

Community radio blues

Small broadcasters face the heavy hand of state and business meddling

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The future of thousands of community radio stations is hanging in the balance, thanks to political and legal challenges.

Broadcasters face increased state intervention by local and national political groups, as well as businesses with vested interests.

A comprehensive survey, conducted between June and December last year, showed the situation had worsened during the Surayud Chulanont government.

Most radio stations imposed self-censorship following the 2006 coup. They stopped talking about local and national political issues, and discussed healthcare, agriculture, folklore wisdom and entertainment instead.

The survey was conducted by five community radio networks and the Thai Volunteer Service. The Heinrich Böll Foundation funded it. It looked at 156 community radio stations.

Half of these reported state intervention, a quarter said there had been political intervention and about three-quarters reported interference from businesses with vested interests.

"These are among the key findings. The research was in-depth and gave us the big picture," said the foundation's Sopida Weerakultawan.

"In short, most operators are struggling and they need the right public policy and support," said researcher Saroj Waewmanee.

A breakdown shows state and military intervention usually comes in form of an official order to close or a "special" inspection by officials. About 11 per cent of operators received "warning letters" from authorities and were asked to report to local military units.

Political intervention involves persuasion, unsolicited "assistance" with programming, finance with "strings attached", or telephoned or direct threats.

Business intervention is unsolicited sponsors for selected programmes and attempts by them to employ popular disc jockeys from other stations.

This intervention runs counter to the basic principles of community radio, which are supposed to be owned and operated by their residents. Community radio stations are intended to be independent and run by volunteers. They are not-for-profit organisations.

Community stations generally have broadcast coverage of no more than 15 kilometres from the station.

The concept was first adopted in Latin America in 1947. It spread worldwide, especially in democracies.

They were first introduced in Thailand a decade ago after being sanctioned in the 1997 constitution. The first station was set up in Kanchanaburi in 2001.

Growth of community radio was gradual to start with, but the turning point came in 2003 when the Thaksin Shinawatra government permitted advertisements. Then the number of stations rose from about 500 to more than 2,000 within three months.

Organic laws will be enacted which will heavily influence the future of community radio.

Opinion is split among operators, with some supporting ads while others do not.

Among the 158 stations involved in the research, 32 broadcast ads - although 10 have since ceased doing so.

"There are five main problem and obstacles for community radio operators," Saroj concluded in the study.

These are: the use of similar wavelengths, affecting broadcast quality; a lack of quality staff and those with technical knowledge; poor finance, which retards human-resource development and instrumentation and maintenance; a lack of equipment; and weak networking with other community radio stations.

The study suggests four solutions over and above basic requirements of government regulations for operation and registration.

It proposes that all those involved with the stations, including their supporters, should meet to discuss the future.

The government needs to introduce measures to strengthen community radio, and its supporters need to become more involved.

Finally, there should be a state-level committee involving civic groups tasked with laying a sustainable foundation for radio and dealing with problems as they arise.

The researchers are holding a forum in Bangkok next weekend to release their preliminary findings and gather more opinions. The forum will be held at the Christian Centre Office.

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