Education reporting faulted

*Media experts question the quality and scope of education journalists*

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As significant portion of the mass media in Thailand has grown overly commercialised, which has resulted in the importance of certain education-related issues or public issues that help educate people about their rights, democracy and citizenship being played down, says Dr Palphol Rodloytuk, an independent researcher and academic on international communication and mass communication.

Pointing to the cause behind the lack of substance and quality in Thailand’s education reporting, Dr Palphol finds that Thai media in most cases only focus on the rising costs of education and the lack of places in schools. Consequently, they fail to highlight why these problems occur.

Polpibool Pengjam, education section chief at the Thai-language Daily News, shares a similar view. "Education reporting is going in the wrong direction," he asserts.

"It’s not true reporting because it’s more along the lines of covering the movements of activities or policies. The focus is frequently on admission processes, costs of learning materials, school uniforms and teachers’ tuition. There is very little coverage on what happens during the school term and little focus is given to the human development aspects of education and curricula."

Regarding the education issues now seen in the news, Polpibool says frankly, "These stories sell."

"There are restrictions that journalists must work with, such as the owner’s interest in keeping the company afloat financially, as well as readers’ poor response to certain stories that may not receive a lot of interest from the readership," he concluded.

According to Prof Khajornjit Bunnak of Bangkok University’s Journalism Department, School of Communication Arts, not only is the quality of the content not good enough, but there is also an insufficient quantity of reporting on education in Thailand.

Prof Khajornjit is of the opinion that we must start by shifting the limelight over to the policy makers of the country, who don’t give enough importance to education.

Second, because by its nature education news is not as colourful or enticing, we must find better, more appealing ways to present it in order to attract more readers.

"The news should not only be informative, but it must tell the audience why it is important to them, as parents, as students, as teachers," Sihkarin Langkulsen, a third-year entertainment media student at Mahidol University International College, says.

The need for journalists to delve deeper into education issues seems to be on the minds of many education specialists and academics.

Dr Palphol points to another problem that may be the crux of the matter in hindering substantial and in-depth coverage of education issues in Thailand.

He says that many individuals in the media industry, as well as a large part of the general public, are still unclear what education reporting really is.

"There is confusion between reporting on and about education."

The majority of reporters have a tendency to cover statements made by politicians or policy makers, he says.

In his view, the purpose of education reporting is to awaken and enlighten the public about important issues that affect their lives, their rights and their freedom of expression, which will ultimately lead to their ability to fully
exercise their citizenship. In this case, it is the right to basic education, the right to know about the education situation in their country, which encompasses their ability to freely voice opinions and take full advantage of their citizenship.

"It's the media's role to make education articles more interesting to the readers," said Polpibool of the Daily News. "But first, they should educate themselves more on this area. They should love education and want to see it develop and improve."

This is where Unesco Bangkok's publication, Spotlight EFA: Getting Education in the News, a handbook aimed at journalists who report specifically on education, may come in handy.

The objective of the handbook is to strengthen media coverage of education and improve public awareness of education.

Sikharin, this year's winner of the "True Vision-BBC Future Journalist" award, found the book helpful as a supplementary resource material as it offered useful education news story ideas and other resources that helped strengthen her own reports. "The handbook is especially good at providing sources of news and basic news analysis methods," she said.

Dr Palphol adds: "The handbook is an excellent start to making an attempt to gain an understanding of education reporting in the countries in the Asia-Pacific area."

However, the book is geared towards the print media, and Dr Palphol expressed a desire for it to include broadcast and other formats.

The handbook is available in English as a free download at

http://tinyurl.com/68boaf .

A free Thai version is available at

http://tinyurl.com/6x5rme .

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