Research on the Role of New Media in Thailand's Democratic Politics

Sijia Wan

Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China
923702319@qq.com

Abstract: With the rapid development of emerging technologies such as the Internet, new media in Thailand have started to develop fast. In terms of freedom of opinion, new media have a higher degree of freedom compared to traditional media. In Thai democracy, the new media is a "double-edged sword" with both positive and negative effects. It is a booster for political parties' election campaigns, a medium for Thai people to express their political views and communicate with the government, an important propaganda and mobilization platform for political campaigns, and a tool for foreign forces to interfere in Thailand's internal affairs. The duality of new media brings new opportunities and great challenges to Thai democracy. In the future, new media can both increase people's motivation to participate in politics and achieve two-way interaction between the government and the people. However, some of Thailand's new media have deviated from the track of democratic political development and have become political weapons for political parties to fight with each other. Some of the new media will also be influenced by Western forces and Western ideology, making Thailand's democracy appear alienated.

Keywords: New media, Thailand's democratic politics

1. Introduction

In the new century, the media's influence on Thai politics has grown, becoming a key political force alongside traditional political institutions such as the royal family, political parties, the government, and the military. However, with the rapid development of new technologies such as the Internet, this political force is also being updated.

2. New Media Development in Thailand

The Thai media industry has been growing rapidly since the beginning of the 21st century, especially in the last decade, when the traditional Thai media has been on the decline. Currently, Thai new media is mainly developed in the field of social media, and young people are the main audience group.

2.1. Social media is extremely popular in Thailand, with Facebook topping the list of social media usage

According to the report *Digital 2022: Thailand* jointly published by "We Are Social" and "Hootsuite", as of January 2022, social media users in Thailand increased by 1.9 million from 2021 to 56.85 million, equivalent to 81.2% of their total population, while social media users worldwide is only 58.4% of the total population.

According to the report series *Digital: Thailand* published in 2015-2022 , we can find that Facebook is the social media platform that consistently tops the list of most used social media by Thai internet users. As of early 2022, Facebook has 50.05 million users in Thailand, accounting for 88% of the country's social media users. After Facebook, the major social media platforms are Line, Tik Tok, Instagram, and Twitter in that order.

Nowadays, the Prayuth government and political parties have set up their own official accounts on Facebook and other influential social media in order to bring the government (political parties) closer to the people. For example, the Prayuth government has not only set up an official Facebook account "Thai ku fa", but also created a personal account for Prime Minister Prayuth to introduce national policies and release government-related news.

2.2. Thai people use the Internet and social media for a longer period of time, especially young Thais

The latest ETDA (electronic transactions development agency) survey results show that the average time spent online by Thais in 2021 will be 10 hours and 36 minutes per day. Compared to 4 hours and 36 minutes in 2013, this figure increased by 2.3 times in 2021. According to the analysis of data from ETDA's online questionnaire survey with a sample of 44,545 people between April 2021 and June 2021, it was found that 2021 was the first year in which Generation Z (under 21 years old) broke the record for the most Internet use with an average of 12 hours and 5 minutes per day, beating Generation Y (21-40 years old) to the top of the list in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, ETDA rounds up the top 10 most popular online activities of Thais, with 95.3% using social media such as Facebook, LINE and Instagram, ranking first.

As can be seen from the above statistics, Thailand's high penetration rate of the Internet allows ample room for the development of new media. This, coupled with a large number of social media users and the relatively long duration of social media use in Thailand, allows the information carried on the Internet to be delivered to a greater extent to a wider audience. In addition, young Thais are lazier about social media than other age groups.

3. Freedom of Public Opinion in Thai New Media

Compared with traditional media, new media have a higher degree of freedom of opinion. For one thing, since new media carries a large amount of information, it is difficult for the government to accurately sift through the massive amount of information to find anti-government and royal-critical comments and warn or even delete them. For another, government control of new media now often also requires a third party, the company behind the social media platform, thus forming a mutual check and balance with Western new media companies.

In August 2020, Facebook and the Thai government clashed over whether to shut down access to the "royal list market market page" group for Thai people. The group was created on April 16, 2020 by Dr. Barwin, a political exile living in Japan. It was originally created to allow alumni of Thammasat University and Chulalongkorn University to help each other out during the pandemic by facilitating online purchases. But after the pandemic subsided, the group became a forum for direct discussion and criticism of the Thai royal family. The group has now become a large group with over one million people.

On August 10, 2020, former Thai Minister of Digital Economy and Government Association, Puttipong Punnakanta, demanded that social media platforms, including Facebook, remove illegal content within 15 days, including restricting the royal list market market page group, or the Thai government will prosecute the social media platforms according to the law. On August 24, Dr. Barwin posted an urgent notice on Facebook "Tonight Thai netizens' access to the 'royal list market market page' group will be closed" and a new group "royal list market market page of Royal Market" was created.

Since then, foreign mainstream media have been all over the story, such as a Reuters report that Facebook has restricted groups of more than a million people at the request of the Thai government. At the same time, Dr. Barwin gave an interview saying that Facebook's actions were an obstacle to freedom of expression. Under the pressure of public opinion on human rights violations, Facebook released a statement saying "After careful consideration, we have decided to restrict access to content that the Thai government considers illegal. But restricting access to royal list market market page groups is a big deal and not only violates international human rights principles but also affects freedom of expression. Facebook operates to protect the rights of all Internet users. We are now preparing to legally oppose such requests. Interventions like this one that go beyond the scope of the government could also undermine Facebook's ability to continue to invest in Thailand."

Although Puttipong Punnakanta and the Prayuth government responded to Facebook's statement with a strong attitude, the matter was later dropped with the stepping down of Puttipong Punnakanta, and in April 2021 it was reported that the Thai government dropped the case against Facebook, and the "royal list market market page Royal Market " group still exists.

From the above cases, we can see that the government faces a lot of difficulties in controlling new media, especially social media. First of all, the government is faced with the difficult task of censoring the Internet with a large workload and high technical requirements. Many radical democrats and intellectuals are demanding changes to the law on offenses against the monarch and freedom of the press, and there are many online groups discussing sensitive issues such as the royal family. Secondly, the Thai

government's control over social media needs to be influenced by foreign social media companies and Western media opinion, and pressure from the West also makes it difficult for the Thai government to control new media.

4. The Role Played by New Media in Thai Politics

4.1. New media is an important assistant for youth political parties to campaign and expand the political space for party activities

Since the use of new media is not limited by time and space, political parties' political activities are gradually expanding online, and their manifestos and related activities are "fermenting" faster on the Internet than traditional media, gaining more influence and better publicity effects. Therefore, political parties participating in general elections tend to focus their campaigns on the Internet and use the power of the Internet to build momentum. In the 2019 Thai election, popular social media such as LINE, Twitter and Instagram have become important platforms for Thai political parties to spread their messages.

According to Thailand's electoral system, there are 500 seats in the 2019 Thai lower house election, consisting of 350 partitioned MPs and 150 non-partitioned MPs. The new media played an important mobilizing role in the election. The new generation of young Thai society showed strong political mobilization and organizing ability with the help of social media on the Internet, and won 81 seats in the House of Representatives for the Future Forward Party led by Thanatron. In contrast, the two traditional Thai parties, the Pheu Thai Party and the Democrat Party, lost more than 100 seats.

In fact, since 2002, Tharnathorn has been building up his influence in the new media sector. He has not only become a major shareholder in Thailand's long-established The Nation and The Matichon, but has also established several (online) media companies, including V-Luck Media Co. With his influence on social media, Tharnathorn has become a popular reform icon among young Thais. Although he has only held social positions such as chairman of the Nakhon Nayok Industrial Committee and secretary-general of the Thailand Auto Parts Manufacturers Association, and seriously lacks political experience in local or central government, he was once a popular candidate for prime minister.

The way Tanatone has shaped his political image through new media has similarities to the methods used by former U.S. President Donald Trump in the 2016 election. In the 2016 election, Trump's social media tweets often used terms such as "join me" and "support me" to catch the attention of voters and create an image of a "political newcomer". He has even launched the trendiest mobile live streaming feature on Facebook to interact with voters. Social media has given Trump more room to promote his party than Hillary. Similarly, during the Thai election, "rising political star" Thanatron interacted with voters not only online but also through social media such as Twitter. His tweets were unofficial and he used a lot of tone words and face characters to bring himself closer to voters, such as "นะครับ" and "^^", thus establishing himself as a leader of a pro-people and people-friendly political party.

4.2. New media is a medium for Thai people to express their political views and communicate and dialogue with the government

In the new media era, new media communication is characterized by "decentralization" and "two-way", and everyone is a media, and individuals are both audiences and communicators. In most cases, the public can control the acceptance or rejection of political information, free from the influence of "gatekeepers", and ordinary people begin to enjoy the right to speak and express their political views freely in various forms.

On October 22, 2018, Thai rap group Rap Against Dictatorship (RAD) released a rap music video video, "What's in My Country," on their YouTube channel. The song has quickly become a hit in Thailand, and the music video has been viewed more than 100 million times so far. The song's lyrics boldly satirize the dictatorship of the Thai military regime, attacking corruption and the lack of fair elections, and accusing the military government of oppressing freedom of expression. In addition, the music video also uses black and white tones to recreate the scene of the 1976 "Law and Order Massacre", a tragic massacre of students by the Thai police and ultra-nationalist forces, giving the audience a strong visual impact. The song, which is full of anger and rap, immediately triggered the collective angst and disillusionment of the Thai people with the military government for too long, and to a certain extent reduced the competitiveness of the military government led by Prayuth in the 2019 Thai election. The Thai government strongly criticized the song, arguing that it was not true, and returned the favor on November

1 of the same year with an original official version of the rap "Thailand 4.0," but to little avail.

In the era of massive information, the public will choose and deliver what kind of political information according to their own political views and value orientations. For the general audience, if a song or a word tweet resonates with them and fits their value orientation, they will be willing to contribute traffic to its momentum in a low-cost way such as liking and retweeting, so as to convey their political demands to the government. For protest initiators, choosing social media is a relatively low-risk way to express their political demands, because in many cases, social media will win the support of the general public opinion for the initiators, making it impossible for the official government to take coercive measures against them.

4.3. New media is an important propaganda and mobilization platform for political campaigns

Social media provides a natural platform for political campaigning. This platform can connect unrelated individuals or groups at a negligible cost and help organize faster and more effective collective action. Social media has changed the balance of power between protesters and the people they are protesting against (the government). Protesters are adept at using social media to organize mass power and create a barrier to public opinion, while the target of their protest (the government) can use the regime to organize its own power.

Following the Constitutional Court's decision to dissolve the Future Forward Party on February 21, 2020, student "flash mobs" across Thailand have continued to fester and sweep the country. The first flash mob was led by the Thammasat University, where the slogan "There is no justice in this country" appeared on the campus in the afternoon of February 21. The next day, a flash mob organized by the "Thai Students' Association" was held near the Pridi Phanomyong[1] monument at the university. This was followed by protests at Kasetsart University, Ramkhamhaeng University and Chulalongkorn University. In addition to the offline demonstrations, students from major universities also carried out a series of retweet invitations on social media, further expanding the reach of the student protest movement. Following this massive student flash mob, other flash mob protest movements erupted one after another, continuing until the end of 2020.

Social media played an important role in the flash mob demonstrations in Thailand in 2020. The rapid dissemination of information through social media allows short-term collective activities like flash mobs to take place without much detailed planning and with immediately visible results, for example, by exceeding the expected number of protesters. During the protest demonstration movement in February 2020, the student flash mob movement relied on the power of the Internet to scale up across the country in just three or four days. In addition, information overload on the Internet may facilitate the organization of short-term collective actions such as flash mobs, as it is difficult for governments unfamiliar with social media to screen and stop protests from the sea of information that is constantly being created and disseminated on social media.

4.4. New media has become a tool for foreign forces to interfere in Thailand's internal affairs

On August 29, 2020, Dr. Noppadon Kannika, Director of Super Poll Thailand, released the results of a field survey entitled "Stop Threatening the People". According to the survey, 82.4 percent of respondents believe that foreign powers and Thai politicians are working together to plan these demonstrations to destabilize national security and exacerbate the social crisis.

It is worth noting that the results of the Social Media Voice survey on trends in "Stop Threatening People" activities on social media, which was systematically researched by Net Super Polls in Thailand, show that on August 16, 2020, the day the protest movement broke out, 148,034 users used social media in Thailand alone. The number of users using social media in Thailand alone was 148,034 on August 16, 2020, but 7,928,492 if data from abroad is included in the analysis.

In response to these results, the director of Super Poll[2] believes that the situation in Thailand would be much smoother than it is now if foreign forces had not been involved. This is because the trend of demonstrations in Thailand has been spiced up by foreign forces who want to create an illusion of great power to incite more Thais to join the demonstrations, especially the youth. The new generation of young people, due to their immaturity and lack of judgment, can easily be used by foreign forces as a tool to

---

[1]Pridi Phanomyong, known as the Sun Yat-sen of Thailand, is credited with transforming Thailand from a monarchy to a constitutional monarchy.
[2]Super Poll, https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/1920540

disrupt Thai society.

5. Opportunities and Challenges of New Media for the Development of Democratic Politics in Thailand

The new media is a double-edged sword for the development of Thailand's democratic politics, which can carry the boat as well as overturn it, bringing opportunities as well as great challenges.

5.1. Opportunities of New Media for Thailand's Democratic Politics

For the government, the new media is conducive to realizing the communication mode of equal dialogue and two-way interaction between the government and the public. The government can quickly convey important political information such as national policies and international situation to the people through new media platforms. The Prayuth government's use of new media is still in its infancy and has much room for development. If the Thai government can successfully use new media to establish an equal communication mechanism between the government and the people in the future, then Thai democracy will go to the next level. In this interactive communication mode, people will express their opinions about the government through social media, and the government will be able to sift through the vast amount of information from the people to improve national policies. At present, Thailand's main way of getting feedback from the public is to set up special survey teams to collect people's opinions and suggestions, which has caused proposals such as the legalization of same-sex marriage to stagnate for a long time in the survey stage. If the government can establish a comprehensive online public opinion collection system and related management mechanism, the time required for the public opinion survey stage can be reduced. The institutionalization and normalization of new media government is a future trend, and if the government can use it wisely, it may become a new opportunity for the development of Thailand's democratic politics.

5.2. Challenges posed by new media in Thailand's democratic politics

While the new media has brought opportunities for the development of democratic politics in Thailand, it has also brought great challenges.

First, some of Thailand's new media have deviated from their proper role and have become political weapons in the battle between political parties rather than representatives of public and social interests. From the war of words between Sondhi Limthongkul and Thaksin Shinawatra and the serious bloodshed between the Red Shirts and the government, we can see that the media war and the chaos of the public opinion war that erupted due to the contradiction in the distribution of interests between politicians and business tycoons have intensified social conflicts and brought a great negative impact on Thailand's democratization. Although the conflict between the lower class and the upper middle class has changed to a conflict between the older generation and the younger generation, the political arena is still a game between the government and the media moguls, and the question of where Thailand's democracy should go has not been resolved. Some of the new media play more of a weapon in the battle between political parties and politicians than a booster of Thai democracy. Thailand's democracy seems to have jumped into a dead-end cycle of constant regime change and periodic outbreaks of social conflict, but the democratic process remains stagnant.

Second, Thailand's new media are susceptible to the influence of Western forces and Western ideology, which may contribute to the tendency of alienating Thai democracy in the direction of Western-style democracy. In recent history, Thailand has long been influenced by Western political ideology, and in 1932, a group of young men who had returned from studying in the West and were deeply influenced by Western liberal and democratic ideas staged a coup and established a constitutional monarchy, which led Thailand to the path of democracy. Since then, however, Thailand has been struggling with democracy, with military coups and street protests, and the introduction of Western-style democracy has been "unsuccessful" because "the orange is born in the south, but the hedgehog is born in the north". In today's Thai society, the most popular social media are from the West, and it is difficult for Thai people, especially Thai youth, not to be influenced by Western democratic ideas. Due to the high usage and dependence on social media, the Thai youth are more influenced by western ideology and aspire to western liberal democracy, while the older generation is more traditional. The great divide between the ideology of the young and the older generation has created a new social conflict -- an intergenerational conflict -- as exemplified by the massive student demonstrations that erupted between 2020-2021. Once

again, the new conflict has hit Thai democracy hard.

Looking at Thailand's political development in the past decade, we can see that Thai democracy has been tied up in media wars and public opinion wars, and has been interfered by Western forces and Western ideologies, causing itself to stumble and fall into difficulties. In the future, how the new media can break out of the whirlpool of political party power struggle and get rid of the influence of Western forces will be a key step in Thailand's new stage of democratization.

References

[1] Simon Kemp, "DIGITAL 2015: THAILAND," https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2015-thailand.
[2] Simon Kemp, "DIGITAL 2016: THAILAND," https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2016-thailand.
[3] Simon Kemp, "DIGITAL 2017: THAILAND," https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2017-thailand.
[4] Simon Kemp, "DIGITAL 2018: THAILAND," https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2018-thailand.
[5] Simon Kemp, "DIGITAL 2019: THAILAND," https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-thailand.
[6] Simon Kemp, "DIGITAL 2022: THAILAND," https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-thailand.
[7] ETDA (electronic transactions development agency), https://www.etda.or.th/th/newsevents/pr-news/ETDA-released-IUB-2020.aspx
[8] ETDA (electronic transactions development agency), https://www.etda.or.th/th/newsevents/pr-news/ETDA-released-IUB-2021.aspx
[9] Zhou, F.Y. Political Differences in Thailand and Implications on China-Thailand Relationship, Contemporary World, July 2020.
[10] Wang, D.T. Zhang, X.F. The Development of New Media's Influence on Party Politics—Take Trump Winning the Presidential Election as An Example [J]. Journal of Harbin Institute of Technology (Social Sciences Edition), 2017, 19(06):43-49. DOI: 10.16822/j.cnki.hitskb.2017.06.010.
[11] Spier, Shaked, "The Impact of ICT-Based Social Media on Collective Action-Difference in Degree or Difference in Kind", Collective action2.0, 2011. No display for Super Poll, https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/1920540
[12] Liu, J.J. The Embarrassment of "Western Democracy" from the Perspective of Thailand's Unrest, Contemporary World, June 2010.