Political News Consumption Behavior of Inhabitants in Phuket Province

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to report the result of the survey on political news consumption behavior of inhabitants in Phuket province, which was conducted during 10-20 September, 2010. The correspondents included Thai people and foreigners who have lived in Phuket for at least 2 years. The findings reveal that most of Phuket audiences who were concerned about the politics usually watch news on television and read newspapers to update themselves with political situations. Their favorite news programs are general news reports on Channel 3, 5, 7, MCOT, NBT and TPBS; and the news talk show 'Rueng Lao by Sorayut'. As for newspapers, Thairat newspapers were most often read by Phuket audiences. These media gained their popularity because their audiences believed that the news presented by them was live, reliable and up-to-date. Most of Phuket audiences rated the reliability of the news by Thai media, whether they were of the Government or private sectors, 80-90%. Also, they were in an agreement that both Thai media and foreign media were of equal reliability.

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พฤติกรรมการบริโภคข่าวสารทางการเมือง
ของประชาชนที่อาศัยอยู่ในจังหวัดภูเก็ต

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อรายงานผลสำรวจพฤติกรรมการบริโภคข่าวสารทางการเมือง ของผู้ที่อาศัยอยู่ในจังหวัดภูเก็ตไม่น้อยกว่า 2 ปี ทั้งที่เป็นชาวไทยและชาวต่างชาติ ซึ่งทำการสำรวจ ระหว่างวันที่ 10-20 กันยายน พ.ศ. 2553 ผลการสำรวจแสดงให้เห็นว่า ชาวภูเก็ตที่สนใจการเมืองส่วนใหญ่ ติดตามข่าวการเมืองจากรายงานข่าวทั่วไปของรายการโทรทัศน์ช่อง 3, 5, 7, 9, สถานีวิทยุโทรทัศน์ แห่งประเทศไทย กรมประชาสัมพันธ์, และสถานีโทรทัศน์ทีวีไทย และรายการคุยข่าวต่างๆ ของคุณสรยุทธ สุทัศนจินดา มากที่สุด สำหรับหนังสือพิมพ์ ผู้ที่อาศัยอยู่ในจังหวัดภูเก็ตส่วนใหญ่นิยมอ่านข่าวการเมือง จากหนังสือพิมพ์ไทยรัฐ โดยสาเหตุในการเลือกสื่อที่ติดตามข่าวคือ ความสด ความน่าเชื่อถือ และความทันสมัยของข่าว นอกจากนี้ ชาวภูเก็ตส่วนใหญ่เชื่อว่าข่าวที่รายงานโดยสำนักข่าวของรัฐบาล และเอกชนมีความน่าเชื่อถือพอๆ กันคือ ในระดับร้อยละ 80-90 และมีความเห็นว่าข่าวจาก สำนักข่าวต่างประเทศมีความน่าเชื่อถือไม่ต่างไปจากข่าวที่รายงานโดยสำนักข่าวภายในประเทศไทย

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Introduction

The politics of Thailand has continually been in crisis since 1995 when Thaksin Shinawatra was still the Prime Minister. The crisis, which started with allegations of corruption against the premier and his family's business, has now developed into a division between the people of two different political points of view: one with an aim to oppose the so-called Thaksin regime and the other to support it. The people with an anti-Thaksin point of view gathered together and formed the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) with yellow shirts as their signature, whereas those with the pro-Thaksin point of view formed the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) with red shirts as their signature. The conflict of political viewpoints between these two alliances has caused several attacks between their members. The attacks have been in various forms -- verbal, physical and psychological. For example, there was news about the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts trading insults at each other nationwide. In some certain provinces where either alliance dominated, assaults against the opposition were reported. There have even been some cases in which people of neutral political ideas were victimized - even put to death -- just because they wore shirts of either color in the wrong places. At one point, the crisis had even worsened to where the Prime Minister, himself, was threatened with his own life if he was to visit some certain areas. In addition to the two main alliances, three more groups of people labeled themselves as the White Shirts, the Blue Shirts, and the Pink Shirts have subsequently taken their roles in an attempt to relieve the conflicts among Thai citizens. However, so far, the reconciliation between the two alliances seemingly remains impossible.

The actual causes of this political crisis have always been questioned. The purpose of those who started the conflict and their anticipated consequences has been discussed among the people who are concerned with national stability. No matter what the hidden agenda of the crisis may be, the mass media has obviously been used as an important instrument to, not only generate, but intensify the crisis as well. This claim is well supported by the fact that most of the PAD members are those who regularly watch ASTV or visit the website Manager Online while most of the UDD members are DTV or D Station fans.

In Phuket, the political disagreement and the division between the members of the two alliances does exist just the same as everywhere else in Thailand. However, the situation here is not as serious as in other provinces. Apart from occasional arguments, people in Phuket seem to live well together as if there is no conflict between them. An assumption of this phenomenon is that Phuket people are either not very concerned about politics or not influenced by mass media or both. This poll was, therefore, conducted to survey mass media consumption behavior, with a focus on political news consumption, in an attempt to understand the phenomenon in Phuket.

Mass Media

Since the poll was aimed to find out mass media consumption behavior of political

news of the inhabitants in Phuket province, the word mass media needs to be more clearly defined. In this article, the word mass media is used to refer to the media that disseminates any kind of information from a person or an organization to a large group of audience. According to this definition, various forms of media are included in this category such as letters, books, newspapers, magazines, brochures, handbills, billboards, television, radio and sound recordings, the internet or World Wide Web, mobile phones etc.

It cannot be denied that in our society nowadays mass media is so pervasive that it is unlikely for us to avoid it. People take at least one or two forms of mass media as their source(s) of knowledge, information, entertainment, inspiration, and so on. In our daily life, we are informed, entertained, inspired, annoyed, challenged, insulted, educated or, eventually indoctrinated, with some kind of ideology through mass media. Consciously and unconsciously, mass media frames our minds and the way we perceive the world.

In terms of politics, mass media has basically been used in the past by people of ruling classes or the administration to announce notices, laws, and warnings; to justify rumors or misconception of matters among citizens; to publicize their benevolence or success in something; and etc. (Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 2550). All in all, mass media was used by these two main groups of people to establish and maintain their privilege and power in the society in the past.

It seems as if the situation today has not changed much from the past. Mass media can secure positions and duties well in the arena of politics. As a matter of fact, not only do the aforementioned functions still exist today, but they also are used to further manipulate the political atmosphere in a society as a whole. According to London (1993), whether or not media audiences take a piece of news seriously depends on the presentation of the news. For example, news that is repeatedly presented, sometimes with an on progress investigation report or insight information time after time, and/or that with a deep analysis by well-recognized respective specialists or experts are easily taken by its audiences as a "must-be-concerned-about" or "must-follow-up" matter. Iyenger (1987, as cited in London, 1993) explained that this is because audiences are sensitive to contextual cues conveyed in media presentation of which the consequences have been anticipated. This explanation is applicable to any form of mass media. However, the impact seems to be the most apparent in case of television, newspapers and the Internet since they are the most powerful mass media tools of the era (Baran, 2004). Based on Iyenger's idea, it can be assumed that mass media more or less influences audiences in terms of political behavior.

Behavior

"Human beings are social animals: we enjoy people, need people, and are profoundly influenced by them (Lahey, 2001, p.605)." Generally people often behave as other people in the same society and sometimes can be influenced by others.

However, there are still some differences among individuals in many ways. For instance, we can see that there are some people who like the prime minister whereas others dislike him; some are optimistic while some are pessimistic; some are friendly to their colleagues while some are not. What can be the cause of behavior? We may first have to review what behavior is.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000), behavior is 1) the way that somebody behaves, especially towards other people; 2) the way a person, an animal, a plant, a chemical, etc. behaves or functions in a particular situation. Psychologists simply define behavior as all of a person's overt actions that others can directly observe (Lahey, 2001). Behavior is not only about overt motor activities -- running, eating, kissing -- but it also refers to more subtle actions such as the way we show our feeling through our facial expression, smiling for example, and also includes what we say and write (Hogg and Vaughan, 2002). Because behavior is an overt action that can be observed and measured, it is the reason why behavior is one of the main key terms explaining psychology (Lahey, 2001).

To be more specific, human behavior is defined as the collection of activities performed by human beings. This human behavior is not the same as social behavior, which is more advanced action that is particularly directed at other people (Human behavior, 2005).

According to the aforementioned definitions, it can be assumed that daily life activities can be viewed as behavior. For example, waking up in the morning, having a shower, getting dressed, having breakfast, going to work, greeting friends and making conversation, making decisions on where to have dinner and etc. Each person behaves differently even though he or she is involved in the same situation. The differences in individual behaviors can be explained by looking at the factors which influence behavior. Human behavior can be influenced by culture, attitudes, emotions, values, ethics, authority, rapport, hypnosis, persuasion, and/or coercion (Human Behavior, 2005). In this article, the focus is mainly on the effect of attitudes and social norms on behavior.

The definition of attitudes can be explained as a consistent way of thinking about, feeling toward, or responding to some environmental stimulus or input (Newcomb, 1961, as cited in McConnell and Philipchalk, 1992, p.530). According to McConnell and Philipchalk (1992), attitude is a "mental program" that is kept in long-term memory. Thus, it can affect present perceptions and responses and also help determine future memories. It might be even clearer to illustrate the influence of attitudes on behavior. Many psychologists believe that attitudes and behavior should be consistent, which can be implied that if a person has a positive attitude, he/she should positively behave toward that attitude. Hence, there are some questions to consider: Is it possible to change people's behavior by changing their attitudes? Are people directly influenced by friends or by watching news or television shows? Will people change their attitudes if they repeatedly perceive certain messages?

Despite this, the effect of attitudes on behavior still becomes a controversial issue as in many cases behavior is not influenced by attitudes (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2005). The study of La Piere (1934, as cited in Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2005) found that at the time that people in the United States had a rather strong prejudice against Asians, a Chinese couple still received good service from a hotel and a restaurant. This situation and other further studies of La Piere reflected an inconsistency between attitudes and behavior. Later studies, on the other hand, show that attitudes and behavior are related to each other in a higher degree (Kraus, 1969, as cited in Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2005). However, there is variation across situations and the relation level is different. One of the most important factors generating high consistency between attitudes and behavior is strong and clear attitudes. Also, it is obvious that stable attitudes, which are easy for a person to remember, are more likely to predict behavior better than those that are less stable (Kraus, 1995, cited in Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2005).

Another key factor that affects behavior is social norms. For example, Thai people wear long-sleeved shirts and pants when they visit the Thai temple on a hot summer's day because it is considered respectful. Social norms refer to rules and expectations about how group members should behave (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2005). Norms consist of all agreements, formal or informal, explicit or implicit, which regulate and give order and purpose to a social system, be it primary or secondary group (Longres, 1990, p. 35). There can be different norms in each social system but people tend to follow the norms of the group to which they belong, even to prove that they still remain members of the group. As a result, the norms can help predict how others will behave (Taylor, 2003). The definition of social norms covers a wide range of rules such as the way one dresses for work, has a meal, shows respect towards elders, the appropriate use of the right hand when you greet another person, or even more complex rules such as regulations and laws issued by the government. Generally, everyone in a social group follows norms no matter who they are or what status they hold in the social group, but there are some norms that apply to people in different positions such as whether the person is a teacher, student, doctor, or politician (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2005). Thus, in this case, norms can possibly lead to conflict in the social group although norms ideally contribute to stability and a sense of unity to the social system. Consequently, all norms should be established from some working agreements which are invented, worked out, debated, and negotiated continually (Longres, 1990).

Survey Result

The survey on political news consumption behavior of Phuket inhabitants was conducted during 10 – 20 September 2010. It focused on both Thais and foreigners who have lived in Phuket for at least two years and have medium to high level of interest in political news.

From the total number of 628, the respondents consisted of 559 Thais and 68 foreigners, which were equal to 89% and 11%, respectively. Among these, 43% were male and 57% were female. Most of the respondents were of the ages between 18 –

34 years old, with 53% whose marital status was single and 30% whose marital status was married and with children. 60% of the respondents obtained a Bachelor's Degree. Regarding occupations, most of the Thai respondents were students (17%), business owners (14.5%), office/clerical workers (11%), and junior public servants (9%), while the least were senior public servants (8%). For the foreign respondents, the survey showed that a majority of them (about 37%) were business owners, followed by 16% of other professional/technical spheres.

From the survey results, Thai TV gained the most popularity (86%) among all mass media that Phuket people usually use to obtain political news. The runners–up were Thai publications and Thai websites, with the percentages of 57 and 43, respectively. Also, moderate amounts of Phuket people followed up with political news through Thai radio (24.5%), foreign TV (20%), mobile phone SMS (19%), foreign websites (14%) and foreign publications (11.5%). Only a small amount of them (3%) listened to foreign radio. (See Figure 1: Popularity of Types of Media Used to Obtain News).
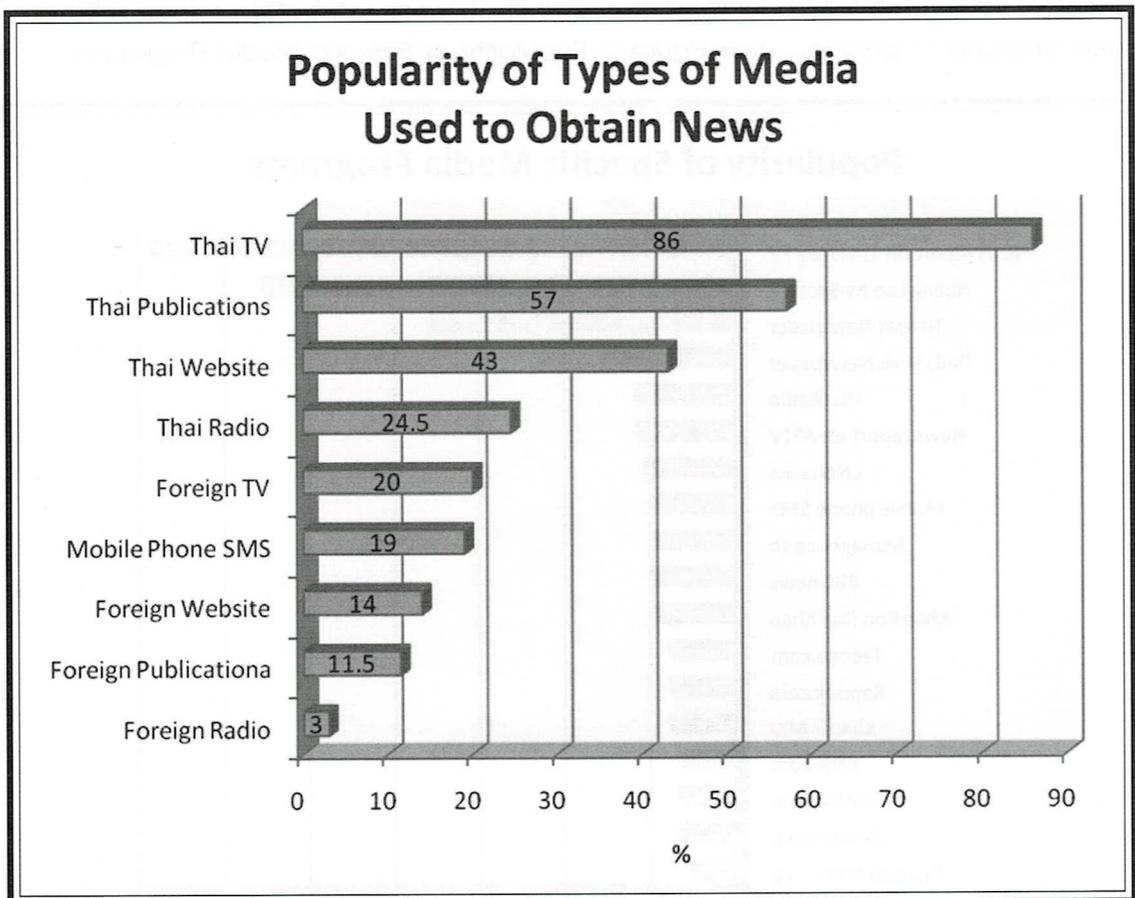

Figure 1: Popularity of Types of Media Used to Obtain News

Regarding the media that Phuket audiences most often spent their time on when they would like to update themselves with political news, the top three most popular media were: news reports on Thai free TV programs; Rueng Lao by Sorayut; and the Thairat newspaper, respectively. News reports on Thai free TV were favored by 34.5% of the correspondents who were the majority. The news reports under this label were those presented by Thai free TV on Channel 3, 5, 7, MCOT, NBT and TPBS on a regular basis such as in the morning, at noon, in the afternoon, in the evening and late at night. Hourly news reports and breaking news reports were also included in this group. Second to general news report programs was Rueng Lao by Sorayut, the collective term for the news talk shows that were either mainly or partially anchored by Mr. Sorayut Sutassanajinda, namely Rueng Lao Chao Nee, Rueng Den Yen Nee and Rueng Lao Sao-Atit. The programs were enjoyed by 28% of the correspondents. The third most popular media was Thairat newspaper which attracted 18% of the correspondents. Other media, which included the Daily News newspaper, Thai radio, news reports on ASTV, CNN News, news reports through SMS, Manager Online website, BBC News and the news talk show Khao Kon Kon Khao were most often selected by only small amounts of people. (See Figure 2: Popularity of Specific Media Programs).

Popularity of Specific Media Programs

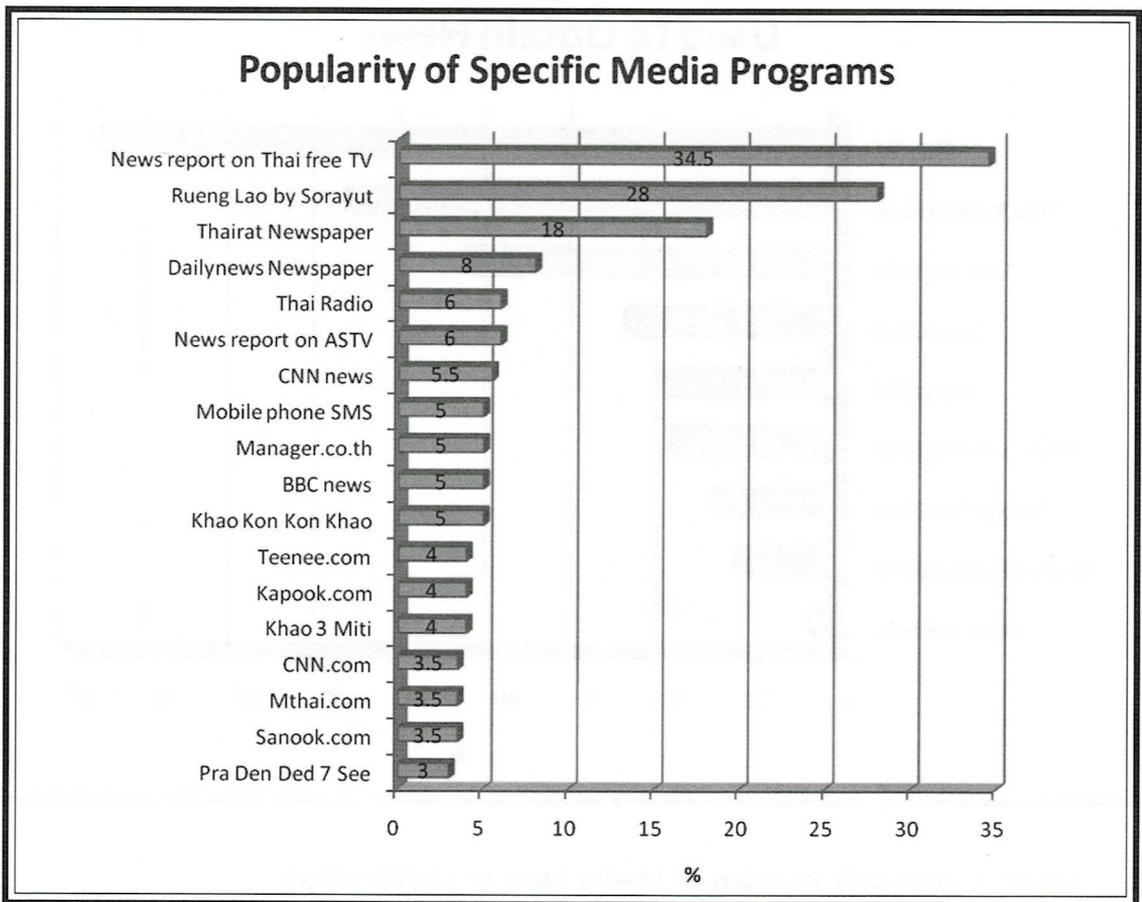| Media	%
News report on Thai free TV	34.5
Rueng Lao by Sorayut	28
Thairat Newspaper	18
Dailynews Newspaper	8
Thai Radio	6
News report on ASTV	6
CNN news	5.5
Mobile phone SMS	5
Manager.co.th	5
BBC news	5
Khao Kon Kon Khao	5
Teenee.com	4
Kapook.com	4
Khao 3 Miti	4
CNN.com	3.5
Mthai.com	3.5
Sanook.com	3.5
Pra Den Ded 7 See	3

Figure 2: Popularity of Specific Media Programs

As far as the reasons for selecting the media are concerned, 45% of the correspondents watch/read/listen to political news through the media of their choice because they believe that those channels provided them with live news coverage. Reliability and the quality of being up-to-date with the news were other main reasons for the people to select a media channel, which accounted for 37% and 32% respectively. (See Figure 3: Reasons for Selecting Media).

Reasons for Selecting Media

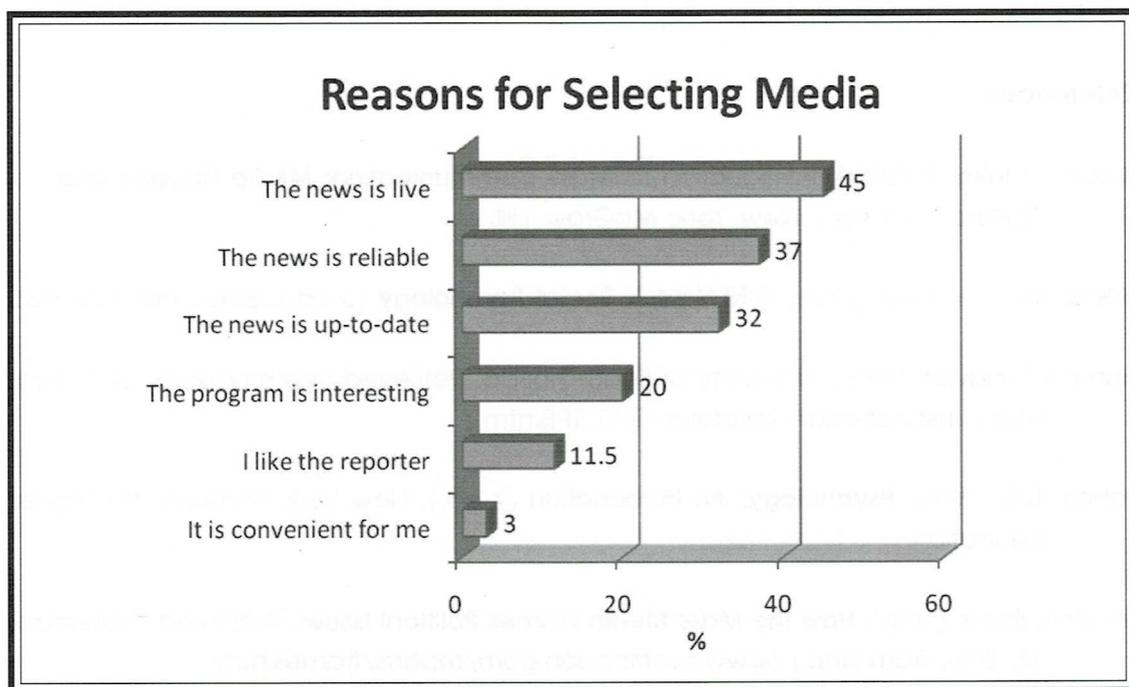| Reason	%
The news is live	45
The news is reliable	37
The news is up-to-date	32
The program is interesting	20
I like the reporter	11.5
It is convenient for me	3

Figure 3: Reason for Selecting the Media

As for the reliability of the government media, the majority of the correspondents which aggregated 56.5% believed that the government media was 80-90% reliable whereas only 18.8% were completely confident in those media. The moderate amount of 24.7% thought they were less than 70% reliable. The results were similar to those of the news presented via the media of the private sectors. 56.1% of the correspondents were of an opinion that the private sectors' media were 80-90% reliable and 14% put all their trust in them. Another 29.8% thought they were less than 70% reliable.

When asked to compare between Thai media and foreign media, 36.4% of the correspondents thought that both Thai media and foreign media were similarly reliable. However, 26.6% of respondents said that Thai media was more reliable while 26.9% viewed foreign media as more reliable.

Conclusion

Most individuals in Phuket who were concerned about politics usually watched news on television and read newspapers to update themselves with political situations. To begin with TV programs, they preferred to watch general news reports on Channel

3, 5, 7, MCOT, NBT and TPBS and the news talk show 'Rueng Lao by Sorayut'. As for newspapers, the Thairat newspaper was most often read by Phuket audiences. These media gained their popularity because their audiences believed that the news presented by them was live, reliable and up-to-date. Most individuals in Phuket rated the reliability of the news by Thai media, whether they were of the government or private sectors, at 80-90%. Also, they were in an agreement that both Thai media and foreign media were of equal reliability.

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