

The Thai Press System

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An Overview¹

Newspaper The number of Thai newspapers are normally fluctuated. As a recent survey, there are 29 daily newspapers published in Bangkok. Nineteen of these are in Thai, five in Chinese and five in English. They exist approximately 160 upcountry provincial newspapers, but only a few manage to appear daily because of problems of small subscription and high cost of production. A majority of the provincial newspapers are published either weekly, once every ten days, or fortnightly. Most of provincial newspapers are published fortnightly because they sell their newspapers with lottery results issued regularly in the middle and the end of each

The Thai press is privately owned and operated. Distribution of newspapers is primarily through sales rather than subscription. Circulation fluctuates greatly, depending on the current news headings, sporting events, lottery results or unusual happenings. It is extremely difficult to estimate the actual newspaper circulation figures since they are considered to be a trade secret. The newspaper that has largest circulation is Thai Rat with about 700,000-800,000 copies of normal sales. The sale prize is 5 Baht per copy

(1 US\$ = 26 Baht). The sale price per copy of Thai newspapers has been increased from 3 Baht to 5 Baht since the late 1987 due to the higher cost of imported newsprint.

The total daily circulation of Thai newspapers is estimated about 2,500,000 serving a literate population throughout the country (adult literacy rate is 85.5 percent of the population).

Thai newspapers may theoretically be classified into 3 groups: (1) popular newspapers emphasizing on self-news reports with colorful format and content; (2) quality newspapers focusing on relatively hard-news reports, and (3) newspapers with mixed characteristics.

Most newspapers in Bangkok devoted about 25-30 percent of their total space to coverage of domestic news, compared to only about 5 percent of foreign news. Since advertising remains a major source of revenue for all newspapers in Thailand, most newspapers allocated a substantial portion of space, 25-35 percent, to commercial advertising.²

Radio Unlike newspapers, all of the radio stations are government owned. There are 269 stations, 33 percent of which are operated by the Public Relations Department, while military stations account for some 57 percent and mostly are franchised to private enterprise. The remaining 10 percent are operated by other ministries and educational institutions.

In general, however, the funds to run these stations come from advertising revenues. There are both spot and sponsored

advertising; programs are produced by the stations themselves, by freelance commercial groups, or by the advertisers. Thus in practice, the commercial interests and the advertising agencies exert certain influence on the program developers.

The operation of every radio station in Thailand is technically controlled, advised, and supervised by the Broadcasting Directing Board, and the Radio and Television Broadcasting Act is emphatic in the obligations which it exacts from the broadcasters to promote culture and education, national unity, and political understanding.

As reported in the survey of Thailand's radio stations in 1975, Elihu Katz and Dov Shinar, noted a rather negative picture of Thai radio stations. At the organizational level, they described an uneven station distribution, low budgets, and lack of overall direction. At the programming level, they described a characteristic diet of music, advertising, and chat, broken up by official news and (rather more lightly) by traditional cultural forms.³

Although there are some development on the radio programs today, the reports of Katz and Shinar still reflect some reality of Thai radio system.

A significant new development is the minority area of educational and developmental radio stations. In 1983, a new national radio network come into operation covering the whole country. This network will, for the first time, provide

educational radio at the national level to schools and out-of-school educational audiences.

Television Thailand was the first country on the Asian mainland to introduce television. This was done in 1932 by H.R.H. Prince Kampanget Akrayothin, but it was only a trial station. In 1955, the Thai television company began the operation on Channel 4. Twelve years latter, the first colour television broadcasting in Asia began in Bangkok by a company sub-license to the Army.

Now there are 5 television stations in Bangkok and 12 stations in various parts of the country. All of them broadcasts in colour. Television stations in Thailand are run by one of the following 3 methods: Government owned, state-enterprise owned, and privately run under franchise.

Since 1955, television has been a commercial medium, most of its programs being sponsored by local and foreign advertisers. Statistics shows that during the past years the Thai television industry has enjoyed a substantial increase in popularity as a medium for mass advertising. From 1960 to 1975, advertising revenue earned by the industry multiplied more than seventeen times. In 1984, advertising expenditures in various media rose to 4,716.2 millions (Baht), divided to television 51.6 percent, radio 19.1 percent, newspaper 20.6 percent, magazine 7.3 percent, and cinema 1.4 percent.

The TV content largely involves various types of entertainment such as drama, game shows, variety shows, and movies. However the survey conducted by the National Statistical Office in 1979 shows that local news, foreign news, and sports news received the highest popularity among audiences. Resulting from a great improvement of news program in recent year, television news today get more popularity and credibility from the viewers. Furthermore, the increasing of feature programs and educational programs make television more valuable than just an entertainment box in the home.

The TV-pool of Thailand is a mechanism through which all television stations co-operate. It was set up on December 20, 1968, to avoid competition in securing rights to broadcast important events. Until then, stations competed for popular programs such as sports events, mostly relayed live via satellite from abroad, thus pushing costs unnecessarily high. Through the TV-pool, every station broadcasts the same programs simultaneously; hence competition is removed automatically. The TV-pool is managed by representatives from all stations.

Magazine The Bangkok Recorder was the first newspaper to circulate in Thailand (1844); this same paper is regarded as the first magazine as well. Considering its format, size, and content, it was designed for education rather than to report "news"

The first magazine edited by a Thai publisher appeared in 1874, called "Darunnawat". It was intended for education and entertainment.

Currently there are magazines printed in Thailand, most of which are in Thai with only a few in English. The trend of magazine content become more specialized. Among the numerous magazines circulated today can be classified according to the survey of the Business Advertising Association of Thailand: 44 woman magazines, 30 entertainment and teenage magazines, 86 business magazines, 25 man magazines, 22 vehicles magazines, 20 sports magazines, 20 tourism magazines, 20 audio and computer magazines, and the rest -- housing, furniture, health, politics, economics, art and culture, photographer, and youth magazines.⁴ These number and type of magazines are normally fluctuate.

It is very difficult to know the exact circulation of each magazine, for only a few disclose it. However, some older magazines, especially women magazines, their circulation figures run up to 100,000.

The format of magazines has undergone massive change recently. Better paper is used, more advanced printing technologies is employed, more attractive design is utilized, and more interesting content is presented because of severe competition in the magazine market.

Advertisement is generally an important source of revenue, therefore advertising staff becomes an important part of the magazine as well as the editorial staff.

The News Agency (TNA) The Thai News Agency was founded in 1977 when its parent organization the Mass Communication Organization

of Thailand (MOT) was established as a state enterprise. Its functions include news operations for television and radio broadcast. TNA also operates teletext news bulletin broadcast during daytime on weekdays, presenting up-to-the-minute local and foreign news in both Thai and English. Another major function of TNA is to publish 3 editions of news bulletin daily for its subscribers ranging from daily newspapers, radio stations, foreign news agencies and other private organizations.

TNA joins the news exchange network with member agencies of the Asia and Pacific News Agencies Organization (OANA) and the Asean News Exchange (ANEX). It has also concluded a bilateral news exchange agreement with the Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) or the Bangladesh news agency.⁵

Press Associations There are various associations in Thai press system. For newspaper associations, there are: (1) Press Association of Thailand, (2) Journalists Association of Thailand, (3) The Reporters Association of Thailand, (4) Entertainment Correspondents Association of Thailand, (5) The sports Writers Association of Thailand, (6) Mass Media Photographers Association of Thailand, (7) The Provincial Press Association of Thailand, (8) The Provincial Journalists Association of Thailand, and the last association aiming to represent and coordinate all newspapers associations -The Confederation of Thai Journalists. Among these mentioned press associations. The Reporters Association of Thailand is more active and more aggressive in development the journalism professional.

For other professional associations, includes: (1) Public Relations Society of Thailand (2) Broadcasters Association of Thailand, (3) Language and Books Association of Thailand, and (4) Publishers and Book sellers Association of Thailand.

Press Education and Training Education in mass communication at the university level begin in 1939 in the Faculty of Arts and Science, Chulalongkorn University, which offered an undergraduate course in Newspaper. Mass Communication education in Thailand is heavily influenced by the way it is organized in the United States-both form and content. Most of mass media scholars in Thai university graduated from the US.

At present, there are 6 state universities including the open university offer B.A. in mass communication, some of them also offer master degree programs. Two privately owned universities teach Communication Arts, one of them offers at master level. Some of Teacher Colleges are teaching Communication Arts at B.A. level. Many other colleges teach mass communication subjects under B.A.level.

There are a few institutes traing mass communication for organization personnel and media professionals, namely, (1) The Public Relations School, in-service training communicators from both government and private sectors, and (2) The Press Development Institute of Thailand, promoting seminars and in-service training to journalists. In addition, the university's communication schools occasionally offer training courses in various areas to the media professionals and to the public.

From missionaries, to the royalty, then to ordinary people

The history of the various mass media in Thailand follows the same pattern. All media of mass communication were imported, for various reasons such as religious propaganda, political reasons, commercial reasons, and even for catching the rapid growth of new technology. Those media come earlier to Thailand than to most other countries in the region, with newspaper originating in 1844, radio in 1926 and television in 1932.

The remarkable historical events that have shaped the Thai press system may chronologically describe as follows:

1844-1932 (Absolute monarchy regime) Newspapers in the early period was confined largely to foreign interest groups. Dr. Dan Beach Bradley an American missionary started the Thailand's first newspaper, the Bangkok Recorder, in July, 1844. This appearance is considered an innovation in the Thai society where the country ruled by the absolute monarchy. The western's liberalism idea was gradually exercised through the newspaper media. The monarch which had never been criticized before was first challenged by the press. Dr. Bradley, through his papers, hoped to influence King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851-68) and through the king, the kingdom:

The royal family, particularly King Mongkut, were the pioneers of Thai journalism. The King himself maintained good relations with the missionary press, often responding to Dr. Bradley's attacks on Buddhism under such pen-names as "Buddhist Champion" and refusing to muzzle the paper as sometimes suggested.

After 1859, King Mongkut edited his own newspaper, the Royal Gazette.

A number of newspapers and magazines were also issued by many of the royal family during King Chulalongkorn's reign (King Rama V 1868-1910). The original Thai press exhibited a characteristic still visible in Thai press: disseminating the official and authoritative words, expressing disputation rather than reporting of information.⁸

The so-called "Golden Age of Thai Journalism" came during the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, 1910-25), who apparently started contributing articles to press while he still was the crown prince. The number of newspapers and magazines owned by the royal family and the ordinary people increased to more than hundred titles. King Vajiravudh himself also became owner of the Bangkok Daily Mail. The press freedom was welcomed. As has been said of King Vajiravudh, "He welcomed fair criticism of his government but reacted with vigor to what he believed to be unfair or groundless attack on his administration."⁹

The emerging press under the absolute monarchy was largely free, specially during the King Rama V's reign. The only press law until as late as 1919 was a libel law. The first formal censorship came under the Newspaper Act of 1919, which required that all military news be cleared by the censor and forbade all criticism of the government bureaucracy. In practice, however, censorship was mild. A little more press control was exercised during the reigns of King Rama VI and King Rama VII due to the growth of the press in both number and their aggressive roles.

1932-present (democratic, limited monarchy, regime) June 24, 1932 is a land mark date in Thai history. That was the day the People's party instituted the coup that ended the absolute monarchy. Members of the People's party were mostly young, Western-educated liberals who saw themselves as modernizing Thai government. Press freedom was part of that modernization. The permanent constitution was adopted on December 10, 1932, included an article granting every person "full liberty of person, abode, property, speech, writing, publication, education, public meeting, association, or vocation" but at the same time it made these liberties "subject to the provisions of law." In other words, statute law was placed above the constitution. The result was to be expected. Thai Press controls have fluctuated almost wildly between complete freedom and virtually complete repression, depending on the particular views of the individuals in power at any given time. But the overall trend clearly has been towards controls.¹⁰ The struggle for freedom of the Thai press was coupled with the struggle for democracy of the Thai people throughout the Thai history after the end of absolute monarchy regime.

The decades after 1932, newspapers were manipulated as tools of political propaganda. Leading politicians and their rivals published a number of newspapers in competition with other newspapers which opposed them. The pro-government leader newspapers were labelled by independent newspapermen of the period as the "prostitute's sheet",¹¹ meaning the newspapers unashamedly promoted the dictator.

The so-called "Dark Age of Thai Journalism" came with the dictatorial rule of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, who was prime minister from 1959 to 1963. With Sarit's age of martial law, the press control was tightened drastically. Several newspapers punished with warnings, impounding and/or destruction. A number of journalists were held in prison, some of them fled away from journalism profession. In Sarit's days, "Thailand became the weirdest country in the world because newspaper licenses turned out to be commercially profitable products." Since no new newspaper was permitted to publish because of his repressive law, "there was a wild economic speculation of the existing newspaper licenses, even among professional bankers. Some bought such licenses for millions of bath each for rent to those who wished to publish newspapers."¹²

During Sarit's government, the Thai press served little more, other than entertainment and escapism. Furthermore, an extreme degree of inaccuracy and irresponsibility that did not merit the privilege of freedom was apparent. This fact is probably rooted in Sarit's dictatorship, which forced the press to dwell on the least sensitive matters to avoid possible "problems."

Some changes occurred under the succeeding government, when press controls were initially much lessened. But the up-and-down nature of Thai-style freedom of the press was seen in the late 1960s, when severe legal restrictions accounted for correspondingly strict self-censorship.

The press after the October 1973 student revolution that brought down the so-called "tyrant" leaders was definitely the freest, and one of the most prosperous financially, for the press. The interim government led by Professor Sanya Thammasak lifted the ban on newspapers and promulgated a constitution that guaranteed press freedom, abolished censorship and restricted ownership for newspapers to Thais. However, the Sanya's year-and-a-half administration was noted for a press that was free but also very irresponsible-reporting to sensationalism, extortion, bribery and in some cases violence.¹²

The drastic change of government in October, 1976 brought to another remarkable impact on press control. Due to the bloody conflict between leftist and rightist groups, Military coup overthrown the weak-elected administration. It is the first time in Thai history that all newspapers were banned. People had no newspapers read for a couple of days. The press control was tighten and another new act was instituted allowing for censorship. However, such authoritative government did not exist long.

The last decade of Thai press has been relatively easeful. Thai journalists have been enjoying press freedom although they were still threatened by a couple of existent press control acts. A group of newspapermen, with an assistance of a number of the House representatives, has put a great effort to push the new press bill to be approved by the parliament. However, this attempt still hasn't succeeded yet. If the press bill would have been passed as law by the parliament, press system of print media in

Thailand will certainly come to a new era. The government control will be lessened, the self-control practice will be much more through the press council. The press council idea has been discussed since 1950. In the administration of the newspaperman-prime minister, Kukrit Pramoj, a new press bill including the press council structure was writing. This press council has four main duties: first, to promote educational and professional progress; second, to control journalists by principle of professional ethic; third, promote unity and dignity among its members; and fourth, to lead the public towards a better awareness of journalism. This news press bill, however, had not been passed through the parliament yet.

Thai journalism in general has been the only relatively free medium, compared to radio and television, which have been government monopolies. Unlike print media, electronic media have never changed much since first introduced more than 50 years ago, especially in terms of their relationship with the administration. Radio and television were almost completely controlled by government. Pongsak Phayakavichien, a well known newsman, wrote that "newspapers are the only medium in Thailand through which people can talk back to the government while the government owned radio and television are clearly propaganda tools."¹⁴ News programs on radio and television mostly reported governmental activities and presented only one-side of views from government. Until 1975 there was a remarkable development of TV news reporting initiated by Sanpsiri Viryasiri, the manager of TV channel 4, at that time. Significant events were many times broadcasted lively on the scene, especially in the period after the student

uprising. In addition to immediate reporting, Sampsiri promoted the reporting of different viewpoints. However, within one year of his TV-news revolution, Sampsiri was dismissed from the Channel 4 television. So the traditional TV news reporting was practiced again. In 1985 there was another so-called TV news revolution started by Somkiat Onwimon. Somkiat, the managing director of Pacific Intercommunication Company, has been renting the evening airtime from the Channel 9 broadcasting news program. He has been both the news editor and anchorman. He has made the new presentation less formal--talking informally and adding interpretation to the news reporting to the audience instead of merely reading to them. In addition to this, he has made news stories more touching with ordinary people rather than focusing only on those high-ranking government officials. The area of coverage has been more varied, the place to cover has been extended to more provincial and rural areas. The feature stories has been emphasized. This kind of news presentation has been very successful in drawing public attention. Success of Channel 9 television news programme brought to the improvement on TV news in other Channels. From this remarkable development, it has been resulted the greater news-watching audience and consequently a higher rate of commercial charges. Furthermore, the TV news revolution by Somkiat causes the television today become a real competitor to the newspapers in regarding with primary source of daily news.

Philosophy and Legal: "Freedom" VS "Control"

Thailand can be translated as "the land of the free." Thais are boasting of national independence maintained for more than 700 years. Historically, however, this doesn't mean that the free people of Thailand are absolutely free from the controls of their government, especially with regard to the press. Thai journalists, like journalists in other free or claimed-free societies continuously cry for more freedom and less control.

The freedom of the press seems to be the principle philosophy of all journalists. This can be seen in the codes or canons of the press in any democratic country. The Press Association of Thailand has laid down codes of ethics for Thai journalists and the press. One and priority of those codes states that: "Promotion and maintenance of freedom of the press shall be the most important of every member."¹⁵

This western's liberalism philosophy has been absorbed by Thai journalist at the same time of coming of the democratic idea. Philosophy of the press and of the politics have been continually developed along history of Thailand. However, in practice, they frequently did not go along accordingly. In the time when government administration advanced democracy, they braked the freedom of the press. This is certainly paradoxical when one looks back to the relatively freer press in Thailand under the absolute rule of kings. When asked which period between the absolute monarchy and the age of "democracy" was freer for journalism, a veteran editor instantaneously answered: "The period before the coming of democracy"¹⁶

Thai press in the period after the October, 1973 student revolution was considerably free but also largely irresponsible. Many parties demanded the press more responsibility. Kukrit Promaj, the most respected and famous newspapermen who became a Thai prime minister, suggested that his government would not tolerate irresponsible journalism born out of emotion and thoughtlessness. As a manipulator of public opinion, he said, the press could obstruct the growth of democracy by exaggerating unimportant issues. The prime minister insisted that Thai press learn the meaning of "responsible press," and he reiterated that his government would respect freedom of the press.¹⁷

Thai journalists have been adopted the idea or philosophy of "free and responsible press" along the development of the Thai press. However, in practice, not all of them intentionally observed this principal although it has been written in the journalism canons. A group of active journalists has been putting a great effort to establish the press council as a mechanism for promoting and enforcing the free and responsible press.

In addition to the free and responsible press idea, Thai press has become gradually accepted the concept of development journalism as a new philosophy of the press, like in some other countries in Asian, The faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University and the Faculty of Mass Communication and Journalism, Thammasat University, including The Press Development Institute of Thailand and other organizations have been diffused this concept to the press either in the national or provincial level.

Philosophically, Thai press today largely accepts the social responsibility doctrine although, in practice, it is somewhat unsatisfactory.

Regarding, rights and freedom of individual, the present national constitution states:

"Every person shall enjoy freedom of speech, writing, printing, and publication.

The restriction on such liberty shall not be imposed except by virtue of laws specifically enacted for the purpose of maintaining the security of the state of safeguarding the liberties, dignity, or reputation of other persons or maintaining public order or good morals or preventing deterioration of the mind or health of the public.

The press owner shall be a Thai national subject to the conditions prescribed by law.

No grant of money or other property shall be made by the state as subsidy to a private newspaper."
(Article 34)

"Every person shall enjoy freedom of Communication by lawful means.

The censorship, detention, or disclosure of communication between persons, including any other act

disclosing a statement in the communication between persons, shall not be affected except by virtue of laws specifically enacted for public order or good morals, public safety, or for maintaining the security of the State." (Article 39)¹⁸

According to the Article 34 and Article 39 in the present Constitution, the Thai press practitioners have clearly been guaranteed for their professional freedom. However, the Constitution still leaves some room for the press controls.

Over the years there have been a number of Thai press laws that journalists have considered unfair. Some of these laws are still effective, for instance:

(1) Press Act of 1941 contains provisions applicable to all kinds of print media. The existing of this act in 1941 gave freedom to the press to be legally established merely by publishers giving notice to the authorities. However, a year later the Press Act of 1941 imposed stiff restrictions. The minister of interior become the sole judge of whether a given article was in violation by virtue of offending public order and morals, and he had complete power to decide whether an offending paper should be merely suspended or confiscated by the government.

Some provisions in the Press Act of 1941 which have been demanded by journalist to be abolished or altered are:

(1) The press shall not publish official secrets unless permitted to do so by officers in charge

(2) To enforce law and order when necessary, the Director General of the Police Department may prohibit temporarily the publishing of articles on military affairs or international politics.

(3) In war time or state of emergency, the Director General of the Police Department may impose censorship on the press.

(4) If a story which is offensive or indecent is published the government officers in charge can:

1. warn the publisher, editor, owner of that newspaper,
2. put that paper under censorship,
3. withdraw the license for a specified or unspecified period of time.

(5) If a paper publishes personal stories about any individual and the information contained therein is misleading and may cause damage to him, he can send a written request to the editor to correct such mistakes. When such correction is done, the case cannot be brought into court.¹⁹

(2) The National Administrative Reform Council Declaration

No.42 Before this Declaration issued, there was a similar press control order called Declaration No.17, issued by Marshall Sarit's Revolutionary Party in 1958. The Declaration No. 17 had been

continuously protested by journalists until it was abolished in 1973.

In 1976, a military group staged a coup d'etat. The group called the "Reform Council" issued Declaration No. 42, which laid down principles for the press to follow in addition to those stipulated in the Press Act of 1941. The order, which is still in force, can be summarized as follows:

Publishing of the following shall be prohibited:

(1) Statements or pictures which are offensive to the King, the Queen, the Heir to the throne, or the Regent.

(2) Statements or pictures which are offensive to Thailand or the Nation, or statements which destroy confidence foreigners have in Thailand, the Government of Thailand, or Thai people in general;

(3) Statements or pictures which dubiously, allege wrongdoing or comment sarcastically on the Government of Thailand or government departments without pin-pointing the specific wrong;

(4) Statement or pictures which dubiously imply that there is corruption or wrong-doing in a government department without substantiating the allegation,

(5) Statements or pictures which promote communism or are destructive to national security;

(6) Statements or pictures or newspaper's headline which are untrue; which may cause popular panic, anxiety, or fear", which instigate the public to break peace and order, or which are morally unfit;

(7) Statements or pictures which are rude, obscene, or harmful to national morality and culture;

(8) Statements or pictures which are official secrets.²⁰

(3) Radio and Television Broadcasting Act of 1955

This Act contains 2 important provisions, namely;

(1) The conduct of radio and television broadcasting must be licensed by government officials; and

(2) For public order or defence of the realm, the Prime Minister may issue temporary orders to designated officials to confiscate for official use, forbid the use of or inhibit the movement of, radio or television broadcasting receivers.²¹

(4) Radio and Television Broadcasting Regulation of 1975

To enhance the enforcement of the Radio and Broadcasting Act of 1955, the government has set up the Radio and television

Administrative Board and the Board has passed a regulation called "Radio and Television Broadcasting Regulation of 1975". The Board, according to the 1975 Regulation, is empowered to: lay down conditions and procedures, and making approval for the establishment or moving of broadcasting stations; consider criteria for commercial and service advertisements, technical characteristics, and broadcasting schedules. Should there be violations, the Board may issue a warning or stop the broadcasting of the violating programs or withdraw the broadcasting license.²²

At present time, the Declaration No. 42 is still being opposed by journalist groups. The press is seeking repeal of the Declaration No.42 and asked for amendments to the Printing Act of 1941, which gives the interior Ministry powers to grant or revoke publishing licenses. The 1973 decision of the Interior Minister gave authority to Bangkok police and provincial governors as "press officers," with powers to close papers. But the press wants authority over newspaper closures shifted to the courts.

An effort to reduce governmental restrictions has been made by forming a new Printing Act which included the provision of press council. However, at the time being, the new Printing Act still is a pending bill waiting for the new parliament to be considered.

Press and the Society

Theoretically, mass media have a complex dual character, namely, the business character and public-service character. In other words, they offer various services to the society, particularly

news, information and commentary services, and at the same time, they have to earn their living.²³

Mass media today tend to become a rather big business enterprise. They need large investment on equipment, machinery and personnel. For the print media, imported newsprint becomes a costly material. The rapid development of new communication technologies not only makes the mass media become more pervasive and effective, but also makes them increase in the investment.

All print media are totally owned by private business. Although some government agencies such as the Ministry of Commerce run some newspapers, magazines and periodicals, the number is very small.

There is still no indication of a monopoly system developing in newspaper and magazine circles yet, even though there may be some groups of private individuals owning more than one newspaper or magazine.

Because it needs a large investment in the media enterprise, the business policy tends to prevail public-service policy in media organizations. This somewhat brings to the problem of access to the mass media today. Business firms or advertising agencies have a greater chance of accessing to media because they are able to buy newspaper or magazine space and air-time on radio or television. State government agencies may somewhat access to radio and television programs with minimum rate or without charges. However, mass audiences can access to media very minimum. Means of access that the audience may employ are: for newspaper readers, writing to editors

or expressing opinion through an article or feature or even making press release; for radio and television listeners and viewers, voicing feedback to the programmers or making press conference, etc. Normally, newspapers or magazines do not devote adequate space for such access. Paradoxically, radio is usually claimed to be a medium reaching largest audience, but it is a medium that mass audience has a very little chance to access. For television, air-time, especially in the prime-time is very commercially expensive. TV evening news programs to day normally charge a highest rate on commercials due to the programs drawing very large audience compared to other normal programs. The so-called TV news-program revolution on Channel 9 few years ago has been created a great competition among 4-5 TV stations in Bangkok. Three of the state-owned television stations (Channel 5, 9, 11) have given franchises to private groups to run their evening news programs because the competition in producing a quality TV news program needs every large investment in which they themselves could not afford.

As a matter of fact, Thailand has so many local or provincial newspapers. They locate in almost every province in the country. However their local readers still do not have opportunity to access adequately. This is due to most provincial newspapers still facing their own problems like shortage of qualified personnel, lack of financial resources, absence of effective management, etc.

In a nut shell, the access to the media by their audiences is still inadequate. However, there are some access by government agencies. Nowadays, television gives a great amount of air-time for educational purposes such as the educational programs of

open universities and of the Ministry of education. In general, the "democratization" of the media in Thailand is still very little aware or interest by the media professionals.

From aforementioned several reasons, the Thai press has limitation in providing two-way communication process. Nevertheless, Thai press recently plays somewhat more constructive roles in the society, namely economic development; education support, democracy promotion, social welfare contribution, etc.

For economics development, it can easily be seen from the growing number of economic and business newspapers and magazines in the last decade. There are more than 10 business-content-oriented newspapers and more than 25 business-content-oriented magazines. In addition, every daily newspapers today devote a page or section of business-related news and articles to their readers. Television evening news also devote air-time to economic news every evening. This is unquestionable of the role played by the press today.

For education supporting, more educational and feature programs broadcast in Bangkok channels and regional channels. Channel 11 is a newest TV station established to broadcast mainly educational programs. From 6.30-7.30 pm. every day, three television networks air educational programs produced by the two open universities. It has been first time in Thailand that television channels have been utilized as medium for nationwide teaching to at-home students of the open university.

Mass media are apparent in promoting political development. Freedom of the press is a vehicle of democracy. News coverage and

opinion expression with regard to politics create public opinion and motivate participation in political activity.

Issues of social welfare are always seen published in the print media and broadcasted on the electronic media. Such topics in the mass media as poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, sickness, drug abuse, crime, etc. provide awareness for the responsible parties to cure and prevent those existing problems

Concluding Remarks

A number of major trends regarding the Thai press has arose from the mid-1970s and has continued progressive. Among them are the availability of more press freedom. The governments are more democratic. The administrations are more tolerant. Prime minister Kukrit has been claimed by a columnist - the most frequently attacked prime minister by the newspapermen. Paradoxically, the last prime minister, Prem Tinnasulanon, become another most frequently attacked prime ministry by newspapermen-especially by a columnist named Kukrit, the previous prime minister.

In addition to the trend of more freedom, it is also possible in the near future for self-censorship through a proposed press council, and other trends such as: the growth of diverse kinds of newspapers and magazines; The improvement of TV news programs and more freedom for news content; the emergence of well-educated young reporters and journalists; the increasing of newspaper readership in both the urban and rural sector resulting from higher literacy rate; the growth of economic and expansion of

business investment bring about more advertisement to the media; and the increasing of public awareness to a proper role for the press.

The most unique aspect of the Thai press, compared to other Asian countries is the less control by government. This makes the press, particularly newspapers, can play their role actively and freely as "ombudsman" of the people. Western authors have pointed out Thai press situation- "the only light in the dark situation of the press in Southeast Asia."²⁴

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