




# COAL AND RENEWABLE ENERGY REPORTING IN THAILAND

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## Executive Summary

Southeast Asia is a fast-developing region, and its energy decisions are critical to the next decade's global effort to reduce carbon-emitting fossil fuels. Yet little is known about the specific media narratives that shape the national debates on an energy transition in each country.

For stakeholders wishing to influence such narratives and increase the quality of energy reporting, lessons from the past are crucial for future success. This knowledge gap is what Climate Tracker and the Stanley Center for Peace and Security wished to fill with an analysis of energy-related media coverage in five countries across Southeast Asia. This report on Thailand is the third in a series of reports commissioned by the Stanley Center and produced by Climate Tracker that will be copublished as part of *Fueling the Tiger Cubs: How Southeast Asia's Media Is Covering Coal's Last Frontier*, a multicountry media analysis led by young journalists from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Solar panels on the roof of a building in Bangkok. (Athit Perawongmetha/Reuters/Adobestock)

Cover: The Lopburi solar power plant in central Thailand is the largest solar photovoltaic project in the world. (Gerhard Joren/Asian Development Bank, all rights reserved.)



Each of the Southeast Asian countries in our study has a unique media landscape with different challenges and opportunities for energy reporting. For Thailand, a country with a **considerable off-shore gas supply**, coal has never played a large role in the overall energy mix, making up only 18 percent of the total power output as opposed to gas's 57 percent. With the upcoming power development plan, the balance will further tilt in favor of gas, which is framed by all news outlets examined as cleaner and more financially viable than coal—despite also being a fossil fuel with **significant environmental risks**. Our media research did not focus on gas coverage but only examined articles that mentioned gas in connection with coal; out of these, eight articles used the term “energy transition” to describe the replacement of one fossil fuel for another.

This figure, however, pales in comparison to the 209 articles—or one in two energy articles examined—that positively framed a transition toward renewables as necessary for the future of Thailand's economy and environment. Solar power in particular attracted enthusiastic coverage, accounting for 60 percent of all renewable energy stories; solar panels were often framed as a **new technology that could bring in profit for individual Thai investors**. Biomass was another renewable energy prominently featured in nearly a fourth of all renewable stories, as the Thai government hopes to take advantage of its **formidable agricultural outputs** to generate power.

Despite the dominant positive coverage, renewable energy is not without its critics. Though articles that framed renewables negatively were present in all Southeast Asian media, in Thailand, it is remarkable that more than half of these stories pitted local interests against national energy policies. Community opposition to the Energy for All scheme, under which the Thai government develops biomass plants in southern provinces, was particularly visible in 21 articles examined.

This trend must be analyzed in the context of Thailand's political divisions, which have pitted the more rural northern and southern regions against the establishment in central Bangkok for more than a century. Southern Thailand is a region with distinct **cultures and languages** and a history of insurgencies the country is on its **20th constitution**. It is natural, therefore, that this distrust in the government has bled into the coverage of energy projects in the rural south. Not only biomass projects but proposed coal plants were also framed using the community-versus-government angle, which contributed to the moratorium on coal development in the south in 2018.

To capture a somewhat comprehensive picture of energy coverage in Thai media, our three Thai researchers examined 501 articles across 15 news outlets, including mainstream commercial outlets and independent nonprofit ones. Bangkok-based commercial outlets such as *Khaosod*, *Thai Rath*, and *Krungthep Turakij* framed energy policies in terms of potential implications for businesses and urban consumers, quoting single sources such as government or business representatives. Independent news sites like the *Isaan Record*, *ThaiPublica*, and *Green News Agency* focused on the experiences of those working in energy projects or the surrounding community. Thus, the various news outlets examined in this

study represent a diverse snapshot of Thailand's media landscape, including how each outlet frames energy stories.

## Key Takeaways

- Coal was not a popular topic in Thai media, being covered in only 37 articles—the fewest out of all Southeast Asian countries studied. Thirty of these overwhelmingly framed coal as detrimental to the environment and Thailand's energy security; 23 deployed the moral frame to portray coal as “**dirty**” and “**harmful to people's health**,” citing Thailand's haze problems of 2019 and 2020.
- Only seven out of 37 coal-focused articles framed coal as a necessary addition to Thailand's energy mix. These articles were either **opinion pieces by government-affiliated columnists** or news articles that exclusively quoted from the state-owned Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) and the oil and gas giant PTT Public Company.
- Hydropower **contributes the most to Thailand's energy output among nonfossil fuel sources**, with 26 dams across the country. Interestingly, 55 percent of hydropower stories were about dams outside of Thailand that caused ecological damages in the country downstream of the Mekong River. Using the words “China Dam” and “Lao Dam,” all publications linked hydropower projects in Laos and China to the record drought in the Mekong in 2019, presenting Thailand as a victim of other countries' hydropower development.
- Mainstream news outlets framed nonhydro renewable energy projects, especially solar and biomass, as opportunities for more rural regions to develop economically and socially. These stories were aligned with government policies, which aim to increase renewables' share of total energy output in Thailand.
- At 106 articles, solar energy attracted the most coverage of all energy forms. It was often framed as a new technology that is profitable to investors in both the city and rural provinces.
- Thai media are proud of the country's solar investment across Southeast Asia. Twenty-three articles from four mainstream outlets featured glowing reviews of Thailand's solar projects in other countries, particularly Vietnam. Articles emphasized how Dau Tieng plant, hailed as the “**largest solar project in Southeast Asia**,” is financed by a Thai company.
- Biomass has been heavily reported on over the last two years, thanks to the government's Energy for All development scheme, which promotes community-based biomass projects in rural areas of Thailand. The coverage, however, more often focused on debate surrounding government policy as opposed to the technology's pros and cons.

- There was a significant difference between mainstream and independent outlets' coverage of all energy sources, though the difference was most salient when it comes to biomass. Mainstream outlets framed biomass as a sustainable solution to resolve poverty and air pollution in rural areas.
- Independent and regional outlets generally framed coal projects as a causes of conflict between local communities and energy investors—as well as the state—with tensions over who regulates and implements energy-related policies.
- Such differences could be explained by differing reporting strategies; all mainstream outlets' journalists said they quote from national government and business representatives, while independent journalists seek out local experts and community leaders.
- In terms of article category, more than half of energy stories appeared in the economy/business section—a consistent trend across all Southeast Asian countries studied. The typical approach to an energy story at a mainstream Thai outlet included reporting on a new policy update, with one-sided comments from big business.
- *Thai Rath*, Thailand's most-circulated newspaper, stood out for having a fifth of its energy stories written as op-eds—mostly in the society section. Its news executive editor, Orapin Yingyongpathana, attributed this to a “long-standing practice” among traditional Thai broadsheets to give space for columnists to pen analysis pieces about policy impacts on society.
- Energy stories were rarely presented with an environmental frame in mainstream media. This may correlate with recent shutdowns of environmentally focused news desks across Thailand due to financial difficulties, according to four journalists who previously worked for such desks. One of them, Piyaporn Wongruang of Krungthep Turakij, formed independent sites to continue their environmental reporting.
- Lack of funding and proper training may affect reporting quality on official and independent sites. Seven journalists, or half of those interviewed, admitted that energy issues are hard for them to grasp as energy connects to several other issues ranging from the economy to the environment to business. Green News Agency's Nicha Wachpanich said she “doesn't have enough knowledge to navigate through all [the] different layers in order to make [energy] news well-rounded.”
- Ten journalists said they have been directly or indirectly pressured by energy companies to tilt their reports in certain ways. A journalist who asked to remain anonymous said some energy companies place advertorials—advertisements that often look like objective news articles—and take the

journalists on media trips so that “the journalists end up writing noncritical or one-sided reports about the project.”

- COVID-19 lockdown resulted in a sharp decrease from an average of 19 energy stories a month to three in April. However, the number of stories quickly stabilized in May; referencing COVID-19 trade barriers, articles such as this [Thai Rath report](#) started framing an energy transition as necessary in the context of lessening Thailand's dependence on imported sources.

## Methodology

The research was conducted by Sippachai Kunnuwong, World Wirada Saelim, and Kadesiree Thossaphonpaisan. Together they independently reviewed a combined 501 energy stories published across ten online newspapers and five television channels.

Sippachai's work focused on a broad examination of coal and general renewable energy coverage from January 2019 to August 2020. In contrast, Wirada's work examined the debates surrounding Thailand's coal moratorium as they played out on television from July 2015 to February 2018. Finally, Kadesiree sought to round out the research by reviewing online coverage surrounding Thailand's community-based biomass power development plan from January 2019 to August 2020.

All the researchers' work included four key phases:

- Sampling.
- Content analysis.
- Framing analysis.
- Interviews with journalists.

### 1. Sampling

Sippachai sampled 341 online articles from five news outlets:

- *Khaosod*, Thailand's mainstream newspaper with the biggest online following.
- *Thai Rath*, Thailand's most-circulated newspaper with the second-most online followers.
- *Krungthep Turakij (Bangkok Business)*, a business-focused newspaper that has an online publication.
- The Standard, a digital-only news outlet popular among the youth and urban population.
- Green News Agency, an environmentally focused news site published by the Journalists Association of Thailand's Environment Journalist Club.



Khaosod, Thai Rath, and the Standard are relatively similar commercial news organizations that emphasize desk reporting when it comes to energy issues—resulting in largely one-sided hard news articles. *Krungthep Turakij*, as a business newspaper, features more in-depth analyses of energy policy impacts. Green News Agency is the smallest news organization examined, with only three journalists, resulting in fewer topics pursued; however, their articles tend to emphasize human interest angles.

To sample the articles, Sippachai used the built-in search function on the news outlets' platforms to search for the following keywords: ถ่านหิน (coal), พลังงานแสงอาทิตย์ (solar), พลังงานลม (wind), พลังงานน้ำ (hydro), and พลังงานหมุนเวียน/ทดแทน (renewable energy).

Meanwhile, in her research on the coal moratorium, Wirada sampled 100 news scoops airing between July 2015 and February 2018 on five channels:

- CH3, Thailand's oldest commercial television station.
- Thairath TV, the television division of newspaper *Thai Rath*.
- PPTVHD36, a commercial television channel.
- MCOT, a state-owned public broadcaster of television and radio.
- Thai PBS, the only public broadcasting service (PBS) channel in Thailand.

As the only public-broadcasting service, Thai PBS played a significant role in highlighting the opposition movements of many communities against proposed coal plants. MCOT featured both procoal and antioal narratives, while the commercial outlets, especially Thairath TV, were keener on featuring coal companies' viewpoints.

Kadesiree sampled 60 articles about community-based biomass projects in Thailand appearing in the following six news sites:

- *Krungthep Turakij* (Bangkok Business).
- *Prachachat Turakij*, a Bangkok-based local outlet focusing on business.
- Manager Online, a daily digital newspaper.
- ThaiPublica, a for-profit media outlet that investigates the government and business sectors.
- Thai Civil Rights and Investigative Journalism (TCIJ), a non-profit, online investigative news site.
- The Isaan Record, a nonprofit local news outlet focusing on northeastern Thailand.

The first three—*Krungthep Turakij* (Bangkok Business), *Prachachat Turakij*, and Manager Online—are large commercial outlets that cater to urban readers in their biomass reporting. Thus they emphasized the national government's viewpoint about the economic benefits of biomass. The latter three—ThaiPublica, TCIJ, and the Isaan Record—as independent or regional outlets, prioritized investigating the experiences of communities around biomass projects.

## 2. Content Analysis

For the content analysis, Sippachai, Wirada, and Kadesiree utilized a standardized **coding method** developed by Climate Tracker with the researchers' input. Using this coding method, they analyzed articles according to 22 parameters in five categories, including Article Type, Thematic Focus, Broader Framing, Energy Literacy, and Sources Used.

## 3. Framing Analysis

The researchers each selected a representative sample of all articles collected—40 of 341 articles for Sippachai, 40 of 100 news scoops for Wirada, and 20 of 60 articles for Kadesiree—to conduct more in-depth framing analysis, which involved asking questions about the articles' choice of sources, source placement, and framing strategies. The framing analysis template can be found [here](#).

## 4. Interviews with Journalists

The research was complemented by a round of interviews with journalists, including editors, who shared their reflections on their own coverage as well as Thai energy coverage in general. In total, 28 journalists were interviewed throughout this research. Each interview sought to explore the cultures within newsrooms and journalistic approaches to energy stories, and clarity as to the biggest influences shaping energy reporting across Thailand.



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The Chaiyaphum Wind Farm in Subyai district, Chaiyaphum province, Thailand. (Zen Nuntawinyu/ADB. All Rights Reserved.)

## Introduction

From August to October 2020, I worked on the research question “How are Thai media outlets framing the future of energy in the country?” To thoroughly answer this, I analyzed 341 stories from five media outlets via their online portals.

Through my analysis, I found a clear pattern of coal being framed negatively in favor of natural gas and solar development. This is in line with Thailand’s unique national energy mix. In a region growing heavily reliant on coal and diesel energy, Thailand is largely powered by a mix of gas and hydropower. As of 2017, natural gas accounted for 57 percent of national energy output and was the main energy source across the country, while renewables like , wind, biomass/biofuel, and hydropower made up 23 percent and coal 18 percent.

Under its new Power Development Plan, Thailand aims to further **reduce the use of coal-fired power to 12 percent** by 2037, while increasing its nonfossil-fuel quota to 35 percent. **Natural gas, however, is set to remain at 53 percent.**

This strategy was strongly reflected in Thai energy reporting, which emphasized a national shift from coal to gas and renewables. Both of these options were portrayed as “greener.” In such articles, lofty goals like Thailand’s commitment to the Paris Agreement and other carbon-reduction goals were highlighted, while the environmental risks of coal alternatives, especially liquified natural gas, were often ignored or overlooked.

With many energy plans ongoing and their impact being felt and monitored over time, this research aims to investigate how Thai media portrayed the developments within the growing Thai energy sector from January 1, 2019, to July 31, 2020, with a focus on coal and renewables. It seeks to uncover trends or gaps in Thai energy news reporting that can be improved upon to better inform the public and policies as Thailand chooses the direction of its energy future.

## Findings

### Quantitative Analysis: Story Type and Prevalence

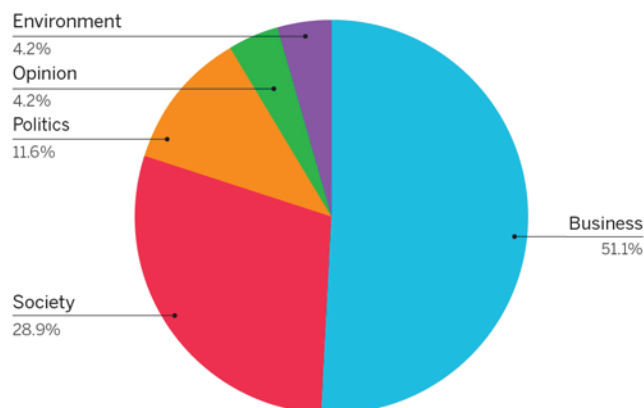
#### Story type by content focus: Economic frame dominated energy reporting

I began my quantitative analysis by trying to understand how energy articles were categorized by different publications. This reflected not only what type of readers each story would attract but also the approach of the journalists involved. Stories published under “science” were approached significantly differently than “business” or “politics” stories.

Over my three months of research, I found that 63 percent of the total 341 articles were written as hard news. Opinion pieces—published only in the three broadsheets *Thai Rath*, *Khaosod*, and

*Krungthep Turakij*—made up 12 percent of the overall stories. The majority of the articles (59 percent) were published under the business section and discussed government energy policies—such as the community-based biomass power plants, solar rooftop schemes, and the 2018 Power Development Plan—with implications for businesses.

**Figure 1. News sections in Thailand-based energy reports published from January 1, 2019, to July 21, 2020**



Pornpimol Yampracha, a business reporter covering energy and industry news for *Khaosod*, explained why he believes Thailand’s energy news is usually categorized under the business section. Energy-focused reporters working for the mainstream newspapers posted at the Ministry of Energy to cover its daily press conferences and announcements. Another team of business journalists is tasked with following stock market updates and corporate news releases and events. “This means most of the energy news [is] being reported through political and business lenses,” Pornpimol said.

Nutnicha Donsuwan, an energy reporter with *Krungthep Turakij*, told of a similar reporting process. “I usually follow the [energy] ministry’s announcements and follow up with the companies whether they have reactions to or plans to work in line with state policies,” Nutnicha said. Four journalists working for the traditional broadsheets *Thai Rath*, *Khaosod*, and *Krungthep Turakij* corroborated the claim that mainstream outlets have at least one reporter to cover the Energy Ministry.

Nakarin Wanakijpaibul, editor in chief of the *Standard*, said the majority of its energy-related content deals with the economic impact of energy policies because he believes it is the aspect that affects readers’ lives the most. As the *Standard* prioritizes “making the news easily understandable to readers,” however, it does not confine its business reporting to simple hard news articles but plays with various digital reporting styles to dig deeper into energy policy. Some of its successful undertakings include a business-focused podcast and YouTube videos derived from Nakarin’s sit-down interviews with former energy minister Sonthirat and CEOs of leading energy companies.





*Thai Rath*, Thailand's most-circulated newspaper, was unique in placing more energy-related news in the society section: 36 percent of its energy articles were placed in that section, which generally emphasized the human impact frame. The outlet also stood out for publishing more opinion pieces on energy than any other outlet, making up 20 percent of its energy stories. *Thai Rath* news executive editor Orapin Yingyongpathana attributed this to a "long-standing practice" among traditional Thai broadsheets to give columnists space for analysis pieces.

Meanwhile, at Green News Agency, a single-subject media outlet focusing on environmental news, energy stories are "covered when there are social and environmental aspects to it," according to news editor Pratch Rujivanarom. Hence, 61 percent of its energy stories were published in the social news section.

To sum up, my quantitative analysis showed that despite some notable exceptions, mainstream Thai media are largely classified energy as a business story. For this developing country, the future of energy was not seen through an environmental lens but a predominantly economic one.

### Digital disruption to newsroom revenue models affected environmental reporting

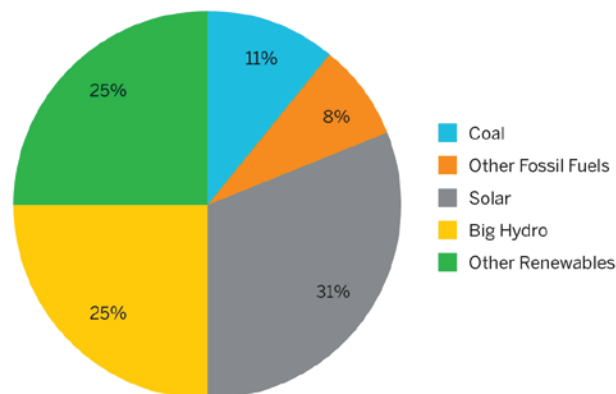
When I interviewed journalists about the lack of environmental impact stories, a common theme began to emerge: the digital disruption to traditional news outlets has led newsrooms to make the biggest cuts across the "noncore" reporting desks—including the environmental desk. The impacts of these shifts were clearly described by four journalists interviewed.

Piyaporn Wongruang, a veteran environmental news reporter and news editor for *Krungthep Turakij*, said that in the past five years, many newspapers and television outlets have closed down because of dwindling revenue as ads moved online, leading to companies eliminating environment news desks to focus on the main sections, like politics and business. "There is no space for environmental news anymore," Wongruang said, adding that "it makes critical reports on development and energy projects increasingly rare."

Outside her main job, Wongruang launched an online news outlet, *Bangkok Tribune News*, in 2019 to create an alternative space for environmental news reporting and fill in that gap. Environmentalist groups also now use social media to communicate directly with the public, while environmentally focused Facebook pages like *Environman* have drawn huge online followings. As a result of digital disruption, therefore, environmental news seems to be moving from mainstream outlets to citizen-curated social media posts; it remains to be seen whether these posts display the same level of journalistic integrity expected of professional reports, but this is beyond the scope of my present analysis.

### Story type by energy focus: Solar power received more coverage than any other technology

Figure 2. Main energy focus in Thailand-based energy reports published from January 1, 2019, to July 21, 2020



My next focus for the quantitative analysis was discovering which energy source received the most coverage in Thai media, which might be indicative of its present growth rate as well as future contribution to the energy narrative. By dividing my sample according to each story's main topic, I found that only 19 percent of articles sampled focused on fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas. Though this reflected relatively small media attention paid to coal, we cannot conclude the same about other fossil fuels, as my sampling method did not look for oil and gas articles specifically.

There were more solar stories than any other, making up 31 percent of the sample. This is nearly three times the number of coal articles found. Big hydro made up 25 percent, while other renewables such as wind and biomass power made up the last 25 percent of energy articles—bringing the total for renewable energy stories to 81 percent of the entire sample.

Without diving into framing analysis, these numbers alone show that the energy narrative in Thailand revolves around renewables—specifically solar energy—more so than coal, whose representation in the article sample was roughly the same as its representation in the energy mix.

### Qualitative Analysis: Common Energy Story Frames

#### News outlets made moral case against coal, blame it for environmental problems

From my framing analysis, I found that not only did Thailand's leading outlets report less on coal than renewables, the articles they did publish overwhelmingly discouraged further coal development. Thirty of 37 coal stories from all five media outlets negatively framed this energy source. Twenty-three stories, or



over 60 percent, deployed the moral frame to portray coal as “dirty” and “harmful to people’s health.” All news outlets except for Green News Agency used the human impact frame to connect current negative impacts with past crises and case studies.

During Bangkok’s haze problem in the first two months of 2019 and 2020, all publications, except Green News Agency, portrayed coal as one of the main causes of air pollution, citing examples from other countries. *Thai Rath* published three stories discussing how Beijing and other world cities battled air pollution by reducing coal production and sales.

A podcast by the *Standard* focused solely on how China’s closures of coal-fired power plants reduced air pollution. A *Khaosod* report mentioned the 1952 Great Smog of London, which stemmed from burning low-quality coal. The articles about the haze problem were either opinion pieces or features, in which journalists offer more background information on air pollution and the impact of coal as well as solutions taken from the case studies.

Green News Agency, meanwhile, focused on the burning of crop residue in northern provinces as a cause of the haze crisis. One of its reports portrayed slash-and-burn practices among Thai farmers, which led to forest fires, as a main cause of the haze problem. It is unclear why Green News Agency—a nonprofit outlet independently run by Thailand’s Environmental Journalists Club, a subset of the *Thai Journalists’ Association*—would frame this issue differently. However, according to editor Pratch Rujivanarom, Green News Agency’s small team of three reporters forces it to prioritize reporting on frames and topics less covered by mainstream media that “might deserve more immediate attention.” Green News Agency’s coal coverage usually takes on the human impact frame to discuss community opposition to specific coal projects rather than general risks of coal development as a whole. I will discuss this frame later in my analysis.

### No-coal policy portrayed as good branding for government and companies

In Thailand’s mainstream outlets, coal was not only portrayed as potentially causing air pollution and other environmental issues; through my framing analysis, I found that a concern for reputation permeated 15 articles that featured news about the government or corporations curbing coal production.

Seven of these stories were listed under the “World News” category and used pledges announced at international events to frame the Thai government’s commitment to reducing emissions. Orapin Yingyongpathana, the editor of *Thai Rath Online*, said that outside the business news section, energy issues in general are covered less frequently by reporters and editors because of limited public interest. However, world events like Earth Day provide an opportunity for journalists to discuss how carbon emissions can impact Thailand’s reputation on an international stage.

*Thai Rath* and the *Standard* reported the speech by António Guterres, secretary-general of the United Nations, that urged the Southeast Asian countries to stop the “coal addiction” believed to have fueled natural disasters in the region. A story by *Thai Rath* contained a summary of a GreenPeace report highlighting coal-fired power plants as a main contributor to the hazardous PM2.5 particles in Thailand. In one *Krungthep Turakij* report, coal is mentioned after three Thai provinces were named some of the cities with the cleanest air in Southeast Asia by an international ranking.

Over 60 percent of coal articles used a moral frame to portray coal-related activities as socially irresponsible. Government and private companies’ antioal pledges were framed as part of their efforts to rebrand as green and modern organizations—even when coal alternatives might not necessarily be less carbon intensive. These media narratives suggested that corporations and state agencies viewed giving up on coal as good for their images. The *Standard* reported about how Banpu, Thailand’s largest coal producer, rebranded itself with a new motto: “Greener and Smarter.” This came with a new business plan that reduced coal from 70 percent to 40 percent of the company’s business and invested in solar energy.







Greenpeace activists protest against effects of using coal energy at the Thai Ministry of Energy in Bangkok. (Reuters/Adobestock)





A Green News Agency [report](#), meanwhile, mentioned the Thai government's 2018 Power Development Plan, which features a goal to curb coal production to 12 percent from the previous 18 percent of the energy generation mix. The article explained that coal reduction is part of the government's commitment to the Paris Agreement—without diving into its continued reliance on oil and gas.

### Coal-related project portrayed as a community struggle

In contrast to the previous two frames, which discussed general coal policies, the third narrative that emerged around coal's negative impact focused on specific coal projects. In my analysis, I found that Green News Agency and the mainstream *Khaosod* and *Thai Rath* used the human impact frame in some articles to present fears and struggles of the local communities against coal-related projects. The eight community-struggle stories—which made up 22 percent of the coal-related reports—portrayed coal mines and coal-fired power plants as a rallying cause for people's struggle to save their community's environment and health. They also discussed the people's calls for the suspension of [coal mining projects in northern Thailand](#) and for [civic participation in the decision making of state policies](#).

A Green News Agency [report](#) headlined “Thai Court Revokes License of Ban Heng Coal Mine after 10 Years of Local Opposition” told of a victory by a community in northern Thailand over a coal-mining company after a Thai court decided to withdraw the company's mining license for inadequate environmental impact assessments. The story was based on a nongovernmental organization (NGO) report on the court verdict and featured quotes from an environmental lawyer. According to Green News Agency editor Pratch, people's activism against coal-related projects deserves coverage as it relates to the outlet's environmental-led agenda and “it's something that people should know about.”

Meanwhile, a *Khaosod* [story](#), headlined “Opposition Party Listens to Omkoy Villagers' Fears over Land and Environmental Issues from a Coal Mine,” mentioned a local community fighting against another coal-mining project in northern Thailand. The story politicized the community's antioil struggle by describing opposition party officials visiting victims of a coal project's environmental damages.

### Natural gas framed as environmentally friendlier alternative to coal

Though my analysis did not focus on oil and gas stories, in my framing analysis I noticed that these two fossil fuels were sometimes mentioned in connection to coal. Eight stories, or nearly 22 percent of all coal stories, portrayed natural gas as a cleaner alternative to coal and advocate for energy shifts toward more natural gas. A *Thai Rath* [story](#), headlined “All GULF Power Plants to Reduce Air Pollution, Using Only Natural Gas,” framed gas as environmentally friendly. In the article, Sarath Ratanavadi, CEO of GULF Energy Development, Thailand's third-largest energy producer, discussed the company's new no-coal policy, which







Aerial view of Mae Moh coal power plant, Lampang City, Thailand.  
(Tavarius / Shutterstock)



stemmed from the “people’s opposition towards it and scientific claims linking them to climate change.” Sarath emphasized that he chose to give up coal completely even though there are “greener” coal-fired generation technologies, thereby branding his company as a socially responsible enterprise. This is despite the link between natural gas extraction and increased emission of methane—a **greenhouse gas** complicit in global warming—as well as **potential environmental issues related to fracking**.

A *Krungthep Turakij* **article** reported on Thailand’s biggest coal producer and distributor Banpu’s plans of investing in natural gas in the United States as part of its efforts to reduce coal and “go green.” The article also cited nonenvironmental factors, such as the government’s inconsistent policy on coal, the US-China trade war, and decreasing coal demands in China.

### **Some articles framed coal power as a necessity and “environmentally-friendly”**

Despite the media’s overwhelmingly negative perception of coal, my framing analysis did show that a minority of articles—seven out of 37 coal articles—portrayed this energy source in a positive light. These articles showed a sincere lack of source diversity: all were based on views from government sources and state enterprises like EGAT and state-owned oil and gas giant PTT Public Company. In these stories, there were no critical views of coal, only the government narratives on the need for coal use.

Of the seven positive coal stories, two were *Thai Rath* opinion pieces in which columnists projected coal as a necessity that still contributed much to Thailand’s overall energy production. One *Thai Rath* **op-ed**, headlined “World Energy Trends,” was written from the columnist’s experience during a media trip to the Nordic countries organized by PPT Public Company. The columnist wrote a glowing account, saying even though the Finnish government decided to stop using coal energy by 2029, coal-fired power plants are necessary in the transition stage and have been operating without environmental impacts. It did not mention, however, that the Mae Moh lignite power plants in northern Thailand have led to health problems and that a Thai court ordered the project’s operator, state-owned electricity company EGAT, **to pay compensation to 131 victims**.

Meanwhile, a *Krungthep Turakij* **report** about Mae Moh stated that although the plants need to be shut down in 30 years, the government is building a new plant to replace them. The article implies that having a power plant replacement is a necessity until the Mae Moh coal mine ends its operations. In the same article, the Mae Moh Tourism Festival was introduced, portrayed as a family event to introduce visitors to the “environmentally-friendly” coal project.

A *Khaosod* report also portrayed the replacement of the Mae Moh plant with a new coal-fired power plant as “environmentally-friendly” because of its advanced technology. However, these articles were in the minority.

It is clear that coal was not seen by the media as a viable solution to Thailand’s energy needs. A few articles quoted from government sources advocating for “clean” coal, but most cited a diverse segment of Thai society—government, academics, business leaders, and citizens—in calling for a coal reduction and eventual phaseout.

### **Renewable sources portrayed as “clean” and “pathway towards energy security”**

As previously mentioned, a striking number of all energy stories—276, or 81 percent of the total sample—discussed renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, biomass, and hydropower. Of these articles, 79 percent portrayed renewables positively. However, if the 85 hydropower stories are taken out of the mix, 93 percent of the remaining stories show overwhelmingly positive views toward other renewable sources, portraying them as contributing to a “**clean, sustainable and secure future**.” This energy security frame was also used by the government to promote Thailand as a strategic energy trader and hub in Southeast Asia.

A *Thai Rath* **story** portrayed renewable energy as important for Thailand’s energy security, stating that the cost of oil and natural gas production will continue to rise because of the US-China trade war, as Thailand still imports these energy sources from abroad. Therefore, the story said, renewable energy that can be generated by Thai households or communities can act as a cheaper and more secure alternative. Two senior government officials, including the director of the Energy Policy and Planning Office, were quoted in the story as saying that the use of renewable energy will help address growing electricity demands, while solar is the most “preferred” energy resource because it is “cheaper” and “compatible with Thailand’s geography.” The article emphasized that renewable energy will not only lead to Thailand’s energy-secure future but to one that is clean and sustainable.

A rare criticism over the use of renewable energy came from a *Krungthep Turakij* **report**, which voiced concerns that the new Power Development Plan might overestimate electricity demands—and renewable energy development. Witoon Permpongsacharoen, chairman of Mekong Energy Ecology Network, was quoted as saying that the projection would increase the already-large electricity surplus that comes at the cost of “sociological and environmental impact.” However, in an **article** in the Standard, the former energy minister, Sonthirat, was quoted as saying the revised energy plans, which aim to boost Thailand’s energy reserves, will be used to make Thailand an energy hub of the region, enabling it to sell electricity to neighboring countries.

### **Op-eds promoting renewables written during media field trips**

In my framing analysis, I found that opinion pieces, which made up nearly 12 percent of all renewable energy stories, drew from journalists’ experiences during trips in foreign countries to promote renewable development. These visits were organized by Thailand’s state enterprises or companies and coincide with Thai officials’ inspections of renewable energy development plans and sites in Europe.





A *Thai Rath* columnist wrote a two-part op-ed [piece](#), “Is It Time That Thailand Move Forward with Renewable Energy Production?,” detailing his experience from the EGAT trip to Spain and Portugal. The columnist called the transition to renewable sources “unavoidable” because fossil-fuels-based power has created many environmental impacts. The first [article](#) featured only one source, the EGAT director, telling of the government’s renewable energy infrastructure plans, while the [second](#) story discussed the different locations visited during the trip, such as the floating solar station and waste-to-energy power plant. Both projects are initiatives the Thai government is pushing forward at home.

Following the same EGAT trip to Spain and Portugal, a *Khaosod* journalist wrote a [report](#), headlined “EGAT Prepares for Renewable Energy Transition by using ‘Solar-Wind-Waste,’” suggesting that Thailand can use hybrid renewable energy production models and solar energy storage systems—the models being used by the two European countries to prepare for its energy transition.

### **Solar energy and biomass framed as a boost to local economy**

An analysis of specific renewable technologies showed that solar was the most mentioned nonhydro renewable energy source, reported on three times more often than coal. It accounted for approximately 60 percent of all renewable energy articles, followed by biomass at 30 percent and wind at 10 percent. Solar and biomass were portrayed by the authorities, and then subsequently by the media, as boosting Thailand’s “grassroot” and “circular” economy. The solar rooftop scheme generated more news coverage than the community-based biomass power project, presumably as the latter has yet to start. Most of the solar news featured government announcements, while the rest dealt with the private sector’s plans to tap into the market. However, biomass news was based solely on government announcements and events related to the launch of the community-based power plant program.

Eighty-eight articles, or more than 83 percent of solar articles, featured government announcements related to the People’s Solar policy, a scheme that allows residents to earn income from selling surplus electricity to the government.

A *Thai Rath* [report](#), for example, talked about the government’s plan to increase the solar power buying rate to draw more users into the program after the previous scheme was considered “unattractive” by the public. A Green News Agency [report](#) featured an interview with the deputy CEO of the Sena Development Public Company that promoted the idea of “green houses,” claiming that its thousands of residential properties have been installed with rooftop solar panels, which have reduced household electricity costs.

A *Krungthep Turakij* [report](#) headlined “Community-Based Power Plants to Inject USD 2M into the Economy” portrayed solar and biomass via the economic frame, saying they will help boost local economies as villagers and companies can produce, utilize, and sell electricity from these sources. The Standard [report](#) discussed the energy minister’s visit to the northeastern province of Khon







Biomass power plant in Thailand. (Reuters/Adobestock)





Workers shoulder corn sack destined for the biomass factory at Mae Ngon, Chiang Mai province, Thailand. (Chomplearn/Shutterstock)



Kaen to inspect the area where biomass power plants are expected to operate. He was quoted as saying that the project will “get rid of the villagers’ poverty” as they can make money from planting and selling energy crops, such as napier grass, to the community-based power plants.

### Renewable energy investments abroad portrayed as profitable

Previously in my quantitative analysis, I had found that 20 percent of Thai energy stories dealt with regional issues, projects, and investments. One of the most prevalent regional story frames, which made up 34 percent of all such stories, was about how Thai companies invest in solar and wind projects in neighboring Vietnam. Four media outlets used economic and nationalistic frames to portray such projects as “profitable” and “reliable” business—reflecting the successes of the Thai companies in tapping into other countries’ markets. The article branded the companies as “technologically advanced” and possessing “strong readiness” for regional investment.

However, *Krungthep Turakij*’s regional stories made up nearly half of the total articles. Piyaporn, the editor, said that stemmed from the publication’s target audience, which is mainly composed of investors and those within the business sector who are interested in doing business regionally. Many stories deployed the economic moral value frame to discuss renewable energy projects abroad and portray them as profitable.

A *Krungthep Turakij* report headlined “Stock Price for Renewable Energy Strong, Contrary to Thai Economy” mentioned three top energy companies and their profits. The article used statistics to portray the Thai renewable companies as doing well with their investments abroad while suggesting that these companies were leading in the renewable energy business in Southeast Asia. There are no other sources with opposing views, making the story one-dimensional. All publications, except Green News Agency, discussed the launch of Thai company B.Grim’s solar power plant in Vietnam. *Khaosod*, *Thai Rath*, *Krungthep Turakij*, and the Standard branded it as the **biggest solar power plant in Southeast Asia** and discussed how Thai companies are becoming the **key players in the region**.

### Biomass projects met with protests; solar questioned over “sustainability”

As the two most-covered renewable technologies, solar and biomass also attracted some unavoidable criticisms from the media. While 89 percent of biomass-related stories were told positively via the economic frame, 11 percent were portrayed negatively via the community-struggle frame. However, instead of using the government framing of “community-based power plant,” these reports mentioned the type of energy directly, following the use of such names by local protesters.

A *Thai Rath* story headlined “Sikao Villagers Protest against ‘Biomass Power Plants’ over Fears of Environmental Impact” discussed a local protest against a rumored biomass power plant in

a southern Thai province. The story featured the voices of the community members and a district official who said the plan was already scrapped after public opposition. Another *Thai Rath* story was headlined “Baan Lad Villagers Protest against Waste-to-Energy Plants over Fears of Pollution Assimilation.” A report by Green News Agency headlined “Srisaket Villagers Rally against Biomass Power Plants Linked to Sugar Factories” discussed an antibiomass protest in the northeast and relied only on the opinion of an environmentalist.

Solar energy was portrayed in a *Thai Rath* story that used the environmental frame as “unclean” because it will cause a waste problem as each solar cell expires after 20 years. The article discussed the Industry Ministry’s plan to handle the 620,000 to 790,000 solar cells expected to be discharged in 2022. The article used the word “urgent” to describe the government actions and quoted the deputy permanent secretary of the ministry as offering two solutions: sending the solar cells to be managed in factories abroad and burying them underground. He also said that 100 solar cell recycling factories are expected to be built across the country to deal with the problem.

### Journalists pushed government for more transparency in energy policy

The most overt skepticism over the government’s energy policies and schemes came from *Krungthep Turakij*’s opinion pieces by its journalists, especially Nutnicha Donsuwan, the outlet’s main energy reporter. One of her reports mentioned the Energy Ministry’s allegations of corruption. Former Energy Minister Sonthirat Sonthijirawong was quoted as acknowledging that ministry officials have been implicated in lobbying work for energy companies. Nutnicha stated that the ministry’s policies have been previously branded by some as “the cake” shared by a few people. Nutnicha cited Sonthirat’s quote to the media that he “will fire any officials involved in the corruption issues.” She also urged the ministry to provide open data related to the selection of project participants to make sure the process is done fairly.

Another of Nutnicha’s articles discussed the solar rooftop scheme that has been revised because the previous program didn’t draw much participation, leading some to question the two energy ministers—Sonthijirawong and his predecessor—for their designing of the plan. However, the article also questioned whether the new, higher electricity prices for household solar rooftop schemes are benefiting the general public or just business groups.

Nutnicha said the columns (opinion) section offers her space to explain the background and implications surrounding the energy policies and projects undiscussed in her routine works. In her writing, she chooses to discuss the energy issues via a consumeristic lens—identifying the pros and cons and the effects on people’s lives—while pushing for state accountability, as she wants to “communicate” to the state agencies about the policy aspects that need critical rethinking, reminding them that “there’s someone watching them.”



To sum up, although Thai media overwhelmingly framed nonhydro renewables—specifically solar and biomass—as the country’s energy future, journalists reflect citizens’ concerns that these technologies’ fast-paced development happen in a fair and transparent manner.

### **Hydropower portrayed as environmentally and socially destructive**

The tone of hydropower coverage in Thai media stood in stark contrast to that of other renewable sources. The majority (55 percent) of hydropower stories dealt with hydropower projects in Laos and China that caused ecological impacts in Thailand, downstream of the Mekong. Fifty-seven percent of the articles reported on these countries’ megadams negatively, using the conflict and human impact frames to portray the projects as “destructive” to biodiversity and people’s livelihoods. Using the words “China Dam” and “Lao Dam,” all publications linked hydropower projects in Laos and China to the record drought on the Mekong in 2019, after the Xayaburi Dam in Laos started its electricity generation and Jinghong Dam in China stored some water for its use. The often-cited sources included Pianporn Deetes, Thailand and Myanmar campaigns director with the NGO International Rivers; Niwat Roykaew of the Chiang Khong Conservation Group; and information from CK Power, the investor and constructor of the Xayaburi Dam.

A [report](#) by Krungrat Turakij headlined “A Historic Catastrophe of the Mekong Region” was published in late July 2019, after the Mekong region experienced a severe drought. It featured six sources, including a Thai academic who studied the environmental impact on the Mekong since the Cold War era, environmental campaigners, and the intergovernmental agency Mekong River Commission (MRC), mentioned indirectly via its findings and other sources. The article framed the hydropower projects in Laos and China as having disrupted the river flow, killing its biodiversity, and destroying the local economy, causing the river to become “severely threatened” by 2040. It also portrayed the MRC, which deals with the Mekong countries’ activities on the river, as having no real power to mitigate the impacts, for its role is merely to monitor the river’s situation and give recommendations to the Mekong governments. One community leader was quoted saying that it is not possible to stop the hydropower projects but “we need to find a common ground—how to add humanism into the engineering framework” to avoid impacts.

A [Khaosod report](#) published in the beginning of 2019, “Mekong Villagers Suffered Greatly from Unseasonal Floods as ‘Lao Dams’ Discharged Water,” told of farmers’ struggles in the Thai province of Ubon Ratchathani, where a plantation was flooded because of the sudden rise of the Mekong water level for a third consecutive day—with one villager quoted as saying she has lost her \$400 income. The story mentioned a local NGO report stating that apart from heavy rainfall, dams’ discharging of water caused many floods in Thailand and Laos and that the deputy prime minister of Laos has said hydropower companies don’t have to compensate for the impact from floods, making the cost of social and environmental impacts resulting from such projects “hidden

benefits for the [foreign] companies who won the concession to co-operate the dams with the Lao government.” This is the only article to mention the role of development aid agencies like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and many Thai banks that helped to finance the hydro companies.

### **Hydropower as a geopolitical issue between China, Mekong countries, and the United States**

Eighteen percent of the dam stories mention the words “China Dam,” which is a broad term to frame hydropower in a geopolitical sense involving China—whose dams were constructed on the upper stretch of the Mekong River—along with five Mekong countries (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam), and the United States. An [article](#) in the Standard, which was a translation of the news wire AFP report, tells of how US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned the leaders of Southeast Asia during a regional meeting that China was trying to take control of the Mekong River through investment in hydropower dam construction, which then resulted in record drought in 2019. The article mentioned that Pompeo “used the occasion to highlight the ‘threats’ from China’s use of the river.” The story portrayed the United States and China trying to counter each other’s influence in the region.

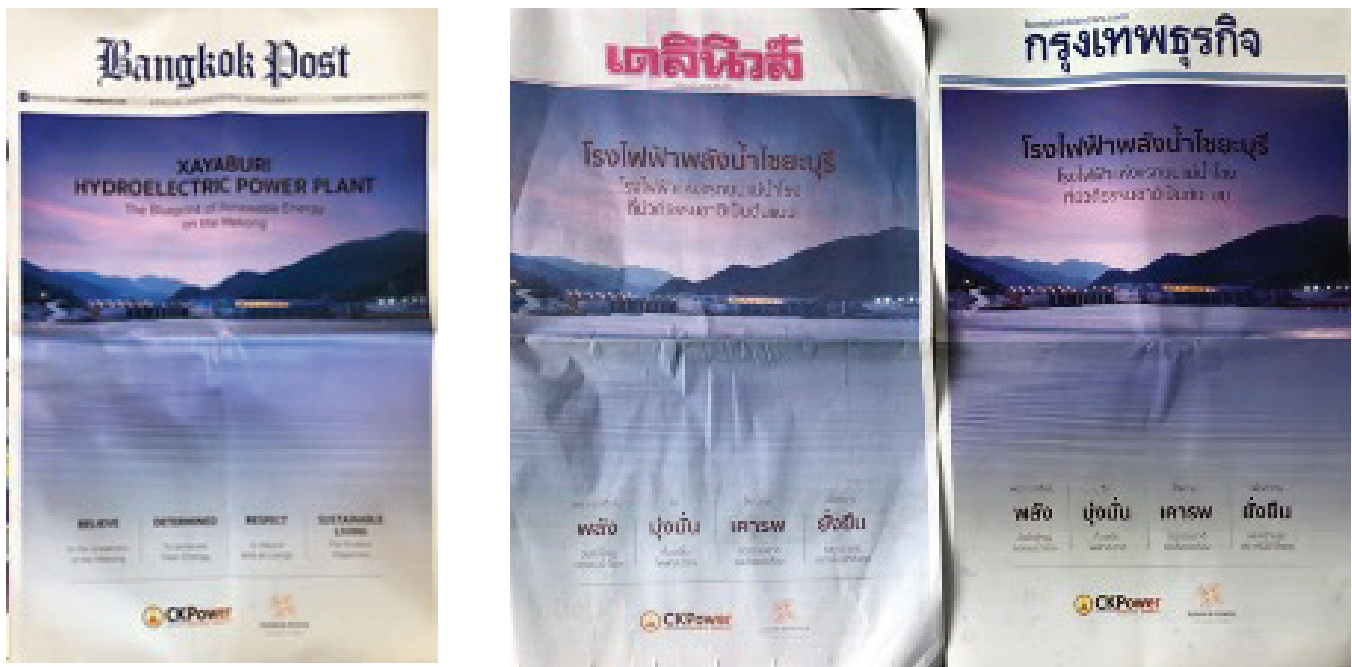
A [Khaosod report](#) told of a Mekong villager network that was preparing to protest in front of the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok and submit a letter asking Chinese President Xi Jinping to reconsider his water-management plan upstream from the Mekong. Local conservationist Niwat Roykaew is quoted saying that ASEAN—the Southeast Asian countries’ regional bloc—should make the Mekong issues its main agenda to negotiate with China. The story portrayed the Mekong hydropower projects’ damage to the environment and people as a regional conflict between the smaller countries against the regional superpower, China.

### **Media trips and hydropower company PR materials boosted “positive” hydropower image**

My framing analysis showed, however, that those with stakes in hydropower development could still push for their voice to be heard in national media. Of all the hydro-related stories, 31 percent portrayed hydropower as positive, in which the one-sided views from companies accounted for 63 percent of articles. CK Power organized a media trip to Laos in late July as the Mekong drought reached its peak. A [report](#) by [Khaosod](#) written from the trip, headlined “CK Power Clarify That Xayaburi Dam Is Not the Cause of Drought in Northeastern Thailand,” featured the company’s account that drought was due to the El Nino effect resulting from climate change, which led to less rainfall in the region. The story also published the company’s claims that its engineering technology and water-management systems prevent negative impacts on the river. A [Khaosod report](#) published in the lifestyle section featured the “good” lives of the villagers who were displaced by the Xayaburi dam and portrayed hydropower as clean and environmentally friendly.

Deetes of International Rivers said that on the same day the Xayaburi dam opened, October 29, 2019, the company displayed





(Credit: Pianporn Deetes/International Rivers)

advertisements on the front pages of at least three newspapers—*Krungthep Turakij*, the *Bangkok Post*, and the *Daily News* (pictured above)—while offering a supplement featuring advertorials—advertisements that often looked like objective news articles—about how the dam is environmentally friendly and making a positive impact on the lives and livelihoods of the people displaced by the project.

### Energy companies attempted to influence media frames via advertorials

Regarding the general issue of media independence, ten journalists interviewed for this research said they have been directly or indirectly pressured by energy companies to influence their reports. A journalist who asked to remain anonymous said some energy companies placed their advertising in her publication and took journalists on media trips so that “the journalists end up writing non-critical or one-sided reports about the project.”

*Khaosod*’s Pornpimol said there is only a “little” space for criticism about the energy companies if they buy advertisements in *Khaosod*. However, Pornpimo said she believes that because her task is limited to following the daily news, “there’s not much to be critical about—I just follow what the officials say.”

*Thai Rath*’s Orapin said the problem with the energy sector in Thailand is that it is driven by monopolies. These big companies can pay for advertorials to promote their projects. “Journalists have to be careful when reporting something critical of the companies because it may affect the [media outlet’s] revenue that is already decreasing,” Orapin said. However, she said one thing that can preserve the outlet’s journalistic integrity is to clearly

distinguish between independent editorial content and advertorials so the audience knows the difference.

Voice TV’s Tatikarn Dechapong said she was not pressured directly, but the large energy companies go through the journalist associations to foster a good relationship with journalists and use the associations as a communication channel to disseminate any rebuttals of certain criticism.

### COVID-19 curbed coal and renewable energy reporting, pushed energy security frame

The last topic I was interested in analyzing was whether COVID-19 impacted energy frames in 2020. Looking at articles before and after COVID-19 first appeared in Thailand suggests that the pandemic impacted the overall quantity of energy-related news. During a one-month period of intense social distancing and nightly curfews in April 2020, there were only three coal and renewable energy stories for all five media—a sharp drop from an average of 19 articles every month for the other months.

Before and after the lockdown month, however, COVID-19 served as a catalyst for more reporting with an energy transition frame. Of all the energy articles, 14 (4 percent) mentioned the pandemic, citing COVID-19 as an incentive for more renewable energy development and achieving energy security. A *Thai Rath* report quoted a Thai member of Parliament urging the government to push for energy sector reform in the post-COVID19 era so it doesn’t need to rely on imported energy sources but only locally generated renewable energy. A *Krungthep Turakij* report discussed the Thai government’s newly introduced Energy Builds Thailand policy, which promises that community-based power plants and renewable energy production will help ease the people’s economic

burden following the pandemic. The article called the government renewable energy projects “urgent plans.”

Qualitative Analysis: Article Quality

Reliance on official and company sources to explain energy terms

Moving on to an analysis of energy article quality, 71 percent of energy stories published in all five Thai media explained the energy terms clearly. However, a majority (80 percent) of the articles that included explanations only cited one source, usually government officials. Predictably, journalists often cited or quoted these same single sources when trying to explain certain terms and provide context in the story. Such a tendency to present only one source in news articles made the majority of stories hard news.

Half of the journalists interviewed for this report admitted that energy issues and specific terms are still hard to grasp, as energy intersects with several other issues, ranging from the economy to the environment to businesses. Green News Agency’s Nicha Wachpanich, who covers different news types and sections for the small newsroom, said she often avoids energy news because she doesn’t “have enough knowledge to navigate through all different layers in order to make news well-rounded.” Three of her energy-related stories deal solely with activism and environmental protests.

As for the issue of neutrality, *Krungthep Turakij*’s Nutnicha said that although a majority of news stories featured one source, the way the publication balances viewpoints is through reporting about the issue via different news desks. However, as it is a business-led medium, business views are expectedly made more prominent than the others.

According to Nutnicham, another challenge Thai journalists face when covering energy issues is the lack of data and statistics by the government and companies. For example, the cost of imported oil is still not disclosed, which makes criticism of high oil prices harder because there is no information to analyze.

Voice TV’s Panisa Aemocha concurred, saying the government’s statistics are insufficient and not updated. Meanwhile, for a small and environmentally focused publication like Green News Agency, it is rare to secure interview opportunities with energy companies’ management. Mostly, the mainstream media with large audiences can feature many interviews with state officials or company representatives; however, as mentioned, they usually portray these official views uncritically.

Lack of human interest angle in energy stories

Eight journalists said energy news is still not “properly” covered by the news outlets, especially outside of the business and politics news desks. The only human impact stories focus on community struggles around power plants rather than every citizen’s long-term stake in energy development. *Krungthep Turakij*’s Piyaporn said this might stem from the news outlets’ agenda to focus on

“news that sells.” Piyaporn portrayed the energy sector as “overlooked” by the news industry—even though it serves as a base for the shift toward the new and more sustainable economy.

There seems to be a vicious cycle wherein journalists don’t invest time in writing engaging, in-depth energy stories, which results in readers feeling “distanced” from this topic, which in turn leads to energy stories not “selling.” Analysis of energy-related news articles revealed that only 25 percent of the reports incorporated people’s needs and their daily lives into the news, compared to the 45 percent that discussed conflicts and activism and the 96 percent that featured money and investment components.

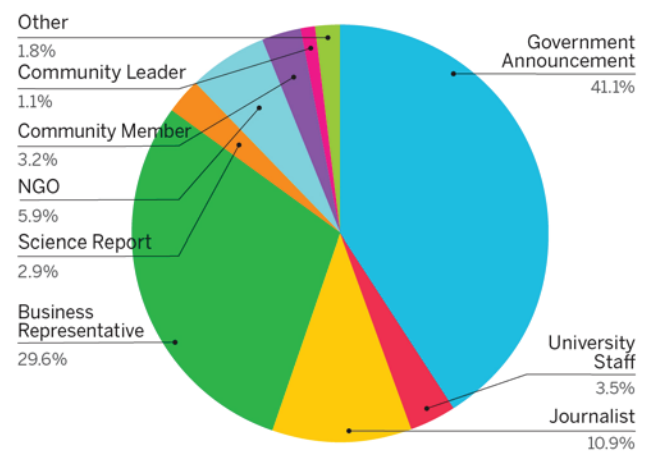


Figure 3. The types of primary sources featured in the Thailand-based energy news, published from January 1, 2019, to July 31, 2020

*Thai Rath*’s Orapin said the media should show the many ways people can be involved with the energy sector, either for personal power consumption or business-wise, to prepare themselves in a time of rapid energy transition. She also suggested that news about innovations, such as renewables-produced power storage systems at a personal level and solar should be more highlighted.

Following the disruption to many media outlets’ ad-based business models, which has led to shutdowns of environmental news desks, *Krungthep Turakij*’s Piyaporn said she believes that online media operated by local activist groups and citizen journalists could offer alternative reporting of energy issues. How much attention





Activists make their case against coal-fired power plants and the burning of coal at the Songkhla Provincial Court, Thailand. (Patani Stocker /Shutterstock)

they give to energy issues and what ways they portray the issues, however, are beyond the scope of this current research.

## Television Coverage of Coal Moratorium in Southern Thailand: A Case Study

By World Wirada Saelim | Climate Tracker Fellow

After years of headlines about antioil protests, February 2018 was a turning point in a heated period of coal debates in Thailand as the government decided to back down **from planned coal-fired power plant projects** in the southern provinces of Krabi and Songkhla. Since television plays a role in communicating and sometimes shaping public and policy debates for broader Thai audiences, this research aimed to investigate how the debates on coal were covered on television channels in Thailand and to understand the potential influences on the work of journalists and editors.

One hundred news scoops were selected from five channels for content and discourse analysis: Thairath TV, PPTVHD36, and CH3 Thailand are commercial channels well-known for news; MCOT is the only governmental channel; Thai PBS is the only public broadcasting service (PBS) channel in Thailand. The samples are scoops

aired from July 2015 to February 2018, when the data can be retroactively accessed on the channels' online platforms. With "coal" as a keyword, all samples were from the evening news, which tends to be one of the most important daily news programs of every channel. Eight journalists and editors involved in producing the sampled scoops were interviewed for the research.

### Conflict-oriented themes and narratives dominated

In the period examined prior to the February 2018 coal project moratorium, conflict was found to be the main theme of news coverage on coal issues by all selected television channels. According to journalists interviewed in this study, this is because coal issues were raised by antioil movements led by local villagers who did not want coal-fired power plants in their communities. Therefore, journalists tended to cover current situations regarding the



### World Wirada Saelim

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demonstrations, requests and concerns of the protesters, how the government reacted, and the conflicts between procoal and antioal groups rather than reporting about coal through the lens of climate change or mainly focusing on environmental issues. Since conflict was dominant, sources were also portrayed and interviewed accordingly, and the same pattern was found across all selected media focusing on procoal and antioal actors. Within the conflict-oriented theme, five main narratives were found in the selected TV coverage when presenting viewpoints about coal issues; some coverage used more than one main narrative.

Two narratives presented coal positively. The first narrative was coal as a solution, with economic advantage as the main argument. Thirty-three percent of the selected coverage used it as a main narrative. It stated that coal, as the cheapest energy source, can help ensure energy security and that coal-fired power plants will benefit the national and local economies, leading to a better quality of life for the people, especially locals. The second narrative, found in 20 percent of the coverage, was coal as harmless, which often was presented together with the coal-as-solution narrative. This narrative was a counterargument to negative public perceptions of coal-fired power plants in Thailand due to widespread headlines about the impacts on the environment and health of

the local community in Mae Moh district, Lampang province, where the 2,400 megawatt lignite-fueled power plant is located. Science-based narratives were used to communicate that the new coal-fired power plants will not have the same negative effects on environment, health, and local communities, as the government will use better technology and “clean” coal. These first two frames were commonly found together.

The third narrative was coal as problem, which mostly focused on the intrinsic impacts of coal, such as how it can harm natural resources and the local way of living. Thirty percent of news coverage used this narrative.

The last two narratives focused on the communities around proposed coal plants. One narrative was local community division, which focused on the conflicts within the same communities. This narrative was found in 17.5 percent of the samples. Finally, the most popular narrative—presented in 65 percent of news coverage on coal—was citizens versus government. This narrative focused on conflicts between the government (as procoal) and antioal citizens. It was used to report on antioal demonstrations and to address criticisms of the government and its assessment process of the coal projects. Moralization was found to be one of the main



Activist leader Prasitchai Nunuan, from Protect Andaman from Coal, protests the government decision to allow the construction of an 870 megawatt coal-fired power plant in Krabi province, Thailand. (Tadchakorn Kitchaiphon/Greenpeace)



arguments of this narrative, saying the government should listen to the citizens and that its public hearings about coal projects should be more inclusive.

### **Newsroom structure, reporting opportunities, and personal viewpoints influenced article frame**

Positive, negative, and neutral framings of coal were found across all selected channels in the period ahead of the coal moratorium. While MCOT had a mixture of framings, other outlets had a majority of scoops framed in a certain direction. Thairath TV had more positively framed scoops on coal, which accounted for 68 percent of sampled scoops. Eighty-four percent of scoops from PPTVHD36 and 79 percent from CH3 Thailand had a more critical framing, with a focus on the citizens-versus-government narrative. Neutral and negative framing of coal were portrayed equally on Thai PBS. While scoops with positive framing were the ones consisting of only procoal narratives (coal as solution, coal as harmless), all negatively framed scoops included the coal-as-problem narrative.

How journalists choose to frame scoops using different narratives can depend on the role of the editorial team, expertise, reporting process, and the journalists' standpoint on coal issues. As each editorial team within an organization has a specific interest, it tends to portray the same situation through different frames. To illustrate, for MCOT, which featured a mixture of framings, all positively framed scoops were aired in the economic news section. Meanwhile, apart from general sections (environment, economics, technology, politics) typical of a news department, Thai PBS has a different organizational structure compared to other channels. Aruchita Auttamapokin, a news editor, explained that her team's role at the Social Agenda and Public Policy Communication Center, a unit within the news department of Thai PBS, is to communicate about issues that involve conflicts between citizens and the government and to find available solutions. This can be seen in Thai PBS's extensive use of citizens-versus-government and coal-as-problem narratives and scholars as news sources with explicit suggestions on solutions (renewable energy and inclusive public participation, for example).

When it came to knowledge and routines, Chadarat Phokkhatanawat, a former journalist at Thairath TV, shared her experience covering the coal issue when EGAT invited Thai journalists to cover coal power plants in Japan in 2017. It happened to be her turn in the queue to go abroad, so she traveled to Japan without any experience reporting on coal. Chadarat said that if she had known more about the issue at the time, she would have been able to frame her articles more correctly and pitch her ideas to the editor more confidently. This aspect was reflected through the opinion of Montri Udomphong, a journalist from CH3 Thailand, who pointed out that Thai journalists tend to be asked to cover a wide variety of issues, which results in a lack of expertise. Montri suggested that lessons and courses would be helpful for journalists, however, he stated that it should be "someone who can share knowledge about coal that is not the government. Someone who can tell us about coal-fired power plants without a hidden agenda."

Finally, this study found that journalists' standpoints on coal can play a significant role in how they use narratives and frame the issue. Afnan Abdulloh and Montri Udomphong, journalists from PPTVHD36 and CH3 Thailand respectively, shared the same perspective on coal issues. They are personally concerned about the government's lack of clear information and inclusive participation when it comes to development projects that might affect local communities, resulting in scoops with a focus on citizens-versus-government and coal-as-problem narratives without positive framing of coal.

Krai Prommi, the former senior journalist at Thairath TV, an outlet with more procoal narratives, said he believed coal is an essential energy resource for Thailand. He said he believes coal as problem is a dominant perspective; therefore, he thought it is important for the audience to know another side of the story.

### **Commercial TV: Financial influence and journalists' viewpoints**

This research found that there were advertorials in news coverage on coal and that the standpoint of editorial teams and journalists working in commercial channels could influence decisions of accepting sponsored content.

Calling it "collaboration," Krai Prommi, the same journalist who expressed procoal views, was in charge of producing a series of reports for Thairath TV sponsored by EGAT. Most of the reports were presented as featured stories with coal-as-solution and coal-as-harmless narratives.

According to Krai, a decrease in sponsorship as a result of a proliferation of commercial channels and online media played a role in some commercial channels saying yes to such collaboration. However, he insisted that sponsorship does not interfere with the editorial decision of how all coal issues should be covered. Although a majority of sampled scoops aired on Thairath TV had a positive frame of coal and gave more time to procoal actors, the channel did have some neutral-framed coverage.

Meanwhile, Pitiporn Praomatooros, the environment editor of PPTVHD36, said it is important for her to work with a company and an editorial team that fit her personal views on coal. According to Pitiporn, PPTVHD36 also has governmental departments as clients. When making these deals, the editorial team can consider whether the message clients want to publicize will affect credibility and then negotiate with the channel's marketing team. When asked if EGAT, which has never been PPTVHD36's client, wanted to sponsor the channel, Pitiporn said "if they want us to communicate about renewable energy, it might be acceptable. But for us to say 'coal is clean,' it is conflicted with our coverage on anti-coal issues."

In sum, this study of TV news coverage of coal leading up to Thailand's 2018 moratorium found that journalists' individual opinions, reporting processes, and newsroom organizational structures played a role in how journalists and editors working for governmental, commercial, and PBS channels covered coal issues.

TV coverage of coal was primarily conflict oriented, focusing on debates between pro- and anti-coal groups, conflicts within the local communities the coal projects were to be built in, and conflicts between anticoal protesters and the government.

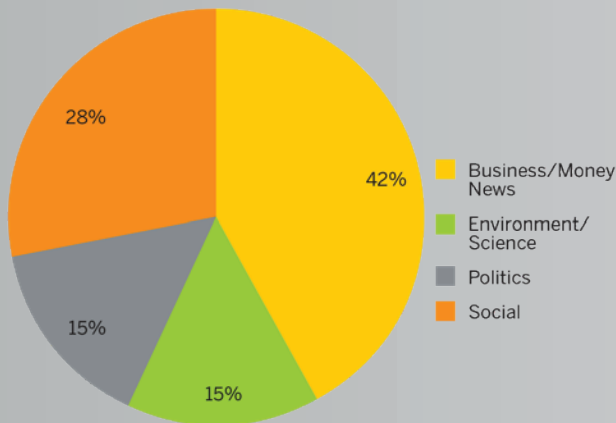
# A Deep Dive into Coverage of Thailand’s Biomass Community-Owned Power Project

By Kadesiree Thossaphonpaisan | Climate Tracker Fellow

The Energy for All scheme, also known as the community-owned power project, is former energy minister Sontirath Sontijirawong’s plan for increasing renewable resources in Thailand’s power generation mix by 2037. The plan aimed to improve the local economies, especially in southern provinces, and increase the employment rate by encouraging farmers to sell agricultural waste to be used in the plants. However, the plan, which was expected to generate electricity in 2020, has been postponed partly because of opposition from affected villagers. This study aimed to investigate how mainstream and alternative Thai news sites shaped the discussion on biomass communities-owned power plants and factors that affected their reportages.

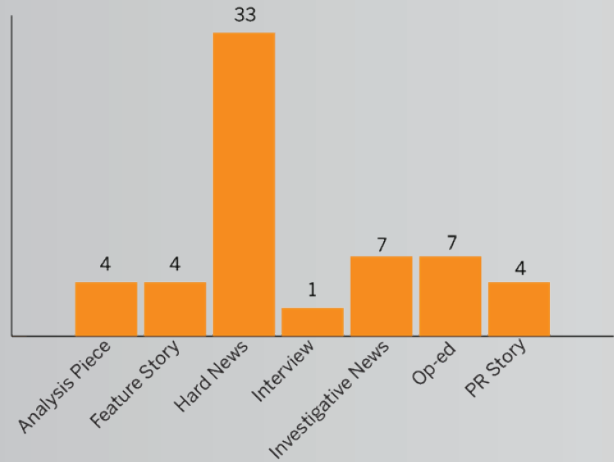
In this research, 60 articles published on six news sites between January 2019 and August 2020 were selected. Three of the sites, Manager Online, *Krungthep Turakij* (Bangkok Business), and *Prachachart Turakij*, are traditional and commercial outlets that have been publishing newspapers before operating their online channels. The others are independent media with different focuses and missions. Thai Civil Rights and Investigative Journalism (TCIJ) is a nonprofit media organization meant to be a database for the public. ThaiPublica is a for-profit media organization that aims to investigate the transparency of the government and the business sector. The Isaan Record is a nonprofit, local news outlet focusing on the north-east of Thailand, a region often overlooked by mainstream media.

Figure 4. Proportions of selected articles by the story section



## Most articles presented only one facet of the biomass projects

In terms of quality of the articles, this study found that most of the biomass stories were simple and reported through one angle—either through an economic, social, or environmental lens. Only 13 of 60 articles discussed multiple dimensions of biomass community power plants. Four and three of those were op-ed and investigative articles respectively. Of note, only seven articles were presented in relation to climate change or energy transition.



The rest were hard news, highlighting key messages from energy conferences led by business representatives or EGAT.

Figure 5. Type of article

## Mainstream media framed biomass as beneficial to rural areas; alternative media presented problems

Overall, this study found that biomass-related articles were presented in the business section the most, while only nine of the selected articles were presented in the environment section. Also, biomass was framed differently by traditional and alternative media.

Biomass as a sustainable solution for an agrarian, energy-hungry society was found to be a majority frame on mainstream sites. Two main narratives supported this frame.

First, 19 articles framed biomass community-owned power plants as beneficial for Thai peasants’ quality of life, the local economy, and eventually the national economy—since it will create new jobs and ensure that farmers’ crops will be purchased.

Second, 13 articles promoted the view that toxic smog, allegedly caused by open agricultural burning, will be mitigated with biomass energy production. Agribusiness activities, principally when applied to the sugar industry, were presented in moral terms, as articles discussed the benefits of biomass projects purchasing agricultural waste and eliminating crop burning.

On alternative media, however, 14 articles framed biomass as a source of conflict between villagers and energy investors as well



as the state. Within this frame, the stories were also presented according to two main narratives. First, biomass was described as the cause of air pollution and environmental degradation as well as a violation of community rights. The selected articles often questioned whether biomass can really be considered clean energy because of the smoke that will be released from chimneys. Articles in the Isaan Record discussed the expansion of sugarcane plantations and the possibility that the need for more biomass to meet energy demand will cause a loss of livelihoods and an increase in paraquat use.

The second narrative, employed by TCIJ in particular, was the concern over the increase in electricity prices, since the state has to subsidize biomass and other renewables. This frame became more prominent after the appearance of COVID-19 and the resulting economic contraction.

**Lack of variety in sources chosen by reporters**

There was a difference in sources quoted by traditional and alternative sites in covering the Energy for All project. While the former quoted high-level sources, such as officials from the Energy Ministry, the renewable energy industry, and the National Farmers’ Federation, the latter interviewed local leaders and academics from local universities who were familiar with affected areas. Interestingly, only nine of 60 articles presented female voices. Most of these were community members and leaders and were highlighted on independent sites only. The Isaan Record’s Hathairath Phaholtap explained that she has prioritized giving local women a space to engage in and speak out on their concerns over biomass-related projects.

Notably, statistical and scientific data were cited in only nine selected stories. About half were op-eds written by academics or practitioners. Panisa Aemocha, an early career journalist from Voice TV, explained that she lacks the necessary network with scientists and has limited access to scientific research. However, some outlets, such as the Isaan Record and ThaiPublica, have

been working with reliable researchers and academic institutions to help explain the issue before they frame stories and check for accuracy.

**Figure 6. Types of sources**

**Differences in priority affected article angle**

Mainstream journalists who wanted to write about biomass faced the same challenges as those who wanted to write in depth about other energy issues: a clear lack of funding. This was compounded by the fact that most biomass project sites are far from Bangkok-based outlets’ headquarters. Sarakadee Magazine’s journalist highlighted how travel costs affected the decision to—or not to—send journalists to investigate biomass projects in person. Additionally, for some outlets, publishing environmental articles could be postponed if there were other hot topics at the time.

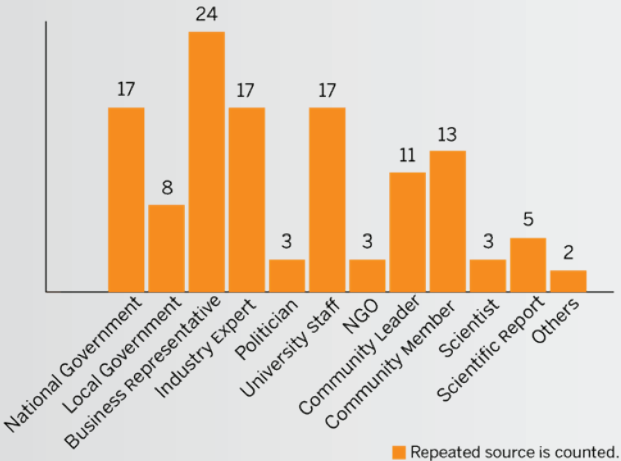
Mainstream journalists also catered to their readers in urban areas. Biomass power plants are located in remote areas, so urban dwellers had not readily seen its impacts on their immediate environment. Energy prices, however, affect everyone in the country, so mainstream outlets usually framed biomass development via an economic lens.

Alternative outlets like TCIJ, the Isaan Record, and ThaiPropublica, on the other hand, displayed less concern for catering to urban audiences. The Isaan Record approached its stories with concern over the locals’ lack of awareness of the many impacts of sugar



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factories and 29 other biomass power plants that will be located in northeast Thailand. Although the stories were intended for a local audience, their impacts sometimes spread nationwide and got attention from national and international media.

## Conclusion

An in-depth analysis of coal and renewable energy reporting in Thailand revealed that Thai media outlets framed solar and other nonhydro renewables as the country's energy future. Despite some notable exceptions in the op-ed sections, coal and hydro-power received mostly negative coverage; all available evidence supported the idea that coal is on its way out, at least as far as the media was concerned.

There were only a third as many coal articles in the time frame analyzed as there were solar articles, and 81 percent of those framed coal as damaging to the environment and human health. Coal alternatives—including renewables and natural gas—were often extolled, sometimes without a critical examination of environmental risks, particularly in the case of natural gas.

This picture of energy-related media coverage reflects the realities of Thailand's current energy mix, which aligns closely with recent development plans. Compared to other countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand has always been the least dependent on coal, with natural gas making up more than 50 percent of the energy mix. With further coal reduction planned in the next few years, companies used news stories to present themselves as “going green” while pledging to phase out coal, despite upcoming expansions in their natural gas business. Such pledges were sometimes framed in the context of Thailand's international commitments to the Paris Agreement and other climate conventions.

A case study of television coverage of the coal moratorium debate from 2015–2018 found that community opposition to proposed coal projects in the south of Thailand was prominently broadcast by journalists, which might have led to the government's eventual abandonment of the projects. The scoops that showed positive attitudes toward coal tended to feature remarks from business and government representatives, while more-critical scoops highlighted the human interest aspect with in-depth coverage of coal's impacts on people and communities.

The community-versus-government frame was also utilized in coverage of renewable energy projects, specifically community-based biomass plants as part of the government's Energy for All scheme. Though Bangkok-based mainstream outlets tend to focus on these projects' environmental friendliness and economic value for local communities, independent journalists—especially those reporting in closer proximity to biomass plants—went behind the scenes and highlighted problems with project execution that validated or fed into community dissatisfaction.

The focus on community opposition to energy projects was a distinctive theme in Thai media, with some journalists attributing it to specific units in newsrooms dedicated to community reporting, such as Thai PBS's Social Agenda and Public Policy Communication Center. The center's goal, according to an editor, is to amplify issues that involve conflicts between citizens and the government so a satisfactory solution can be reached.

Only solar power stood out as a much-covered energy source that was not framed as part of a conflict or struggle. Most solar articles framed solar as a lucrative investment—especially for Thai companies financing projects in neighboring Vietnam—and the answer to Thailand's future energy needs.

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