

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Chapter Overview

This final chapter draws together the theoretical framework of this study and the empirical findings based on the analysis in the previous chapter of select articles from American newspapers. This chapter contains the following sections:

- Overview of what has been done, why, and the findings that relate to the research questions in Chapter One.
- Identification of some of the themes discussed in the study
- A summary of the arguments presented in each of the preceding chapters
- An application of some of the theoretical concepts discussed in the Literature Review to the findings in the Results section

This thesis focused on the issue of media representations of reality, and analyzed the case of violence in Southern Thailand as an example of the manner in which the American media may be misrepresenting reality in its portrayal of global political events. The study characterizes the American media's response to the insurgency in Thailand by means of select articles from the three periodicals chosen for analysis – the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Asian Wall Street Journal*. Passages from these articles were analyzed within the conceptual framework of media responsibility theories, with special reference to the media's highlighting of the religious aspects of the violence. The empirical foundation of the study is the violence which began in Southern Thailand in January 2004, and the events that precipitated the declaration of a state of Emergency by Prime Minister Thaksin in July 2005.

This study commenced with the following research objectives in mind:

- To analyze the ways in which three particular newspapers characterize the Thai insurgency

- To determine the similarities and differences in these characterizations

Some of the critical themes identified in the course of this study which pertain to the media's response to violence in Thailand are outlined briefly in the following section. The findings of this study support the fact that in the limited number of articles we chose to read and analyze there is a definite pattern in the characterization of the current conflict in southern Thailand. Since the conflict is primarily between the Muslim community and Thai authorities, it is not surprising to discover that the majority of these articles give these events a strong religious/political interpretation.

Another trend in the articles is to mention the issues of human rights abuses in Thailand and by Thaksin in particular. The interesting aspect of this characterization found in many of the articles is the fact that although they strongly criticize Thaksin and his action, there is not much focus on the fact that the U.S. has taken no actions against him.

4.2 Summary of Findings

In Chapter One, with respect to the ongoing violence in southern Thailand, some salient questions were mentioned especially as they are depicted in American newspapers:

1. How is the violence being described – in what terms?

The researcher found the violence described within the three newspapers labeled this as a conflict between Muslim insurgents and the Thai authority. Often the insurgency characterization by the articles that were analyzed described the insurgency as terrorist and Muslim fundamentalist. To a degree some articles also put the continuing violence on Prime Minister Thaksin mishandling the conflict and his heavy hand in dealing with the conflict. The majority of articles made no attempt to explain the root causes of the conflict. Many of the articles alluded to the fact an international terror network might

behind the violence. This researcher believes that very few of the articles gave an objective picture of the conflict and fell back on labeling this as another Muslim terrorist conflict as found in other parts of the world. To some degree some of the articles blamed the Muslim community as violent and the complete opposite of the Thai Buddhist community, often reporting on the deaths that have been accruing in the Thai Buddhist community while not mentioning the deaths of Muslim teachers, lawyers, laborers and political leaders.

2. What do these newspaper articles suggest as the root or foundation for this problem?

The lack of information concerning the root causes and a complete absence of insurgent voices within all of the articles left an impression that newspaper's covering the conflict as being lopsided and left a negative image of the southern Thai Muslim community. Some of the articles contributed the conflict as being derived from poverty and corruption, yet none of these theories were ever fully explained and many issues concerning the conflict seemed to be blamed on the Muslim community dissatisfaction with the Thai government, without making an attempt to give the reader an objective look into the local region and the issues concerning the Thai southern Muslim community such as the Thai government closing Islamic schools and the total absence of an Islamic higher education institution, as well as the cultural differences found in this part of Thailand, e.g. traditions, spoken and written languages.

3. How do these articles describe Thailand's Prime Minister and his role in either aggravating or alleviating the violence?

The articles examined placed some of the blame on Prime Minister Thaksin as contributing to the continuing violence. Thaksin's government's human rights violations and his mishandling of the conflict are mentioned as factors for the continued escalation of violence, but this is never fully explored with an objective reason since members of the

insurgency are never found in any of the articles. The articles left the impression that Thaksin as being only part of the problem, and his lack of concern for human rights and cultural insensitivities. Yet, Thakin is not portrayed as the instigator of the conflict, and none of his domestic policies are ever described and or mentioned as being part of the causes or the continuing violence. Thaksin is also not being credited with alleviating the conflict; there is no mention of peace initiatives and other parties contributing to building peace in the region.

4. How are the subjects of 'religion' and 'politics' woven into these articles? What prominence do they have in the articles?

The news articles examined show a distinct predilection towards focusing on the religious aspects of the violence in the region. But that does not necessarily mean that the violence has been motivated by religious differences, although the articles leaves the impression that it is. From the tone and direct statements made by the majority of the articles in these three particular newspapers, there is no doubt that the insurgency is being blamed on 'Muslim terrorists' and 'Islamic extremists' along with the Thai government for heavy handling of the conflict. The articles continually describe the relationship between the Muslim minority and the rest of Thai society in terms of a deliberate dichotomy. None of the news articles speaks about Muslim communities found in other parts of the country and whether the concerns are shared. This researcher believes that do to the lack of objective reporting all Thai Muslims are lumped together and may leave a negative impression of Thai Muslims as being disgruntle.

In chapter two, this researcher stated that the role of newspapers is to 'inform and entertain'. In line with its responsibility to inform is the issue of the media and social responsibility. The question that arises from this study is; do these select American newspapers assume any level of social responsibility when it comes to their characterization of the conflict in southern Thailand? Certainly, they are trying to present at least some of the facts. The violence is being reported on, most especially the incident

when 78 Muslims suffocated in the back of a government truck. Certainly these select journalists have reported on the violence and approximately 48 articles were published on this topic during that time. However, given the fact that the majority of these representations of what the media purports as political reality place most of the blame on the Muslim community, it is questionable as to whether these are truly objective representations of the conflict, or if, rather, political reality is being misrepresented by the media.

Another theme that arose in the analysis of these articles is that of Thailand's relationship with the U.S. Although it was not reported on in an extensive manner, it was mentioned in several articles. For example, the article by Glen Kessler states overtly that Thailand is being forgiven its abuses in human rights due to the fact that it assists the U.S. in the war on terrorism. This suggests that the political construction of reality by the media in this case has been severely affected by the terrorist attacks in America, since the government is willing to overlook the atrocities in Thailand in return for assistance in its own agenda. If Thailand is going to emerge as a 'true democracy' the issue at hand is whether or not it is going to become a democratic nation by its own definition or by the definition of the U.S. If it is the latter, then the price may be very high indeed.

The other factor that could be a cause of the manner of representation that the media exhibits with reference to the Thai insurgency is: just 'what kinds of human rights abuses' will the U.S. tolerate, and which ones will it abhor? Finally, one wonders about the media's apparent lack of interest in the human rights abuses that were being perpetrated on those in the Muslim community in Thailand, perhaps because of its own sentiments regarding the international Islamic community. In the light of the research conducted with reference to the social construction of reality, this may mean that the 'reality' depicted by the media in America is a construct rather than a true and objective representation.

This trend that the media has of applying pre-determined references and ideologies to what should be treated as context-specific issues seems to reflect an oversimplification of the issues at hand, which does not account for the idiosyncrasies of particular political situations, but seems rather to be an attempt by the media to appropriate all issues related to all nations as being subject to the same rules and trends that are characteristic of American culture. Arguably, the media's response to the Thai insurgency has been to interpret the situation along the same lines as that of the terrorist attacks on America, which results in reducing every act of insurgency to the common denominator of fundamentalist militancy. This may also reflect Berger and Luckmann's view that the organizational is more influential than the individual. By representing reductionist world-views, the media seems to have compromised on the representation of objective world-views by adopting political and subjective attitudes.

The analysis of these articles in Chapter IV also reveals a strong tendency towards putting the blame for the violence on the Muslim community, thereby suggesting that there may be a cultural hegemony at work in international relations. Although several articles bordered on providing a deeper understanding of the violence, they almost always ended up in the same place; the Muslim community bears primary responsibility for the continuing violence. At heart in this matter is the fact that the Muslim community has expressed deep concerns over the way they are treated in Thailand. Their concerns go back a long way not just to the beginning of this conflict. In fact, their primary claim is that they have long been treated as 'second-class citizens' in Thailand, especially in comparison to the Buddhist community. It was found in this study that the articles in focus paid scant attention to this aspect of Thai reality.

While such ethnic issues may rest at the foundation of the violence in the Deep South in Thailand, the media response to them seems to unfortunately (and possibly unwittingly) target a particular community by making it a scapegoat, and ensuring that it takes the fall for particular acts of violence, which is then followed up by joining the dots and seeing the same community as responsible for other acts of violence performed

elsewhere in the world. The implications of the findings from these analyses seem to lie in the direction of media constructs of reality, where dominant corporate media giants are given jurisdiction over the public's right to information, and public knowledge is controlled to the degree that it is made completely reliant on media agencies for its access to information about world events.

An interesting aspect of the articles chosen for the purposes of this study is the distinct lack of analysis over the role of the Buddhist community. There are no direct interviews with community leaders, nor is there any speculation or interpretation of the ways in which the Buddhist community behaves in this matter. Its role in the context of the insurgency has barely been explored by the media. Again, this researcher must ask whether or not this is an objective characterization of the conflict. If not, why would American journalists represent the conflict in this manner? The answer seems closely connected with the U.S. and its emphasis with the war on terrorism. It may be that American journalists see this conflict as another example of Islamic fundamentalists committing acts of terror just as they did in the U.S., and were presumed to do in London. If so, can these articles be considered truly objective? In this researcher's opinion, one of the roles of the journalist is to try and be as objective as possible.

4.3 The Results Examined with Reference to the Theoretical Framework

The study has been based on two main bodies of research, which have been instrumental in the formation of the theoretical concepts that form the framework of the study, as well as in the gathering of empirical evidence to support the claims made by the study on the basis of its theoretical assumptions:

- (a) specific articles from newspapers that may have been instrumental in precipitating the current condition of media-constructed social reality that this study is interested in examining; the newspapers used in this analysis are the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, and articles from all three periodicals have been selected and analyzed;

(b) Theoretical and critical points of view on the manner in which political reality as well as governmental processes may be misrepresented by the media.

The research methodology has been grounded throughout the study in the instances of communication literature that have been chosen with special reference to their pertinence towards the issues examined in the thesis. Special focus has been placed on media effects theories with reference to political reality.

Of special significance in this context are theories which pertain to the normative system of societal development, which hold that societies are founded on prescribed and predetermined norms of thought and behavior. It is hypothesized that media constructs and governmental policies are both based to a considerable extent on such normative systems; it is also suggested that media organizations are themselves responsible to some extent for the public representation and maintenance of such systems.

The thesis is founded, as the literature review elaborated upon, on the various theories that exist with reference to the manner in which the media affects the creation of knowledge about situations in foreign countries (in this context, the subject relates to how the American public's conception of the Thai insurgency is informed by the media). The first relevant theory in this regard that was examined was the media responsibility theory, which decrees that the media has the responsibility of reporting accurate and timely news to the public. Since the media is primarily the medium through which communities form their judgments and opinions about political events, the importance of media responsibility cannot be understated.

Yin and Skerdjal's concepts regarding the media's ability and responsibility to critique the government are also important to this study. The thesis that "theories concerning mass media and society to a large degree correspond to actual political systems" (Skjerdal 1993, 83) lends credibility to the central concerns of this study, which seeks to prove that media constructions of reality are often the only channels through

which people learn about events in other countries. This thesis also questions whether people's awareness of international events can be autonomous of media constructs.

The concept of libertarianism has also been applied to the theoretical framework of the study, and its implications examined thoroughly. The theory has implications for the economic aspect of media engagement with political reality, drawing attention to the fact that some newspapers have more capital than others, and are hence more likely to hold sway over public opinions. Such organizations may be in a position to be able to displace more objective versions of political events with constructs of their own making that suit their own agendas rather than providing disinterested reports on social and political events.

Related to the theory of libertarianism is that of authoritarianism, which seeks to examine the manner in which authoritarian governments can curtail the freedom of expression of the press. Yin's theories on the manner in which the government may assert its own authority on media corporations and news agencies are particularly relevant in this context. This study has also examined possible counter-arguments to the theories it has explored, so as to provide constant referential frameworks in terms of alternative and/or corrective theories. For example, the social responsibility theory has been critiqued on the basis of both liberal and conservative theories of analysis, especially with reference to the manner in which government policing is approached and analyzed by theorists. Media impacts on policy-making have also been examined in this regard, and one of the observations made in Chapter 2 has been that "a clear relationship can be perceived between the state and the (U.S.) press."

The monopolistic nature of the media is also examined with reference to post-September 11 patterns of referencing in the media, with special reference to the manner in which the U.S. media seems to have played a significant role in the formation of a global network of news agencies that seem to perpetrate the same agenda all over the world, whether it be in America or in Thailand or in Afghanistan. Galtung's identification

of the U.S. and the E.U. as two contemporary 'empires' has also been instrumental to the formation of the theory of the media as a monopolistic corporation, a many-headed entity that is governed by a few organizations.

The theoretical framework of this study has set up models of communicative discourse which have led to the formation of hypotheses and assumptions about the nature of the media organizations researched in this study, and of their formative roles in the structures that determine the public's understanding of political events, as well as in the media's representation of the manner in which governmental policies are created.

This thesis has concerned itself with characterizing the Thai insurgency in the light of the ways in which certain American newspapers reported on events in Thailand and on the possible implications of the same for existing theories on the role of the media in the representation of political events, especially in an international context.

One of the primary and most consistent points of focus in this study has been the religious basis of the violence in Thailand. Parallels have been drawn with the ascription of the responsibility for the violence perpetrated in America on Muslim fundamentalists, so much so that 'Islamic' has become an adjective meaning 'terrorist' or militant. Significantly, over ninety per cent of the articles chosen for this research from the three select periodicals referred to communal violence in terms of religious discord. The Results chapter notes that "news coverage examined showed a consistent bias in favor of the Thai Buddhists in the southern district." This observation seems particularly intriguing in the light of the ongoing discord between the Muslim minority and the governmental authorities in Thailand.

The seemingly irresponsible assertions by American journalists along the lines of statements such as "But the latest campaign is fueled primarily by militant Muslims, casting the conflict in religious terms that ominously polarize the communities" (Sipress) and "Those responsible for the violence on the Muslim side should call a halt to the wave

of killings and bombings that has killed more than 580 people this year” (Vatikiotis) are examined in the context of the assumption that such allegations by the media have further misrepresented to people in America the communal violence in Thailand.

One of the primary conclusions drawn in the Results chapter, therefore, is that it appears as if the Muslim community is being unfortunately marginalized in the Thai context, and that this can lead to the misrepresentation of the Thai situation in the context of a global understanding of the same. This fits in with the theories of media effects that have been examined in the theoretical sections of the thesis, since the empirical evidence seems to verify the hypotheses that were created on the basis of the ideological and abstractive principles that were garnered from the theoretical resources utilized in the study.

A political analysis of Thaksin’s role in the context of violence in southern Thailand has also legitimized the suppositions established by the critical hypotheses created earlier in the study. It is illustrated through means of the articles chosen for analysis that public response to Thaksin’s decisions “appears to also place tremendous responsibility on Thaksin’s government for ignoring the true problem – the long years of discrimination and then using the situation to blame international terrorism.” It is estimated that there need to be additional perspectives on the situation in Thailand instead of merely the images propagated by the media.

In chapter one, the following was stated: Through our exploration of various forms of media, we the reader (reader = public) give meanings and often multiple meanings to a particular subject; that is, we create and recreate our own reality based on the information we choose to receive. If there is any bias on the part of these journalists, another question that must be asked is; ‘what reality is being created and recreated in these specific articles?’ The discourse we seek to understand here is the characterization of the conflict in southern Thailand. As described in these articles, this researcher interprets that discourse as one which focuses on the conflict as the responsibility of

Muslim insurgents who may or may not have connections to Al Qaeda and imposing this violence on the innocent non-Muslim community. Another aspect of the discourse is the construction of Thaksin as aggravating the conflict but above reproach due to his role in the international war on terrorism. As such, the political reality constructed here is one that sets up the conflict as another example of the way in which Islamic fundamentalists seek to terrorize the world at large.

Another aspect of this construct is that in the course of this conflict abusing the rights of the Muslim minority in Thailand is justified because of the larger picture. That larger picture, once again, comes back to Thaksin's willingness to commit Thailand to assist the U.S. in the war on terrorism. The Thai communities are the ground on which international relations are being played out in various overt as well as covert forms. Media assumptions about the crisis in Thailand seem to identify the Thai situation as a likely parallel to the situation of terrorism in the West, involving the homogenization of international political events into a single political structure that is expected to subject itself to the same rules in disparate political situations.

Is it possible, then, that these American journalists, although interested in the conflict to some degree, are misrepresenting the Muslim community in a specific way because of the U.S. and its stated war on terrorism? Have these journalists succumbed to creating a specific discourse on this conflict that must portray the Muslim insurgents as the enemy of the Thai state? If so, have these journalists abandoned social responsibility in this matter? These are difficult questions which themselves are worthy of further study and analysis.

In terms of analyzing the root cause(s) of this conflict, only a couple of journalists suggested that the mistreatment and systemic inequality of the Muslim community may be at the heart of this situation. But even so, they inevitably returned to the discourse described above. Somehow then, another aspect of this discourse is that although this inequality may exist, there may be an agenda to blame Islamic fundamentalism because

of America's current interests and political leanings. This is not to suggest that these journalists are being told what to write, but perhaps the political influence is there nevertheless. Ultimately it is a shame that the root cause of this problem is not being truly explored; rather, these journalists fall into simplistic descriptions of the conflict and offer a rather simple and tired explanation – Muslim insurgents, probably backed by or influenced by Al Qaeda, are at the heart of the problem. The same organizations are cited over and over again as being responsible for violence in countries as disparate as the U.S., Thailand, Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan.

This conflict then will likely continue until someone in Thailand comes to the conclusion that it is the foundation or the reason for the conflict that truly matters. Only when that reason is properly addressed does the conflict have a chance to be resolved. What form that resolution is likely to take is hard to predict before the issue has even been publicly identified as an issue. The media response to the situation in Thailand seems ultimately to be the product of too much reliance by the media on political ideologies in its interpretation of the Thai insurgency, and goes back to the question of journalistic objectivity.

It may be argued that a media organization has the innate ability to represent political reality with subtle undertones which may detract from the objective representation of events. A possible effect of misrepresentation can be the danger of representing a superficial reality instead of paying equal and objective attention to all aspects of a news story. If this is true, then the question of who should be concerned about these issues almost becomes redundant. The findings of this study imply that politics is intrinsically related to the contexts in which media roles are played out, especially in the international framework. Perhaps what is required is a radical de-politicization of such issues, so that they may be objectively analyzed by the media without recourse to disparate political agendas.