New Media
and Political Mobilization

This public discussion forum was sponsored by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Southeast Asia Regional Office. The goals of the forum were as follows: (1) promote the rights of access to information and freedom of expression; (2) to encourage citizens to be aware of such rights; and, (3) to discuss international and domestic policies pertaining to such rights.

Due to political conflicts in Thailand over the last few years, new media (e.g. online media, cable TV, satellite TV, community radio) have been widely used as tools in public discussion surrounding political issues. Due to governmental censorship in the recent past – as evidenced by the blocking and closing of websites, shutting down of community radio stations and arrests of webmasters, academics and other citizens – questions have been raised about the provision and protection of freedom of expression and access to information.

The goal of this forum was to stimulate discussion between representatives of government agencies, academics, professional journalists and members of civil society groups. The three main issues discussed were: (1) the borders of free speech and hate speech in expressing political opinions; (2) the use and scope of online media in enabling political campaigns; and, (3) the challenges of online media, cable TV and community radio in political movements in the period leading up to the July 3, 2011 election.

Free Speech Vs. Hate Speech And The Political Expression In Thai Society

In a democratic society, freedom of expression – the right to think, speak and write freely – is protected by law. It is considered to be a fundamental right which applies to every member of society. If citizens are able to freely express their views on economic, political, and social issues, there will be an abundance of information, both in the mainstream and alternative media spheres, from which the public can evaluate what is best for themselves and society.

Thus, the public can participate in a country's social, political, and economic development meaningfully as well as monitor the efficiency of state administration. As a result, the government is accountable to the people, public policies will reflect the demands of the people and the country will develop positively. One area of inquiry regarding freedom of expression is the issue of 'hate speech' or, verbal expression aimed at creating hatred against individuals or groups while insulting other people's dignity. 'Hate speech' also includes verbal expressions of prejudice against race, religion, gender, or sexual preference.

Soraj Hongladarom Ph.D., Faculty of Arts at Chulalongkorn University, stated that if a society censors 'hate speech' then the public must define what constitutes 'hate speech' before legislation against it can be passed into law. If 'hate speech' is censored, Dr. Soraj maintains, it requires a clear definition because censorship of any speech jeopardizes the right of freedom of expression.

In Western countries, such as the United States and countries in Europe, 'hate speech' is defined as a verbal attack targeting someone because of their race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation.

In Thailand, however, most 'hate speech' expressions over which certain groups call for censorship and legal action are actually on the grounds of lese majeste law, which, Dr. Soraj claimed, is not related to 'hate speech' as such. Dr. Soraj emphasized that the distinction between lese majeste law and 'hate speech' needs to be debated thoroughly in Thai society.

Pornsan Liangbunlertchai Ph.D., Faculty of Law - Assumption University (ABAC) added that any legal action on the grounds of 'hate speech' must be proved by intention and whether any damage had been inflicted. According to the democratic ideal, freedom of expression cannot be taken away by the state – but the legal framework in Thailand does not contain such a provision.

In a democratic country, Dr.Pornsan continued, the state shall guarantee the right of freedom of expression for all people and the state cannot interfere or restrict the freedom of expression. However, the law has an exception. Freedom is limited by laws which are divided into two categories: (1) absolute rights, such as the freedom to choose religion, in which the state cannot intervene; and, (2) relative rights, which are limited by the rule of law and are legislated into existence through the democratic process. Both aim at creating security for individuals and the country, but this concept of 'security' must also be clearly defined. For Thailand, the definitions of these terms need to be discussed because 'national security' has been conditionally used to restrict freedom of expression of the public. There cannot be a double standard; these rights must apply to everyone equally.

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In addition, the attending scholars acknowledged that international laws have been established to protect freedom of expression, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), but that the provisions contained in these laws are selectively applied in Thailand.

Pirongrong Ramasoota Rananand Ph.D, Asst. Prof., Faculty of Communication Arts - Chulalongkorn University said that although there are protections for freedom of expression, there is a growing public sentiment that the laws do not adequately restrict 'hate speech' as evidenced by many cases in which social sanctions of online media have infringed upon individuals' right to freedom of expression. For instance, mechanisms of social pressure and sanctions have been violently used against people who write or comment on the Thai monarchy. Presently, there are no organizations or laws to protect these people. Ironically, Dr. Pirongrong claims, people who condemn free expressions as 'hate speech' also use 'hate speech' against those individuals whom they accuse of 'hate speech' in the first place.

views; the debate should be centered on the protection of civil rights and freedom of expression. Also, participants in online media discussions should argue their points with information and logic rather than humiliating other participants.

It seems, Somchai continued, that online media has been used to announce one's point of view or to promote an ideology instead of being used to present meaningful information. Members of the online community must work together to create a constructive debate and must work to educate a stronger culture of critics. Every person is different; Somchai maintained, no matter if one is a Yellowshirt, Redshirt or anything else. Everyone must respect each other and discuss these issues in a productive and civil manner. One topic that has been discussed in this forum is that the mainstream media focuses on the 'hate speech' aspects of the discussion and, as a result, the public focuses too much on the 'hate speech' while neglecting real issues that affect Thai people.

Pinkaew Laungaramsri Ph.D., Asst. Prof., Faculty of Social Sciences - Chiang Mai University added that besides the issue of 'hate -

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Somchai Preechasilapakul, Asso. Prof., Faculty of Law, Chiang Mai University, said that there seems to be a lot of verbal violence in the language appearing in online media which is a reflection of ongoing political and social conflicts in Thai society. Somchai maintained that the appearance of 'hate speech' and fierce conversation in online media exist because people are confused as to exactly what kind of political system exists in Thailand.

Therefore, Somchai continued, the debate about these issues should not be about how to manage the 'politeness' factor of online exchanges over political

speech' the people should be equally concerned about 'loving but manipulative speech' which is also dangerous. Dr. Pinkaew claimed that 'love and unity of the nation' phrases, which are designed to inculcate and preserve a 'high moral culture' in Thai society, are strongly debated, leaving the real problems that face Thai people not adequately discussed. As a result, Pinkaew said, such phrases can actually lead to civil unrest and violence.

Chonrat Chitnaitham, a representative from the Office of The Election Commission of Thailand, commented further on this issue. Chonrat argued

that expression in new media can be done freely and creatively, but the principles of the Constitution must be regarded. The claim under the Constitution of Thailand in 2007, Section 45, which states that 'a person shall have freedom of opinion, speech, writing, printing and advertising' should be protected, but not at the expense of the security of the state. Moreover, Chonrat added, the protection of these rights as well as one's reputation, honor, freedom, family or privacy is necessary to maintain public order and good morals in the people of the Kingdom. Additionally, Chonrat emphasized, besides freedom of expression, people also have a right to access information – including information from government agencies – and new media plays an important role in this respect. Because of new media, Chonrat concluded, information can be shared with the public quickly and efficiently.

Boonyod Sukthinthai, Deputy Spokesman of the Democrat Party, noted that allegations of 'hate speech' must be proved on a case by case basis. Furthermore, Boonyod added, if what is alleged to be 'hate speech' is actually fact, then it should not be labeled 'hate speech'. Boonyod admitted that new technology allows for content to be distorted or manipulated, and that careful examination of the content for validity must be conducted.

During the election campaign in 2011, the political atmosphere between the two major political parties – the Democrat party and the Puea Thai party – was intensely competitive. The 2006 coup had divided Thai society and resulted in the gathering of large groups of Redshirts in the years since the coup. After the brutal crackdown on the streets of Bangkok in 2010, emotions had run high among members on both sides and the tension over the political situation in Thailand was the highest it had ever been.

Participants in the forum discussed whether the election could take place fairly or freely in the wake of the Computer Crime Act of 2007 and the Emergency Decree of 2005, both of which allow the state to intervene in any action in order to maintain the peace, order, and national security. This means that in no uncertain terms, the state can censor citizens' free expression at its discretion. Moreover, it was noted by several panelists that it is unclear whether the declaration of emergency in Thailand was warranted. At the time of the forum, there were many websites and community radio stations had been shut down. The public is therefore directly affected by these laws and the question of fairness in the July 3 election remained.

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Moreover, Boonyod said, if the manipulated content accuses or insults others, there is a defamation charge to deal with such a transgression. The Democrat party spokesman also cautioned that while people have the right to speak freely, people must be careful not to savagely curse others; in particular, comments regarding the main institutions in Thai society, such as the monarchy, should be avoided. Boonyod concluded that government agencies and educational institutions need to educate the public to take this kind of 'hate speech' seriously.

Online Media:
The Use And The Scope In Enabling
Political Point Of Views And Campaigns

Online media can overcome many of the limitations of traditional media (e.g. print newspapers, radio and television), most notably in the area of low-cost circulation, but also in an editorial sense: where traditional media can be state-regulated and filtered by editorial bodies,

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Office of the Election Commission of Thailand

online media is easily created and circulated without editorial consent and, often, anonymously. In the online world, users are only responsible for their actions and opinions to the degree their identity is known.

Chonrat Chitnaitham, Office of the Election Commission of Thailand said his organization applies the usefulness of online media in their work as well. For example, the Office of the Election Commission publicizes information about elections, laws and regulations, political campaigns and contents of the Computer Crime Act. According to Chonrat, the Office of the Election Commission also seeks partnerships with other agencies - such as the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology - to jointly pursue filed complaints of election fraud, as well as any 'national security' threats.

Chonrat expressed that new media has tremendous influence on the election campaigns of political candidates. On the other hand, it is difficult to control new media content due to its borderless nature. For instance, if someone in Thailand wrote a message on Twitter containing false information, the person who tweeted (and whoever re-tweeted the message, as well) could be prosecuted. The problem, Chonrat explained, is that online media content which violates

Thai law - but which is created outside the jurisdiction of the Thai authorities - cannot be investigated according to Thai law. Of course, Chonrat said, where the Thai authorities cannot intervene, it is up to the public to distinguish which groups are telling the truth.

Many participants in the forum agreed that the ethical standards which apply to traditional media should be extended to new media as well. Because new media allows for people to exchange information quickly and more freely across national borders, political institutions and other organizations perceive the tool of new media as a potential threat to national security, as it can be used to divide society and incite violence.

Chiranuch Premchaiporn, director of Prachatai.com online newspaper, commented that the government, instead of expanding support and broadening the use of new media for public discourse, tends either to limit or take advantage of its influence. The government, Chiranuch claimed, seeks to control new media - as well as curb its growth - because it fears that new media, left unchecked, will negatively affect society.

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Chiranuch said that new media has not yet reached its full potential and that none of the political parties have used it as effectively as they could in their campaigns. This is because, Chiranuch claimed, the number of people using the internet in Thailand is only a small percentage of the voting population. Thailand has a population of 60 million people – of which only 40 million people are eligible to vote – and approximately 21 million Thais have access to internet. Of those 21 million internet users, nearly 10 million use social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. To emphasize

Prab Boonpan, editor of Matichon online newspaper, explained that online media plays an important role in presenting and reproducing information, as well as creating a forum for discussion among the public over what is presented in traditional media. Hence, Prab claimed, mainstream media and new media are not separate from each other; instead, they are complimentary, particularly in the sense that new media enables the public to verify and supplement information presented in mainstream media. While the rhetoric

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Editor, Matichon.co.th

the relatively low internet penetration rate, Chiranuch added the fact that nearly eight million people live in Bangkok, which is not even one-eighth of the population of Thailand. Moreover, Chiranuch added, access to internet is concentrated in large cities, not in rural areas – where most of the Thai population resides.

Chiranuch stated that new media is helpful but some groups claim that it may need to be controlled. New media is a useful tool, Chiranuch stressed, as evidenced by people being able to access information and watch debates regarding the July 3, 2011 election, and if any decision should be made about how to control it, that responsibility should rest with the public. There are many websites, like that of the Election Commission, which inform the public about political campaigns and events. Chiranuch maintained that information can also flow the other direction – from the public – as new media can be used to present local events and share information among members of the public as well as monitor the actions of the politicians and state-run media.

about new media is filled with hope for new potential, the reality in Thailand is that there are many restrictions and limitations imposed on free expression in new media.

Prab added that most internet users reside in large cities and while they are not representative of the majority of the Thai population, they tend to represent mainstream sentiments. Prab continued the online media was once a broad, open arena for people to voice their opinions and post information. Recently, the 'openness' of online media has shrunk dramatically in the wake of an emergency decree and political conflicts. Many sites have been shut down and many Facebook users were arrested or faced social sanctions by their peers. The social ethos in Thailand is such that people who think differently from the mainstream are ostracized and, to be precise, are targeted in what can only be called a 'witch-hunt' because of their non-mainstream beliefs. Because of this, Prab said, over the last 4-5 years, online media has failed as a venue for civilized public discussion.

Although the number of Facebook and Twitter users in Thailand is growing, significant social and political issues are not largely discussed in these social networks. Some critics maintain that sensitive issues are not discussed because the discussion alienates Thais from each other.

Thus, free expression on new media is seen as a social problem. Critics also maintain that Thais do not recognize the value of free expression or the importance of access to information, both of which are made possible by the existence of new media. Thus, fundamental democratic rights seem to be ignored by Thais. The debate over new media, Prab concluded, should be about understanding the importance of democratic values in Thai society, not the tool of social media itself.

Arthit Suriyawongkul of Thai Netizen Network, emphasized the fact that the real world and the online world are not separated from each other. Both are a part of the same society in which the fundamental rights and principles laid down in the Constitution of Thailand exist, and such rights and principles must apply to online media as they do in the real world.

Many participants who attended the forum agreed that the role of the election commission is not only to detect instances of voting fraud, but to protect the rights of citizens during the election. People need to have enough information to make informed voting decisions. If websites are censored or shut down, the Election Commission of Thailand needs to prosecute any such cases transparently and straightforwardly, with justice and fairness. Moreover, participants generally agreed that new media has provided opportunities for public participation in the political process, which should not be controlled because the online world needs to be regarded and protected as an area for free expression. It was noted by a few panelists that, ultimately, the free flow of information will benefit the development of society.

Arthit raised a question to politicians about the implementation of the Computer Crime Act, which violates an individual's right to freedom of expression - and whether the law should be reformed. In response, Boonyod Sukthinthai, Deputy Spokesman Democrat Party, replied that

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members of Thai society need to agree upon a clear definition of 'national security' and, once that definition is clear, people should not violate it. Boonyod stated that all Thais know the monarchy is the highest institution and for security of the nation, Thais should not make negative comments about the monarchy. As for websites being shut down or blocked, he said, each case should be evaluated on an individual basis.

Jirayu Huangsup, Deputy Spokesman Pheu Thai Party, said that he disagreed with the censorship of websites and that to be fair to the public, any investigation into sites which allegedly violate or insult the highest institution [Thai monarchy] on the grounds of lese majeste law must be transparent and proof of such violation must be made available to the public so people can learn what not to post online.

In addition, Somchai Suwannaban, Board Committee Member of Thai Public Broadcasting Service (TPBS), was interviewed off-site and the video of his interview was shown to the forum attendees. In his interview, Somchai stated that the coup in 2006 intensified the atmosphere of disharmony and hatred in an already divided society. Somchai alleged that the mainstream media was partially responsible for the widespread discontent due to its one-sided news coverage of pertinent issues in Thailand. The bias is understandable, Somchai continued, because the mainstream media is under control of the state and influential private groups. Somchai noted that the state continuously seeks to control information in both the mainstream media and new media and the result of this pressure is widespread self-censorship. The explosion of non-mainstream information and opinions seen in new media, Somchai clarified, is a response to the lack of adequate coverage from the mainstream media. As a result, there is an emergence of a 'new species' of political thought in Thai society which has used new media to empower itself.

While new media has the potential to be a check against the bias of the mainstream media, Somchai continued, those who participate in the creation and dissemination of information must present information from multiple points of view and if, for example, a media company is aligned with a particular political party or interest group, the media company should be open to opinions counter to theirs. Also, insofar as new media acts as venue for free expression for members of the public, the presentation of such information should be done with respect to those who hold different points of view. In terms of expressing opinions and access to public information, people need to be aware of their civil and political rights that they are able to do so. Active citizens are of vital importance, Somchai concluded, for the creation of a desirable society both in the real world and in the online community.

Challenges Of Online Media, Cable TV And Community Radio In Political Movements During The Election

Satellite TV/Media - Cable TV.

Sonthiyarn Chuenrutainaitham, managing director of T-News, noted that there are many forms of media at the present time - satellite TV, community radio stations, websites, and news organizations, etc. – and these media are in the process of merging. For example, a news organization can send updates via SMS to subscribers' smartphones. The definition of 'traditional media' is changing due to the emergence of new media, particularly because people can easily create their own media. This fact mitigates the once dominant influence of traditional

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media and the censorship ability of the state. Currently, if a government shuts down a website, mirror sites can be set up again and again. People have access to the radio, cable TV and streaming TV news on the internet. The challenge to both traditional and new media, Sonthiyarn said, is to work responsibly, use the new technology to present accurate information and do so according to the ethics, laws and customs of society.

Chatchai Tawantharong from Spring News said that over the past decades television news stations changed from 'black screen' [during coups or periods of military censorship] to investigative news and finally to today's 'talk show' news programs, but one thing has never changed: the stations are state-owned and controlled. However, during the last 4-5 years, the bloom of satellite and cable channels has led to more non-state-owned cable television news productions. Spring News was born because of the emergence of social media which was no longer state-owned. Also, the redshirt protests in 2010 and the crackdown in the same year triggered the official launch of Spring News as an independent media source which presents news from all sides and serves as a space for everyone to express their opinions.

public the information necessary for them to make informed voting decisions.

Warit Limthongkun from Manager Daily online newspaper mentioned that the emergence of new media - beginning with the internet, supplemented by a boom of community radio and cable TV stations - has played a significant role in the social and political transition in Thailand. Before the 2006 coup, new media was a burgeoning communication tool for the sharing of political information; after the coup, new media has become even more prevalent as advanced technologies and networks emerge. For example, news updates are available in real-time through internet radio, mobile phones, Facebook, Twitter, etc. New media, Warit noted, is more responsive to the individual in the sense that it allows for efficient, on-demand communication of new information.

Additionally, Warit continued, Youtube and blogs have reduced the prevalence of mainstream media in Thai society because people are able to create and publish information on their own without relying on traditional media outlets. Within the next few years, all community radio stations will be networked together on the internet. Even though

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Warit Limthongkun,
Manager.co.th

In the name of new media, Chatchai continued, Spring News offers socially responsible news. The staff at Spring News believes that people can think for themselves and the editorial board works hard to present accurate facts and a range of opinions from many different sectors of society. In the 2011 election, new media was instrumental in helping Spring News campaign for voting awareness and participation. Spring news used new media, Chatchai concluded, to inform the public about voting guidelines, political campaigns and interviews with politicians to give the

new media is largely not censored by the state, private entities may exert control over new media outlets because they require financial support (donations, sponsors, etc.) to maintain their operations. This presents a challenge for new media; namely, to remain unbiased while becoming financially self-reliant.

Warit concluded that new media also faces challenges regarding laws and regulations. If a media organization violates the law, they will be subject to legal action. But when the government

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Faculty of Social Sciences - Chiang Mai University

censors, for example, a website used for organizing a rally, the censorship of the website may lead to more violence in society. There are many instances, Warit said, of media censorship by the state being a key factor in causing social unrest in Thailand and if the trend of censorship continues, more violence can be expected to occur.

Local Community Radio

Pinkaew Laungaramsri Ph.D, Asst. Prof., Faculty of Social Sciences at Chiang Mai University, said that in addition to online media, community radio stations must also be considered new media. For the past half-decade, community radio stations have been employed in political activism campaigns and helped to promote political ideals (especially democratic ideals) in Thai society. It can be said that most mass media outlets are associated with and controlled by powerful institutions in Thailand. The rise of community radio stations has occurred because of a disinclination to be affiliated with such 'traditional institutions' who have historically wielded so much power and influence.

Community radio stations, Pinkaew continued, act as a communication venue for democratic movements - especially in rural areas - and most stations have been established by local residents. These media are heavily censored by the state and

many community radio organizations network with other organizations also oppressed by the state. Thus, Pinkaew claimed, community radio stations are a valuable tool for the people to keep fighting for their rights and is the reason for their emergence in Thailand several years ago.

Pinkaew concluded that the political landscape in Thailand has changed, specifically in rural areas. Rural farmers, for example, no longer receive information from the state-run mainstream media. Since the 2006 coup, the people in rural areas have become more aware of what is going on in Thailand and are active in politics, both of which are unprecedented. The Democrat administration being aligned with the military (viewed as an 'undemocratic' power) after the coup caused many rural people to question whether they were living in a democratic society. The 'anti-military government' sentiment spread like a wave over the countryside through the use of community radio by rural farmers.

Krisanapong Prombuerum, from Community Radio 'Kon Ruk Chiang Mai', said that the Redshirt-community radio was already in existence before the 2006 coup, but was focused mainly on entertainment content and not political activities. After the coup, many Thais disagreed with the

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Krisanapong Prombuerum
Community Radio 'Kon Ruk Chiang Mai'

military seizing power over the country. Because the mainstream media concentrated on presenting information that did not reflect the thoughts and feelings of many people, community radio stations, which once focused on entertainment, evolved into outlets which presented alternative news and political views. Currently, almost every province has 3-4 Redshirt radio stations.

During the election, Krisanapong continued, community radio served as a voice for local people and widespread complaints emerged regarding the fact that the mainstream media had not satisfactorily informed the public about the election. People wanted more information before they could make a voting decision. Community radio helped the people find such information. Community radio networks have the intention to provide information about democratic elections and to encourage local people to vote. An important point, Krisanapong added, is that Redshirt radio stations do not only stand for the Pheu Thai party, but also stand for any group which struggles for democracy. If the military intervenes in politics again, community radio will serve to educate local people to be aware of their democratic rights.

Research conducted by Dr. Pinkaew found that rural residents began to use new media as an alternative to receiving messages from the state-run mainstream media because the messages in the mainstream reflected the interests of the government and not the interests of the people. Residents in rural areas set up satellite equipment and tuned in to alternative news sources. They exchanged this information with their friends and neighbors which gave rise to new media being instrumental in a social revolution in rural Thailand. To be specific, rural people sought out new information, became receivers and senders of such news and produced new content. Rural residents also linked multiple media types to each other (through radio, satellite TV and the internet) which helped to bridge the gap between rural and urban areas. "In the past, people in cities were close to the center of information and rural areas were underdeveloped and not well connected. In the present day, local villagers are not just consuming information from various sources – they have also established community radio stations and websites and are producing new information. This is a new era in which rural people have a better understanding of the political environment and the larger society. This is exactly the point of a key change in Thai society," said Dr. Pinkaew.

Many community radio stations, Dr. Pinkaew continued, are primarily funded by members of the community and have many volunteers working for them. Some stations may be private ventures. The goal of community radio is to serve the needs of villagers. Radio is a two way communication medium which allows the exchange of ideas between the organizers and the audience. Most community radio stations analyze mainstream news and convey the information in language that is easily understandable to everyone in the community. Pinkaew's research also found that if there is any community radio which focuses on promoting political violence, the community members usually do not want to participate and the radio station will be shut down.

Dr. Pinkaew concluded that the political radio phenomenon in Thailand is indicative of the fact that the public not only consumes information from media sources, but that the public is capable of producing media as well. The definitions of 'media' and 'professional reporter' have been redefined in the advent of new media, largely because many people have determined that the mainstream media has failed to report the thoughts and opinions of the people. Urban and middle class people use Facebook and Twitter to express their opinions. Rural people use community radio to voice their opinions. Over the past several years, community radios have become a key institution alongside traditional institutions like community centers, temples and schools.

Suthep Wilailert, Campaign for Popular Media Reform Thailand, said that although there are broadcasting laws to accommodate the public, such laws do not allow individual citizens or local businesses to broadcast their own TV or radio signals without a license. The Office of The National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission is the main telecommunications regulatory body and issues temporary licenses to community radio stations. Suthep continued, in the last two years, over six thousand radio stations applied for registration and only one station has been granted a license. Local radio stations which operated without a license – whether politically or commercially oriented – were shut down and many people who operated them were arrested. Suthep concluded that the arrests have occurred more frequently since the emergency degree

on April 7, 2010. The destabilization of community radio institutions is a major obstacle for new media.

Suthep continued that media should play a role in promoting the idea of democracy. Media outlets may support a particular political party or policy, but they need to present the information openly and include different opinions from others as well. The focus of community radio stations is to open up the political debate in Thailand through the process of sharing information about policies or projects which affect the people.

Suthep argued that in the past, reports in mainstream newspapers alleged that Redshirt radio stations had been shut down and the staff had been arrested because the community radio station had violated lese majeste law. Such accusations fueled conflicts and divided communities across Thailand. A closer look at these cases shows that the legal action taken was on the grounds of 'technical' aspects of regulations pertaining to the radio station licensing requirements. Therefore, Suthep claimed, the ethics of journalism need to be reviewed. The mainstream media must take more responsibility in reporting the news accurately. The reports of shutting down community radio stations must be verified and the media must present accurate facts – including cases in which the government shut down the radio stations without any inspection. If there aren't clearly defined rules and regulations agreed upon by consensus, Suthep warned, the situation will likely lead to more conflicts in society.

At the end of the forum, one participant noted that people are fully capable of handling information and discerning what is best for their own lives. Furthermore, people do not require any intervention from any party to censor the media. The state must protect citizens instead of infringing their rights. The state has a duty to protect the individual's right to information and the right to free expression. The media should share the views of every group in society and communicate the full spectrum of political, economic and social issues as equally and fairly as possible. Society will flourish when people have access to many kinds of information and are able to freely discuss in a civil manner, what is best for the society. The openness of media is a prerequisite to the development of a truly democratic society.

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Boonyod Sukthinthai,
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Moderators:
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Media Activism Organizations:
Arthit Suriyawongkul
  Thai Netizen Network
Suthep Wilailert
  Campaign for Popular Media Reform Thailand

Online Media Organizations:
Chiranuch Premchaiporn
  Online Newspaper Prachatai
Prab Boonpan
  Online Newspaper Matichon
Warit Limthongkun
  Manager Online

Public Media - Cable TV & Community Radio:
Chatchai Tawantharong
  Spring News
Sonthiyarn Chuenrutainaitham
  Directing Committee of T-News
Krisanapong Prombuerum
  Community Radio 'Kon Ruk Chiang Mai'
Somchai Suwannaban
  Board Committee 'Thai Public Broadcasting
  Service -TPBS' (Video Clip)

Kannikar Kittivachakul (Afternoon Session)