



THE Media AND Political Change ASIA

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Flowering of Thai press coincides with emergence of democracy

Thailand is a country in transition. A bloody confrontation between soldiers and demonstrators in 1992 led to reforms that ended 60 years of military control of daily life, including access to information. Vibrant and free print media have sprung up to meet the needs of a democratic Thai society, but television and radio remain tightly regulated by the government.

Against that background The Freedom Forum sponsored the first of four 2001 international forums on "The Media and Political Change." The two-day Asia Media Forum attracted 100-175 journalists and journalism educators to venues in Bangkok, the Thai capital city that serves as the Southeast Asian hub for international news organizations.

In a briefing for a Freedom Forum delegation just before the forum, U.S.

Embassy officials said the news media have become more prominent in Thai life and are being relied upon as the eyes and ears of the citizenry. But average pay of \$200 a month for reporters and \$400 a month for editors is an impediment to greater effectiveness. A major challenge, U.S. Ambassador Richard E. Hecklinger said, is to uncover corruption that taints Thai society. "It's a daunting battle, and it has to be waged not only by the media but in the media," he said.

Anand Panyarachun, a reform-minded former prime minister, said in a keynote address that Thailand's print media have



Chris Wells, senior vice president/international of The Freedom Forum

made "a lot of progress" in moving beyond being part of the problem (accepting gifts and favors) and toward being part of the solution (exposing corrupt practices). But investigative reporting of corruption often lacks follow-through, he said, and free and independent broadcast media are "an impossible dream for the moment."

Other program segments analyzed news-media coverage of Thailand's landmark election last Jan. 6, overall

quality of Thai journalism, the prospect for deregulation of the airwaves, advances in online news, and Thailand's image as projected by international news organizations.

"The forum highlighted the issues facing the media reporting on political change in Thailand," said Chris Wells, senior vice president/international of The Freedom Forum. "Whenever societies face political change, from the mildest to the most controversial, the media have a crucial role to play," she said.

The other three 2001 forums are scheduled for Croatia in June, Nicaragua in September and Zambia in October.

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Thai journalists breathe air of reform and freedom, assume watchdog role

Reporting politics remains a dangerous business for the news media in Thailand.

In a single decade, working conditions have evolved from dictatorial suppression to conditions so free that Thailand now is associated with the Philippines and India as having the freest press in Asia. Yet the rules of the game have not been defined.

"The legacy of decades of military and government control, as well as the power of big business groups and individual politicians, means that the Thai media [are] still struggling to establish a new balance between the demands of commercialism and the responsibility of a free [press]," Kavi Chongkittavorn, managing editor of *The Nation* in Bangkok, wrote in "Losing Control," a book published last year in Australia. He also is president of the Thai Journalists Association and chairman of the Southeast Asian Press Alliance.

As recently as Feb. 7 of this year, 23 journalists and production staff of ITV — started in 1996 as the first and only independent television station in Thailand — were fired one day after they complained about the station's news stance on political coverage during the campaign leading up to the Jan. 6 national election. The overwhelming winner in that election was the Thai Rak Thai Party of new Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. His Shin Corp. bought a controlling interest in ITV last May before the election campaign started, essentially ending Thailand's experiment with independent TV. All other television stations are controlled by either the military or the government or are operated privately under government concession.

Management of ITV defended its action, saying some employees were fired because they showed a "hostile" attitude. Others were said to have been fired for economic reasons.

No surprise, said Sorajak Kasemsuvan,



Arnold Zeitlin, director of The Freedom Forum Asian Center



Susan Bennett, director/Asian and European programs of The Freedom Forum

director general of the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand, which controls television and radio stations as well as a cable television network. "We have freedom of the press in Thailand, but nobody in the news media believes it yet," he said. "They feel they still are victims."

Press freedom is young and fragile — and old practices have deep roots. From the mid-1970s through the 1980s, the military held over the heads of the news media a notorious Decree 42 that allowed arbitrary closing of the press and required licensing of printers, publishers, editors and newspaper owners. By 1990 the decree had been abolished.

Journalists such as Suthichai Yoon, co-founder and former managing editor of *The Nation*, now consider journalists to be watchdogs. He titled a collection of his Thai-language newspaper columns "Ma Fao Ban," which translates as Watchdog.

The watchdog role represents a dramatic departure for the Thai press, which over the years has been associated with playing favorites among politicians and

"We have freedom of the press in Thailand, but nobody in the news media believes it yet."

— Sorajak Kasemsuvan,
Mass Communication
Organization of Thailand

others in exchange for favors or gifts.

As Thailand's news media have moved beyond this tradition over the past decade, reform has become a powerful aroma in the Thai air.

In March, the Thai Journalists Association presented its annual story-of-the-year award to *The Prachachart Business*, a newspaper published by the Matichon Group, for its exposé last September of alleged attempts by then-candidate Thaksin to hide his wealth by assigning shares in his corporations to his domestic servants, drivers and security guards. Thaksin now faces charges before Thailand's Constitutional Court that could cost him his high office.

Prasong Lertratanawisute, executive editor of *The Prachachart Business*, said the stories evolved from a routine public statement by Thaksin notifying the Securities Exchange Commission of a change in his corporation's shareholding structure. Prasong's editorial staff used the government's Commerce Ministry Web site to trace Thaksin's shares.

Dangers to the media in Thailand are exemplified by Amnat Jongyoting, editor of *Phaknua*, a daily in Chiang Mai, Thailand's second-largest city. He was shot in April 2000 by soldiers allegedly in the pay of a local politician who opposed the editor's reporting. Amnat spent a month in the hospital.

Amnat vows to stay on the job, or, as his daughter Micky said, "He will go on fighting, even if his life is not safe. At present, he only stays in his office. He is a little bird in the cage, always demanding freedom. He hopes one day the 'mafias' will be gone from his lovely fatherland."

Thai press improving by the day, former prime minister says

Former prime minister Anand Panyarachun said the press in Thailand had made great strides over the past decade and is positioned for further improvements in the years ahead.

Known in the region as a champion of press freedom, Anand said Thai journalists “have made a lot of progress” in moving beyond a history of accepting gifts from news sources and other business acquaintances.

“There’s a group of young journalists and reporters who are very dedicated, and

“There is a hunger for truth.
... There is a hunger for
openness in our society.
[But] that kind of hunger
still applies to a minority
of the reading public.”

— Anand Panyarachun,
former prime minister

not only dedicated to their profession but also are prepared to sacrifice some of the (financial) gains [journalists] have made in the past in order to preserve the principles of independence and objectivity.”

But aspects of the “you-scratch-my-back-I’ll-scratch-yours” system persist, he said, “and I think it’s going to take another generation” before they can be fully overcome.

Anand, the keynote speaker for the two-day forum, spoke before about 175 journalists and others at a Bangkok hotel.

Answering questions first from moderator Bernard Kalb of CNN’s “Reliable Sources” and then from the audience, Anand said Thailand’s print news media had shown they can investigate and expose corrupt practices in the country. Where they have fallen short,

he said, is in following through. “We need investigative reporting that can be sustained up to the point of conclusion, one way or the other,” he said.

Allowing an investigative project to fizzle out “has a lot to do with [journalists’] stamina, with the guts and with the dedication to seek truth for the sake of truth,” he said. Journalists are “still on a learning curve. Let’s hope the learning curve doesn’t take too many decades.”

Anand said the stagnation of investigative reporting also reflects newspapers’ recognition that the Thai people have short memories and want exciting new news every day.

“There is a hunger for truth. ...

There is a hunger for openness in our society. [But] that kind of hunger still applies to a minority of the reading public,” he said.

“The openness of society is predicated on freedom of the media. They have to go together. One cannot

move away from the other. They have to move in parallel lines.”

Although media observers regard the Thai press as among the freest in Southeast Asia, the degree of freedom falls short of that in the United States, Australia and much of Europe, Anand said. But he said



Anand Panyarachun

the Thai people, conservative by nature, were turned off by the excesses of the Western press.

Thailand’s press also can “fall prey to sensationalism or news of some gossipy nature,” he said. Sometimes the news media “even slander or ... even tell lies.” News and opinion can be found “within the same paragraph, within the same column.”

But Anand said he believes journalistic performance in his country is improving from day to day. He urged owners of news organizations to accelerate efforts “to veer toward objectivity, independence and impartiality,” and he reminded journalists “that in presenting the truth you have to do it with fairness, you have to do it with objectivity and you have to be responsible.”

During his two brief periods as prime minister in 1991 and 1992, Anand began a process of reforming the government’s tight regulation of the broadcast media. Later he led the campaign that produced Thailand’s new constitution that, among other things,

mandates privatization of the airwaves. But that goal remains elusive, he said, as an “unholy alliance between business interests and the power [structure]” is stubbornly resisting change to the status quo.

Free and independent broadcast media are “an impossible dream for the moment, but still a dream that has to be pursued,” Anand said. “One day, hopefully not too far away, we’ll get there.”



Anand fields questions from CNN’s Bernard Kalb.

News media awarded good marks for coverage of milestone free election

Three Thai journalists and a media watcher engaged in a favorite American press pastime: They looked back at the coverage of an election and assessed the performance of the press and the role pollsters played in the reporting.

For Thailand, the Jan. 6 general election was the first since a reformist constitution was adopted in 1997.

"It was the first one in which people voted on issues and the policies of the political parties," said Thepchai Yong, group editor of The Nation Multimedia Group. "People have a feeling that they are part of the democratic process."

Though the constitution failed to accomplish one of its goals — eradicate vote buying — it succeeded in reducing the number of political parties and encouraging candidates to campaign on issues. The candidate who was elected prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, talked about fraud and the national debt.

"Our reporters did a good job on the coverage," Thepchai said.

Sommai Parichart, managing editor of *Matichon Daily*, said the new political situation relieved the boredom of past elections and got the people and the news media interested. But he said news-media performance still lacked in some areas, specifically in in-depth coverage of the candidates and in a failure to raise the issue of press freedom during the campaign.

At Thailand's largest newspaper, *Thai Rath*, which circulates about 1 million copies a day nationwide, reporters worked harder than they had on past elections, according to Senior Editor Manich Sooksomchitra. He credited the excitement

of his reporters to the new transparency of the election process.

The audience of 150 or so, mostly journalists, was not so eager to accept the editors' appraisal. Laurent Malespine, a reporter for Dow Jones news wires, described scenes in which reporters from competing news organizations would collaborate on a story and then each send the same copy to his or her editor. "You would have to see it to believe it," he said.

Thepchai acknowledged situations in which reporters covering the same ministry would anoint one to remain on duty "while the others went shopping."

"This is something bad; this should never happen. Reporters in the new era should not be influenced by the political parties," he said. "Good competition would be good for our press."

Thepchai said it may take time, "but the professionalism will be high in our reporters."

Another member of the audience,



Thepchai Yong says The Nation Multimedia Group's reporters did a good job on election coverage.



Professor Wandee Thong-ngok comments from the floor on journalists' blending of fact and opinion.

Wandee Thong-ngok, an assistant professor in the Department of Mass Communication at Chiang Mai University, asserted that the news media report facts mixed with opinion. "People don't understand if just the facts are being reported on or if the reporter's emotions" are mixed in, she said.

Thepchai saw progress in the fact that people can figure out if a newspaper is in bed with a politician. "It shows that the media cannot deceive the public anymore."

The question of polling surfaced throughout the discussion, mostly when Sukhum Chaleysub, vice president of Rajabhat Institute Suan Dusit, had a chance to speak. The Suan Dusit survey was described by Susan Bennett, panel moderator and Freedom Forum director of Asian programs, as the most widely quoted poll in Thailand.

Competition among the media has led to new ways of presenting the news so people don't get bored, Sukhum said, adding that reporting poll results helped the media become "more colorful."

But he said that the polls should have covered issues and not just who was likely to be elected. He also cautioned about the accuracy of polls.

Finally, he said, media outlets need to know the sources of polls. "The media can choose to report or not report poll results. If they choose to report, then they become a tool of the poll conductor. Poll conductors can be troublemakers. The media have to look at polls carefully."

Thai editors cheered by credibility gains

Editors at three major Thai newspapers see progress in the quality and role of journalism after political reforms were instituted in the country in 1997.

"The credibility of our newspapers is" increasingly accepted, said Kavi Chongkittavorn, managing editor of *The Nation* and president of the Thai Journalists Association. He also said "the media can criticize the government in moderation. This is done on a daily basis."

Kavi was joined by Pichai Chuensuksawadi, editor of the *Bangkok Post*, Prasong Lertratanawisute, executive editor of *The Prachachart Business*, and Ubonrat Siriyuvusak, head of the Department of

Mass Communication at Chulalongkorn University, for a discussion about whether the news media are keeping up with political change in Thailand.

The constitution adopted in 1997 sought to clean up the election process by eliminating vote-buying and requiring bureaucrats and politicians to be accountable for their actions. Ubonrat, the journalism educator, said political reforms "were moving ahead quite well"

but questioned whether the news media — which she said were trying to conduct their own reforms — could keep up.

Prasong said journalists have a duty to study the constitution and the law. "If you don't understand the law," Prasong said, "then you don't have the ability to scrutinize politicians efficiently and effectively."

Earlier this year, Prasong's newspaper

won the Thai Journalists Association story-of-the-year award for reports of alleged attempts by candidate Thaksin Shinawatra to hide his wealth. Thaksin is now prime minister.

Pichai agreed that the press "must keep a close watch on political parties and politicians." But he said the most important role of the press is to provide a voice for the people. "The situation is much better than in the past when we could not talk openly about anything," he said.

Many people regard the quality of the news media as low, Pichai said. But, he said, editors know where their strengths and weaknesses lie. "We need to improve our quality," he said. "We have to listen to our critics, like it or not."

Pichai's closing comment drew a round of applause from many of the 150 people, mostly Thai journalists, in attendance.



Pichai Chuensuksawadi of the *Bangkok Post* urges people in the news business to heed criticism.



Kavi Chongkittavorn says the news media "can criticize the government in moderation."

Journalists association will get new Bangkok headquarters



Charles L. Overby

To further strengthen Thailand's burgeoning free press, The Freedom Forum will contribute \$50,000 for a Bangkok headquarters of the Thai Journalists Association, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Charles L. Overby announced.

Overby said that the headquarters would serve as "a center where Thai journalists can gather to enhance their skill," and that a number of other journalistic organizations also will be located there, including the Press Council of Thailand, the Press Development Institute of Thailand, the Confederation of Thai Journalists and the Southeast Asian Press Alliance.

The Freedom Forum grant will be matched by funds from the Thai newspaper industry, he said.

"No country's media have moved so swiftly toward free expression as the Thai press," Overby said in opening the Asia Media Forum. "Because of that accomplishment, the Thai press can serve as a model for the rest of Asia."

Deregulation of TV, radio hinges on public support

Thailand's state-dominated broadcasting industry will be successfully deregulated only if the news media give people reason to believe that over-the-air television and radio will help them to improve their lives, a Thai news executive said.

Suthichai Yoon said public support for broadcast deregulation could be mobilized if the media successfully made the case that independently owned stations would offer "relevant" news, not "rubbish."

Suthichai, group editor in chief of the Bangkok-based Nation Multimedia Group, said he based that conviction on the experience of his company's National Channel, which provides around-the-clock news programming to households that can receive and afford cable television.

The National Channel was established in June 2000 shortly after the Shin Corp., a telecommunications giant owned by the politically ambitious Thaksin Shinawatra, acquired a controlling interest in Thailand's first independent television station, ITV. Early this year Thaksin was elected prime minister of Thailand. His wife and son have assumed ownership of the Shin Corp.

At a panel discussion on "The Future of Free Broadcast News," Suthichai recalled that Thais of modest means used to say, "We do not want news. News is too serious, news is too political for us. We don't understand news."

Because the National Channel has "tried in our own way to popularize news and to make news something that is really relevant to their daily lives," people have come to appreciate "quality news and political news. They do not want rubbish. They know the difference now."

The ability of people to draw the distinction between news of high quality and news of dubious value, Suthichai said, "is a most encouraging sign," because public awareness of the advantages of independent journalism can foster an atmosphere in which it is nurtured. A disappointing fact of Thai history is that at certain times that kind of public support could have been crucial but was lacking, he said.

In the 1990s, after several decades of military control and multiple coups d'état,

Thailand emerged as a tender but potentially strong democracy. Now, in the first decade of the 21st century, all eyes are on the process by which the institutions of its dem-



Suthichai Yoon says the public wants "quality news." Listening is moderator Adam Clayton Powell III of The Freedom Forum.

ocratic society are developed.

In the case of television and radio, the process is beginning with the selection of individuals for a National Broadcasting Commission that will decide how frequencies are allocated. Thailand's new constitution, adopted in 1997 as the centerpiece of a wide-ranging reform movement, mandated that the frequencies be assigned by an independent, public regulatory body — not by the government and the military.

Suthichai and fellow panelist Joopmol Rodcumdee, dean of the Faculty of Communication Arts at Chulalongkorn University, said they had not been heartened by the names that had surfaced.

"We have some problems with the individuals being considered," Joopmol said. The commission, he said, should be built around those who support "a working environment free from intervention by the owners or political parties or businessmen."

Suthichai put it this way: "We don't want the power of the state to control the media. At the same time, we don't want the power of money to control the media, either."

"The question that should be asked is, 'Who are you working for?' The answer is, we work for the people."

— Joopmol Rodcumdee,
Chulalongkorn University

"I don't feel really good about the selection process. ... It seems it's going to be big businessmen and big politicians and big former government officials."

He noted that the process now unfolding will determine the path Thai television and radio must follow for at least 10 or 20 years.

Another panelist, Sorajak Kasemsuvan, director general of the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand, said the press could assure its freedom from political influence only through enactment of laws "to guarantee

the freedom specified by the constitution."

The organization, which was formed in 1977 with the help of government seed money, operates two television stations, a cable-TV channel and more than 50 radio stations.

Direct intervention from the government to cover or not cover a certain news story has not occurred, Sorajak said, but it could happen unless "we ... have a mechanism to prevent it."

For example, he said, if a news organization goes to court over a perceived infringement of press freedom, it might have to wait three years for a verdict and be willing to accept the possibility of very little punishment for the offender. A freedom-of-the-press statute could remedy that situation by requiring swift disposition of, and specific penalties for, such a case, he added.

Joopmol said what is needed are not more laws but news media that act responsibly and in the public's best interests. "The question that should be asked," he said, "is, 'Who are you working for?' The answer is, we work for the people."

Executive shows latest in online news coverage

The executive news producer of MSNBC.com took a group of Thai journalists on an Internet tour of high-end, state-of-the-art multimedia news presentations.

Robert Aglow used terms such as layering and choices and interactivity as he demonstrated new storytelling techniques made possible by Internet technology.

"The idea is to give people choices," he said. Users with a high-speed Internet connection can click on a MSNBC.com news story and read text and/or choose among a single still photo and caption, a series of photos, a video and an audio interview with the photographer. Users can access a map and animated informational graphics that illustrate the event. They also can enter a chat room to talk about the news or perhaps register a vote on a news-related issue.

Aglow showed many examples, including his company's coverage of a 12-year-old Palestinian boy who died in crossfire during violence in the Mideast. As he worked his computer mouse around the Internet site, Aglow clicked on the choices: the compelling photo of the father protecting the child, a series of photos ending with the boy's death and a video of the entire sequence shot by a Dutch journalist. The visitor to the site could read text about the incident and the escalating violence.

In some examples, a click of the mouse would start an audio interview with the photographer, who would set the scene

and describe his emotions.

"Television is passive," Aglow said. "You sit back and watch. The Internet lets you be active. You decide what you want and how long you want to spend with it."

The purpose of the program, titled "The Future of Online News," was to expose the Thais to advances in Internet journalism, to encourage them to develop their sites with the user in mind and to be creative.

Internet usage in Thailand is low. Fewer than 4% of Thais have home computers, according to session moderator Adam Clayton Powell III, Freedom Forum vice president for technology and programs. A smaller percentage has a home Internet connection. The relatively high costs of PCs and Internet connections have discouraged online usage, although the secretary general of the Thai Journalists Association, Chavarong Limpattamapanee, said connectivity costs were dropping.

Aglow didn't pretend to have all the answers. "We're still experimenting," he told the more than 100 Thai journalists who turned out for the two-hour discussion at the office of Internet Thailand in Bangkok. "We're looking for different ways to tell stories."

Aglow clicked quickly through several major stories covered by MSNBC.com, including the Chechen war, the Russian economy, the 2000 Olympics, the nominating conventions and the inauguration of President Bush. He peeled back the dot-com's coverage of several enterprise stories, such as the rising use of methamphetamines in the United States and the present deployment of U.S. forces around the world.

In almost every case, Aglow showed how the sto-



Robert Aglow says MSNBC.com attracts 3 million visitors a day.

ries were layered with text, photos, video, audio, maps, informational graphics and chat rooms. Users could click on various buttons to follow the story in the direction they chose.

"People can drill down into these stories as deep as they like," he said.

Aglow worked at ABC News for 18 years before moving to MSNBC.com as executive news producer. At ABC, he helped launch ABCNEWS.com. MSNBC.com has more than 3 million daily readers, making it the number one news site, Aglow said. He said the site, which has been operating for five years, prides itself on original reporting. It has 200 employees worldwide and partnerships with key news operations such as *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek*. It shares material with The Associated Press and Reuters and frequently gets plugs from NBC News, Aglow said.

Aglow's demonstration of the capabilities of MSNBC.com generated a high wow factor among the Thai journalists, most of whom belonged to the Information Technology Press Club and worked on their news outlets' Web sites. Several asked what it cost MSNBC.com to produce such comprehensive coverage.

Aglow said he could not itemize the costs but suggested that the coverage itself was not expensive. The expense comes from running an operation 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and needing "thousands of servers" to handle 3 million visitors a day, he said.

Chavarong, who runs the Web site for Thailand's largest daily newspaper, *Thai Rath*, said he was stimulated to improve *Thai Rath's* online operation. "I think most people in the room were inspired to do a better job," he said.



Journalists watch presentation at Internet Thailand in Bangkok.

Thais worry about their global image

A discussion about Thailand's image as projected by the international news media detoured into an examination of how the Thai press portrayed the United States in the recent military flare-up with China. Both images, it seems, need work.

Kiatichai Pongpanich, senior editor and foreign-affairs columnist of Bangkok's *Khao Sod Daily*, complained that international press reports about Thailand were almost always negative, focusing on corruption, prostitution and other societal ills.

With 340 journalists — representing 128 international news organizations — based in Bangkok, the city of 10 million people serves as “the hub of the media in the region,” Kiatichai said. “Even with all these foreign correspondents here, I still have the impression that the coverage of our country is not that accurate.”

As they write about Thailand, reporters should be guided by one principle, he said: “Adhere to the facts, the accuracy of the information, [and] provide the real image of Thailand.”

Kiatichai was joined by three foreign correspondents as panelists in the forum's final segment.

Rodney Tasker, Bangkok correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* of Hong Kong and president of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand, disagreed with Kiatichai's critical assessment of the work of the Bangkok press corps. “In fact,” Tasker said, “the image is fairly good by comparison to other countries in the region.” Thailand is seen as “an oasis of stability and tranquility.”

He acknowledged, though, that the country “has had a bad press in many ways,” especially when journalists fly in for a look around and leave before gaining context and depth of knowledge. “The ones coming in for quick visits tend to accentuate the negative,” Tasker said. “Those based here look for more positive stories.”

And there are plenty of positive stories to write about, he said: tolerance, “supreme politeness” and racial harmony among the Thai people, and the country's emergence over the past decade as “a bastion of democracy and of a free press” in Southeast Asia.

These characteristics are “mainly overlooked by the foreign press,” he said, but not because Thailand is being picked on. Tasker cited the news media's “natural tendency worldwide ... to play up the negative aspects of society.”

Robert Horn, who reports for *Time* from Bangkok, said it is difficult for a country like Thailand to compete with major powers like China, Russia and Western Europe for the news media's attention except when things go badly, as happened in 1997 when the



International journalists should convey the “real image of Thailand,” says Kiatichai Pongpanich of *Khao Sod Daily*.

complained that the Thai-language press had “weighed in, to put it bluntly, on the side of China” after a U.S. spy plane and a Chinese fighter jet collided April 1 over the South China Sea. “One missed seeing any editorial comment, any news comment [that said to China], ‘Look, ... you’re holding the (U.S.) crew. The longer you hold them, they become hostages and prisoners, so release them.’”

The newspapers depicted China as victim despite Thailand's “great alliance with the United States,” Metha noted. Thailand supported the United States during the war in Vietnam, sending troops into combat and permitting U.S. military installations on Thai soil. Today the two countries are major trading partners.

Time's Horn suggested a reason that the newspapers might have slanted their coverage in China's favor: Many are owned by Thai-Chinese businesspeople.

Kiatichai said some Thai columnists, including him, were restrained in their reporting and analysis because the circumstances of the collision were murky. Kiatichai, who studied at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University and at Stanford University in the United States, also said that in the past he had written about the potential dangers of China's growing military might.

“We are concerned about what might happen next,” he said of the recent military and diplomatic confrontation between the superpowers. “We have to be careful. ... We have to keep good relations with China and the U.S.”



Bangkok-based *Time* reporter Robert Horn meets the press after the forum concludes.

Thai economy went into a free fall.

By virtue of being a more mature, peaceful society, “Thailand has kept itself out of the headlines,” Horn said.

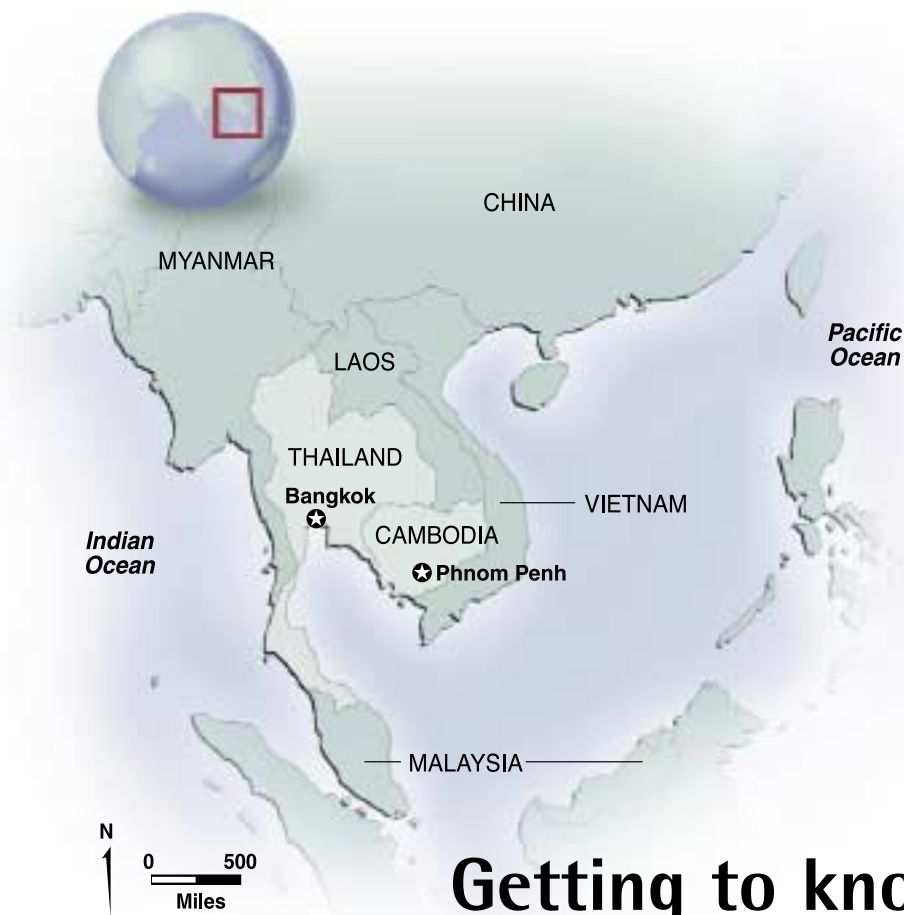
Thailand's concern about its global image can go too far, Horn said. Several years ago, for example, a Bangkok television station refused to share videotape of an ugly incident with Western news media. “I don't think that's the role of a local television news organization — to decide what to let out to the outside world,” he said.

The detour into discussion about the image of the United States in Thailand came when Harish Metha, Bangkok correspondent for the *Business Times* of Singapore,

Forum in Bangkok spotlights emergence of a free press



Clockwise from upper left: Forum attendees follow the give and take among panelists; bountiful newspapers attract browsers; Preecha Sa-ardsorn edits in the newsroom of the National Channel in Bangkok; Charles L. Overby (left) presents Freedom Forum memento to U.S. Ambassador Richard E. Hecklinger; Thai broadcaster Sorajak Kasemsuvan assesses press freedom.



Getting to know Cambodia

Following the Asia Media Forum in Thailand, a Freedom Forum delegation traveled to the bordering country of Cambodia. The agenda there included visits to The Freedom Forum-supported journalism library at the Cambodia Communications Institute in Phnom Penh and to the Killing Fields Memorial in Siem Reap, as well as discussions with editors of Cambodian newspapers and correspondents who cover the country for international news organizations.



Above: The Freedom Forum's Chris Wells (left) chats with library director Sek Bariso at the Cambodia Communications Institute. Right: Young boy expresses the somberness of a memorial to victims of the genocide that claimed the lives of more than 1 million Cambodians during the 1975-79 regime of Pol Pot.



NEWS MEDIA AT A GLANCE

THAILAND

- The Kingdom of Thailand is in the heart of Southeast Asia. Roughly the size of Texas and shaped like an elephant's head, Thailand has land area of 198,114 square miles. It borders on Myanmar (Burma), Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, the Gulf of Thailand and the Indian Ocean.
- Thailand has a population of about 62 million, 10 million of whom live in the capital city of Bangkok. The largest ethnic minority is Chinese, with as many as 14% being of Chinese ancestry. Other ethnic groups include Malays, Cambodians, Vietnamese and Indians. The country has a 94% literacy rate.
- Nearly 100% of the population speak Thai, the official national language. Chinese and Malay also are spoken in some areas. English is widely spoken in Bangkok and other major cities.
- The Committee to Protect Journalists credits Thai journalists with being more aggressive in covering government misdeeds since constitutional reforms in 1997. The Thai Journalists Association is the most powerful press organization in Southeast Asia. It has been a consistent force for self-regulation of the Thai media, encouraging members to reform questionable ethical practices. The association is influential in the region as a founding member of the independent Southeast Asian Press Alliance.
- Thailand has about 19 daily privately owned newspapers including four Chinese-language and two English-language publications. The Thai press is considered one of the freest and strongest in Southeast Asia.
- *Thai Rath* is the largest-circulation newspaper in the country, with about a million copies distributed daily. *Bangkok Post* (circulation 56,750) is the largest English-language newspaper.
- Thailand has six national television stations operating from Bangkok, five of which are government controlled. The country's only independent station, ITV, was taken over by a company controlled by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's family in 2000.
- Radio is the most popular medium for news and information in Thailand. More than 500 radio stations operate there, about 130 of them run by the government's Public Relations Department.
- With the exception of ITV, radio and television frequencies are controlled by the military or government agencies. Government domination of the airwaves has prevented Thailand from having completely free media. All stations are required to carry news feeds from the government's Radio Thailand at regular intervals, although there are no direct controls at other times. Under the 1997 constitution, control of radio and television frequencies is to be transferred to an independent, public regulatory body.

CAMBODIA

- The Kingdom of Cambodia is in Southeast Asia, bordering Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and the Gulf of Thailand. Its land area is 69,900 square miles, slightly smaller than the state of Oklahoma.
- The population of Cambodia is about 12 million. Ninety percent of the population are Khmers, followed by Vietnamese (5%) and Chinese (1%). About 95% speak the official language, Khmer; others speak French and English. The nation's literacy rate in 1996 (the most recent figure available) was 35.2%.
- Cambodia has about 30 newspapers and 200 licensed publications that publish regularly in the capital city of Phnom Penh. Khmer-language *Rasmei Kampuchea* (circulation 15,000) is the country's largest daily newspaper. Newspapers are not widely available outside Phnom Penh.
- Only a few Cambodian newspapers derive significant sums from advertising. Ninety-nine percent of local advertising revenue goes to just 10 newspapers. *Rasmei Kampuchea* accounts for 23% of the Cambodian newspaper industry's total advertising revenue.
- Cambodia has about 11 radio stations and six television stations.
- According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, press freedom in Cambodia is guaranteed by the constitution, and the Khmer-language print media are critical of political leaders in their coverage. However, radio and television do not enjoy these liberties. The broadcast media remain under firm state control, CPJ reports, with the government exercising formal and informal control by granting broadcast licenses to its allies and not to opposition figures. With the exception of a low-power radio station in Phnom Penh run by the Women's Media Center and Radio Beehive run by businessman Mam Sonando, Cambodia's airwaves are dominated by the government or its allies, according to CPJ.

Sources: Embassies of Thailand and Cambodia, Washington, D.C.; Committee to Protect Journalists; The Freedom Forum; CIA's "World Factbook 2000"; "2000 Editor & Publisher International Year Book"; "The Europa World Yearbook 2000"; "World Almanac and Book of Facts 2001"; U.S. State Department.

The Freedom Forum, based in Arlington, Va., is a nonpartisan, international foundation dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all people. The foundation focuses on four main priorities: the Newseum, First Amendment issues, newsroom diversity and world press freedom.

The Freedom Forum funds two independent affiliates — the Newseum, the interactive museum of news in Arlington; and the First Amendment Center, with offices at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., and in New York City and Arlington. Other operating offices are in Buenos Aires, Hong Kong, Johannesburg, London and Cocoa Beach, Fla.

The Freedom Forum was established in 1991 under the direction of Founder Allen H. Neuharth as successor to a foundation started in 1935 by newspaper publisher Frank E. Gannett. The Freedom Forum is not affiliated with Gannett Co., does not solicit or accept financial contributions, and does not accept unsolicited funding requests. Its work is supported by income from an endowment now worth about \$1 billion in diversified assets.