

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter includes five parts: Rationale of the Study, Objectives of the Study, Significance of the Study, Scope of the Study and Definition of Terms.

1.1 Rationale of the Study

Press freedom reflects the level of democracy in a country. In Thailand, the media has for a long time been one of the most important pillars ensuring political situation in the society, together with the monarchy, the people, parliament and the military. The 1997 Constitution provided favourable condition for the birth of the so-called independent media, which was designed to liberate newspeople from state interference and help society find free access to information. Thailand, together with Indonesia and the Philippines, has been considered as the most democratic country with the freest media in Southeast Asia region. However, this freedom in Thailand was to some extent undermined by various policies under Thaksin Shinawatra regime.

Studying newspapers, especially English language newspapers – the last frontier that Thaksin attacked to maintain his absolute ruling power – turns to be a meaningful task, especially when there has been no research on the very portrayal of Thaksin in Thailand's English language dailies, *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*. By studying the images of Thaksin in the two newspapers, one can somewhat understand the level of press freedom in Thailand.

Thaksin is one of the most famous figures in the country. He is known by the public with both positive and negative characteristics. He is a kind of celebrity, whose wellknownness has been somewhat built by newspapers.¹ Thaksin, as other celebrities, is

¹ The definition of "celebrity" was introduced in Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image – A Guide To Pseudo-Events in America (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1961), p. 57.

born in the daily papers and never loses the mark of his fleeting origin.² The celebrities are differentiated mainly by trivia of personality. When someone is known for his or her personality actually proves him or her a celebrity. Thus a synonym for “a celebrity” is “a personality”.³ For Thaksin, his personality is always depicted in newspapers as a successful businessman, a capable leader with good vision and good care for the poor, a good husband, and a good father. At the same time, he is described to be lack of basic criteria for legitimacy needed for a good leader like integrity, morality, honesty and self-sacrifice; he is impatient, incautious, arrogant, immodest, stubborn, selfish and impulsive. He sometimes turns to be a dictator disregarding human rights and democracy, favouring corruption and cronyism.

Newspapers reflects public opinion, which is formed by the pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes and relationship.⁴ Those pictures are acted upon by groups of people or by individuals acting in the name of groups. Those pictures now became synthetic, believable, vivid, concrete, simplified, and ambiguous as never before. Changes were recorded daily or twice daily, opinions were vivified by journalese and photographs.

This research aims to study the images of Thaksin Shinawatra introduced in Thailand’s two English language newspapers: *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* through journalese, illustrations and feedbacks from the readers.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The research aims:

- To study the images of Thaksin Shinawatra in two leading English language daily newspapers of Thailand.
- To study whether there is a trend in covering Thaksin in both newspapers from the beginning towards the end of his ruling time (February 2001-September 2006).

² *ibid.* p. 63.

³ *ibid.* p. 65.

⁴ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 28.

- To study whether there are any differences in covering Thaksin in the two newspapers.
- To study why there is such a trend or such differences.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The research provides for the first time:

- The portrait of Thaksin presented to the intellectuals, educated Thais and expatriates from various countries living in Thailand.
- The coherence between news, the balance of comments, the choice of letters to the editors, the use of visuals in photos and cartoons.
- The strategies have been employed by the newspapers to do this.
- The foundation for further studies on the images of Thaksin in Thai media.

1.4 Scope of the Study

- One week coverage of *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* in the seven most important periods throughout Thaksin's ruling time were selected. The sample covers:
 - + January 6-13, 2001.
 - + August 3-10, 2001.
 - + October 6-13, 2003.
 - + October 24-31, 2004.
 - + February 6-13, 2005.
 - + January 23-30, 2006.
 - + September 20-27, 2006.
- All items of news, comment, letters to editors, photos and cartoons mentioning Thaksin were studied.

1.5 Definition of Terms

- News: pieces of writing that introduce facts or opinions by the public or people outside the newspapers.

- Comment: pieces of writing that introduce opinions by editors, journalists or academic researchers representing the newspapers' point of view.⁵ Under this category, comment includes commentary, opinion, analysis and editorial.

- Letters to the editors: pieces of opinions by the readers published in the newspapers.

- Watchdogs (journalism): any media (including blogs) providing consumer watchdog activities.

- Lapdogs (journalism): media, which is easily controlled by any power.

⁵ The way of categorising pieces of writing in newspapers into two kinds: news and comment has been introduced by Duncan McCargo, Politics and the Press in Thailand: Media Machinations, (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 3.