

The Opinion of Media Entrepreneurs towards Thai Mass Media

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Abstract

The purposes of the research are to study the roles of today's mass media and to gather media members' opinions on media reform via qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Quantitative findings show that television is the medium media entrepreneurs have used the most. The next most used media are email and mobile phone respectively. Media entrepreneurs have high approval for the role of mass media today and think the roles follow the Normative Theories of Media Performance. The approval for public interest and accountability are in the middle to high level. Besides, most media members view that media organizations should have the regulation in certifying media license and the regulation in controlling the salary and welfare of media. Qualitative findings show that in regards to freedom, media members believe Thai media has freedom on the overall but has faced many legal restrictions too. In regards to content, most media members think the unbalanced proportion of substance and entertainment is not the problem of mass media. In regards to work-amid-crisis atmosphere, most newsmen admit that working under the "red-yellow conflict" is more difficult than any previous political crisis. In regards to code of conduct, all media members say their editorial staff will not violate any person's rights or defame anyone. In regards to media oversight, most media members disagree with the idea of media supervision by the government. They agree that a self-regulatory system should be in place. To them, media consumers are the best mechanisms to supervise media.

Keywords: Thai, Mass Media, Reform, Freedom

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Introduction

Media reform has been a subject of widespread debates and discussions throughout the past decade. There have also been efforts to reform the way media work, but to little effects. Both mainstream and new media are found to have presented some unreliable and unethical content particularly during Thailand's recent and intense political conflicts. Just as Thais become politically divided, there emerges a question as to whether media have carried out their duty in line with ethics and professional standards.

Following the 2010 unrest, media reform became a really hot issue once more. Back in 2010, the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) had staged its rally at the Ratchapong Intersection or the Bangkok's key shopping district. Troops were finally deployed to disperse demonstrators. In the wake of the violence, then-prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva presented a national-reconciliation proposal in a bid to heal rifts in the Thai society. His government made the media reform a part of the national reconciliation plan, which gave birth to the research project titled "Studies for Media Reform Planning". This project comprises a total of five researches, covering all groups of stakeholders in the media reform. Being a part of the project, this research aims to study the opinions of media professionals on media reform. Findings and recommendations from the research will be used to develop guideline for tangible media reform in the future.

Objectives of the study

1. To study opinions of media professionals towards the work of today's mass media;
2. To study opinions of media professionals about ways to reform the mass media

Methodology of the study

This is a quantitative research study, with the use of survey research method, quantitative research, in-depth interviews and focus group interviews. The sample group selected for their opinions consists of media professionals, including news editors, columnists, news announcers, program hosts and news commentators. The method of Purposive Sampling, which is Non-probability Sampling, is used. Questionnaires were sent to the selected media professionals at different organisations. There were a total of 183 samples, 60 samples for in-depth interviews, and 48 samples for focus group interviews (divided into five groups).

Before the actual data collection, the Researcher carried out a pre-test with a sample group of 30 people with comparable qualities. This was to test the reliability of the data-collecting tool. The Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient formula was used to measure the result, and the reliability value was 0.87.

Analysis and processing of data

1. The descriptive statistical method is used for basic analysis, with such figures as frequency, percentage, means and standard deviation. All those statistical numbers are used in describing the population, the media used by the professionals, opinions towards the Thai media, and opinions about the welfare for media professionals.

2. The inferential analysis, or statistical analysis of the t-test, is used to analyse the differences of opinions between male and female media professionals, and between media professionals from print media and those from radio and television broadcasters.

Findings of the study

Quantitative findings

The following are findings from the study on the opinions of media professionals towards the Thai mass media.

Part 1: General information about the respondents of questionnaires

The sample group in this research study consists of media professionals working in print media, radio and television. Of the respondents, 53.0 per cent are men and 45.9 per cent are women. Most of the samples, or 53.0 per cent, are aged between 36 and 45 years old. Most of the samples, or 92.3 per cent, work in Bangkok and the adjacent provinces. The remaining 7.0 per cent of the samples work in other areas of the country.

It was also found that the largest group of the samples, or 29.0 per cent, is reporters/correspondents, followed by 25.7 per cent who are news announcers and program hosts. The largest group of the samples, or 29.0 per cent, works for the front-page news, regional news and crime news sections, followed by 15.3 per cent who work for the sports news section. The smallest group of samples comes from the IT news desk, making up of 0.5 per cent of all the samples. The largest group of the samples, or 29.0 per cent, gets a monthly salary of between 10,000 and 20,000 baht, followed by 18.0 per cent of the samples who have a monthly salary of between 20,001 and 30,000 baht. The smallest group of samples, or 1.6 per cent, gets a monthly salary of 50,001 to 60,000 baht. Of all the samples, 25.1 per cent work in print media and 74.9 per cent work for radio and television stations.

Part 2: The media that media professionals use to receive and send information

The order of media that media professionals use to receive and send information the most is as follows: First, television (27.3 per cent); Second, e-mail and mobile phone (12.6 per cent); Third, radio and online social media (11.5 per cent). The media that the media professionals use the least are as follows: satellite dish (3.8 per cent), True cable TV (3.3 per cent), and magazines (0.5 per cent).

Part 3: Names of the media that media professionals receive and use to send information

The newspaper that media professionals receive and use to send information the most is Thai Rath, which accounts for 24.0 per cent of the samples, followed by Matichon (12.6 per cent). The newspapers that receive and send information the least are KrungthepTurakit and Post Today, which account for 0.5 per cent equally.

The television outlet that the sample group receives the most is Channel 3, which accounts for 28.4 per cent, followed by Thai TV (10.9 per cent). The sample group receives Channel 7 and Channel 11 the least, equally at 2.7 per cent. Of all the respondents, 96.2 per cent said they had never received local cable TV and 90.2 per cent said they had never received satellite-based TV. Regarding the new media, the sample group receives news websites the most, accounting for 37.2 per cent. As for the search website, 84.0 per cent of the respondents use Google. And the largest group of the samples, or 47.5 per cent, use Facebook as their online social media.

Part 4: Opinions of media professionals towards today's mass media

Regarding the work of the Thai media, there are two issues that the sample group showed the highest degree of agreement. As for the first issue, "the news coverage of international conflicts should be done carefully", the average of opinions is 4.18. For the second issue, "the mass media can present news in a modern, quick and up-to-date manner", the average of opinions is 4.12. The two last issues where the samples replied that they felt "indifferent" are "the media present news with respect to the right of privacy of people in the news" (the average is 2.88) and "the media have credibility" (the average is 2.51).

The difference between the sexes is not a factor for media professionals to have different attitudes, with statistical significance, in 23 different issues. There are only three issues where the attitudes between the sexes differ with statistical significance. These are: (1) "The government allows the mass media to have various channels to present news and information" ($p = 0.04$). The male samples have the average of opinions at 3.34, compared to 2.98 for female samples; (2) "The media carefully check the credibility of news sources" ($p = 0.03$). The male samples have the average of opinions at 3.45, compared to 3.69 for female samples; and (3) "The media encourage political and social participation by the people" ($p = 0.05$). The male samples have the average of opinions at 3.78, compared to 3.53 for female samples.

There is no difference with statistical significance between the opinions of media professionals from different types of media (print media vs radio and television) on 24 issues. However, there are two issues where there is difference with statistical significance. These are: (1) "The Thai media have the freedom to present news and information" ($p = 0.05$). Media professionals from print media have the average of opinions at 3.78, compared to 2.95 for those from radio and TV; and (2) "The media present news and information with respect to the rights of people in the news" ($p = 0.02$). Media professionals from print media have the average of opinions at 3.65, compared to 3.72 for those from radio and TV.

Part 5: Opinions of media professionals on welfare

Of all the samples, 69.4 per cent agreed that there should be occupation permit for media professionals. A group of 74.9 per cent of the respondents viewed that such permit should be issued by the media groups. And 97.0 per cent viewed that to be eligible for such permit, the media professionals must pass training. A similar size of the samples agreed that those who should have occupation permits are reporters, news announcers and program hosts.

A group of 42 per cent of the samples agreed that media professionals should earn more than 20,000 baht a month. Another 33.3 per cent viewed that their monthly salary should range between 15,000 and 19,999 baht. The largest group of respondents, or 38.3 per cent, agreed that media professionals who have to work in the field in a conflict situation deserve additional welfare in the form of life insurance. Another 23.87 per cent said there should be health insurance, and 10.18 per cent suggested allowances.

Qualitative findings

Media freedom

The media professionals viewed that the Thai media have considerable freedom although they have to comply with the libel law and the code of conduct. Due to certain legal loopholes, relevant laws have been used to control the media, since the tenure of ThaksinShinawatra's government. Newspapers are sued and they have to spend a lot of money in their court battles. This is an expensive cost of them. New media, meanwhile, are under the control of the Computer Crime Act. An editor of an online media outlet said that the media are under government control through the law. This makes it more difficult for them to perform their duty. The editor suggested that enforcement of the Computer Crime Act should be reviewed, as there has been much problem on the enforcers' part.

The media professionals said that due to the direct and indirect intervention, as well as political and business interference, their work has been affected. However, they are not prohibited from covering certain news. A newspaper editor stated that, "The mass media have to do self-censorship for the survival of their business. You have to know how to present the news. It depends on the social context. If you go against the mainstream, you become social outcast." Eventually, media professionals opt to do self-censorship, keeping a balance between the journalistic ideology and business survival. They attempt to answer the question "How to make the business survive?" They may end up moving news reports that are supposed to be on the front page into an inside page.

The local media also share the view. They see that there is considerable freedom in presenting news. Their problem is intervention from influential people. Their media outlets serve a small society, in which all residents know one another. Therefore, they have to be careful in presenting news, by doing an extent of self-censorship.

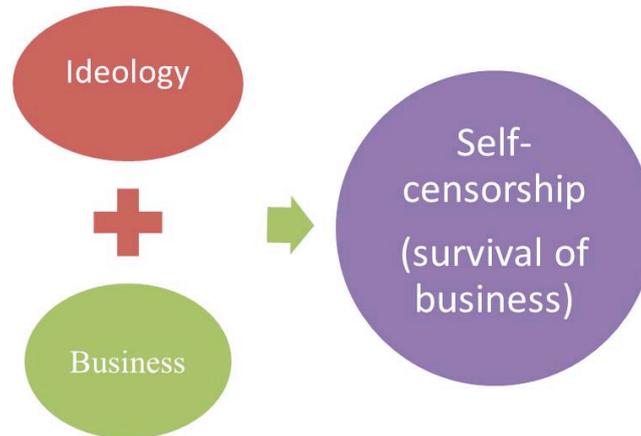


Figure 1: Philosophy of running media business

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Most media professionals viewed that the proportion between serious substance and entertainment is not a problem for the mass media. It involves a matter of policy that differs from one media organisation to another. For example, newspapers often design their “personality” to be compatible with the targeted readership. The television media is viewed as being influenced by the market mechanism, or rating. But the problem for TV rather involves quality of the contents. The quality should be improved, for serious substance as well as entertainment. An editor said that the Thai media have four elements -- power, bias, discourse and benefit. The editor saw no need for the civil society to help determine the media contents. It is because the market mechanism, or the audience, already is involved in determining the proportion of the contents.

Media that create division vs Media that encourage unity

The opinions over this matter can be divided into three groups. The first group admitted that the media’s work at present is partly responsible for the social division and that they are a catalyst for conflict. The second group admitted and also denied. They agreed that the mass media encouraged conflict but that the media also reported accurately. The third group denied that the mass media created social division. They said that the media were doing their job of reporting facts. Truth is that the society is already divided. The media simply report that to the audience. It is the audience who will interpret the information they get. However, all the three groups agreed that politicians are the cause of the division. Most of the respondents said that they did not think it was the media’s duty to mend the conflict. The media have no duty to help with reconciliation; they just serve as media to report facts and happenings.

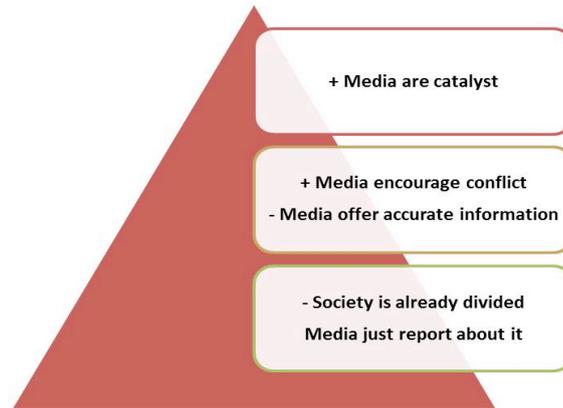


Figure 2: Media that create division vs Media that encourage unity

Working under the situation of conflict

Most of the respondents admitted that it was difficult for journalists to work at a time of conflict between the “yellow shirts” and “red shirts”. It was more difficult than any political crisis in the past. It was because under the situation, you could not tell exactly what was right or wrong. That was different from the past’s conflicts between “democracy and dictatorship” or between “democracy and coup”. It was not between black and white but at present it was grey. You could not tell which was better between “yellow” and “red”. And this made it more difficult for media professionals to do their work. The journalists had to work under restrictions: 1. various facts that were difficult to be verified; 2. a situation in which there was liking and dislike; and 3. bias and personal preferences of both media people and media consumers.

Regarding “neutrality”, the media professionals said that the mass media have to adhere to the principle of neutrality in presenting facts. An editor of an online media outlet said that in fact the term “fairness” may be more suitable in this case. It was because the media have to present news to the public in a fair manner, correctly and accurately.

Local media also present news carefully. Most of them avoid political news and instead focus on entertainment content. And they opt to present information that is neutral by its nature, such as words of wisdom by His Majesty the King.

Most media professionals agreed that there should be a review on welfare and well-being of media workers. They suggested regular training for reporters about the changing work environment. They agreed that it was the duty of the Thai Journalists Association. Regarding salary and remuneration, they pointed out that it was the responsibility of the employing organisations to provide.

Code of conduct

Media professionals of all groups said that the editorial department has the code of conduct to follow in doing their work. They are required not to violate individual rights or commit libel that results in someone’s reputation being adversely affected. They must be particularly careful about news on children and women, as well as

photos of children in the news. However, when a mistake is committed, the journalists involved have to admit to the fault and offer to present corrections or clarifications.

The local media likewise said that media professionals are well aware of the code of conduct. But they also admitted that there was still a practice of accepting money for food and fuel to cover news. It was because local media workers got small income.

Supervision of the mass media

Most of the media professionals disagreed with any government attempt to supervise the mass media. They said that there should rather be self-supervision by the media. More importantly, the media in effect are supervised by society, by the media consumers through the market mechanism. Readers do not buy newspapers they think are not worth their money. The media professionals viewed that the media organisations, such as the National Press Council of Thailand, can well take the duty of supervision although some structural adjustment may be needed. They were against establishing a new independent organisation to supervise the mass media. The media professionals also agreed with having an independent media monitor. However, most of them disagreed with the proposed requirement for a media occupation permit. Some respondents viewed the requirement as violation of people's basic rights to communication. However, some media professionals in the group of community radio and local cable TVs agreed with the idea of requiring occupation permit.

Discussion of the findings

Media professionals' adoption of mass media

For media professionals, new media such as e-mail, online social networks (Facebook and Twitter), chat programs and search engines like Google and Yahoo are among the most used media in sending news and information. We can conclude that modern-day media professionals are gradually shifting from an "analog" age to a "digital" work environment.

With the growth of new media, as mentioned above, the study found that new media is a popular tool for media professionals to receive and send news and information. More than two-thirds of the media professionals studied use Facebook, clearly higher than other online social networks. This indicates that media professionals tend to prefer new media with the capability of simultaneous interaction. Facebook helps them to present images, sounds and video clips in one place. They can use it to present news or communicate with recipients of the content, as well as to exchange views on issues that are widely interested in society.

Opinions of media professionals towards the Thai media

Generally, the media professionals showed a high degree of agreement with different research issues involving the work of the media at present. Likewise, findings of in-depth interviews showed most media professionals viewed that the Thai media present news with neutrality and professionalism. This is in line with theories about the social norm of liberal media and about mass media with social responsibility. We may conclude that the Thai media have the guidelines of work in line with the norm and ideology at a satisfactory level.

The media professionals viewed that the mass media perform their duty in line with the liberalism norms and social responsibility, and the average of the opinions is of a high degree. This is in accordance with the Normative Theory of Communication suggested by McQuail (2005). There are three major aspects: (1) structure and execution of media work, (2) public interest, and (3) people's and social safety.

The media professionals agreed most on the issue that the media's coverage of international conflicts should be done carefully. This indicates that media professionals place importance on the public interest of both their own country and other countries involved. They regarded national interest higher than other factors.

Another issue that the media professionals agreed with, at a lower degree, involves the media's ability to present news in a modern, quick and up-to-date manner. This well corresponds with the media professionals' behaviour in adopting and using the media. New media are becoming increasingly popular among media professionals. A major strength of the new media is that they can spread news quickly. The political violence in May 2010 was widely reported through online social media, and numerous video clips were recorded for TV broadcast.

The media professionals showed a high degree of agreement in the work of media regarding public interest, particularly concerning support for social order, national security and democracy. This indicates that the media work in line with the Theory of Social Norms suggested by McQuail (2005,p.167). The theory is that the mass media are expected to perform their duty in a way that serves the public and mainly for the public interest. The media professionals said that the mass media have a duty of serving as forum for expressing opinions and encouraging political participation by public members. This is how the media professionals are actually doing their job. Television and radio programs feature public members or stakeholders to express their opinions and explain about their viewpoints on different issues. For example, the "Ruang Den Yen Nee" TV program often invites ordinary people to appear. Also, many TV programs allow audience members to send short messages (SMS) to express their views on different issues. In addition, an essential content is a column for "letters to editor" where readers can file their complaints. This kind of communication also appears in new media, such as message boards and online social media.

Suggestions by media professionals

The media professionals involved in this study suggested that the first thing the government should do about media reform is to change the structure of media ownership.

The main media like television and radio are still under state control. This has resulted in restriction of media freedom, as the mass media remain under state control, both directly and indirectly. Revenue from privatisation of those media outlets should be destined for funding a new independent organisation to be set up to oversee the mass media.

The print media is dominated by capitalism, as the publication business is mostly listed in the stock market as a public company. Operating result is the main concern for the business as they have to make profits for the shareholders.

Regarding the local media, there are calls for the government to expedite establishment of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunication Commission to ensure that the relevant laws and regulations are enforced. Community radios and local cable TVs are mostly careful about operating in a way that does not violate the regulations. However, the problem is that there is still no clarity. There are many local media outlets operating illegally. And there seems to be double standards.

Conclusion

This research was conducted at the time Thai society experienced a high level of political conflicts. During the period, Thais were divided by their political ideology and their society often saw prolonged protests. However, Thailand's situation has been changing since the 2014 coup took place. Coup leader General Prayut Chan-ocha has now served as the Thai prime minister. Under his military-installed government, media work under strict control. With such limitations and circumstances that are different from what were during the elected governments, media forms of work has changed. Such point is interesting and worth of being a subject for future researches, which may focus on media work under the current military-installed government.

Suggestions for future studies

1. This research focuses on studying the opinions of media professionals, so the findings obtained may be from just a group of people. There should be future studies on other relevant groups, such as people who consume the media, media professional groups, and academics.
2. There should be additional study about the work of reporters in times of emergency or armed conflict. Also, future studies should cover factors that affect reporters' decision of news presentation at times of unrest.

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