

Mass Media and Environmental Reporting in Thailand*

Malee BOONSIRIPUNTH

Introduction

Thailand is known as the land of smiles, full of traditional values, strong cultures and a wealth of natural resources. Within 513,142 square kilometers in an axe shape, the country shares borders with China, India, Cambodia, Burma, and Malaysia. The approximate population size is 60 millions in which about 10 millions are crowded in Bangkok and nearby areas. The Chao-Phraya is the main river which people rely on for survival in one way or another. In the past, Bangkok used to be called the 'Venice of the East' due to the number of rivers and canals the people used for travelling. So, water is the major part of Thai people's lifestyle that can still easily be evidenced by the building of houses along canals and riversides. The country has faced environment problems after the past government put out national development plans called National Social and Economic Plans since the 1960s. The plans have brought about major changes in Thai society, especially in ways of living. Problems were accumulated along the way of industrialization in such areas as migration, economics, housing, health, and social values.

* A Country Paper presented at the International Congress on Water and Environment: Role of the Media in Comilla, Bangladesh, September 13-18, 1999.

This paper proposes to review the situation concerning environment and the role of mass media in environmental reporting, particularly focusing on mainstream media in Thailand. This writer will examine some environmental issues appearing in daily newspapers in recent decades.

Development vs Environment

Since the Thai government initiated its national development plan in 1960s, the consequences of development on environment were rarely taken into consideration and mentioned by concerned organizations. All kinds of developments had been rapidly introduced and confidently implemented according to the plan under western expertise. The western development concepts were highly concentrated on materialism, construction, and industrialization. The success of developments were measured by such factors as economic index, per capita income, amount of infrastructure, mass media ownership in a particular country. Such a path of development is market driven development in which maximum profits' was the most desirable goal. The situation increased natural resources exploitation as well as the demand of all possible chemical utilization to boost mass production and to introduce mass consumption. A large number of developing countries voluntarily jumped in to this circle of exploitation process in order to be categorized as 'well developed.'

Thailand is one of the victims that apparently experienced undesirable side effects of its speedy development. Several incidents have proved that the proud rich natural resources, cultures and traditional values were gradually destroyed by the so-called 'new technology' used for development both in agricultural and industrial production processes that brought about negative impacts on ecology, environment, and daily human life. It is also true that development and environmental conservation are parallel concepts in which development needs to be carefully managed along with the consciousness of a well-defined

conservation of the environment. The problem of the environment, therefore, should be the major concern of all responsible sectors. In order to secure proper development planning and management, the Ministry of Science and Environment has been set up to be responsible as an institutional decision-maker and planner on every project that would affect environmental quality. There are also a number of existing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Foundation of Environmental Conservation, Institute of Thai Environment, World Wild Life Fund of Thailand, and Environmental Reporters Forum which are active in various environmental protection activities. They frequently spoke out when national resources were illegally or improperly used either by the government or private sector. Mass media, due to their influential position in society, have been expected to play roles not only in reporting environmental issues but also in raising consciousness and motivating participation among the public groups.

Early Stage of Environmental Reporting

The global movement concerning the environment has more or less influenced the environmental movement in Thailand. Dating back to around the mid-70s, Thai people began to be aware of environmental problems when several incidents of illicit deforestation, illegal logging, unusual flooding, and wildlife violation were covered extensively in the mainstream media. Mass media are actually the vital forces of encouraging the environmental movement and protection in Thai society.

We could estimate the starting period of environmental journalism in Thailand was around 1973, when all mainstream dailies reported an event of a military helicopter crashing in a national park in a province near Bangkok. A lot of animal parts were found around the area. The case finally disclosed the illegal hunting of wildlife by a group of high ranking military officials. The media reporting on such a scandal created strong impact on the awareness of

environmental protection among the public. A number of social groups were formed to protect, inform, and educate ordinary people about the value of the environment. A series of public campaigns about natural conservation projects had been initiated by many government and non-government organizations.

A few years later, another big incident was reported concerning a public protest against the construction of an American mining plant in a southern province. The event led to unexpected violence that forced the government to abandon the project. A Committee for Natural Resource and Environmental Conservation was created by a group of students from eight universities to protest all kinds of development projects that might affect the local environment and ecology. Mass media roles in reporting the situation were prominent in helping create public awareness.

The situation reached a peak when a senior forestry official, Sueb Nakasathein, killed himself due to the pressure of discouragement from insufficient authority to fully exercise his duty to protect the national forest in his area of responsibility from violation by influential officials and powerful business groups. His suicide created a strong sense of environmental protection among Thai people as a whole.

Another example of a chronic problem was the conflict between NGO groups and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (GAT) on cases of electrical dam construction in many parts of the country. Such cases obviously revealed the conflict between national development and natural resource conservation. Several projects had to be delayed due to the lack of running proper public hearings and inadequate providing of essential information on the advantages and disadvantages of dam construction. The pros and cons resulting from scientific study of the conflicting parties were not fairly and transparently presented in the media where people can look for decision making information. Mass media in such cases were unavoidably criticized and questioned about their objectivity and fairness on reporting environmental issues. The public

thus are usually in the midst of confusion and inadequate information. Moreover, mass media were, sometimes, blamed for being unable to provide clear and adequate in-depth technical information concerning the advantages and disadvantages of the projects in terms of both environment and development in simple language. Public decisions are made with great difficulty under such circumstances. People expect mass media to pay more attention and play more concrete roles as reliable sources of information.

Mass Media Situation in Thailand

Compared to its neighboring states, mass media in Thailand enjoy freedom of expression at all levels on various social issues including social issues, politics, and economics. There are about 500 radio stations, 11 television channels, plus one privately operated channel, throughout the country, whereas the number of newspapers total more than 200, of which approximately 25-30 are leading national newspapers based in the capital city. Electronic media are formally owned by either the government or military sector. Only about half of the number is actively operated by either government organizations or leased to private companies. Among the 12 television channels, there are five channels broadcasting nationally, i.e. channel 3, channel 5, channel 7, channel 9, and channel 11. The only *free* channel operated by a private company is Independent Television (ITV) which rapidly gained a nationwide audience within three years of its establishment. It is well recognized for its outstanding informative programs and for its investigation/coverage of misbehavior or mismanagement of government officials.

The print media in Thailand are private enterprises, whose primary concern is to survive as a business by balancing the benefit of the organization and of the public. The most influential newspapers are the three to five biggest circulation dailies based in Bangkok, namely Thai-Rath, Daily News, Kao-Sod, Matichon, and Phu-Chad-Karn. While the former three could be

categorized as ‘popular newspapers’ the latter are considered to be ‘quality.’ News and stories covered by these newspapers always catch high attention from all concerned agencies and the majority of people. The Nation and Bangkok Post are the two English language newspapers that successfully market to the elite groups. Provincial newspapers constitute a large number of newspapers in the nation, but there is also a certain gap between metropolitan papers and local papers in terms of quality of production, news coverage, management, and technological advancement. It is partly because of the limitation of capital, investment, location, and/or training opportunity. The easy access to metropolitan dailies and other media channels of local readers are another factor of provincial newspapers’ disadvantage.

It is worth mentioning here that, according to the major theme of the Constitution of Thailand 1997 emphasizing the rights and freedom of the Thai people, Thailand is currently in the stage of a mass media revolution. The mass media system and its roles are directly stated to promote human rights and freedom of expression. Additionally, the previous announcement of the Information Act has opened doors for journalists and the public to guarantee individual right of information and to protect the public’s human rights. The sections dealing with mass media in the new constitution mentioned as follows are the key to mark the significant roles of mass media in the development of Thai society in all aspects:

“Section 39. Every person has the right to freedom of expression. Restrictions are only possible by virtue of law in the case of national security and public order or morals.

The government is forbidden to close down the mass media (the press, radio or television stations).

It is forbidden for officials to censor news or articles before their publication except in time of war or fighting but this is only possible by virtue of law.

Media owners must be of Thai nationality.

State financial aid for the private media is prohibited.

Section 40. The frequency bands of radio, television and telecommunications are public resources.

There will be established an independent public agency to allocate bands and oversee relations with the mass media under the law.

Section 41. Employees of the private media have rights and liberties under the constitution and must not be ideologically controlled by the State or the owners of the media. The same applies to employees of the state-owned media.

Section 58. Every person has the right to receive information and news from government agencies unless their revelation is contrary to national security.

Section 59. The right of access to information from government agencies is coupled with the possibility of public hearings and inquiries as permitted by law, especially as regards projects affecting the environment and quality of life.”

The aforementioned Constitution confirms the need to reallocate radio bands to serve the best need of civil society. Essentially, ordinary people and the grassroots are assured to have their own operated local radio channels in order to be able to speak about and participate in national/community needs/activities. Consequently, the concept of ‘community radio’ was introduced as a channel of popular communication and expression. While the issues of environment demand better management and protection, the right of the people to be well informed and to be heard concerning all development projects possibly affecting their immediate environment and quality of life are among the urgent issues of community interest, awareness, and participation. The suitable workable community radio is therefore a topic of interesting debate among scholars, media practitioners, local broadcasters, NGOs, and other concerned parties.

Current Stage of Environmental Journalism

As previously stated, environmental reporting in Thailand had been recognized as playing a role in alerting public awareness since the 1970s. Newspapers initiated investigation and then undertook extensive reporting. Reporting did not intentionally favor environmental awareness other than to reveal political influence and the corrupt use of power by high ranking officials as any regular news report. Nevertheless, environmental issues increasingly appeared in news media in the forms of news reports, features, and critical articles. All branches of mass media played some active roles in environmental journalism.

Looking firstly into print media, specifically national daily newspapers, apart from events reporting mentioned above, during the passing two decades, a number of Thai newspapers formally opened environment page/section/column specially for environmental reporting. The Manager Group took the lead in providing a section for environment in Phu-Chad-Karn Daily that successfully proved to be an influential reliable source about the environment. Most stories in mass media are presented in feature writing styles to promote values of culture, natural heritage, environment, and valuable local lifestyle. The main theme of most stories is to create appreciation of their immediate environment and also to support the theory of sustainable and self-sufficient development. The print media do contribute certain efforts for environmental awareness.

It is noticeable that environmental stories will gain much attention when reported on the front pages. That means typical news values are applied to environment stories to attract readers. News editors are more likely to look at the value of all news according to its general criteria i.e. conflict, proximity, consequence, human interest, etc. Thus, most front-page environment stories contain, more or less, elements of political conflict, social conflict, and disaster, together with sensational presentation as another factor to stimulate higher public

attention. To be optimistic at least, this could be an effective strategy to motivate readers' interests and to involve responsible organizations to seriously find ways for better solutions to environmental problems. From passing experiences, people learned values concerning the environment largely from front-page coverage. But it seems that society does not expect mass media to limit their roles only to news reporting but also to provide educative environmental information as well.

Observing electronic media, even though radio is not very prominent in reporting on the environment compared to other media channels, there are still many stations which devote some airtime to provide environment information and education. Most presentations come in documentary format, spots, talks, and short features. A lot of broadcasters try to integrate useful environment information into their regular programs. A study shows the biggest radio programs' audience is teenagers and housewives, so radio is trusted as either a companion or an advisor for personal problems. Therefore, environmental think pieces by their admired DJ would be influential to persuade participation at some levels. Moreover, there also increasing airwaves devoted to the environment and human rights movements, for instance, the Green Waves, Women Waves, Environmental News. One could say that radio media are essential in supporting roles to promote environmental consciousness, especially to its target audience. They serve a bridging role to narrow the information gap between different media habits groups.

Television is apparently the most influential channel of information in this information era. Many environmental programs are presented on almost all TV channels. The degree varies according to management and content policy. The government owned channels, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, offer some documentaries, such as World of Environment, Our Immediate Environment, Beauty of Nature, or Natural Resource Conservation. However, channel 11 as the only educational public channel does advocate a greater degree of environmental

education programs than other government channels. But the presenting formats and production techniques do not seem to be as attractive as other commercial channels due to limited resources.

The most competitive environmental programs could be in the independent television (ITV). As its frontline policy is informative, independent and the only people's channel, ITV's policy on environment and news investigation is clearly interpreted (apart from regular news program treatments) through its intensive in-depth coverage on both investigative environmental issues and informative natural resources documentaries. For example, it shows such programs as Green Planet, Environmental World, Beneath Blue Sky, Lives under Sea, as well as environmental talks and interviews. ITV could be ranked as one of the leading channels in environmental reporting.

It could be concluded that mass media in Thailand have played essential roles in environmental journalism. They are obviously the prominent factors of inspiring social environmental awareness and protection. A lot of environmental campaigns have been fully supported by all branches of media. The social marketing aspects on environment has been successfully applied to a number of powerful commercials through mainstream media to gain more public participation. It is hoped that mass media themselves could continue playing their vital active roles in promoting positive public behavior change for environmental protection.

Interestingly, while mass media have proved to be useful supporters for social campaigns, in the case of the environment, some criticisms were heard that mass media do not give much effort to digging for in-depth information on particular environmental subjects. Especially when conflict arises, mass media should play a better role as reliable sources of information to educate people at the grassroots to be able to make proper decisions, increase participation, and as well to appreciate the value of their immediate environment. The role

of environmental journalists are thus not only to *report* news events but also to learn, to invest, to understand and to interpret complicated in-depth information that can equip regular readers to be able to help protect their environment and resources. Environmental journalists should put more emphasis on environmental investigation and interpretation in order that people can benefit from his/her environmental reports. Only adequate reliable knowledge/information can assist the public to change attitudes and behaviors on the proper use of natural resources. Hopefully, it could form a powerful public agent to balance undesired political interference and misuse of the natural environment.

Environmental Journalist/Environmentalist

Similar to nation states, mass media are always expected to play a role in helping environmental conservation. Working journalists are actually fully aware of the critical stage of environmental problems and pay high attention to cover all problematic issues. Many attempts have been made to disclose the intentional or unintentional misuse and/or exploitation of natural resources and the subsequent national affects. In doing so, journalists were frequently criticized concerning their objectivity and fairness. The working culture in the newsroom and news selection policy is another factor conditioning the presentation of environmental issues. For instance, competing with other current events news values, environmental news is more likely to be postponed due to its delayed impact and less immediate consequences. Therefore, environmental reporters have to find a strategy to get the editor's attention concerning the necessity of environmental news selection and thus to prove their sincerity to the public.

The Environmental Journalists Forum in Thailand began in 1994 under the PACT support. A group of active reporters were formed to set up an environmental journalists network in order to act as a forum for working environmental journalists in all media branches. The main objectives are to promote

environmental journalists, to serve as a center of exchange of ideas and information concerning the environment, to serve as a supportive body to increase editors' attention to environmental news selection, to gain better cooperation from environmental news sources, to help improve environmental reporting skills, and to mobilize better understanding of environmental issues for news sources and the publics.

A series of activities were conducted since its first year of establishment. There were, for example, a group seminar on the impacts of current environmental issues and news angles on certain topics that would interest readers, publication of manuals for environmental reporting and its news sources, and a training program for environmental reporters at all levels. Some interesting activities were organized on top of regular proposals, such as a seminar on national environment policy in the 8th National Plan and a panel discussion on a controversial major dam project. A series of subsequent projects also follow occasionally.

Nonetheless, this author observes that although the forum was set up with the good intentions of a group of young journalists, it was a rather loose gathering of interested reporters with consequent low participation in some activities. The working committee has tried to overcome such burden deriving from the very nature of journalists by setting up an organizational structure in which participation could be assured in one way or another.

Some years prior to the founding of the Environmental Journalists Forum, in 1988, the Reporters Association of Thailand (RAT) had successfully launched an environmental news contest project named Better Life Award. The project gained good cooperation from various news media and had been able to continue until a few years later. RAT pushed the same idea to target all practical campus newspapers since 1997. Such supportive roles of course confirmed the recognition of environmental journalism among Thai journalists.

Again, the question arises of whether environmental journalists should limit to his/her job as a good journalist or should, in some situations, become sympathetically involved in the situation for insight reporting. The problem of fair and objective reporting became more controversial when major environmental conflict among various interest groups appeared on the front pages. The bigger the environmental issue covered, the louder the criticism was pressed against environmental reporters on their degree of objectivity. Such circumstances sometimes led to the battle of gaining the public's trust in which conflicting agencies tried to employ other media strategies (PR/Advertising) to manipulate public attention. The reliability and creditability of environmental journalists were obviously challenged by concerned parties.

It is rather true that to dig for complicated insightful information, reporters need to build close relationships with news sources and may also need some sense of environmental consciousness. But being objective as much as possible is also expected of professional journalists. This professional dilemma does create some confusion for most young journalists. When should one be an environmentalist or an environmental journalist is a question that needs some experience to answer. What kind of role does the public expect 'journalist' to play?

By Way of Conclusion

The environment will catch wide public attention only when it contains strong news value. Environmental news on the front pages attracted editors' decisions based on the value of conflicts more than the value of environment itself. Apart from news coverage, other forms of presentation regularly appeared on inside pages/columns that may have less immediate impact but give much more educative, interpretative, and informative news on various environmental subjects. But it is a fact that when the nation has to face the crisis of economic decline, mass media enterprises are the same as other business that need to reconsider their management policy by firstly minimizing the size of organiza-

tion. It is sad that the environment section is among the first to be laid off. Although it is obvious that mass media have played distinguished role in environment, opportunities to continuing to exercise such a role still depends upon unavoidable factors such as the editor's attitude and business survival.

However, many educational institutions and private sector organizations are increasingly aware of the need to help promote and inspire environmental consciousness among the public. Attempts have been made to integrate environment information/knowledge into their study syllabi as well in regular activities. Simultaneously, the application of a social marketing concept concerning the environment into normal product marketing campaigns is frequently visible through electronic media, press, and relevant publications.

Hoping that the future of environmental journalism will continue to be essential to all concerned, environmental reporters should be encouraged to apply better reporting strategies for environmental presentation. News media editors and the public should as well take part in improving environment journalism. Global environmental journalists' forums may be pioneers to provide new definitions of workable news values/elements on environmental news selection/presentation. In order that environmental journalism be guaranteed continued existence in more visible and authoritative positions, international environmental journalists' forums could play a leading concrete role in the matter. It could be an endless process to improve the world environment but it should not be endless to assure effective environmental reporting in the mass media.