Redefining Power
The Politics of Social Media and Information in Thailand
By Pavin Chachavalpongpun

THAILAND’S political realm has long been dominated by conservative elites. Part of their success in maintaining power was the ability to control the mainstream media, shaping the way in which information was shared, circulated and manipulated. For a long time, both print and broadcast media were exploited to serve a variety of political purposes.

Successive military regimes and the paramount role of the Thai monarchy came to define Thailand’s political structure. From the need to justify countless military coups to the necessity of safeguarding the inviolable status of the monarchy, the Thai media became an important component in guaranteeing the political staying power of the elites. Alongside other powerful tools, such as education and state propaganda, the media could either dampen or stoke a political conflict. As a result, the media emerged as a major political actor in Thailand.

In recent decades, however, Thailand has changed immensely, as is evident by its impressive economic growth, the growing middle class and the arrival of globalization — all of which have significantly transformed the way the media have acted and reacted to political developments. Since 2005, Thailand also has been in a political crisis. The conflict between traditional powers and the new forces led by former

Safe to go back into the Web? Mobile social media has opened up a new world for ordinary Thais to get news and opinion outside the mainstream media at any time. Photo: EPA/Rungroj Yongrit
Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra have effectively shifted the contours of Thai politics. While conservative leaders have continued to rely on the controlled state media to shape information, their opponents have taken advantage of a variety of new media outlets to propagate their own information, and more importantly, to diminish the political domination of the old powers. This essay investigates the rise of social media and its impact on Thai democracy in this critical period.

**THE MEDIA AS POLITICAL ACTOR**

British scholar Duncan McCargo argues that Thai media institutions are simply political actors or political institutions, judging from their role, behavior and actions that inexcusably affect the fate of Thai politics. Indeed, the Thai media have exercised a number of political roles; some have assisted in the process of democratic consolidation, and some have worked in the opposite direction. But this aspect of the Thai media as a political actor is frequently overlooked in the West, where the media space is supposedly limited to its non-partisan, news reporting duty, rather than anything that could be considered overtly “political.” Western journalists often defend their professionalism, while many of their counterparts in developing societies, including Thailand, gleefully accept their role as political players. Kanok Ratwongsakul, a senior reporter at the English-language, royalist-leaning newspaper The Nation, went on stage at a protest site calling for then Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra to resign. He admitted on his Facebook page to taking sides: “During the day, I join the anti-government protest. At night, I work as a journalist. There is nothing wrong with opposing the tyrants.”

For McCargo, the Thai media play three broad types of roles. First, they can be an agent of stability in times of political stalemate, as seen in the impact of the media in helping to force the resignation of General Suchinda Kraprayoon, a general-turned-prime minister, in 1992. In this case, the Thai media helped restore political order. Second, the media can be an agent of restraint, highlighting critical issues so as to alert the government of the day to tackle the problems quickly before they could turn into a serious crisis. And third — and rather relevant to the current political situation in Thailand — the media can act as an agent of social change, a cushion that prevents violence ensuing from change, or indeed in influencing social change in certain directions that could be favorable to either the government or the opposition.

In Thailand today, the emergence of social media is arguably in response to the control of state media by the traditional elites. The battle between different camps of media perfectly illustrates the political nature of Thai journalists and the agencies they work for.

**A HISTORY OF CONTROL**

Thailand abolished its absolute monarchy in 1932, but political power has firmly remained with the traditional elites, not with elected leaders. Together, conservative leaders with close ties to the military and the monarchy successfully constructed a special kind of politics in which civilian rule had to be kept weak and vulnerable or otherwise face the possibility of a military coup. During this period, the state’s most vital agenda was not the promotion of democracy, but the preservation of the interests of the monarchy and the military. In so doing, leaders in key institutions sought to exploit the media to strengthen their power. State media, in particular, became politically institutionalized and served as a mouthpiece mainly for the defense of elite interests, rather than presenting unbiased information, writing critical commentary or discussing significant issues that were of concern to the public.

A series of methods have been used to control the media. First, powerful institutions extended their direct domination over state media, as is evident during military regimes and in the fact that the military has its own broadcast channel (Channel 5). Through this channel, the Thai elites chose what kinds of messages were to be aired, embargoed or restricted, often citing national security as the reason. Through such means, certain information was propagated and manipulated. During the student uprising of October 1976, mainstream newspapers in co-operation with the state found an opportunity to crack down on what was perceived to be a threat to the Thai establishment. When the military launched deadly attacks against students at Thammasat University who were campaigning against the homecoming of a former despot, Thanom Kittichakorn, the print and broadcast media collectively painted the students as enemies of the state and offered distorted reports to provoke public anger against them. Second, the state has used televised media, in particular, to provide a regular platform to showcase the activities of the Thai monarchy. The daily royal news at 8pm has been broadcast for many decades, commanding a one-way and top-down message from the palace to the public on prime-time television. Meanwhile, the media is forbidden from making critical reports on the monarchy, which is protected under a lèse-majesté law. This state that insults against the king, queen, heir apparent and regents are punishable by up to 15 years in prison. The mainstream media have thus possessed a single view of the monarchy as the sole source of political stability, even when the king stayed above politics. Third, those in big businesses with vested interests in a certain kind of political system have long sought to set up private media companies, mostly aimed at maintaining their political and economic status. In addition, influential politi-
cians, high-ranking military officers or the police may have had shares in some leading newspapers, such as Thai Rath or Matichon, confirming the political role of these media institutions.

But while the mainstream media largely served as a political asset for those holding power, there were other realities that began to reshape Thai political and economic structures in ways that eventually led to reform of the media. Although the financial crisis of 1997-1998 hit Thailand badly, the economy recovered quickly. And the boom of recent decades has transformed domestic politics through the expansion of a new middle class now known as “urbanized villagers.”

Another factor helping to accelerate the pace of economic and social change has been globalization. The cross-border movements that are characteristic of globalization have opened up a political space long influenced by the old power-holders. The premiership of Thaksin from 2001-2006 not only challenged the old political structure, but also threatened to recast the way the Thai media functioned. The electoral success of Thaksin — through two landslide election victories based on it, examine issues from alternative viewpoints or even challenge the information controlled by the state. Second, social media makes information “affordable and pervasive,” thus breaking down the walls of information sources once protected by the traditional elites. And third, the rise of social media may contribute toward consolidating the democratization process. This is because social media have the power to expand freedom of expression, which was previously constrained. Information flows are no longer one-way but interactive, resulting in a loosening of the state’s grip on power. Some media outlets that have worked to guarantee the interests of the elites are now being defied by curious, or politically conscious, citizens whose views and opinions are freely voiced on Facebook and Twitter. Political division in Thailand is visible not only on the streets of Bangkok. It is also intense in cyberspace. Thailand now has 28 million people on Facebook, 4.5 million on Twitter and 1.7 million on Instagram. Through Facebook, many Thai citizens have become “active citizens,” articulating their opinions, establishing their own perspectives and asserting and regulating the ways in which they participate in politics. In many ways, the battle to control information has moved away from the domain of traditional media to online social networks. Matthew Phillips, a scholar on modern history, argues that “the act of going to a ballot box and casting your vote is obviously something that is being regulated through current political discourse. That being said, you cannot really see the current discourse without understanding the role of social media.” Politicians, civil society leaders, representatives of independent institutions and a large number of academics turn to Facebook and Twitter as their main platforms to inform the public — to be more specific, their supporters — about the political situation, while convincing them to support their own political agendas. Both former Prime Minis-


and imprisoned for 20 years. Such political campaigns have helped raise awareness and a sense of belonging among social media users, enabling people to participate in political activities directly. Third, through a greater sense of belonging, social media reintroduces a participatory exercise that is fundamental to democratization. Participating in politics no longer exclusively means going to the polling station or joining street protests. It can be done online, possibly more effectively. Fourth, as part of raising awareness, social media has become a forum for critical discussions, dealing with contentious issues that wouldn’t be discussed in the mainstream media. And finally, the explosion of social media has compelled journalists to redefine their role as political actors in a changing media landscape. Their performance is monitored closely because of the greater accessibility of information through social media.

In a forum titled “New Media and Political Mobilization,” organized by the Heinrich Boll Stiftung’s Southeast Asia Regional Office in November 2011, the key messages were clear: the new media have a tremendous role to play both in terms of mobilizing political forces and spreading certain political ideologies that could further polarize society. Among numerous speakers, Somchai Preechasilapakul of Chiang Mai University said the language of online media appeared to feature a lot of verbal violence, reflecting ongoing political and social conflicts in Thai society. That “hate speech” and fierce conversation appear in online media may be because people are confused as to exactly what kind of political system exists in Thailand, and this could possibly be one negative view regarding social media. At the same time, Chonrat Chitnaitham, from the Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, expressed the view that new media have a tremendous influence on the election campaigns of political candidates. It is also difficult to control new media content due to its borderless nature, meaning the Thai authorities cannot effectively intervene. It is up to the public, therefore, to distinguish which groups are telling the truth.

CONCLUSION
In the past, those in power in Thailand were able to maintain their political positions partly because of their successful shuttering of the media space. The flows of information in those days could be described as top-down, self-serving and politically driven. The capacity to control the media was remarkable, particularly during many crucial events such as military coups or the routine work of inculcating a sense of loyalty to the royal institution. The media was indispensable in justifying certain behavior among Thai power-holders — thus earning its title as a political actor — even when such behavior was antithetical to democratization.

Political leaders took control of information, propagating messages that could be exploited to their own benefit politically and economically. But control over the media was seriously challenged by three factors: rapid economic growth, the expansion of the middle class and the advent of globalization. These factors effectively amplified the realm of the media, allowing more actors to enter and redefine the function of journalists. This period coincided with the birth of social media, and gave voice to what could be seen as marginalized, or even radical, political thinking. But obstacles are ahead, involving the safety of using social media, as well as the ever more aggressive responses from Thai power-holders who continue to perceive the shift in the media landscape as a threat to their political position.

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