

CHAPTER 5

MEDIA AND THE SOUTH

It has long been known that sometimes media reportage can pose an influence over policymaking, which will be elaborated further in this section. However, this may not be the case in terms of the southern violence. I argue with the following discussion that media reportage, as a part of global civil society, cannot induce tangible or obvious betterment in solving the problem of the strife-torn region.

Clearly, media and politics are often intertwined in their interplay. Many studies attempt to explain the phenomenon in which media struggle to influence its counterpart—the authority which represents nation-state or the government. On the one hand, media do manage to exert its influence over government policy. The influence of news reportage during the first Gulf War in 1991 brought about a theory called the “CNN Effect” theory, which asserts that reports of broadcast media, especially that of 24/7 global television news networks like CNN (Cable News Network), are able to influence audiences’ sentiments and emotions via broadcast footage of people’s sufferings. The result is public pressure on the government to intervene in order to halt such misery brought to them by broadcast media. Consequently, policymakers can no longer make decisions or map out strategies solely on national interest. Rather, they are required to heed public opinion and public sentiments out of the issues they are handling.⁴⁶ In particular, if the policymakers or those in authority are blind in their response to humanitarian crises, media tends to gain the upper hand. Robinson has clearly summarized the influence of media over policy as:

“Media influence on policy occurs when there exists (1) policy uncertainty and (2) critically framed media coverage that emphasizes with suffering people. In this situation, policymakers, uncertain of what to do and

⁴⁶Eytan Gilboa, “Global Television News and Foreign Policy: Debating the CNN Effect” *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 3 (2005).

without a clearly defined policy line with which to counter critical media coverage, can be forced to intervene during a humanitarian crisis due to media driven public pressure or the fear of *potential* negative reaction to government inaction.”⁴⁷

Nevertheless, Robinson notes that if the government manages to have its clear policy on handling the issue, especially in handling humanitarian crises, the media coverage will be unable to pose any impact which produces the change of policy. Apart from that, Robinson points out that another explanation on media-authority interplay. Journalists, Robinson argues, may fall victim to “manufacturing consent”. The manufacturing consent idea can be seen as artificial agreements by executives and elites. The executive version focuses on the extent that news media content conforms with the agendas and frames manipulated by government officials.⁴⁸ Therefore, media are unable to influence policymaking of top authority. The elite version, meanwhile, contends that media can cast its shadow over the policymaking process by taking advantage of interest groups. In other words, the elite version of manufacturing consent asserts that media has to seek indirect support from interest groups in policymaking process to empower itself.

As a journalist myself, I contend that Robinson’s explanation on the power of media over politics is relatively deterministic. Subscription to Robinson’s argument may render that media themselves are powerless as they need to employ the dissensus of the elite groups as a springboard to exert the influence over policymaking. I argue that the media or the editorial themselves have the authority to decide which issues to be followed. The movement of People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which shook Thaksin administration last year, was spearheaded by five members. In fact, the very individual who sparked the on-the-street campaign opposing Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was Mr. Sondhi Limthongkul, a media tycoon who was the founder and owner of Thai-language *Manager* print-and-digital daily and *Asian Satellite*

⁴⁷ Piers Robinson, “The Policy-Media Interaction Model: Measuring Media Power During Humanitarian Crisis,” *Journal of Peace Research* 37, no. 5, (2001): p.614.

⁴⁸ Piers Robinson, “Theorizing the Influence of Media on World Politics Model of Media Influence on Foreign Policy,” *European Journal of Communication* 16, no. 4, (2001): p. 525.

Television (ASTV). Though it is said that Mr. Sondhi's movement stems from the conflict of interest between himself and the prime minister,⁴⁹ the role of Mr. Sondhi in shaking and sparking anti-Thaksin sentiment is undeniable. In a bid to topple Prime Minister Thaksin, Mr. Sondhi employed his own media outlet in print (Manager Newspaper), broadcast (ASTV), and news website (www.manager.co.th) to convey severe criticism against the then embattled prime minister. Months after that, Prime Minister Thaksin had to relinquish his premiership. Though other factors, such as the sale of Shin Corporation shares to Singaporean government's investment arm Temasek and rampant corruption committed by Mr. Thaksin himself and his cronies, may contribute to the end of the one of the strongest ever Thai political leaders, the role of media manifestation should never be overlooked as it serves as the machine to amplify the objection to the government in order to pose pressure to the executive branch.

Apart from that, media presence itself is powerful and can be an amplifier of many voices. Some social movements even serve the media as a catalyst to increase their momentum. The movement of Assembly of the Poor (AOP) in 1997 illustrates a good example. The AOP invested its effort to bring its activities, which protested against the Thai government at that time to take responsibility for the adverse impacts of careless government-imposed projects, into news and media space.⁵⁰ With the coordination of the press, the pleas and demands of the protesters—although not all—were realized. It is because of media attention on the issue which involved the image of the democratic government. The AOP admits that they need consistent media coverage to keep their movement in the public eye, which is a key ingredient for their success. To do so, many interesting, unusual and new activities were invented to captivate the press interest and avoid the media's fatigue on this particular issue.

Turning to the southern issue, however, it remains unsettled whether the reportage of the media had any influence over policymaking of the Thaksin

⁴⁹ The Nation, November 29, 2005.

⁵⁰ Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, "Politics of Representation A Case Study of Thailand's Assembly of the Poor," *Critical Asian Studies* 36, no. 4, (2004).

administration. Given the nature of violence, the situation may be equivalent to a humanitarian crisis.⁵¹ If this is the case, how is the reportage of media able to induce any policy change regarding the south?

It is argued here that the reportage of the media remains unable to induce any helpful change to the southern situation. The inability of media to introduce the betterment in the southern problem will be elaborated. First of all, the method that reporters employ to garner information is comparatively state-centric. That is, media report is excessively dominated by official voice or the voice of authority. State-centric media reports, especially international media organizations or wired service news agencies which deliver the information in English, the global language, and cater to media outlets worldwide, is a factor of this inability. In this discussion, given the role of online news on cyberspace, the role of local English news websites—The Nation (www.nationmultimedia.com) and Bangkok Post (www.bangkokpost.com)—will be taken into consideration because cyberspace traverses physical borders and allows every internet-accessible English-speaking individual to update themselves with the situations in every corner of the world. Moreover, these renowned wired service news agencies, such as Reuters, Agence France Presse (AFP), and Associated Press (AP) sometimes carries reports based on local online news reports as their source. Definitely, there is interdependence between both news service agencies and local agencies.

As a reader of news reports from wired service for two years, I have observed that sources in the reports of the daily southern violence are always officials, namely police or military officers or civilian officials. Sometimes, their name, rank and position appear or the information-giver is quoted as an anonymous source. The bigger the mishap is, the higher ranking officials give information. It is because the nature journalists work. Chalermripinyorat explains the work of journalists in the following lines:

⁵¹According to Dr. Chaiwat Satha-anand's public lecture in October 2005, *op. cit*, it is suggested that the situation in the south might be fallen into a criterion of civil war given the more than 1,000 of the dead.

“Structurally, journalists divide their beats in accordance with the structure of state bureaucracy and they are usually assigned to ministries and state agencies that are deemed most important. The way news organizations are structured shows that their coverage revolves primarily around state apparatus.”⁵²

The reason why journalists need to rely on official sources stems from the fact that the state bureaucracy is well structured.⁵³ Bureaucracy is systemized into lines of command and the authority has the center to gather information. This makes it easy for journalists to gain quick access to information to meet deadline pressures. Without official sources, journalists will find no way to gain information because they do not know which place to contact to learn information. Quoting official sources was a way to play it safe because it can be a way to avoid conflicts with officials, to some extent.⁵⁴ This has something to do with unequal power structure between those in authority and locals. Besides, in journalistic terms, official sources are more newsworthy.⁵⁵ Therefore, the media in Thailand—wired service or local media alike—have to rely on official sources in reporting the situation in the south while only a few reports carry the voices of villagers or locals. It is rarely found that these agencies regularly interview with locals and villagers who may give a fundamentally different account. In other words, the voice of locals disappears due to the time constraint nature of media. Another obstacle deals with access to news sources based on linguistic limitations. Mostly, local and international media rely on stringers to garner the information in the south. Few stringers can speak Malay, the local language of southerners and worse, few know about local culture given religious differences. This therefore bars local reporters and stringers from accessing local voices, instead they opt to base their reports on official sources who they find it easy to gain intimacy and channel with.⁵⁶ To some extent, news items about the south channeled through local and international media are monopolized by these stringers who are close to

⁵² Chalermripinyorat, p. 549.

⁵³ Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, Phone Interview (April 2007).

⁵⁴ Supara Janchitfah, Phone Interview (May 7, 2007).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Supalak Ganjanakhundee, Phone Interview (May 8, 2007).

officials. This also leads them to be more sympathetic with the official as well. Given the fact that quoting officials is convenient and newsworthy, it should not be a surprise that news items about southern violence are full of authority attribution.

Time constraint is perhaps the crucial factor for online English newspapers in Thailand to employ reports of wired services because the nature of these wired agencies is swift.⁵⁷ The usage of wired reports can set the agenda of newspapers.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, it is not always the case because a study by Lim (2006) reflects that it is indeed the online newspapers which are able to exert the influence over the online news agencies.⁵⁹ Though the study of Lim is not flawless because it uses only South Korean newspapers—*JoongAng Ilbo* and *Chosun*—and Korean-language *Yonhap* news agency as samples aimed at Korean-speaking audiences, it helps to point out the correlation between wired-service news agencies and online newspapers. However, normally Thai local media, both in Thai and English, always carry news items about the south written or filed by their own reporters. Local media in Thailand—be it in Thai or English—are not influenced by wired service reports. Local media in Thailand have their own reporters responsible for military beats and they are tasked to report on the southern situation. Most local media in Thailand also have regional news centers or hire local stringers to supply Bangkok offices with stories. Though reports of those wired news agencies are regularly used, at the end of the day, the final version of a report about the south is normally from local media.

Apart from that, another journalistic dilemma leading to the inability for the change in the south is the absence of contextualization in media reports. Media constructs crises to appear to have no histories in their objectified versions; crises as commodities.⁶⁰ Such a dilemma of contextual explanation is found in the media report

⁵⁷ The news website of Bangkok Post (www.bangkokpost.com) and The Nation (www.nationmultimedia.com) always uses stories of wired service to update their website given the swiftness of wired news agencies.

⁵⁸ Jeongsub Lim, "A Cross-Lagged Analysis of Agenda-Setting Among Online News Media," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 83, no. 2, (2006): p.300.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 305.

⁶⁰ Mohamed Zayani and Muhammad I Ayish, "Arab Satellite Television and Crisis Reporting Covering the Fall of Baghdad," *The International Communication Gazette* 68, no. 5-6, (2006): p. 490.

of the fall of Bagdad, Iraq, in 2003. Ideally, news writers are required to give background to their audiences to shed the light on the issue. Unfortunately, sometimes space constraints do not allow reporters to do so. News items on the south only gave short details on the background of the issue. In general, they only explain that the current problematic region was an independent sultanate which was annexed into a part of Siam kingdom a century ago. Moreover, problems periodically arose in the sense that there were conflicts because of religious difference stemming from the fact that locals in the south were Malay-Muslim while the authority who supervised the area were from central government of this Buddhist-dominated state.⁶¹ However, this has something to do with space constraints. Everyday, physical space in newspaper, measured in inches, is allocated for political, crime, social, southern violence issues, as well as other issue. Editors are authorized to decide how much space to be allotted to each issue, depending on trends and public interest. In this sense, space for southern news is limited so the stories are dedicated with updating readers with what is going on rather than elaborating complex historical details. Normally, historical detail of the south is being detailed in features, which are not in the form of hard news, which I think, is not adequate to reproduce historical details in the mindset of the public. Also, some reporters who follow southern issues may not have a chance to properly equip themselves with the perplexed and detailed historical background.⁶² Apart from the space limits, the repetition about historical background which is a different version from the mainstream can be problematic. Repetition of Patani Kingdom's history, which narrates the suppression by Bangkok government into news items, will bring about a clash between hegemonic and subaltern historical explanation.⁶³ The conservative forces in society which supports the hegemonic historical explanation will be unable to accept the discourse that the ancient central government played a key role in hatching the problem of the south.

Finally, the media themselves are sufficiently powerful to introduce changes elsewhere, but not the south owing to time constraints, space limits which

⁶¹ I have collected the southern news myself. The information is from my observation.

⁶² Janchitfah, Phone Interview.

⁶³ Ganjanakhundee, Phone Interview.

lead to the absence of issue contextualization, and excessive reliance on official sources lead to the inability to optimize the power of media for the betterment of locals in the strife-torn region.