

SHAPING JUSTICE: HOW MEDIA IS TRANSFORMING CRIME INVESTIGATIONS IN THAILAND



In Thailand, growing public distrust in law enforcement has increased reliance on the media for crime investigations and accountability. As confidence in law enforcement's transparency, integrity, and effectiveness erodes, media outlets have stepped in as a critical alternative, providing a platform for whistleblowers, citizen journalists, and independent experts to uncover the truth behind criminal cases.

This shift is particularly evident in cases where police inaction or suspected complicity in corruption has fuelled public scepticism. In such instances, media-led investigations not only expose shortcomings within the justice system but also encourage public participation and scrutiny, challenging official narratives put forth by authorities.

However, while media involvement can promote justice and expose corruption, it also carries risks, including sensationalism, misinformation, and the potential to undermine formal investigative processes. As the media assumes a more prominent role in crime investigations, responsible journalism and ethical reporting are essential to prevent further erosion of public trust.

Public Distrust Towards Law Enforcement

Public confidence in law enforcement is a crucial factor in maintaining social order and ensuring justice. However, in Thailand, trust in the police remains low, with concerns about corruption, inefficiency and selective enforcement shaping public perceptions.

Various indicators highlight low levels of trust in police forces. As it will be shown in subsequent sections, this has led to increased media involvement in crime investigations as the public is looking to alternative sources for accountability and information regarding criminal cases.

A 2023 survey by the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) revealed concerns regarding law enforcement’s effectiveness and trustworthiness in Thailand. 39% of respondents expressed “low or little confidence” in police integrity, while 29% had “no confidence at all”. Furthermore, 24% of respondents doubted the transparency and accountability of police operations, and 30% lacked faith in the police’s ability to solve crimes and ensure justice. Other studies echo similar sentiments, revealing that 70% lack confidence in law enforcement.

Corruption is a key factor that must be taken into account in the broader contextualisation of such a low level of public trust towards law enforcement in Thailand. Transparency International, a leading organisation in combating global corruption, published its yearly Corruption Perceptions Index. The 2024 index (Table 1) shows that corruption is a major source of concern in Thailand.

Table 1: Corruption Perception Index 2024 in ASEAN Countries

Country	2023 Rank* (Score**)	2024 Rank* (Score**)
Singapore	5th (83)	3rd (84)
Malaysia	57th (50)	57th (50)
Vietnam	83rd (41)	88th (40)
Indonesia	115th (34)	99th (37)
Philippines	115th (34)	114th (33)
Thailand	108th (35)	107th (34)
Laos	136th (28)	114th (33)
Cambodia	158th (22)	158th (21)
Myanmar	162th (20)	168th (16)
Brunei	N/A	N/A

Source: Transparency International, 2024

* Out of 180 countries; 1st being the country with the lowest corruption perception

** 0 “highly corrupted”; 100 “very clean”

In a context where Thailand ranks poorly on global corruption indices, corruption within law enforcement is widespread. According to the Global Corruption Barometer (2020), 37% of Thais believe that most or all police officers are corrupt, and 47% reported paying bribes to the police in the past year.

A major concern is the perception of unequal justice, particularly for the powerful elite. In an interview with The Nation, Pol Col Wirut Sirisawasdibutr, a former Deputy Inspector General, highlighted how politicians and wealthy individuals frequently evade legal consequences. This is evident in the fact that only 5% of all police complaints lead to legal action, reinforcing public scepticism about law enforcement’s impartiality and effectiveness.

Reinforcing this trend, a poll on influential people and government officials in September 2023 found widespread scepticism regarding law enforcement’s impartiality. The survey revealed that 39% of

respondents had no confidence in the ability of police and government officials to ensure justice in conflicts involving influential individuals. 37% expressed limited confidence, while 59% believed law enforcement often protects elites and powerful figures, further deepening mistrust in the system.

Against this backdrop, the media has become a key player in holding law enforcement accountable, increasingly viewed as a critical force in exposing misconduct, monitoring investigations and even accelerating criminal inquiries. While this growing role offers opportunities to enhance transparency and oversight, it also presents significant challenges, such as sensationalism and the risk of undermining formal investigative processes, as explained below.

Media as a Watchdog: Investigating Crime Amid Public Distrust in Law Enforcement

With low public confidence in law enforcement, the Thai media has become a key force in holding authorities accountable. Crime reporting influences how people perceive its prevalence, severity and nature, ultimately shaping their sense of security within their communities and the country. As the fourth estate, the media plays a crucial role in exposing crime, shaping public perceptions of safety and pressuring law enforcement to act.

This rise in media whistleblowing and crowdsourcing justice highlights a shift in how wrongdoing is exposed, with journalists, citizens and insiders bypassing traditional legal channels to bring cases to public attention. By leveraging media coverage – whether through news outlets, social media or influential figures – whistleblowers aim to pressure authorities into taking action. This often results in law enforcement reopening previously dismissed or neglected cases, as public scrutiny makes it more difficult for officials to ignore allegations of misconduct, corruption, or injustice.

A notable example of how media scrutiny can expose overlooked evidence, challenge official narratives, and push law enforcement to conduct thorough investigations is a murder in Sa Kaeo province. In January 2024, a female victim was found dead in a pond behind an old gas station. Initially, her husband was brought in for questioning and had confessed to involvement. However, a reporter from Channel 8 went back to the crime scene to hold interviews with the witnesses, he found inconsistencies with the testimony of the victim's husband. With his team, they thus started to search for and successfully obtained and released to the public the CCTV footage around the area that showed the husband not being involved.

The video revealed the real perpetrators: a group of teenagers, including sons of local police officers. During the investigation into claims that the husband was unfairly targeted by the police, an audio recording was leaked, which documented the police's harsh interrogation methods. The recording showed the husband being chained and having his head covered. It is noteworthy that the media's involvement in the case significantly expanded the legal repercussions. The increased attention drew in diverse voices, including district lawyers, who pushed for further charges, leading to the young group being charged with 11 criminal offenses, encompassing murder, rape and assaults.

Another recent case that reflects how investigative journalism continues to be a powerful tool for public scrutiny is the collapse of the newly constructed 30-story State Audit Office (SAO) building in Bangkok following an earthquake in Myanmar on 28 March 2025 and the death of nearly two dozen construction workers. This case shed light on the media's ongoing roles in uncovering irregularities in public procurement processes. Not yet in use and costing over two billion baht, its collapse raised serious questions about construction standards and oversight. Media outlets, like Isra News Agency, and others, quickly mobilised to expose a series of red flags that may have led to the tragedy, including suspicious procurement procedures, the low quality of construction materials and the questionable credibility of the contractors. Uncovered evidence has led to the Department of Special Investigation taking up the case as a special case and the media, as of writing, actively seeking new evidence to shed light on the matter.

By exposing wrongdoing and keeping authorities accountable, the media can push law enforcement to act where they otherwise might not. However, while media-led investigations offer opportunities for greater transparency and justice, they also pose challenges. Over-reliance on media reporting can lead to trial by public opinion, misinterpretations of evidence, and unintended consequences for due process. The delicate balance between media-driven scrutiny and formal law enforcement procedures remains an ongoing debate in Thailand's justice system.

Challenges and Implications of Media in Crime

While the media plays a crucial role in uncovering wrongdoing and holding authorities accountable, its expanding involvement in investigations introduces significant challenges, particularly when media-led inquiries fall short of professional standards. Additionally, the public's perception of crime investigations can be swayed by sensationalised content, raising concerns about the appropriate role of the media.

First, media-led investigations risk not adhering to professional standards, which can damage the credibility of the investigation and affect the justice process. This can stem from several factors. Journalists and media outlets may lack the specialised training required for forensic analysis, legal procedures or investigative methodologies, leading to inaccuracies or misinterpretations of evidence. Additionally, time pressures to break news quickly can result in incomplete fact-checking or reliance on unverified sources.

In 2025, the death of a former police officer, found hanged in prison, raised suspicions among his family and fuelled concerns of possible foul play. The officer had been serving a life sentence for torturing a suspect to death during an investigation. Amid growing public scepticism over the circumstances of his death, Lui Chon Khao, a TV programme on Channel 8, conducted a televised reconstruction of the alleged suicide, attempting to test various theories despite lacking expert input or specific knowledge of the case details. Later, an official re-enactment by law enforcement concluded that the officer's death was indeed a suicide. The media's role in this case highlights how unverified and unspecialised investigation risks fueling misinformation and skepticism by presenting unverified theories without proper expertise.

Another case that raised concerns about investigations conducted by parties outside law enforcement, as well as the media's role in promoting such claims, is that of Thai actress Phatthida Patcharaveerapong (Tangmo), who drowned in the Chao Phraya River after falling from a speedboat under unclear circumstances in 2022. Media outlets extensively covered various self-proclaimed "investigative teams", which operated in parallel with the official law enforcement investigative and criminal justice process, that gathered evidence from multiple sources and issued contradictory claims about the case, casting doubt on the official investigation. In one instance, the media closely followed a re-enactment conducted by one such team, which even involved beauty pageants to test theories surrounding Tangmo's death.

The extensive media coverage of Tangmo's case raised concerns about journalistic ethics and responsibility, as outlets often provided a platform for self-appointed "experts" without rigorously verifying their claims or applying the evidentiary standards expected in judicial processes. This was particularly troubling as some external figures publicly accused the police and political actors of covering up key details, further fueling public distrust in the official investigation. Meanwhile, by giving these outside teams undue prominence, the media failed to encourage their cooperation with law enforcement, potentially undermining the integrity of the case and exacerbating misinformation.

The second potential issue is sensationalism, as news outlets often use dramatic headlines to attract viewers and generate traffic. An NBTC survey on TV news programmes found that approximately two-thirds of the inspected programmes were classified as sensationalist, frequently covering crime, violence, sexual matters, disputes, supernatural beliefs, and scandals in an emotionally charged manner.

A study by the Thai Media Fund, a public agency dedicated to promoting media literacy and responsible journalism, assessed the media's coverage of Tangmo's death in the initial months following the incident through its "Media Alert" project. The study found that the media sensationalised the tragedy to capture public attention, leading to widespread confusion and misinformation. Outlets circulated unsubstantiated claims and theories, including unverified information from social media sources. The cross-sector assessment also highlighted that much of the coverage was characterised by speculation, emotional appeal, and a lack of factual, balanced reporting.

In early 2025, public interest in Tangmo Nida's case was reignited, with media outlets once again giving prominent coverage to new developments. This renewed attention was marked by sensationalism, as individuals outside the criminal justice system use media platforms to cast doubt on law enforcement and lawyers from both sides publicly air their disputes over the case. Additionally, the coverage continued to dramatise the case, focusing on interpersonal conflicts between Tangmo and her friends before the incident to fuel speculation about whether she was murdered. Yet, as of writing, public attention has started to wane with media attention placed on other social developments, while the case itself drags on in an unresolved manner.

Such reporting poses several risks. Sensational news can inflame public emotions, provoking fear, outrage, or panic, and may distort news priorities by overemphasising certain cases while neglecting more critical but less dramatic issues. Furthermore, the pursuit of virality and engagement can lead to exaggeration or misinformation, ultimately compromising journalistic integrity. This not only shapes public discourse but also influences law enforcement actions, as authorities may feel pressured to respond to high-profile cases rather than prioritising investigations based on actual legal and social significance.

Addressing these concerns requires strengthening journalistic standards, fostering responsible reporting, and encouraging constructive engagement between media and law enforcement. Looking ahead, understanding how the media can play a more constructive role in crime investigations – balancing public interest with ethical and professional integrity – will be crucial in shaping a more responsible and impactful media landscape.

Ensuring a Constructive Role: The Future of Media in Crime Investigations

As it has been shown, the media in Thailand plays a crucial role in addressing gaps within law enforcement, particularly in crime investigations. By highlighting overlooked cases and bringing new evidence to light, media coverage has the potential to advance justice and foster greater accountability. However, this influence must be exercised responsibly to avoid undermining legal processes or distorting public perceptions of crime and law enforcement.

Strengthening journalistic standards is key to ensuring that media investigations contribute constructively rather than becoming sources of misinformation or sensationalism. Rigorous fact-checking, ethical reporting, and a commitment to accuracy are necessary to maintain credibility and prevent the pursuit of viewership from taking precedence over responsible journalism. A more self-regulated system, developed in collaboration with organisations such as the Thai Media Fund and the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission, could help formalise these standards through an enforceable code of conduct and content monitoring mechanisms. Additionally, measuring media impact beyond audience engagement—considering societal implications and public trust—would provide a more comprehensive evaluation of journalistic practices.

Beyond institutional regulations, professional development within the media sector is essential. Stronger capacity-building initiatives from media and journalistic councils can equip journalists with the necessary skills to navigate complex investigations while upholding ethical principles. At the same time, collaboration between media, law enforcement agencies, and other stakeholders in the justice system can foster a more balanced approach, ensuring that reporting enhances rather than disrupts legal proceedings.

A well-regulated and principled media landscape not only strengthens the integrity of crime reporting but also reinforces public trust in both the media and the justice system. By refining its investigative role, the media can continue to act as a catalyst for transparency and accountability while contributing to a more informed and just society.



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