CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Concerning press freedom in a western context, an underlying essence is personal freedom, since their struggle for freedom, especially in the U.S., was a core development in their history. Press freedom equates to their freedom of expression and rights. As a result, people's freedom cannot be separated from press freedom, and the spirit of the U.S. Common Law enshrines this idea as well (Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boonlert Supadhiloke, interview, January 23, 2008). However, when the idea of press freedom, together with professional journalism, was introduced into Asian countries, its essence was unavoidably and significantly altered in each researched country by those involved: the governments, media and journalists, NGOs, and most importantly, people.

Before proceeding to the glocalization process in each country, WSIS and the role of IOs/NGOs will be discussed to give some idea to what extent they impact the research countries. A number of opinions and comments were raised by interviewees regarding to role of IOs and NGOs. Beginning with UNESCO as the main organization mandated to promote press freedom under the WSIS framework (Please see appendix 3), the organization has initiated the "Global Media Development Index" (Kavi Chongkittavorn, interview, January 7, 2009) to evaluate the need of press development in each country. To be implemented in 2009, the index would include, for example, capacity building, ownership issues, and legal issues

which would support the IPDC programme[1]. In addition, the index could indirectly indicate the level of press freedom in each country. Yet, given the overall picture, the role of UNESCO has not been outstanding because of many factors. First of all, internal conflict have led to the stagnation of the organization. Its limited budget and the sensitive nature of press freedom are also important impediments. During post-colonialism when newly emerging countries were asked for a free flow of information by the U.S., confrontation between these two parties was strong in that African countries saw the request as disadvantageous to them. They, instead, required both free flow of information and balance of information. This was the starting point of the New World Information Order. Unfortunately, the U.S. did not enthusiastically support this new idea. Thus, the lack of budgetary support by the U.S. led to the organizational 'collapse' of UNESCO. Although, later, the WSIS summit was initiated to push the issue further and new technology introduced, there has been no concrete consequence through implementation (Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boonlert Supadhiloke, interview, January 23, 2008). This is because the summit looked at internet governance, freedom of expression and press freedom as economic, rather than social or cultural agendas. Hence, it tried to encourage press freedom through providing communicative access as much as possible. Here, the hidden agenda was that the U.S. and transnational telecommunication companies, who lobbied participating countries for a stake, gained the most benefit, not the people. This explains why ITU worked as a driving force, not UNESCO. Although UNESCO, in

---

[1] International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) is a major forum in the UN system designed to develop free and pluralistic media with a global approach to democratic development. (UNESCO)

WSIS's statements and declarations, was mandated to advance press freedom, its role was marginalized. Additionally, the stance of states were at odds.

> "Certain governments found themselves in the midst of controversies. Hostile to the participation of civil society, countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and China found themselves ad odds with the liberal democracies. China notably struggled (ultimately in vain) to exclude any reference to media and human rights from the official texts. Attempts were made to subordinate the accepted universal right to freedom of expression to that of national governments to exercise sovereignty in this area (Raboy, 2004, p. 347)."

Like UNESCO, operations of South East Asia Press Alliance (SEAPA), as a regional NGO, have a limited role. Established in 1998 by three founding countries, namely Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia, its underlying objective is to fill a gap between existing international and domestic press NGOs campaigning for press freedom. The rational was that, prior to its foundation, the Southeast Asian region would be criticized directly on press freedom issues by international organizations. Their criticisms were hardly welcomed among regional members, giving as a reason that those NGOs outside of the region were not in a position to comment. In this situation, SEAPA would protect freedom of the press through people within the region. It worked as a 'middle man' to create collective understanding on the issue among the international and domestic NGOs, and it hoped that member countries in the region would listen and understand 'us'. To explain more, beside stimulating shared understanding on certain issues (the organization, during former-prime minister Thaksin's administration, cooperated with UNESCO and the Thai Journalist

Association (TJA) in clarifying understanding about media law issues), SEAPA would consult with local organizations on debated issues and then take a position. However, it has played a limited role because of many factors. When one views Southeast Asia, the political, economical, and socio-cultural diversity in this region is evident and shows that there is no commonality among countries in the region. Also, there are some countries, for instance Singapore, and Malaysia, that do not allow any involvement by SEAPA[2]. A further reason is the changing of core values within the organization itself. This is an important point because it shows what SEAPA's stance is. SEAPA is criticized as being more and more westernized because it has relied on an operating budget form western organizations. Without consulting local organizations, SEAPA has begun speaking on its own, many times through a western lens. This brought about distrust and misunderstanding, consequently good relations with its counterparts are being undermined.

In this situation, it is interesting to see how Thailand, China and Singapore handle the issue of press freedom.

As in other countries in Asia, Thai press freedom is not rooted in individual rights or individualism, but is distorted to serve the interests of certain groups of people. To start with, the media and government always stand on diametrically opposed sides. Despite the fact that the role of Thai press is active and its level of press freedom is greater than other Asian countries (Wanna Vuthiaporn, interview, January 22, 2008), press freedom is considered only for the media themselves, and they struggle for their own freedom, not for the people. At the same time, the government sees the media not as fact finders but as sensational news reporters

---

[2] SEAPA has initiated an outreach programme to expand its role in these countries (Kavi Chongkittavorn, interview, January 7, 2008)

(Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boonlert Supadhiloke, interview, January 23, 2008). Besides, the government does not accept the fact that the rights belong to everyone (Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, interview, February 8, 2008). Thus, it is legitimate to control the media for national security, and above all, for protection of the government itself. For these reasons, when speaking about press freedom, it raises a question—"freedom for whom?" It indicates that the term press freedom has been exploited at the expense of people, who've been neglected, and that the interests of both media and government have been prioritized. Besides, at the civil level, people are still not aware, and lack understanding of, their own rights of freedom that they should be enjoying. Further, a majority of Thais think that Thailand already enjoys press freedom. This attitude is a major obstacle for media and journalist associations in mobilizing and pushing the idea of full freedom in Thai society, despite the fact that public participation is most crucial.

Additionally, two particular characteristics or cultural contexts of Thai society are that a disconjunction between 'reality' and 'principle' (Chavarong Limpattamapanee, interview, January 24, 2008) exists, due to the untouchable "Institutions," such as the Royal Family, religion, and patriarch. The former means that Thai press freedom may not be fulfilled in a so-called democratic environment. One obvious example is a comparison of press freedom during the Thaksin administration and the military-appointed government. Prime Minister Thaksin deconstructed media institutions when he enjoyed his power. This situation changed when a new government was formed by a coup. Journalists and media worked and cooperated with the government, and at the same time were able to criticize the leader. These two periods indicate that the coup-led government did not always have a

negative impact, despite the fact that intervention in media still existed, and the democratic government did not guarantee press freedom.

Regarding the 'Institution,' freedom is based on standards of the Thai government, which is whether you should or should not know, whether the issue affects other people's rights or national security. Bureaucratic involvement in the control of monarchic information in online media cannot be understood in a western context. Briefly, the more online media spread, the more criticism and anti-monarchy content was publicly disseminated, both in Thailand and abroad. To solve this problem, the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies of Thailand (ICT) panicked and reacted by temporarily closing or blocking such online media. Only one or two seconds explains the Thai 'systematic pattern' of blocking websites (Kavi Chongkittavorn, interview, January 7, 2008). In this context, SEAPA has to understand its role and limitation in supporting press freedom in Thailand (Kavi Chongkittavorn, interview, January 7, 2008).

Furthermore, it is important to note that a problem with Thailand is that the Thai NGOs only want to focus on local issues (James Gomez, interview, March 21, 2008). It is important to contribute and dedicate their energy to other countries as well, since they would gain more experience, information and develop relationships which could be adapted in Thailand. The other problem is the lack of English fluency with which to communicate with external organizations.

In the case of China, its socialist-based ideology has long been rooted in every aspect of society. Chinese media, too, have been under control, serving as the government's mechanism of propaganda. In the past, the government easily controlled and even manipulated popular opinion by limiting the public to only official

information sources (Li, 2004, p. 237). Yet, there is a tendency towards improvement in the situation.

According to Mr. Li Datong[3], Chinese domestic controls are changing. Despite the issue being widely debated in public, he showed some outstanding changes of a freer press environment in 2007. For instance, the State Council announced new regulations to the effect that foreign news reporters can interview individuals without requiring permission from authority. Also, the Chinese premier initiated a regulation supporting dissemination of political news to the Chinese people. In addition, regarding reformation of the political system, there was an article in a newspaper written about politically sensitive topics such as democracy, but it was not banned. The article was later publicized on the internet. This signaled that the public and media could read and criticize previously forbidden political issues more openly. Another similar case was that Yan Huang Chun Chiu magazine published an article entitled "Democracy, Socialism, and the Future of China." It emphasized that implementation, not theory, can judge whether a political system is good or bad. It went on to say that if implementation of a certain political system is effective, it should be considered good for society. In brief, it implied that democracy is not totally a bad thing in Chinese society and should be supported. The article further compared its argument with the Chinese Cultural Revolution in that there were many

---

[3] Mr. Li Datong used to work as Chinese senior editor of China Youth Daily, Chief Editor of Freezing Point Weekly of the China Youth Daily, and free-lance writer and contributor to open democracy on current global affairs. He was dismissed from his positions twice. The first time was when he initiated and led more then 1,000 reporters to meet with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China about reforming China's press system. The other time was when he touched upon controversial issues and his articles could negatively influence readers. He delivered a speech titled "The Changes and Development of Chinese Press System" at a conference organized by the East-West Center, on 21 January 2008, at Novotel hotel, Bangkok

problems following the revolution, thus, communist ideology did not guarantee positive consequence. Human rights issues have been raised by the Chinese Premier during a press conference as well. Speaking in front of foreign media, the Premier mentioned that Democracy, the rule of law, freedom, and human rights do not belong only to Capitalist societies, but they belong to the world as 'common values' of mankind. Western and Eastern values are not different. Based on these scenarios, it can be inferred that last year was a year of human rights and public opinion, meaning that the Chinese people could participate more in the political realm.

Additionally, Mr. Li Datong explained that after China opened its economy in 1978, the domestic economy has changed rapidly, together with the political and media dimensions, the latter albeit slowly. He stressed, however, that state control and interference remains a serious factor, but top-down authority is no longer a match for the myriad forces of openness. "Even with (continued) strict control by China's government, the development of democracy in the Chinese media is irreversible (East West Center)." There is some evidence supporting his idea. One is that the traditional ideology of the Communist Party has collapsed. Media and journalists used to be propagation mechanisms of the government, but they have become more and more democratic and increasingly work for public interests. Likewise, local newspapers, which have been publishing since 1980's, are more popular than non-local newspapers. An explanation is that these newspapers report articles concerning communities, cross communities, and local people, not only central government. Hence, people feel that more self-related information is being provided. Moreover, the rapid spread of the Internet since the 1990's cannot be disregarded. The power of 160 million internet users, 1.3 million websites and BBS, 40 million web blogs together

make local news into national news, which is being openly discussed and to which the Chinese central government must pay attention. It also shows that public participation in media space is evident. These communicative technologies also affect the works of traditional media, whose work is under the administratively mismanaged Ministry of Propaganda in the sense that agenda setting[4] is no longer asymmetrically performed by national media. Rather, the technologies have taken over the duty, with the result that the national media often has to follow. The conclusion could be made that the national propaganda system (of state control) has been destroyed (Mr. Lee Datong). At the same time, the media values are being internationalized, which might lead to a conflict between 'openness' and 'hiddenness' in the system.

The reference to the demise of government power over information by the national media is reaffirmed by Li Xiguang. The rise of chat rooms has created pressures on China's official propaganda mechanisms, including the government press. The chat rooms are forcing China's media outlets to respond to a larger universe of news than that generated by Xinhua…The internet news reporting of different or even dissenting views or perspectives of the news events has forced the government to loosen its initial blackout policy (Li, 2004, p. 255).

Moreover, the Internet can influence the changing mindset of officials. Li Xiguang's interesting analysis is that Chinese cyber communities are taking shape based on mutual interests, values and ideologies. An increasing number of Net users are seeking their identity in cyberspace. With the drastic changes taking place in China in terms of values, ideology and even profession, more and more elite people

---

[4] Agenda setting theory holds that the mass media determine what is important by leading newscasts with that story or printing it on page one. When news gatekeepers no longer consider an item of importance, they allow it to slip off the public agenda. (Li, 2004, p. 249).

have lost their identity. They are reconstructing their identities by joining cyberspace discussions….China's today cyberspace is becoming more a forum for fictional fighting than a serious discussion and debate of public policy. However, broadly speaking it does challenge the singular hold of Chinese state propaganda (Li, 2004, p. 267).

The impact of communicative technology in changing Chinese media space was reaffirmed by Mr. Isaac Mao, who spoke about "From Meme to Social Fabric".[5] Believing in the bottom-up revolution, he stressed that social media is a new version which emerged due to various social applications, such as blogs, Facebook, YouTube, mobile phones, and G-mail. More and more people are using these applications to connect with one another. As the social media operate by sharism/sharists, social networking, and collective intelligence, small ideas can find their own way to spread, and truth emerges from social perception. More importantly, social norms will be changed by people.

While the entire world will change as blogging connects and informs people in new ways, the impact will be particularly vivid in China (East West Center). The reason is because, rather than attempting to reform or change existing media institutions, still largely state-controlled, China's 145 million bloggers simply go around the old media and find their audience in a different way (East West Center). The impact of a multiplicity of bloggers watching, reading and responding to each other is greater than the sum of its individual parts. And as blogging is changing

---

[5] Mr. Isaac Mao is a co-founder of Social Brain Foundation and CNBlog. He gave a speech titled "Social Media in China: From Personal Memo to Massive Influence" at a conference organized by the East-West Center, on 23 January 2008, at Novotel hotel, Bangkok

China, soon, too, it will change the world once obstacles of language, culture, regional differences and technological barriers can be solved (East West Center). To clarify how blogs affect traditional media and government, Mr. Isaac Mao gave an example of when a rural Chinese farmer showed a photograph of a rare Chinese tiger. The story was published in newspapers and the farmer received awards. Questioned by a blogger whether it was genuine, the photo was posted in a blog, and then thousands of bloggers accessed it and demonstrated how the fake could be produced. Finally, it was proved that the image of the tiger appeared to have come from a calendar the farmer has tacked on his wall.

The Singaporean government, while actively introducing new communicative technologies to its citizens, has at the same time been exploiting new technologies for governmental stability and national development. Singapore's authoritarian and technocratic rule over the media has enabled the continuation of its rapid economic growth, to the extent that the government's lack of transparency and openness is either viewed with indifference or justified in the pragmatic terms of 'political stability' (Lee, 2004, p. 165).

Under the Singapore IT2000 Master plan, the ruling party aims to transform the country "into an intelligent island where IT is exploited to the fullest to enhance the quality of life of the population at home, work and play (Gomez, 2000, p. 13). The phenomenon of 'internet boom' was an evident result of the scheme, while at the same time other internet-relevant businesses were also blossoming. Yet, the technologies introduced have come bundled with a strict set of laws and regulations. Singapore has no law that spells out freedoms and rights of the individual. Rather it has a set of laws that place restrictions on these basic freedoms (Gomez, 2002, p. 33).

A number of laws controlling traditional and news media have been implemented. For instance, The Public Entertainment and Meeting Act signed into law in 2001, the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA), Internet law enforced in 1996. Besides, a police state[6] is one of most effective mechanisms of surveillance. Its targets are civil society, religious organizations, opposition politicians and perceived threats to the government. Various means to stop opponents are being practiced, such as approaching family or friends, intimidation and, lastly, law enforcement. Moreover, the Out-of-Bound Markers (OB Markers) (Chun Kiat, interview, March 23, 2008) limits what the media and society can discuss, perform, or promote, such as sensitive or offending issues like race, religion and other taboo topics. Even though the media is more open to talk about prohibited issues, the government still maintains the position that the media cannot promote such alternative lifestyles as this will disrupt the good values of the Singaporean society. These situations create anxiety among people.

Meanwhile, "Outsiders shouldn't equate freedom with criticizing the government (Gomez, 2005, p. 177)," is the government's statement reacting to global press freedom indexes which was released by Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF). The report ranked Singapore at 147 out of 167 countries. The government, furthermore, said that RSF's index "imposes a standard that fails to take into account 'special circumstances' in Singapore", where "journalists contribute to the nation's development, and the press are not necessarily in an adversarial role (Gomez, 2005, p.

---

[6] A Police state is a condition in which the authority and power of the police have become so great that they are the most feared entity of the state and sometimes effectively uncontrollable. A police state is one in which the executive uses the police and other instruments of the state from the bureaucracy, judiciary and other agencies as tools at its disposal to monitor and control civil and political activities of its citizens and others on its territory and even beyond. (Gomez, 2002, p. 19).

177). Not only government officers, but also local pro-government media insist and support such a standpoint as well. The Strait Times once issued an article about the work of NGOs, affirming that "human rights" was a Western liberal idea and that Singapore is unique (Gomez, 2005, p. 178). This indicates that not only the government but also local media and journalists have negative attitudes toward external NGOs. Although this situation continues, there have been various international organizations advocating human rights and press freedom on the island. There are essentially two groups of international organizations: the human rights tradition and the media watch tradition. The former, such as Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, and International Service for Human Rights report a wide range of issues including those relating to media. The latter, Article 19, Committee to Protect Journalists, and the International Press Institute push directly for media-related issues and provide annual reports. Apart from the international level, regional organizations, for example SEAPA, Think Centre, and Asian Human Rights Commission have been playing active roles as well. These NGOs do not work separately but rather share information and build essential connections. Furthermore, the Internet has been an important facilitator in these areas.

Amid the restrictive control and other mechanisms, a different reaction is predicted by Singaporean people, unlike either Thailand, whose citizens believe that their media is free, or China, whose people are struggling for more open media through new technologies. Lacking participation and courage from people is the main obstacle in promoting press freedom. "The problem with Singapore is its small size and the courage of people. Singaporeans, most who are Chinese, unlike the Chinese from China, have no courage. (James Gomez, interview, March 21, 2008)"

Technology on its own, however, is of no strategic value [sic] terms of expanding political participation. Its democratic potential only comes alive when there is a group of committed people who are willing to use and promote the use of new technology for democratic purposes. And that use has to be well designed and properly targeted. However, in Singapore even though the government has provided the infrastructure for widespread Internet use, the public is nervous about using it for political ends (Gomez, 2002, p. 17).

Likewise, Lee reaffirmed the established social norms, stating "in the context of Internet surveillance, silent acquiescence can only be interpreted as consent. Auto-regulation hinges on an ideology of control with the sole aim of producing law-abiding, self-regulated and therefore, economically useful and productive citizens – what Foucault refers to as 'docile bodies' (Lee, 1990, p. 174).

It does not mean that the NGOs' contribution is totally ineffective. Reaction against their criticisms by the Singaporean government raises awareness among its people. However, domestic structure is the major obstacle. First is the legitimacy of the PAP government, meaning that regular elections, efficiency, wealth, high standard of living and education levels, for instance, push issues of freedom of speech to the periphery in Singapore (Gomez, 2005, p. 198). As mentioned previously, not only the government but also local media react negatively to NGO reports and criticism. To some extent, the PAP government's stance against these external advocacy groups influences how some local groups view their relationship with these external organizations (Gomez, 2005, p. 199), so to avoid trouble, they tend to decline direct involvement with external NGOs. This does not mean that there is no means to

promote press freedom in Singapore. "I think most media, be it foreign media or local media, predicts that press freedom in Singapore will continue to open up as more foreigners work and live here. But I do not expect press freedom to reach that of the western societies in the near future. (Chun Kiat, interview, March 23, 2008)" In addition, a domino effect can lead to a change in Singapore. "If such large countries (i.e. Thailand, China, Vietnam) have media freedom, then it will put pressure on Singapore as it will be the odd one out with media freedom. (James Gomez, interview, March 21, 2008)"