the downfall of the Chuan Leekpai government last year.

It should be noted here that press freedom in Thailand is largely enjoyed only by the print media sector whereas Radio and Television are still subject to strict government controls, both directly and indirectly. The Radio sector has undergone major improvement since the bloody events of May 1992; there has been a proliferation of Radio news and talk-show programmes which significantly boosted freedom of expression in this sector although such freedom rests on fragile grounds since all the radio stations are owned and controlled by either military or state civilian agencies.

That the print media sector enjoys far greater freedom is best explained by the fact that all the leading newspapers are privately owned and have thrived on Thailand’s traditional spirit of free enterprise. There are at present about a dozen national dailies with combined circulation of approximately 2 million.
Freedom Versus Professional Standards

In spite of its influential position in Thai society, the Thai press is coming under increasing pressures on various fronts. By and large, professional standards have improved over the years as newspapers become financially stronger and hence could invest more in recruitment and training. But as the average readers become more sophisticated, they place higher expectations on editorial quality.

Sensational reporting used to be a focus of public complaints in the past and remains a contentious issue at present. But the growing debate in Thailand today is how to strike a proper balance between freedom and better professional standards. The debate is intensifying in light of the sharper conflict between the press and the government of Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa. Aggressive and critical press coverage has prompted a strong rebuff from the government and the result is a proliferation of libel suits.

In many respects, the Thai press has come to a vital crossroads. As far as news and commentaries are concerned, it is still the preferred medium over Radio and Television. It is more authoritative and popular. But the press needs to seriously address new challenges, especially those relating to professional standards, to bolster its position in Thai society.

Firstly, the Thai press needs to put its own house in order through an accelerated and consistent training programme. Manpower requirements brought about by the explosion of Radio news programmes and Cable Television in the last few years have caused a severe drain on the pool of experienced journalists in the print-media sector. The shortage of experienced journalists has been made all the more acute by the newspapers' own expansion.
The overall consequence has not been detrimental but it does reflect on instances of inconsistent quality and sub-standard coverage of complex issues. More seriously, fair and balanced reporting is sometimes sacrificed in the face of intense competition (among the newspapers themselves and also between Print and Radio plus Television), giving rise to public criticisms that the press is one-sided and unfair.

This is a serious issue that has to be corrected if the newspapers want to gain more public trust and respect in the longer run. There is no shortage of university graduates in the fields of mass communication and journalism—both subjects being highly popular among university entrants. The onus is on publishers and editors to spend and concentrate more on training.

Of equal importance and more urgently, members of the Thai print media have to fend off heavy-handed tactics used by the current government through more authoritative and more balanced coverage.

Freedom of expression in general has taken a few steps backwards after the Banharn government came to power last year. A number of Television and Radio talk-show programmes critical of the government have been closed down. Ministers and senior officials in the ruling Cabinet do not hesitate in filing libel actions against newspapers critical of their policies and actions. Within less than a year in office, leaders of the government have filed more libel suits against newspapers than all put together during the two-and-a-half-year tenure of the former government. Which is indicative of a concerted campaign to rebuff the press. In this very context, credit should be given the previous government of Mr. Chuan Leekpai for being more tolerant and appreciating the importance of free speech.
What is at stake here is not simply a question of press freedom versus responsibility. It is the very sense of responsibility to the society that prompted members of the print media to persistently pursue all the alleged misdeeds by senior officials of this government. The freedom to report and criticize is more or less institutionalized. The crux of the problem is to match this freedom with greater consistency in balanced reporting, the presentation of facts and documental evidence to back up allegations, and more investigative-type reporting. The Thai press can further enhance its extra role as the societal watchdog if overall professional standards are improved. And in the same process, publishers and editors would be able to stand on firmer grounds to defend libel lawsuits.

Higher professional standards would also place the press in a more favourable light in the eyes of the general public. More grumblings have been heard from members of the ordinary public in recent years over one-sided and biased press coverage. This is hardly surprising in view of higher expectations raised by a readership that has become more politically-aware and economically-affluent. Against unprofessional practice by some journalists, there have also been intermittent calls by outsiders for some form of self control or self regulation within the press fraternity.

In summary, it is clear the Thai press is going through an important adjustment process to cope with new political, economic and social realities. This is not a make-or-break situation. Rather, the press is addressing the new challenges from a position of strength. Professional standards will necessarily have to improve to ensure that its dual role as a competitive medium and a potent social force continues to take firmer roots.

Bangkok
13 May 1996