

Chapter 48

The Blogosphere in the “Land of Smiles”: Citizen Media and Political Conflict in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Since the turn of the century, Thailand, dubbed as the “Land of Smiles,” has been racked by internal political instability, turmoil, and violence. This study assesses how an ongoing political crisis in Thailand is deconstructed via blogs. A qualitative content analysis of 45 blogs (838 posts) about Thailand indicates that during a peak period of massive anti-government protests in the spring of 2010, blog posts about the crisis tended to fall under three categories: (a) creating a partisan view of the political conflict, which largely mirrored the dominant discourses already present in mainstream media; (b) presenting a dispassionate account that often provided a synthesis of different viewpoints; or (c) offering improvised accounts of what expatriate-tourist bloggers perceived to be important yet having little context to explain. It is argued that although blogging potentially offers new spaces for representing political perspectives in and about Thailand, these perspectives do not always enhance the public’s understanding of the political processes and in some cases fan the flames of inflammatory rhetoric.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Since the turn of the century, the Kingdom of Thailand, known to the outside world by its optimistic tourism moniker, the “Land of Smiles,” has been racked by internal political turmoil and violence.

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Among the most dramatic moments were: a 2006 military coup that overthrew a democratically elected prime minister and imposed martial law; an occupation of the Bangkok’s Suvarnabhumi international airport in 2008 by anti-government protesters, which paralyzed the tourism and export industries; massive political demonstrations in March-May 2010 in Bangkok organized

by the opposition movement with the demands of immediate elections. The crackdown by the government led to 88 protesters being killed and more than 200 injured during the street clashes between demonstrators and security forces (Amnesty International, 2010a; Ministry of Public Health, 2010). As Allan (2006) argues, sudden spikes in citizen journalism, such as blogging, are frequently triggered by violent political crises.

While Thailand’s mainstream print and broadcast media have long operated within zones of official control and self-restriction, the government has purposely used the public protests to curtail the freedom of the press and the Internet. Indeed, attempts to contain oppositional political groups have resulted in what was a relatively free media state becoming increasingly less so (Klangnarong, 2009). At the same time, online media (such as independent websites, blogs and bulletin boards) have taken on a larger role, serving as alternatives that foster open discussions and provide criticism of the government, but also, in some cases, fan the flames of inflammatory rhetoric. The issues underlying the political conflicts in Thailand as well as the growth of social media such as blogs can be linked to the changes wrought by Thailand’s embrace of the global economy, which has been followed by mounting income inequalities (Nostitz, 2009). The rise of a new urban middle class has brought demands for a greater say in their country’s political decision making and started political clashes with the old political class rallying around Thailand’s monarchy.

Political disputes in Thailand reflect a long-standing power struggle among the country’s elites representing different social and ethnic groups that crystallized during Thailand’s 19th century colonial period (Connors, 2008). The most recent disturbance is traced to the 2001 election of a billionaire businessman and communications tycoon, Thaksin Shinawatra, to become the country’s prime minister. As an outsider representing a rising new business class, Thaksin threatened the existing power structure, particularly the

network surrounding the royal family. Portraying Thaksin as an authoritarian populist, a coalition of opponents, known as the “Yellow Shirts” (yellow represents the monarchy) rallied against him. Thaksin’s political foes organized mass protests against him, eventually leading to Thaksin’s removal from the office after a military coup in 2006. This gave rise to the anti-coup “Red Shirt” movement seeking immediate elections. The “Red Shirts” staged popular demonstrations culminating in a massive march on Bangkok in the spring of 2010, when an encampment was formed in the city center. After weeks of intense confrontation and clashes with the police, the demonstrators were forcibly removed from the streets by the army.

While it has been argued that citizen media such as blogs potentially offer a means of expanding the range of voices and points of view available, we should also keep in mind researchers’ warnings that communication technology does not automatically empower or provide democratic alternatives (Nakamura, 2002; Slack & Wise, 2002). The aim of this chapter is: a) to critically explore how blogs focused on Thailand’s internal political affairs depicted a peak period of a decade-long political conflict; b) to consider the ways in which blogs commenting on or documenting such political conflicts can potentially challenge or reinforce patterns of information flow maintained by the mainstream media.

MEDIA, THE MONARCHY AND POWER IN THAILAND

Thailand’s news media and especially its privately owned print component have been considered to be among the freest in Southeast Asia (McCargo, 2001; Servaes, Malikhaio, & Pinprayong, 2008). However, traditional reporting routines frequently focus on elite sources and oftentimes merely string together quotes with little analysis or context (McCargo, 2001). For example, the monarchy is heavily covered by the Thai media,

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