

Thailand: Joint Editorial on Harrassment and Violence Against the Media

On 11 April 2006, Thai newspapers (both Thai and English-language) published a Joint Editorial in order to speak out against media harassment and violence in Thailand. The editorial follows:

Editorial

Free media must become a reality

A democratic society cannot expect to be governed well without the free exchange of information and ideas

Freedom of expression is the lifeblood of any free media. Without this freedom, professional journalists cannot be expected to perform their duties as intended - encouraging and facilitating an open exchange of news and views through objectivity in reporting and the exercise of free speech and, through publishing and broadcasting, making accurate, truthful and timely information available to the general public.

The concept of a free press in this country dates back to 1835, when American missionary and medical doctor Dan Beach Bradley published Thailand's first newspaper, The Bangkok Recorder, which was later sued into bankruptcy after having exposed tax evasion by the French consul-general in Bangkok. But the legacy of this pioneering journalist/publisher has lived on to this day.

Successive generations of journalists have paid a high price for press freedom in this country, particularly during periods of military dictatorship. Free-thinking journalists and publishers have been assassinated, persecuted, arrested or incarcerated and their offices attacked or printing presses destroyed, for insisting on telling the public the truth, for exposing corruption, for upholding public interests or for defending citizen rights to the freedom of expression.

And this spirit of press freedom has been kept alive by professional journalists who have refused to bow to repressive regimes. They always put public interest ahead of all else while striving to live up to the expectations of a public that has put its trust in them.

Journalists know they rely on a bond of public trust to do their job well and preserve media freedom, which is based on the constitutional right of free expression. Without media freedom, newspapers would be nothing but ink-stained pages, and broadcast journalism would be no different from those worthless programmes that poison the minds of television viewers and radio listeners and make a mockery of the people's right to access factual information and a free exchange of views.

It is regrettable that even though the 1997 Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and media freedom, the government, in collusion with certain media owners, has tried systemically to undermine press freedom and intimidate industry professionals through underhanded, if not outright illegal, methods. These repressive measures continue unabated today.

Even worse is the use of violence and propaganda to intimidate and defame individual media professionals with the malicious intent of creating divisiveness among the public and free press.

Last Wednesday, editors and journalists from all newspapers and broadcast-news outlets resolved to stand together in a united front against all forms of press intimidation, because we honestly believe that intimidation against our industry is a threat against all citizens' right to freedom of expression. Without a free flow of accurate, truthful and timely news information and views, Thai society as a whole would descend into ignorance and Thailand's fragile democracy

be placed in jeopardy.

We, the members of the Kingdom's free press, have taken it upon ourselves vigorously to defend press freedom to the best of our ability, to carry out our duties based on strict adherence to professional ethics, to open ourselves to public scrutiny and due process of law as law-abiding citizens. But we will never be cowed by threats of violence and intimidation, nor any other form of illegal interference.

We call on all sides to respect both the letter and the spirit of the 1997 Constitution, which guarantees the right to freedom of expression and media freedom. We call on Thai society to help us translate our lofty ideals into a practical reality for all media professionals, one that is universally respected.

We hereby commit ourselves to exercising our constitutionally sanctioned rights in strict adherence to our professional code of ethics, in order to ensure that the torchlight of truth that represents progress prevails over the regressive forces of ignorance.

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