

A Status Report on Media Education and Training in Thailand

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Abstract

Media professions in Thailand generally receive the highest popularity among the non-science students. This is due to the fact that media professions seem much more challenging to the youths, hence leading to the high number of students competing severely to be admitted to the communication schools at major universities all over the country. The subjects available for them to study include, for example, advertising, public relations, broadcasting, telecommunications, journalism, etc. To equip the communication students with proper and adequate media skills, a number of internships and training programs are regularly conducted. Every student, for example, has to pass the required internship program at a media company before graduation. In addition, there are also various training programs conducted for them during the summer session. Some of them concern advertising creativity, film editing, script writing, internet and web page creating, media education, as well as writings for various kinds of media outputs. An issue perceived as necessary for these future media professionals is media ethics.

The term “media training” generally means the providing of technical knowledge and skills to media students and professionals. Media education, on the contrary, may be interpreted in three ways. It may be about providing formal media education to the students who want to pursue their media career in the future. Moreover, the term may involve educating media practitioners about matters they’re supposed to know for better career performances. Lastly, media education may cover the providing of knowledge about ‘promise and perils’ nature of media to media recipients, so that they would be alert to watch over media contents and functions.

This paper, therefore, aims primarily to provide information about the aforesaid media education and training. That is, it will summarize the attempts of various professional associations to provide technical training to media students and practitioners. Meanwhile, the topic of media education will be expanded to cover the efforts of various organizations to educate three important media-related groups in Thai society—media students, media practitioners, and media recipients.

Media Education and Training in Academic Realm

Media profession in Thailand has generally received the highest popularity among the non-science students. This is due to the fact that media careers seem much more challenging to the youths, hence leading to the high number of students competing severely to be admitted to the communication schools at major universities all over the country. The subjects available for them to study include, for example, advertising, public relations, broadcasting, telecommunications, journalism, etc. (Komolsevin & Sumano, 2000).

At present, there are 9 public universities and 22 private colleges and universities in Thailand that are offering a bachelor's degree in communication, not including the program offered by 36 nationwide campuses of Rajabhat Institute (<http://www.mua.go.th>). Chulalongkorn University was the first to offer the Journalism education in 1965, followed by Thammasat University in 1954 (Komolsevin & Sumano, 2000).

Media practitioners in general remain skeptical about formal education for the media and communication professions. They periodically voice their opinion that media educators "do not provide to their students the knowledge and skills deemed necessary in the career" (Komolsevin & Sumano, 2000, p. 263), rendering them unable to obtain employment or to succeed in media professions (Morgan, 2003). The educators, however, have realized these limitations, and attempted to fill the said gap with internships and training programs. On-site experiences will enable the media students to have a glimpse over the operation of the media industry.

To equip the communication students with proper and adequate media skills, a number of internships and training programs are regularly conducted. Every student, for example, has to pass the required internship program at a media company before graduation. Students with various majors need to seek internship in the relevant media firm.

Students majoring in advertising will have their training at an advertising agency, while those majoring in public relations will be sent to either a PR agency, or an organization that has a PR department. The ones majoring in radio/TV broadcasting will be sent to local radio/TV stations to work as an announcer or production trainee. Likewise, the journalism majors join a newspaper for internships. (Komolsevin & Sumano, 2000, p. 274)

In addition, there are also various training programs conducted for the students during the summer session. Some of them concern advertising creativity, film editing, script writing, Internet and web page creating, media evaluation, as well as writings for various kinds of media outputs (Summer training document, 2003). The media industry constantly supplies speakers and trainers to help implement these training programs. Occasionally, academic institutions arranged an educational trip to a media agency. Over there, a top manager usually provides a special lecture concerning professional works to those students (see, for example, Sookkasem, 2003).

Not only media educators but also media organizations help bridge the gap of discrepancy regarding media knowledge and skills of students. In general, they willingly accept students for professional internships, arrange various kinds of media competition programs among the students, and offer opportunities for student training in both domestic and international levels. The United Broadcasting Corporation (UBC), the only cable TV operator in Thailand, initiated the Young Journalist Award in 1996 in a joint cooperation with CNN International and the Council for the Mass Communication Faculty of Thailand (CMCT). In this case, the award-winning student was sent to get hands-on internship at the CNN headquarter in At-

lanta, USA. In 1999, Times Magazine joined with the team to provide internship with the print media. This program, however, was halted in 2001 due to financial problems of CNN. However, BBC took place of CNN in 2002, and joined with UBC and CMCT to restart the program with the name of "Future Journalist Award" (YJA & FJA documents, 2000-2002). This training program proves very successful in stimulating the media students to realize their inescapable encountering with globalization. They are additionally reminded of the necessity to augment their knowledge and skills to the international standard. In this aspect, they are expected to help uplift the performance of the Thai media industry and bring it to the forefront of the international forum. Some award winners, after coming back from their internship, joined the international section of media organizations, and constantly furnished CNN World Report with news pieces from Thailand!

Another area of training for media students concerns media technology. Realizing that communication technologies are of much more importance for the students' future career, the communication schools have regularly included in their programs the training on media technology. Bangkok University, for example, announced on its website the training programs on computer applications and webpage design and production (<http://www.bu.ac.th>). An issue perceived as necessary for these future media professionals is media ethics. At present, media are increasingly accused of bringing many disgusting issues to the forefront, and stimulating the young viewers to imitate those antisocial behaviors. Some of them include adultery, violence and killing, drinking, smoking, to name just a few. Hence, the ethical issue is put into the curriculum, so that these future media practitioners will step out and consider the issue of social responsibility more seriously.

Not only media students but media faculty members also need training for gaining on-site experiences. So far, media educators have been criticized of knowing only theoretical concepts, but lacking adequate professional experiences to produce capable media graduates. Hence, these educators seek to attend a variety of training programs held by academic and/or professional institutions. They may join a media agency during summer, read professional journals to widen and update their knowledge, and create personal connections with media practitioners (cited in Komolsevin & Sumano, 2000).

Media Education and Training for Media Practitioners

Training Programs

Not only media students and educators, but media practitioners also need training on a regular basis as well. In the present day, the media industry requires more media personnel who are trained specifically in the discipline. These training programs aim to brush up their technical knowledge and skills, and will keep them abreast of the changing media technology. Both local and international agencies are providing training programs for media practitioners. These institutions are, for example, the Public Relations Society of Thailand (PRST), Thai Journalists Association (TJA), Thai Press Association (TPA), the Press Council of Thailand (PCT), and the Advertising Association of Thailand (AAT).

The Thai Journalists Association (TJA) stated in its policy that it "supports the idea that education must continue to the mean towards strengthen one's career and occupation . . . [and] continue to educate Thai students about journalism (Thai Journalists Association Site, 1999-2003). The same policy has been stated by other professional associations as well (see, for example, Confederation of Thai Journalists, 2001).

These professional associations have established linkages with both local and overseas organizations, through which information about and grants for participation in training programs are provided. The Confederation of Thai Journalists (CTJ), for example, recently announced in its website that a grant for journalist training in Japan was available (Confederation of Thai Journalists, 2003). Some other training programs include, for instance, the workshop on investigative reporting to be held in Indonesia early this month (Thai Journalists Association Site, 1999-2003).

As for the local levels, several seminars have been regularly held throughout the country for journalists to provide them knowledge in various areas, e.g. press law (Confederation of Thai Journalists, 2002), photojournalistic techniques for feature magazine (Thai Press Association, 2000-2002), etc. Besides, a training institute for journalists of the Government Public Relations Department was established at Nakhon Sawan, a province located approximately 200 km north of Bangkok (Bangkok Post, April 2, 1999). The Public Relations Association of Thailand has also held seminars and workshops on various topics: news release writing, PR and technology, PR research and evaluation, English practice in PR works, etc. (PRAT documents, 2002-2003).

Besides the local organizations, the regional and international organizations provide training programs for media practitioners as well. International organizations have been participating arduously in providing various training programs for media professionals. Isis International Manila, for example, perceived a "need for training opportunities to help upgrade the skills of Asia-Pacific women broadcasters in different aspects of radio production." It held the "Radio Production Training for Asian Women Broadcasters" in Bangkok in April 2002 (<http://www.isiswomen.org/radio/>). UNESCO stated the same reason when it offered training opportunities for women broadcasters in Korea early this year (UNESCO documents, 2003).

Furthermore, the Committee on Culture and Information of ASEAN (COCI) has regularly sponsored a number of seminars and workshops for Thai media practitioners and their ASEAN colleagues. These efforts will induce not only better knowledge and skills in their career, but also will strengthen professional bonds among the media professionals (ASEAN-COCI documents, 2002).

Media Education

The powerful impacts of media on the society are widely recognized among the media scholars and professionals. Media can play a positive role by promoting beneficial knowledge and information to the audience. Meanwhile, media are accused of initiating a number of antisocial attitudes, values, and behaviors among the vulnerable audiences, namely children, the minorities, etc. Hence, media education activities conducted to a variety of constituencies – school children, university students, religious communities, women's groups, teachers, government officials and policy makers, aim primarily to promote greater awareness of the "promise and perils" of modern media (Tuley, 2002).

However, media practitioners are those who should be primarily made aware of their significant roles in using media for the better or worse. Such efforts as media monitoring, or the establishment of 'mediawatch' groups and media council will prove inadequate as long as the media practitioners themselves are left ignorant about the issue.

In Thailand, media education is presently considered an urgent issue and needs to be pro-

moted to the media practitioners on a regular basis. There exist various social factors and situations that contribute to the urgency of media education in Thailand. Those factors are listed as follows:

1. Youths' aggressiveness

Lately, several devastating incidents have taken place in Thailand. Some of them concern the youths' using of violence to solve problems. Those incidents include, for example, youth gangsters roaming around on motorbikes to kill and injure people; a high school student committed a shooting spree on schoolyard; a high school teen killed his girlfriend; and a jilted teen attempted to kill his ex-girlfriend but ended up killing her relatives and himself (see, for example, *The Nation*, March-June, 2003).

The teenagers are said to imitate these antisocial behaviors from the violent scenes they've seen from the media. Hence, several parties concerned (the government, school, family, NGOs) come out to call for more thoughtful contents and responsibilities from the media, and even ask for some procedures to regulate the media contents. A columnist in *Weekly Matichon*, for example, argued for implementing the movie rating policy so as to prevent the youths from seeing violent movies. He believed that such violent scenes might be imitated and lead to further aggressiveness (Khawneawklang, 2003).

2. Improper advertising content

The concern over the improper media content and presentation is also prevalent nowadays. Advertising has long been recognized of imposing undesirable values and attitudes on media viewers, e.g. materialism, rudeness, selfishness, competition, and so on. Recently, a company advertised its soap product by having an attractive female TV star take a shower on a pickup truck that ran around town! Even though the public saw only the silhouette of a-naked woman taking a shower, no one can deny the negative effects of that phenomenon on young viewers.

The incident stirred the whole society and the public starts asking for the proper conducts and social responsibility from the advertising people. The Advertising Association of Thailand, therefore, has recently conducted a series of six seminars on advertising ethics (Chaisuwan, 2003), in an attempt to initiate efforts for consumer protection. Finally, a set of codes of ethical conducts has been drafted for further implementation. Moreover, the government announced its effort to ban TV advertising of all kinds of alcoholic beverages, stating that it is misleading for the young viewers. This effort is undoubtedly being opposed by the industry itself.

3. Conflicts and misunderstanding

The issue of conflicts and misunderstanding is one of major concern among media educators and professionals. Due to the existence of differing religio-social backgrounds of Thai people, conflicts across sub-culture groups cannot be avoidable. In addition, conflicts between Thailand and its neighboring countries occur on a periodical basis. This is due to the historical conflicts involved by these nations. Such conflicts aggravated to be the riot of Cambodian people in Phnom Penh against Thai business and people in late January this year. That incident was analyzed to stem partly from long-lasting and deep-rooted dissatisfied feelings of the Cambodian people toward Thailand. However, the lack of cultural sensitivity among the Thai press may aggravate such conflicts. The self-assumed superiority of Thailand over its neighboring countries have

appeared once in a while in media outputs, and that even upset the people of those countries. Hence, the press and other media professionals need to be made aware of this issue.

4. New media technologies

New media technologies have heightened media pervasiveness to the extent that no audience of all demographic characteristics can escape from media influences. The media's greater accessibility to people of all ages and communities is a matter of growing concern. "... The global diversification of the media has made its impact more influential and has caused changes both to the adult and youth audience. . . Young viewers are much more easily affected than grown-ups" (Muntrabhorn, as cited in *Bangkok Post*, July 4, 1996).

The concern is not limited to television only, but also to other on-line media that can distribute a piece of information easily and simultaneously around the world. At present, almost all media organizations in Thailand have their on-line section (see, for example, <http://www.tv3.co.th>). Hence, they may have their media contents viewed anywhere and by anyone. The new medium with the increasingly prevalent power on young users is the Internet. In Thailand, children and teenagers are among the most active groups to use the Internet. Generally, they use the Internet 1-3 hours per day in the evening either at home, at school, or at the Internet café (as cited in Komolsevin, 2002).

The major concern regarding the young users of the Internet involved mainly the 'double-edged' nature of the Internet. That is, while the Internet can provide great benefits to the users, it could harm the young users with indecent websites containing sexually explicit contents and violence. Other risks of Internet usage on teenagers include, for instance, meeting strangers met on the Internet, fraud information, information about drugs, alcohol and illegal objects, and patent violation (as cited in Komolsevin, 2002).

The aforementioned factors have called for an urgent education of media practitioners. The activities are numerous and sponsored by various local and international organizations, with a purpose of expanding perception and imposing proper values and attitudes among media practitioners. The topics to educate the media professionals are as follows:

1. Cultural Sensitivity

The topic of cultural sensitivity in news reporting was mentioned in a seminar on Synergy for ASEAN Cultural Promotion Media for Young Generation, being held in Thailand early 2002 and sponsored by the Committee on Culture and Information (COCI) of ASEAN (Seminar documents, 2002). Besides focusing on objectivity in news and information contents, participating media practitioners were also cautioned of the 'different but equal' concept of culture and to avoid the phenomenon of cultural hegemony, in which a culture is assumed to be superior to other cultures, and vice versa (Komolsevin, 2002).

The similar kind of seminar was recently held early 2003 in Bangkok to provide the government provincial public relations practitioners with knowledge about ASEAN. During the seminar, all of them shared concern over the conflicts between Thailand and Cambodia occurring recently in late January. They reluctantly admitted that the lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of media professionals may have ignited the flame of such con-

flicts (Seminar report, 2003).

The concern over the media practitioners' lacking of cultural sensitivity in their works is not voiced for the international issues only. The similar concern occurs in the country where accommodates differing races and subcultures. In this case, Dr. Thaksin Shinawatra, the Thai Prime Minister used to warn the press against their lack of objectivity and cultural sensitivity when they reported about the conflicts currently occurring in the South of Thailand.

2. Media Ethics

Media professionals are actually very influential (Christians, Fackler, Rotzoll, & Brittain McKee, 1998). This is due to the fact that their outputs are disseminated through the most powerful channels—mass media. And generally, “they operate in their own interests . . . and often [their] professional values are high-minded” (p. 9), with profit orientation. As a result, their outputs (e.g. advertising, media programs) have been constantly accused of highly focusing on indecent contents merely for the sake of business profits, while ignoring elements that may enhance prosocial values and social benefits.

At present, the society calls for ethical practices among media institutions and professionals. Ethical issues stem from the disagreements between media producers/programmers and educators regarding business profits and social benefits. Advertising, for instance, is accused of providing sexual-arousing and violent contents (Pacharoen, 1997); journalists violating the public's right to privacy and usually providing bloody pictures on the front-page coverage; and media producers providing low-taste elements in their programs that promote undesirable behaviors among the viewers (Christians, Fackler, Rotzoll, & Brittain McKee, 1998).

The professional associations, therefore, have taken a number of efforts to initiate professional codes of ethics and attempted to enforce them among the practitioners. The Advertising Association of Thailand (AAT), for example, had arranged a series of seminars on advertising ethics for self-regulation among the practitioners. Chaisuwan (2003) content-analyzed the seminars, added up depth-interviews of distinguished advertising practitioners, conducted a survey among middle-level advertising people, and came up with a list of ethical codes and implementation steps.

In 1992, the Public Relations Association of Thailand (PRSA) conducted a seminar on professional ethics for PR practitioners, and came up with 9 items of the “Code of Professional Standards for the Practices of Public Relations” (cited in Stawedin, 1999, p. 320). As for journalists, the Thai Journalists Association (TJA) clearly announced in its policy that its members “uphold honesty, ethical behaviors and the principle of neutrality . . . [and also] uphold the principles and journalist ethics.” In this case, TJA has set up a committee of 5 members to “look into issues and problems of unethical behavior and practices among journalists” (Thai Journalists Association Site, 1999-2003). The stated policy was implemented by all the press associations. On July 4, 2003, the Press Council of Thailand, for instance, invited a renowned monk, a well-known senior citizen, and a distinguished businessman to voice their opinion on roles and ethical practices that the society expected from the journalists.

3. General knowledge

It is widely accepted that media practitioners, be it producers or managers, need to be fully equipped with the well-rounded knowledge of various disciplines. This is due to the fact that media is an important social institution, and the contents of which are influential to all media consumers. Besides, media people should be able to view any situation in an integrative manner. That is, they should realize the nature of interdependence among various elements of the society, of which media is a part.

Hence, the professional associations perceive the necessity to provide general knowledge, local or international, to media practitioners, in addition to technical knowledge and skills. The aforementioned general knowledge includes that about social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of Thailand and other countries (Thai Press Association, 2000-2002). For instance, the Thai Journalists Association (TJA) worked with Nihon Shinbun Kyokai (NSK) of Japan to offer training on "political, economic, and social aspects of Japan" to the selected Thai journalists (Thai Journalists Association Site, 1999-2003). Other activities concerning general knowledge include "journalists meeting with environmentalists," "aesthetics in writing and page making," and establishing of "People's Library" and "Thai Press Museum." In addition, regular meetings among "folks of the same feathers" are held in the local, national, and international levels (Thai Press Association, 2000-2002).

Media Education among Media Recipients

The most important issue to educate media recipients is media literacy. The term "media literacy" has been defined as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms" (cited in Hobbs, 1998). The term is widely adopted among media scholars and educators as an alternative to the traditional media education; that is, to merely protect naive and vulnerable viewers from the harmful effects of media. Arduous attempts had been made to control media contents and to educate the media professionals on creating more decent media outputs. These efforts are proved more or less fruitless since the concept of educational media goes against the entertainment-oriented aspect of media contents as a means to profit making business.

Hence media critical scholars shifted their focus. To protect the young viewers from harmful effects of media, the media educators choose to equip them with critical thinking skills to analyze the positive and negative aspects of media contents, and to promote students' more understanding of and participation in media (Buckingham, 1998).

In Thailand, the efforts to promote media literacy among young viewers are prevalent in media textbooks and course syllabus where contain media literacy contents (<http://www.odi.stou.ac.th/CollectionDev/CommArts/MassComm.asp?pg=2>, http://www.pn.psu.ac.th/comsci/course_desc.html). In terms of the Internet, various seminars and workshops have been held to educate young Internet users, teachers, and parents to be aware of its potential positive and negative effects (Bangkok Post, July 4, 1996; and cited in Komolsevin, 2002).

Another point to ponder is the participation from media information recipients in media operations and programming. The information recipients are encouraged to participate in supervising the media contents that may affect their community, and, for the better, producing their own media programs to serve the local needs. As a result, the concept of commu-

nity radio has been introduced to the social forum, and currently under the strong push for practical implementation in the future (Siriyuvasak, 2002).

Conclusion

Due to the critical roles media play in the society, both scholars and professionals perceive it necessary to educate all parties concerned about media functions, contents, and effects. Students are equipped with not only media-oriented knowledge and skills, but also ethical principles so that they would employ media in a constructive way. Moreover, since media technology has been advancing very rapidly, both the students and media practitioners have to be trained on a regular basis, so that they would be abreast of and handle effectively the swiftly changing technology.

Media training and education are not conducted only in the national level. Globalization has reduced space and time barriers, and thus required the media people to form a global network with their colleagues all over the world. Hence, a variety of training programs have been regularly held overseas by several international organizations. This will enhance not only personal contacts among media practitioners, but also an opportunity for them to get training with modern media technology.

All in all, training the media people with professional skills only is fruitless and inadequate without educating them about general knowledge and ethical principles. By bearing in mind their responsibility toward the society as a whole, they can help alleviate pains and problems we have presently been encountering in our society.

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