Characteristics of new media in the Thai context

The meaning of the term 'new media' is still elusive. However, it can be said that new media is associated with information technology or the internet, and is an interactive form of communication.

This book tries to explore the role of new media in social movements in Thailand, and how it will develop, through interviews with academics, journalists and activists. It is found that, among other things, new media has taken an increasingly important role in communication, challenging the conventional means of news consumption. Along with growing access to information technology, the number of new media users has increased.

According to some interviewees, government policy should promote access to IT. Currently, Thais still have limited access due to the lack of infrastructure such as the telephone and internet, and access to computers is still too costly for many Thais.

New media in Thailand has not been well received by conventional media organizations which have raised doubts in terms of media ethics and the accuracy of information presented through new media. Particularly during the political crisis in Thailand since the coup in 2006, new media has been accused of being part of the instigation of conflicts by presenting unverified news and information. However, several interviewees also raised doubts about the ethics and accuracy of conventional media as well.

7 characteristics of new media in Thailand:
1. interactive
2. not restricted in time and space
3. anonymous
4. costly access
5. cannot be blocked
6. unstoppable
7. not accepted as media

1. interactive

Interactivity is among the first things mentioned by most interviewees. Users' ability, through the internet, to interact with information they receive and to present information themselves is a distinguishing characteristic of communication in the 2.0 era.

However, this interactivity can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. Nidhi Eawsriwong says that new media does not contribute to democratic development as much as direct political struggle, but it adds up to democracy development by opening up space for marginalized or lower-class people who are excluded by mainstream media to access and present information.

Arthit Suriyawongkul says that news from 'online citizen media' has limitations as it lacks a narrative, and it can be misused by others, raising as examples numerous video clips of red shirts which were edited and exploited by the Center for the Resolution of Emergency Situation. Although marginalized people with no access to mainstream media have gained some space on the internet, they restrict themselves or are restricted to their own marginal issues, as has happened with mainstream media.

Interactivity has both advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages:
- Empowering ordinary people
- Opening space for marginalized people
- Reducing the dominance of mainstream media and the state in controlling the flow of information
- Reducing the monopoly on intellectual property
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Disadvantages:
- Restricting the scope of issues of marginalized people to their own identities (but this is also a problem with mainstream media)

- Free-form online discussions might result in violations of the rights or defamation of individuals

- Strict laws result in self-censorship of internet service providers

- Internet service providers have to take responsibility for comments which they do not post

- Violations of intellectual property rights

- Lacking narratives; open for misuse and distortion of information. The CRES took video clips posted on Facebook by red shirts and explained that the red shirts were armed and violent

2. not restricted in time and space.

The strength of new media lies in the fact that communication is not restricted in time and space. Pavin Chachavalpongpun says that new media has significantly changed Thailand's 'political landscape' because political struggles have become virtual, not bound by physical limitations as in the past and they are hard for the state to suppress or control. Struggles through new media are borderless and not subject to any sovereignty, nationality or race.

As a result, political mobilization through the internet reaches far and wide, at low cost.
However, Sarinee Achavanuntakul says that mobilization through the internet might not be truly effective without mobilization in the real world. Several online petitions have proven ineffective in pressing for changes.

Others including Pitch Pongsawat, Nidhi Eawsriwong and Arthit Suriyawongkul argue that mobilization in the online world, in order to be effective, needs to be connected to the real world, and new media is supposed to support movements in the real world. The persecution of those who are alleged to have committed lèse majesté in the online world is strong and draws many supporters, because it does happen in the real world.

3. anonymous
Given the strict enforcement of the Computer Crimes Act and Section 112 of the Criminal Code, Tewson Seeoun says that an advantage of new media is that those who express their opinions can conceal their identities.

4. costly access

Ubonrat Siriyuvasak says that, according to research, access to the internet costs over 30,000 baht for computer equipment and internet service. So the internet seems to serve the middle class only. Nidhi Eawsriwong argues that access is probably not exclusive to the middle class, as content from the internet can reach a wider audience in other formats such as community radio and printed hard copies.

5. cannot be blocked

All interviewees agree that the state or service providers can block access to internet content only temporarily, but internet users can always find other ways to circumvent the blocking to disseminate such content.

6. unstoppable

Nidhi says that communication through the internet, whether it be websites, Facebook, etc., is new and the powers that be in Thailand cannot catch up with or stop the changes.

Nithinand Yorsaengrat, an executive of the Nation Group, says, 'Like it or not, mainstream media has to move toward new media.' She does not foresee any further growth for conventional media. Studies on media around the globe all point to the fact that the number of online media consumers has been increasing, while sales of newspapers have been in rapid decline. Media corporations around the globe who have depended on newspapers cannot go on and have to turn to new media.

New media is currently a subject of debate among media professionals. Mainstream media is criticized for sticking to conventional media values, which face immense challenges.

7 not accepted as media

During the political crisis in Thailand, media organizations never showed any reaction to the blocking of websites and the prosecution of website personnel. They have criticized new media and cast doubts about journalists' use of twitter to report news as lacking in credibility.

Thai media organizations hold an attitude toward new media which can be described as not favourable and sceptical of its media ethics and the accuracy of its news reportage. As a result, new media is not supposed to be protected by them.

Ubonrat Siriyuvasak addresses the issue of ethics of new media. She distinguishes new media from conventional media. New media is the 'right to communication', which has nothing to do with the ethics of conventional media. New media will not completely replace conventional media, but it fills in what is missing in conventional media, including, for example, feedback from readers and coverage of issues ignored by mainstream media.

Other interviewees say that mainstream media also has the same problems in terms of ethics and accuracy.

Nidhi raises this question with mainstream media. '[Mainstream media] is also irresponsible. TV gives you lies everyday, and you are aware of that. Newspapers do the same. Take just one example of a non-political issue. How many deaths in a car crash? Five papers give different numbers.'

Nithinand says that mainstream media cannot keep up with news consumers, and is not aware that they do not want to be fed one-sided information which they don't believe. They want information from all sides. But mainstream media has chosen sides, and does not allow space for opposing sides. Many mainstream media workers do not understand the nature of new media and do not understand human nature. After all, even they need truth and freedom.

Prap Boonpan questions how well mainstream media personnel understand a changing society. He believes people are not easily convinced about anything any longer. Now there is no such thing as ultimate truth which we can hold on to. So questions about the ethics and accuracy of new media are probably irrelevant today.

Nevertheless, most interviewees are aware of the flow of information between new media and conventional media, where the latter tends to incorporate more and more information from new media in its own news.

Mana Treelayapewat says that collaboration between citizen and professional journalists has increased. WikiLeaks, for example, is a collaboration of hackers, sources inside the bureaucracies of various countries and professional journalists, resulting in investigative journalism which draws world-wide attention.

Looking ahead

The number of internet users globally and in Thailand has been increasing, sometimes spectacularly.

Increasing role of Facebook and Twitter

Sombat Boon-ngam-anong expects that online social networks, including particularly Facebook and Twitter, will grow and overshadow websites and blogs. The number of Facebook and Twitter users rapidly increase in the tension of political crises. However, Arthit Suriyawongkul says that the increase in numbers might not be attributable to politics alone. There has yet to be any study to prove whether the political situation really affects the number of users of online social networks.

Matichon Online has found that its readership did increase during April and May 2010. The number of people reading political news increased from about 60,000 IPs a day to a hundred thousand IPs.

Communication changes

Communication in Thai society is changing. Several interviewees say that Thai online communities are in a trial-and-error phase. Debates and discussions must be encouraged, although debates and discussions in several online forums appear sub-standard, generating hate, violating individual rights and spreading rumours.

Nidhi argues that the poor standard of debate and discussion is also a feature of conventional media and Thai society itself. This is a result of failures in an education system that does not encourage debate and discussion.

Diminished role for conventional media, weakened monopoly of information

There is no indication that new media will completely replace conventional media. Several interviewees say that conventional media has to adapt to new media, and each can complement the other.

Conventional media has to adjust its attitude towards a 'monopoly of truth', which is irrelevant in new media where readers can make decisions by themselves.

Conventional media tends to turn more and more to new media.

Increased censorship

As of the time of the interviews, figures on government censorship of the internet were not available. Sawatree Suksri, a law lecturer who studies censorship on the internet in Thailand, says that the government is increasingly using the Computer Crimes Act and the lèse majesté law in Section 112 of the Criminal Code.

Most problematic are Sections 14 and 15 of the Computer Crimes Act, which stipulate severe penalties for 'intermediaries' or service providers, and result in self-censorship.

Online archive

Although currently many websites have been blocked for various reasons including national security, lèse majesté or pornography, Pitch says that for academic purposes, the government should allow unrestricted access to websites. The information on the internet should be regarded as an online academic archive, like the National Archive which keeps banned books and rare documents, and allows researchers to access them.

Survival of new media and free-of-charge access

New media has been associated with free-of-charge access, which affects its survival in the long term and has an impact on conventional media whose sales have dropped significantly and which has to find ways to adjust in order to survive.

Prap says that even though Matichon Online draws about 60,000 readers each day, it still cannot survive and has to depend on advertisements.

In conclusion, new media has played an important role in communication in Thai society, enabling people who used to be passive readers to interact and present their own information. This capacity will only increase along with the development of information technology and the intensity of the political situation. And the government cannot resist this trend.

Although conventional media is still sceptical about the ethics and accuracy of new media, collaboration between the two is likely to increase. Now new media is a source of information for conventional media, while critical comments made in new media are mostly based on issues presented by conventional media.

At this early stage, there are problems about debates and discussions, resulting in threats to the rights and freedoms of individuals and incitement to hatred. Internet users and service providers also face strict law enforcement and censorship by the government.

But new media is a global trend which cannot be stopped. The government and conventional media have to adjust to a new situation of diverse flows of information; that means they must refrain from 'monopolizing the truth'.

Abstract

Ubonrat Siriyuvasak
Independent academic, Chair of the Campaign for Media Reform
New media is still restricted in terms of access. Only the middle class can afford to access online media as it is costly, while the poor or those in remote areas without the internet cannot access online new media.

Online media is therefore not a space for the voice of the voiceless, but rather a place for those who already have their place in other forms of media, as they are the same target groups as for mainstream mass media.

There are two important points about online new media:
1 State control over the public space for dissemination of information and expression o political opinions in the media. Those who feel disenfranchised have struggled to secure and expand their space in the media to connect to others or to expand their support base.

2 The right to communication, meaning the right to receive information and express opinions, though recognized in principle by the state through provisions in the constitution and various laws (the Information Act, for example), is, in practice, restricted in many ways. Society and the state must ensure this fundamental right for all people equally and in accordance with the needs of each individual and groups of individuals. Currently, most people do not receive sufficient information necessary for their lives or self-development, reducing their advantages, career opportunities, political participation, etc.

Prap Boonpan
Assistant Manager of Matichon Co Ltd, Editor of Matichon Online
New media is a territory where things have yet to be clearly defined. Its definition not only concerns new technologies, but also opening space to let diverse information and differing views collide with one another.

The opening of this space is based on the idea that no one has a monopoly on truth, and people can think for themselves about the information they receive.

However, state control makes it uncertain as to whether the online space can be really open, or how long it can remain open. Online media has run into restrictions imposed by the state, as seen in many cases, including the prosecution of the director of Prachatai, for example.

After going online, Matichon found that its readers do not focus on entertainment news as was previously assumed to be the case. Readership increased greatly during the April-May incidents, and readers have increasingly interested in political news.

Sombat Boon-ngam-anong
Leader of Red Sunday group
I use Facebook as my main channel of communication, as it is a space that can be both public and private. It can serve the purposes of a group or organization and still serve the interests of an individual. A webboard is not capable of doing this.

Facebook will surely grow and overshadow webboards and blogs, because it encourages people to have conversations and mingle with one another. Normally people who read and write on webboards do not go to webboards which are not in line with their interests. But Facebook allows users to cross over, and all kinds of issues to go far and wide.

I believe that government blocking or law enforcement [to prevent access to Facebook] will not have any effect. And a culture of debate and discussion is what needs to be developed.

Arthit Suriyawongkul
Programmer, anthropology graduate student at Thammasat University
Social networking websites have proven useful for political movements in Thailand so far. As an example, Sombat Boon-ngam-anong uses Facebook as a means of communication and mobilization to lead a red-shirt group.

Communication through online social networks allows users to present light-hearted angles on serious issues, such as clips of red shirts' aerobic dance campaigns.

The social networking websites allow users to show their human touch. They share not only political opinions on serious issues, but also matters of everyday life and emotion.
The social networking websites also allow two-way communication. Ordinary people can post their responses to news presented on television or newspapers on Facebook or Twitter.

Sawatree Suksri
Blogger, lecturer at the Faculty of Law, Thammasat University
Using blogs to present serious ideas is not very popular in Thailand, while Facebook is, because it takes less time and messages are short. In my opinion, blogs are a better choice for serious matters.

I notice that serious issues written in man's language seem to gain more acceptance and credibility than in woman's language.

It is better to have a computer crime law than nothing at all, as this is a specific issue. Freedom has its own limits, about which society must reach an agreement. The most problematic of all is Section 15 because it also penalizes internet service providers for any offences made.

Apart from the legal means to block or restrict access to internet content, organized online groups have proven far more effective in restricting online freedom.

There is no bright future for freedom of online media in Thailand.

Tewson Seeoun
Netizen
I do not believe that the internet and opinions of individuals can affect the security of the state. I once thought the cyber space was a free world, but after joining the Netizen I found that this was not the case.

I have studied prosecutions under the Computer Crimes Act, and found that those who were prosecuted lacked an understanding of their rights, and the police did not treat evidence in each case by the same standard.

Pitch Pongsawat
Lecturer at the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University
To have many media outlets does not mean that there is freedom of expression. Rather, that might lead to the freedom to express hatred. This also applies in the case of new media. The number of websites is not

the point. Some websites may have nothing to do with learning at all, but just cause rifts. So there must be rules derived from our common understanding, which takes time and tolerance.

When we talk about cyber space, we usually focus on the issues of freedom and law, but we hardly address behaviour in the online world. After the coup, the internet has become a like jungle, similar to the situation in 1976 around the 6 Oct events.

Political participation or mobilization through the internet is just part of the whole thing which has to include components in the offline world.

Now there is an interesting trend of women taking a role in criticizing religion and politics, challenging social foundations. It is the most obvious feminist movement ever seen in Thailand, in which middle class women come out to raise questions in a male-dominated society.

Sarinee Achavanuntakul
Blogger, board member of Netizen
Internet users still do not recognize the right of individuals. They are not aware that it is wrong to disclose personal information and people do get affected by the disclosure. And many still hold a misunderstanding that on the internet they retain their privacy. It's not true. Although we try to conceal our identities, we surely leave traces in cyber space. This is quite a serious issue which many people are not aware of.

One advantage of internet media is that it allows diverse information, particularly when mainstream media is subject to self-censorship. However, the fact that it facilitates the grouping of people with the same interests or opinions makes them impervious to the views of others.

When bloggers in other countries get arrested, blocked or censored, media organizations are enraged as it is considered an issue of freedom of expression. But the journalists' organizations in Thailand do not consider it as their problem, although one day they might face the same fate.

To have groups or followers on Twitter does not equal social change. It needs skills in management and communication to achieve goals.

The state's filtering of internet content violates the rights of the people, and the state has been ambiguous on what damage will be done without such filtering. The blocking of websites only slows down access, but users will always find ways to circumvent the blocking.

Nidhi Eawsriwong
Independent academic
I see the anarchy which has been a perceived flaw of the cyber space reflects the anarchy of modern society.

I am not much concerned about issues which have been much debated about cyber space, including responsibility, identity and the culture of criticism, as I do not consider cyber space as separate from the real world. The flaws of the internet are no different from those in other places in society, because the Thai culture of criticism is not strong. And we have not yet prepared our people to deal with a changing world and the rapid flow of information through the new media.

Those who apparently are not prepared to cope with changes are the elite. There is no other way to deal with emerging challenges than to learn to adapt. And such learning is not possible without the freedom to learn.

Nithinand Yorsaengrat
Senior editor of the Nation Broadcasting Corporation Plc
Mainstream media cannot catch up with consumers. Consumers do not want one-sided information. The problem is that the mainstream media has already chosen sides and does not allow space for opposing views. Many mainstream media people do not understand the nature of new media and human nature in that after all even they also need truth and freedom.

Societies in the modern world are not vertically structured. Cyber space creates a horizontally structured society. It is no longer the case that only news from country leaders matters, but news from ordinary people matters as well.

It's inevitable that the media will be headed toward new media, because conventional media, particularly print media, cannot grow any further. Surveys on media around the globe all indicate that the number of consumers of online media has increased, while the sale of newspapers has rapidly declined.

Mana Treelayapewat
Lecturer on social media and journalism, Thai Chamber of Commerce University
Communication in the 2.0 era has changed the way truth is defined, and now there is no longer only one set of truths.

Media ethics which mainstream media in Thailand has always claimed for its legitimacy and social status is just its own fabrication.

From now on, everyone can be the media. Citizen journalism will continue and grow. Mainstream media has to turn into new media or online social networks in finding and presenting news, and has to open more space for citizen reporters, a trend which has been going on in the western world.

However, the government and journalism education still cannot keep up with the changes. The government still focuses on imposing control in a traditional way, which cannot cope with the growing new media. There are just a few universities which have started to update their curricula and to catch up with their students. Overall, media personnel cannot keep up with the new media, while curricula are still based on conventional media.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun
Academic at the ASEAN Studies Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore
New media has changed Thailand's political landscape, and communication and political movements are no longer bound by borders, nationalities and sovereignties. People can participate in politics without physical limits. The government wants to impose its control, but it cannot because of the technology.

Online media enhances transparency which is an attribute of democracy. And this transparency applies not only to the government, but all political organizations are subject to scrutiny and criticism from the people.

The government cannot hamper freedom of expression, to which the new media is instrumental, and changes which are happening, because the people have opened their eyes. The government's sweeping and strict use of laws shows that it is struggling hard to deal with challenges to its power.