

Informed Citizen under the State of Always-Emergency ¹

Crowdsourcing the Crowddestroying

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Better access to information networks and more participation in public space, mediated by information technologies, bring about optimistic vision of civil information society where informed citizen decide rationally on the basis of equal-accessed information, where voices of minority get heard, where the crowd of individuals collectively move towards participatory democracy. This study will argue that it may not always be the case. Online/offline actions and movements in or about Thailand show another side of information society, where participatory social media paradoxically go against the participatory culture and freedom of expression.

This study tries to show that the participatory ‘nature’ of online media does not automatically means the democratic participatory culture, in the same vein as, more freedom of media production by individuals realized by digital media does not automatically means more freedom of expression by individuals to the public. Cases from recent political conflicts in Thailand show that we cannot take the ‘nature’ of online digital media for granted, and actually warns us to rethinking the possible opposite, where online participatory platforms could lead to collaboratives action that harm the political and human rights of the individuals.

This paper is part of the preliminary studies for the author’s master thesis topic, to be proposed, on civic friendship and liberal citizenship in relation to online social media and media consumption. Casual online interviews have been made with 10 Facebook users, with age around 22 to 35, who are all connected with the author in Facebook. Additional face-to-face short interviews and informal discussions have also been made with few people from the same group. The author would like to thanks Prachatai online newspaper and Center for Social Development Studies, Chulalongkorn University, for their organization of new media focus group discussion, on September 30, 2010, where the author got many insights and useful information from the media professionals, scholars, and activists.

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Political Movements and Internet in Thailand

Cases presented in this paper were mostly occurred during 2010, particularly during the big rally of Red Shirts in Bangkok city center between March and May, including the military crackdowns and significant events afterward up to early October 2010. Development of cyberactivism in Thailand, from around 1997 up to 2004, which spanned from pre-Thaksin time to the peak of his era, can be found in Daorueng (2004), where she illustrates the early usages of Internet by civil society groups. The work also describes politico-economic situation of the times, where mainstream media were controlled directly and indirectly by the government and businesses, which led civil society to change their media strategy and adopt Internet activism.

The campaign led by *People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)* to oust Thaksin Shinawatra from Prime Minister position can be said a first nation-wide political movement that outstandingly put Internet a central role in its media strategy. *Manager Online* news website is one of the spearheads in the campaign, together with a cable news channel *ASTV* and printed media of Manager Publishing Group like *Manager* newspaper. Links and articles copied from Manager Online got circulated around online circles of Thai Internet users, through forwarded e-mails, web forums, and blog posts. From Truehits Top 100 ranking, of Thai websites, Manager Online went from the sixth rank in 2003 to the third in 2004, and stayed there for three continuous years. After the coup, in year 2007 and 2008, its rank dropped to the fourth, and recently in 2009 dropped to the seventh (Truehits). While the raise in traffic cannot only attributed to the public's interest in politics during the high of anti-Thaksin rally, as Manager Online has many other non-politics sections as well, it cannot be denied that politics attributed to a large number of traffic. A broader view of anti-government movements in Thailand between 2005 and 2006 can be found in (Chaisukkosol 2010), where it discussed in details online political movements and their struggles from the nonviolence perspective.

Social networking sites, at that time, were not very popular yet among Thai Internet users, and it was even less so in terms of political discussions and movements. Online social and political critics of that time mostly active in their personal blogs, two prime examples are BioLawCom.de and Fringer.org. The former one runs by three Thai graduate students in Germany – one of them in law school, while the later runs by Sarinee Achavanuntakul, an US-educated blogger known to be working in financial sector. Apart from general comments, both blogs use their academic and professional expertise to analyze, and criticize, Thaksin's government activities. Links from this kind of social critics and 'citizen bloggers' got circulated around and cited by the press. An analysis of abnormality in the Shin-Temasek deal by another two lower-profile authors, originally published as a series of blog posts in Fringer.org, eventually published as a book, went best-seller, and is one of the very key books in the anti-Thaksin movement which partly driven by the anti-corruption movement.

It's all about blogs at that time. On the coup's night, September 19, 2006, a group of Thai Internet users swiftly set up a blog *19sep.blogspot.com* to give the world the reports from inside Thailand. Group of volunteers collaboratively posted updates from televisions, translated parts of Council for Democratic Reform under Constitutional Monarchy's announcements into English, posted photos of tanks on streets, and gathered links from different news sources. The birth of *19sep.blogspot.com*, and followed by many other blogs, repeated what happened in May 1992. After the military cracked down the pro-democracy demonstrators in that month, Internet users found a *soc.culture.thai* Usenet newsgroup a source for political news (Daorueng, 2004). 15 years later, different faces of military came back, so different Internet media are back as well. This time, they are waves of the so-called 'Web 2.0' sites and blogs ran by citizen themselves. 'Citizen reporter' emerged to be a buzz word, and later faded away recently to make way for another buzz word 'social media'.

The Rise of Social Media in Thai Political Sphere: @Thaksinlive A Torch Stealer

While Thai Internet users are familiar with social networking sites and social media well before the time of Facebook and Twitter, none other services can compare with the two in terms of the political uses during the still going on political conflicts after the coup in 2006.

On politicians side, there were attempts by several politicians (or their public relation team, for that matter) like Abhisit Vejjajiva, Democrat Party leader,² and Rosana Tositrakul, then Senator candidate,³ to use Hi5, the most popular social networking site at that time, to capture support from young generations. But the channel still considered as a secondary to the primary ones like televisions and billboards. On the civil society and general Internet users sides, there is almost no significant online movements happened either on Hi5 or MySpace. The exception goes to the movements similar to the one led by the anti-coup group, *NoCoup.org*, in 2008, where they ran a "Bored of PAD Mob" (เบื่อมือบพันธมิตรฯ) campaign, distributing one million stickers offline and asking supporters to put the "Bored of PAD Mob" logo as their Hi5 or MSN's avatar (Prachatai 2008). There were similar campaigns of this online symbolic display from PAD supporters and other groups as well.

As the political conflicts keep going on in the country, the social media landscape keep revolving. In Thailand, practical Twitter usages and experiences were introduced in a public space for the first time in the first BarCamp Bangkok conference by Sugree Phatanapherom, Twitter account @sugree (Phatanapherom 2008). Sugree himself is a software developer, and later wrote a Twitter client software for mobile phone named "jibjib". After that event, Twitter gained popularity among techies and further spread out more and more. But for wider public, it is only until

2 <http://abhisitvejjajiva.hi5.com/>

3 <http://rosana-t.hi5.com/>

@Thaksinlive, an account of Thaksin Shinawatra, entered the Twittersphere.

Around July 2009, more wider Internet users got to know about Twitter, from the Twitter Wall of Fame competition, in which @Thaksinlive is one of the Mr. Twitter candidate (anyone can propose anybody as a candidate). The competition has been reported in mainstream media and got public attention, as any other Thaksin's movements. Lots of Thai Internet users flocked to the vote, either vote for Thaksin or someone else to ditched him off the top position. There was even a report that a laborer, who is a non-Internet user, had shown an interest in the voting and like to participate, to vote for Thaksin (Kerdsiri 2009a). Soon after, the focus is on the race among @Thaksinlive (Thaksin), @PM_Abhisit (Abhisit Vejjajiva, the Prime Minister), @sugree (number one Twitter user in Thailand, in terms of numbers of tweets), @chaturon (Chaturon Chaisang, former acting leader of Thai Rak Thai Party), and other politicians and celebrities. There were mobilizations around the Internet, from many sides, to call for support and do strategic votes to blocked the oppositions to reach the top of the Twitter Wall of Fame. For Thaksin supporters, there was one message posted in Pantip.com's Rajdumnern room, one of the largest web forum for political discussions, asked for a favor to vote @Thaksinlive.⁴ For 'third-way' side, of those who did not want vote for either Thaksin or Abhisit, they picked Sugree as a proxy. Many of them show support for Sugree by put a smaller version of Sugree's avatar as part of their own avatars, at the lower right corner (Kerdsiri 2009b).

Illustration 1: Seven Thai Twitter users in worldwide Top 10. Many are the Reds. (Screen caption from Kerdsiri 2009c)



After many months and rounds of competition, @Thaksinlive won the second place worldwide. Mr. Twitter, the winner, is @peterfacinella, a Twitter account of Peter Facinelli, an American actor who plays *Twilight*. The third place is @chaturon. The fourth to the seventh are all Thais, and many of these identities could be Red Shirts, considering their avatars. @sugree got the ninth. In the result report, Twitter Wall of Fame did recognized the storm of votes, wrote: "This was a tough competition because his fans were taking on a political voting battle with a large

⁴ The posted has been deleted. Original URL is

<http://www.pantip.com/cafe/rajdumnern/topic/P8148915/P8148915.html>

section of the population of Thailand expressing support for Thaksin Shinawatra, the exiled Prime Minister.” (Kerdsiri 2009c).

“Confident that Over 1 Million Thais ... has Facebook”: Attack of the Snowclones

According to Katika Saiseni, a Thai social media marketing expert, Facebook came popular in Thailand in 2009 and this could be attributed to at least two reasons: 1) user-interface got translated to Thai, means no more language barrier; 2) the emerging of ‘social games’ like *FarmVille* (Nation Channel, 2010a). The second reason attributed to social games is confirmed by the interviews, ran by the author in September 2010, of a small group of Thai Facebook users, where they placed social games (including quizzes) as one of their top activities in Facebook.

Jon Russell (2010a) made an observation that politics is a new driver for Facebook growth in Thailand, in addition to “gaming, multimedia sharing, localization, and word of mouth”. Within five months, from January to May 2010, more than one million Thai users added to Facebook. Of that number, 500,000 new users are added within six weeks, between April and May 2010 (Russell 2010b), which is the time between and during the Red Shirts crackdowns on Ratchadamnoen Road and at Ratchaprasong Intersection, caused the death of 91 people, according to Bangkok Emergency Medical Services (Fuller and Mydans 2010). While we cannot say that the political situation is a major contribution to the growth of Thailand's Facebook *population*, as the growth rate is not extraordinary if compare to the worldwide trend, also the estimation from Facebakers.com (Russell 2010b) shows no spike in the growth during the time, one will have difficulty to deny that the situation during March and May 2010 drove up a lot of *traffic* and *activities* in Thailand's Facebook. From a small interview conducted with university students and young professionals, some said they already had Facebook account considerable long before the recent demonstration, but they came to be more active, in terms of wall posting, sharing news, and expressing their views, only because of the recent political situation. Wall postings include links to local and international news reports, video clips of the current and the past demonstrations.

Groups and Fan Pages have been created to gather and show support for a political cause. A collective action of showing group identity avatar, like one for “Bored of PAD Mob” campaign, also appear in Facebook as well as other blogs. As collected and reported by Sarinee Achavanuntakul (2010), there are at least 70 avatars created as used by groups of different colors, shades, or ideologies. Some of them are pro-Red Shirts, some anti-Red Shirts, some disagree with the parliament dissolution, some agree, some pro-Monarchy, and some are for fun or absurdity. Offline, the several same avatars could be found as stickers on street furnitures and traffic light poles. One of very popular phrases, already a snowclone,⁵ for these campaign names is “Confident

5 From Wikipedia: “A snowclone is a type of cliché and phrasal template. An example of a

that Over 1 Million Thais ...” (มั่นใจคนไทยเกิน 1 ล้านคน ...), as found in groups like: “Confident that over 1 million Thais are against the dissolution,” “Confident that over 10 million Thais are so irritated of the politics,” and, funny, “Confident that over 1 million Thais can't distinguished between basil and sweet basil.”.

Some of these campaigns active not only online, but offline too. On April 18, 2010, a demonstration of 2,000 “Multicolor Shirts” people took place at the Victory Monument. According to The Nation (2010), “*Most of the demonstrators are fans of the anti-House dissolution Facebook page and members of the group of ‘civilian volunteers to protect the motherland’. [...] led by Doctor Tul Sitthisomwong to sing the national anthem, the royal anthem and several other patriotic songs as well as a special song for His Majesty, ‘the father of the land’. [...] Several demonstrators carried banners with wordings like ‘Stop protesting, we want to live our normal life; we provide moral support to troops’, [...] The demonstrators also chanted in unison as ‘We love the king, we love the country’ and ‘Long live the King’*”. Those activities described in The Nation are just exactly like what many Thais in Facebook did online, videos posting of patriotic songs and speeches⁶ from YouTube, expressing their frustrations about demonstrations, showing support to the government demonstration control measures and crackdowns, and other things. The conception of online space as a virtual one is obviously disappeared here. It is as real as the human beings behind the screens and on the streets.

Illustration 2: Campaign graphics used as profile pictures before April 10, 2010 (Achavanuntakul 2010)

snowclone is ‘grey is the new black’, a version of the template ‘X is the new Y’. X and Y may be replaced with different words or phrases.”

<<https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Snowclone>> For more examples, please refer to The Snowclones Database <<http://snowclones.org>>

- 6 Including Pongpat Wachirabanjong’s acceptance speech for his Best Supporting Role at the Nataraj Awards ceremony. He said: “If one is burning with anger against someone or feeling frustrated with something but vents that anger on father, hates him, slanders him, and even thinks of chasing him out of the house, then I will walk straight to that person and say this: ‘If you hate father, if you no longer love him, then leave. Because this house belongs to father. This land belongs to him.’” The video clip of this speech rapidly circulated around social media and re-run on televisions (Ekachai 2010).



Illustration 3: A "No Dissolution of Parliament" banner shown, on the right pane, in "Ban Thaksin" blog <<http://banthaksin.blogspot.com>>

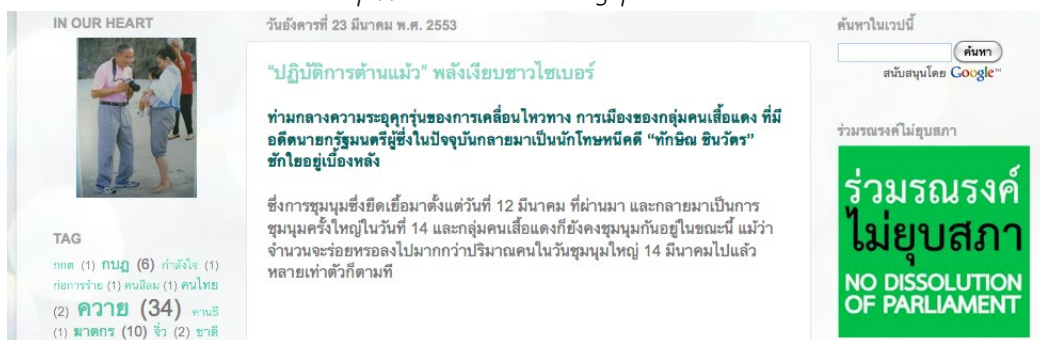


Illustration 4: Sticker of "No Dissolution of Parliament" Facebook group. Pra Arthit Road. May 7, 2010.



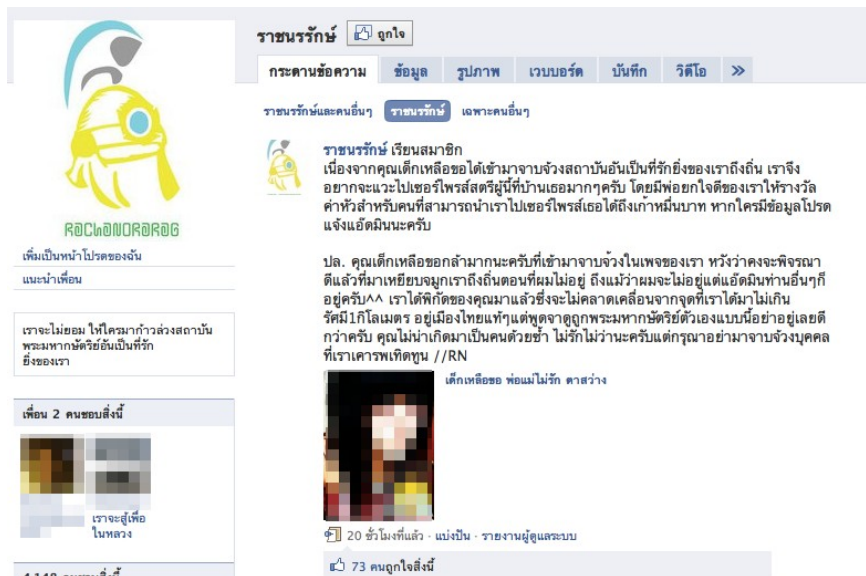
And the Winner is ... the Witch-hunter! ;)

In addition to the public gathering mentioned earlier, direct ‘social measures’ are in use as well, against opposition individuals. Few groups, like *Social Sanction: SS*⁷ and *Rachanorarang*,⁸ have been created to collectively searching for Internet users who they considered anti-monarchy. When found, those people’ personal data, including home address and telephone numbers, will be posted in the group’s Fan Page or Facebook Group. In one post by *Rachanorarang*’s administrator, on September 8, 2010, it said there will be 90,000 baht cash reward for anybody who can give a ‘surprise’ to a victim at her living place. The post claimed that they already have her co-ordinate, with 1 kilometer accuracy range. The geo-location data is possibly taken from her social media sharings.

Illustration 5: A post in Rachanorarang’s Fan Page, hunting ‘anti-monarchy’ individuals.

7 <https://www.facebook.com/pages/yuththkar-lng-thanth-thang-sangkham-Social-Sanction-SS/126146367427506>

8 <https://www.facebook.com/pages/rach-nr-raks/121435997877658>



Data gathering is more than active. While some of the victims’ personal data are gathered from websites across the web, some of them are gathered by actively seeking through the human web, like asking for a telephone number of the victims through friends of friends (information from personal communication with one university student, whom has been asked by the question). Lots of cases like this occurs many places, inside and outside Facebook. Sawatree Saksri, a lecturer at Thammasat University Law School, called this phenomenon a ‘digital witch-hunting’, referred to witch-hunt activities between 15th and early 18th centuries in Western societies (Pandey 2010). The best known case to the wider public is probably the case of *Mark V11*. Mark V11, or *Withawat Thaokhamlue*, is a budding singer from *Academy Fantasia* singing contest, the most popular reality TV show in Thailand.

‘Confident that over 1 million Thais are against Mark V11’ group was promptly created, around July 2010, after the group spotted that Mark V11 has posted controversial messages to his Facebook profile page. Media reported that the messages are criticizing Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva (Pandey 2010). But other Internet users found it ‘more serious’ than that. *n/e* (2010), a blogger of boringdays.net, said in his blog indicated that Mark V11 has posted a message “Remove the picture that every house has” in 23 May 2010. The phrase “the picture that every house has” is widely known in Thailand that it refer to the image of the King Rama IX. So to pro-monarchy people, this posting of Mark V11 is very insulting and cannot be accepted. Mark V11 has to, in the end, apologized the Prime Minister, quit the singing contest, and decided to live abroad. All of these started off first in the Internet, spotted by an individual citizen, circulated around, got wind, mainstream media then picked it up, and Mark V11 was forced to quit everything.

Thai government eventually formally recognized the power of the crowd in this information warfare. July 1, 2010, Ministry of Information and Communication Technology launched “Internet Scout Capacity Building” project, widely known as *Cyber Scout* project. The objective is, according

to Ministry of ICT, “to create a network of civil volunteers. The cyber [boy] scout volunteers will monitor information or behavior that is a treat to civil security, using information technology and active information operations.” The project got supported from the ICT Ministry, TOT (government-owned telecom provider), CAT Telecom (government-owned telecom provider), Thailand Post, Software Industry Promotion Agency, and Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (which take care of Bangkok local government-funded schools). It will initially trained 200 students from 10 schools, to become cyber boy scouts (MICT 2010).

By monitoring for “civil security” here, according to the ICT Minister, is also including “to voluntarily contribute one hour a day to search in different websites. If they found good content about the King’s activities, speeches, or his virtue, they will post these contents to websites that contain insulting messages to the King.” The project expected this to help “building King-loving consciousness” for the youth (ASTV Manager Online 2010). The part that the Minister has left without mentioning is what if the cyber scout found “bad content”? Ministry of ICT also operate a 24-hour hotline, call 1122, for reporting “inappropriate websites.”

As everybody can see from the project activities, its agenda for the monarchy is very obvious. The Cyber Scout group,⁹ that has been created in Dek-D.com,¹⁰ shows very prominent at the top the image of the King in scout dress, followed by a text: “The Rules of Boy Scout made it very explicit in its first rule that ‘I will be loyal to the Nation, the Religious, and the King. Therefore, the boy scout is part of the Nation defending and the Monarchy esteeming.’” As a related note, in the recent history, the Village Scouts, which is linked to royal family, plays a significant role in Massacre of 6 October 1976, where lots of left-wing activists and students lost their life.

Seeoun (2010) shows a procurement document of Ministry of Information and Communication Technology that already spent 1.9 million baht for this project in June and September this year. A plan has been made, according to ICT Minister, to trained 100,000 cyber scouts out of 1,000 Community IT Centers. In preparation to achieved that goal, Ministry of ICT will allocate 2011 budget worth 578 million baht to increase the numbers of Community IT Centers, where 600 something already in operation.

From a brief survey and personal communication with a number of Facebook users, who all recognized the activities of these social measure action groups, many admitted that they changed their behavior of posting things online, trying to protect themselves from any possible attacks. Few even canceled their Facebook accounts, or create a new one for private, only with close friends, use. One user even explicitly avoid anyone calling him offline with his online name, to hide any link between his two personas. This clearly shows a concern of consequences from discussing

9 <http://group.dek-d.com/cyberscout/>

10 Is the largest student and youth community website, ranked 4th overall in Truehits 2009 Awards.

some particular political issues openly in the public, especially those about the monarchy. Witch-hunting, social sanction groups, and cyber scouts do not only affect the direct victims, but also the Internet users of non-mainstream beliefs. Big brothers, and small brothers too, are watching you.

CRES Retweeting YouTube: Military Fantasia

While aforementioned digital witch-hunting shows a participation aspect that mainstream media cannot fulfilled, YouTube reporting also shows how citizen media went somehow surpassed the mainstream media – but that's not all the story yet. Despite the very good job by Red Shirts and citizen reporters who shoot and upload lots of video and photos to the Internet, the Center for the Resolution of Emergency Situations (CRES) does it far better in reaching the mass with a meaningful message. To sum it up in only one phrase, it's a real demonstration of "Rip. Mix. Burn.," in the same spirit of Apple's iPod advertisement. Red Shirts provide footages. CRES provides a plot. And just like any movie, it's the plot that counts. It's a few of video clips and photos, shoot by the Red Shirts, curated by CRES, matched it with CRES's own version of narrative, that got delivered to the mass. When the very power to produce new media meets the very limited freedom to broadcast, it's another kind of mobilization. It's basically a crowd-sourcing of footage production by the state, while they still control the narrative production and the outlets.

During the April and May 2010 incidents, lots of video clips have been posted online by people who was in or went to the field. Video clips have been selectively used by both side, pro-Reds and anti-Reds, to support their beliefs and arguments. At that time, CRES has a full control over every TV stations, and for everyday in the evening they have a daily situation update, in addition to regular 'CRES breaking news' during the day. It was mainly an information warfare. Video clips gradually became the feature of the daily update. CRES spokesperson, Col. Sansern Kaewkamnerd, will play selected video clips and give explanations one by one by himself. Video clips that indicate a possible violence made by the Red Shirts got rerun, and paused, pointed out the violence, repeated.¹¹ Video clips that are controversial, but did not clearly harm the CRES, will be also played with explanations on what is the "truth" and why the rumors are just the misunderstandings or are from distorted sources.¹² For the public reception in Facebook and Twitter, lots of posts show moral supports to the troops, the military, and the government.

From a new media focus group discussion which consists of journalists, scholars, media executives, and new media practitioners, held by Prachatai online newspaper and Center for Social Development Studies, Chulalongkorn University, on September 30, 2010, a large number of participants generally agreed that new media by itself alone has not enough power yet to make an

11 e.g. <http://video.mthai.com/player.php?id=6M1274155740M0>

12 e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qKkhC9AEIc> – CRES announcement after April 10, 2010 crackdown

immediate effect in Thai political sphere, for various reasons including low Internet penetration rate, especially outside city areas. They admitted that new media has already changed Thai media landscape and news production, as shown during the ongoing political conflicts, but traditional media is still in its dominant role. Citizen reporters may spotted incidents and interesting stories, disseminated them through various social media channels. But without the follow up by reporters in mainstream media, either in their broadcast, print, or even online outlet, those stories are hardly make their way to the wider public. This may change in the future, many participants have a hope, but currently it is still not the case.

In normal political situation, where traditional media has a relative press freedom, citizen reporters can be degraded into cheap news gathering labors in which the big media will picked only the elements that fits their ideology and re-disseminated them to the public through their outlets. In 'emergency' political situation, the state will replaced the content gatekeeping role of traditional media. As long as the new gate, for the Internet and other new media, is not widely open for the public yet, the keepers of the existing gates still have a final say on what can be passed. This links to the issues of telecommunication infrastructure ownership. TOT and CAT Telecom are companies who operate two of the biggest Internet international gateways for Thailand. Both of them used to be a state enterprise, and even now their legal status are 'public company', 100% of the shares are owned by Ministry of Finance. Government, either in normal political or emergency situation, still have an influence over the companies' policies.

What's Next After 'Reclaiming' the Space?

At least for Thailand, new media or citizen media revolution cannot replace the need for traditional media and telecommunication infrastructure reform. Without the decentralization of content gatekeeping power, especially for broadcasting, and the decentralized ownership of telecommunication and internet infrastructure, new media, which is structurally still depends on traditional media, will have a very limited ability to challenge the status quo in the political sphere in a nation-wide scale. Online-connected offline activities initiated by Sombat Boonngamanong, an 'horizontal-leader' of Red Sunday activity, shows another, and important, turning point in the online-connected political sphere.

According to Sombat, his Facebook communication is an interpersonal communication to his peers. He keep posting his opinions and thoughts, not only links, and tinkering out loud his idea of Sunday activities. The first gathering of the group, to tied up red clothes around Ratchaprasong intersection sign plate, drew only 50 people. Media reported that people know about this activity from his Facebook (Khaosod 2010). The biggest gathering on September 19, 2010, drew about 10,000 people, an estimation by Sombat himself (Fuller and Mydans 2010). Obviously, the gathering crowd is build upon the existing networks of Red Shirts, and not a sole result from

Sombat's Facebook activities. But it cannot be deny that online campaign, mostly by supporters and not Sombat, play a significant role for the movement. Many artistic plays and satires have been posted to YouTube by lots of people. One of them is about a story of one 'ghost' that went to BTS sky train to haunted to troops stationed on the sky train, a symbolic play asking people "Don't Forget the Ghost", not forget the people killed during the two crackdowns.¹³ They are video clips with strong messages embedded in themselves, not just footages. The words 'reclaiming the space' and 'tightening the space' have been used by CRES for the crackdowns. Red Sunday and the almost self-organized online-offline activities of their supporters make us think about what will happen next, when media space got 'reclaimed' to the dissidents, when the Internet population and information that allowed to flow on it are no longer dominated by people at the center of the power.

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