

The Roles of ASTV Channel on Political Socialization: A Case Study of Maha Sarakham Audiences

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Abstract

The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)'s political rally resisting Thaksin system for 193 days is not only the longest rally in Thailand's history, but it is also the new political phenomenon (i.e. broadcasting the rally for 193 days) in television industry. The mentioned broadcast had audiences from across Thailand and eventually caused a major political change. This is the reason for examining the roles of ASTV channel about political socialization in the case study of the channel audiences in Maha Sarakham where is a political stronghold of the old network of Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra and also the place of the assemblies of people in the name of PAD.

In this research, the political socialization includes political awareness, political attitudes, and political participation. Questionnaires were used with ASTV channel audiences in Maha Sarakham. The findings show that the audiences have medium and high levels of political awareness. Their political attitudes are consistent with information provided by the channel. In terms of political participation, the political discussion of most audiences is also considered as a form of political participation. Moreover, these people are also considered as the one active in receiving political information.

By considering the relationships between demographic characteristics, media openness, and political socialization, it is found that gender and education level have no relationship with media openness and political socialization. Gender, occupation, and income have relationship with media openness and political socialization. These findings are consistent with the analysis results of the difference between demographic characteristics and political socialization indicating that people having different genders and education levels have similar political socialization, while people having different ages, occupations, and incomes have different political socialization.

Keywords: Political Socialization, Media Roles, Thai Politics, Thai TV, Maha Sarakham

Introduction

The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)'s political rally resisting Thaksin system is the longest political rally in Thailand's history starting from 25 May 2008 to 2 December 2008 (193 days). The rally had speeches, dialogs, and new reporting of the mainstays of PAD, former politicians, political activists, scholars, and speakers who had different occupations. Therefore, the rally became the stage that was considered as a university having audiences and participants as its students.

The rally was broadcasted for 24 hours a day on ASTV channel, which is a television media that resists Thaksin system and protects the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand 2550 B.E. as well as constitutional monarchy. It was also considered as the first political phenomenon in Thai television industry.

ASTV station broadcasts the rally on various communication channels such as local cable television channels, DHL satellite television channels, local radio frequencies, and internet. Hence, the number of audiences increases. Currently, ASTV audiences are about 20 million that is the double of the number in 2006 because the political news reported on this channel cannot be found in the government's television channels. Thus, the sales volume of ASTV satellites is continuously increasing. Many ASTV audiences are northeast people who do not only watch the PAD's rally on ASTV channel, but also form political groups in the name of PAD in each province in the northeast region of Thailand. Similar to other regions, the northeast people form the groups, even though their region is used to be the political stronghold of the old network of Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra. Therefore, the conflicts between the people resisting and supporting Thaksin system occur when sub rallies are conducted in each province.

The opposite side of PAD uses violent actions with the PAD supporter as happened in Buriram on 21 July 2008, in Maha Sarakham on 23 July 2008, and in Udon Thani on 25 July 2008. One of provinces that the conflicts occurs is Maha Sarakham, where some ASTV audiences joined the PAD's rally in Bangkok and in this province. Interestingly, the question is why these people think differently from the majority of Maha Sarakham people and support PAD in the environment that is used to be the political stronghold of the opposite side? Even though ASTV channel has disadvantages as compared to free television channels, the number of its audiences is still increasing. This is a new phenomenon of Thai television industry that the channel, ASTV channel, instead of newspapers becomes a media politically influencing audiences.

Objective

To study the roles of ASTV channel on political socialization of Maha Sarakham people (The political socialization refers to political awareness, political attitudes, and political participation)

Methodology

This study analyzed 100 ASTV channel audiences in Maha Sarakham who had watched the People's Alliance for Democracy's rally on this channel for 193 days by

using questionnaires. The questionnaires are divided into three parts: demographic characteristics, media openness, and political socialization. The research aims to examine the relationships between demographic characteristics, media openness, and political socialization.

Findings

By analyzing the questionnaires completed by 100 ASTV channel audiences in Maha Sarakham who have watched the People's Alliance for Democracy's rally on this channel for 193 days, it reflects their political socialization and the relationships between their demographic characteristics, media openness, and political socialization.

By considering the relationship between demographic characteristics and media openness of ASTV channel audiences in Maha Sarakham at the significant level of 0.05, it is found that gender and education level has no relationship with media openness, while age, occupation, and income have the relationship with media openness.

While there is the relationship between demographic characteristics and political socialization of ASTV channel audiences in Maha Sarakham at the significant level of 0.05, it is found that gender and education level have no relationship with political socialization. Age, occupation, and income have the relationship with political socialization.

These findings show that the relationships between media openness, political socialization, and demographic characteristics are consistent. In other words, media openness and political socialization do not depend on gender and education level. Both genders can similarly receive news and learn about politics. It cannot be identified that which gender can learn more. Although most people who participate in the PAD's rally in Bangkok are female, it cannot be concluded that female participants are interested in political more than male participants because the awareness, attitudes, and participation of the men who do not participate in the rally cannot be identified.

Similarly, the findings show that education level has no relationship with media openness and political socialization. In other words, it does not mean that people who have low education level cannot learn politics nor have no political knowledge. By receiving news from televisions instead of newspapers, the people who have low education level can learning politics, especially from ASTV channel same as those who have high education level.

This issue can refute many research results indicating that newspaper media openness has positive correlation with public affairs more than television media openness. One research found that the correlation between the space of news provided in newspaper and the remembered contents of news is stronger than the correlation between the news reporting periods on television and the remembered contents of the news (Satian Choeypatub, 2009: 306). The findings of this research indicate that if television media report qualitative news as in newspaper and audiences regularly receive news, then they will be able to learn politics without having to read newspapers.

By considering gender, occupation, income, media openness, and political socialization in details, it is found that the relationships between these factors are consistent.

The audiences, 18 – 25 years, who are students and have income 5,000 – 10,000 baht have less media openness as compared to other people who have different ages, occupations, and incomes.

This can be concluded that the people aged 18 – 25 years lack of interest in politics as can be seen from their political awareness and political attitudes. Mostly, their answers in the questionnaires are “Not sure”. This is consistent with the concept of knowledge gap that explains about education by giving an example of the respondents of a research answering “Do not know”.

These respondents are called as “neutral people who care nothing” (Satian Choeypatub, 1997). This answer is similar to “Not sure”. This can be summarized that the people who have less media openness do not have much political knowledge. However, it cannot be concluded that these people have low education level because the previously mentioned findings show that education level has no effect on political socialization. Moreover, as they are not interested in political news or think that politics is not directly related to their lives or occupations, they are not interested in political participation.

Nonetheless, by considering the answers in the questionnaires, it is found that the main reason for watching ASTV channel is to know the unknown news. This shows that the audiences believe that good civilians have to follow news (Satian Choeypatub, 1997), especially the audiences who watch ASTV channel everyday and many hours a day. Their interest is also considered as their political participation that is part of political socialization.

Other interesting issues from the questionnaires are the differences between demographic characteristics and political socialization/knowledge of ASTV channel audiences in Maha Sarakham. It is found that the data about gender and education level similarly have medium level of political awareness, while the data about age, occupation, and income have different levels of political awareness. Nevertheless, there are no data in any group that indicates low level of political awareness. It can be considered that regularly watching ASTV channel strongly affect political awareness.

Another interesting issue is about age. It is found that the people aged more than 55 years have the highest political awareness followed by the people aged 46 -55 years. This indicates that old people have more interest in political news than other people because most of them do not have to work or resign from their jobs. Therefore, they have more time to receive political news and think that politics directly affects their lives. So, they can remember more contents of news reported on ASTV channel than other people. This finding is relevant to the fact that most people, both men and woman, participating in the rally in Bangkok are middle aged and old aged.

The issue of ASTV channel audiences who have different education levels similarly have medium level of political awareness indicates that education level has no effect

on political awareness. The researcher considers that official education is not an obstacle for recognizing politics. This is consistent with the speeches of the mainstays of PAD that considered the PAD's rally on Ratchadamnoen road providing knowledge from scholars, knowledgeable people, and experts for 193 days as "Ratchadamnoen University". Regardless of education level, the people who participate in the rally and ASTV channel audiences are all students who can equally receive news from the rally. Hence, the mentioned finding is not consistent with the hypothesis of knowledge gap (Satian Choeypratub, 2009) predicting that the people having higher education level will learn faster than those having lower education level.

There are obstacles for political awareness that are the variety and contents of news. That is, if people are not aware of political news, then media will only report some parts of the news. Thus, the people will not be aware more of the news. If the people can receive the variety and complete contents of news, then they can be aware more. Because of these obstacles, ASTV station tries to donate ASTV satellites to the people in rural areas in order to provide them opportunities to receive more news.

In terms of occupation, the group of people who are housemaids has the highest level of political awareness followed by the group of agriculturists and resigned government officers. By considering the answers in the questionnaires in details, it is also found that these groups of people have quite high frequency of receiving news (i.e. watch television every day and many hours a day). Therefore, they can remember more contents of the news reported on ASTV channel than other groups. This indicates that frequently, regularly, and intentionally watching ASTV channel can make the audiences learn and be aware of politics. In other words, it is because those groups of people have more free time than other groups of people. So, they spent their free time to watch television more than other groups.

In terms of income, it is found that the people who have income higher than 40,000 baht have the highest level of political awareness followed by the ones having income of 30,000 – 40,000 baht. This indicates that the people having high income have high level of interest in politics, regularly receive political news, and can remember many contents of the news reported on ASTV channel. In details, these groups of people have a similar reason for watching ASTV channel. The reason is they do not support Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra. This can be summarized that the people having high income think that Thaksin system affect their lives and national security that will eventually affect their incomes.

The researcher found that ASTV channel does not only provide facts from the PAD's rally, but also provides political knowledge and attitudes as well as opportunities for participating in politics. Even though Maha Sarakham has small number of ASTV channel audiences, the results show that the audiences receive news, have new attitudes, and participate in politics. This reflects the important roles of ASTV channel about political socialization. Especially, ASTV channel is also the medium of the communication between the people who are the PAD's supporters and the PAD's mainstays and between the PAD's supports across the country for the continuation of political activities as Sondhi Limthongkul said that "if there is no ASTV channel, then it will be difficult for the PAD to assemble" (Sondhi Limthongkul, 2009). Television plays a role in broadening the sense of group identity and establishing the reference

norms and the standards of the social group with which the person identifies. (Dlutsky, 1991)

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings of political awareness indicate that behavior of regularly receiving news from ASTV channel with/without reading newspapers and receiving news from other media make the audiences to have more political knowledge or high level of political awareness. This awareness was caused by watching the programs (i.e. speeches, dialogs, discussion, news, and explanation) of ASTV channel for 193 days. Any television media has not done the rally broadcast for 193 days.

Also, the findings can refute the beliefs and other research findings indicating that newspapers provide more qualitative news than other media and newspaper readers can remember more contents and knowledge about public affairs than television watchers. ASTV channel proves that it can provide qualitative information and broadcast live rally that can clearly show the real situations; for example, the dissolution of the rally on 7 October 2008 in front of the congress; the people participating the speech in the government house are fired by the officers of the Metro Police Bereau with M79 granades; and the work team of ASTV studio are fired with AK rifles while filming in the studio. Those situations were repeatedly broadcasts in the programs of ASTV. That is to say, it is an advantage of television media as compared to newspapers.

In terms of political attitudes, ASTV channel has roles in changing its audiences' attitudes. In other words, some audience might support or had neutral attitude towards Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra before watching ASTV channel. After receiving facts about Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra for a long time, they started comparing the facts from ASTV channel and that from other media and agreeing with that from ASTV channel. Eventually, their feeling and attitudes towards Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra are changed, while their attitudes towards PAD become more positive. This is consistent with the concept of the influence of mass media on people's opinions and politicians' images that news is part of political images. Therefore, people currently are influenced by the mass media. Also, the mass media have influence on media openness (Satian Choeypratub, 1997).

After some audiences who have negative attitudes towards Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra receive the information from ASTV channel, their attitudes become more negative. That is, their attitudes are confirmed by the information. Also, they are ready to believe in new information and express their opinions that are difficult to be changed. This is similar to the concept of Key (Key, 1961) who stated that the important influence of mass media on political attitudes confirms the existing attitudes. Partly, this is because people usually are interested in mass media if the information provided by the media is relevant to their thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes. On the other hand, they will not be interested in mass media if the information is not relevant to them.

With thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes that have been existed for a long time, audiences interpret information under their environments. That is, if ASTV channel provides information about suspicious politicians in an area that politicians usually buy votes

or commit corruption, then the people in the area will interpret that the information is true and trustable because they already know the current situations. For instance, the people in Maha Sarakham decided to join the rally or expressed their resistance of the government in various forms. This is consistent with the questionnaire answers of the people applying the information provided by ASTV channel to their decision to join the rally.

There are many previous research findings showing that the mass media generally has no direct effect on people. The mass media reach opinion leaders, and then the leaders transfer the contents from the media to people influenced by them or searching for the contents from them. However, the findings of this research show that the mass media has direct influence on people. After receiving the information from ASTV channel, the audiences can act and express their opinions by themselves as can be seen from the call of the PAD's mainstays for doing activities (e.g. Daokrajay activity, civil disobedience activity, symbolism activity, or donation activity in Bangkok by ASTV station) that are quickly answered by the audiences without the actions of the opinion leaders.

ASTV channel often has the role in sparking people to think and pay attention to political news, especially the discourses about Prachabhiwat government and new politics that are accepted by people and an ally resisting old politics as well as replace other news in other media.

Furthermore, ASTV channel also indicates that peaceful rallies are effective political activities as the concept of Satian Choeypratub (2009) that the mass media provide examples of political participation by reporting political behaviors and actions. Also, the mass media indicate that which political activity is effective or ineffective.

Nevertheless, the roles of ASTV channel about political socialization are part of political awareness and attitudes. While other political participation such as political rallies, political symbolism activities, and opinion expression are not enough (there are only political discussions between people who know each other), the people discussing about politics show that they are active in receiving political news and discussing about politics. Consequently, they are in the group that can be easily affected by politics (Schoenbach & Weaver, 1985).

By conducting fieldworks, it is found that the number of Maha Sarakham people watching ASTV channel is low. Thus, the channel does not have important roles about political socialization of those people, especially political movements as compared to other provinces in Thailand. And with the participation of political expression manifest, there might be strong resistance from a greater number of Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra's supporters in such areas including the inhibition of some government officials that support the Thaksin's nominated government.

It can be concluded that despite the political communication through a satellite ASTV plays a role of political socialization, overall, it does not have enough power to push for political change at the national level. ASTV is the only spark of political socialization to those who need a variety of information only. If the matter still cannot

be reached, whether by intention or not, it's hard to result in the perception of political attitudes and participation in democracy truly.

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