Politics and the Press in Thailand

Media Machinations

Duncan McCargo

Rethinking Southeast Asia

Politics and the Press in Thailand

An important element in the Thai success story during the boom years of the late 1980s and early 1990s was the flourishing and politically interventionist print media. *Politics and the Press in Thailand* is the first book in English to examine the tangled web of relationships linking newspaper owners, editors, columnists and reporters, with leading politicians and power-holders.

Duncan McCargo was granted unique access to the editorial meetings and newsrooms of Thailand's leading newspapers. Drawing on numerous interviews and extensive observation, this book unpacks the contradictions and dichotomies that underlie political coverage in the Thai language press. This highly original book discusses in detail:

- the historical and conceptual background of the press in Thailand
- the process of political news-gathering
- the work of parliamentary reporters
- the internal politics of a newsroom
- the influential role of political columnists
- the impact of the 1997 economic crisis on the Thai press.

McCargo argues that Thai definitions of 'news' and 'comment' lead to a passive attitude to news-gathering and questionable reporting practices based on reproducing the opinions of politicians and other senior figures. It is suggested that only a systematic reform of the news-gathering and news-production processes will lead to a substantive change in the way 'news' is presented to the Thai people.

Duncan McCargo is a senior lecturer in politics at the University of Leeds. His other books include: *Chamlong Srimuang and the New Thai Politics* (Hurst, 1997), *Media and Politics in Pacific Asia* (Routledge, 2001) and *Reforming Thai Politics* (edited, NIAS, 2001).

Rethinking Southeast Asia
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London and New York

First published 2000
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
McCargo, Duncan.
Politics and the press in Thailand: media machinations/Duncan McCargo.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Press and politics – Thailand. I. Title. II. Series.

PN4751 .M38 2000
079'.593–dc21 00-057637

ISBN 0-203-99599-6 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0–415–23376–3 (Print Edition)

Contents

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been written without David Beetham, who urged me to apply for the Economic and Social Research Council Research Fellowship which funded my work. I can only hope that the outcome justifies the faith he placed in me. The book is one major 'output' from my 1994–9 ESRC project H52427002694, 'The politics of the media in Thailand and Pacific Asia'. I gratefully acknowledge funding for my year's fieldwork in Bangkok (1995–6) from the ESRC, the British Academy Committee for South-East Asian Studies, and the Department of Politics, University of Leeds. I am greatly indebted to David S. Bell, my former Head of Department, for all his practical support.

In Thailand, I owe so many debts that I can never begin to repay them. I should like particularly to thank the editorial staff and reporters of the following publications: *Athit* (especially Chatcharin Chaiyawttn), *Thai Rath* (especially Pramote Fai-uppara), *Matichon* (especially Sommai Paritchart), *Phujatkan Daily* (especially Khamnoon Sitthisamarn), and *Siam Post* (especially Roj Ngamman), as well as all the parliamentary reporters I encountered (especially Charin Chamsakorn and Sirikan Onpheng) and the many other media staff with whom I came into contact during my research. I would especially like to thank all those who granted me interviews. Some of my sources have preferred to remain anonymous.

I am also very grateful to the following for their invaluable help and encouragement: Abhisit Vejjajiva, William A. Callahan, Chavarong Limpattamapanee, Matthew Copeland, Gordon Fairclough, Paul Handley, Kevin Hewison, Chalinee Hirano, Jane Vejjajiva, Korakot Surakul, Nattaya Chetchotiros, Nopporn Wong-Anan, Parichart Chotiya, Surasavadee Hunpayon, Walailak Piriyasurawong, Wilasinee Phiphitkul, and Wiraphan Tomibun.

The National Research Council of Thailand kindly provided me with research permission for the study. My local mentor, Sombat Chantornvong, not only sponsored my NRCT application but has also been a constant source of advice and ideas for the past decade. While Sombat is Thailand's most distinguished political scientist, Ubonrat Siriyuvasak is the most outstanding Thai scholar of media. I have learned an enormous amount from them both.

I am also extremely grateful to Kevin Hewison, Kittipong Soonprasert, Nantiya Tangwisutijit, Naruemon Thabchumpon and Savitri Gadavanij, who kindly gave me useful comments and answered questions on draft chapters. Kanokrat Lertchoosakul helped me with additional research assistance in April and May 2000. The remaining mistakes and misinterpretations are all mine.

Duncan McCargo
Leeds
June 2000

1 Introduction

Politics and the media in Thailand

The media in Thailand is one of the principal sites of political contestation. Although the electronic media remains subject to considerable state control, the print media has carved out a great deal of political space for itself. Few countries in the world have a print media as vibrant and energetic as Thailand's. Newspapers report freely and comment critically on all aspects of politics. The press is one of the most dynamic elements in Thai civil society, constantly monitoring and checking the power of both elected politicians and unelected bureaucrats. The Thai press proved its mettle in the political crisis of May 1992, when strong pressure from the print media was an important factor in driving the unpopular Suchinda government from office.

The Thai press is an island of outspokenness in a tight-lipped ocean. No other ASEAN country apart from the Philippines permitted the existence of such a lively, critical, and highly independent press.[1] The press in Vietnam and Burma was controlled by authoritarian regimes; in Malaysia and Singapore, formal and informal mechanisms of censorship abounded, while in Indonesia, until the fall of Suharto in 1998, self-censorship was widespread and publications were under constant threat of closure by the authorities. Unlike its counterparts in most of Southeast Asia, the Thai press has largely secured the right to say what it likes. Whereas in most other Southeast Asian countries the media is largely subordinate to state power, in Thailand relationships between the media and power-holders are vastly more ambiguous, and the issues involved more complex and subtle. This book sets out to explore those ambiguous relationships and complex issues, looking in some detail at the character of political coverage in the Thai press.

Background: the workings of the Thai press

This book is concerned primarily with the Thai language press. The overwhelming majority of newspaper readers read Thai language newspapers: at the time of fieldwork, the two major English language dailies (*Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*) had circulations of only around 60,000 each.[2] By contrast, the best-selling Thai language daily *Thai Rath* sold around 700,000 (over a million on the twice-monthly lottery days); its rivals *Daily News* and *Khao Sot* sold in the region of

400,000 and 160,000 respectively, whilst *Matichon* (a more serious newspaper) sold around 120,000. Other politically important newspapers at the time of fieldwork in 1995 included *Phujatkan* (70,000) and *Siam Post* (60,000). The majority of Thai politicians and political journalists are unable to read English well, and obtain the bulk of their news from Thai language sources.

Thai language newspapers exist in a parallel world to that of Thai politicians and political parties. Not for nothing is the best-selling *Thai Rath* sometimes referred to as a 'second government'. There are close connections between politicians and those who write about politics in Thai language newspapers. These are mutually beneficial arrangements. Both worlds are rich in rumour and gossip, characterised by constant power-play and intrigues.

Most of the research for this book was carried out during a year of fieldwork in Bangkok, from February 1995 to February 1996. I engaged in several spells of participant–observation research, lasting anything from three weeks to two months, at the following locations: the editorial office of *Athit Weekly* (March 1995); the political desk of *Thai Rath* newspaper (April 1995); the reporters' room at the Thai parliament (May 1995); the executive editor's office, *Matichon* newspaper (July–August 1995); the culture desk, *Phujatkan Daily* newspaper (October–November 1995); and the front-page desk, *Siam Post* (November 1995 to January 1996). Fieldwork typically involved working closely with newspaper staff, attending daily news meetings and other editorial meetings, accompanying reporters to events, and conducting both formal and informal interviews. The primary focus of my research was the methods and approaches of media practitioners to the coverage of political news; I was only secondarily interested in the political issues that the press was engaged in covering.

This book argues that, for all its vitality, strengths and remarkable achievements, the Thai press remains constrained by a number of factors from acting as a fully effective force for political change. Successful though they may often be in applying decisive pressure at times of political crisis, Thai newspapers are at the same time failing their readers and their society in numerous respects. In part, these shortcomings reflect structural problems within Thailand's state and society, and have important historical explanations. But another set of shortcomings reflect failures on the part of newspaper owners, editors, columnists and reporters to adapt to changing political conditions, and to change and improve their news-gathering methods and working practices over time. A fundamental argument of this book is that political news-gathering in Thailand remains locked in a kind of time warp.

One striking feature of political coverage in the Thai language press (discussed in detail in the news-gathering chapter) was the preoccupation with the gathering of quotations from 'big shots' in public life and the political world. The bulk of political news actually comprised a series of such quotations, without any real analysis, explanation or background. News had a different character and meaning from 'news' as understood in most other countries, even other countries in the same region. This was not a problem created by individual reporters but was inherent in the news-gathering system, which saw 'collections

of opinion' as equivalent to news. Whereas in most countries a news story had to have a clear point and was always summarised or set in context, in the world of Thai political news these principles were anathema. The contrast could not have been more explicit with a western publication such as *The Economist*, which had a policy of only using direct quotations from news sources where there was an important reason for doing so, and would rarely use more than a couple of sentences of direct speech. Accounting for this style of political news involves examining the Thai cultural and political context.

Thai newspapers maintained a strict distinction between two kinds of political material: news (consisting of the opinions of important figures in the wider world) and comment (consisting of the opinions of important figures inside the newspaper). In this status-based order, mere reporters had limited powers; they were not entitled to analyse or explain anything.[3] Analysis was the sole responsibility of columnists, who were already senior figures. But in practice, their 'analysis' was largely a matter of their personal opinion.[4] What was largely absent was the sense of a duty on the part of newspapers to inform and explain political developments to readers who were not 'in the know', who needed concise and accessible information. Columnists often preferred to write in an opaque fashion, demonstrating their own inside knowledge; in this way they tried to show their seniority and importance, their power over others.

Information (especially politically sensitive information) cannot necessarily be readily obtained in Thailand, even by those with good research skills. Because in Thai society access to information – like access to wealth and to power – derives mainly from inside connections, who you know largely determines what you know. Those who write for Thai newspapers and who wish to obtain exclusive stories need to establish 'special relationships' with news sources. Unfortunately, forming such a special relationship often involves compromising journalistic integrity. In some cases, 'special relationships', for example between columnists and politicians, involve newspaper staff in receiving material benefits.

For the most part, however, the political coverage of Thai newspapers more reflects a very high degree of bureaucratisation and routinisation. Reporters operate as channels for the pronouncements of 'big shots', both senior bureaucrats and party politicians. Reporters typically have a very limited range of news sources, and lay themselves open to performing a public relations role for vested interests: to a large extent, they 'wait for news' rather than 'look for news'. The apparatus of political news-gathering, focused as it is on key institutions such as Government House, parliament and the major ministries, reflects a highly conservative agenda which serves the interests of the state.[5]

Another feature of the Thai news media is its Bangkok focus. The extent to which Bangkok Thais are Bangkok-centric in their perception of Thailand is difficult to exaggerate; to the non-Thai, it can appear difficult to credit. The division of editorial departments into desks is revealing: typically, Thai newspapers have desks for types of news such as crime, politics, business, foreign news, sport, women, environment and entertainment. In addition to these, they have a separate desk for 'provincial' news. Any news story which breaks outside

Bangkok is first and foremost a provincial story; only in a secondary sense will it be considered a crime story, a political story, or whatever.

Thai newspapers do not, as a general rule, maintain proper news bureaux staffed by career reporters in provincial areas.[6] Instead, provincial news is the domain of 'stringers', who are paid largely by the story. Many stringers work for several different newspapers. Their status as local people in their districts and provinces makes it difficult for them to report objectively on many of the events which take place, since they work of necessity in close proximity with the very same government officials and businesspeople who are often most implicated in any illegal or semi-legal dealings. Provincial news is generally relegated to special pages designated for such news, most of which is extremely routine in nature. Most Bangkok-based reporters are uncomfortable travelling to provincial areas (other than areas with which they have some personal or family connections), and experience difficulty in obtaining news stories there. For them, important events are those which occur in the capital, or at least those involving national-level political figures. Beyond Bangkok is a kind of hinterland, where nothing of much significance is deemed to occur. Thus a typical political desk of a Thai newspaper might have twelve to fifteen reporters, none of whom ever venture outside Bangkok, except either to accompany a politician (such as the prime minister) on a provincial visit or to cover an election. The broad gamut of political activities which take place outside the capital, ranging from party meetings to farmers' protests, are dealt with mainly on inside pages, in short and dismissive stories.

The weakness of the system of provincial stringers was clearly illustrated during the run-up to the May 1995 no-confidence debate, when the Chuan Leekpai government was under attack over its handling of a land reform programme. Controversial former Deputy Agriculture Minister Suthep Theuksuban, the figure at the centre of the scandal, made a fiery and entirely unrepentant speech in his southern constituency of Surat Thani on 18 April. He called upon his supporters to march on Bangkok in their hundreds of thousands, to back up his stance on land reform. Local stringers in the province filed reports on the rally for all the main Bangkok dailies, but took the precaution of omitting Suthep's rabble-rousing call for a march on Bangkok. The only newspaper to get the story was *Siam Post*, which had flown one of its Bangkok-based political reporters down to Surat to listen to Suthep's speech. Once the story had appeared all over the front page of *Siam Post*, it was quickly picked up by other national newspapers and became a major issue, further undermining the credibility of the Democrats.[7] Yet the fact that an important development could be missed by all but one of the national papers because of self-censorship on the part of their stringers illustrated the weakness of the stringer system, and begged the question: how many significant issues and developments (especially 'upcountry') were missed by the national press simply because of structural problems in their news-gathering operations?

It is often argued that the transformation of the news media from relatively small-scale operations to the industrial character which it enjoyed in the 1990s

has led to an increasingly commercialised and business-oriented news media in Thailand. It is certainly the case that some Thai newspapers now form part of large business groups: these include *Thai Rath*, *Matichon*, *The Nation* and *Phujatkan*. Nevertheless, it is also the case that very few Thai newspapers are published solely for business reasons. Perhaps the single outstanding example of a profit-oriented major newspaper is *Daily News*, the second best-selling Thai language newspaper, produced by a family company which has never sought to involve itself greatly in political activities. Most other newspapers in Thailand are preoccupied not simply with increasing sales or advertising revenues, but also with exerting various forms of political and economic power and influence. Only a handful of newspapers (*Thai Rath*, *Daily News*, *Matichon*, *Khao Sot*, *The Nation*, *Krungthep Thurakit*, *Bangkok Post*) have turned in regular and consistent profits. Most others are essentially loss-leaders, fronts for advancing the views and interests of their owners. This has long been the tradition of the Thai press; newspapers have been vehicles for political lobbying, backstabbing and rabble-rousing, used by all manner of groups ranging from disgruntled foreigners to rightist vigilantes, from the military to communist insurgents, from party politicians to besieged monarchs. The purpose of owning a newspaper has been to advance your views, to get your voice heard, to talk up the prices of shares in companies you own, to discredit your enemies, to promote the interests of a friendly politician. Nor have these activities been confined to the formal owners of the newspaper, but they have also been available to those who could obtain access to its pages.

The distinction between news and comment in the Thai context has the effect of creating a class of columnists with considerable licence to voice their personal views. Because columnists are sometimes locked into mutually beneficial relationships with politicians, the net result is a kind of diversification of newspaper ownership. Each newspaper has an owner (sometimes formally constituted as a company, but generally with one individual in a commanding role), but those to whom newspaper space has been allocated (columnists, especially senior columnists who enjoy a kind of territorial right to a given number of regular column inches) are in turn able effectively to sub-lease this space to interested parties. Columnists sell their services to politicians on a long-term basis, working on behalf of particular partisan interests.

For a newspaper to adopt strong political stances which antagonised important power-holders was always risky. Politicians and other influential figures had numerous tactics at their disposal for toning down press criticism, ranging from co-optation to coercion. Any newspaper which sought to take on a powerful individual or group needed strong backing.[8] As Girling noted, 'with powerful protectors behind them, newspapers may also denounce or libel adversaries to a remarkable degree'.[9] For example, when Chatichai Choonavan was ousted by the National Peace-Keeping Council (NPKC) in the 1991 military coup, Sondhi Limthongkul, the owner of the *Phujatkan* group, used his newspapers to attack and undermine the NPKC's credibility. He did so with the tacit backing of Chatichai, and with the active support of a group of people who had been close

to the Chatichai government, including: Pansak Vinyaratn, former head of Chatichai's advisory team; Kraisak Choonavan, son of Chatichai and one of his advisors; Chai-Anan Samudavanija, Chulalongkorn University political science professor and one of the brains behind the advisory team; Chalerm Yubamrung, one of Chatichai's ex-ministers and sidekicks; and Manoon Roopkachorn, former 'Young Turk' military officer and coup-maker. Sondhi made his newspapers the focus of opposition to the NPKC, backed up by those who had lost out as a result of the coup.[10] When the NPKC was ousted from power after the bloody events of May 1992, Sondhi publicly called for Chatichai to be given a chance to return to the premiership, illustrating the extent to which he was allied with the ex-prime minister.

Similarly, *Thai Rath*, with formidable contacts in the political world and even within sections of the palace, was well placed to challenge power-holders. Yet the preferred style of *Thai Rath* was to achieve a *modus vivendi* with the government of the day. It would typically do this by first criticising and attacking a new administration, until the administration granted it respect and privileges in terms of access to information (not to mention business privileges). Generally, successive prime ministers would conclude that it was in their interests to kowtow to *Thai Rath*. General Prem Tinsulanond (1980–88), for example, who was always anxious that the press should not scrutinise his private life, cultivated excellent relations with *Thai Rath*'s owner, Kamphol Wacharapon. It is no coincidence that Prem was able to serve a remarkable eight years in office. Newspapers such as *Thai Rath*, and to a lesser extent *Matichon*, were able to co-operate pragmatically with governments of different varieties. Both welcomed the February 1991 coup and befriended the NPKC, but both were ready to denounce the coup-makers in May 1992 when they lost power.

Individual newspapers were rarely in a position to act alone. More often, their political interventions had the character of mutually beneficial collaborative ventures, or barter trade. During the May 1992 events, anti-NPKC publications, led by *The Nation*, *Phujatkan Daily* and *Naeo Na*, formed a broad front against the military. In 1995, *Thai Rath* was engaged in a circulation war with *Khao Sot*, a newspaper owned by the *Matichon* group. The result was that when *Thai Rath* led a campaign against the Chuan government based on the issue of a land reform scandal within the Democrat Party, *Matichon* and *Khao Sot* initially lent support to the Democrats in order to check *Thai Rath*'s political power. Only as weeks passed by and the evidence of wrongdoing by the Chuan administration mounted did other newspapers begin to emulate the stance of *Thai Rath*; until eventually even *Matichon* and *Khao Sot* began explicitly to oppose Chuan.

The land reform scandal was partly *Thai Rath*'s revenge for a previous story, a sex scandal involving prominent 'superstar' monk Phra Yantra. Beginning in 1994, *Khao Sot* had run allegations that Yantra had been engaged in sexual relationships with a number of women. Unwilling to support any story spearheaded by circulation rival *Khao Sot*, *Thai Rath* had trumpeted Yantra's innocence until the evidence against Yantra became overwhelming. Only then did *Thai Rath* switch tack and condemn Yantra, whereupon Yantra was

drummed out of the monkhood early in 1995. Meanwhile, however, *Thai Rath* had lost out heavily in terms of both sales and credibility. Land reform offered *Thai Rath* the chance to turn the tables on *Khao Sot*, demonstrating that while *Khao Sot* might be able to lead the campaign to oust an errant monk, only *Thai Rath* could lead a campaign to remove an entire government.

The history of the Thai press

Understanding the distinctive features of the contemporary Thai press involves a degree of familiarity with its history and origins. Significantly, the first Thai newspaper was founded by an American, Dr Dan Bradley, in 1844. Bradley set out to use newspapers as a means of influencing the then monarch, King Mongkut, and so having a broader political impact on the country. Boonrak describes the birth of the Thai press as 'an indirect product of western expansionism'.[11] Copeland notes that Bradley's efforts were opposed by the court, and failed within a year.[12] The Siamese monarchy responded to attempts by foreign missionaries to establish newspapers by countering with its own publications. The first of these was King Mongkut's own *Royal Gazette*, launched in 1858. When the *Royal Gazette* failed, Mongkut sought to curtail journalistic activity in Siam. King Chulalongkorn reissued the *Royal Gazette* and also supported a number of 'semi-official' broadsheets.[13] He also provided subsidies to the foreign language press in order to patronise and control it, a policy which was not entirely successful. His successor, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), sought 'to make use of the government-subsidised press as a vehicle for presenting his ideas to the broader public'.[14] Vajiravudh published his own newspaper columns under pseudonyms, thereby engaging directly in the politics of disputation beyond the walls of the palace and making newspapers 'an obscurely influential social institution'.[15] Subsidies were provided by the government to several Thai and English language newspapers and one Chinese language paper.[16] Newspapers in the period from 1912 onwards – a time of fevered controversy within the ruling elite as to the most appropriate form of political institutions to be adopted – featured numerous allegorical diatribes containing thinly disguised, but nevertheless vitriolic, criticisms of the monarchy and its hangers-on. Copeland argues that the King had 'erroneously anticipated that few would dare to openly challenge his views';[17] the press turned out be a difficult medium to manage and to regulate. Attempts by the court to dominate political discourse were strongly countered by sections of the press which referred to themselves as 'political newspapers' (*nangsuephim kanmuang*),[18] adopting a critical, oppositional stance. This stance was epitomised by the newspaper *Sayam Samai*, which published a single issue in 1917 before being closed down by order of the government. During the 1920s a large number of newspapers were started which adopted critical stances towards the Sixth Reign.[19] These developments reflected the declining popularity of the monarch and a growing newspaper market resulting from the emergence of a new class of educated, literate and under-employed Bangkokians.

The origins of the Thai press, then, lay in the efforts of competing elite interest groups both inside and outside the charmed circles of power to advance their own positions and to undermine the standing of others. The press was partisan to the core, each publication dedicated to cheering its friends and discrediting its enemies. The press was also underhand, secretive and cryptic: the identity of columnists was disguised, and the meaning of their articles concealed by the use of analogies and allusions. Newspapers were thus 'obscurely influential', influencing only those sufficiently 'in the know' to be able to decipher the hidden meanings, to get the jokes, to grasp the point. This was a press created in a world of absolute monarchy, where political openness could only exist under severe limits. At the same time, the very existence of the press had the effect of expanding the size of the political public,[20] with political consequences which were not entirely predictable. What began as an elite medium nevertheless had the effect of breaking down barriers, increasing the size of the politically engaged and informed class.

After the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the tradition of a partisan press continued. Both of the leading figures of the post-1932 period, Pridi Banomyong and Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram, were associated with particular newspapers which sought to advance their political causes. The Thai press entered a period of severe restriction and control during the tenure of Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat (1959–63), whose 'Announcement 17' obliged all newspapers to be licensed. Licences could be withdrawn for publishing 'statements of a certain character', which included pro-communist statements, statements which offended the King, and, most ominously, statements which 'discredit the government'.[21] The result was a repressive climate for the press. At the same time, newspaper licences became a valuable commodity; speculators purchased them at very high prices, then rented them to would-be newspaper publishers. The resulting newspapers were often sensational and full of inaccuracies, which Boonrak attributes to a combination of the desire to avoid problems with the authorities, and a sleazy tradition of 'journalisme à la siamoise'.[22] Ironically, the press itself bore some responsibility for the emergence of the Sarit regime, having lambasted the Phibun regime and praised Sarit in 1957.[23] This was not the last time that the Thai press would act in a short-sighted fashion, hounding out one flawed government only to see it replaced by another, arguably worse. The sole exception to the general run of newspapers was *Siam Rath*, founded and owned by the writer, scholar and later prime minister MR Kukrit Pramoj. *Siam Rath* developed its own style of serious journalism which was essentially conservative and pro-royalist.

While the Thanom regime (1963–73) was initially less repressive in its handling of the press, Thai newspapers continued to be characterised by sex and sensationalism at the expense of political issues, and were considered among the least serious in Asia.[24] At the same time, improved production methods meant that popular newspapers could compete aggressively for increased circulation. Newspapers were content to follow, rather than to lead, public opinion; according to Boonrak:

> The decay of political morality resulted in unimaginative journalism which tamely conformed to the political whims of the military men in power. Businessmen who invested in newspaper enterprises in this political setting seemed to seek merely commercial ends from newspaper publishing. Thus, the main tendency of newspapers in this period was to imitate all popular features adorned by the mass mind. *Thai Rath*, the pro-Sarit newspaper founded in 1958, served as an ideal model since it had been the giant of the popular press in terms of circulation.[25]

Towards the end of the Thanom regime, however, there were also signs of the emergence of a more incisive and critical press. In 1971, a new Thai-owned English language newspaper called *The Nation* was established, which sought to practise 'objective' journalism to international standards (similar to that of the foreign-owned *Bangkok Post*). Early in 1973, a team of young journalists took over the Thai language daily *Prachathippatai*, turning it into a serious newspaper which took a more progressive stance than *Siam Rath*.

Writing in the 1970s, Boonrak argued that the electronic media and print media offered conflicting sources of information:

> On the one hand, there has been a communication network directly controlled by a number of public agencies and, on the other hand, there has been a print medium, obscurely controlled by the powerful figures in the political arena. By Western standards, the notion of objectivity, except in special circumstances, has been almost foreign to the Thai mass media in general. In the context of information flow, the press has been the primary source to reflect and 'lead' some public opinion.[26]

The year 1973 saw the gradual rise of the student movement, as public resentment against the Thanom regime increased. The press was an important element in the rising tide of anti-Thanom feeling; while the way was led by quality newspapers such as *The Nation*, *Siam Rath* and *Prachathippatai*. By the time of the showdown between student and military forces on 14 October 1973, even popular newspapers such as *Thai Rath* and *Daily News* had joined the anti-Thanom bandwagon, to the extent that on 13 and 14 October the regime sent troops to their offices to try and censor them. Some have argued that the student uprising of October 1973 would not have succeeded without supportive press coverage.[27] Nevertheless, one study has argued that the media was not involved in initiating popular pressure for constitutional and political change in 1973, but took up these issues only after they had first been raised by the student movement.[28] Indeed, the popular press only began reporting the student movement in detail following the controversial arrests of thirteen student activists on 6 October 1973.

The interim government of Sanya Thammasak swept away long-standing restrictions on press freedom, allowing new publications to obtain licences easily: in 1974 alone, 177 licences were issued for new daily newspapers. At the same

time, this liberalisation coincided with a growing realisation that military governments were not the only enemies of a free press in Thailand. Corrupt practices by newspaper owners, columnists and reporters grew increasingly rife, and most of the newspapers published during this period were 'more than willing to do service for politicians and businessmen, who had always played dirty games for the sake of their own personal interests'.[29] At the same time, the thriving decadence of old-style Thai journalism was challenged by a 'new journalism' which advocated objective news reporting and responsible comment, led by *The Nation*, *Prachacha*, *Prachathippatai*, *Siangmai* and *Athipat*. Newspapers such as *The Nation* and *Prachacha* advocated a democratic political order, but also national sovereignty and economic independence.

The Thai press as a whole was not consistently supportive of the student movement throughout the 'democracy period' of 1973–6; from late 1974 onwards, there was an increasing tendency to criticise the movement.[30] Anut argues that the Thai press during this period should be divided into three groups: right wing (such as the rabid *Dao Sayam*), centrist, and left wing (led by the student newspaper *Athipat*).[31] The electronic media, notably the army-controlled Free Radio Broadcasting Network, were allied with conservative and rightist forces that sought to undermine the student movement, employing the nationalist rhetoric of 'nation, religion and monarchy'. These same forces sought to exert influence over the print media, using economic pressures to bring leftist publications into line. One example was the left-wing newspaper *Prachathippatai*, which moderated its political stance in late 1975 and subsequently fired thirty-nine 'leftist' reporters and their sympathisers.[32] Increasingly, the media was becoming the tool of other power-holders and interest groups, ranging from students to the military, rather than an independent actor or commentator.

When Kukrit Pramoj became prime minister in March 1975, Thailand was led by a distinguished journalist and newspaper editor. Nevertheless, Kukrit enjoyed an ambivalent relationship with the press during his time as prime minister, and sought to establish a press council which would serve to regulate the print media and be responsible for the issuing of newspaper licences. However, these minor skirmishes were nothing compared with what followed.

One of the most controversial episodes in the history of the Thai press was the publication of a photograph in *Dao Sayam* and the *Bangkok Post* on 5 October 1976, which purported to show a mock-hanging of the Crown Prince. A student apparently resembling the Crown Prince had taken part in a re-enactment of the brutal murder of two labour activists. Many analysts believed that the published photograph had actually been retouched by rightists to inflame popular opinion against the students. The photograph was an important factor in unleashing the rightist assault on Thammasat University which took place early in the morning of 6 October, and the subsequent massacre of student activists at the campus.[33] The bloody crackdown on the student movement, and an accompanying military coup, brought the 'democracy period' to an abrupt end.

In an unprecedented move, all newspapers were banned by the new rightist Thanin government, though over the next few days most were allowed to resume

publication, beginning with the more moderate and conservative newspapers. Nevertheless, the government only permitted newspapers to reopen if they fired certain 'undesirable' journalists and barred others from writing. This stipulation affected the reporting staff of almost every newspaper.[34] The Thanin government also published its own 'model' newspaper, *Chao Phraya*, which was both a commercial and a journalistic failure. The press was extremely dissatisfied with the Thanin government, which was not only authoritarian and unresponsive to public opinion but also consistently hostile to press freedom: some twenty newspapers were closed down during the government's one year in office, and all journalists were forced to apply for work permits from the Ministry of Interior.[35] Some columnists and newspaper owners were arrested in connection with the attempted coup of 26 March 1977; in October 1977, a second coup attempt successfully ousted Thanin, ushering in the more moderate Kriangsak administration and resulting in a gradual return to business as usual for the Thai print media.

From 1977, there was a renewed flowering of the Thai press. The self-proclaimed 'quality' newspaper *Matichon* was founded by a group of progressive writers and journalists in January 1978; a number of weekly publications were also established which sought to continue the best elements of the politically engaged journalism of the 1973–6 period. The Kriangsak period was not entirely a happy one for the press, however; despite initial pledges to support more openness, Kriangsak did order the closure of a number of publications, and withdrew more than fifty inactive licences[36] which publishers had kept in reserve in case of closures, thereby enhancing the government's bargaining power. The 1981–8 Prem administration continued Kriangsak's policy of an uneasy truce with the press, maintaining friendly relations but taking no steps to abolish legislation which undermined press freedom, and making use of arbitrary powers to punish or threaten errant publications from time to time. Not all pressure on the media came from the government itself; in 1985, army commander-in-chief General Arthit Kamlang-ek sued *Matichon* for libel over a gossip-column item concerning his love life, and *Matichon* owner Khanchai Boonpan went abroad for several weeks after his safety was threatened.[37]

The Chatichai administration of 1988–91 saw an elected politician become prime minister for the first time since 1976. Chatichai sought to establish good relations with the media, hosting parties for them and allegedly planning a special budget to buy gifts for prominent columnists, a plan which was severely criticised and so never implemented. Nevertheless, early on in the Chatichai period 'reports of corruption disappeared from the pages of the press',[38] apparently as a result of the systematic bribery of reporters, columnists and editors by certain cabinet ministers, coupled with a selective policy of intimidation – partly through threats to investigate the tax affairs of hostile columnists. Rumours typically linked cash-dispensing allegations to Industry Minister (later Interior Minister) Banharn Silpa-archa, and intimidation allegations to Prime Minister's Office Minister Chalerm Yubamrung. In 1989, Chalerm accused *Thai Rath*, *Matichon* and *Naeo Na* of trying to overthrow the government,[39] claiming

that they were allied with 'the old power group' which was trying to return to office. Chalerm's aggressive stance led to hostile relations between press and government. At one point, *Thai Rath*'s owner allegedly barred three of his most well-known columnists from writing, because of the newspaper's reluctance to provoke scrutiny of its tax affairs. In a no-confidence debate in July 1989, Chalerm called upon the Ministry of Interior to close down *Thai Rath*, a request which was quietly shelved.[40]

In February 1990, Decree 42 – a piece of legislation enacted by the Thanin government which had made it an easy matter for the government to close newspapers – was invoked against the daily newspaper *Naeo Na*. Following the short-lived banning of *Naeo Na* over its coverage of the deaths of three Saudi diplomats, the newspaper world united around demands for the law's abolition. They were resisted by then Interior Minister Banharn Silpa-archa, who tried to push through a new and potentially draconian press law. Banharn was for a time 'boycotted' by reporters over his stance on press freedom; ironically, he declared that he was not afraid of the boycott as he had his own newspaper, *Ban Muang*.[41] The media and its supporters initiated a vigorous campaign against Decree 42, using the symbol of three monkeys (representing leading Chart Thai figures Chatichai, Banharn and Sanoh Thienthong), and the slogan 'Hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil' (in Thai, literally 'Close your ears, close your mouth, close your eyes').[42] Under strong pressure from the media, the Chatichai government eventually repealed Decree 42 in early 1991. The abolition of Decree 42 seemed to symbolise the end of heavy-handed state intervention in the print media. However, barely a month after the repeal of the decree, a military coup by a junta calling itself the National Peace-Keeping Council led to a fundamental realignment of the political landscape.

The Thai press and the two Mays

One of the first actions of the NPKC was to announce that all newspapers would be censored before publication; within days, these stipulations were lifted, partly because the idea was virtually unworkable, and partly because many Thai language newspapers gave such positive coverage of the coup that censorship seemed unnecessary.[43] This honeymoon period was a relatively short-lived one, however, and by mid-1991 the press was becoming increasingly critical of the coup group.

Boonrak and Wasant have examined the political role of the media in the 1970s with reference to two pivotal events separated by a three-year period: the 14 October 1973 uprising and the 6 October 1976 coup. Whilst the 14 October events illustrated the potential of the media to help bring about progressive change, the 6 October showed how the media could become a tool used in an ultra-conservative backlash. To understand the political role of the media in the 1990s, it is useful to compare the behaviour of the media in two events also separated by three years: the May 1992 protests which led to the collapse of the military-backed Suchinda Kraprayoon government, and the May 1995

parliamentary no-confidence debate which culminated in the demise of the Chuan Leekpai administration.

Many writers have portrayed May 1992 as the Thai print media's finest hour.[44] Faced with a government which controlled parliament, the military, the bureaucracy and the electronic media, the press joined forces with opposition parties and protest groups to bring down Suchinda. As the protests against Suchinda intensified, the gap between reporting and reality strained viewers' credulity beyond breaking-point. On 4 May, one of Thailand's most popular politicians, Palang Dharma party leader Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, made the dramatic announcement that he would fast unto death unless General Suchinda resigned from office.[45] This major story, which made the headlines in every newspaper the following day, went entirely unreported on the evening television news bulletins. For the next two and a half weeks, no politically conscious Bangkokians paid any serious attention to the news on their television screens.[46]

The crowds of protestors in Bangkok were not simply opposed to Suchinda Kraprayoon's becoming premier; they were objecting to a political order in which the military and the bureaucracy exerted tremendous influence. At the heart of this struggle, between entrenched state power on the one hand and the collective popular will in a rapidly changing urban society on the other, was a battle for the control of information. The achievement of the press was examined in a commemorative book published by the Reporters' Association of Thailand, which highlighted injuries sustained by reporters during the protests (thirty-three reporters were hurt), intimidation of press personnel and attempts by the Suchinda government to silence the critical voices of the newspapers.[47] Without the courage and determination of Thai journalists to inform the public about the unfolding political situation, it is questionable how successful the anti-Suchinda protests would have been.

This image of the Thai press as the courageous guardian of liberty and democracy contains a great deal of truth. At the same time, a complete understanding of the role of the press in the May events requires a more nuanced analysis. Ubonrat notes that 'For the first time in history, the majority of the press united against state suppression of freedom of expression. Professionalism and press autonomy prevailed over any political patronage.'[48] The key word here is 'majority'; some elements of the press were not wholeheartedly behind the anti-Suchinda campaign, and others were downright sympathetic towards Suchinda. Political patronage may not have prevailed in the May crisis, but it was still an important issue. The anti-Suchinda role of the Reporters' Association of Thailand during the May events represented the stance of one particular group.[49] Then RAT President Banyat was known to sympathise with the anti-Suchinda protests. Certain newspapers, notably *The Nation*, *Phujatkan* and *Naeo Na*, took the lead in resisting Suchinda. *Phujatkan* was closely allied with the political enemies of the NPKC, whilst *Naeo Na* enjoyed strong personal ties with the opposition New Aspiration and Palang Dharma parties. *The Nation* stood out as the leading anti-Suchinda newspaper, adopting a clear liberal stance largely