

***The Influence of Online Social Communication Networks on the Agenda of the
Front Page of Thai Newspapers***

Kritiya Rujichok, Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University, Thailand

The European Conference on Media, Communication and Film 2015
Official Conference Proceedings 2015

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The influence of social communication networks in the online world is the new empirical phenomenon spreading across the world. For example- in terms of the U.S. presidential election in late 2008, many scholars agreed that the media and the new online media were the key factors to Barack Obama becoming the first black President of the United States. Micah Sifry, a co-creator of the social-social blog in the States, said that Obama's social success was in part the result of his understanding of the power of the online network that he created to support his campaign. Sifry called it techpresident.com.

In addition, David Almay, one of the internet service team members and a communication networker in the White House between March 2005 and May 2007 said Obama understood the concept of the power of the online community's communication network from the beginning. Obama focused on sending messages to Twitter every day (Seathapong Malisuvan, 2007: 3) and understood the dynamic interactions between multiple communities and it use n online strategy to create the Obama campaign.

Not only does social networking have a powerful impact on politics in the United States, but it has come to significantly affect politics in Malaysia as well. For example, after recent elections in 2013, the Malaysian Prime Minister admitted that the ruling coalition lost seats to the opposition in a landslide because the government did not pay enough attention to social networks.

Additionally, social networks have had a considerable influence on politics in Thailand. An obvious example is from the social crisis in April 2007 when a group of people who did not agree with the "Red Shirts" gathered to protest against the government. This event resulted in the government dissolving parliament and holding a new election quickly. The 400,000 protesters communicated using Facebook and organized their gatherings through online media (Facebook) which resulted in social change in Thailand.

Social networks are not only important for social communication, but they are also very popular for both consumers and businesses, for example, with the dissemination of information and images about a business and its activities, plus a place to post comments and share experiences. It can be seen that online media serves as a source of vast amounts of data to suit the needs of users when they want to send new messages. (Thanapruek, Chamarath, 2007)

The purpose of this research is to study the influence of social networks on the agenda setting in the front pages of Thai newspapers by using qualitative and quantitative analysis. For the qualitative method, the journalists who made the news selection were interviewed and for the quantitative research, a number of social news that appeared in the online media and printed on the front page of the newspaper was surveyed. The study used the second edition of the newspapers such as *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* daily. The research was conducted by using the news content for twelve months from February 2011 to 30 January 2012 for twelve months

Literature Review

This section presents the theoretical concepts and research related to the approaches used in the study including the Agenda-Setting Theory, the Spiral of Silence Theory, the Communication Technological Determinism concept, the Computer-Mediated Communication Concept, the Virtual Community concept, and the Public Sphere concept.

The Agenda – Setting Theory was used as a framework to study the effects of online social communication on the decision to select news items on the front page of two newspapers which set the social agenda in Thailand. The principles and concepts of the origin of the Agenda- Setting were studied in detail: determining the coverage area, selecting the featured coverage area, adding the news content, reducing the news content, following up the news in the following day, and deciding the period in the news.

Initially, Lippman (1922) formulated the Public Opinion concept and this later led to the Agenda-Setting Theory. He said that the intermediary that created the images of the brain was media. In 1968, McCombs and Shaw proved this theory again by using extensive research to verify the media's role in a number of Agenda-Setting concepts. The research aimed to determine the effectiveness of the media in reporting news about the presidential election in 1968 and, as a result, expanded the concepts of Agenda-Setting. Based on this prior research, it can be concluded that the agenda-setting role of mass media set social issues to the audience in the general public.

In addition, journalism scholars, Dearing and Rogers (Dearing and Rogers, 1996, pp. 3-6), said the Agenda-Setting process had three major components. First, Media Agenda is an issue which receives media attention and the media determine which issue is important enough to be presented to the public. Second, public importance issue (Public Agenda) is an issue of public attention when the public realizes that an issue is important to themselves and society as a whole. Third, an issue that policymakers focus (Policy Agenda, is from the objectives of governmental authorities which can be expressed in the form of various policies.

Another important factor which explains the role of Agenda Setting is the "degree of concentration of the press which determines the concentration of news in three ways. The first is about the addition or expansion of the news and then, more generally, the news position, the news area and the font size which indicate the importance of the news compared to others. The second is the frequency of the news coverage which is the number of days an item is on the front page of the newspaper. This is important because the more often a news item appears; the more reinforces the audience's interest. The last one is the period of news reporting which is nearly as significant as the frequency. It measures the number of days from the first to the last reporting of a news item.

This is the role of Agenda-Setting on the front page of newspapers. In this research, it will be used as one of the theories in the theoretical framework in order to examine the influence of online news on the front page of *Thairat* and *Matichon* newspapers. The framework of the study is the number of days that each online issue was reported on the front page of the newspaper, how the newspaper followed up the issue and who

influenced the news agenda on the front page of the newspaper the public (public agenda), media (media agenda) and government (policy agenda).

The second theory that was used as a framework for this study was the Spiral of Silence that appears to affect social communication in online media and the front page. -Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. German political scientist explained the principle and theory of the Spiral of Silence in 1974. Spiral of Silence is the term meant to refer to the tendency of people to remain silent when they feel that their views are in opposition to the majority view on a certain subject.

The theory posits that there are a few reasons that they remain quiet. They are, for example. They are, for example, fear of separation when a large group in the community thinks that the person has a different view from the majority position and/or fear of acts of vengeance or greater separation, in the sense that expression of thoughts or views might lead to a negative effect worse than mere separation (loss of a job, social standing, etc.).

The theory relies on the basic instincts of people combined with their social context when they are in a situation where there is a difference of opinion with the existing view. The spiral is created or reinforced when someone with the perceived majority opinion speaks out confidently in support of this majority opinion and people in the minority begin to be more and more distanced from a place where they are comfortable to voice their views and start to experience the aforementioned fears. The spiral effect can continue to impact the minority people who have a different opinion from the majority. Those people who have an underground idea may express it publicly later if they have chance and it may provoke a violent situation.

The weakest parts of the spiral are those of the vocal minority and the internet. First, the internet apparently levels the playing field, where a minority opinion would not be felt by the individual as a minority opinion and might be voiced in that showground whereas the individual would have not been so vocal in another place of public discourse. Second, there are some individuals in the vocal minority with unusual ideas, like cats need the right to vote, that they constantly express who are seemingly outside of the effects of the Spiral of Silence.

This study examined the factors that affect the agenda issue from the spiral of Silence theory, for example, the attention of journalists, editors and receivers that affects the news agenda on the front page of newspapers. The data from in-depth interviews were examined. An expected result is that the interest of these individuals becomes the sound of silence that influences the agenda on the front page of the newspapers.

Technological determinism concept

The technological determinism concept was summarized by Merritt Roe Smith as the principle of technology as a major force in society. Later, this idea was developed by Bruce Bimber who stated that technological development determined social change. Technological development changes the ideas of people and how they cooperate with others and can be described as a three-word logical proposition: "Technology determines history." Michael L. Smith believed that social progress is driven by technological innovation, which in turn follows an "inevitable" course. This idea of progress or doctrine of progress is centralized around the idea that social problems can be solved by technological advancement, and this is the way that society moves forward.

In addition, technological determinism was defined by Croteau and Hoynes as an approach that identifies technology, or technological advances, as the central causal element in processes of social change. As technology is stabilized, its design tends to dictate users' behaviors, consequently diminishing human agency. This stance, however, ignores the social and cultural circumstances in which the technology was developed. Sociologist Claude Fischer (1992) characterized the most prominent forms of technological determinism as "billiard ball" approaches, in which technology is seen as an external force introduced into a social situation, producing a series of ricochet effects.

Before acknowledging that a society or culture interacts with and even shapes the technologies that are used, a technological determinist view, as expressed by Neil Postman, holds that "the uses made of technology are largely determined by the structure of the technology itself, that is, that its functions follow from its form." However, this is not to be confused with the inevitability thesis by Daniel Chandler which stated that once a technology is introduced into a culture, what follows is the inevitable development of that technology.

Virtual community concept

The virtual community concept was used in this research as it is one of the online community concepts. A virtual community is an area of mutual exchange of ideas crossing geographical and political boundaries in order to pursue mutual interests or goals. One of the most pervasive types of virtual communities operates under social networking services consisting of various online communities.

Haward Rheingold wrote the book with the same title of the terms of virtual community. The discussion in his book covers Rheingold's adventures on The WELL, computer-mediated communication and social groups, and information science including the use of internet, chat rooms and electronic mailing lists by a large society of members from around the world belonging to a virtual community.

The result of early research based on media-based communities was concerned with the nature of reality that existed through the media. This research put the result into the field of social science under the name of Ontology.

Another researcher, Benedict Anderson explained in 1983 that the imagined communities concerning the different technologies, example, and national newspaper, that the virtual communities showed the development of national and regional consciousness in the early nation states.

In addition, in 1981, a variety of social and professional groups were explained by Plato as the interaction between community members from a person and simply official such as email distribution list operates on an informational stage. In the mid-1990s, the proliferation of virtual communities in the form of social networking services and online communities was fostered by the explosive diffusion of the Internet. Technologies with the community had be analyzed clearly the virtual community. Plato assumed that social interaction between exchange and users online was depended upon online communities.

The concept of the virtual community is one of the variables in the study to examine how online content is used to bring about the creation of a virtual online world. In addition, in-depth interviews of editors and journalists were used to verify if they check whether the contents of the online news are propaganda that could be used to influence this virtual community.

Method

In the research, we have two methods were used for collecting data: quantitative and qualitative method. For quantitative, the researcher chose the online social issues that were the most commented on each day from the *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* Facebook pages for twelve months between 1 January and 31 December 2011 for a total of 356 pages. Next, the news items which was chosen from online and that was with the most commented on was checked to see if it was presented on the front pages of both *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* newspapers. After that, the news items that were presented on the front pages of both newspapers were examined to determine the frequency of news reporting and the news position on the front page.

Afterwards, based on the Agenda-Setting Theory, we examined the type of communication was examined from the online news that was selected for the front page of the newspapers. Communication patterns were divided into three categories: cognitive communication, interactive communication, and expressive communication. After that, each communication style was ranked according to frequency and percentage, from the least to the most frequency.

For the qualitative method, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of twelve interviewees: three editors and three journalists who work on the front page of *Thai Rath* and three editors and three journalists who work on the front page of *Matichon*. For the interviews, we conducted a standardized interview about the process of news making after the decision to select the social online news for the front of the newspaper was conducted: how to verify the content, sources, credibility and objectivity, as well as how to determine the news positions and follow-up, according to Agenda-Setting.

For data collection, *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* daily newspapers were chosen to represent quantitative and qualitative newspapers, respectively. *Thai Rath* is the best-selling quantitative newspaper in Thailand and it presents qualitative and quantitative news on the front page. Likewise, *Matichon* is the best-selling qualitative newspaper in Thailand and its reports include qualitative and quantitative news on the front page. Moreover, the period of February 2011 to January 2012 was chosen for this study because it was the time when online news became more popular. In addition, an initial survey found that the most popular online news tended to appear on the front page of daily newspapers.

Intended for in-depth interview, we selected the question for news processing on the front page of newspaper such as, news processing in editorial room: how to select some issue from online news and what is the theme to set the coverage area on the front page, determining the level of continuity in reporting: how to decide on the online news in the following days and why to bring to an end presenting the following news and how to evaluate whether or not online news can set the agenda on the front page. For in-depth interviews, the interviews will give examples of news that has ranked in the quantitative methods

Research results

The study results are presented as follows. There were five main results for the qualitative method from extensive interviews with sub-editors and reporters from both *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* newspapers about the influence of social online communication networks on the agenda of the front page of Thai newspapers: first, news processing in the editorial room; second, validating the accuracy of content before reporting; third, setting area on the front page; fourth, determining the level of continuity in reporting, and fifth, evaluating whether or not social online news can set the agenda on the front page.

First of the qualitative results is news processing in the editorial room. Both newspapers choose the news issues during the daily editorial staff meetings. To start, the online reporters discuss issues from various news areas in the editorial room. The consideration of the choice of social online news items is based on the same criterion as the newspaper. For example, editors will check the source credit and content reliability from other sources to prevent rumors, misinformation or defamation. Next, after selecting the online news in the editorial room, the online news issues that are selected will be sent to the concerned news desk, such as the online news concerning economic news will be directed to the economic desk. Later, the economic desk will check the news content including the accountability, the other sources and the credibility. Then, the news will be sent to the front page desk where it will be edited and checked again by the front page editor before its area is set on the front page.

The second of the qualitative results is validating the accuracy of the content before reporting it on the front page. For the two newspapers, the social online news items that are transferred to the concerned desk should be checked again to confirm the accuracy of the information before being reported on the front page of the newspaper. For example, SimSimi¹ website news is the most popular player in Thailand in social media that is reported by online media, including Facebook and websites. SimSimi news receives a lot of comments from online readers and *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* editors often choose it for the front page of their newspapers. Before newspaper reporting, this news is sent to the concerned desk (Information Technology desk, IT). The IT desk has to check the accuracy of the content by comparing it with one or more websites. For example, the IT desk editor compares the content of SimSimi news with two or more websites to determine if they reported the same or different content.

In addition to examining the accuracy in the above situations, for other online news, if the editor is unsure about some facts or information, such as a number, a date, or a name of a victim related to the news item, the editor will ask the reporter to confirm the data. If this happens, the reporter will need to contact other sources to make certain the information is correct.

In the following example of the news about a member of parliament voting more than one time in parliament by using the voting cards from other members of parliament, the editor should ask the reporter about the facts, such as how many members of

¹ **SimSimi** was created by ISMaker in 2002 as an artificial intelligence chat program. In Thailand, the program has led to argument and protest for some of its content, including swear words and has been disapproved of by leading politicians. SimSimi is pronounced "shim-shimi". It comes from the word "bored" in Korean, which is *Simsim* (심심). This program works on Android, Windows Phone and iOS systems.

parliament were involved, who they are, etc. For inquiry before reporting, the editor should require more than one source to check the reliability and facts. Additionally, the editor should inquire about the various comments from the concerned sources, such as the opposition politician who saw this event, parliament technician, etc.

In the following days, if the news content is continued on the internet or other media, the editor will check the progressive content and report it on another day. For example, if the parliament police can find the suspected politician who voted more than once in parliament by using other voting cards, it will be reported on a subsequent day.

The third of the qualitative results is setting area on the front page. After the concerning desk has already processed the accurate online news content, the front page editor will edit and check it again before its area is set on the front page. For setting on the front page, the editor will examine the importance of the issues and compare them with other news that have been prepared for the front page of the newspaper and determine the priorities of the issues.

For instance, on the first day of the SimSimi news item, *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* reported that it found that a group of teenagers used profanity on the SimSimi website. In the following days, with the progress of the news, it was reported that the Minister of Culture received complaints from parents that children had much more aggressive behavior after they joined this program. On the last day, the story was updated with the news that the behavior of SimSimi users would change in a positive way because the website would not allow users to use swears words. In this case, if this news story had continued, the editor would have reported it on a following day.

For editor correction, the accuracy of the online news data is reviewed again, such as the spelling of the source's name. The front page editor will also check the contents using logic, common sense and previous experience. For example, with news about a nude clip that was opened during a meeting of parliament, *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* editors should check the concerned sources before reporting, such as members of parliament who were involved in these events or who were in attendance at that time. It is very important for the press to verify the accuracy of news, especially with news that can affect the country's reputation.

The fourth qualitative result is to determine the level of continuity in reporting. The front page editor should check the importance of news content each day such as news progress impacts, changes in the events or the final outcome of the news. If the issue has just comments, the editor will reduce the area of presentation on the front page of the newspaper. In addition, if the issue has only comments and they do not affect the events, they will be presented as an article or report on another page of the newspaper. For instance, the news about "Twin Punch Varajath" (a lecturer at Thammasat University) was reported continuously by *Thai Rath* and *Matichon*. The first day, the news about the twin brothers' sharp shooting skills was reported and it was presented as the biggest news on the front page. In addition, *Thai Rath* also presented Varajath news with a photo of the twins in the coverage and added to the news content by reporting that in the past, one brother was arrested for carrying concealed fire arms and now, the other was charged with assaulting Varajath.

The last qualitative research result is regarding the evaluation of whether or not social online news can set the agenda on the front page. Songporn Srisuvan, the *Matichon* front page editor, said, "If the social online news can set the agenda on the front page, it will depend on the importance of the news and public attention. If the issue ends, journalists will stop reporting it. In contrast, if the news also gets attention from the public, it will get ongoing presentation. In addition, if the news has less progression, it will be presented on another newspaper page."

Discussion

Social online news can set the front page agenda if it is important and gets public attention as determined by the front page editor. In addition, the role of social online news also determines critical awareness and can set the agenda for the newspaper audience.

It can be concluded that the social news online influences the news agenda to the public by media agenda and public agenda based on Agenda-Setting Theory. (Dearing and Rogers mentioned that media agenda and public agenda are the elements of agenda setting in 1996) In addition, social online media also serves to determine the degree (news area) of the coverage. The last point is that the mission of the media is to try to act as a filter of news (media gate keeping) that aims to influence the audience according to an agenda.

For reducing the news priority of social online news on the front page, the front page editor would reduce the level of importance of social online news if the news did not progress and was not consistent. This concept of consistency is from Windahl, Signizer and Olson's concept about the effect of news content.

In addition, online news that was reduced in the level of importance in the newspaper on the following day was the online news that also had fewer comments on the following day. Online news that has a reduced priority will also be reduced in terms of the space on the front page of the newspaper or may be moved to a related page. The reduction of online news on the front page of the newspaper is part of the Agenda-Setting Theory.

In addition, technology development has impacted newspaper content because information flows quickly in online media. To create a commercial advantage over the online news content, the newspaper should adjust the news content with additional depth, width, fairness, human interest and objectivity. Consistent with Chaffee and Metzger's study, it can be concluded that technology has caused changes in traditional media.

In addition, the importance of social information can be seen in the creation of social networks that can be linked by virtual networks to create virtual communities. This shows the power of audience comments that can be considered "the sound of silence" of the social network, consistent with Marshall McLuhan's study of virtual communication.

Reference

Allee, Verna.(2008). Value Network Analysis and Value Conversion of Tangible and Intangible

Assets. (1974). Journal of Intellectual Capital Intellectual Capital, Vol. 9 No. 1, (p.5-24).Boissevain, Jeremy. Friends of Friends : Network, Manipulators and Coalitions. Oxford : Basil Blackwell.

Borgatta, (1992). Edgar F. ; and Borgatta, Marie. Encyclopedia of Sociology. (Volume 4 : S-Z Index). New York : Macmillan Publishing Company,. Brayan, (1998).

Cathy; Tsagarousianou, Rosa and Tambini, Damian. Cyberdemocracy: Technology. Cities and Civic Network. London:Routledge, p. 15

Bruce, Steve ; and Yearley, Steven. (2006). The SAGE Dictionary of Sociology. London : SAGE Publication Ltd.

Cheong, Internet adoption in Macao.W.H. (2002) Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 2002 Vol. 7 Issue 2. Document Type: article, online,

Dearing James W. and Rogers, Everett M. Agenda-Setting. (1996). Thousand Oaks Calif.: Sage Publication,

December, John. (2002). "What is Computer-Mediated Communication..." <<http://www.december.com/john/study/cmc/what.html>> online, Emerson, Richard. Social Exchange Theory.Available : <http://www.Annualreviews.org/aronline>, 1976.

Ethier, Jason.(2006). Current Research in Social Network Theory.Available : <http://www.ccs.neu.edu/home/perrolle/archive/Ethier-SocialNetworks.html>, 2006.

Katz, Vikki S : Understanding ethnic media : producers, consumers, and societies / Matthew D. Matsaganis, Vikki S. Katz, Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach; CL, Comm ; 302.2308 M434U, 2011.

Kilduff, Martin;and Tsai, Wenpin. Social Networks and Organizations.London : SAGE Publication Ltd, 2003.

Lin, C.A. "Audience Fragmentation in a Competitive Video Marketplace." Journal of Advertising Research 34 (1994): pp.1-17.

McCombs, Maxwell E.; Shaw, Donald L. Public Opinion Quarterly. Summer72, Vol. 36 Issue 2, p176-187. 12p. 6 Charts.

McGuigan, Jim. "Culture and the Public Sphere". London: Routledge 1996, p. 182.

McQuail, Dennis. McQuail's Mass Communication Theory, London; Sage Publications. 2005.

Morris, Merrill & Ogan, Christine. "The Internet as Mass Medium" Indiana University. <<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol1/issue4/morris.html>>. online, 1996.

Neergaard, Helle; Shaw, Eleanor; and Carter, Sara. (2005). The Impact of Gender, Social Capital and Networks on Business Ownership: A Research Agenda. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research*, Vol. 11 No. 5, (p.338-357), 2005.

Noelle-Neumann. *Central Currents in Social Theory: Contemporary Sociological Theory 1920- 2000*, 2000, Vol. 5, p62-72, 11p.
Nohria, Nitin ; and Eccles, Robert G. *Networks and Organizations : Structure, Form and Action*. Boston : Harvard Business School Press, 1992.

Parker, John ; Mars, Leonard ; Ransome, Paul ; and Stanworth, Hilary. *Social Theory: A Basic Tool Kit*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Poster, Mark. "The Net as a Public Sphere?," *Wired Magazine*, Issue 3. 11
<<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/3.11/poster.if.html>>. November online, 1995.

Reid, Elizabeth, "Electropolis: Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat". University of Melbourne,
<<http://www.irchelp.org/irchelp/misc/electropolis.html>>.online, 1991.

Rheingold, Howard. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2000, p. 80.

Ritzer, George. *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots : The Basics*. New York : McGraw-Hill, Inc, 2003.

Ritzer, George. *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. 3rd ed. New York : McGraw-Hill, Inc, 1992.

Rogers, Everett M. *A History of Communication Study. A Biographical Approach*, New York : The Free Press, 1994 , p. 484.

Severin, Werner J., and Tankard, James W. *Communication Theories: Origins. Methods and Uses in the Mass Media*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 2001, pp. 374-375.

Turner, Jonathan H. *Sociology : Concept and User*. New York : McGraw-Hill, Inc, 1994.

Turner, Jonathan H. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. 7th ed. Belmont California : Wadsworth, 2003.

Verhoeven, Piet. Who's in and who's out? Studying the Effects of Communication Management on Social Cohesion. *Journal of Communication Management*, Vol. 12 No. 2, (p.124-135), 2008.

Walther, J. B. "Interpersonal Effects in Computer-Mediated Interaction : A Relational Perspective." *Communication Research* 19 (1992), p. 55.

Whittaker Jason. *The Internet: the basics*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Willams, F.; Rice, Ronald E.; and Rogers, Everett M. *Research Method and the New Media*. New York: Free Press 1988, pp. 97-98.

Windahl, S.; Signitzer, B.; and Olson, Jean T. *Using Communication Theory ; An Introduction to Planned Communication*. London : Sage Publications, 1992. p. 211.