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Asia's Media Innovators
by Alastair Carthew

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Chapter Eight

Phuket website continues journalism's noblest traditions

The Phuketwan website in Thailand's major tourist destination, Phuket, brings old-fashioned, fearless and opinionated journalism to the Internet in a region where such things are generally lacking. Testimony to Phuketwan's credibility is the number of Thai and international news sites and organisations that frequently quote it as a reliable source on Phuket. For example, Phuketwan broke the story about the Thai army's disgraceful treatment of Rohingya boat people in January 2009 that prompted an award-winning CNN documentary.

Phuketwan's founder is Australian journalist Alan Morison. He has a staff of one Thai journalist, Ms Chutima Sadasathian. The website embodies two journalistic imperatives: curiosity and perseverance. Most Phuket websites focus exclusively on hospitality, property and aviation. Phuketwan – with its mix of hard news, comment, tourism, property news, entertainment, biting "push back" on controversial issues by the editor and jobs news – is a hybrid in the Phuket market and a beacon of light for unflinching journalism in the Internet era. The site takes on entrenched interests in Phuket – even criticising travel information icon *Trip Advisor* and receiving a drubbing in the blogosphere for its trouble.

"Sweet" every day
Phuketwan means "sweet Phuket every day". In Thai *wan* means "day" and *waan* means sweet. Phuketwan's record for investigative journalism is a clear legacy of owner Alan Morison's own journalist background and Ms

Chutima's exceptional investigative and reporting skills amongst the Thai population. Morison is not quite John Pilger, the controversial Australian journalist famous for taking on the establishment, in his intensity but then he doesn't have the comfort of big organisations and budgets behind him to "rip the scab" off atrocities and injustices around the world. But Morison is definitely of like mind with Pilger. Phuket is tailor made for a hard news website like Phuketwan, awash as it is with stories of crime, muggings, rip offs, scams, horrendous and too frequent motorbike accidents, sexual assaults, murders, tourist drowning and corruption. Sometimes, it would seem, Phuketwan has trouble finding something "sweet" to write about on Phuket.

In its "About Us" section the Phuketwan website says: "We are not here to constantly praise the island's virtues or to cover the kind of crimes that happen everywhere around the world. We just aim to provide an accurate account in words and photographs of Phuket and its people, including both smiles and warts." In this respect Phuketwan differs markedly from virtually every other island publication, apart from the *Phuket Gazette*, the main weekly news-

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Media Programme Asia
www.kas.de/mediaasia

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October 2010 –
Chapter Eight

paper, whose website www.phuketgazette.net carries many of the same daily stories, but with less trenchant opinion and comment.

Phuket's Internet landscape

As Thailand's "Pearl of the Andaman" Phuket attracts many websites promoting the island's attractions. Major sites include *AsiaWeb*, *Phuket.com*; *go Phuket*, *Phuket Thailand*, *Phuket Hotel Reservations*, *Phuket*, *Phuket Maps* and *DomesticflightsThailand* (aviation). But they generally only promote beaches, islands, what to do, what to see, nightlife, hotels, shopping, dining, maps, getting around, tips, excursions and weather. Large hotel groups like Laguna Resorts & Hotels, Marriott, Meridien and Hilton and more independent hotels like Cape Sienna, Indochine and a raft of smaller and lesser-known brands all have their own individual websites promoting the island. Phuket has five types of Internet access: dial-up 56Kb, ADSL broadband, leased lines, general packet radio service (GPRS) and satellite broadband. GPRS is a standard for wireless communications and runs at speeds up to 115 Kbps. Dial-up is freely available via a pre-paid kit from any 7-Eleven, bookshops or computer shop. Internet service providers also offer monthly services, and these are common in condominiums and villas. ADSL broadband connection speeds vary from 128Kbps to 2Mbps downstream.

Internet connection speed on Phuket is a source of constant frustration and complaint from visitors accustomed to much faster speeds, and locals trying to run businesses. For example a 1Mbps ADSL connection that costs Baht 1000 with one Internet service provider (ISP) might be the same speed or slower than a 256Kbps connection that costs about the same. Leased lines are more viable for businesses because they are not shared and they offer a guaranteed bandwidth.

All the main mobile operators provide GPRS, which is an efficient use of limited bandwidth and is particularly suited for sending and receiving small bursts of data such as email and web browsing, as well as large volumes of data. Satellite broadband is an option for areas without phone lines, which still exist on Phuket. Finally, wireless is available at hundreds of Wi-Fi cafes around Phuket. A speed test by live-access.com found that speeds across Phuket varied greatly, from 7.92 Mbitps download in Patong on an

ADSL 10Mbps True system to 1.07 Mbitps at Koh Kaew through a Maxnet Premier 4Mb provider. The Phuket cyberspace is alive with complaints about the Internet service. For tourists from places like South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, the United Kingdom and many European countries the Internet in Phuket is a continuous round of slow speeds and indifferent service.

Phuketwan arrives

It was against this type of Internet background that Phuketwan was launched in January 2008. Alan Morison describes how he came to Phuket in 2002 from CNN in Hong Kong as chief subeditor on the *Phuket Gazette*, which was in the process of going from fortnightly to weekly. After two years he started a small publishing business, *Big Island Media*, which did editorial work for the in-house magazine at Phuket's largest destination resort, Laguna Phuket. In early 2005 Morison was approached by three expatriates to become the founding editor of a second local newspaper, the fortnightly *Phuket Post*. Both the *Phuket Post* and the *Phuket Gazette* run competing websites, particularly the *Phuket Gazette*, which has the newspaper's resources plus a substantial shareholding by the Bangkok based *The Nation* from which to draw.

Morison's time at the *Phuket Post* was relatively short, despite *Big Island Media* providing news for the *Phuket Post* website for a period. Finally, as Morison describes it: "Recognising the importance of the Internet and fast news delivered by *Big Island Media* we opted to go it alone and launched Phuketwan on January 1, 2008. He describes the website's modus operandi as targeting "anyone with an interest in going beyond the make believe world of travel brochures and property puffery to find out what's really happening on the island, in the surrounding region and in Thailand". It is a noble and pure journalistic approach reflecting the traditional antipathy toward those who have gone "to the dark side," as traditional journalists describe those in public relations. But Alan Morison has a point. Phuket is not blessed with many experienced public relations practitioners, most either working for hotels or charities with a tendency toward hyperbole on behalf of their clients or organisations.

Phuketwan stands alone among Phuket websites as the only website without news-

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

Media Programme Asia

www.kas.de/mediaasia

Asia's Media Innovators

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October 2010 –

Chapter Eight

paper back up producing a daily diet of hard news and opinion. And it is done with three staff, two reporters including Alan Morison, and a sales and marketing person. How do they do it?

Firstly, a typical bunch of "Most Popular" Phuketwan headlines would read like these from 13 September 2010:

"Phuket Crackdown on Bars in Patong"

"Phuket Balcony Plunge Tourist is Named"

"Shock Phuket Figures show 'Non-Legal' Tourism" The most commented headlines on the same day read:

"Phuket Open Until 5am? Debate Lights Up Inequality"

"Burmese Accuse Thai Officials of People Trafficking"

Then there are more exciting *News of the World* type headlines that a resort island seems to attract because of the hugely diverse types of people who visit the island. On 18 August 2010: "Phuket Kickbox Killing," "British Tourist Found Dead in Phuket Room" and this memorable one: "Phuket Ladyboy Kills 'Punchy' Italian Tourist." The stories behind these headlines are collected and processed by Morison and Ms Chutima (nicknamed "Oi"), whom Morison says has the Thai "reporting nouse" that makes her universally well regarded and responsible for the "really hard work of interviewing Thai subjects about sometimes awkward topics".

Morison admits that Phuketwan has to prove itself as a business – it has not yet made a profit – but he regards it as a pioneer for the quality and consistency of its journalism. To underline this Phuketwan can point to a very specific scoop that, perhaps more than anything else, established its credentials as a seriously professional news website. The scoop was the "inhumane pushbacks," as described by Morison, of the Thai military in abandoning Rohingya boatpeople to a potential watery grave in January 2009.

The Rohingya "scoop"

The story of Phuketwan's world scoop about

the disgraceful treatment of boatloads of the displaced Rohingya people being turned back to their native Burma by the Thai military epitomizes the approach of Alan Morison and Ms Chutima towards what they perceive as the wrongs in Thai society. It's a long story, but in summary it goes like this: Ms Chutima discovered through her Thai contacts that the Rohingya refugees escaping Burma in boats who would normally be housed at Ranong on Thailand's southern coast were no longer going there. Previously Phuketwan had noticed large numbers of Rohingya were turning up along the Andaman coast, and asked to be able to accompany the Navy to see the boat people. The Navy refused, but gave them photographs of refugees being apprehended and laid out on the beach "like sardines".

Phuketwan published the story and photographs but nothing happened. They were not on Google at the time but knew it was a dynamic story. Said Morison: "I have never been so frustrated in all my life." Undaunted, they went to Ranong to pursue the story and, by a stroke of luck seeing a public notice in a small local newspaper, discovered that a policy change had occurred which meant the Rohingya were to be housed on a small island called Red San (Sai Dang in Thai) off the Thailand coast. Despite attempts to persuade locals to take them there, they did not make it. But by chance a tourist had photographed the transfer of refugees accompanied by army personnel on to Red San. These photographs were also published, but no impact – "only Khun Oi and myself read it," said Morison with an ironic grin.

So to get traction on the story Morison contacted former colleagues on the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong. The newspaper quickly realised the importance of the story and used their correspondents in Indonesia and India to follow up. "The tourist pictures were incredible. People in bikinis in the foreground and refugees lined up like sardines in the background," said Morison. "The cat was out of the bag."

The front-page lead in the *South China Morning Post* elevated the story and gave it global impact. Eventually the Thai media caught up with the story and asked questions of the government, which received scathing criticism for its handling of the

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Media Programme Asia
www.kas.de/mediaasia

Asia's Media Innovators
by Alastair Carthew

October 2010 –
Chapter Eight

policy, which was, effectively, to tow the boatloads of refugees out to sea and set them adrift. Two boats were found in Indonesia and the Indian-administered Andaman Islands, 400 nautical miles north of Phuket. Nobody knows how many people died, but the *South China Morning Post* put the figure in the hundreds.

Eventually Dan Rivers, a CNN correspondent in Bangkok, picked up on the story which went viral globally with the exposure. Rivers and others on the Internet have given Phuketwan due credit for breaking the second biggest news story in Thailand in 2009 behind the Red Shirts uprising. From there other organisations such as the BBC and the South-east Asia office of *Al Jazeera* picked upon the story. As a writer on thaicrisis.wordpress.com said of the coverage: "Let's praise the western media, independent media (Phuketwan) but also from Indonesia, the *South China Morning Post* and even *Al Jazeera*."

Exposing such a scandal involving the Thai military – and also the prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva who came under intense pressure to investigate – carries some risk to life and limb in Thailand so Phuketwan's role was particularly noteworthy. Another major event covered by Phuketwan was the Red Shirt uprising in Bangkok in April-May, 2010. The website used a former reporter living in Bangkok to file stories for it and also extensively used live local television coverage, which was in Thai language, to update events as they happened.

Alan Morison and Chutima Sidasathian
At 62, Alan Morison seems to be thoroughly enjoying the freedom of rising at 5am seven days a week to scan news websites to put on his very own website. It's tough, and it doesn't make him any money to speak of, but he and his real-life and professional partner, lawyer, former waitress, teacher and now one of the best Thai journalists around, Chutima "Oi" Sidasathian, relish the challenge of breaking hard news quickly, accurately and without fear or favour. She calls him "the boss". He, in turn, is



Burmese Muslim men arrested and taken to Surin Island, Dec. 2008
Photo by Thai Royal Navy

obviously in awe of her ability to sniff out a story, to maintain vital contacts with a diverse range of people on Phuket – no easy task when the website pulls no punches – and to do the journalistic leg work required to stay ahead of the competition, in this case mainly the *Phuket Gazette* website.

Morison describes himself as a "old fashioned" journalist: "the word is what matters." But he does himself a disservice. He was in fact, a bit of a "new age man" back in 1993 when he first discovered the power and the energy that a new fangled invention on the scene – the Internet – could do for news gathering as a journalist on *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne in his native Australia. He started as a cadet in 1966 on the now defunct *Melbourne Herald* and over the years worked at the *Daily Express* in London, helped to start the *Sunday Herald* back in Melbourne, worked in Hong Kong for *CNN* and finally landed in Phuket in 2002 where he became managing editor of the *Phuket Post*, which he remains a shareholder in today.

Stints in one or two other organisations including the *Phuket Gazette* followed before starting Phuketwan in April 2008. Ms Chutima never formally trained as a journalist, but armed with a law degree has proved herself, not only to Morison, but to many other people on Phuket who know her, as a rarity amongst Thai journalists for her tenacious pursuit of facts. As a rule Thai journalism is timid and, with a few exceptions amongst Bangkok newspapers such as *The Nation* and *Matichon*, rarely take on authority. The *Phuket Gazette*, the main competi-

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Media Programme Asia
www.kas.de/mediaasia

Asia's Media Innovators
by Alastair Carthew

October 2010 –
Chapter Eight

tor, is more aggressive these days and does break some good stories, something Alan Morison takes some credit for (although not everyone on Phuket would agree with this assessment). Despite having just two reporters, with a third now being tested, Phuketwan has won a Hong Kong human rights award for investigative journalism and the Hong Kong "Scoop of the Year" award – both for the Rohingya story.

A typical day

A typical Phuketwan day starts with Morison surfing the overnight news stories of relevance to Phuket, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore and boiling these down to around 20 items that can be posted on the site. Ms Chutima kicks in a little later with calls to contacts and surfs the Thai language websites. Good, credible stories vary from day to day, from 2-3 to none. Stories are also sourced by people contacting Phuketwan, usually through Ms Chutima directly. Morison says Phuketwan did not "set out to compete with the *Phuket Gazette*. "We drifted into competition because we realised we had a capacity to be pretty fast. Because Phuket is such an active place we found ourselves covering the hard news as well."

Morison and Ms Chutima are realistic about their ability to keep the current business model going, given it is so utterly reliant on both of them working as a team. They hope a "workable model" will emerge in time. Phuketwan claims to have around 3000 page views a day, rounded, (a figure disputed by others as far too high, but quite possible with regular visitors from outside the island) with a target of at least 5000. Morison said the 3000 visits per day is derived by statistics showing in August 2010 they had 65,000 "unique visitors" who made 109,000 visits and looked at 515,000 pages, an average of 3000 visits.

Morison lays claim to improving the standard of English language journalism amongst Thai journalists on Phuket and with giving the *Phuket Gazette*, which is in its 18th year, some stiffer competition for hard news online. Phuketwan does not have newspaper or radio resources behind it. Their bread and butter is "life and death stories that have the greatest impact: murders, drownings, plane crashes, dive boat

sinkings. We cover the good, the sad and the bad."

Living on the edge

You would think that with its crusading spirit in a country like Thailand where violence, threats, and even death are not uncommon against journalists, that Phuketwan would have been sued and threatened with closure. So far it has not happened. Morison and Ms Chutima are proud of their editorial policy of "playing the ball, not the man." In other words by "showing respect for people from all walks of life" Phuketwan has steered a steady path through any controversy. Says Morison: "They can see where we are coming from. So far we have not had a run in with anyone, including the Thai army." Perhaps emboldened by the Thai army's lack of action against them on the Rohingya case, Phuketwan has ploughed ahead. The policy is not to attack individuals, but an organisation or its policies. They do pull back on some stories.

Morison also attributes the personal relationship he and Ms Chutima have for Phuketwan's success: "We are not activists in any sense but we do have an ability to identify what is right and what is wrong." It also helped, Morison said, living on Phuket where the diversity of life presents daily opportunities to write interesting stories. "I wake every day wondering what to do today. Phuket is a paradise for journalists. Every day there is something quite remarkable." Morison tells the extraordinary story of Phuketwan reporting on the mass circumcision of 30 Thai boys in full public view and receiving outraged feedback from around the world for covering something that is not at all unusual on Phuket.

In some ways Phuketwan does get attacked. Morison's decision to take his prerogative as the editor to hit back at criticism or unfair and unjustified comments on the Phuketwan site in response to stories is a rarity in today's journalism. But hit back he does, taking a few hits himself in the process. It does not matter. The issue is that free debate is to be encouraged and this is one way of doing it. "Telling the whole story doesn't please everyone so we get some interesting feedback. We've also had advice from time to time from people in uniform. This is usually friendly and well meaning. Overwhelmingly, the feedback about the site has been positive."

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Media Programme Asia
www.kas.de/mediaasia

Asia's Media Innovators
by Alastair Carthew

October 2010 –
Chapter Eight

Partnerships and competition

Partnerships with other media organisations are essential for Phuketwan to enable it to gather news from credible sources. As Morison says regarding their own reporting: "We correct our own inaccuracies." Phuketwan is used as a source of Phuket news by major international organisations such as the BBC, CNN, Sky News, Al Jazeera and Fox News in the United States. The *South China Morning Post*, Australian newspapers, and CNNgo.com also commission articles.

But what makes Phuketwan and Alan Morison different from the mainstream is his willingness to get involved on the Internet in many different ways. For example a chat on thaivisa.com/forum where he took issue with a comment by "happyaussie" when he/she said: "In my opinion Thailand is in danger of losing its sparkle if it's not careful. Corruption and violence are running rife; developers are building wildly and without controls and I notice the beautiful nature of Thai people becoming tainted." Morison shot back noticing "the beautiful nature of Thai people being tainted". He responded: "That's a fair sized generalisation. What do you mean?" This prompted a lengthy apology and explanation from "happyaussie."

Such engagement by an editor to individuals is generally rare in Thailand cyberspace. Phuketwan was the first news site on Phuket to introduce comments on the end of articles. The point of difference is that the editor fires back, often in a feisty manner. As Morison comments: "The expat racism and paranoia that flourishes on some chat sites is actively discouraged and put down by Phuketwan." But it is not always "beer and skittles" for Morison as his brush with TripAdvisor, the large on-line travel portal, showed.

Taking on TripAdvisor



For travellers who use the Internet, TripAdvisor is the giant of travel feedback portals. It is important to a major tourist destination like Phuket. In August 2010 Morison decided to take the site on. The issue arose when a "highly suspicious topic" on tripadvisor.com was removed and the thread closed

down. Morison said the posting involved "shonky revenge-seekers". Phuketwan then reproduced the story and printed the original post to TripAdvisor in full on its website. In doing so Phuketwan concluded: "TripAdvisor has become a favourite research source for many tourists, and deservedly so. Honest feedback is of great value to other travelers. But the site's operators failed a basic test of fairness by neglecting to question the accuracy of this post." This comment unleashed a torrent of criticism of Phuketwan and support for TripAdvisor.

A selection of comments tells the story, both for and against the Phuketwan article: "PW did over cook the story a tad, probably a slow news day."

"The author should trust that the majority of TA users are intelligent enough to see through these paper thin yarns and dodgy hotel reviews."

"Trip advisor and destination experts do a fantastic job and intelligent traveler reviews and tips are so helpful."

"I thought it was good that Phuketwan investigated it. I don't understand what the problem is."

"I think Phuketwan did everyone a favour by finding out a lot more information about what seems to have gone on."

And so it went on in this vein, for and against Phuketwan's stance. Says Morison: "The sad thing is TripAdvisor takes no responsibility for the accuracy of its content. It's like a sloshing bucket into which people tip (clean) spring-stream water and sewage. Journalists, though, have to check the facts."

Local stories

Phuket's diverse range of visitors and expats make it a cosmopolitan melting pot, which in turn is a gold mine for local news. Consider that the island attracts models, movie stars, British royalty and extremely rich people from around the globe, on one hand, and on the other numerous German, Scandinavian and Russian charter flights. Thousands of Australians visit during the "low" season and tend to stay at three or four star hotels and frequent the Patong nightlife. The island is seeing increasing numbers of Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern tourists and interesting news is bound to happen. Phuket even boasts five billionaires who either have investments on the island or are frequent visitors.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

Media Programme Asia

www.kas.de/mediaasia

Asia's Media Innovators

by Alastair Carthew

October 2010 –

Chapter Eight

The island generates interesting news stories. Take the case of the Australian mother of four, Annice Smoel, who faced being thrown in jail after a drunken night out when she left a popular bar with a large bar mat, then abused the police when they arrived. It was a cause célèbre, with even the Australian prime minister getting involved. Local residents thought Mrs Smoel was very foolish and deserved a jail sentence. Or the case of a British Muay Thai (Thai boxing) exponent who fled the country after allegedly killing a U.S. marine in a fight. He was eventually found in England. Phuketwan covers these stories, but its approach can often be differentiated by Phuketwan's attention to what Morison calls "broader themes and trends that are sometimes overlooked". They try to avoid promotions but still review restaurants (paid for themselves) at every opportunity, although they are starting a resort review where they will accept free accommodation. Morison points out they declare their interest openly.

Thailand also means being aware of cultural and language difference. "We try to explain issues to both Thai readers and to the broad expat community. We try to encourage the Thai media to take a greater interest in the point of view of tourists and expat residents, with mixed success." What about cultivating sources? "We try to cultivate sources among the administrators and decision makers and local police as well as officials at hospitals and the airport. Mostly they understand that Phuketwan is going to tell it straight and respect us for that."

New media/trends

Alan Morison's description of himself as an "old fashioned journalist" is both apt and a little misleading. An early adopter of the Internet, he now uses its power through words and photographs to tell the story. Phuketwan can carry up to 60 photographs with one story, either downloaded or taken by Morison or Ms Chutima. They describe themselves as photojournalists. This means building a large bank of useable photographs. New media like RSS, Twitter and Facebook are all in the mix, although the lack of staff means labour intensive distribution channels like Facebook are not utilised as much as they would like. Morison does see Twitter as a definite major player in future, if it is not already, in newsgathering.

Because speed is an underlying theme of the Phuketwan business model, new media are recognised as being a necessary part of the business, although they are not exploited as much as they would like. Of the Phuket website community, Morison says it is "reasonably wired" but that Thais are slow online adapters, although their uptake of cell phone technology has somewhat overtaken the personal computer and laptop. "We will remain in a wait and see situation for as long as we can sustain our own interest," says Morison of where Phuketwan may go in future. So what does Phuketwan – still essentially a website with some small value added new social media that is somewhat neglected through lack of time and resources – need to do to keep its edge? "Multiply. If there were four of us we would double our output and probably double our audiences." Phuketwan has published a code of ethics based on Australian standards. Thailand has a comprehensive journalistic code of ethics but, unfortunately, it is often ignored. Says Morison: "Ignoring our commercial self interest remains the toughest call." He admits he has "more failures than successes" in training Thai journalists.

Comments

A website like Phuketwan is not without controversy. A number of people spoken to for this article refused to comment on Phuketwan, reflecting the smallness of the business community but also criticism of Phuketwan and Alan Morison. Speaking strictly for without attribution, a number of Phuket residents criticised what they saw as unnecessary ruffling of feathers in the community. Some predicted Phuketwan would fold because the two staff members would run out of both energy and money. They, themselves, do not deny this.

Here are some on-the-record comments from local people familiar with the website:

Bill Barnett, c9 Hotelworks, property consultant and commentator: "Phuketwan is an interesting case study as it shows a shift to a pure Internet news site, no hard copy, online media, updates on the fly. It demonstrates the wider shift happening globally to print media, and the public's need for instant gratification. . Some view it as tabloid, others as hard news. In the end it's the new media ... two journalists running a

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Media Programme Asia
www.kas.de/mediaasia

Asia's Media Innovators
by Alastair Carthew

October 2010 –
Chapter Eight

high profile news site. The playing field has changed and this is just the beginning.”

Simon Hand, media consultant, *Phuket Post*: “From what I see, Morison uses the Wan as a tool to keep on top of the local scene, so that he can dig out juicy stories for international media outlets. It’s a very clever formula: the headlines that read “Local website breaks international stories” could as easily read “International stories make local website”. And he’s making a good show of it, from what I can tell. Morison’s a consummate journalist, and he’s called some great stories – the one about the treatment of the Rohingyas is, literally, award-winning. It’s definitely the kind of journalism Phuket needs. Unfortunately crusading journalism a little hard to pull off in Phuket – you’re a court case away from financial ruin, even if you win; advertising can mysteriously dry up if you piss off the wrong people and there can also be a few health issues involved. He needed to bring in some international help for the Rohingyas story and I heard that a great many threats were made against him and his reporter, Chutima Sidasathian, when they first started digging around. Wan isn’t just Alan Morison. A lot of its success comes from Khun Chutima’s work as its chief reporter. She is one of the best Thai reporters I have ever met, and should definitely be working for a serious national or regional daily. Once she joined the Wan, it really came to life.”

Alasdair Forbes, former editor, *Phuket Gazette*: “Morison’s a dedicated journalist with a nose for good stories. He regularly beats the conventional (i.e. print) press, not just in terms of immediacy but also in terms of getting to a story first and getting it in greater depth. He scored a world scoop with his story on the plight of the Rohingya “boat people” fleeing from Myanmar and ending up in the none-too-tender clutches of the Thai military. As a result of his stories, the Thai government had to sit up and take notice – and do something positive for these refugees. Alan’s very serious about what he does, about getting stories right. He also cares passionately about the rights of the little guy, the underdog.”

Ian Young, former international editor, *South China Morning Post*: “I have worked extensively with Alan via my former position as international editor of the *South*

China Morning Post. What he and Khun Chutima have done with PhuketWan is pretty remarkable, and shows how effective a locally-focused web-based news product can be. . Instead of website bells and whistles, they are focused on old-fashioned journalism, delivered in a new way. They really do punch above their weight; I don’t think Alan would be offended if I described PhuketWan as a shoestring operation. At the same time Alan is a realist when it comes to the limitations of PhuketWan and its presence. That was why he decided to share the Rohingya scoop with the *South China Morning Post*, an established media brand in a major world city, with a big regional reputation. The work they did for us, and the material they provided, was put on the world stage as a result.

Alan Morison and his partner Ms Chutima Sidasathian like to think they have influenced, in their own small, way the shape of Phuket as a society. Their overriding mission is to “inform and explain”. Morison repeatedly praises Ms Chutima’s contribution to Phuketwan, and this is endorsed by others on the island who have dealt with her. The pair use speed as their adrenalin fix but also as a key driver of the business model. They seek to inform as quickly after something happens. The site’s long-term future depends very much on the two individuals maintaining the grueling work schedule to try to build a strong financial base to hire more people. It is a brave and admirable experiment in an environment not conducive to critical journalism. Alan Morison -- crusader, “new age” early Internet adopter, old fashioned journalist, controversial, a bit grumpy at times (according to former colleagues and those who have dealt with him) but fearless – has the last say: “My view is that the kind of questions we continue to ask are in the best interests of Thailand. Others in Thailand seem to be not so sure. Many intelligent people, especially those in the expat community, also prefer a Phuket where questions are not asked. That’s sad for them, and even sadder for Phuket.” □