A Historical Review of Media Coverage on the Southernmost Unrest of Thailand

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Abstract

In a general manner, journalists rely upon conflict as a conventional method of framing news reporting. Be faced with the pressure of strained resources and their perception that media audiences prefer this reportorial style, journalists resort to conflict-based reporting. The approach often exacerbates the conflict by the very nature of the reportage. Using an unrest in Southernmost of Thailand as a case study, this historical study aims to uncover the past, define the present, and suggest the future alternative approach of reporting conflicts for media. A systematic review method was employed to identify, appraise and synthesise all the empirical evidences. This examine relied upon qualitative analysis of documentation from 1998 to 2006 of the news media agency and academic literature. The results reveal that media reports deliberately represented the insurgency in Thailand's restive South as Islamic in nature and portrayed attacks as revenge against the Buddhists. The media coverage revealed characteristic patterns of War Journalism. The general public, therefore, comes to expresses dissatisfaction with these media practices. This study thus proposes an alternative concept underpins Peace Journalism procedure for consideration.

Keywords: Media Coverage, Southernmost Unrest of Thailand, War Journalism, Peace Journalism

Introduction

The South Thailand insurgency is a separatist campaign centred in the Pattani region, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, three southernmost provinces of Thailand where the vast majority of people are Muslims. The violence increasingly spill over into neighbouring provinces and threatening to extend up to the national capital in Bangkok on New Year Eve 2007. A long series of conflicts has resulted in 15,869 unrest events with over 6,700 deaths and 12,375 injured in the southernmost provinces of Thailand since an escalation of violence in January of 2004 (DeepSouth, 2016). Some experts have suggested that this unrest occurred under the influence of foreign Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (AFP, 22 November 2006; Chalk, 2001), though such connections have never been fully substantiated and highly contentious. Some reports suggest that a number of Pattani Muslims had received training at al-Qaida centres in Pakistan (Islam, 1998), though many experts believe, to the contrary, that the Pattani separatism had little or nothing to do with religious differences. Instead, they emphasised more on the ethnic Thai versus Malay character of the conflict (see Harish, 2006a; Harish, 2006b; Vatikiotis, 2006; Wolfe, 30 September 2005). The Thai government, nevertheless, attributed the violence to Islamic militancy and managed to evade awkward questions about ethic and cultural identity that lie at the heart of the conflict.

Based on Johan Galtung's classification of War Journalism, this study examines the media coverage from 1998 to 2006. This period represented the most peak periods of the Southernmost unrest in Thailand and the media often exacerbated the conflict by the very nature of their reportage. The purpose of this study thus is to uncover the past, define the present, and suggest the future alternative approach of reporting conflicts for media.

War Journalism

War Journalism was first defined by Johan Galtung, a Norvegian scholar as journalism about conflict. War Journalism approach is characterized by conflict resolution through violence and ceasefire. Violence oriented conflict resolution adopts a linear criterion which begins with a problem, leading to confrontation/conflict and then a ceasefire leading up to a resolution (Galtung & Jacobsen, 2000). In other word, the War Journalism approach focuses on the outcome, which is the driving force and is finally stated in a formal agreement that the conflicting groups entered into. Galtung's (1986, 2002) classification of War Journalism is orientated in war/violence, propaganda, elite and victory.

War Journalism is violence oriented and indicates that conflict is confined to closed space and time. Conflict in War Journalism is reported with two opposing parties in a zero-sum game, differentiated as good versus evil and emphasizes on government and military resources

War Journalism is a propaganda orientation. It shows bias towards a party and presents the actions of one party as positive and the other as negative. Due to government censorship and media control, the media may be limited to the official discourse on an event, and may become a part of wartime propaganda.

War Journalism upholds the elites and political ruling class. Galtung (2002) points out that in the elite orientated, War Journalism focuses on the visible effects of war (casualties and damage to property), while obscuring the invisible effects which could help to add context to a story.

War Journalism banks on the agenda setting influence of the media and assumes that if news is framed based on the victory oriented model, it may influence audience thought process and ultimate action towards expedites conflict. In this orientated, the media focus on treaty, institution and the controlled society.

In 1970, Galtung (1986) proposes the model of peace journalism that promotes conflict resolution, reconstruction and reconciliation. It concentrates on stories highlighting peace initiatives and preventing further conflict while playing down ethnic and religious differences. Peace journalism contributes to a change in the reporting about conflict from the current focus on violence to a focus on peaceful conflict transformation (Galtung & Jacobsen, 2000).

Methodology

Understanding the past to guide the future of a media portrayal of the conflict is the aim of this research study. In essence, a systematic review method was employed to identify, appraise and synthesise all the empirical evidences. The study relied upon qualitative analysis of documentation from the news media agency and academic literature.

Initially, six media news agencies, *Reuters, AsiaMedia, The Free Press, AFP, The Bangkok Post, The Nation* were scanned for relevant news and articles. The first four news agencies were chosen as they are global news agency. The last two are Thai leading English-language daily newspaper. In order to increase the reliability of the search results and ensure that news and articles from various scholarly fields will be included, the search was repeated with Google Scholar. All searches were narrowed down to empirical studies reported in peer-reviewed journal articles. The phrases 'Southern Thailand', 'Conflict in Southern Thailand' were used in the searches in order to find articles that discuss the situation in Southernmost Unrest, Thailand in some manner. As a result, a total of 49 news and articles meeting the inclusion criteria were selected for the review. The selected articles were published in the years 1998–2006.

Results

The results of this study revealed that media reports deliberately represent the insurgency in Thailand's restive South as Islamic in nature and portray attacks as revenge against the Buddhists. The examples of media coverage reveal characteristic patterns of War Journalism are analysed.

War/Violence-Orientated

The rise of the religious facet has given rise to the popular perception that the conflict is one entirely between Buddhists and Muslims. The media has played a significant role in sustaining this slant. When reporting on the violence in Southern Thailand, the

religious angle is emphasised even though religion had very little to do with the incident. For instance, the *Free Press* gave an account of the episode with the headline, "Muslim Buddhist War" (see R. S. Ehrlich, 18 December 2004). The *Bangkok Post* began with its headline "Rising conflict between Buddhists, Muslims" (see The Bangkok Post, 29 August 2005).

While the villagers, Muslim academicians, lawyers, ex-insurgents and criminals in the South were certain that such framing of conflict as completely religious is distorted. As *Asia News Network* gave the quote:

> "There were many actors involved in the violence. Contrary to media reports, popular belief and official statements from the Thai government, the unrest in the South is not merely about the militants, separatists and religious differences. Only a handful of people in the South are bothered about separatism or religious differences. Most are pretty secular in their thought and behaviour" (Asia News Network, 3 March 2006).

After the prominence has been given to the religious issue, almost all acts of violence, whether proven to be related to the insurgency or otherwise (Liow, 2004), are portrayed to be executed by suspected "Muslim" or "Islamic" militants as they are the first stone of this problem and the victims are usually depicted as "Buddhist". For example, calling the Muslim militants as "wild animals" or "terrorists" (see Ganjanakhundee, 27 September 2005), or *Reuters* posted its report with "Suspected Muslim militants killed a Buddhist teacher…" (see Reuters, 14 December 2004), "Suspected Muslim militants shot dead a Buddhist man…" (see Reuters, 19 November 2006). These news reports always describe one party's view of what another party has done. To use them puts the journalist on that side and helps to justify an escalation of violence.

These descriptions, however, are contrary to an interview of a well-known person among villagers in Narathiwat province, he revealed:

> "What the Muslim militants have done is only the tip of the problem. Ask the soldiers and police what they did. Their actions were 10 times worse than what the militants did" (Asia News Network, 3 March 2006).

The conflict focus in war journalism, hence, polarises and escalates, calling for enmity and more violence to avenge and stop "them" (Galtung, 2002). The *Straits Times*, for example, reported that, "the teacher was among scores of Buddhists killed in apparent acts of revenge by Islamic militants after at least 85 Muslims died at the hands of Thai security forces, who dispersed a violent protest on October 25 in Narathiwat's Tak Bai district" (Straits Times, 15 December 2004).

Furthermore, the continued media depiction of the tragedy as one between Buddhists and Muslims led many Islamic countries to express outrage at the incident. Lukman Lima, PULO's Sweden-based leader, told the *Associated Press* in September 2005:

> "If the government opts to kill and kill without reason, perhaps fighters from Indonesia and Arab countries will help us because, according to

Islam, real Muslims cannot just stand by when their brother Muslims are being slain," (P. Ehrlich, 12 March 2006)

Propaganda-Orientated

Human Rights during state of emergency

According to International Council on Human Right Policy (2002), Governments and other authorities have often used human rights to manipulate or inflame public opinion, particularly when they are involved in wars. Numerous controversies about news manipulation can be cited. In relation to some of them-propaganda, on 15 July 2005, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra government submitted the new Emergency Decree to replace the existing martial. Deputy Prime Minister gave the reason:

> "We needed to integrate all legal instruments to deal with the state of emergency without any violation to the Constitution or basic human rights." (The Bangkok Post, 16 July 2005; The Nation, July 16, 2005)

The move, however, is ostensibly to address the situation in Southern Thailand. The government bypassed the Parliament by making the new law an executive decree, rather than an act of legislation. In its Initial Report, the government of Thailand justifies **"extrajudicial killings"** in certain situations. The fact that there are no guidelines similar to the United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials (Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2005). It implies that the law enforcement agencies can be judged and juried and take measures to deprive the right to life under various pretexts. The results of this practice of allowing extrajudicial killings are the mass murder of 107 persons, mostly teenagers in Krue Se Mosque, Pattani province on 28 April 2004 (see The Nation, 29 April 2006) and the Tak Bai killings, Narathiwat province of 25 October 2004 where 85 persons were suffocated or crushed to death after being arrested and packed into trucks by security forces for transportation to military barracks in Pattani province (see The Bangkok Post, 23 October 2005). Since the insurgency began in the Southern provinces, over 8,000 persons have been killed with sharp increase of extrajudicial killings but not a single police or military personnel has so far been punished.

The net effect of the shift from martial law to rule by Emergency Decree is more likely to harden the conflict rather than bring about its end. The southern conflict is not strictly military in nature. The Decree does nothing to bring the southern, Muslim population into the process of ending the violence.

Key Claims in War Propaganda

Use of language has always been important, of course, to propaganda. One of the bloodiest actions by the security forces, Massacre at Krue Sae Mosque can be analysed. The killed youth, mostly armed with machetes and only a few carrying assault rifles, allegedly battled policemen and soldiers in Pattani, Yala and Songkhla. General Pallop Pinmanee, commander of the Southern Peace Enhancement Centre and Deputy Director of the Internal Security Operations Command was the most senior Army commander on the scene. After a tense seven hour stand-off, He ordered

an all out assault on the mosque. All the insurgents were killed. The media quoted his statement that he later noted that

> "**I had no choice.** I was afraid that as time passed the crowd would be sympathetic to the insurgents, to the point of trying to rescue them."
> (The Nation, 29 April 2004)

The *Free Press* also reported that Thailand is a "major non-NATO ally" of America and cooperate with U.S. President George W. Bush's worldwide, extrajudicial "war on terror", so America gave helicopters, weapons, technical assistance, and training to Thailand's confused military to kill Muslim rebels in the south (see R. S. Ehrlich, 11 December 2006).

Biggest Media Crisis: Two cases on Freedom of the press

Case I, on 5 November 2004, a group of print and broadcast journalists was lured to the headquarters for "a press conference" by the officers from the Crime Suppression Division (CSB) and allegedly pressured them for four hours into giving information to the security officials about the Tak Bai killing. Police also demanded they surrender video footage of the carnage (The Nation, 8 November 2004).

Case II, on 15 July 2005, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra government submitted the new Emergency Decree that grants the Prime Minister absolute power to declare a state of emergency. Report of the government of Thailand on the implementation of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) declared:

> "To quickly end a situation that necessitates a state of emergency,   the Prime Minister is empowered to prohibit publication of news and distribution of printed materials or other types of media which may cause the people to panic or with an intention to distort information"
> (The Bangkok Post, 16 July 2005).

The freedom of the press, consequently, was crucial in such critical situations. Nevertheless, with Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was being a media baron himself, independent media had been facing serious repression. The Government used various means to increase control over the media, including direct control through ownership, the threat of withdrawing financial support and advertisements, constraints on the flow of information, and direct pressure on critical journalists and activists. The media must neither criticise the government nor take away the business of the Prime Minister. Hence, there were many protests occurred to against this issue. Figure 1 and 2 are the examples.

Figure 1: *A woman joins protests against the sale of iTV to Singapore's Temasek Holdings outside Shin Corp's head office in March. The TV station's future is hanging by a thread, much like the political fortunes of its former owner, caretaker Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and his Thai Rak Thai Party.* (Photos in the News, 16 March 2006)

Figure 2: *About 150 people including taxi motorcyclists stage a protest in front of 'The Nation' offices, demanding an end to what they called distorted news.* (Photos in the News, 22 March 2006)

Elite-orientated

Bias Issue: The case of Ban Tanyonglimo Village

The villagers of Ban Tanyonglimo, Narathiwat hamlet proposed a banner declaring their community a "Thai media-free zone'", showed the world that Thai reporters were not reliable enough to cover such a critical situation because they are too close to state agencies. One woman at the scene said:

> "The Thai media was too cosy with the military and many journalists have personal relationships with soldiers" (Pathan, 22 September 2005)

The woman's assessment was not completely wrong as local media usually rely on security officials as sources of information for their reports of violence in the Deep

South. They routinely quote officials and rarely seek the opinions of local residents. Unbalanced reporting on the Deep South was first seen after the Tak Bai incident in October 2004, when the Thai media marginalised and failed to tell the whole story.

It is little wonder that the residents of the Muslim-dominated region feel that the Thai media are nothing more than mouthpiece for the state. In reality, the government and the military have used state-run media, mainly television and radio stations, to air public relations news items.

Victory-orientated

On March 2005, respected former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun was appointed as Chairperson of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), tasked with overseeing that peace is brought back to the South. A fierce critic of the Thaksin-government, Anand frequently criticised the handling of the southern unrest, and in particular the State of Emergency Decree. He has been quoted to have said,

> "The authorities have worked inefficiently. They have arrested innocent people instead of the real culprits, leading to mistrust among locals. So, giving them broader power may lead to increased violence and eventually a real crisis."

Unfortunately, the situation deteriorated from 2005 to 2006, with escalating violence, especially among teachers and civilians. Despite much criticism of the Thaksin-government's policies, Anand refused to submit the NRC's final report, choosing instead to wait for the results of the 2006 legislative election (The Nation, 12 Auguest 2006). Anand finally submitted the NRC's recommendations on 5 June 2006, but Deputy Prime Minister Chidchai Vanasatidya, who oversees issues relating to the South, said he had not yet read the report.

> "I have sore eyes. No, I have not yet read the report. I have not had time to consider it," said Chidchai, who is also a member of the NRC (The Nation, 7 June 2006).

This showed the government did not attempt to employ peaceful means to contain violence in the region whereas many Thai ordinary people did, as can be seen in Figure 3 to 5.

Figure 3: *About 1,500 Muslim religious leaders from southern border provinces take part in a mass prayer at Rajabhat Yala University for blessings for members of the Royal Family and peace in the Deep South.* (Photos in the News, 8 November 2005)

Figure 4: *Muslims in the South say prayers during a ceremony to declare a resolution against the violence in the three southernmost provinces.* (Photos in the News, 29 August 2005)

Figure 5: *TENS OF THOUSANDS of women gather at the Royal Plaza as part of a campaign to call for peace in the Deep South as violence continues unabated in the restive region.* (Photos in the News, 11 July 2005)

In addition, Thaksin-government's reaction to all other calls for outside mediation had been met with a harshly worded assurance that Thailand can resolve the separatist problem on its own. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said in his weekly radio address on Saturday that:

> "If we already explained and they do not understand, that is their problem. We are not begging for food from any countries and we did not start this problem," he said, adding that no foreign figures had any role in the debate (Aljazeera.net, 2 May 2004).

After the September 2006 coup, the junta's boosters congratulated Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont for his compassionate apology about the previous government actions as a brilliant way to help bring peace. The *Free Press*, however, began its headline, **"Too Little and Too Late"** and went on to say that the rebel-linked Pattani United liberation Organisation (PULO) said,

> "It took more than two years for the Thai state to sincerely utter such a word, letting the Pattani people and their homeland suffer mentally, physically and inhumanely" (R. S. Ehrlich, 11 December 2006).

This state of affairs further convolutes the security situation in Southern Thailand and makes the search for solution all the more difficult.

Discussion

Regarding to the escalating violence in the South of Thailand, this paper proposes the "P-E-A-C-E journalism", an appropriate and more peaceful approach than the one that media has been performed for consideration.

What peace journalism is really all about and what it means for the work of media?
By definition, peace journalism is an approach or pattern of journalistic news coverage that contributes to the journalists' acting when covering and seeking sources, and coverage that encourages peace. This implies that peace journalism does not only simply mean the result of journalistic work, but also refers to how media perform and perceive their cherished roles in reporting conflicts.

Basically, the media have a special relationship with conflict circumstances. The reasons for such a relationship are: Firstly, conflict is recognised as being of crucial news value and, as such, constitutes a major area of functioning for the journalist; Secondly, it is a matter of utmost public importance and interest because of its security implications. However, it is not easy for a journalist to cover conflicts and report on them in a neutral manner that is capable of pleasing and satisfying both fighting groups, without the insertion of personal opinions based on the reporter's visions and missions. Furthermore, it needs to be underscored that the parties in conflict try by any means necessary to use the media to further their own ends, and therefore the journalists come heavily under all sorts of undesirable pressures.

What can journalists do to report conflict situations? How can reporters remain independent, unbiased and faithful to the truth while we are also to promote peace, reconciliation, and other such concepts?

The explanation of each alphabet of **P-E-A-C-E journalism** will give some useful ideas to consider.

P = People's happiness

In the area of conflict resolution, the journalists can really play a major role in enlightening the public opinion and in helping people attend to the need for peace, for their overall happiness. The Journalists should take all steps on no account themselves contribute directly or indirectly to the creation of conflicts or situations which cause conflicts. We have to avoid oral or written words, projections of scenes and depictions of pictures, which may inflame passions of the people, create hatred between different sections of the populace, or lead to violence. All audio-visuals, news and views must conform to the most elementary precautions taken for human beings.

E = Ethics and Journalistic Responsibility

With regards to news journalism, ethics can be referred to as a set of defined individual and collective organisational values and behaviours. Adhering to journalistic ethical standards is a complex duty to self, others and community to report truthful facts and present opinion, while respecting individuals and society as a whole. Ethical responsibility must be an integral part of journalistic and editorial endeavours. It covers all principle of right or good behaviours, such as objectivity, self-censorship and responsibility of any outcomes. The journalists have the potential to quickly inform, motivate and change individuals and a society like no other entity or social force. In addition, freedom of the press should mean more than printing whatever one wants, whenever one wants to.

A = Avoid War Journalism

Numerous controversies about war journalism should be realised. In relation to some of them, the journalists must avoid representing conflict as comprising of only two parties fighting for one goal 'Victory orientated'. We must not posit one side against another by excluding the likely possibility that there are several sides in any given dispute. Furthermore, we are required to protect ourselves from being war propaganda's device. We must avoid relying so heavily on sources, coverage reflected facts as provided by official sources rather than acquired from investigative methods.

C = Creativity

Peace reporting requires imagination and creativity. The journalists should create new ideas which lead to a non-violence outcome. For instance, reporting on cooperative group of people who are joining and working together to establish trust and good relationship among any parties of the conflict. This kind of report demonstrates what those do about reconciliation and how the technique it works. Hence, its influence on the actions and motivations of parties to conflicts can be noticed.

E = Effectiveness

Besides performing peace journalism approach in news reporting, jouranalists are required to determine how effective the procedure of implementation has been. This is a significant course of action that informs us of the effectiveness of our roles we have undertaken and to help us learn and derive benefit from that learning to improve our practice. It also provides a moment for evaluating and reflecting on what we have done and what the consequences have been, whether intended or unintended. The journalists should try to answer the questions, for example, how is this news report contributing to the overall peace process? is it making any difference? what difference is it making? what is the consequence of this report on the community as a whole and on the different individuals within it? are there unanticipated impacts, positive or negative? and so on.

Conclusion

This research paper reaches to the notion of peace journalism as its newsworthy and outstanding agenda which can be calculated to enhance the prospects for peace. The alternative approach is distinctive from the way the story was reported at the time. The profession as journalists who possess a chance and power certainly can bring peacefulness to our planet. The P-E-A-C-E journalism could enable any parties of conflict notice the non-violence means and the peaceful solution, giving hopes to a unified future. It could lead any parties of the conflict imagine the future together, see that we hope for the same thing "Peaceful solution" that can pursue the happiness to the region. The past may not be unified, but we all desire a cooperative future.

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