

Civic Organizations's Communication on Websites for Democratic Empowerment in Thailand¹

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Abstract

The objective of this study, entitled “The Use of Websites by Civic Organizations for Democratic Empowerment among people in Thailand”, is to examine the content relating to democratic empowerment found in the official websites of two civic organizations - Prachatai (www.prachatai.com) and Isranews Agency (www.Isranews.org).

This qualitative research employs content analysis, together with in-depth interviews, to investigate content relating to democratic empowerment found in the websites. Articles chosen for analysis cover the period from August to September 2014. The samples were chosen from the Prachatai and Isranews Agency websites.

The analysis of website content that relate to democratic empowerment demonstrates that the two sites have various organizational structures, with the use of websites as mediums for promoting democratic empowerment. A clear advantage of the websites is the diversification of content to help shape informed citizens, which is universally considered a fundamental factor in democratic empowerment. The examination of the organizational structures of the websites shows that they are independent organizations. The analysis of the content show that content relating to democratic empowerment fits within three themes: governance, way of life, and ideology. For these reasons, it can be concluded that the website content helps promote democratic governance as well as the exercising of human rights. The content also promotes liberal criticism towards Government administration and freedom of expression.

Keywords: Communication, CSOs' Websites, Empowerment

Introduction

Freedom of expression is a basic human right enjoyed by any citizen under a democratic system. The first paragraph of Article 45 in Thailand's Constitution A.D. 2007 provides that: “A person shall enjoy the liberty to express his or her opinion, to make speeches, write, print, publicize and make expression through other means”

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Paragraph two deals with restrictions on the fundamental liberties mentioned in paragraph one. It provides that:

“The restriction on liberty under paragraph one shall not be imposed, except by virtue of the provisions of law specifically enacted for the purpose of maintaining the security of the State, safeguarding the rights, liberties, dignity, reputation, family or privacy rights of other persons, maintaining public order or good morals or preventing the deterioration of the mind or health of the public”

Article 45 stresses that the Government does not have the authority to order the closure of newspapers or other media businesses order to deprive them of the liberty expressed under this Article. Neither does the Government have the power to intervene or censor news presentations, except by virtue of a separate and specific law.

Freedom of the media/press is strongly correlated with the individual’s freedom of expression. Suppression of media freedom makes it more difficult for individuals to enjoy freedom of expression, because people tend to exercise their freedom of speech through the media. In other words, freedom of the press is inseparable from the rights of common people or citizens under a democratic regime. Having a free and empowered media is a fundamental principle of the people’s freedom. The media has a responsibility to offer information and opinions, as well as having the ability to monitor and criticize the Government and its agencies. This means that the media exercises the rights to freedom of speech on behalf of the people (Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 2004). Therefore, the media, under the Thai democratic system, is crucial to upholding the spirit of the Constitution i.e. to serve the public with impartiality, so that society has a reliable source of information and public discourse.

The mainstream media in Thailand still fails to be a reliable source for the people. During the political turmoil experienced in 2008-2010, the mainstream media became the mouthpiece for the Government, offering biased views that undoubtedly reflected the will of the regime. At the same time, the Government ordered some pieces of news considered critical of the regime to be censored. Worse yet, some alternative media organizations were forced to shut down.

A paper entitled “Citizenship in Newspaper Media: A Study of Non-Governmental Organizations and the Consumer Protection Draft Act” was produced by Media Monitor. It investigated 6 newspapers; namely Thairath, Matichon, Daily News, Bangkokbiznews, Post Today and ASTV Manager, and found that none of the newspapers reported anything that could be perceived as content supportive of the movement for the draft Act. Thairath in particular has not reported any news about the draft Act, conduct that is inconsistent with the rights of consumers under article 61 of the 2007 Constitution. An academic in journalism, analyzed the reasons for the media’s negligence of duties and found that it might be partly due to the commercially based nature of the Thai mainstream media. This, she argued, makes it more difficult for the public to have access to information and share opinions. Therefore, space for public participation and communication at civil society level has been compromised. (Pirongrong Ramasoota, 2011)

A paper which focused on government interference in the media, entitled "Measures to prevent and resolve government interference in media" written by Jareeya Khongma (2011) found that the reasons for the interference of successive Thai governments stems from

their desire to use the media as a mouthpiece for government policies and achievements - in order to maintain loyalty among core voting blocs. This includes the use of the media as a tool to convince people to agree with government policy, while preventing the media from forming attempts to challenge the government. The study found six patterns of how Thai governments, along with commercial influences, interfere with the media in Thailand 1) interference through use of media advertising budgets, 2) interference through personal relationships with key media figures, 3) Media interference through monopolizing or taking over shares of media companies 4) interference through giving of concessions to media outlets 5) interference through the legal system, and 6) Media interference from government agencies. Such interference in the media results in limited reporting pertaining to the actual work of the Government's and its administration. The credibility of the media, journalists and media professionals is compromised by this interference. The media has eventually begun to censor itself. Moral support given to Media professionals' has been compromised. Finally, the public is deprived of their right to be truly informed.

Analyzing the current situation in the media using the Role of the Media Theory finds that the current mainstream media (including television, radio and newspapers) is dominated by capitalists and the capitalist system. This potentially dictates the nature of news reporting as commercial interests lead to biased reporting and the omitting of crucial information. Meanwhile, current communications technologies, including the print media, radio, television and the Internet, are more developed than ever. These developments gave birth to the "New Media", which is a type of media that is highly independent. Kent Wertime and Ian Fenwick gave a definition of the New Media as a media that offers content in a digital format and possesses five essential freedoms 1) Freedom from time constraints, 2) Freedom from border restrictions, 3) Freedom from size restrictions 4) Freedom from format restrictions and 5) Freedom from marketers. These freedoms lead to consumers gaining the ability to create and control content themselves. Due to lower costs of production, people can essentially create their own media. Everyone can easily access new media via mobile phones and the Internet. The decreased credibility of mainstream media indirectly accelerates the emergence of alternative online media, which offers consumers alternative content and brings different perspectives.

In theory, alternative media refers to media that openly challenges the power of political institutions. The alternative media campaigns for continuous in depth examinations of traditional values and societal status quos. It has a relationship with key political players in the sense that it represents a social and political ideology that is outside the framework of mainstream political consensus in the parliamentary system. The alternative media provides a space to communicate opinions that are otherwise overlooked. It also focuses on issues of marginalized groups who have very little bargaining power and are usually neglected by the political sphere, and often disregarded by the local and national media (Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 2007). The alternative media offers its role as a provider of otherwise under-the-radar reporting. Alternative media comes in different forms, namely; community radio, newspapers, Local TV and online media. Specific Examples of alternative media include the Isranews Agency and Pattani News. It is observed that alternative media often uses the Internet or social networks as their main method of communication, as this is the channel that, at present, has the greatest reach.⁵

⁵Statistics according to the report of Internet World Stats found that Asia had highest internet activity of 44.8% in 2011. Infographic: Thailand Digital Statistic in September 2012 found that Thailand ranked at No. 16 as a country with most Facebook users with 16,403,280 accounts. The market shares

In addition, social media allows people to participate more fully in government activities. Activists use applied cyber programs for various purposes such as urging to people to vote in elections, demanding the release of media and political prisoners, campaigning against corruption and organizing anti-government marches. Social media can influence the government to take certain action. It could be said that there is an increase in the role people play in the media themselves these days. Civil society organizations also use online media and websites more, forming channels offering alternative news or less popular news. It can be stated that, at times, alternative media plays an even more influential role than the mainstream media. That is because the mainstream media is disempowered the moment it becomes a tool of the state and capitalism. The people start finding mainstream media unreliable. At present, as online media plays a bigger role in increasing social mobilization, civil society organizations' websites are important factors in supporting and facilitating such movements and mobilization. Thus, this study will focus how people become democratically empowered through the media channel of CSOs' websites:

1. Civil society organizations <http://prachatai.com/>
2. Civil society organizations <http://www.isranews.org>

This paper will utilize the concepts of democracy, democratic-participant media theory, democratic empowerment, analysis and communication as the framework for the study. The aim is to bring learned results and knowledge in order to further develop CSOs' websites in order to strengthen democratic systems for people and society.

Objectives

To Study content on the CSOs' website that contributes to democratic empowerment.

Definitions

Civil Society refers to what comes about from the gathering of people with a shared consciousness in order to develop a community or society where they live. It must be voluntary, unsolicited and not based in government. The gathering's goal is social empowerment. In this paper, Civil Society refers to the people who use online methods to make Prachathai and Isranews Agency websites.

Civic Society's Websites or Civil Society's Websites or CSOs' websites refers to online websites that are not owned by the Government or the private sector. The websites are nonprofit based. In this paper, CSOs' websites refer to <http://prachatai.com/> and <http://www.isranews.org/>.

Content refers to **content** and messages provided by CSOs' websites which contribute to democratic empowerment. In this paper, Content refers specifically to articles contains in the websites.

Democratic Empowerment refers to the dissemination of various content and/or information from CSOs' that contributes to the exercising of rights, and the freedom of people to form opinions and make political criticisms. This must be consistent with the 3 aspects of democracy; Democracy in Governance, Democracy in the way of life and Democracy in Ideology.

for online social network in 2013 were as follows, 1. Facebook 58.51% 2. Youtube 24.15% 3. Twitter 1.72%

Literature Review

“The Use of Websites by Civic Organizations for Democratic Empowerment among People in Thailand” used the following concepts/ theories as guidelines.

1. The concept of Civil Society
2. The concept of Civil Society Media
3. The concept of Alternative Media
4. The concept of Democracy
5. The concept of Democratic-Participant Media Theory
6. The concept of Social Empowerment

The researcher of this paper used the concept of Civil Society, Civil Society Media, Media Participation of the Public and concept of Alternative Media to thoroughly understand the key characteristics of Civil Society Media. The concepts of Democracy, the concept of Democratic-Participant Media Theory and the concept of Social Empowerment create a framework for analysis of content on the CSOs’ websites. It must be noted however, that the study of democratic empowerment shall be consistent with the three aspects of democracy i.e. Democracy in Governance, Democracy in Way of Life Living, Democracy in Ideology.

Research Methodology

“The Use of Websites by Civic Organizations for Democratic Empowerment among People in Thailand” is a qualitative study that employ in-depth interview and content analysis.

The paper studied two sampled groups. The first group was two websites of CSOs that are picked using the purposive sampling method. The selection criterion was simply to find current online websites run by Non-Governmental Organizations or organizations without the goal of making a profit. The second groups were academics with expertise in journalism and a sampled group of users from the CSOs’ websites. The paper analyzed content on “articles” that appeared on the CSOs’ websites during the two months of 1st August 2014 – 30th September 2014. As this was the period where significant political changes has took place, this paper wishes to find if there was any change in the nature of content on the CSOs’ websites. The 3 concepts i.e. of Civil Society, Civil Society Media and Democracy will be used as frameworks for the following analysis. Findings will be in the form of descriptive analysis

Results

Content of Democratic Empowerment on the Thai Citizen

The content on Prachatai consists of content that embodies all three aspects of democracy; Democracy in Governance, Democracy in Ways of Life and Democracy in Ideology. On Democracy and Governance, the content most frequently found on the website are writers’ opinions on the Government and its administration, and complaints against the state. This implies that Prachatai focuses on providing a public platform for people to voice their opinions. On Democracy in Ways of Life, most content involves the idea of “hearing people with different opinions”. On Democracy in Ideology, most content talks about social, political and economic equality as well as equality before the law (legislations/ the Constitution). The most frequently found content in regards to Democracy in Ideology also discusses freedom of speech, publishing and advertising (freedom to express opinions). All of these demonstrate Prachatai’s stance as a media outlet that provides a forum for people to share various opinions that are often contrarian in nature. This results in people using the comment section under website articles to voice their thoughts on the Government and its

administration. The people receive diversified information on how the government uses its power from media organizations and social activists, as well as from other authors. These authors include ordinary citizens and people from all walks of life. Visitors use the website as a public online space to share issues impacting their own communities as to hear about issues from others. Visitors gain a better understanding about civil citizenship, law, the Constitution, civic duties, freedom, rights and social opportunities. What stands out in Prachatai's articles is the diversity of content and the broad selection of authors used. Authors from different areas offer insights into different issues. Authors from different professions i.e. civil servants, academics, social activists, farmers, businesspeople, students and other citizens are likely to have different standpoints on issues. The openness and diversification of content and the sharing of ideas helps the reader to become more empowered towards critical thinking, helps them form a more holistic analysis of issues in society

Like the Prachatai website, Isranews Agency offers content concerning Democratic Empowerment that reflects three aspects of democracy. On Democracy in Governance, the most frequent content found was author's opinions towards the Government and its administration. On Democracy in Ways of Life, most content found dealt with the expression of different opinions. On Democracy in Ideology, most content found dealt with legislation, the Constitution, as well as freedom of speech, publishing and advertising (freedom of expression). All of these imply that the readers receive diversified information through these articles, and participate in conversations regarding Government behavior. Readers also have the opportunity to read complaints against the Government and access diversified information about the Government's use, and perhaps abuse, of state power. These characteristics are similar to the Prachatai website. What makes articles featured on the Isra News Agency website unique from Prachatai's, however, is the fact that some of the articles were prepared by the Thai Journalists Association, or by a team of journalists working for Isra Agency News. Thus, the articles are likely to be more extensive and insightful. They also present themselves as well-investigated articles that offer perspectives on issues that differ from those found in the mainstream media. The information is reliable with citable sources which can be traced for fact-checking. The articles are presented in various forms, including news exclusives, editorials and interviews. As a result, the audience receives information that cannot be found in the mainstream media. This contributes to people seeing society and problems from different perspectives, which help give rise to fresher ideas. It can be said that the content of this website helps empower critical thought amongst the people.

Discussions

"The Use of Websites by Civic Organizations for Democratic Empowerment among People in Thailand" found that these two CSOs' websites possess three key strengths

One: Strength in Organizational Structure

Democratic-participant Media Theory objects to anti-monopolization, over-commercialization and centralization of the media. It instead proposes diversified communications, the right to access information, the right to use communications as a channel to build relationships in the community and among sub-cultural groups, and the right to exchange of messages. McQuail proposed 3 roles for the media in a democratic society, and proposed for the media to be structured, and subsequently function, as follows: (McQuail, 2005, cited in Kanjana Kaewthep) freedom of the media/press, diversity in media ownership and diversification of information. Moreover, access to differing opinions and cultures, as the ability to report with freedom and responsibility, are cornerstone to the process of democratic empowerment among people.

The Democratic-participant Media Theory sees that the media must be free from Government and profit seeking influences. In their liberalized and diversified approach to news reporting, especially in the reporting of minority or marginalized groups, the two studied websites are consistent with the Democratic-participant Media Theory. Moreover, the two CSOs' websites have a variety of organizational structures, and are not dominated or influenced by any powerful oligarchs or capitalists. The websites are therefore able to report on a diverse range of content, which is deep in its analysis, as well as news that can potentially open people's minds and therefore contribute to democratic empowerment among the people.

Two: Strength in Democratic Empowerment in Governance, Ways of life and Ideology

Democratic Empowerment in Governance

Pongsak Lekboonyasin (2004) summarized the meaning of democracy as a form of political systems based on sovereignty of the people, which requires the participation of the people. It is also a system where decisions are made by majority votes, but also respect every person's dignity in making decisions

This study found articles on studied websites where the authors wrote them as a way of sharing certain issues with society, or to request for the Government to take greater responsibility. Launching complaints regarding the role of government is considered a civic duty under democratic systems. That is to say, civil citizenship embeds the individual with inherent rights, freedoms and the ability to participation in politics. In law, civil citizenship also covers the issue of individualism and the state. A quality citizen under a democratic regime must have characteristics than that can contribute to the bringing of peace and happiness to the country in democratic ways. These include the possession of freedom, independence, access to and respecting of rights and the following of certain social responsibilities, to name a few (Thawilwadee Bureekul, 2012). Both CSOs' websites reflect a democratic system based on people's sovereignty, expressed through articles that educate on aspects of civil citizenship, government services, the government's use of power, and discussions of elections. All of these contribute to the stabilization of society in a democratic system.

Democratic Empowerment in Ways of Life

The CSOs' websites contribute to democratic empowerment in everyday life by being the medium for people to share different problems and opinions. Some interviewees who are users of these two websites reported that they have used Prachatai and Isra as a means of presenting problems and requesting assistance. They mentioned that the websites offer in-depth reporting, which is a difference from the mainstream media, and they also allow people to share their opinions. This is in line with the concept that, when people have access to various forms of information and to different methods of communications, especially online, people will become "informed citizens" who use logic and reasoning when voting in elections. This will make for greater participation in politics and enable people to have greater autonomy and responsibility, (Barber, 1984 cited by Kriengsak Charoenwongsak) which helps empower the democratic system.

Democratic Empowerment in ideology

The study found that both Prachatai and Isranews websites are consistent with the concept of Democratic Empowerment in Ideology. The websites present content that embodies the rights of the people. Namely, human rights, civil rights, privacy rights, property

rights, the right to obtain legal protections, freedom of speech, freedom of publishing and advertising (freedom of expression), and the freedom to assemble and form associations. Moreover, social, economic and political equality are dealt with through articles or Op-eds that discuss human rights, inequality in Thai society, and critique the government administration of the time.

Therefore, it could be stated that both the CSO's websites help foster the empowerment of democracy in an ideological sense, featuring articles that deal with rights, freedom and equality, as well as through educating visitors on legal issues. This includes making the people aware that the rule of law and the Constitution impact regular people and should be appropriately focused on. The websites also raise people's awareness in how they should protect and fight for their individual and community rights, as well as other issues that are of public interest.

Three: Strength of Empowering CSOs' websites

When applying the study of "The Use of Websites by Civic Organizations for Democratic Empowerment among People in Thailand" to the Prachatai and Isranews websites, it is found that most content deals with reflections on the definition of democracy in relation to other issues.

Larry Diamond (cited in Montakan Tapaneeyangkul, 2002) stated that a functioning civil society is both a goal and a process in the development of democracy. Civil society's role is to create a social space for creating and sustaining the democratic system, because they are more empowered than business groups or groups of people with specific or common commercial interests. Online communications clearly assist in adding strength to civil society as it expands the platforms for people to collectively and freely share their thoughts. It could be said that online media assists in forming civil society networks as people can access information and share ideas without having to rely on the mainstream media, which still has the same mindset of popular content presentation. The anonymous nature of communicating via the internet makes people feel as though they have more freedom to express their thoughts. There is a transitioning of the websites' role from traditional vertical information dissemination, to a more horizontal space where everyone can communicate. This helps to facilitate easier social movements, as it changes the role of the people from playing a passive role as recipients of information, to a more active role in create content, sharing opinions and pressuring the Government regarding important neglected issues. (Montakan Tapaneeyangkul, 2002) called this change "arming the citizen with information and knowledge". These ideas align with the findings that the content featured in Prachatai and Isranews creates democratic empowerment among people. Equipping the media with 3 strengths i.e. Strength in Organizational Structure, Strength in Democratic Empowerment in Governance, Ways of life and Ideology, and Strength of Empowering CSOs' websites, will help create informed citizen who actively participate in political activities, and influence public policy.

Well-versed people who are equipped with a genuine understanding of democracy and a collective interest in developing society and the community in which they live, will contribute to both the strengthening of political movements and an increase in the focus on equality and human rights. These are fundamental qualities that can drive Thailand towards becoming a more functioning democratic society.

Recommendations

There are still many aspects regarding the study of CSOs' websites that can be extended or further studied. The creation of a space for political participation, for example, can be studied in depth, particularly on the nature and different types of political participation. Readers and contributors to the websites can be studied further to find out how the content or knowledge on the websites contributes to actual participation in social activities. The ideal goal is to have findings that can practically strengthen people's political participation.

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