

David Armstrong vs the Bangkok Posturers [1] Today, 12:43 PM

The text below is from an email that Pichai Chuensuksawadi, the editor-in-chief of Post Publishing PLC, sent to the *Bangkok Post* staff yesterday (background [here](#) and [here](#)):

This morning David Armstrong met with a number of editorial staff. Understandably [sic] not all could be present and he asked that his views be conveyed [sic] to as many of the editorial staff as possible, hence this message.
Thanks - Pichai

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Talk to Bangkok Post editorial staff: August 30, 2005

I had intended to discuss with you today the future of the newspaper, which is your future - until I read in an opposition newspaper that you had demanded that I resign.

In doing so, you have, deliberately, massively escalated the argument. Further, you took this issue public and had neither the courtesy nor the courage to present your demand to me. According to the report in the opposition newspaper, you want me show my responsibility for the mistake.

You do not say what that responsibility might be - and I suspect you do not know. The facts - and as journalists you should know the importance of facts - are that I took part in a discussion on Friday, August 5 about the story and the problems with the story. I did not take part in a discussion to publish the story, as has been said elsewhere.

I, and others in this discussion (including Khun Sonchai) expressed doubts about the story - doubts about the source; doubts about the US experts (their existence, their qualifications and who they represented) and doubts about the existence of the cracks. All these points, it was agreed, needed checking before the story could be published. I had an engagement that evening, so I delegated responsibility to Khun Sonchai and Khun Chadin - to use their judgment about publishing the story in the light of our ability to fix the flaws in the story. That is a proper exercise of authority and responsibility.

It has been said I could have stopped the story during that discussion. I can only imagine what you would have said about political interference if I had. But I didn't want to stop the story: I wanted us to get the story right. I wanted us to do basic journalism. We did not do the basic journalism and we got the story wrong. It has also been said that I could have stopped the story appearing on August 9. I was away addressing a conference at the time, an engagement which had been arranged before I came to Bangkok. Before I left I delegated authority to Khun Sonchai - again a proper exercise of authority and responsibility. I could never have imagined we would run the airports runway story a second time, when we essentially had no new information. Nor could I have been expected to.

My responsibility then was to deal with a unique case.

It is a unique case and it has meant that we are going through sad and dramatic times at the Bangkok Post - for the colleagues who have just left us, for the editorial staff, for the good name of the newspaper, for the company and for all the people in other departments who work for the company.

They are also unprecedented times, for everything about the case surrounding the publication of the story on August 9 - "US experts insist runways cracked" - is unique.

The story was unique, not least because we managed to run the same incorrect story twice. A soft version, based on the same information, was published on Saturday, August 6. A tougher version, the one that caused the trouble, was published on Tuesday, August 9. In between the publication of the two stories we managed to miss official denials of our runway cracks story, and we missed TV footage showing that the cracks we said were so bad the runways might have to be rebuilt did not exist.

The retraction which followed was unique - in the swiftness with which it appeared and its placement, on the front page, within a story detailing the official denials.

The response by government authorities was unique - a criminal libel lawsuit with absurdly excessive demands. The

damage all this did to the standing of the newspaper - and our relationship of trust with our readers - was therefore unique.

The investigation process, in which all involved were able to give their version of events, was unique.

The action which followed - the resignation of one senior colleague and the dismissal of another - was unique, because the investigation exposed a horrifying chain of errors of judgment, compounded by a series of failures to do our job properly.

The motivation for the action was unique, for there was no political pressure and no pressure from the owners. Khun Suthikiati left it up to me. As far as I know (and I have checked) there was no contact between Khun Suthikiati and anyone in the Government on the story. I was motivated by a desire to preserve the credibility of the Bangkok Post as "the newspaper you can trust"; by a desire to uphold high professional standards; and by a desire to see meaningful responsibility and accountability for such a serious series of errors, omissions and misjudgments.

I am going on at some length about the unique nature of all facets of this case because I want to talk about what it means for the future.

Does it mean that the Bangkok Post is going to give up doing investigative journalism? Absolutely not. The fundamental trouble with the airport runways story was a failure to investigate. Investigative journalism is one of the hallmarks of a great newspaper. It's my impression that we should have more original, investigative journalism - not less. When I look at the paper, I think we spend too much time, energy and space on recording and recounting the statements of various officials and not enough on finding what is really going on - and telling our readers. In short, I'd like to see more good stories in the newspaper.

Does it mean that those who write investigate stories which spark a reaction from the government are going to get into trouble? Absolutely not. If stories are well researched, accurate and honest, fair and balanced, then I will always defend the stories and the reporters. No one need be afraid of lacking support if they do their job properly.

Does it mean that anyone who makes a mistake in the future is going to be dismissed? Absolutely not. I do expect those who make errors to accept responsibility and be accountable. But how these principles are applied depends on the severity of the error and the effort taken to avoid the error. Mistakes can be handled with anything from a simple admonition not to do it again, upwards. I cannot imagine the unique sequence of events we have just experienced ever happening again.

How do we try to ensure that serious mistakes don't happen again? I think we all need to work on that. I would like to start discussions with the senior editors - with input from all staff who want to contribute - on the processes, procedures and structures at the Bangkok Post to ensure that our quality control is top class -so that, as far as is humanly and organizationally possible, we can always claim the title of "the newspaper you can trust."

Another matter which is on my mind - and I imagine it is on yours - is the relationship at the Bangkok Post between editorial and management. I think it is clear that there has been a degree of mistrust for a long time - on both sides. If we are to build up trust, then both sides have to work at it. What does editorial have to do? Basically, do our job properly - fair, accurate, balanced journalism, in stories and headlines. Treat sensitive stories carefully. Be aware of the commercial environment in which a modern newspaper operates and be consistent in our approach to commercial requests. Treat the Central group exactly the same as we treat any other big company - no more, and certainly no less.

I'm sure you have no shortage of ideas of what management should do. But essentially it has to respect editorial independence and let editorial do its job as professionals. I am now in management but my background is editorial. I started in newspapers straight out of university - on November 16, 1969 to be exact - and except for a few months trying out public relations I have worked in newspapers and magazines, as a reporter and editor, ever since. I hope I can act as a bridge between management and editorial at the Bangkok Post.

Finally, does the Bangkok Post deserve a full-time editor? Absolutely yes. This present arrangement is meant to be an interim one and it will be. It has been in place for less than a month and for three weeks of that time we have had a serious distraction. But this week we will begin the search for a new editor in earnest and while that is going on, I will spend more time working with you.

The Bangkok Post is one of the most respected mastheads in this part of the world and is recognized around the world. I would like to think that when it comes to trying to enhance that respect - and to build up the paper's reputation as one which breaks news with neither fear nor favour - that we are all on the same side. Let's return to where we started. You have deliberately and publicly escalated the argument. You have decided we are not on the same side.

I will discuss the future of the paper with you when I get some sign that you want us to be on the same side. Thank you.

The "report in the opposition newspaper" is [here](#).

[Read more...](#)

Encore! [1] Today, 12:43 PM

A *Bangkok Post* editor is deservedly fired, the staff is acting all indignant, and some international journalistic organization is crying foul. Welcome to My So-Called Country (rerun).

First the story from *Bangkok Post* itself:

Chief reporter sacked over airport report

Sermasuk Kasitipradit, a chief reporter of the Bangkok Post, was dismissed yesterday by Post Publishing Plc.

His dismissal follows a Post report on Aug 9 that there were serious cracks in the runway at Suvarnabhumi airport. The Post retracted the story.

The News Editor, Chadin Thepaval, resigned last week over the incident.

Tsk, tsk, still not coming clean even now, eh? The *Post*'s August 9 lead story did not exactly say there were serious cracks. Headlined "[US experts insist runways cracked](#)", it at once did much less and much more than that. Much less because the actual story (if not the headline) said an anonym said anonymous experts said there were cracks. Much more because by citing the "US experts" in excruciating detail, the story was even more credible than it would've been if the reporter (or editor, as we now know) had gone to the site and reported the cracks first-hand. Even I myself believed it at first.

To refresh your [memory](#), below are some key excerpts from the original August 9 story (a copy of which can be found chez [Free Republic](#)). According to the *Bangkok Post*, the "US experts":

[Were] brought in by the prime minister to give him an independent assessment

[A]rrived last Tuesday [August 2], examined the runways and have already finished their report.

[E]xamine[ed] the cracks which were not the small ones on the runway shoulders that Gen Chainant brought reporters to inspect on Sunday [August 6].

[Were] insisting that both runways at Suvarnabhumi airport need reconstruction as there are severe cracks that are large enough to sink the nose wheel of an aircraft.

[R]ecommended in their report, which will be submitted to Mr Thaksin soon, complete reconstruction since repairing them, though possible, would make the airport runways unacceptable internationally.

The "experts" also didn't exist.

This elaborate hoax is the crux of this controversy, not whether or not there were actually serious cracks on the runways. The rumor about such cracks, including the sensational "touchdown" bit, was first gleefully circulated by the hosts of a state-run, but not state-friendly MCOT radio talk show, setting off a media frenzy that, indeed, culminated in the *Post*'s August 9 lead story. The rumor turned out to be false, but even if it were true, the *Bangkok Post*'s wild "scoop" about the "US experts" would still have been indefensible.

Of course, by the lowly standards of Thai journalism, basing an entire story on a single, anonymous, unchecked, and fraudulent

source isn't particularly heinous. [Much worse](#) is being churned out everyday. Unfortunately for the culpable editors in this case, however, the stake is rarely so high. There's nothing like a lawsuit to grab the journalists' attention, not to mention that of their bosses.

It also doesn't help the editors that [Post Publishing](#), the *Bangkok Post's* publisher, has a major non-Thai boss in the form of the [South China Morning Post Publishers Limited](#), who can't afford to be seen to go by the standards of the Thai press (much less Thai talk radio), at least not in so explosive a case: [from today's *Bangkok Post*]

David Armstrong, the deputy chief executive officer of Post Publishing, said disciplinary action was clearly warranted.

"This was not a simple mistake ... The number of errors and misjudgments in the lead-up to the publication of the story was so great that firm action was both justified and necessary," he said.

"A responsible paper cannot tolerate lapses in standards of this magnitude."

I'm beginning to like this guy already. Best of luck to him, then, in dealing with [the rest of his staff](#):

Bangkok Post reporters protest firing against editor

BANGKOK, Aug 29 (TNA) – More than 100 Bangkok Post reporters dressed in black to express their anger against their editor, and sympathy and support for a sacked colleague, demonstrated in the newspaper's editorial offices today.

Acting Bangkok Post editor David Armstrong, who had fired a veteran news chief who stood by the story, refused to meet with the protesters after he had sacked Sermsuk Kasithipradit, chief of the newspaper's military affairs and security news desk, following the reports of alleged cracks in two runways at Suvarnabhumi international airport.

*Alleged cracks? Stood by the story? And this, from the most state-owned of Thailand's state-owned media. For those of you who may think that the Thai News Agency may be trying to put the *Post* in a bad light by portraying it as obdurate, let me assure you that it is not that smart, nor are its readers.*

Barring those crucial details, which are too inconvenient for the press-bullying angle anyway, the article is probably quite accurate. This mindless herd wore black, too, during the disappointingly short-lived [Veera Prateepchaikul](#) affaire. Mr. Armstrong should take advantage of this opportunity to fire all the black sheep of journalism.

On cue, the [International Federation of Journalists](#) (*Is this a reputable organization? Its website stinks.*) is already howling protests. I find the conclusion rather amusing:

The IFJ, the global organisation representing 500,000 journalists' worldwide, supports the Bangkok Post editorial staff in their efforts to keep the two editors from losing their jobs and calls on the in house committee to come to a decision that takes into account the right of the public to correct and fast information and the nature of a newsroom.

Aye, let's uphold the public's right to "correct" information by retaining propagators of falsehoods. Let's safeguard, too, the decrepit nature of the newsroom that got us here in the first place. And while we're at it, let's recruit another 500,000 journalists (diarists?) to sign up to have their views on a local dispute collectively articulated by this global organization. (And one wonders why journalists are left-leaning!)

Now if all goes according to the script, within days we'll hear about a new round of press intimidation by the Thaksin government in such august publications as [The Economist](#), the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Asian Wall Street Journal's* editorial page, and the [Socialist World](#). Nothing unites opposite poles like Thaksin... hatred.

Then next year Khun Sermsuk, perhaps Khun Chadin as well, will get a mention in the State Department's [Human Rights Report](#). Then the Thai government will react negatively, thus proving the allegations in the minds of those who already believe them.

It's all worth it, though. Veera, Chadin, Sermsuk,... I can't wait for the next head to roll.

Encore! Encore! Encore!

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Academy Fantasia 2 vs Human Rights Today, 12:43 PM

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and all the world's guardians of liberty and justice, listen up. Thailand's National Human Rights Commission is fighting to safeguard a fundamental right long neglected by you amateurs — [the right not to be surprised by reality TV](#):

นายคมสรศักดิ์ เมธีกุล เจ้าหน้าที่สิทธิมนุษยชน 7 สำนักคุ้มครองสิทธิมนุษยชน คณะกรรมการสิทธิมนุษยชน(กสม.) เข้ายื่นหนังสือต่อสำนักงานคณะกรรมการป้องกันและปราบปรามการฟอกเงิน(ปปง.) เมื่อเวลา 09.30 น. วันที่ 25 สิงหาคม ขอให้ดำเนินคดีกับบริษัท ยูไนเต็ด บรอดคาสติ้ง คอปอเรชั่น จำกัด(มหาชน) หรือยูบีซี ขอให้เพิกถอนสิทธิออกเสียงประชามติของให้ตรวจอายุเงินที่ได้รับมาโดยมิชอบจากการโหวตของประชาชนในรายการ “อะคาเดมี่ แฟนเทเชีย ปี 2” ซึ่งล่าสุดจะมีการให้โหวตเอาผู้ที่ถูกคัดออกไป 5 คน กลับเข้ามาแข่งขันใหม่จำนวน 3 คน ในวันที่ 27 สิงหาคมนี้ โดยไม่แจ้งผู้เข้าแข่งขันครอบครัว และผู้ชมที่ร่วมโหวตเข้ามา

Mr. Komsan Matheekul, Human Rights Officer 7 of the Office of Human Rights Protection of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) [*talk about bloated bureaucracy. -ed.*], submitted a petition to the Anti-Money Laundering Office (AMLO) at 9.30 am, August 25, requesting a criminal proceeding against United Broadcasting Corporation (PLC) or UBC in the charge of fraudulent behavior [and] requesting an audit [and] seizure of the money that [the company] has received illegitimately from people's votes in the “Academy Fantasia 2”, which most recently will have [hold] a vote on the five eliminated contestants to bring three back to compete again on August 27 without notifying [from the beginning] the contestants, families, and the viewers that have participated in the voting.

[Translated by yours truly, whose prose aesthetics was greatly damaged in the process. Links added.]

Just to be clear on what AF2 (as the show is known to its numerous aficionados) is doing: it is taking a page from [Survivor Pearl Islands](#). Yup, crass American cultural imperialism again. No wonder human rights are violated.

Now just imagine if someone tried to do a Thai version of [Joe Millionaire](#)...

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National Rationalization Commission Today, 12:43 PM

Dr. Prawese Wasi, vice chairman of the much vaunted National Reconciliation Commission, has [spoken up](#)... for the Islamists:

ความขัดแย้งระหว่างตะวันตกกับอิสลาม เพราะว่าอิสลามอยากมีวัฒนธรรมของตัวเอง ชีวิตที่อยู่กับศาสนาไม่เห็นเรื่องเงินเป็นสำคัญ แต่ว่ากระแสโลกเห็นเงินเป็นสิ่งสำคัญ เป็นความขัดแย้งที่เชื่อมโยงไปสู่ความขัดแย้งอื่น่า จนปกคลุมไปทั่วโลก

The conflict between the West and Islam [happens] because Islam wants to have its own culture — a life that's tied to religion — without regarding money as the important thing. [This] is a conflict that connects [leads] to other conflicts that spread all over the world.

Conflict between the West and *Islam*? Whatever happens to “not all muslims are terrorists”? With this asinine statement, Dr. Prawese not only endorsed the bin Ladenists' pretension as representatives of Islam, but also anointed his Buddhist self as their spokesperson. The jihadists are probably quite torn over this; maybe they'll kill last.

Or second last. There's also [Anand Panyarachun](#), who handpicked Dr. Prawese as his deputy.

Some background: Dr. Prawese Wasi is a physician who first gained fame and recognition for his charity work. More recently, however, he was known in the Thai-language media as the “Senior Citizen” (ราษฎรอาวุโส). Note the capitals. The title may sound to you like one that gets your granny and mine cheap movie tickets, but you'd be wrong. My grandmother is decidedly *not* a “senior citizen” in this esteemed and exclusive sense. Indeed, I've never seen the title applied to anyone but Dr. Prawese. (At the movie, the term “the elderly”, ผู้สูงอายุ, would be used, provided you manage to find the precious few that do give discounts.)

Earlier, perhaps a year ago, the Senior Citizen, in his venerable wisdom, urged the Thai government to follow the “ancestors” example and triangulate itself between America and Islam. To anyone who's studied in a Thai school and paid attention, the evoked ancestors were obviously none other than [Thailand's World War II leaders](#), who, Thai students are thought, ingeniously positioned the country to win either way. With the above quotation, Dr. Prawese apparently abandoned instinctive *realpolitik* in favor of his true ideology. The man has found his integrity!

Of course, there are likely NRC members that are even surer of which side they're on. Here's the father of one, [responding to the July 7 terrorist attack](#) in London:

In predominantly Buddhist Thailand's troubled southern provinces, Muslim leader Sen. Den Tohmeena said that, "when Prime Minister Blair says the attacks were 'terrible' and 'barbaric,' we should ask him if when he joined bloody hands with the Americans in killing innocent people in Iraq, if it was 'terrible' and 'barbaric' or not."

Surely the daughter shall not die for the sin of the father (just as, I should add, civilians shall not die for the sin, real or perceived, of the leader). But what if the daughter's only qualification for the job is being daddy's girl? From the NRC website's [staff page](#):

นางสาวเพชรดาว โต๊ะมีนา ลูกสาวนายเด่น โต๊ะมีนา ส.ว.ปัตตานี

Miss Petchdao Tohmeena, daughter of Mr. Den Tohmeena, Pattani Senator

And if by some miracle, this doesn't turn out to be a case of "like father, like daughter", you can be sure Khun Anand and Dr. Prawese have packed their commission with plenty of other people who are ready to pick up the slack.

[Read more...](#)

A retraction of my own Today, 12:43 PM

Breaking a taboo in the Thai media, the *Bangkok Post's* retraction of its story on Wednesday inspired me to look at my own blog, particularly the [entry about the Post retraction](#). Perhaps not surprisingly, I found something I should retract, too.

I wrote:

Now this [a retraction] *never* happens in Thailand without someone getting sued. And even a litigation-induced retraction is usually billed discretely as an "announcement" and always placed on the most obscure spot possible (they always find one, even when the settlement terms require that the retraction be on the front page).

The *Post* retraction today is nothing like that. It is swift. It is clearly labeled "retraction". It is on the front page, under a related lead story. So kudos to the *Post* for, today, being notches above the scum of the journalism.

I take back the last sentence.

Even though the *Post* eventually did the right thing, it very nearly didn't. In an earlier copy, the retraction was a mere "correction". The wording was much more equivocal, betraying more reluctance than repentance. And although this lame version appropriately never made it to print, it somehow slipped onto the *Bangkok Post* website, where it was picked up by a Google crawler before being removed ([the page](#) is now preserved for posterity in Spurl's cache):

Correction

A press tour of the West Runway of Suvarnabhumi airport yesterday found no cracks in the middle of the runway as earlier reported by the *Bangkok Post*. There were small cracks on the shoulders near the touch-down points.

These may have been mistaken by the source for serious cracks on the main runway.

The *Bangkok Post* apologises for any inconvenience this report may have caused to all parties concerned.

Mistaken by the source? Mind you, this source said, and I'm quoting the *Post* lede, "a team of US aviation experts is insisting that both runways at Suvarnabhumi airport need reconstruction as there are severe cracks that are large enough to sink the nose wheel of an aircraft." While the "experts" might have erred in their inspection (and what kind of expert would that be to mistake cracks *besides* a runway for ones *on both* runways?), the *source*, who purported to simply be relaying the "experts'" findings, had no right to be. Whoever wrote the "correction" knew that the whole deal about "US experts" ("reportedly brought in by the prime minister to give him an independent assessment," the *Post* had told us) was an outright fraud, but he or she was trying to gloss over that.

Of course the final copy is much better. Less welcome, however, is that fact that, coming at the end of a story headlined "[Authorities deny big runway cracks](#)", the retraction has both the headline and the lede buried in it. In an ethical newspaper, the

headline would have read something like:

Press tour reveals no runway cracks

Bangkok Post retracts contrary report citing “US experts”, whose existence PM denies

Unfortunately, ethics and Thai journalism don't mix.

So, all in all, the *Bangkok Post* deserves a grade-inflated B- from its retraction. Earlier I said that in retracting its story, the *Post* was “notches above the scum of journalism”; I now take back “notches”.

See, I'm capable of self-criticism, too.

PS Also in my last post, I never made it to writing the note that my “see note below” referred to. I'll write it now.

The *Bangkok Post*'s retraction was the first I've ever seen. There was, however, another occasion I witnessed of the paper's admitting a mistake. I'm not sure what to call it, since it never officially billed as a retraction or a correction. The admission was made in the “Postbag” (letters) space under the title “With regrets”. An apology, perhaps.

In December 2003 (if I remember correctly) the *Bangkok Post* reported that former PM Anand Panyarachun compared PM Thaksin's management style to former Singaporean PM Lee Kuan Yew's and commented that it would not work in Thailand. Khun Anand protested, saying that he had not been alluding to the Thai PM, and the *Post* quickly apologized. The paper's tractability in this case might have something to do Khun Anand's being a former chairman of the Post Publishing Group. I made a brief mention of this episode in the “[Anand at the Fawning Correspondents' Club](#)” entry.

PPS We still haven't got to the “quotations” issue that left hanging at the end of my last post. Perhaps we never will.

[Read more...](#)
