

The History of Journalism in Thailand with the Theories of the Press

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Abstract

At the present, as we know that, a news report is not a story of information, news become a social product and illustrates the viewpoint of a journalist or news organization to the eyes of the public. Thailand's newspapers are in private owners, but all television and radio are run by the government or the military. Thus, this essay focuses the history of the development of journalism in Thailand. It looks at the crucial factors such as politics, economics and social frameworks that influence its development. It will concern special attention to crucial events such as the first Thai newspaper, the struggle for press freedom and the practice of Thai journalism in society with the theories of the press.

This paper presents an overview of the history of Thai press from 1844 to the present, focusing three periods; they are as follows:

First, the history of the establishment of

newspaper before the revolution of June 24, 1932; this part introduces about the first printing press in Thailand. It also explains the free journalism under 'the absolute monarchy'.

Second, the situation of press under a constitutional monarchy from 1933 - 1992, the period was called the beginning of age of democracy in Thailand. Modernization was also an important theme such as press freedom. However, the government used newspaper to become propaganda mouthpieces for their causes.

And the third, the struggle for freedom of the press after the bloody crisis of May 17 -18, 1992 to the present day. This period presents about the right to know of people. Thus, journalists have had more freedom to report, criticize and give comments. But the economics of several became key factors in influencing journalistic practice and professional standards.

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Moreover, this essay critiques the history of the journalism in Thailand with media theory which is modernization that impact on social, political and economic development of Thailand. To extent that journalism has a contributory role in development. Under the rubric of media theory, there are in fact a variety of theories that impact on media that is development journalism.

This essay reviews the history of the development of journalism in Thailand. It looks at the crucial factors such as politics, economics and social frameworks that influence its development. It will concern special attention to crucial events such as the first Thai newspaper, the struggle for press freedom and the practice of Thai journalism in society with the theories of the press.

The essay presents an overview of the history of Thai press from 1844 to the present, focusing three periods: first, the history of the establishment of newspapers before the revolution of June 24, 1932; second, the situation of press under a constitutional monarchy from 1933 - 1992, and the third, the struggle for freedom of the press after the bloody crisis of May 17 -18, 1992 to the present day.

The Period before the Revolution of June 24, 1932.

The capital city of Bangkok was founded in 1728 by King Rama I (1782-1809), the first King of the present Chakri Dynasty. He made an impact on the development of public education by reforming the Buddhist Church. Modern technology in the form of the printing press

entered Thailand with the coming of Western missionaries and merchants in the mid 1800's. For the first time, printed books were available in the Thai language.

The first publishing work in Thailand began during the reign of King Rama III, when an Englishman, Jameslow, who was fluent in Thai language, started a printing press in 1828 to produce educational materials to teach Thai to English settlers.

In 1839 - 1844, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions established a Thai language printing press, located in Singapore, to publish Christian books for Thais (Boonsa - ad, 1974, p. 5).

The first important newspaper, starting with Dr. Dan Beach Bradley, an American missionary in Thailand. In 1844, he established the fortnightly newspaper, The Bangkok Recorder, published in both English and Thai languages. This newspaper caused publication in 1846 due to diminishing readership. This was followed by daily newspapers such as Bangkok Daily Advertiser, and Siam Daily Advertiser (Terawanich ,1977, p. 8), both of them owned by foreigners.

In 1858, King Rama IV (1851-1865) commanded the government to establish a printing press for its own use and began to print the Royal Gazette or Rajkitchanubeksa which has continued till the present day (Terawanich, 1977, p. 22). He aimed at answering questions posed by foreign owned newspapers and to counter Christian missionary propaganda to his people. The Royal Gazette became the royal project and has continued to the present. In 1875, a Thai

privately owned weekly newspaper, Darunowadh, was launched. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), it was a boom of Thai journalism because there were 59 newspapers and magazines, published in Thai, English, and Chinese (Boonsa - ad, 1974, p. 13).

There was generally free journalism under 'the absolute monarchy'. According to Mitchell, "The emerging press during the reign of King Rama V was largely free to criticize, although there was no question of the Throne's right and power of control and even censor directly, if the monarch so decided" (Boonyaketmala, 1982, p. 339).

The state of affairs continued during the reign of King Wachirawut (Rama VI), a period called "Golden Age of Thai Journalism" in which the king welcomed fair criticism of his government but reacted with vigor to what he believed to be unfair or groundless attacks on his administration (Boonyaketmala, 1982, p. 339). King Wachirawut reigned during the transition from an old-fashioned to a modernized Thailand. He continued the modernizations introduced by his father, whose achievements were difficult to follow. At the end of the reign of Rama VI, Siam had many serious problems, many of which were setbacks resulting from modernization. Siam spent a lot of money on western technology, while receiving little from exporting its mostly agricultural products. The King refused political reform or democratization of the system of "Absolute monarchy". Thus, the reign of King Wachirawut was established 22 newspapers, and 123 journals (Terawanich, 1977, p. 102). As the result of the period, King Wachirawut was closely relative

with journalism in Thailand. Journalists had a freedom to report and critique to their society. Also, the number of Thai people who were interested to read newspaper had been increasing.

However, during the reign of King Prachatiwok (Rama VII), Thai people began to demand greater freedom of expression which was reflected in the first Thai constitution in 1932. After this period, the tradition of royal involvement in Thai journalism ended.

The Situation of Press under a Constitutional Monarchy from 1933 - 1992.

The rise of the People's Party marked the beginning of age of democracy in Thailand. The People's Party was led by Pridi Panomyong. At that time, "the press was more often than operating under fear, while political instability was gradually transformed into the way of life for Thais" (Phongpanich, quoted in Boonyaketmala, 1982, p. 339).

The period also marked the age of romance between journalists and politicians in Thailand, when politicians and social elites had good relationships with all leading newspaper. They manipulated some newspapers to become propaganda mouthpieces for their causes. When Field Marshal Pibulsongkhram was the prime minister during World War II, all newspapers were forced to promote his point of view and advocate Thai nationalism and elitist ideologies. Press reports were to urge the people to: "believe in the leader, [and] the nation will be out of danger"

(Boonyaketmala, 1982, p. 340). In other words, Field Marshal Pibulsongkhram, the government's ideological spokesman, copied the propaganda techniques used by Hitler and Mussolini to build up the cult of the leader. Aware of the power of mass media, they used the government's monopoly on radio broadcasting to shape popular support for the regime. Popular government slogans were constantly aired on the radio and plastered on newspapers and billboards. Pibulsongkhram's picture was also to be seen everywhere in society, while portraits of the ex-monarch King Prajadhipok, an outspoken critic of the autocratic regime, were banned. At the same time he passed a number of authoritarian laws which gave the government the power of almost unlimited arrest and complete press censorship. During the World War II, newspapers were instructed to print only good news emanating from Axis sources, while sarcastic comments about the internal situation were banned.

Also in 1939, Pibulsongkhram changed the country's name from Siam to Thailand, meaning "land of the free." This was a nationalist gesture: it implied the unity of all the Tai-speaking peoples, including the Lao and the Shan, but excluding the Chinese. The regime's slogan became "Thailand for the Thai."

Modernization was also an important theme in Pibulsongkhram's new Thai nationalism. From 1938 to 1942 he issued a set of twelve Cultural Mandates. In addition to requiring that all Thais salute the flag, know the National Anthem, and speak the national language, the mandates also encouraged Thais to work hard, stay informed on

current events, and to dress in a western fashion. By 1941 it became illegal, among other things, to ridicule those who attempted to promote national customs. The programmes also encompassed the fine arts. Fiercely nationalistic plays and films were sponsored by the government. Often these depicted a glorious past when Thai warriors fearlessly gained freedom for the country, defended their honour, or sacrifice themselves. Patriotism was taught in schools and was a recurrent theme in song and dance.

From 1959 to 1963, the Thai press entered the so-called "Dark Age of Thai Journalism". During the rule of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who was prime minister, the press was continuously threatened by Announcement No.17, issued by his Revolutionary Party in 1958. The Announcement required:

"[a]ll prospective newspaper publishers... to apply for a license and that any newspaper publishing statements of a certain character shall be warned, impounded, and destroyed or undergo punishment in the form of withdrawal of the license of its publisher, printer or proprietor" (Boonyaketmala, 1982, p. 340).

Statements targeted for punishment in the Announcement were those which offended the king, discredited the government, contributed to the popularity or desirability of communist subversive tactics, and were likely to undermine the morals of the nation. Announcement No. 17 was considered to be the ultimate symbol of withering away of press freedom in Thailand.

Field Marshal Thanom Kittichachorn took over from where Sarit's authoritarianism had stopped.

Press controls under his government however, were less stringent. With developments in modern technology, the popular press of this era was consciously driven by profit motive. In 1970, Thanom established the National Assembly which presented a new press act. This act aimed to introduce stringent regulation for the press. However, the act was not completed until the arrival of the silent “coup d'etat”, of 17 November 1971 (Lee , quoted in Boonyaketmala, 1982, p. 343). After the coup, Thai newspaper become followers, rather than leaders of public opinions. It was this period that the increase of the middle class marked the beginning of English language newspaper with the The Nation being the first English daily owned by Thais.

On October 14, 1973, a student - led revolution disposed the military dictatorship. With the overthrow of the military regime, the interim Sanya Thamasak government was appointed by the King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX). Under Sanya's government, Thai journalism was liberated from the “kingdom of fear” expanded during the decades of military rule. Further the press was guaranteed complete freedom unprecedented in the nation's history (Boon yaketmala, 1982, p. 354). After the coalition government of Seni Promoj, responsibility in journalism has often been overstepped in the name of press freedom. Ever since [sex, sensation, and violence] have been exploited by newspapers.

Therefore, a new coalition government under Kukrit Promoj often talked of a press council as a method of a press control. At that time, a new press act was written. The act

required the setting up of a press composed of 17 to 21 with power to control journalists in various ways. In the bloody coup of October 6, 1976, all newspapers were banned by the military. Twelve of the leading newspapers were monitored under strict censorship guidelines, banning nearly all criticism of the authorities. The Printing Act and Revolutionary Announcement No.42 was used to control freedom of the press. According to the act, The Police Department had the license to shut down newspapers which made accusations against the government. During that time, the owners of the newspapers had to seek patronage from the factions in government in order to survive. In 1991, the act was revised after the Press Association of Thailand petitioned the government. Once again Thai press became free in real sense (Lent ,1982, p.365 - 367). In sum, politics has played a key role in Thai press during the second period. It was also a period of transition both domestic and foreign policies. Economically, however, it was a hard time for Thai Journalism.

The Struggle for Freedom of the Press after the Bloody Crisis of May 17 - 18, 1992 to the Present Day.

After the May 1992 uprising, the state attempted to control the media, especially, radio and television (Siriyuvasak ,1996, p.94). Only newspapers were free from state control. Journalists have had more freedom to report, criticize and give comments. Thai people believed in the newspapers as a ‘watchdog’ of the people. A new government since the May event changed

the constitution. So no one has the power to close or suspend any the publication without judicial authority (Far Eastern Economic Review, July 4, 1996, p.20).

Newspapers have more power in Thai society. They have become an institution unto themselves influencing politics, economics, and social life. However, in the high of Thailand economic crisis since 1997, many newspapers have found themselves in financial difficulties. Some have been closing. Economics of several became key factors in influencing journalistic practice and professional standards. It is in environment state, the Press Council of Thailand was established to monitor the press and maintain professionalism in the trade.

In 1998, Thai businessman and politician, Thaksin Shinawatra, is the deposed Prime Minister of Thailand and the former leader of the populist Thai Rak Thai Party. He represented distinctive economic, public health, education, energy, drug and internal relations policies that made him the first elected Prime Minister in Thai history to complete his term in office and helped him win a re-election in 2005. However, Thaksin government has been frequently challenged with allegations of corruption, dictatorship, conflicts of interest, human rights offences, acting undiplomatically, the use of legal loopholes and hostility towards a free press.

According to president of The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Christopher Warren, “in a step backwards for press freedom in Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra, despite his caretaker position, is clearly attempting to silence all and any criticisms of him by his repeated use

of criminal defamation laws and unreasonable civil defamation claims” (<http://www.ifj.org>). For instance, on June 14, Thaksin filed one criminal and one civil defamation charge against the opposition Democrat Party and three editors from the Thai newspaper which is Matichon, Khao Sod and Daily News for publishing comments made by Thepthai Saneponge.

Thailand was a step backwards from the March 2006 victory against criminal defamation when human rights activist Supinya Klangnarong and the Thai Post, the daily newspapers, were found innocent in defamation charges from the Thaksin government. These cases concerned that the Thai Post had published an interview with Supinya in which she accused Thaksin of use his position to unjustly Shin Corp, a company that owned by his family. He involved to limit journalists’ ability to report confidently. However, the court found these accusations to have been made in good faith for the benefit of the public. Shin Corp also withdrew a civil defamation case against Supinya in May in which they were claiming an exorbitant 400 million baht (<http://www.ifj.org>). These cases implies that the freedom of the press must be protected.

On 19 September 2006 military coup in Thailand, when the Thai Army staged a coup against the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Even normally well-informed news media have evoked images of a quiet and non - violent coup that expected to just slip in and slip out (Asian Human Rights Commission, 2006, p.1). The military cancelled the election, suspended the Constitution, dissolved Parliament, banned protests and all political activities,

suppressed and censored the media, declared martial law and arrest Cabinet members. The new rulers led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin. He organized in a Council for Democratic Reform that involved the reasons for taking power and giving a commitment to restore democracy within one year. However, the Council for Democratic Reform announced the establishment of a government, the council also transformed into a permanent 'Council of National Security' whose future role in Thai politics has not yet been explained. Moreover, the Council selected retired General Surayuth Chulanont as Prime Minister.

At present, in Thailand, only the print media is not controlled by the government (Siriyausak 1996, pp.105-106). Thailand has traditionally enjoyed a free and colorful press. Thai journalists have been catalytic, advocating the people's right to know. They consider themselves more free than other journalists from Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia among others, where governments control the press. Thailand as a press system is committed to the concept of development journalism. However, reporting in the public interest is disappearing from the Thai media as socially-responsible journalism is being muscled out by political and commercial interests (<http://asiamediaforum.org>). The country has shifted its emphasis to overall economic growth. The status of the nation's press is therefore affected by the ongoing economic process with a stress on professionalism. This is impacting the quality of Thai journalism.

The Theories of the Press

The history of the journalism in Thailand is related to media theory which is modernization that impacts on social, political and economic development of Thailand. To the extent that journalism has a contributory role in development. Under the rubric of media theory, there are in fact a variety of theories that impact on media that is development journalism.

Since the 1940s, the term development has been used increasingly in relation to the developing countries. It is a type of social change in which new ideas are introduced into a social system in order to produce higher per capita incomes and living standards through improving social organization (Rogers, 1969, p.8). According to Samuel P. Huntington and Joan M. Nelson (Mowlana & Wilson, 1990, p.15), the term 'modernization' is used to refer to the overall process of social, economic, intellectual, political and cultural change that are associated with the movement of societies from relatively poor, rural, agrarian conditions to relatively affluent, urban, industrial conditions. The model presented was patterned of the western nations which were considered modernized. In the modernization model, communication played a dominant role. This implies that modernization refers to a state in which societies become increasingly industrialized and urbanized and more dependent on the media and communications. As the result the development philosophies of Thailand is based on following of the patterns of modern societies in the western countries in terms of their politics and economics. The history of journalism of Thailand was based on a bipolar theories of

tradition and modernity with one universal path to development, that is, to follow the west. However, the role of journalism in Thailand derives from culture imperialism discussion, that the state must be responsible for the media and protect Thais from cultural aggressions.

In journalism, the modernization model involved to a development approach as well as ideas of democracy. This may imply that Thai press has played a dominant role in terms of freedom to comment and investigate which is a core of the modernization model. Although most newspapers are only ranked medium in terms of their abilities to critique the government. One of the important factors in press freedom development in Thailand is the revision of Printing Act, especially, Revolution Announcement No.42 which annulled the control of the press.

Communication and social change as a field has traditionally stressed the role of the mass media in the process of modernization. Further, this process has been influential in providing the climate for development. Along with ideas of democracy and civil society, the press has been shown to be useful in focusing attention on the goals and process of development programs. The free press theory applies to journalism development in Thailand. It implies that “an individual should be free to publish what he/she likes and thus an extension of other right to hold

opinions freely, to express them, to assemble and organize with others” (McQuail, 1984, p.87).

Hence, freedom of expression of journalists is controlled by political power groups. This indicates that political power affects press freedom. In other word, press freedom comes from individuals who have power in political parties. However, the journalists’ behaviors raised the question of press freedom versus social responsibility and professional standards.

The ideas are that one can exercise one’s freedom, or the country’s freedom, while still providing a comprehensive, objective account of news. The two should work together. Generally, these are the results and goals of the development journalism in Thailand:

1. Journalism schools established and future journalists are taught.
2. Journalists make themselves free of obligation to other interests.
3. Press places opinion in a specific place, namely, the opinion pages.
4. Creation of ombudsmen in the media to become reader’ advocates.

These are actually one basic thing and variation from each. It means that mass media always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which the media operate.

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