

# The international media and the missing parts of the puzzle

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Little more than two decades ago, Thailand attracted relatively little interest in the outside world. Its economy was still largely agricultural. Its financial system was closed. Tourism was limited to adventurous types prepared to hire fishing boats to get to pristine islands now buried under concrete. Bangkok had few foreign residents other than employees of international agencies. Beyond the capital there were only a few left stranded after the Vietnam war. Academic interest was confined to a specialized coterie, mainly anthropologists studying picturesque backwardness among the northern hill-tribes or in deepest Isan. Thai restaurants were rare even in Bangkok let alone the outside world.

Fast-forward to the present and the change is overwhelming. The economy has been inserted into the world-spanning production chains of multinationals. The baht and the stock index bounce around on flows of international finance. A million people pass through the immigration checkpoints every month. Thai restaurants are a fixture on every high street.

Many, many people have an interest in understanding what is happening in Thailand for the simple reason that they have something at stake. The world's automobile giants have huge sunk investments accumulated over twenty years. Managers of international financial funds hold Thai currency, stocks, and bonds. Manufacturers of millions of products depend on a Thai-based supplier for some part or component. The size of the resident international community has ballooned as the growth and internationalization of the local economy has sucked in everyone from English teachers to Korean restaurateurs. Rural Thailand is dotted with colonies of European retirees. Thousands of families hope a vacation in Thailand will be a highpoint of their year.

With more people in the world having more at stake in Thailand, there has been a growing demand to understand the country and how it works. International financial firms analyze the economy for the clients on a daily or weekly basis. Risk analysts publish regular reports. Thai academics can earn extra pocket money by acting as speakers and consultants. A few blogs act as forums for debate and comment. In this knowledge industry, the foreign media play a major role because of the immediacy of their response to events.

Go back two decades again, and the interest of major international media in Thailand was almost zero. The Far Eastern Economic Review catered for a slim and specialized audience, but stories on Thailand in the international press were very rare, and on BBC or other major broadcasters were virtually unknown. Journalists resident in Bangkok were mostly focused on neighboring countries such as Burma and Cambodia. If anything big happened in Thailand, journalists flew in and struggled to understand what was going on. During the political crisis of 1992, many journalists who had last been in Thailand at the close of the Vietnam War hopped off the planes and tried to understand what was happening in a framework that was now twenty years out of date.

Today is very, very different. During the peaks of last year's rolling crisis, Thailand was often the lead story on BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and NHK. The Chinese news agency, Xinhua, named the Thai turmoil among its top ten international stories of the year. International papers like the International

Herald Tribune, Wall Street Journal, and Financial Times regularly run a Thailand story several times a week. Several daily newspapers from Australia, Japan and Europe maintain permanent correspondents in Bangkok. In contrast to the fly-in/fly-out mob, many of these international correspondents stay for a long time, become proficient in the language, and get dug into the culture.

The job of everybody in this knowledge industry is to give a full picture. The audience for the specialized reports, the blogs, and the international media demand to know what is really going on because they have a lot at stake. In the past three years, and especially in the past three months, that has been very, very obvious. Investors have seen their capital devalued. Manufacturers have had worldwide production systems disrupted. Families have lost their holidays. The demand to know and understand how the country really works has increased. But this creates difficulty because of those parts of the picture that are blocked out.

The local media practice self-censorship because it would be dangerous not to. But in private space, Thais compensate for the gaps in public knowledge by exchanging opinions, relaying gossip, comparing interpretations. This network of information sharing is very dense. Of course, it is difficult to judge the validity of much of what is exchanged. But this informal information network helps people to fill in the blanks and allow them to feel that they understand the full picture.

Those consuming the international media do not have access to a similar network. Hence the gaps in their picture are glaringly obvious. People find it difficult to accept that an institution that figures so prominently in the nation's constitution, in the daily word-of-mouth exchange of information, and in the visual drama of street protest is not part of the political landscape. International correspondents try to compensate because their audience demands it.

Over the past year alone, the nature of political debate within Thailand has changed utterly. More sections of society are involved in the debate. Things once unsaid are now said. In public forums, speakers have evolved codes, metaphors, and gestures which their audience can understand. On radio, presenters have quietly transgressed old taboos. In semi-private spaces like the interior of a taxi, exchanges have become more forthright.

Those restating old truths about Thai politics are perhaps trying to reassure themselves that nothing has really changed. But it has. The knowledge industry, both inside and outside the country, will continue trying to fill in the missing parts of the puzzle because there is such a large audience that has so much at stake and a desire to understand what is really going on.

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