Thailand

A troubled path to a hopeful future

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The weight of this sad time we ought to obey, speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.' So ran the editorial of Thailand's *The Nation* newspaper on 20 May 1992. The quote from the last act of Shakespeare's *King Lear*—when the good and the bad, the strong and the weak, all die alike, and the stage is so littered with corpses that it is left to Edgar to stammer the curtain down—was edged in the editorial in the black of mourning. The remainder of the editorial box was left blank, for the point had been made.

During the previous three days soldiers of the regime of former military chief, General Suchinda Krapayoon, had opened fire on hundreds of thousands of pro-democracy protesters at Sanam Luang, one of Bangkok's most famous parks set amidst the golden domes and spires of the Buddhist temples which line the Chao Phraya river. How many people actually died is still unclear, but hundreds of local and foreign journalists witnessed the massacre and trailed the bands of brutal troops through the eerily empty streets of the Thai capital as they hunted down fleeing demonstrators.

The 1992 pro-democracy uprising in Thailand was dubbed the 'mobile phone revolution' because it was the first major political movement in Southeast Asia in which new communication technology—combined with rising levels of affluence due to rapid industrialisation—meant that a crucial protest movement could be pulled together by phone. The protesters were predominantly middle class, those who had benefited from economic growth under authoritarian regimes but believed Thailand could now afford to open up its political life.

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At that time the Thai media was, supposedly, under strict government control, following the bloodless military coup of 1991 and imperfect elections which left the country with an appointed, not elected, retired General as Prime Minister. Thai TV and radio stations continued on behalf of the besieged regime, to lie and fabricate reports, which bore little resemblance to the terrifying scenes on the streets. But technology had already defeated the censors and the propaganda departments. With satellite TV functioning and with enough receivers of live and recorded pictures from services such as CNN and the BBC, it was impossible to shield the Thai people from the truth. Pro-democracy activists made thousands of video copies of the carnage, which were sold on the streets and passed from neighbour to neighbour. Rising income levels of the past few years meant many Bangkok homes had their own video compact discs (VCDs).

The Thai government tried to block the newspapers and several did not print normal editions during the chilling 72-hour stand-off which brought Bangkok to a standstill, most of the city's residents huddling inside, the dull roar of the traffic replaced by cracks of gunfire. But, with rumours racing across the city that the General's tanks were moving on the offices of *The Nation*—and after an acid bomb attack on the home of the newspaper's editor-in-chief—the journalists and editors inside decided to go ahead with an uncensored edition anyway. For freedom of the press in Thailand, *The Nation's* bold stance marked a critical turning point which has since shaped the media's future. For Thailand as a nation, the pro-democracy movement marked the beginning of the end of the direct political control of the Generals, and the cycle of *coup d'états* marring the development of democracy.

How the drama was resolved is already history. Thailand's deeply revered King Bhumiphol Adulyadej intervened. On national television General Suchinda and pro-democracy leader, Chamlong Srimuang, were seen crawling along the carpet to prostrate themselves at the King's feet, as commoners must. The military was effectively banished from political life, but without the punishment for their excesses many would have liked. A transitional government led by a respected former diplomat, Anand Panyarachun, was put in its place to prepare for new elections.

Nowadays, Thailand boasts one of the freest presses in East Asia. In recent years significant changes to the regulations controlling the media

have allowed newspaper, radio and television reporters to carve an important role as social 'watchdogs', focusing on government corruption and incompetence, as well on social issues such as the impact of the recent economic crisis on Thai society. In 1997 a new constitution was promulgated, including 37 articles which promote a free press, freedom of speech, and individual rights. For the first time the constitution stipulates that the airwaves belong to the people—and not the government or the military—and, as such, must be managed by an independent commission.

But the legacy of decades of military and government control, as well as the power of big business groups and individual politicians means that the Thai media is still struggling to establish a new balance between the demands of commercialism and the responsibility of a free media. Many Thai newspapers, for example, have been accustomed to taking partisan positions, their stories freely mixing facts with opinions and reflecting the views or political positions of their owners. Thai newspapers, too, have continued to pursue the commercially successful formula of sex and violence, with some tabloids using extraordinarily gory photographs of horrific accidents alongside bikini girls, with little thought for serious political news.

Recently, some sectors of the serious press have been subjected to harassment and threats by political power brokers. The incidents are described by the government as 'personal matters' between the politicians and the newspapers, but they represent a form of potential censorship. At the same time the Thai media industry is starting to realise that its history has stunted the development of a core of professional journalists with the skills to operate effectively within the new environment.

Corruption, or the culture of the white envelope, has long been part of the industry due to low wages and long working hours as well as the partisan tradition of the media. But, ironically, just as new laws have secured press freedoms, and provided expanded opportunities for the media to hold bureaucrats and politicians to account, some journalists and editors have also been exposed. Working in the field, journalists and TV personalities do not always practise the ethics espoused by their bosses. Proud of its watchdog role, the press was rocked recently by the disclosure of a list of names of alleged bribe-taking journalists from established newspapers. What was new was the scale and audacity of the

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arrangements journalists are willing to make with politicians and businessmen. Traditional bribe-giving through the so-called white envelope has given way to direct deposits, stock options and gifts of cars and houses.

As Thailand approaches the end of the century media analysts agree much has been accomplished, but the new question which must be answered is 'Who will watch the watchdogs?'

From dictatorship to democracy

The history of the Thai media parallels the nation's political history: a roller coaster ride of military coups and anti-government uprisings, the rapid rise and fall of governments, but the appearance and reappearance of many of the same old political players through the revolving door of power.

Thailand was ruled by the Royal Family until 1932, but western-inspired democratic forces pushed King Rama VII into accepting a shift from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. However, the success of early democratic forces was limited to shuffling aside the King. For the following four decades the country remained under the control of the successive authoritarian, military governments of Field Marshals Phibun Songgram, Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikacharon. Press censorship by the state was routine, and was justified on the grounds that media controls were essential to protect the monarch and to counter the communist insurgency, which threatened Thailand's domestic stability from the 1950s to the 1980s. During this period numerous newspaper editors were accused of being communists or collaborators and subsequently jailed. Critical newspapers were closed down and others hijacked by politicians and military leaders to serve as mouthpieces for their own personal interests.

The printed and electronic media came under the direct control of the feared Police Special Branch and the Public Relations Department. These two arms of government monitored the media and took appropriate action against those acting counter to the national interest. The police had the power to revoke printing licences and confiscate publications, and their role as guardians of the national interest meant charges could be pressed against journalists on almost any pretext. More specifically the media was

prohibited from commenting on the Royal family, national security issues, or making statements which could incite disturbances or insult Buddhism.

In 1973, a popular uprising ushered in a new period of democracy and openness, celebrated with the establishment of a number of new daily newspapers. However, despite the government being in the hands of the democratic forces, restrictive press laws and regulations of the past remained in force, a constant reminder to journalists and editors that the winds could change at any time. The relationship between the press and the new government improved dramatically, but much of the goodwill and tolerance of criticism from the media relied on personal relationships between editors and the power brokers and not on any kind of impartial legislative protection. Government press officials granted the media much wider boundaries for reports on corruption, crime and scandals, but retained sensitive local taboos such as reporting on the Royal family or insulting Buddhism. The result, though, of this personalised system of press freedom was partisan reporting. Newspapers came to identify with particular, friendly powerholders and their ongoing access to information—and in a sense their commercial survival—relied on supporting their patrons on their pages.

Thailand lapsed back into right-wing dictatorship following the bloody suppression of students in 1976. The restrictive media laws were still in place. The new government tried to take control of the press one step further by publishing its own newspaper, *Chao Phraya*. But, so unpopular was this daily that it folded after only three months. The print media remained in the hands of the private sector, but under the watchful eyes of the censors; the electronic media continued to be directly controlled by the government or the armed forces. Journalists' and editors' associations mounted a concerted campaign against the restrictive press laws, because the country's cycle of military coups—17 in all since 1932—meant the media was always vulnerable. During political transitions police and press officials sometimes directly intimidated journalists, or used other forms of harassment, to control the content of newspapers. At times of intense political uncertainty journalists, themselves, often became the victims. Between 1979 and 1984 at least 47 Thai journalists were killed, mostly in provincial areas.

The 1980s marked the beginning of high economic growth and the gradual movement away from military dictatorships. As the economy

boomed, the restrictions on the press were relaxed under the government of Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond. This was a period of political stability, rare in Thai politics. The country retained the same leader for almost a decade, despite successive cabinet reshuffles. Compared to other East Asian nations at the time, Thailand enjoyed relative press freedom. But, there were still attempts by the Prem administration to blunt criticism, particularly in the final years of his rule.

Boom times for the newspaper business

The economic boom spurred the growth of the media as an industry. Dozens of new, mainly business-oriented publications were published, to compete for an increasingly middle-class readership. Radio and television stations spiced up programming formats with more business and economic information. The new business papers, however, were largely advertorials, their editorial content driven by the interests of advertisers or the business stables of their owners. But, at the same time economic growth stirred underlying social pressure, exacerbating the gap between the rich and the poor and the disparity between the developed urban areas and the poor provinces. The vernacular press began to report on these issues, which more and more were bringing the people into conflict with the state.

Populist Prime Minister, General Chatchai Choonhavan, who succeeded Prem at the end of 1988 was a defender of press freedom, despite his military roots. Riding high on years of double digit growth and increasing international optimism about the sustainability of Thailand's economic boom, Chatchai saw a free press as a means of promoting Thailand both regionally and globally. Editors and journalists used the buoyancy of the late 1980s to agitate for the scrapping of archaic press laws. The most stringent of all, known as the Revolutionary Decree No. 42, was enacted by the military junta in 1976 and gave overwhelming powers to the Interior Ministry to withdraw licences simply because the government or military did not like critical articles or editorial content.

From 1988 the decree was finally scrapped and the media industry boomed. About 150 new publications, including dailies, weeklies, fortnightlies and monthly newspapers and magazines, entered the highly competitive market. Significantly, the scrapping of Decree No. 42 opened

the way for Thailand's media to enter the regional media market. For decades, Bangkok had been an important base for foreign correspondents covering the region, particularly Indochina. But, Thailand's own strict anti-communist regulations governing the press had prevented the Thai media from actively engaging in reporting on their nearest neighbours. From 1988, however, first-hand reporting from the Communist Party-ruled states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—then in the process of a UN-supervised transition—was encouraged and both Thai and English-language dailies despatched their own correspondents to begin exploring the social and economic conditions of their neighbours for the first time in decades.

But, unlike newspapers, the electronic media remained in government hands, partly due to the long-term concessions handed out in the past to the armed forces and various government agencies, but also partly due to relatively successful programming formats. Since 1954, when television was first broadcast in Thailand, it had been under military or government control. Television continued to broadcast news reflecting the opinions of government with little analysis or current affairs. Popular games, quiz shows and sit-coms dominated prime time slots. Radio has always been more popular in rural areas and continued to reach the majority of people. Of more than 400 radio stations nationwide, all were owned by the government or military, with the armed forces directly controlling more than 200. Both television and radio stations were used as tools by the government and the security apparatus and, in contrast to the increasingly outspoken print media, the electronic media broadcast news bulletins heavily influenced by their masters. To boost their own financial fortunes various military officers leased radio stations to private operators. These deals bred large-scale corruption and the huge concessional fees for control of radio stations did not find their way into the military's coffers.

The 1980s and early 1990s changed Bangkok, and much of Thailand. So rapid was economic growth that building continued 24 hours a day, the capital rumbling under the weight of delivery trucks, the air filled with dust as scores of new high-rise towers edged their way upwards, transforming streetscapes and laying out a new middle-class dreams for millions. In Thailand everyone had a job; tourism was booming thanks to a successful international advertising campaign promoting the soft land of smiles, industry was booming because wages were still low, real estate

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and construction was booming, and infrastructure was booming as the demand for roads, gas and power rose exponentially. But, just as quick to rise were expectations. And with the boom came a sharp rise in housing costs, horrific traffic jams which destroyed the social fabric of the city and forced family life into the car—complete with portable potty and meals—and caused industrial accidents and pollution so severe that it threatened the tourist industry. The progressive Thai Research Development Institute predicted that unless economic growth could be held above seven per cent, raised expectations could not be met, and the downside of roaring industrialisation would overtake the optimism for the future. Coincidentally, perhaps, growth dropped to 6.8 per cent at the beginning of 1992, just as the military regime of General Suchinda was due to hand over power to an elected government. In March that year the elections did go ahead, but Suchinda moved to appoint himself Prime Minister and the scene was set for the bloody confrontation on the streets of Bangkok.

The May massacre and its aftermath

The 1992 May massacre shook Thailand to the core. Those charming, sunny images of the kingdom of Thailand, sold by travel agents around the world, would never be quite the same again. The King replaced Suchinda with Anand Panyarachun, a respected civilian, who set about trying to catch up with the social and political problems created by the economic boom. One of his first bold steps was to deregulate the electronic media, allowing both independent operators and owners. A new non-government TV station was approved and private operators were handed radio concessions previously reserved for the armed forces. The result was Thailand's first independent TV station, iTV, a new 40-channel cable TV operator, United Broadcasting Co-operation, and a raft of special interest private radio stations ranging from those focusing on women's affairs to agriculture and business.

Thailand's revolving door of political power continued to turn through the 1990s, with the nation facing several leadership changes, each one affecting press freedom in different ways. During the reigns of former Prime Ministers Banharn Silapa-archa and General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, repeated attempts were made to influence the press

through rewards and incentives. Certain newspapers received more advertisements from government agencies and state enterprises. Selected columnists enjoyed access to government leaders. Under Banharn, a select group of top editors was granted special access to him and his cabinet members. But, even with such a patronage system in place, the independent press continued to be critical of the government. Responding to bad media reviews of his government, Banharn sought to ban some radio and television programs and applied pressure to have anti-Banharn journalists dismissed. In the prevailing post 1992 political environment these tactics tended to reflect badly on the government in the eyes of the public, rather than functioning to tame the press effectively.

Chavalit tried a similar strategy but became more openly hostile and manipulative. In June 1997, the Chavalit government set up a Media Monitoring Centre under the auspices of the Interior Ministry. Its announced purpose was to clarify inaccurate reporting and limit sensationalism in the media. Although the Centre had no power and did nothing more than issue occasional warnings to journalists, it did harm the atmosphere of press freedom in Thailand. After five months, it collapsed and was ridiculed as one of the biggest fiascos of the Chavalit government. Apart from a critical press, the growing number of public opinion polls—a new phenomenon since 1992—also contributed to Chavalit's downfall. At its peak in 1995–96, at least three dozen pollsters, took daily samples of the public's reaction to government policies. Opinion polls became an integral part of freedom of expression, and the marriage of media and the polls was inevitable. Not a single day passed without a newspaper citing an opinion poll. But, by the end of 1998, only a few credible and independent pollsters survived.

The financial crisis

The devaluation of the baht in July 1997 which triggered the East Asian crisis was both a blessing and a curse. The economic crisis, coupled with a critical press, literally drove out the unpopular and incompetent Chavalit government and its hostile attitude to the media. The new government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, was a welcome change. The government acted quickly to restore local and international confidence. With a decent, clean image, Chuan has been reasonably

successful in rebuilding confidence amongst key foreign investors and winning support for his government's ongoing economic and financial reforms. Chuan's new slogan was that the public should know what the government knows. Through the print and electronic media, the Chuan government was able to present its policies for overcoming the crisis which saw the new middle class facing unemployment and reduced to hawking the goods of their recent success—their snappy clothes, expensive furniture and electronic goods—in sidewalk markets reserved for the new poor.

During the first year of the Chuan government, the media was generally supportive of the government, particularly its economic reforms and financial restructuring. But as the crisis worsened and began to hurt ordinary people, the Thai-language media became predictably more critical of the government's failure to protect disadvantaged groups from the impact of reforms. More and more negative assessments of the government's economic recovery policies frustrated officials. Despite the Chuan administration's repeated assurances that it would uphold press freedom, many politicians and officials have been unable to hide their hostility toward the independent press and have, from time to time, urged them to be cautious with their commentaries.

It is true that certain hard-hitting newspapers have acted as if they are campaigning against Chuan. It is also important to note that during the economic crisis the public has increasingly relied on the press to provide them with information and analysis of the economic collapse. The public has little trust left in officials who failed to take note of impending signs of economic disaster, nor the public relations machinery which had wrongly assured everyone that Thailand was on the right track. The press has been responsible for reminding the authorities of the painful, social consequences of economic restructuring. Before the crisis, financial reporting was mediocre at best. Many reporters failed to detect early signs of economic problems partly because the government did not tell the truth about Thailand's economic conditions. The government refused to divulge reliable statistics and figures and misled the public about the severity of the crisis. But, with the imposition of the International Monetary Fund restructuring package, transparency has been forced on the administration and information is now much more readily available.

The press has since exposed corruption, incompetence and overspending. During the financial crisis, newspapers expanded

corruption investigations to virtually all government agencies, both at the national and local levels. In the past, the press would concentrate on key cabinet ministers, but with the recent decentralisation of political power towards provinces and districts, the press has also begun to focus on sub-national politics. The result is more and more corruption stories, exposing even low ranking bureaucrats. Even the extensive vote-rigging at the 1999 council election in Samut Prakarn was extensively covered by the local and national media, an event which would have been largely ignored in the past.

In the second half of 1999, the unblemished record of the Chuan government on freedom of the press has been tarnished by incidents of abuse and intimidation. Within the Thai context, there is a correlation between the level of press freedom and the length of government's reign of power. It has almost become an axiom that the longer the government lasts, the more hostile its attitude towards the press. Since the democratisation of 1973, no Thai government has completed its four-year parliamentary term. In July, a private aide of a deputy Prime Minister together with seven men, some armed, burst into the newsroom of the *Thai Post* around midnight. The aide demanded the paper, a three-year-old hard-hitting daily, correct a news report which referred to the deputy Prime Minister as a coward. The incident led to widespread condemnation by local and foreign media organisations and academics. The Chuan government treated the incident as a personal matter between the newspaper and the Minister, but the Prime Minister urged the press to exercise self-control and become more responsible and ethical. Media associations and academics expressed deep disappointment over the government's response, labeling its indifference as 'growing arrogance'. Because the authorities took no action against the minister and his men, there are fears that such blatant acts of thuggery may be repeated with impunity. Press organisations have urged the government to investigate the incident and punish the culprits, but apparently the Chuan government remains so confident of its 'free press' image that it feels there is no need to act.

The economic crisis has also, of course, greatly impacted on the media as an industry. Media proprietors expanded their operations considerably during the 1980s and 1990s, focusing on expected new gold mines such as property and hotels. Consequently, the economic collapse has forced

significant contractions. Both the dominant Wathajak and Phujadkarn groups, whose ambitious projects included newspapers, business publications and satellite communications, collapsed under the weight of bad debts as the baht tumbled, leaving only their flagship newspapers in operation today. In the two years since Thailand's baht crisis triggered the region's financial tsunami, a dozen newspapers and magazines have been closed, including the English-language *Asia Times* and *Thailand Times*, and about 3,500 journalists and other media-related personnel laid off. The number of pages in major newspapers has been halved and the use of colour reduced due to soaring newsprint prices. Advertising revenue has plunged 60 per cent. Each of the failed newspapers had its own early retirement and compensation plans, but half of the journalists laid off were not paid out in full or adequately compensated. Surviving newspapers have had to restructure debts to reflect the baht's lower value, and slash the salaries of their administrators and journalists by as much as 50 per cent.

The difficulties have increased competition and forced editors to be more creative just to survive. Press organisations have been re-engineering and downsizing. Surviving dailies are biting the bullet and their editorial staff, hit with huge cuts in salary and fringe benefits, are working overtime. To lower costs, reporters are no longer assigned specific stories, but cover broader issues and take up additional beats. With fewer pages and journalists, proprietors and editors have to change the way their newspapers are run—most importantly to improve the accuracy and accountability of news reporting. Thai journalists have had to tighten their usual pompous and long-winded style of news coverage. Most Thai and English-language papers now feature more investigative reports and analysis. But, the mass circulation sensational dailies, such as *Thai Rath*, *Daily News* and *Khao Sod*, continue to rely on their successful formula of combining gossips, crime, social and political scandals and exposés with bikini-clad women. These papers still publish grotesque pictures of accidents and crime scenes.

In a similar vein, foreign language publications, mainly English and Chinese, have had to reorganise to stay alive. The country's two major English-language newspapers, *The Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*, were forced to cut down staff and page numbers and suspend foreign and domestic expansion plans. New marketing strategies were adopted to

maintain and increase subscription and readership levels. Overseas bureaux of both newspapers, mainly in Indochina, were shut down and foreign assignments trimmed or discouraged to decrease costs. Stringers are now used instead. Specialised journalists were urged to expand their news beats and become roving reporters taking up general assignments. In the case of the Chinese-language press, the financial crisis has had less impact, because of their small editorial staffs and low-cost operation. However, the combined circulation of the six Bangkok-based Chinese newspapers was down by 20 per cent last year. With less advertising, their pages were also reduced, as was colour printing, to save money. Two Japanese-language weekly papers continue to rely on advertisements from Japanese companies.

High hopes, disturbing reality

There are high hopes that the Thai press will emerge from this crisis as a more professional industry. However, the evidence to date suggests the press has not improved enough in response to trying times. Even though Thai society is now more open, the issues tackled by the press remain narrow and parochial. Most news reports continue to lack proper backgrounding, or clear interpretations of the news. Despite the increase in exposés of corruption by the media, few journalists have serious investigative skills. Editors and mid-level Thai journalists at the major Thai dailies are fiercely independent, highly opinionated, and often partisan. The voice of a newspaper is often that of the proprietor, or of his or her political allies and connections outside. Cooperation between editors and journalists from competing newspapers on issues such as responsibility is virtually non-existent. Cooperation is only seen when dealing with issues of press freedom, but under Chuan legislative controls are no longer a problem.

The struggles over the past decade have resulted in press freedom becoming one of the main pillars of Thai society, and one which has shaped the country's journey towards a civil society. The new constitution, promulgated in 1997—containing 37 articles promoting freedom of the press, freedom of expression and individual rights—is one of the most comprehensive in the world. It also stipulates that the airwaves used by the electronic media belong to the people—effectively preventing the

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government and the armed forces from ever again asserting complete control over radio and television. Some of the highlights are as follows.

- A person shall enjoy the liberty of communication by lawful means (Article 37).
- A person shall enjoy the liberty to express his or her opinion, make speeches, write, print and publicise; the closure of a press establishment or a radio or television station is forbidden; the censorship of news or articles before their publication in a newspaper, printed material, radio or television is not allowed (Article 39).
- An independent newspaper body will distribute the frequencies and supervise radio and television broadcasting (Article 40).
- Newspaper, radio or television broadcasting enterprises shall enjoy the liberty to present news and express their opinions without the mandate or direction of any government agency (Article 41).
- A person shall enjoy the right to have access to information held by the government, its agencies or state enterprises (Article 58).

With the new constitution in place, over two dozen existing anti-press laws are considered unconstitutional and must be abolished. The Chuan government has repeatedly pledged to do just that. But the government's refusal to act after the July intimidation incident has raised suspicions amongst some journalists and the public that the government will keep a card or two up its sleeve, such as the archaic Printing and Advertisement Act of 1941. The Act permits police closures of newspapers or printing presses in time of war or national emergency, but only with a court order. Police can also reprimand the press if they publish reports deemed to be disturbing the peace, or offending public morals. Even though press officials claim to be convinced of the need for a free press, they insist that there must be some new laws in place of the 1941 Act to oversee the local and foreign press, and retain some form of media registration process.

Press associations strongly object to the idea citing the new constitution's guarantee of a free press without any licensing. But they agree with the government's proposal that any new publication in Thailand must notify an independent bureau, outside the purview of the Interior Ministry or the police, for the sole purpose of keeping records. Conservative quarters of the Chuan government, particularly some lawmakers, are still deeply skeptical about granting wide-ranging

freedoms to the foreign press. *Newsweek's* negative coverage of the state of Thai economy in July 1999 upset the Thai leaders and has been cited by conservatives as a justification for controlling the foreign press and distribution of foreign publications. In October 1999, the cabinet unanimously approved the new bill called, the Press Notification Act of 1999, pending deliberations by the parliament. It obliges all new publications to notify the authorities of details of their new titles, names of publishers and editors and their addresses.

In the Southeast Asian region, Thailand is the most progressive nation in terms of the dissemination of publicly held information. The Official

The foreign press

The first printing press was introduced to Thailand by a western missionary, and in 1844 the first newspaper was born. Since then the foreign press has enjoyed press freedom because of extra-territorial laws. Using satellite technology, foreign newspapers began to publish on a daily basis in Bangkok in 1993. The Japanese-language *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the world's largest circulation daily, was the first foreign newspaper to be printed via satellite in Bangkok. Later, the *Asian Wall Street Journal* joined in the satellite-editions. Since May 1999, the *International Herald Tribune* has been printed locally. Furthermore, a local Chinese-language daily printed in Bangkok, *Universal Daily*, has its front pages and entertainment sections prepared in Taipei.

With more than 300 foreign journalists representing 110 major news organisations from around the world, Bangkok is second only to Hong Kong in terms of the number of foreign correspondents. Japanese correspondents are still the largest single group based in Bangkok since the 1980s, mainly due to massive Japanese investment in the Thai economic boom of the time. Despite negative news reports by Bangkok-based foreign correspondents in recent years, the government has so far resisted the temptation to ban correspondents it has identified as unfriendly. In the past two years, the government has also been trying to lower costs of satellite feeds and telecommunications because of complaints by foreign media organisations and journalists. With cheaper services and improved traffic conditions, the government hopes to attract more media organisations to use Bangkok as a regional base. The government has also recently published a handbook for foreign press with contact addresses and phone numbers of all spokespersons from all government agencies and enterprises.

Information Act was enacted in October 1997 as part of the overall political reforms. Among 16 countries, mostly in the west, which have a freedom of information act, Thailand is the only developing country in East Asia to adopt a law authorising public access to government information. Japan followed suit and passed a similar act in July 1999. The Thai Information Act has been hailed regionally and internationally as a means to promote transparency, good governance and accountability of the government and the civil servants. The public hopes the Act will serve as a deterrent to corruption and inefficiency on the part of officials, as journalists or pressure groups will have access to records of their decisions and performances.

In the past 12 months, nearly 200 petitions were filed with the Office of the Information Act Committee requesting various government agencies to release basic information ranging from details of government contracts and state examinations to budget allocations and past minutes of the Bank of Thailand. The high number of petitions reflects the lack of understanding of the spirit of the new Act, as officials continue to resist giving the public access to information under their control. The Thai media has only made two dozen applications for government-held information, all of which related to telecommunications contracts and TV concessions. Journalists appear to be relying on traditional sources of classified and personal data—their own personal connections. Their reliance on politicians to leak documents, however, means they can become tools within political power plays. It will require more than a change in the information law to change long-standing work practices and ethics.

Some sectors of the media have been less than enthusiastic about the new information laws because they can also be used to expose how well known journalists and televisions personalities abuse their own power and influence. The most damaging case for the media was the release in 1999 of a list of journalists, many from influential media outlets, allegedly involved in accepting bribes and exploiting their press privileges and connections. The bribe list highlighted the low wages and long working hours within the industry, particularly since the economic crisis. Some journalists work second jobs to make ends meet, but for others the solution lies with politicians and business people who are more than willing to pay for favourable reports. More shocking to many Thais than the reality of bribe taking by journalists was the scale of the corruption. The industry has long been accustomed to the culture of the white envelope, tips of

taxi money handed out to journalists and press conferences, for example. But it appears the white envelope has given way to direct deposits, stock options, gifts of computer laptops, mobile phones and vehicles.

After some initial stalling, the Reporters' Association of Thailand and the self-regulatory Press Council of Thailand (PCT) launched their own investigations into the scandal. The PCT has still to prove it can monitor and regulate the local press—especially the sensational dailies—and make it more responsible. The corruption probe has prompted editors to review their newsroom ethics and phase out journalists who might have abnormal relationships with the power brokers. One of the corruption cases involved a reporter, who used his connection with a Cabinet Minister to speed up the delivery of a car he had ordered. The Minister paid the deposit on the

The provincial press

There are more than 300 provincial newspapers spread throughout 76 provinces including weekly, fortnightly and monthly publications. They are competing in a small market and have only a handful of staff each, who do the reporting, page layout and map advertising and marketing plans themselves.

Focus Songkhla, a Thai-language weekly, is a successful community newspaper in Southern Thailand, selling well with a circulation of about 5,000. The weekly has filled the gap left by national dailies by focusing on issues affecting local communities in the four southernmost provinces, ranging from investment opportunities to the misappropriation of government funds. Regional newspapers can play the role of an early warning system with the first reports of local scandals or malfeasance, which are later picked up by the Bangkok press. With decentralisation and the spread of economic growth to remote areas, these small provincial publications have played an important role in providing local economic data and other useful information, including a local advertising service. Only Chiangmai and Nakhon Ratchasima have daily provincial newspapers.

However, the overall quality of provincial newspapers is poor, often reflecting the views of local interest groups and their connections with the editors and publishers. Politically, these newspapers can have influence in their local communities, as they can mobilise sentiment much better than national newspapers. During political campaigns, especially prior to local district or provincial elections, they are the primary sources of information on local politics.

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car. The incident came to light after the Minister's personal memo was leaked to the press. In a letter to the PCT 68 journalists demanded an investigation as they considered the incident a violation of press ethics. After a six-week investigation, the council reached the verdict that the journalist in question must not use his connection or any form of influence for personal interest as it was considered inappropriate. Before the council reached the decision, however, the journalist in question resigned from his newspaper. But he was immediately given a job a pro-government newspaper. As such, questions have been raised about the effectiveness of the PCT in providing social sanction against corrupt journalists.

Who will watch the watchdogs?

Clearly, more education and training is needed for the media, the bureaucracy and the public on how to use the new Information Act effectively. There are two key provisions of the act.

- A person has the right to scrutinize and obtain a copy of official information. All government information is considered open and the public may have access to it, except in specific cases related to the royal family, security and lawsuits.
- Any person who considers a state agency has failed to make the information available for public inspection is entitled to lodge a complaint with the Official Information Act Committee after seven days.

In other areas, the Thai media also needs to make serious efforts to improve professional standards. Because of fierce competition, the press tends to report quickly on stories which focus on scandals and personal matters. Inaccurate news, intentional or otherwise, is common. Entire stories are sometimes based on quips or off-the-cuff comments, without any background research or attempts to verify the information. News coverage is also heavily focused on Bangkok, and especially Government House, ignoring many important social issues in the rural areas. The predominant writing style continues to mix facts and the personal opinions of the writers, without any clear distinction. Moreover, inaccurate translations from Thai (particularly of colloquial political discourse), into English and Chinese have increased factual distortions without malicious intent.

One of the most serious problems is the quality of journalists. Without proper training nor a clear understanding of press ethics, reporters are out in the field struggling to understand the labyrinth of Thai politics and the complicated social and economic environment the recent crisis has produced. With inexperienced reporters and heavy work loads, journalists tend to concentrate on single issue stories such as comments made by political leaders. Although there are 53 universities and colleges offering media-related subjects, few new graduates choose to work as journalists, perhaps because of the low pay rates. Editors have also complained that the graduates are not well equipped to take up the challenges of journalism. At the end of 1998 representatives of journalists' associations and institutions, which used to treat each other as adversaries, met for the first time and immediately agreed to work out a syllabus for future journalists. They shared the common view that Thai journalists need sound basic training in interview techniques, writing styles and verification of news stories. Field experience and on-the-job training could also help enhance media professionalism.

Now that Thailand has undertaken far-reaching reforms in media laws, questions have been raised about reforming the press itself, 'Who will watch the watchdogs?' In response to growing public pressure for a more responsible and accountable press and to counter future press restrictions, 25 publishers and editors from all national newspapers met and established the long-envisioned PCT in July 1997. The main aim of the self-regulatory body is to monitor press ethics and promote greater professionalism. Since its establishment, more than 50 public complaints have been filed with the PCT mainly concerning sensationalism and obscene pictures as well as inaccuracy and right of rebuttal. Despite the PCT composition of editors and publishers from all the major dailies, they have failed to enforce a uniform code of ethics. The 1999 corruption scandal has, instead, prompted individual editors to issue their own codes of conduct to ensure journalists do not misbehave. In the past two years, a few non-government organisations have been established to monitor the media, but their work has had little impact so far.

Currently, ten professional associations represent the interests of various groups of journalists including photographers, crime and entertainment reporters, both in the capital and in the provinces. The Reporters' Association of Thailand (RAT), established in 1955, is

considered the main press organisation, because it boasts the largest number of members and the most comprehensive agenda including scholarships, and training programs. But only 60 per cent of active journalists have joined the organisation, and some continue to view professional associations with disdain. To broaden its membership base, RAT last year admitted broadcasters as associate members. In the foreseeable future, the remaining press associations could merge with RAT due to overlapping functions and memberships. As a core professional body, RAT will soon merge with the Journalists Association of Thailand.

With increased public expectation and more democratisation, the Thai press has to clean up its own house. It must also demonstrate that greater freedom will raise newspaper quality and make journalism more responsible. Otherwise the hope that the Thai press will be a force to be reckoned with, at home and in the region, will remain just that.

Media websites

The Nation, www.nationmultimedia.com/

The Bangkok Post, www.bangkokpost.net/

Thai Rath Daily, www.thairath.com/

Daily News Daily, www.dailynews.co.th/

Matichon Group, www.matichon.co.th/