

7-1998

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Recommended Citation

Lewis, G., Thai reporting of Australia in the 1990's economic crisis, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 5, 1998, 103-115.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss5/8>

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MEDIA COMMENTARY

Thai Reporting Of Australia In The 1990's Economic Crisis

This article considers some of the factors that shape Thai international news reporting and makes a qualitative analysis of two leading Thai English-language dailies -- The Bangkok Post and The Nation's -- coverage of Australian news before and since the Asian financial crisis of July 1997. It concludes that while Thai coverage of Australia is either positive or benign, there are ambiguities in this coverage. Thai perceptions are quite sensitive to any evidence of Australian anti-Asian attitudes, as in the rise of the One Nation party.

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Thailand's spectacular growth in the 1980s was followed by an equally striking collapse when its currency devaluation set off the Asian financial crisis in July 1997. Yet despite the importance of the Thai experience in Southeast Asia, few studies have been made of the Thai media and fewer still of Thai international news reporting. The first part of this article will outline some of the contextual factors that shape Thai international reporting. The second part will then use Thai English-language press reporting of Australian news before and after the financial crisis of 1997 as a case study of the dynamics of Thai international journalism.

The two leading English-language dailies in Thailand are the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*. Although a number of other English-language dailies began during the economic boom in the second half of the 1990s, most collapsed with the financial crisis. This article will consider the reporting of Australian news in the *Post* (BP) and the *Nation* (TN) from the mid-1990s to the present to determine the newsframes (Entman, 1991) used to portray Australia and Thai relations with Australia.

This article does not delve into the Thai-language press due to my limitations in the Thai language. Nevertheless, this analysis is useful as both BP and TN are widely read by Thai elites. They

©AsiaPacific
MediaEducator
Issue No.5
July - Dec.1998

Historical Influences

provide much more international news coverage than the Thai tabloids, and perhaps more so than the other elite papers (Boonrak, 1982; Wasant, 1992).

Another limitation is that Thailand and Australia have relatively little in common historically or culturally. Australia is not a major country in the Thai international news map and vice-versa. Australian reporting of Thai news is probably even less than Thai coverage of Australia. Putnis' study on international news flows covering one week in September, 1995, showed that then Australia ranked 12th on the Thai international news map, while for Australia, Thailand ranked 26th (Putnis et al, 1998).

Thailand is the only Asian country (except for Japan) not to have been colonised. This important historical factor influences both their foreign policies and their international news reporting. Thai foreign policy has often been described as 'bending with the wind', to indicate the historical need for the Thais to keep changing their international and regional alliances to preserve their independence (Buszynski, 1994). During World War II, for instance, when Japan occupied the nation, the Thai government formally supported Japan against the Allies. Yet at the same time there was a Free Thai (*Seri Thai*) movement that fought the Japanese, and its leader, Pridi Banomyong, became one of the first post-war Prime Ministers (Wright, 1991).

Other historical factors have shaped Thai foreign policy. First, in the twentieth century they have had significant links with a range of Western powers. The British pioneered the teak industry in Northern Thailand and there has been a tradition of elite Thais being educated in European schools and universities. The Thai legal system also derives from French precedents. The Thai monarchy, which played a central role in Thai modernisation, often looked to Europe.

Second, in the 1960s and 1970s the US involvement in Vietnam made Thailand a front line state in the war against communism. Large numbers of American troops were stationed in Thailand and major US financial and tactical support was given to the Thai military. The expansion of the domestic Thai sex industry and the subsequent AIDS problems often are attributed to the US interregnum, although the Thai sex industry traditionally has been for locals (Askew, 1997). America also indelibly influenced Thai education and popular culture. Thai journalism education and communication programs mostly follow US models. American popular culture is also as dominant in Thailand as in the rest of the region, and the largest number of expatriate Thais live in the US.

Third, Thailand in the post-war years has been a regional centre for Chinese and Japanese influence. Some 14% of the Thai population are Chinese-Thai, yet most of these are in Bangkok, where perhaps as many as 40% of the city's eight million people are Sino-Thai (Chatavanich, 1997). The integration of the Chinese into Thai society is the most striking successful example of multiculturalism in Southeast Asia, especially compared with Indonesia or Malaysia. However, it is historically misleading to describe Thai language, media and educational policies as multicultural, as they have mostly followed an assimilationist, nationalist path (Reynolds, 1991).

More recently, with the Japanese-led economic boom in East and Southeast Asia, especially after the mid-1980s, the Thai economy has increasingly gravitated towards Tokyo. The auto industry, electronics and manufacturing in Thailand became major sites of Japanese investment. Although Japanese cultural influence in Thailand is less visible than Western or Chinese, until the 1997 crash Bangkok was home to some 25 000 expatriate Japanese. Japanese cultural and educational influence has extended into Thai society in many ways, such as the training of Thai managers and workers in Japan (Yoshihara, 1990).

Lastly, there are the historical links Thailand has to its own region. Burma (Myanmar) is seen as the traditional enemy of Thailand, due to the Burmese invasion and destruction of the former Thai capital, Ayudhya, in the 18th century. Thailand's great economic success in the 1980s, however, and Burma's repressive military dictatorship, has meant that Burmese foreign labour comes to Thailand, not vice versa. Burmese contract labour was important until the 1997 crash in the southern Thai fishing industry and in low-paid construction and labouring work in Thailand.

Laos is seen as the closest cultural neighbour to Thailand, due to the historical origins of the Thai people coming from southern China through Laos to Thailand, and the linguistic similarities between Lao and Thai (Ngaosyvatan, 1994).

Cambodia has remained one of the regional trouble-spots for Thailand, with its tragic experience with the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot, and its continuing problems with civil war between the Hun Sen and Ranariddh factions (Kevin, 1998). The Thai military has regularly been involved in controversies about its involvement in Cambodia, especially for its alleged dealings with the Khmer Rouge over illegal forestry and diamond mining practices. By comparison, Thai relations with Malaysia are relatively peaceful if not warm. Periodic border disputes involving Muslim-Thai separatists and other border incidents were a feature of the relationship until recently.

What this pattern of historical influences and geographical constraints means for Thai foreign policy and international news reporting is that the great powers Thailand is most concerned with are the US, Japan, China and Europe. Regionally, Thailand's continuing experience as a 'front line state' with Cambodia and Myanmar, and its strategic centrality to mainland Southeast Asia, means that foreign policy and the press pay very close attention to Indochinese issues. The Bangkok papers therefore are mostly concerned with US, Japanese, Chinese and European news on the one hand, and Thailand's immediate region on the other. ASEAN issues are also regularly covered, though reports about Malaysia, Singapore and the other ASEAN states are located mainly in the context of regional affairs or their bilateral contacts with Thailand.

Some features of the Thai foreign policy process and the question of government media control also need to be appreciated in considering the nexus between Thai foreign policy and international reporting. In US studies of the relations between foreign policy and international reporting, the argument has been made that journalists and diplomats in the US engage in a process of mutual influence (O'Heffernan, 1993). In foreign news reporting in any country, official sources will be in a position to influence journalists' reports because of their privileged access to policy and decision-makers. In the US, its relatively transparent political system and the intensity of media scrutiny makes it likely that such a 'mutual influence' model may be plausible, despite claims to the contrary by US critics (eg., Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

In Asian states, however, even in a democratising state like Thailand, which traditionally has a reputation along with the Philippines of having the freest press in Southeast Asia, the notion of 'mutual influence' between Thai journalists reporting foreign news and politicians is inappropriate. Thai foreign policy traditionally was a monopoly of the Thai political elites and the Army (Vatikiotis, 1996). The National Security Council and the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintained close links.

Any reports that challenged the national interest as expressed in Thai foreign policies were unlikely to be made. The Army still retains control over most of the national Thai radio stations and is the formal owner of the majority of the Thai television stations. While the television stations and some radio stations are leased out to commercial operators, Thai radio, in particular, usually has supported the Thai Army (Ubonrat, 1992). During the Banharn and Chavalit administrations in 1996-97 critical political comment was actively discouraged.

Coverage Before The Asian Crisis

Thai-Australian relations generally have been positive. There was little sustained cultural exchange between the two until the 1990s. At that time the boom in the Thai economy boosted the rate of international travel, education and tourism between the two countries. Bilateral foreign policy matters mostly have been concerned with trade and strategic issues. However, media relations between Thailand and Australia have not so far been marred by the kind of incipient hostility that has developed over time between the Australian press and Malaysia's Dr Mahathir (Nordin, 1997), or with the Indonesian government over East Timor (Kingsbury, 1997).

Australia provided substantial financial and military aid to Thailand during its development period to the 1980s. In the mid-1970s Australia was the largest foreign aid donor to Thailand behind the US, the UN and Japan (BP 19 Apr 98). Since then the Thai boom and the relative stability of the region has reduced the need for that support - at least, until the financial crisis in July 1997. The opening of the 'Friendship Bridge' between Laos and Thailand in 1994, attended by then PM Paul Keating, was the culmination of that original phase of development aid.

Nevertheless, Thai knowledge of Australia, as evidenced in press and television reporting, is episodic and rather stereotypical. So far as there is a public image of Australia in Thailand, it has come more from media reports about the exploits of Australian sportsmen, and advertising by the Australian Tourist Commission, which has sold Australia globally as a wilderness paradise with mod-cons (BP 29 Aug 96). Several Thai elite figures, such as the Crown Prince and Dr Mechai Virvaidya - a well-known champion of family planning and safe sex programs, known as 'Mr Condom' - studied at ADFA (Australian Defence Forces Academy) and Melbourne University respectively (BP 24 Aug 98). Since the early 1990s, more Thai students came to Australian universities. The National Thai Studies Centre was established at Australian National University in Canberra in 1991, while Australian and New Zealand Studies Centres were created at Kasetsart and Khon Kaen Universities in 1996 (BP 30 Aug 96).

From the mid-1990s to the beginning of the financial crisis in mid-1997, Thai media coverage of Australia increased steadily and was often positive particularly in foreign policy issues. However, another newsframe that emerged periodically concerned the experiences of Australian individuals who had got into trouble in Thailand or the region. These were human interest-type stories, though some had a political edge. The most prominent newsframe which emerged just before July 1997 was critical reports about Pauline Hanson and her anti-Asian immigration One Nation party.

Concerning Australian foreign policy issues with regional implications, the overall tone of Thai press coverage tended to treat Australia as a Western rather than as an Asian country. Australia was represented as a small cousin of the more powerful Western states, especially the US. Two diplomatic issues were important to Thailand — the launch of the ASEM (Asia and Europe) group, which had its first meeting in Bangkok in 1994, and second, the subject of the enlargement of ASEAN's membership. Coming at the height of the former Labor government's 'engaging with Asia' period, whether Australia should be allowed to participate in ASEM meetings was diplomatically sensitive. Just as Dr Mahathir had earlier attempted to challenge the APEC grouping with an alternative Asians-only East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) alliance, he again opposed Australian membership in ASEM. Although Thailand's then PM Banharn supported the Australian attempt to become an ASEM member (BP 23 Apr 96), this was not achieved. In the ASEAN membership issue, Australia tended to follow the US line of criticising human rights in Burma (TN 19 Mar 97).

Trade issues were less politically contentious than ASEM and ASEAN, and this was reflected in the relatively neutral reporting of bilateral trade stories. These concerned mostly aviation rights, tourism, and education. QANTAS and THAI airways had been engaged in a dispute about regional carriage rights for some years. THAI executives claimed that Thailand was disadvantaged by current practices. These permitted QANTAS more flights out of Australia to Europe stopping in Bangkok, than the number of THAI flights allowed into Australia. The matter was eventually resolved to their mutual satisfaction (BP 5 Mar 98).

Tourism was an industry considered important to both countries. News articles focused on the the countries' potential tourist destinations for their nationals and comments on the tourism promotion campaigns. For instance, the Australian Tourist Commission's more technologically based marketing practices were used as a model for the Tourism Authority of Thailand (BP 5 Nov 96). Concerning education, as the marketing initiatives of Australian universities developed, a number of positive stories were written about Australian tertiary institutions as a less expensive alternative to US and Europe (TN 26 Feb 97).

As the Thai economy continued to boom in the early 1990s and domestic levels of affluence increased, it became possible for the first time for larger numbers of Thais to travel abroad and seek education overseas. This affluence also led to ambitious plans from some of the larger companies to expand regionally and internationally. Mostly, these new business stories were focused

on the region and China. Large Thai conglomerates, such as the agri-business group *Charoen Pokphand*, tended to focus on China, while other Thai communications companies, such as *Shinawatra*, focused on Indochina, the Philippines and India (Klaiwongse, 1997). Australia did not feature in these plans, except for one spectacular project in mid-1996. The UCOM group, a large cellular-phone company, proposed to establish a satellite launch station at Darwin, Australia, in a joint-venture with STS, an Australian company headed by Queensland ex-National Party Premier Mike Ahern (Lewis, 1996).

The second major category of Thai reporting about Australia before the crisis might be described as human-interest stories. Hughes (1968) suggested that human-interest stories may be as important a staple theme of international news as in domestic news reporting. Such stories can be either good or bad news, depending on the event. In this case, they tended to be bad ones, focussing on the problems of Australians in the region. These also tended to have a political edge. The major story here, which gained considerable coverage internationally, as well as in Thailand and Australia, was the kidnapping of David Wilson and three other young Westerners, by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in 1994.

The Wilson kidnapping issue was seen quite differently in the two countries. Thailand's relations with Cambodia were much more intense and troubled; Australia's links with Cambodia's were relatively marginal. Former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans had actively supported the UN peace process in Cambodia that culminated in the election of the dual Hun Sen-Ranariddh government in 1993. Otherwise, Cambodia was probably a blip on the consciousness of most Australians, except perhaps for knowledge of 'The Killing Fields' era of Pol Pot (Knight, 1994).

Thailand had much more serious immediate concerns about Cambodia than the fate of a few young Westerners. A sizeable Cambodian refugee population resided in Thailand for almost a decade after Pol Pot's downfall, and sections of the Thai military retained covert links with Khmer Rouge for illegal logging and diamond trading (Frost, 1993). This broader regional context was mostly unacknowledged in Australian reporting of the Wilson kidnapping case. The agony of the Wilson family and their friends was shown on Australian TV screens, commercial and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in 1994. Eventually, it was reported that the captives had been executed, not too long after their kidnapping, though questions of moral responsibility still remain. Evans' handling of the matter had been criticised by family friends in Australia, and reportedly Thaksin rebuked him for his comments about the role of the Thai military in Cambodia. Thai military dislike of the Australian criticisms was also reported

to be a factor in the Army's reluctance to finalise an arms deal with Australian suppliers.

Thai press coverage of the issue, however, was less fixed on the fate of one Australian individual, and not overly concerned about Evans. It was more preoccupied with Thailand's own ongoing difficulties with Cambodia. To the extent that the Australian angle of the episode received attention, however, it fitted into the existing newsframe of young Westerners getting into trouble in Thailand. This was a theme that went back to the imprisonment and execution of Australians and other Westerners in Thai prisons for drug offences (*'Bangkok Hilton'*, an Australian TV mini-series on this subject, was made in 1989).

This kind of association between the reporting of Australians as unfortunate victims in the region had a potential ambiguity. From another viewpoint it might be considered that if they were in trouble they possibly deserved to be. In this light, the kidnap victims were foolhardy, while the other Australians were in prisons for drug offences and deserved to be. The ambivalence of Thai journalists to Westerners is worth exploring here. Papers like TN are at times so patriotic that they adopt an anti-Western stance. When this happens Australians are a safer target than Americans, as they come from a much smaller and less powerful country.

TN is more outspoken on many issues than BP. A significant number of the staff of BP are Westerners. The current chief sub-editor of the BP's international news desk, for instance, is an Australian, Natalie Bennett (See BP 21 Sep 98). TN's coverage of international news tends to focus more on Thailand's immediate region and it has a regional news desk, unlike BP. The combative style of TN is personified by one of its senior reporters and group editor, Suthichai Yoon. Yoon writes a regular *"Thai Talk"*, column for BP for five years after 1969, and became one of the founding editors of TN in 1971 (Suthichai, 1995). Suthichai's adversarial style is untypical for Thai journalism, but an aggressive nationalist stance is not for TN whose staff is almost entirely Thai. Historically, the Thai press, especially the Thai-language press, has been highly partisan (McCargo, 1996).¹

The potential ambiguity in Thai journalism and public attitudes to Australians, considered as Westerners, became more pronounced when the first reports about Pauline Hanson were made in late 1996. This might be considered the first phase of international Asian attention to Hansonism, following her notorious maiden speech to parliament in September, 1996. Shortly after, the editors of both Bangkok papers made a point of criticising Hanson, in editorials and in television interviews for Australian audiences. The editor of BP took an unusually interventionist

position, warning that the country's 'White Australia' history was in danger of being revived. This would confound any Australian government's attempts to become part of Asia. In a similar vein, Dr Mechai, normally a staunch friend of Australia, claimed that Prime Minister John Howard should resign for his failure to condemn Hanson.

When the financial crisis hit in July 1997 among the business casualties were sections of the Thai media and telecom companies. Several English-language dailies that had been started up in the mid-1990s and some Thai-language dailies shut down. These included the M Group's *Asia Times* and *Financial Day*, and Wattachak's *Thailand Times*. Hundreds of journalists lost their jobs and a public fund was launched to assist them. In telecoms, the UCOM, TA (Telecom Asia) and TT&T (Thai Telegraph and Telephone) incurred huge debts as their large overseas borrowings were held in unhedged funds (BP 30 Jun 98). In pay-TV, the two main competitors, Shinawatra's IBC and the CP-backed UTV merged in April 1998 to form UBC.

Thailand's focus turned sharply inward at this time and the ambitious plans held for domestic and international expansion by Thai media companies were shelved (Lewis, 1998). News coverage was concentrated on the economy and the new Chuan government elected in November 1997, especially its dealings with the embattled finance companies and the IMF. The question of responsibility for the crash was widely canvassed in the press. Stories were a mixture of support for the US and the IMF, counter-balanced by claims that the US had acted too late in assisting Thailand and that the IMF rescue plan was not working (TN 10 Sep 98)

The financial crisis had major political consequences. Concerns that sections of the Thai economy would now be taken over by foreigners were raised. Prominent Thai figures, such as King Bhumiphol and the Buddhist social critic, Sulak Sivaraksa, argued Thailand should go back to its agricultural roots and foster a 'contented economy' (TN 21 Jul 98). The other major political issue was the successful passage of the new Thai constitution in October 1997. This included provisions for a democratically representative press council and added pressure towards the liberalisation of Thai media.

Thai attention to foreign news, except for that relating to the economic crisis, declined considerably after July 1997. The relatively small coverage of Australian news since then should be seen in that context. Given the dominance of the economic crisis in Thai public consciousness, it is not surprising that many of its

Coverage Of Aust Since The Financial Crisis

subsequent Australian news reports have fallen into a positive newsframe about Australia acting as a friend in need. News about Australian direct assistance to Thailand via its contribution of US \$1 billion to the IMF rescue package was reported this way (TN 25 Apr 98).

Stories about bilateral trade and educational relations were relatively minor though reported positively. The interest of Australian companies, such as the ANZ bank, in investing in the restructured Thai financial sector were covered (BP 18 Jun 98). The prior experience of Australian out-placement firms dealing with displaced company executives was also reported (N 11 May 98). Moderately positive coverage was given to the efforts of Australian universities to attract Thai students by a new scholarships scheme from Western Australia (BP 1 Sep 98). The experience of the Australian Tourist Commission in preparing for the Olympics was also seen as a favorable model for Thailand's Asian Games in December 1998 (N 7 Aug 97). Another favorable story concerned an agreement between Deputy PM Tim Fischer and the Thai agricultural Minister to oppose the US position on greenhouse emissions at the earlier Kyoto environmental conference (BP 23 Jun 98).

The main counter-balancing negative reports of Australia since the crisis concerned the fortunes of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. The success of that party in the Queensland state elections in June 1998 was critically reported in both papers, with strongly anti-Hanson articles (N 5 Jun 98; BP 21 Sep 98). Finally, with the October 1998 Australian federal election, many lead-in stories reviewed the Hanson issue, with some dire warnings about the damage to Australia's image in Asia that would be done were Hanson's party to succeed (eg. Rhodes, 1998).

Conclusion: No News Is Good News?

The immediate point of this survey is that Thai reporting of Australia, with the exception of the Hanson case, has been positive in the second half of the 1990s. Secondly, Thai journalists' newsframes about Australia have constantly emphasised on elite foreign and trade policy stories, with some attention to human-interest material about Australians in trouble in the region, and the Hanson issue. Nevertheless, an analysis of the Thai-language press could reveal different themes and possibly a less positive attitude. A more theoretical question concerns the usefulness of such a bilateral news comparison. The literature on international news flows tends to be dominated by US or European global studies that usually depend on large scale cooperative and quantitative collection methods, eg., the current work of Robert Stephenson and Annabelle Srebeny, the Australian section of

which is being coordinated by Peter Putnis (Putnis and Patterson). Such studies are important in providing an overview of global trends in international news reporting, but are also handicapped by the time and resources they require, and the datedness of their results when they finally appear. A qualitative study of reporting on a bilateral, regional basis is a useful supplement to these more macro news studies. To take this approach further would require several steps.

First, an analysis of Australian reporting of Thailand in the same period - it would seem that Australian news stories usually have relied on negative stereotypes of Thailand as a centre of sex, drugs, and AIDS, and positively as a prime tourist destination. Second, a comparative review of methods of journalism education and press ownership and control in both countries (Paisal, 1988; Oranuj, 1988). And third, analysis of the Thai-language press. A wider question is the role of the English-language press in Asia, and how accurate its representation of international news may be.

The more substantive point that emerges from this analysis concerns the potential ambiguity of Thai attitudes. Although coverage of Australian news is usually benign and often positive, both the Hanson issue and the newsframe of Australians in trouble in the region gave Thai journalists occasions to express anti-Australian feelings. While Thai politicians and public intellectuals did not take up the 'Asian Values' theme articulated in Singapore and Malaysia in the pre-1997 period (Yao, 1994), Thai national pride should never be under-estimated. If the democratisation process underway since the early 1990s is seriously weakened by the current economic crisis, Thai leaders could turn away from Western-based models of social order, as Mahathir recently has in Malaysia. In this scenario, Australians could become the whipping boy of the West in the region, as they are a smaller and weaker target for pan-Asian, anti-Western nationalist sentiment. ■

NOTES

1. In one of the few relevant studies McCargo (1996) argues that pressure from the Banharn ministry subordinated international news media to domestic political needs.

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