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Media Response In Urbanization

By

Chanyaporn Chanjarearn
Media Response in Urbanization

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General background

When talking about the process of urbanization in Bangkok, it is undeniable to begin with the introduction of the National Economic and Social Development plan to the country in 1961 under the dictatorial government of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat.

The plan is a series of a five-year plan which aims to, as mentioned in its title, to develop the country in terms of economics and society. In fact, the social part was added in later (can't remember the year). So from the start, our government planned to develop the country economically only. Currently we are under the seventh plan.

However, it is very ironic that after completing the 6th National Economic and Social Development plan in 1991, the number of poor people in the country has doubled from the number of 30 years ago, that's before the beginning of the plan. So that the GDP is much higher does not mean that people have a better life.

The NESD plans have put Thailand into the state of economic boom which Bangkok has been playing the centre of everything. That's when influx of migration from the rural area took place. Despite the expectable growing population in the urban area, the government never plans or prepares anything. There is no proper urban planning, which results in traffic jams, slums and squatting area and sanitation. Those coming to Bangkok do not have the life they wish for: men serve the ever-increasing demand of labour while women mainly serve the sex industry.

Now the official figure of population in Bangkok is about 6 million, but according to the Population and Development Newsletter of Mahidol University, the figure has reached 8 millions.

In the country where political stability and the stock market are not still at ease, urbanization is discussed in a limited circle like academics only though the process affects the country as a whole.

Now I will give you a general background of the Thai media. I'll begin with the oldest form of media, that is the press.

There are more than a dozen of major newspapers in Thailand, all privately owned and offering quite a balanced point of view. The press has the most free
and independent form of expression: in most situations they can criticize the government, the military and everyone except the royal family. Three of them are English-language, namely the Bangkok Post, the Nation and the Thailand Times. The latter is less than one year old and is in a staggering condition.

Regarding the broadcast media, there are five TV stations and hundreds of radio station, all are state-owned. Three TV stations belong to the government, one of which is run by a private company. The other two are owned and run by the army. Radio stations are shared among various government agencies and the military.

There are three more pay TVs, a satellite channel is included. All TV channels emphasize more of the lighter and commercial side, that is entertainment. Apart from news coverage, urbanization is sometimes portrayed in the guise of documentary and discussion programs, both of which are yet popular in the country.

In general, the Thai media give priority to the political arena and the stock market since most people think there are of national interest. Social issues are relatively less discussed.

Talking about the media response to urbanization, it's a real vague topic with too many implications. However, I'll pick up four issues relating to urbanization and discuss the media response to each of them. My four issues are traffic congestion, pollution, prostitution and slums.

Traffic Congestion

Traffic congestion may be the urban problem people, including the media, pay attention to the most since it's the most obvious and indiscriminatory pest of Bangkokians. Every one, be they rich or poor, suffer the same fate of getting stuck for hours in the congestion.

Traffic congestion in Bangkok is a result of lack of proper urban planning, increasing population in Bangkok without good mass transportation problems, coupled with limited road space. The street area in Bangkok covers only two percent of the city land.

Every kind of media pays attention to this problem and it has been foremost highlighted. I think the media best respond to this subject, particularly radio, of which popularity is directly the result of traffic jam. Because people get stuck for hours in their cars, radio is the only media keeping in touch with them.

In respond to the gravious traffic problem, a radio program called Jor Sor 100 was launched two years ago. It is an around-the-clock program monitoring the traffic condition in Bangkok and its peripheries. It's the most effective media concerning the problem.

Since the beginning, the program has had open-line for phone-in traffic reports from Bangkok's motorists. Traffic reports from a helicopter are offered twice a day during rush hours, with the assistance of the traffic police.

After one year in operation, its popularity increases with more than 2,000 calls a day and most motorists stay tune. Jor Sor 100 does more than simply informing, it alerts the public awareness and creates a good environment on Bangkok streets with its various campaigns on safety road and respect of traffic rules.

It also raises many issues that concerns urban interest like accidents, fire on big buildings. Currently, it is setting a fund to buy fire suits for fire fighters. Though Bangkok has hundreds of skyscrapers, its safety measure regarding fire has been neglected. And Jor Sor 100 also lets people phone in to comment on this.
Moreover, the programme shows good concerns on motorists' health. It is the first one promoting "portable toilet" called Comfort 100 which you can use in your car to relieve yourself during the congestion.

Other radio stations also offer traffic reports during programme breaks.

Regarding the print media, apart from the routine covering of accidents, two English-language newspapers in Thailand, the Bangkok Post and the Nation, have opened a forum for the public to voice their opinions on the topic last year. Both papers have received overwhelming responses from the public who employ the forums for various degrees of expression from making jokes, complaints, satires to cursing the authority. Some write to make suggestion and offer various kinds of analysis on the problem.

The Thai-language newspapers and TVs are relatively less creative regarding the topic. Most of them are just mere reports which are routine coverage. But overall I think traffic jam is an urban issue the Thai media respond to the best.

Pollution

All kinds of pollution can be found in Bangkok -- noise, water, air and also human pollution. Though unleaded gasoline has been introduced to Thailand for nearly four years, it does not help much reduce air pollution. The lead level, dust particles and carbon monoxide, all are higher than the standard.

And environment is big issue in my country where all kinds of media play a significant part in informing and alerting the public. Most newspaper have environment section which offer coverage and analysis of the environmental degradation in both the urban and rural areas. TV and radio stations, too. Particularly TV programmes, many quality environment documentaries have been on air and received overwhelming respond from the public. The pioneering programme is owned by Pacific Intercommunication, the same producer of Jor Sor 100 radio programme I mentioned earlier.

There are also many "green" campaigns like the Magic Eye to keep the city clean and the Love Chao Phraya Project to protect our main river, the Chao Phraya. Yet I feel in terms of raising the public awareness to take action on the problem, what we have done is also far from enough. Only a limited group of people have real environmental concerns and the true understanding of the problems, judging from public littering habit, the use of ULG in Bangkok and discharge of sewage and toxic waste in the country.

Prostitution

I'm certain that all of you know about Thailand's notoriety in prostitution. Last year, our government protested against the newly-published Longman Culture Dictionary which gives a definition of Bangkok as a city where there so many prostitutes.

The government's protest does not mean we don't have prostitutes. It in fact shows that the government wants to hide this fact in the closet. And to look at this point in a wider aspect, such reaction indeed reflects the superficiality of the Thai society who don't want to talk much about this problems. We realize its existence, but we do not feel comfortable discussing it out loud.

For poor Thai women in the rural area, being a prostitute is a form of showing gratitude to their parents. For poor Thai men, they have many better options to escape poverty as well as to gratify their parents --- that is to enter monkhood. We have a belief that the son's saffron robe can send his parents to heaven.
However, this do not apply for women. Any of them entering nunhood are regarded as desperado. Selling themselves is far better since it will improve their family's financial situation.

However, apart from routine coverage of this problem, it's very hard for the Thai media to find new angles on this issue. Though its response to the problem has been very consistent and some really have in-depth analysis, it's hard to alert the public awareness.

As the monstrous issue of AIDS has dramatically portrayed in Thailand, we try to associate the two issues together. The broadcasting media host several campaigns on TV in form of short plays like an ad, still they are too didactic. It's hard to be creative on such issue. So far we are not successful to educate people on the topic.

Slums and squatting

Slum problem coverage faces the same problem like prostitution, but in a more serious degree. It's an old issue and we press often feel its hard to convince our editor that this's still worth a publication.

Actually, over 1,000 slums in Bangkok are facing more gravious problems of eviction as they are in the way of urban development, which means more road construction.

There is an editor of a highly-respected newspaper in Bangkok who declared to his staff that he wanted no more "plight story". He said the readers must already get sick with poor people, both in the urban and the rural, lamenting about their ancestors' land or any other vivid accounts of how beautiful and green or whatever the land used to be.

Also it's hard for us journalists to find new angles to such chronic problems which a particular group of people who have no say at all are suffering. Unlike traffic jam and pollution which receive national focus, slums and squatting problems have received very less attention during the past five years except in some big cases when there are massive protests by slum dwellers, or big fires in slums.

In short, slum problem is one of the least covered among any other urban issues by the media.

Conclusion

There are also many issues concerning urbanization which deserves more coverage by the media, mostly in the social aspects like the changing lifestyles of urban people, their new values, sanitation and health, mental health in particular. None of which have been adequately presented by the media. These kinds of problems, in my opinion, are best presented in feature and analysis form, which the Thai media have yet mastered.

In most Thai newspapers, feature section is very new and those analysis columns are mostly on politics and economics. Though the two English-language newspapers have considerably contributed to the urban issues in various aspects, their limited readership, roughly less than one per cent throughout the country, keep them from making real strong impacts. Needless to say about the broadcasting media.

Another problem is that the Thai media still don't have enough far-reaching influences in the provinces apart from Bangkok. Since urbanization problems also have roots in the rural area, it's very important that rural people are well-informed of the real situation in Bangkok.

I also feel that to raise the issues of urbanization, other forms of media in Thailand, apart from news people, should also chip in. Soap opera is a good...
one if it will educate people more on these issues since it has the highest rating among all broadcast programmes. With good scripts and stories, urbanization will definitely make good presentation in soap opera since it's already a part of people's life and scriptwriters can add the story of AIDS or prostitution in these kinds of dramas.

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