

*Past, Present and future: A Thai Community Newspaper*

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Abstract

This study focuses on Thai newspapers in Los Angeles, regarding services and benefits offered to the Thai community, their individual characteristics, and challenges they have encountered. In-depth interviews were conducted among 7 Thai newspaper publishers. A focus group consisted of 15 Thai readers with varying ages. Although, having provided critical contributions to Thai community, research found that Thai newspapers in LA lacked professional newspaper organization and quality reporting regarding local issues.

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## **Introduction**

***Background, importance and problem of the research;*** Funding was granted by Isra Amantagul Foundation, the Thai Journalist Association under the Asian Partnership Initiative of University of Wisconsin at Madison, having been funded properly, the researcher was eligible to research Thai communities in the United States of America to increase the knowledge and understanding of mass communication. While a visiting professor at in the United States, the researcher recognized that local newspapers play an important role in local development, for it publicizes all information and connects people among the community.

The status and existence of community newspapers in Los Angeles was interesting, especially in the aspects of pattern, content, and organizational management. The existence of local newspapers are beneficial to both government and private organizations, readers within the community, and the newspapers in the community itself. Local newspapers aim to reflect their own success in order to improve the Thai community newspapers in Los Angeles to continue their businesses and contribute to the overall benefit of the local community.

### ***Research Questions:***

1. What is the current situation of Thai community newspapers in Los Angeles?
2. What are the roles of Thai community newspapers in Los Angeles?
3. What will be the future of Thai community newspapers in Los Angeles?

### ***Research Objective:***

The objective of this research is to study the history of how Thai's received their news, current news reporting situations and the roles of Thai community newspapers in Los Angeles. Reporting the results of the study to increase knowledge for developing community newspapers to be prompted for organizational management, which will eventually assist the newspapers in continued success, reduce working conditions dealing with unethical situations, and improve managements attitude about increasing social responsibilities.

### ***Scope of the Research:***

This research focuses on the current situation and existence of Thai community newspapers in Los Angeles in order to make a guideline for developing a community newspaper, including searching for positive models of community newspapers which are able to successfully continue reporting and contribute to the society at the same time.

### 1. Scope of population used in the research:

The population used during this research are Thai community newspapers in Los Angeles which have regularly had their production and publication for at least five or more years, and newspapers that stopped their publication, but had previously and regularly produced and published the newspaper during a period exceeding five years.

### 2. Study duration:

The duration of the data collection was from April through September 2011 and December 2012.

### 3. Research Limitation:

The knowledge about community newspapers is set into 5 groups;

3.1.1 Background of Thai newspapers in Los Angeles

3.1.2 Demographic characteristics and background of the newspapers' owners and editors.

3.1.3 Newspaper organizational characteristics and structure, including physical characteristics of Thai newspapers in Los Angeles.

3.1.4 Roles of Thai newspapers in Los Angeles.

3.1.5 Future trends of Thai newspapers in Los Angeles.

### ***Expected Benefit***

1. Recognize and understand the existence of Thai community newspapers in Los Angeles, and use information from the research as a model for improving and developing the newspapers in order to suitably meet the community's expectations.

2. Enable to obtain methods to develop Thai community newspapers in Los Angeles along with finding a successful model of a community newspaper which is able to maintain its business exceeding five years.

3. Able to use the research as a reference in academic work and as a model to further study in other related topics.

*Research Method:* The research is titled, "Past, Present, and Future: Roles and Trends of Thai Community Newspapers in Los Angeles", it is a qualitative and descriptive research.

### ***Research Demography***

1. The research demography in the publications field are owners and/or editors of 9 Thai community newspapers in Los Angeles which have been regularly produced and published for more than 5 years, and Thai community newspapers which were previously regularly produced and published for more than 5 years. Among the 9

newspapers, 7 of them are still operating, namely: Thai LA, Khao-sod USA (literally USA Flash News), Siam Town US, Se-ri-chai (literally Liberal Victory), Siam Media, Asian Pacific, and Muang Thai (literally Thai City). The other two newspapers, Inter Thai, and Siam Chronicle no longer print. (Data collected on April, 2011)

2. The research sample group of newspaper readers is 15 people from the Thai community in Los Angeles. These people are from three different generations and from every segment of Thai community in Los Angeles with differences in age, gender, education and occupation.

3. Four individuals of the research sample group were selected from experts and journalism specialists from both Thailand and the US.

### ***Research Tool:***

The tools that are used in this research are in-depth interviews, observations, focus groups and note taking. The information will be analyzed through qualitative and descriptive research using in-depth interviews, observations, and note taking. The analysis will be done by connecting the result with related methodologies.

### **Results:**

#### ***The opinions of the readers***

The research explored the readers' opinions by using a focus group discussion method to study the relationship between Thai newspapers and a Thai community.

The results are as follow:

Community; The Thai community in Los Angeles has a close relationship with the Thai newspapers. Newspapers are important and highly influential in the Thai community. Newspapers seemed to build up the community. Readers are seeking more news about the Thai community in Los Angeles. Several participants specifically agreed that newspapers have had an influence on the Thai community in Los Angeles for many decades. The newspaper is a mechanism to drive the community because all contents are about and for people in the community; moreover, the newspapers are published by the people within the community. People should support the Thai community and the newspapers should be sustained. "The newspapers are a significant tool in LA boosting the strength of the community."

Bias; Bias is one of the apparent themes found from the focus group method. It was raised by the roles of the newspapers in the community. Several participants specifically blamed Thai newspapers for biased reporting. They think that the newspapers serve the community with no moral or ethical concern for reliable reporting. One participant in a focus group said regarding Thai newspaper reports, "They write news for their allies and their own benefits. The articles can't be trusted because people have different points of view. The newspapers are owned by the

entrepreneurs who are immoral and only use the newspaper for their own benefit and business. They criticize things irresponsibly.” Another person interjected that the Thai newspapers in LA are biased and only do what pleases the entrepreneurs. The reason that the newspapers are biased is because they need the sponsors.

Distribution : In focus group sessions on the distribution of Thai newspapers, research found that the only distribution of a newspaper is not sufficient for the needs of readers. Newspapers are distributed by the local Thai restaurants and Thai temples in Los Angeles. So distribution cannot reach all the Thai people in community. Nowadays, newspapers are faced with the advancement of the Internet. Most of the older generation subjects strongly commented that they have read the Thai newspaper in Thai temples or at a Thai restaurant. Usually they prefer to read from printed newspapers because it contains more content. They don't normally read online news because they don't know how to access the online sources. If reading news online is their only choice, it would be really hard for them because they have to adjust themselves and it might prevent them from updating news. Another research participant stated, “I think the printed types of newspaper are very crucial. It is necessary for elders and online news is suitable for younger generations so a publisher should have both types of newspapers. I believe the newspapers will not move to be completely online within 5 years.”

### **Summary and analysis.**

The problems of preparing a local newspaper in Los Angeles during the early period were various, for example bad management, rough formatting, and under standard forms. The papers often do not focus on a main theme of the newspaper lack professional journalistic ethics. The publishers should publish their newspapers as regularly as possible in order to keep their production up to date. At present, most of the team who make local newspapers are limited to Thai's hailing from central Thailand and therefore lack diversity in representing opinions from the entirety of Thailand. In addition, the newspapers were not published in accordance with the philosophy of journalism. They never enhance or develop the related officials and promote professionalism. Therefore, the organization was unstable as the journalists and the publishers aimed to gain popularity and power. Unfortunately, many of the readers themselves did not believe the news presented.

However, the overall appearance of the local newspaper in Los Angeles, as seen above, is the weakness to the develop local newspapers that are socially acceptable, especially in the current era, when people are more educated and they require more quality and trustworthy media sources.

The obvious weakness of the local newspaper in LA is that the publishers lack a clear target audience, quality products and staff. Consequently, the local newspapers in Los Angeles are not well recognized, accepted by society or the readers. It is impossible to build a readership base to increase and research shows that the future to develop the

business as a stable and sustainable professional newspaper organization. The local newspapers of Los Angeles respond less to local development because of structural problems with management issues, personnel issues, financial issues (revenue from sponsors only), or even the lack information, manpower and professional expertise. In addition, a better understanding of the local Los Angeles demographics is essential. Overall, this affects the needs of local people. It is also dominated by offering news of mainstream newspapers from Thailand. The newspapers do not understand the Thai context, which is the immigrant community in the US. This community has different cultures, and those cultural changes play a major role among people in the Thai community. These are all important factors that determine the quality of the local newspapers there.

Local newspapers of Los Angeles should pay much attention to achieve the purpose of creating Snap local communities: however, the current performance standards of local Thai newspapers are not high enough. It is essential that local newspapers understand and recognize the limitations and local realities including the important basic factors which can lead to an effective presentation of information about local communities and achieve positive social missions in their local communities.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

There are three main issues to be analyzed and concluded for the Thai mass media in Los Angeles. Firstly, how do the six Thai newspapers serve the community? Secondly, what are the characteristics of each newspaper and how do they appeal to the readers? Thirdly, what are the challenges for the Thai mass media in Los Angeles? Lastly, what are the strengths and weaknesses and recommendations that will be presented?

Regarding the first issue, there is a rich history of the Thai newspaper industry in Los Angeles. In 1970, the first Thai newspaper was launched to serve about 10,000 Thai people. Currently, there are six Thai newspapers in Los Angeles with 300,000 readers. In addition, these six newspapers reach about one million readers throughout the United States. Because of limited skills of the aging readers referring to technology, they rely heavily on hard copy versions instead of accessing online editions.

However, it was quite difficult for any Thai newspaper in 1970s to survive because there were only a few Thai businesses existing during that period. In fact, there was only one weekly newspaper, "Sereechon" which was able to survive because of its good management and financial stability. The other five newspapers came and went because of poor management and insufficient financial support.

There are four possible main reasons why the current six newspapers are able to survive at the present time. First, there are many successful businesses that are willing to purchase the advertisement space within publications. These Thai

enterprises comprise of about nine hundred Thai restaurants in Los Angeles alone and over three thousand restaurants throughout the United States.

Second, even though the Thai community is rather young, it is somewhat reaching its maturity. As a matter of fact, there are many Thai government offices operating in the United States such as the Royal Thai Consulate, the Thai Tourism Organization, the Thai Trade Center and the Thai Board of Investment.

In Los Angeles alone, there are over twenty Thai temples and over one hundred temples throughout the United States. There are as many as ten Thai university alumni associations. These organizations keep their members close together and often times information is shared between the organization members and between the organizations.

Third, the owners of each newspaper have financial stability because of their successful ventures.

Fourth, all newspapers are distributed free of charge. The readers do not have anything to lose. Each newspaper is placed in almost all Thai restaurants, temples and markets. Each newspaper takes turns to distribute the newspapers. Kao Sod newspaper is the first. It is launched every Wednesday and followed by Seree Chai newspaper on Thursdays. The other four newspapers are distributed on Fridays. Since the readers often shop during the weekend, they would pick up all these newspapers at about the same time. By Monday each week, all Thai newspapers are all gone.

Each newspaper has its own charm and appeal. Siam Media newspaper, in its 30th year of its existence, is one of the most popular newspapers because of their effective delivery. Ten thousand hard copies are delivered to their target areas in a timely manner. The truck drivers begin delivering on Friday morning and carry on until Saturday. Its primary audiences are in the Los Angeles area in its own market niche. Its online version is for the worldwide audience. Siam Media has a large advertising section, which is the most popular among those who look for jobs or any kinds of advertisements. This newspaper has made substantial profits from the advertisements.

The third reason for its success is due to its content. Arkadet Sripipat, the publisher and Dr. Vivat Sethachuay, a prominent banker and a successful businessman, is the driving force to make this newspaper successful. Arkadet has been in the newspaper publication business for over twenty years and has developed Siam Media into a prosperous stage of success. Also, Dr. Vivat who has been writing for this newspaper for over seventeen years has many consistent followers. He focuses on business and politics in his writings.

Thai LA newspaper is unique in appealing to a particular audience. The owner is a successful businessman and he is able to provide financial support to run the

newspaper. He owns the largest Thai supermarket and his newspaper is a part of his business to keep his high profile in the community. It is a good business for him and suits his highly active lifestyle through diversifying his businesses. In addition, Mr. Virat Rojanapaya, the publisher, is highly respected in the community. He has been in the newspaper business since 1975, when he was an editor of “Sereechon”. He has a lot of followers for his own right. Also, there is a prolific writer from a major newspaper in Thailand that writes for this newspaper. He appeals to many of the newspapers audiences. In addition, it’s “Social Section News” is very popular. Seree Chai newspaper is unique as well. It is the oldest newspaper being established in 1975. But in 1988, there was a change of ownership. The newspaper changed its name to “Seree Chai” from “Sereechon.” It also publishes the annual Yellow Pages of over one thousand pages. It has been in existence for over thirty years and draws most of its revenues through advertisements. There are many prolific writers. Somjet Payakarit, the current editor-in-chief, used to be the editor-in-chief of Siam Media.

Seree Chai is one the best, well-managed and well-run newspapers among the six newspapers. There are hundreds of loyal subscribers throughout the United States. However, its popularity is declining because the management team allows a few controversial writers to antagonize some politicians, which has created unnecessary friction within the Thai community living in Los Angeles.

Asian Pacific newspaper is very popular in terms of its professional journalism. Mr. Paisan Promnoi is the publisher and he is the only trained journalist by profession among the Thai journalists in Los Angeles. He was also a lecturer at Thammasart University in Journalism in Thailand prior to his coming to the United States over 30 years ago. His writing style is very stipulating and objective. His newspaper presents both Thai and Laotian sections. Its strength is that it can draw audiences from both Thai and Laotian audience.

Siam Thai Town newspaper stands out from other publications as its lay-out is very clean. It's main competitor is Siam Media in terms of the amount of advertisements. Since the editor is rather aggressive to pursue the hottest news; therefore, there is a lot jealousy from the other five newspapers.

Kao Sod newspaper is on its 25th year and is a rather small newspaper. Sriwong Ayasith, the owner, is merely a registered nurse and does not have any previous experience in journalism; therefore, this reflects the quality of her newspaper. The circulation of Kao Sod is very small compared to the other five newspapers. There is only one full-time staff member. This puts Kao Sod at a disadvantaged position to stay competitive with the other Thai newspapers.

To some extent these six newspapers serve 300,000 Thais in the Thai community in Los Angeles. However, they do a poor job to serve almost a million people throughout the United States. Their websites need to be improved, particularly their



online news versions. This is due to their poor investment in technology and personnel.

Additionally, these six newspapers do not serve the audiences who were born in the United States. This is because the majority of Thai's born in the US cannot read the Thai language. The publishers of each newspaper should reach out to young people to come in as 'interns' during the summer vacation in order to get them exposed to the Thai mass media and allow them to write English versions in a smaller scale. Generally, the trend for the online version is on the rise in the mass media industry. Unfortunately, the Thai newspapers have not kept up with this trend. In fact, the preferences of the readers from the first generation of immigrants still rely on hard copy versions. They are familiar with the online versions. Though, at least 25% of the older generation turns to the hard copy version rather than the online publication.

During my two research and data collection ventures to Los Angeles, having the opportunity to interact and interview readers, community leaders, owners/editors of all six newspapers, my recommendations are follows:

The Thai Mass Media Association is rather influential. The association was established a number of years ago but there is no continuity. Quite often, the president of the organization stays in the office for a long time, rarely visiting Thai media outlets. The president has also been in office for many years. Members of the association have not attended a meeting in years. Obviously, there is a power struggle in the Thai newspaper enterprise. Newspaper publishers, editor-in-chiefs and owners for all newspapers are self-centered. Each is trying to play politics to serve their own interests rather than serving the community and the interest of the entire mass media enterprise. There is no strong leadership in the overall Thai media business structure. Mr. Paisan Promnoi, the current president, a highly respected journalist but to some extent he is a rather controversial figure. And it is quite difficult for him to build a cohesive organization.

***Future Challenges:*** There are six issues and challenges facing the Thai Mass Media Association (TMMA) in Los Angeles that are urgently needed to be addressed and resolved.

Firstly, the TMMA has a history of disputes and mistrust with one another. These principal concerns could be solved through their willingness for every newspaper owner and editor to learn to overcome their differences and to trust the workings of group dialogue and cooperation.

In order to make this important association to survive and to represent the Thai media enterprise well, it is extremely imperative that the TMMA should create a cohesive partnership to work together as 'dialogue partners' in resolving any issues they are facing. The association will create trust among themselves otherwise their mistrust will deepened and widened and it may not benefit anybody. The TMMA must create a legitimate organization by having by-laws in place. If they do so, the TMMA will

have a strong voice not only representing the organization, but also speaking on behalf of the entire community on certain issues. This recommendation should be implemented as soon as possible and it is quite urgent.

Secondly, each newspaper should keep its own archive. During the past 41 years, there is no single newspaper keeps its own archive. It is a big loss for the community. Unfortunately, the Thai community has lost a great treasure. The damage is done and it is almost impossible to repair. Fortunately, with the far sight of the Royal Thai Consul-General Damrong Kraikruan, he has already launched a remarkable project to begin archiving all Thai newspapers.

Thirdly, there is no book written about the history of the Thai mass media in Los Angeles. It is a rich history my future intentions are to research and compile a book focusing on Thai media coverage in the United States.

Fourthly, the Thai Mass Media Association should establish an external relationship with the outside world. They should not only increase networking with the American mass media professionals, but they should also create a good relationships with the Thai mass media in Thailand collectively or individually.

Lastly, all Thai newspaper owners and editors should be made aware of the significance of the trends of online versions and take measures in order to survive. There is a good future and a great hope for the Thai mass media in Los Angeles. If the people involved could agree on practical long term goals, improving communication within the Thai community and create a great vision, then seriously carry out their vision the success of the Thai media in Los Angeles can become a model for other communities worldwide.

**Recommendations from the research:** Based on the results from the desirable features of the local newspaper. The researcher has suggested as following:

1. Local newspapers should focus on providing useful content to the community and locals as much as possible. Most local news readers are interested in useful content, which can be helpful in everyday life. The local newspaper should be more aware of the responsibilities and ethics of journalism.
2. The local newspaper should develop various ways of delivering a variety of content increasing more interesting issues.
3. The local newspaper executives should develop knowledge and competence of their personnel. 4. They should have the central organization of the local newspaper in governance, ethics and responsibility to stimulate awareness of ethical standards for the local newspaper on a regular basis.

### **Suggestions to the research.**

1. The Department of Communications should design courses or subjects related to the production of a local newspaper by surveying the local needs and cooperating with local newspapers to develop appropriate curriculum. This would be a collaboration between academia and professional publications.
2. The agencies who are involved in local newspapers, including journalists, publishers and professional should take part in developing local newspapers in order to help standardize the newspapers sustainably.
3. Journalists or reporters' competency should increase, and journalism ethics should become standardized. The professional association should take part in creating professionalism among all levels of the Thai media providers.
4. Governmental sectors and private sectors should cooperate in developing local newspapers because it is equal to developing the community.

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