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Sex Trafficking in Thai Media: A Content Analysis of Issue Framing

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Understanding how news media frame sex trafficking in Thailand, a country with high levels of trafficking and an understudied media landscape, has strong implications for how the public and policy makers understand and respond to the issue. This quantitative content analysis examined 15 years of trafficking coverage in five English-language Thai newspapers and found a focus on female victims, official sources and crime frames, with a lack of discussion of risk factors, solutions and high-profile criminals. In doing so, this study illuminates a problematic and tightly controlled Thai media landscape.

Keywords: sex trafficking, Thailand, content analysis, framing

In 2011, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof live tweeted a brothel raid in Cambodia, posting tweets such as, "Girls are rescued, but still very scared. Youngest looks about 13" and "I've been told to rush out of town for safety. That's what I'm doing now" (Nash, 2011, para. 10). Critics were quick to condemn Kristof for the tweets, asking questions such as, "When a *New York Times* columnist live tweets a Cambodia brothel raid, who benefits—the women or the reporter?" (Carmon, 2011, para. 1). Kristof is not alone. Journalists on the "humanitarian beat" regularly receive criticism for sensationalizing or misrepresenting issues (Ahmadu, 2000; Khazaleh, 2010). However, relatively little scholarly attention has been given to the framing of human rights journalism to be able to speak to the accuracy of these criticisms. This is problematic given the multitude of human rights violations that occur around the world (International Labor Organization, 2008), and the possible implications of coverage on how audiences understand and respond to the issues. One globally prevalent human rights abuse in which media coverage has been criticized for sensationalism is sex trafficking (De Shalit, Heynen, & van der Meulen, 2014). As defined by the United Nations (2000), sex trafficking is

> the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation. (Art. 3, para. A)

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Sex trafficking is a problem in all corners of the globe, but is especially so in Thailand (U.S. Department of State, 2014). Given that prevalence and a lack of research on Southeast Asian media landscapes, this study focused on Thai news coverage of sex trafficking. This research expands our understandings of media framing in the context of human rights reporting and the Thai media system.

Sex Trafficking in Thailand

Although the Thai government's efforts to fight sex trafficking are gradually increasing, as a whole, the government tends to minimize the issue, making it difficult to collect reliable data on the scope of the problem (Sorajjakool, 2013). Specific statistics are unknown, but according to the U.S. Department of State's 2015 *Trafficking in Persons* (TIP) report, Thailand is a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking to occur, much of which is sex trafficking.

Fully understanding why sex trafficking occurs can be challenging. There exist competing ideologies regarding sex work in Thailand and globally. One school of thought focuses on supporting sex workers' rights, views prostitution as legitimate work, and fights to see it regulated in much the same way as other industries (Chew, 2012; Friedman-Rudovsky, 2016). On the other end of the spectrum is an abolitionist movement that is based "on the moral rejection of prostitution and defines prostitution per se as abuse and prostitutes as victims to be rescued and rehabilitated" (Chew, 2012, p. 73). Some sex workers do not view themselves as victims; rather, they participate in commercial sex work because of the economic opportunities they derive from it (Sorajjakool, 2013), making them consenting prostitutes. Some sex workers do so because they have no other means to make a living wage, and others are deceived, coerced, or forced through the use of physical and/or psychological violence or threats of violence, making them victims of trafficking, by many laws (Sorajjakool, 2013).

One thing that both camps tend to agree on, however, is that sex work and sex trafficking are often due to poverty and a lack of opportunities. Girls often engage in sex work to help subsidize their family's income, largely because of gender inequalities that result in girls being seen as expendable, and laws and law enforcement, as well as some cultural and traditional contexts that provide them unequal protection (Sarkar, 2011). This is especially the case with children from Northern Thailand's ethnic minority communities (Sarkar, 2011).

One aspect that puts these populations at increased risk of being trafficked is that approximately half of the population of Thailand's ethnic minority communities is thought to be "stateless" (Lynch, 2005). Most individuals in ethnic minority communities were born in Thailand, and one or both of their parents were born in Thailand, so they are legally eligible for citizenship (Park, Tanagho, & Gaudette, 2009). However, in practice, discrimination against these ethnic minorities is common, and the Thai government often does not recognize their citizenship or provide them the documentation necessary to access health care and education, and move freely around the country (Park et al., 2009). This institutionalized racism increases the risk factors for an individual being vulnerable to trafficking, specifically due to poverty and a lack of education (Becker, 2008). Additionally, in the case of a crisis situation or urgent need for money, the presence of such risk factors may make it more difficult for a person to deal with the newly arisen

situation and as a result, they may be more willing to migrate and/or be susceptible to trafficking (van Waas, Rijken, Gramatikov, & Brennan, 2015).

In 2008, Thailand passed a comprehensive anti-trafficking law that criminally prohibits all forms of trafficking, including sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2014). However, there are reports of officials protecting brothels from raids and inspections as well as officials who have "colluded with traffickers; used information from victim interviews to weaken cases; and engaged in commercial sex acts with child trafficking victims" (U.S. Department of State, 2014, para. 4). Given this, in 2014 and 2015, the U.S. State Department listed Thailand as a Tier 3 country, the lowest ranking in the department's annual *Trafficking in Persons* report, which indicates insufficient anti-trafficking efforts and puts Thailand at risk of economic sanctions (U.S. Department of State, 2014, 2015).

Thailand: History, Culture, and Media

The complexities that surround the topic of sex trafficking in Thailand, and the government's response to the issue, can only fully be understood within the context of the country's history, culture, and political landscape, which, in turn, influence the media landscape. Thailand had a bloodless coup in 1932, which led to a constitutional monarchy (Marshall, 2014). Since then, Thailand has experienced several rounds of political turmoil, including a military coup in 2006 that ousted then Prime Minister Thaksin Chinnawat and which was followed by large-scale antigovernment street protests from 2008 to 2010 (CIA, 2014). In 2011, Thaksin's youngest sister, Yingluck Chinnawat, was elected prime minister (Marshall, 2014). In May 2014 Yingluck was removed from office and the Royal Thai Army staged a coup against the caretaker government (CIA, 2014). This fluctuating political environment brings about challenges for understanding the media landscape.

There are 17 Bangkok-based daily newspapers, six terrestrial channels, hundreds of cable and satellite channels, 204 AM and 334 FM radio stations, and approximately 4,000 community radio stations (Plotnick, 2013). Social media also has a large and growing presence. As of February 2014, Thailand had an estimated 24 million Facebook users (Sakawee, 2014) and two of the top 10 most "Instagrammed" locations of 2013 were in Bangkok (Instagram, 2014). However, despite an array of media platforms, little scholarly attention has been given to Thai media systems. In 1965, John Mitchell published one of the first known English-language works analyzing Thai media and concluded, "Possibly the first thing a student of Thai journalism learns is this: Not very much is known about it" (p. 87). Not much has changed in that regard since 1965.

One thing we do know is that the Thai government is said to have an "obsession with secrecy" to ensure that the country's three main pillars—religion, nation and monarch—remain strong (Chongkittavorn, 2001, p. 179). Attempts are made to keep all government-held information private and limit open debate. Thailand's wide-reaching defamation laws have been called "draconian" and "oppressive" (Asia Forum, 2005, p. 57). Individuals and businesses file defamation suits against the media at alarmingly high rates (Asia Forum, 2005). In fact, plaintiffs regularly file defamation cases with claims for "exorbitant damages that, if awarded, would completely bankrupt a newspaper publisher" in order to silence dissent (Asia Forum, 2005, p. 81). In 2013, there were reports of "trafficking-related complicity by

Thai civilian and navy personnel in crimes" involving the exploitation of Rohingya asylum seekers (U.S. Department of State, 2014, p. 374). Although this is primarily labor trafficking, not sex trafficking, the Thai navy filed defamation charges against two journalists in Thailand, potentially resulting in five years of jail time for each journalist (U.S. Department of State, 2014). After global attention turned to the case, both journalists were acquitted in 2015 (Amnesty International, 2015).

In addition to broad defamation laws, strict lese majeste laws prevent criticism of the royal family (Streckfuss, 2011) and today, the ruling junta (Sabur, 2015). In recent years there has been an increase in lese majeste cases. Before the 2006 coup there was an average of five lese majeste cases each year, but since 2006 there have been more than 400 cases (Horn, 2011). This demonstrates the use of the law as a weapon for silencing criticism and public debate. Thai journalists practice rigid self-censorship on anything even mildly critical of the monarchy (Freedom House, 2013; Rojanaphruk, 2010). Thailand was ranked 134 out of 180 countries in the 2015 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index (Reporters Without Borders, 2015).

In addition to legal mechanisms of press control, a number of sociocultural and political factors underscore the repressive Thai media landscape. Thailand is a hierarchical culture; access to information is based on whom you know. In accordance with Buddhism, many Thais believe that all living things are in a hierarchy based on merit and power (Hanks, 1962). The hierarchy plays a significant role in the media, determining who has access to information and what stories get reported. "The Thai press is said to reflect the hierarchism which was such a pervasive feature of Thai society. Only *phu yai* (senior people) counted; ordinary people were irrelevant, unmentioned and voiceless" (McCargo, 2000, p. 239).

Political instability in Thailand plays a significant role in Thai press freedom. Although Thailand has had a constitutional monarchy since 1932, it has experienced continued political instability, and at the time of this study was under the power of a military dictatorship. All of these social and political elements fuse together to result in a tightly controlled media landscape that has severe implications for how human rights abuses such as sex trafficking get discussed.

Media Framing

More than half a century ago, Harold Lasswell (1948) suggested that the functions of media systems, in general, are to survey the environment, correlate responses and mobilize responses, and to transmit cultural legacies. Many of these functions can be done through the presence of various frames in a media text. It has been suggested that frames are the result of commonly accepted cultural ideologies. Such frames can dominate news coverage for long periods (Hardin & Whiteside, 2009) or they change with time, and reframing can occur any time a situation presents incongruent information and more plausible explanations emerge for why something appears the way that it does (Goffman, 1974).

Despite their ability to change throughout time, frames are believed to have four key functions: define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993). As such, this study aims to explore how the frames in sex trafficking stories define the problem and discuss solutions.

Media and Sex Trafficking

Although research on the linkage between mass media and sex trafficking is in its infancy, scholars have begun to turn their attention to the topic, albeit largely limited to Western media. A 2012 content analysis of newspaper coverage of human trafficking in Canada, England, and the U. S. found that coverage relied on official sources, described criminal activity as the primary cause of trafficking, and lacked the voices of victims (Gulati, 2012). More recent research analyzed sex trafficking coverage in major U.S. newspapers and determined that stories were primarily framed as a crime issue, portrayed as episodic rather than thematic, suggested few remedies and focused on the opinions of official sources (Johnston, Friedman, & Sobel, 2015). However, a separate study of sex trafficking coverage in U.S. newspapers revealed that more types of voices and more causes and solutions were present in coverage that included transnational references to trafficking (Johnston, Friedman, & Shafer, 2012).

A comparative study of human trafficking news stories in the U.S., India, and Thailand found that coverage increased and was more localized after the launch of a large-scale anti-trafficking initiative (Sobel, 2014). Another work found that sex trafficking representations in newspaper coverage in the former Soviet Republics focused on female victims and used gendered language to perpetuate societal beliefs about patriarchy (Sobel, 2015b). However, as a whole, there remains a lack of attention given to sex trafficking coverage from non-Western media contexts. As such, this study posed the following exploratory research questions:

RQ1: How often did Thai newspapers cover sex trafficking from September 1999 through September 2014?

RQ2: In what ways did newspapers define sex trafficking and offer solutions?

Method

This study used quantitative content analysis to examine news frames present in sex trafficking-related stories in five English-language newspapers in Thailand from September 1999–September 2014. Thailand was selected for this study because of the prevalence of sex trafficking and the understudied media landscape. The study was set in the perspective of previous research by Johnston et al. (2015) within the framework of Entman's (1993) four-part frame typology.

Research Design

English-language newspapers were selected because their audiences are often the educated, elite policy makers, NGOs, and diplomats, so they are likely to be the decision makers with regard to anti-trafficking efforts and legislation. This study analyzed coverage in the two largest English-language daily newspapers in Thailand, *The Nation* and *Bangkok Post,* as well as three weekly, regional newspapers from areas outside of Bangkok: *Pattaya Mail*, *Phuket Gazette,* and *Chiang Rai Times.*

Bangkok Post has a daily circulation of approximately 75,000 (ePaper Catalog, 2012). Its major shareholders include the Chirathivat family and GMM Grammy (Gruppe, 2010). *The Nation* has a circulation that ranges from 60,000 to 80,000, and it is the flagship publication of the Nation Multimedia Group (Sutthisripok, Bain, Stats, Chaban, & Holland, 2006). While *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* are both English-language dailies, they are staffed differently. *Bangkok Post* was founded by an American editor in 1946 and is staffed with a mix of foreigners and Thais, and *The Nation,* established in 1971, is directed and staffed predominantly by Thais (Prado, 2010). It has been argued that *The Nation* tends to be more critical of the government and is better at reporting local events in comparison to *Bangkok Post*, which is said to provide a more *farang* (the Thai word for foreigner) or "internationalist" view (Prado, 2010).

The three regional newspapers, *Pattaya Mail*, *Phuket Gazette,* and *Chiang Rai Times* are smaller English-language weekly newspapers. *Pattaya Mail* has a circulation of approximately 5,000 and focuses primarily on local news in and around Pattaya, a beach resort located on the Gulf of Thailand (Francomasia, 2011). *Phuket Gazette* is the island of Phuket's largest English newspaper, with a circulation of 25,000–35,000, depending on the season, and more than 80% of the local newspaper readership market (International Property Show, n.d.). *Chiang Rai Times* covers local events in the Northern part of Thailand (Chiang Rai Times, n.d.). It is meaningful to analyze Bangkok-based and regional newspapers to understand the similarities and differences in how sex trafficking is presented to audiences in different social, cultural, linguistic, and economic environments.

The 15-year timeframe enabled a longitudinal analysis to be conducted around a number of anti-trafficking initiatives as the topic has emerged in recent years. For *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*, a census was used; all of the sex trafficking-related articles in the 15-year time period were analyzed. For the three regional papers, all available articles were analyzed.

Archives for *The Nation* were retrieved from LexisNexis using the search terms *sex trafficking*, *human trafficking*, *sex slavery*, *prostitution*, *solicitation*, and *flesh trade*, returning 936 articles. Search terms were chosen after reading numerous sex trafficking articles in each newspaper and using the terminology featured in the stories to ensure all relevant articles were included. Archives for *Bangkok Post* were retrieved from a number of sources. Archives from November 19, 2012, to September 1, 2014, were retrieved from LexisNexis using the same search terms, resulting in 374 articles. For articles before November 19, 2012, a search was conducted in ProQuest, which returned 661 indices. Articles from these indices were then retrieved from microfilm archives at the Center for Research Library's Global Resources Network. The Center's microfilm archive is missing a few articles according to the ProQuest index (114 articles), so missing articles were retrieved via interlibrary loan, totaling, 1,149 *Bangkok Post* articles.

For the regional papers, Google was used to search the sites of each newspaper according to the same search terms. These Google results were compared against archive searches on each newspaper's website to ensure that as many articles were retrieved as possible. The search resulted in 106 articles from *Pattaya Mail*, 41 from *Phuket Gazette,* and 86 from *Chiang Rai Times.* In total, 2,318 articles were retrieved. However, although analysis of articles from *The Nation* and *Bangkok Post* was comprehensive over the 15–year time period, analysis of the three regional newspapers was likely not all-inclusive. With unreliable archives for the regional newspapers, it is possible that some articles were missed. However, it

is worthwhile to analyze the available articles to gain a more complete appreciation of how the issue is presented to audiences in different regions. The difficulty in obtaining the articles demonstrated the challenges inherent in studying Thai media and likely why there has not been more research in this area, but does not diminish the need for such work.

Coding Instrument and Measures

Entman (1993) rationalized that the most important functions of frames are the problem definition and remedy suggestion phases, so this study focused on those two elements and aimed to determine how Thai newspapers defined the problem of sex trafficking and what, if any, remedies they suggested.

Initially, each article was read to determine whether it specified the type of trafficking that occurred. In Thailand, the term *human trafficking* is often used to refer to an array of exploitative situations, one of which is sex trafficking. If the article was not about sex trafficking, it was not analyzed any further. After creating a collection of sex trafficking-focused articles, a codebook was adapted from Johnston et al. (2015).

To better understand how the problem was defined, stories were first coded for type of article, whether sex trafficking was discussed in conjunction with any other form(s) of human trafficking, age(s) of trafficked person(s), terminology used to describe the trafficked individual, and gender of the trafficked individual. Articles were also analyzed for whether they referenced statelessness or ethnic minority communities, an international aspect of trafficking, Buddhism or the monarchy, as well as what the dominant frame of the article was, whether the article portrayed sex trafficking as an isolated incident or recurring problem, and what sources were cited. Finally, articles were coded for whether they suggested a remedy for lessening the prevalence of sex trafficking, and if so, what that solution was.

Furthermore, given that the adapted codebook was initially created for analysis of Western media content, all articles were read qualitatively to tease out underlying messages, themes, and frames that can contextualize the quantitative findings. This allowed for unpacking of arguments and ideologies in a more meticulous way to ensure that all important elements of the story were noted.

Intercoder Reliability

Using Krippendorff's alpha, intercoder reliability between two trained coders was assessed on a randomly selected 10% sample (N = 232) of articles: article type (.96), type(s) of trafficking (.91), age (.93), phrase describing trafficked individual (.89), gender (.92), stateless (.92), ethnic minority (.88), international trafficking (.91), Buddhism (.96), monarch (.93), dominant frame (.86), timeframe (.91), cite official source in Thailand (.92), cite official source outside Thailand (.89), cite advocate (.85), cite victim (.91), cite trafficker (.90), cite witness (.86), cite news outlet (.92), cite other (.86), punish individual doing sex acts (.87), punish traffickers (.81), punish purchasers (.94), policy change(s) (.85), creation of advocacy programs (.86), other remedies (.82).

Findings

Amount of News Coverage

After removing the articles that did not focus on sex trafficking, *The Nation* was reduced from 936 to 115, *Bangkok Post* from 1,149 to 116, *Chiang Rai Times* from 86 to 33, *Pattaya Mail* from 106 to 35, and *Phuket Gazette* from 41 to 20. Out of 2,318 articles, only 13.76% of articles (319 articles) focused on sex trafficking. The majority of articles reported on labor trafficking, specifically in the fishing industry, indicating that labor trafficking is another significant problem in the country. This study focused specifically on commercial sexual exploitation, so only the articles that clearly reported on sex trafficking were further analyzed.

Overall, the amount of coverage of sex trafficking in all five newspapers increased over time, with the largest increase in 2013. When peaks and valleys did occur in coverage, they were fairly similar across newspapers. Figure 1 shows that *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* had slight increases from 2000–2004, but notably escalated coverage starting in 2010. Across all newspapers, 2013 was a big year for sex trafficking coverage with each newspaper featuring some of their highest amounts.

Although archives for the three regional papers are not comprehensive, this research found the first story about sex trafficking in *The Nation* in 1997. *Bangkok Post* followed suit two years later with its first story in 1999; *Phuket Gazette* did so in 2002, *Pattaya Mail* in 2005, and *Chiang Rai Times* in 2011. There were no articles about the topic in any of the newspapers in 2008, which is ironic because in that year Thailand enacted its first comprehensive anti-trafficking law. It is possible that articles about this law did not focus specifically on sex trafficking or it took time for the ramifications of the law to turn into newsworthy angles.

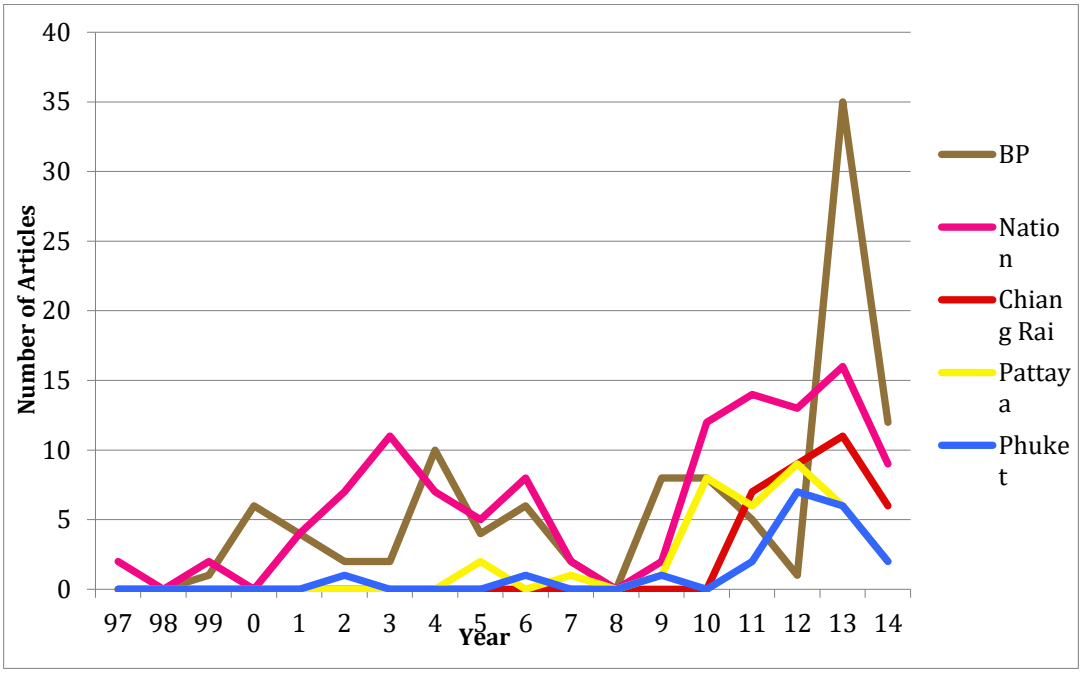

Figure 1. Difference in number of articles over time, by publication.

Given the small number of articles in each of the regional newspapers as well as the aim of this study to understand coverage as a whole, data from the three regional newspapers were aggregated into one regional variable for the remainder of analysis, totaling 88 articles.

Framing Techniques: Article Type and Terminology Used

A good place to start when analyzing media framing is to consider what type of article the content is packaged as (a news story, a feature story, an editorial, etc.). Feature stories or op-eds may offer a wider array of perspectives than are traditionally seen in news stories. Almost two-thirds (71.2%) of analyzed articles were news stories, followed by feature stories, which accounted for almost one fifth of articles (17.2%). Rarely did newspapers carry editorials about sex trafficking. *The Nation* had the highest percentage of editorials, but in only 9.6% of articles.

Another element of a story that can contribute to understanding the issue is whether the article was framed episodically or thematically. Overall, slightly more articles discussed sex trafficking as a recurring problem (thematically, 50.5%), but still almost half suggested it as an isolated incident (episodically, 49.5%). The regional newspapers featured thematic framing in 34.1% of articles, *Bangkok Post* did so in 58.6%, and *The Nation* did so in 54.8% of articles.

Furthermore, how trafficking victims, traffickers, and sex purchasers are identified can also influence the framing of a story. For example, the term(s) used to describe trafficked individuals may influence how audiences perceive that person's level of responsibility. However, data revealed that no term notably stuck out as being used most commonly. Overall, 26.3% of articles referred to trafficked individuals as "victims," 24.5% said "prostitutes," 21.6% used some other word or phrase (such as "the girls"), and 32.0% wrote about sex trafficking broadly without mentioning a specific person. *Bangkok Post* featured the highest percentage of articles that referred to the trafficked individual as a victim as well as articles that referred to the trafficked person as a prostitute, with 37.9% and 43.1%, respectively. *The Nation* and the regional newspapers featured more articles that did not mention a specific individual than any descriptive phrase. No article described the trafficked individual as a survivor. In addition to the variation in diction used to identify a trafficked person, a vast array of phrases were used to describe the topic of sex trafficking, as can be seen in the following qualitative examples: human trade ("Upper North people-smugglers," 2013), to flesh trade (Jinakul, 2004), to vice trade (Hutasingh, 2000), to schoolgirl prostitution (Akkrabal, 2004).

The news stories tended to not distinguish between consenting prostitution and sex trafficking, and the concepts were frequently used interchangeably in the same article. These stories would commonly discuss an arrest by the human trafficking police, but give no further indication as to whether the individual(s) involved were actually trafficked or consensual sex workers. This mixing of phrases makes it difficult to understand what sex trafficking is and who is consenting.

When broadening analyses of how labels were presented and specific individuals were talked about, the qualitative read of the articles found that while all papers typically withheld the name of the victim (with a few exceptions), differences were observed in how other players in the trafficking scenario were identified. *Bangkok Post* identified a trafficker by name if he or she was not a prominent public official, as can be seen in "The [victim], whose name has been withheld, provided police with enough evidence to arrest and charge Jirapat Ramlee, 53, a senior teacher at Nong Bua Wittayayon School . . . with human trafficking" (Ngamkham, 2009, para. 2). However, the paper did not name a government official involved in a trafficking case when he was a prominent figure, but named less prominent individuals in the same article: "One suspect, an unnamed former secretary to a Phichit MP, was arrested and released on bail on Tuesday night, said Pol Col Santirak Intharakhao. . . . Three other men who are also accused of having paid for sex with the two girls, aged 13 and 14, were identified as Sophon, 40, Pramote, 35, and Jet, 40. . . . The former aide, Mr. Sophon and Mr. Jet have been released on bail" ("Four men charged in child sex scandal," 2010, para. 3–6). This lack of naming, in conjunction with the diversity of terms used to identify trafficked individuals and trafficking situations, results in a lack of clarity regarding who is responsible.

Framing Techniques: Age, Gender, and Status of Trafficked Persons

Another way to think about how the framing of a story defines the problem is to consider more specific identifying information. Who gets talked about in a sex trafficking story, in terms of age and gender, can paint a picture for audiences about who this issue most directly impacts. However, more important than such demographic descriptors is how the victims are labeled in terms of their social status and whether they *belong* in society.

First, when analyzing the age of the victim(s) in the news reports, almost one third of stories talked about the issue generally without discussing a specific trafficked person. Of articles that did mention a trafficked individual, more articles discussed children (37.6%) than adults (14.4%). The national and regional newspapers were similar in how they reported on the age of trafficked individuals: most commonly featured stories about only children, with each doing so in 34.8% to 40.9% of articles, followed by stories that did not mention a specific individual, in 27.3% to 28.7% of articles, then stories discussing both minors and adults, in 18.1% to 20.9% of stories, and finally, stories that focused solely on adult victims, which were seen in 13.6% to 15.5% of articles.

Another way of understanding how stories discuss who gets trafficked is to consider the victim's gender. Articles overwhelmingly wrote about female victims. Table 1 data reveal that the regional newspapers reported on male victims more frequently than the national newspapers, but still in only 5.7% of stories. It was rare that articles discussed transgendered individuals or "ladyboys," but the national newspapers did so most frequently.

Table 1 further illustrates the prevalence of other defining characteristics that contribute to how articles defined who is trafficked. Discussions of statelessness and membership in an ethnic minority community can indicate the individual's perceived social status. Despite the prevalence of stateless victims in sex trafficking literature, none of the newspapers commonly identified trafficked individuals as stateless.

Oftentimes, stateless individuals are members of ethnic minority communities, making it worth analyzing whether articles discussed these populations, which can further contribute to understandings of trafficked people's place in society. Table 1 further reveals that while sex trafficking was discussed in relation to ethnic minorities slightly more often than statelessness, it was still rare across all newspapers. The national papers discussed ethnic minority communities most frequently, both in approximately 13% of analyzed articles.

Table 1. Differences in Gender, Statelessness, and Ethnic Minority Mentions.

	BP *N* = 116	Nation *N* = 115	Regional *N* = 88	Total *N* = 319
Differences in gender of trafficked person, by publication (%). χ^2 = 16.84, *df* = 8, *p* < .05.				
Male	3 (2.6)	1 (0.9)	5 (5.7)	9 (2.8)
Female	69 (59.5)	56 (48.7)	51 (58.0)	176 (55.2)
Other (i.e., "ladyboy")	9 (7.8)	4 (3.5)	1 (1.1)	14 (4.4)
Both	3 (2.6)	7 (6.1)	6 (6.8)	16 (5.0)
No gender ment.	32 (27.6)	47 (40.9)	25 (28.4)	104 (32.6)
Differences in presence of stateless mentioned, by publication (%). χ^2 = 5.80, *df* = 2, *p* = .05.				
	10 (8.6)	2 (1.7)	4 (4.5)	16 (5.0)
Differences in presence of ethnic minority mentioned, by publication (%). χ^2 = .622, *df* = 2, *ns.*				
	16 (13.8)	15 (13.0)	9 (10.2)	40 (12.5)

Framing Techniques: What Issues Are Identified as Connected to Trafficking?

In addition to defining *who* is trafficked, considering how the stories frame the issue in conjunction with more established ideas can help us better understand how the topic is presented. Oftentimes people tend to think about sex trafficking as happening "over there," meaning, it happens in communities outside of their own (De Chesnay, 2013). Such a notion could be seen in this analysis, as both national newspapers discussed sex trafficking as an international issue in more than half of stories. The regional newspapers discussed sex trafficking as an international issue in 47.7% of articles, making it less common than in the national outlets, but still a prevalent frame. Furthermore, literature continually points to the prominence of the monarchy and Buddhism in Thailand. However, sex trafficking was never discussed in relation to the monarchy, which is unsurprising given the strict lese majeste laws, and was very seldom discussed in the context of Buddhism (in only 0.6% of articles).

Another way that sex trafficking could be tied to different ideas is by presenting it in conjunction with other forms of human trafficking. However, sex trafficking was infrequently discussed in relation to other forms of human trafficking. In the rare cases when it was, all newspapers primarily reported on labor trafficking in the fishing industry.

Another central aspect of understanding these stories is the dominant frame in which the issue is presented. Each of the news outlets predominantly reported on sex trafficking as a crime issue (overall 47% of articles). The regional newspapers featured crime-focused stories in the highest percentage (68.2%) of articles and *Bangkok Post* did so in the lowest percentage (36.2%), but still dominantly framed the issue as crime related. After crime, a noteworthy number of stories were framed as human rights abuses (10.2%–25%) and policy/legislation matters (4.5%–22.6%). The national newspapers featured notably higher percentages of policy-focused and human rights-focused stories than the regional newspapers; however, both types of stories paled in comparison to crime-focused stories. In all newspapers, sex trafficking was rarely reported on as a public health concern, a societal problem (such as an eyesore or increased pedestrian or car congestion on roads) or relating to morality or economics.

Framing Techniques: Sources Cited

Another important way that stories can frame the topic is through the use of specific sources and the enabling of some perspectives to be represented while omitting others. A notable similarity that emerged across all newspapers was the clear absence of the voices of victims. The newspaper that cited victims most frequently was *Bangkok Post*, in 11.2% of stories, compared with *The Nation,* which did so the least (2.6%). All newspapers most commonly cited official sources from within Thailand, almost to the exclusion of all others. When considering officials from inside and outside the country, regional newspapers cited official sources in 82.9% of stories, *Bangkok Post* did so in 77.6% and the *Nation* did so in 63.4% of articles. The next most commonly cited type of source was advocates/NGO staffers (in 23%–33% of all articles). When considering all articles as a whole, witnesses/nonexperts were cited more commonly than victims were.

When diving deeper into what these official sources were quoted as saying, a hero police theme emerged. For example, an arguably unnecessarily heavy focus on police work can be seen in the following:

> After hearing the victim's statements, the detective team investigated the madams . . . The police then went to arrest the madams. . . . At the scene, police discovered that Ms. Notira had just procured a Middle East customer to purchase services from the victim. The police also found many other victims, and seized their passports to prevent them from escaping. ("Three Uzbekistan women arrested for trafficking Uzbekistan girls," 2012, para. 9–11)

This "patting on the back," so to speak, of the police work being done to stop trafficking is fitting given the high numbers of crime stories that focus on the work of the police to conduct raids and make arrests. Additionally, by focusing on details of the police work, attention is deflected away from victims and traffickers.

Framing Techniques: Remedies Suggested

In the context of social issues, providing solutions is one of the most important functions of frames (Entman, 1993). Table 2 indicates that overall, almost two-thirds of articles did not suggest a remedy for curbing sex trafficking. *Bangkok Post* featured the highest percentage of stories that did present a remedy, with just under half of articles, and regional newspapers did so the least in just over one-quarter of articles. Of the articles that did suggest a solution, the most common option was "other," which largely focused on raising awareness of the dangers of trafficking. The second most commonly suggested remedy was the need for policy changes, which was discussed more in the national newspapers than the regionals. *Bangkok Post* was the only newspaper to suggest increased punishments for the trafficker, but did so in less than 2% of articles. The regional outlets may have taken a more localized approach as they most commonly suggested the creation of organizations that care for victims, but such a recommendation was made in only approximately 10% of stories.

Table 2. Differences in Presence of Remedies, by Publication (%).

	BP *N* = 116	Nation *N* = 115	Regional *N* = 88	Total *N* = 319
Punish trafficker χ^2 = 3.52, *df* = 2, *ns.*				
	2 (1.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (0.6)
Policy change χ^2 = 2.43, 2 *df* = 2, *n.s.*				
	17 (14.7)	19 (16.5)	8 (9.1)	44 (13.8)
Creation of advocacy and care programs χ^2 = 10.88, *df* = 2, *p* < .01				
	13 (11.2)	1 (0.9)	9 (10.2)	23 (7.2)
Other χ^2 = *2.86, df* = 2,*ns.*				
	31 (26.7)	24 (20.9)	15 (17.0)	70 (21.9)
No remedy χ^2 = 11.44, *df* = 2, *p* < .01				
	59 (50.9)	73 (63.5)	65 (73.9)	197 (61.8)

Note. No article suggested punishing the individual, trafficker, or sex buyer.

Discussion and Conclusion

Many of these findings lend support to previous framing research regarding journalistic conventions influencing story topic and sources cited (Iyengar, 1991). This study found a notable number of stories that featured episodic framing. Episodic frames focus on the immediate incident and give little

context about underlying issues, while thematic frames focus on the big picture to help audiences view the issue in a broader context and may lend themselves more to notions of collective responsibility (Iyengar, 1991). Data from this study, as a whole, point to the need for more thematic and contextualized reporting on sex trafficking. However, the national newspapers featured more thematic frames than the regional newspapers, suggesting a more contextualized view of the problem in urban areas.

The role of sources in framing is another important topic in this analysis as well as of previous scholars (Andsager & Powers, 1999; Nacos, 1994). A study of American AIDS reporting, which certainly may incongruously apply in Thailand, found that when cited, government officials were more likely to provide a sense of reassurance (Colby & Cook, 1991). This could explain the "hero police" narrative and the overwhelming focus on official sources, in the sense that the police were demonstrating their handling of the problem and the public need not worry.

Additionally, this study found that coverage suggested few remedies and concentrated on crime-focused stories. Both of those findings, as well as the focus on official sources, are consistent with previous research of sex trafficking coverage, suggesting that framing of the issue is similar in Thailand and Western countries (Johnston et al., 2012; Johnston et al., 2015). Moreover, these findings taken in conjunction with framing studies of other human rights abuses such as female genital cutting (Sobel, 2015a) and interethnic conflict (Lai Fong & Ishak, 2012) could shed light on how human rights journalism functions: largely episodic, regularly cites official sources, lacks victims' voices, and focuses on crime or conflict frames.

This study also revealed that coverage primarily reported on female victims, with a notable lack of stories about sex-trafficked boys. Although some people believe that there exist fewer male sex trafficking victims (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2014), and therefore coverage would be a reflection of the actual trafficking landscape, it could also be seen as problematic because of conventional notions of sexuality and gender. Scholars have argued that men and boys are left out of sex trade discussions because they are portrayed as having more knowledge of what they are doing and are regularly depicted as the victimizer rather than the victimized (Dennis, 2008). On the other hand, however, this focus on female victims lends support to Baker's (2013) argument that U.S. media and policy discourses surrounding sex trafficking focus on a rescue narrative, which reinforces traditional beliefs about gender, sexuality, and patriarchy. Although this study cannot pinpoint a causal link, it suggests the possibility that such a focus on female victims could perpetuate similar notions of gender in Thailand.

In addition to the lack of boys discussed, articles omitted considerations of statelessness or ethnic minority communities—elements of the story that can describe one's social status. The United Nations (2006) noted, "A significant number of children residing in Thailand remain stateless . . . which renders them vulnerable to abuse, trafficking and exploitation" (para. 33). However, it is unsurprising that such populations were not more prevalent in coverage given that they are likely not considered worthy of media attention. Laswell's (1948) typology works in many countries because the national cultures are based in a norm of helping the helpless and shining a light into dark corners. In a system such as Thailand's, with deep class divisions that are institutionalized and maintained by corrupt officials and powerful people, those in power likely do not want to see trafficking treated in a way that reveals what is

truly happening. Officials may portray trafficking (deliberately and subtly) in ways that reinforce the class dimension: The girls have no other means of survival, many are willing prostitutes, and so forth. As long as trafficking is framed in those terms, the ethnic dimension is not highlighted. If media cooperate in such framing, they are not performing the surveillance and mobilization functions of Laswell (1948); rather, they are helping to maintain the status quo.

Furthermore, the heavy focus on crime frames suggests that sex trafficking is reported on in the context of criminal justice. Research on criminal justice frames has revealed that such frames are common in coverage of a wide range of topics and can result in misperceptions about the subject and have limited effects on policy decisions (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2005). In the context of the 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School, despite a large amount of media attention, Birkland and Lawrence (2009) found that coverage "caused little political learning (i.e., learning about how to make effective arguments in the policy process) because the frames chosen by journalists and advocates were largely preexisting frames" (p. 1422). In our study, it could be argued that because of the continued reliance on crime-focused frames, this coverage is unlikely to impact antitrafficking policy. A wider array of frames, specifically those that are not commonly used in coverage of other topics (such as human rights or morality frames), are likely needed for trafficking stories to positively influence policy decisions. This suggestion is supported by Baker's (2013) argument that traditional criminal justice-focused approaches to combating sex trafficking (that being victims rescued and traffickers prosecuted) are inadequate. Rather, public policy must focus on systemic changes and address "how trafficking is rooted in political, economic, and social conditions" (Baker, 2013, para. 58). Thai news media have the potential to help change the trafficking conversation to focus more on systemic causes, but a wider array of frames are needed to do so. If media do not challenge the trafficking that continues because of institutionalized racism and they continue to report mostly frames that maintain it, they are part of the problem and not the solution.

This study illuminates important aspects of the Thai media landscape. Findings point to the dominance of crime-focused frames and a reliance on official sources. While these news elements are not unique to Thailand, when they are understood in conjunction with the notion that identities of criminals (in this case, traffickers) are withheld if he or she is a prominent individual in society, a more problematic media system emerges. When news stories are crime focused and only include the voices of officials, the media are likely to serve the purpose of strengthening the authoritative structure of Thai society, thus, preventing democratic development. Bronstein (2005) suggested that frames evolve over time and can be reformatted by journalists or their sources to parallel the current social and political environment. The repressive Thai political environment could explain the controlled media content, so it is necessary to evolve politically so that journalists and sources can follow suit.

Although this research revealed unique findings, it has several limitations. First, only English newspapers were analyzed, which could give a skewed impression of how the issue was represented. Thai-language publications might give less attention to sex trafficking altogether because of their appeal to a different readership; English news sources might be more likely to cover it given the international pressure Thailand has recently received. Also, the findings cannot be generalized to all English-language news sources in Thailand. It would be worthwhile to analyze print, broadcast, and social media coverage

in different languages. In that same vein, it is necessary to analyze media representations of labor trafficking and other human rights abuses both in Thailand and abroad. Additionally, future research analyzing the positionality of journalists writing about human rights abuses would be highly beneficial. Finally, and most significantly, this study was set in the perspective of Western-centric scholarship both with the theoretical framework and much of the literature. Attempts were made to mitigate this shortcoming by including Thai works whenever possible, but there is no denying this study's dependence on hegemonic scholarship. International communication researchers need to continually work toward lessening the reliance on Western ways of thinking. Findings from this study could be considered a starting point with which future work could apply non-Western theories to better understand the Thai media landscape and human rights reporting.

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