

Social Media and Media Literacy in Thailand

Nudee Nupairoj

National Institute of Development Administration, Thailand

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that media literacy be prioritized and address all kinds of media, especially social media, in response to the rapid change of the media. Social media has indeed become popular among Thai people, from adolescents to adults, and is expanding at a very rapid rate. The new channel of communication also allows a new form of crimes. While media literacy in Thailand seems to address mainly mass media, especially broadcast, particularly prime-time dramas, crimes on social media seemed to be understated, even though it indicates lack of digital literacy among our people, amidst the convergence of the media and the emergence of user-generated content. This paper reviews cases of crimes in social media, including LINE¹, which involves identity theft, child exploitation, and how information circulated in the social media can be biased. Through documents survey, the paper explores media literacy measures among other countries in comparison to the Thai media literacy circumstances and obstacles. It is hoped that this paper accomplish its goal to convince Thai policymakers to prioritize media literacy that covers digital media as well; and that it would lead to a more elaborate study among other countries that may share the same situation.

Introduction

The media landscape revolves and evolves rapidly due to the development of technology, allowing communication to be more computer-mediated. The rise of the Internet created the network society connecting us all through the networked computer, resulting in the globalization of the world and the convergence of the ‘traditional media’ (e.g. radio, television, newspaper, magazines, books) and the digital media. Computer-mediated technology, specifically, smartphones and tablets, along with Web 2.0 open up the world of user-generated content (UGC) we are now living in. At times this kind of content is biased and requires a lot of critical thinking skills and judgment for individual to understand, analyze, and act accordingly as well as appropriately with social responsibility in mind. Media literacy helps equip individual to understand the traditional (mass) media, including the way it is produced and circulated, and their goals and effects on us, socially, economically and culturally (Jenkins, 2009). Media literacy, which includes the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content, are skills crucial for building an informed and active citizenry still apply to digital media literacy (Martinsson, 2009). It also helps people to manage content and communications, and protect themselves and their families from the potential risks associated with these services. However, the “Participatory culture” where producers of the media content are professionals combined with any users (aka user-generated content providers). Individuals, thus, are obliged to earn more knowledge that expands to the digital media so that they can “archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content by using the new media technologies (Jenkins, 2009).

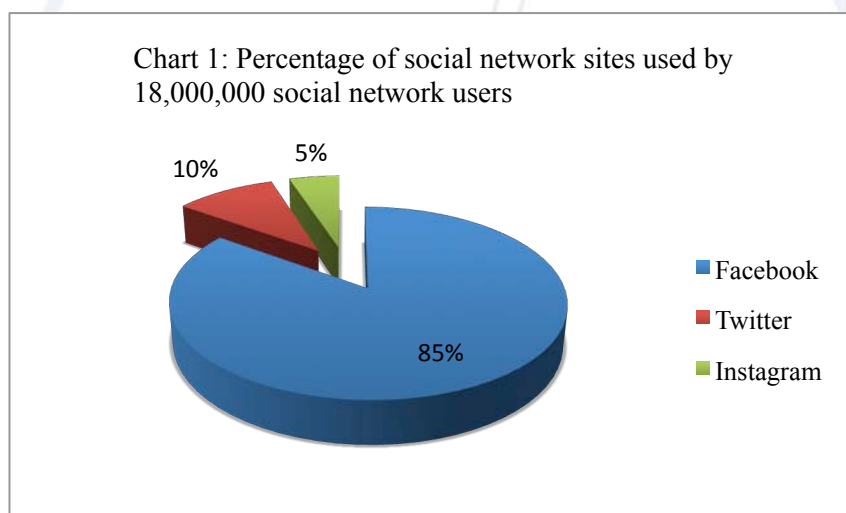
During the past five years, the 2007 Constitution along with the enactment of the Broadcasting Business Act B.E. 2551 (2008) that led to the establishment of an independent regulator (The National Broadcasting and Telecommunication or NBTC) have stimulated extensive media studies, including literacy issue, especially among scholars. Social media cases in Thailand during the past year (2012-2013), including identity theft, child exploitation, and impact of information circulated over the social media on the society, are understated and the number of cases are evidences that literacy is a key to protect the people and create a strong citizenship for the country. The following sections give an overview of Thailand’s social media landscape, a summary of literature review, and how digital literacy should help protect individuals as well as creating quality citizenry among people in the country.

Thailand’s Social Media Landscape

Social media refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks². The rise of integrative information, communication, and community-building Internet platforms such as blogs, wikis, or the SNS’s embrace the Web 2.0 concept (Fuchs, 2009). Social media differs from traditional or industrial media in many aspects such as reach, frequency, usability, immediacy and permanence (Morgan et. al. 2012). To reach 50 million people, it took radio 38 years, television 13 years, the Internet 4 years³. Facebook, one of the most popular SNS’s reached 200 million users in less than one year⁴; while 625,000 people join Google+ every day⁵. And because the Internet can be accessed anywhere and anytime with such devices as smartphones and tablets and other computer-based devices, it is used – or accessed – more frequently than traditional media. In Thailand, social media plays major role as communication channel among contemporary and the younger generation. The world’s studies show an increase in Internet usage and the social media usage with the majority users

engage the SNS's via mobile phones; while in Thailand, the latest research by ZocialRank⁶ showed that if all 66 million population, there are 25 million Internet users, and among these, 18 million are social network users with the percentage of social network sites usage as shown in Chart 1 below. The chart shows that Facebook is prospering immensely in Thailand followed by Twitter and Instagram respectively. When it comes to growth rate, the result is in reverse. In the first quarter of 2013 (April 1, 2012 – April 1, 2013), Instagram ranks first in terms of growth rate at 178 percent compared to the same period last year; Twitter comes in second at 53 percent, followed by Facebook at 24 percent growth. Meanwhile, Nielsen's Informate Mobile Insights June 2013 mobile applications usage reports, covering the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, found Thai people are more favorable to use LINE application over Facebook (Positioning Magazine, 2013).

These findings are evidence that the media landscape has changed and turned digital. Social media enhances the distribution of content to be very fast, sometimes ending up as social issue. Anyone can create or be a part of content distribution in social media. Question-answer databases, digital video, blogging, podcasting, forums, review-sites, social networking, social media, mobile phone photography and wikis are all the examples of user-generated content (UGC). UGC, which is part of the participatory culture, have gained popularity over the last decade, as more and more users have begun to flock to social media and "content-based" sharing sites⁷.



Because “users” are not professionals and hence are not bound by any professional code of conduct, content generated by users can be biased. Consumers in today's world of UGC must be literate in order to be able to analyze, believe, judge, and act upon the right rationales from the information they get. In social media, no one can be sure who is who anymore. Anyone can claim to be someone else; a fan page may have a hidden agenda or a person whose account claims to be could be run by a representative or an agent. It is harder to believe what are being shared and liked on social media. The growth of social networking sites (SNSs) also becomes the new window of opportunity for crimes. The following cases may be evidences how literacy could have prevented such crimes and help people exercise more complete and efficient citizenry, and thus media and digital literacy must be prioritized nationally.

Social media cases in Thailand

Some social media cases are crimes that aim at identity theft and financial fraud, some target at children exploitation, and others are cases of how information circulated on social media can be biased or one-sided. Identity theft occurs mostly because people are not aware of the sensitivity of personal information they give away when they use the Internet. Social media are often considered, by users, as private space, while in fact, they are not. Unfortunately not many Thai people are aware of privacy or cybercrimes. According to Thailand Knowledge Center, the seven most common cybercrimes in Thailand are: spam mails (with malware or virus in attached files or link to websites with virus), viruses and worms (targeted at users' hardware), hoax and phishing (aim at stealing individual's identity for financial fraud purposes), BOTNET (hackers seize user's computers to create their network to commit internet crimes without user's knowledge, such as sending spam mails), peer-2-peer threat (through the use of such file sharing programs as BitTorrent, eMule, Kazaa, eDonkey or LimeWire, resulting in computer crashes due to bandwidth overused as well as malwares), spyware and adware (spying on our computer activities and send the information back to host for marketing purpose), and Google hacking threat (a hole in the system that allow Google search engine to get into our private files or sensitive information)⁸.

The invention of social media allows personal activities to become public. Crimes are not from 'strangers' but 'friends' who may not use the real identity. Facebook becomes the means to get acquainted with the victims before luring them for physical harms. In May 2013, a woman was tricked to transfer almost 200,000 baht to a foreigner who claimed he wanted to start a business in Thailand and marry the victim, promising to give her assets and 300,000 US\$ cash, once she transferred the money to help him clear out his belongings from the Thai customs⁹. This kind of case took advantage of the Thai women who believe marrying a westerner would make their lives better. It is reported that this type of fraud is run by international group of people with Thai member(s) (Morning News BEC-Tero, 2013; Technology Crime Suppression Division, 2011).

Identity theft can also occur via texting application such as LINE, a free smartphone application currently number one application in the country (Positioning Magazine, 2013), which can be considered social media based on the definition mentioned earlier. LINE achieved 200 million global registered users as of July 21, 2013, with Thailand the second top users¹⁰. 'Stickers' (one of LINE's popular features) become a new opportunity for a type of identity theft called phishing. Advertisements are posted in web sites offering free LINE stickers through hyperlink. The link then leads to a fake web site asking for Apple ID and personal information. Once the perpetrator gets the information, user's password will be changed, disabling the real user to log in to the account. Stolen Apple IDs can be used for online purchases while all other personal information and pictures stored on iCloud can also be accessed and possibly used malevolently¹¹. According to the credit checking company Experian, there were 12 million pieces of personal information online by fraudsters in the U.S. in the first quarter of 2012, an increase of 300% since 2010. A lot of personal information on social networking sites is sold to third parties: users who google data, upload or watch videos on YouTube, upload or post personal images on Flickr, accumulating friends with whom they exchange content or communicate online via social networking platforms like MySpace or Facebook, constitute an "audience commodity" (Smythe 1981, cited in Fuchs 2009), and we are all in the information society.

In the month of July alone, two child exploitation or rape cases with social media as communication tool were reported consecutively. On July 22, 2013, a fourteen-year-old girl ran off with a security guard whom she has been in contact with via Facebook. Her parents filed a police report claiming the security guard lured their teenage daughter to run away with him. The father of the security guard said his son and the girl were together but he could not

reach his son.¹² On July 30, 2013, it was reported that a fourteen-year-old girl, who, via Facebook, was asked to meet up with a boy of 16 years old late one night and was taken to and raped at the boy's residence¹³.

The above stories spoke of old crimes on the new channel that partly could have been prevented or reduced with the knowledge of online privacy and other basic characteristics of the social media. Studies of the Internet use in Thailand found that Thai students have little media literacy or can be easily dominated by the media (Chindarat Bovornboriharn, 2005; Wisaluk Sithikhuntod, 2008). Several studies also found that knowledge was positively correlated to the behaviors of Internet use and privacy protection among adolescents (Culnan and Armstrong, 1999; Hoffman, Novak, and Peralta, 1999; Jariya Sankpetch, 2008; Park, 2013; Pierson & Heyman, 2011; Turow, 2003, 2005 cited in Park, 2013). There are also cases that show that media literacy can provide social media users a strong ground on how they should take societal issues or events and know how to act, respond, or voice their opinion as an individual as well as a member of the society at large, either in public or other social contexts, including the social media (Martinsson, 2009). Often times information, images or video clips shared over the social media are either biased showing only one side of the story, and exponentially accumulates biased emotions rather than creative arguments as they circulate over the social media, and end up creating public discourse. The one-sided story will remain one side due to the spiral of silence that the minority do not speak out or provide the other side of the story or their adverse opinions for fear of isolation and reprimands in their offline world. In addition, opposed ideas are not shared as much and will be silenced eventually among the homophilic network.

Recent case of social media movement against the building of Mae Wong Dam in Mae Wong National Park provides a good example of social media's spiral of silence and the one-sided story told. The story of Mr. Sasin Chalermklarp, secretary of the renowned Seub Nakasatien Foundation, walked from Mae Wong National Park to Bangkok in protest of the dam building starting from September 10 to 22, 2013. The walk was published continually from day one to the final day in Bangkok, both by himself and witnesses along the 388 kilometers. In the meantime, information about Mae Wong Dam project was published mostly by the opposition of the project and shared all over social networks with 100,000 views, while the supporters (minority) of the project were little or silenced. The mainstream media did not broadcast any of Sasin's protest (Chutiman Noonman, 2013). Hence, the majority of the information circulated were one-sided and at times partial facts were used in favor of the protest while the rest were withheld (Sopon Pornchokechai, 2013).

The 21st Century Literacy for Thailand

From the aforementioned cases, media literacy could have helped prevent, reduced cybercrime rate as well as protected individuals from risks and enabled them to effectively exercise their citizenry. Over the years, many definitions have been defined to reflect different points of view, approaches goals, and audiences (the US National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE); the European Union; The British Ofcom; the World Bank). Traditionally, media literacy refers to the mass media, however, as communication technology develops, digital literacy becomes its expansion (Jenkins, 2009), if not a replacement. While different cultures have their own terms for digital literacy; i.e. digital competence (the Organisation for Economic and Co-operation and Development (OECD)), and new media literacies (Jenkins, 2009), Renee Hobbs' five steps of digital literacy seem to be applicable to both mass media and digital media at the same time. In her 2010 *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action* white papers, Hobbs proposed that digital literacy include

the following abilities: making responsible choices and access information; analyzing messages in a variety of forms; creating text, audio/visual content in a variety of forms; applying social responsibility and ethical principles to the content created; and taking social action by working individually and collaboratively in all levels of society.

From the definitions above, I would like to propose that media literacy in Thailand refers to six skills: Access, Analyze, Evaluate, Create, Apply Social Responsibility, and Take Action for future development in media literacy. There is no need to separate digital media from traditional media since the boundaries between the different media are blurred due to the media convergence. In addition, Thai media literacy is still moving slowly while digital technology is way ahead of the law and regulations, and digital literacy has not yet capture the attention of people at large due to the big digital divide in the country. For over a decade, UNESCO (Thailand) has collaborated with the Ministry of Education, media literacy has not yet been placed into the mandatory educational system (Kamolrat Intararat, 2013). It is possible that it is harder to educate teachers so that they have enough understanding to teach their students, especially in schools in the rural areas across the nation. As of the time this paper is written, we know that besides formal education, the Thailand Media and Information Literacy (MIL) has been working to support media literacy in non-formal education system, including training teachers. The problem is when teachers, who voluntarily integrate media literacy in their class, talk about a media issue; sometimes they cannot respond to a question by the students with strong critical answers. When that happens, the teachers become disheartened and quit mentioning media literacy in their classes, no matter how eager they are to integrate media literacy when applicable (Kamolrat Intararat, 2013).

Another reason why media literacy in Thailand is rather lagged behind is the digital divide. Thailand is a developing country of which the majority of population is farmers and people who live in the rural areas including small municipalities and communities. If media literacy involves ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content (Martinsson, 2009), their prioritized media literacy skills are access and analysis. Through the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology's (MICT) project, around 300 Telecentres provide physical access to computers and the Internet across the country (the MICT do have plan to expand this). Through series of training by the MIL incorporation with the MICT, farmers are able to seek, locate, and select information to suit their needs. People in Telecentres communities are encouraged to 'create media content', while the MIL supports the distribution of their production.

Promoting media literacy that integrates digital literacy is, thus, a shortcut to achieve the dissemination of both media and digital literacy at the same time, so that our people are immune to the fast development of communication technology. Tablets were already distributed to children around the country as part of the government's plan. Soon enough, social media will become a hit and risks and problems such as the above mentioned cases will reach people in the rural areas. Media literacy can strengthen the public interest to improve socio-political conditions, enable citizens to participate actively in public discussions and deliberations to affect change, and empower citizens to fulfill their rights and obligations (Martinsson 2009). It also helps people to manage content and communications, and protect themselves and their families from the potential risks associated with these services.

Implementation of media literacy in education

There are several efforts from different organizations to promote media literacy. Besides MICT and MIL that I have mentioned before, the Thai Health Promotion Foundation is also

active in media literacy promotion, by organizing campaigns and events annually under the project ICT Literacy for Thai Kids (unofficial translation). The project includes organization of events in schools across the country to promote information communication literacy. This type of event in schools is also shared by Media Monitor, Thailand's media watchdog project initiated by the Foundation for Media Literacy in 2005.

In late 2012, there were talks on the National Broadcasting and Telecommunication commission's (NBTC) plan to establish a consumer's network for media literacy and watchdog for content on broadcast television in collaboration with the NBTC. As part of the 2013 plan, media literacy will become a mandatory in primary education curriculum, specifically literacy of dramas and sports content¹⁴. The news was promising but appears to focus on broadcast media rather than any other media, particularly digital media, which is showing more and more threats and influence on consumers especially the younger generations, aka the digital natives who tend to access traditional media via digital devices and applications rather than traditional media. Accessing media from portable devices would be much harder to monitor or regulate, and thus, may expose the children to harmful content such as pornography, harsh language, identity fraud, and violence, to name is just a few. Hence, teaching children to know and learn how to use the digital media is the most effective way to protect them from risks. Nonetheless, some efforts from different organizations happened inconsistently and incoherently. Some campaigns from private sectors are part of their corporate social responsibility projects, targeted at a very small specific group. An establishment of an official agency or organization may provide a more effective way to media literacy communication and distribute official and updated information and organize or delegate activities as well as taking partnership with other agencies and organizations. For example, in Europe, the European Union has financially supported several projects related to media literacy, including ones with the objectives to analyzing multimedia, encouraging the promotional materials for media literacy, stimulating the use of media for the improvement of social and community life, increasing media education networking, and implementing media literacy initiatives.

However, since Thailand is a developing country and digital divide is rather vast, encouraging media literacy as compulsory in formal education may take too long to accomplish, partly because it has to start from the top down – the government needs to be convinced that media literacy is a crucial life skills for future children to initiate a policy. Nevertheless, efforts to push media literacy to be national mandate must be continued. Media literacy in formal education has been conducted in several countries in Europe, which can be used as a model for implementation in Thailand. For example, in Sweden and Denmark media education is compulsory. In the Netherlands, media literacy was placed in the agenda by the Dutch government in 2006 and in 2008, with the establishment of “media literacy expertise center” targeted to make media education part of the official curriculum¹⁵. In the United Kingdom, there have been continuously activities by Ofcom on studies of UK adults' and children's understanding and use of electronic media, as well as sharing the research findings with a wide range of stakeholders internally and externally. In addition, Ofcom policymakers have been conducting research on people's media literacy needs in order to help with the formulation of public policy, and to provide organizations and agencies with the evidence they need to best target their initiatives on the ground. Across the continent, in the United States, media literacy education is growing because of the increased emphasis on 21st century literacy, which now incorporates media and information literacy, collaboration and problem-solving skills, and emphasis on the social responsibilities of communication. More than 600 educators are members of the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), a national membership group that hosts a bi-annual conference. Therefore, there

are plenty of models that the Thai government can study and use as models to include media literacy in the official curriculum.

In the meantime, non-formal education is a possible alternative that non-profit organizations like MIL and UNESCO (Thailand) are working and collaborating in order to extend media literacy to stakeholders outside the education system. Children are always parts of other social contexts outside schools. Non-formal media literacy, therefore, is meant to educate every stakeholder so that everyone in the society is aware and capable of tackling the information-overloaded situation together in unison; parents, community leaders, officials of Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO), etc. in order for media literacy to become their way of life. In addition, the level of media education should be segmented in accordance to people's priorities and needs (Kamolrat Intararat, 2013). Currently for grassroots, information literacy is more practical than media literacy. This is because the word 'media' for these people is intangible, while, 'information', on the contrary, is something they can actually use, and that makes information literacy more tangible. Knowing how to use information certainly helps improve their farming and agriculture which will eventually result in their better living conditions. While grassroots should have information literacy, which is "the adoption of appropriate information behavior to identify, through whatever channel or medium, information well fitted to information needs, leading to wise and ethical use of information in society,¹⁶", teachers and municipal officials might need to acquire higher level of media literacy up to the creation of information, applying social responsibility and taking action.

Conclusion

The changing of the media landscape has led to the obligation to educate people about media literacy as it becomes harder to monitor the media content, who can or cannot access to it, and how they use it. Social media is becoming a part of our lives and it breaks time and space boundary of access, which makes users more susceptible to the associated risks. Biased or one-sided content and information circulating the social media requires users to have critical thinking skill and judgment to respond or take action. Therefore, media literacy plays an essential role to equip all social media users, as well as other media consumers to be able to reap the benefits rather than to fall victims to the social media.

For Thailand, efforts to disseminate and cultivate media literacy to reach all segments of the society is rather disperse and not as effective as it should. An official media literacy organization should be established as a center to provide necessary support as well as to create a strong mandate through a multi-stakeholder in order to affect policy change and extend research programs, demonstrating clearly the linkages among media literacy, citizen action, and good governance (Martinsson, 2009).

Media literacy should then be well-defined, by the established central agency/organization, so that everyone shares the same idea and concept, and thus, is able to provide each of their initiatives in the same direction that complement each other. To prevent misunderstanding and to make media literacy in the 21st century up-to-date, the paper proposes Thailand to define media literacy as *the abilities to make responsible choices and access information; to analyze messages in a variety of forms; to create text, audio/visual content in a variety of forms; to apply social responsibility and ethical principles to the content created; and to take social action by working individually and collaboratively in all levels of society* (Hobbs, 2010), because this definition can be applicable to both mass and digital media, and covers skills needed for the consuming and using the media in the digital era.

The paper further proposed that media literacy be put into compulsory education system, as government's initiatives. In order to accomplish media literacy in the education system, we need to ensure that the children will be able to acquire knowledge, develop skills and experience so that media literacy become their way of life, which would lead to their sense of social responsibility and action as a citizen in the participatory culture (Kanchana Meesilapavikkai, n.d.). However, it is important to educate the educators first and foremost so that they have a strong knowledge to improvise responses to children queries. In the meantime, non-formal education system is an alternative to extend media literacy education to reach all segments of people including children, special education students, juvenile offenders, teachers, and parents, so that the cycle of literacy is a complete system (Hobbs, 2010).



Endnotes

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- [¹] LINE is a proprietary instant messaging application for smartphones and PCs. In addition to basic messaging, Line users can send each other images, video, audio media messages and make free VoIP calls. People can add a specific groups or add 'friend' to anyone they can find through LINE search.
- [²] Ahlqvist, Toni; Bäck, A., Halonen, M., Heinonen, S (2008). "Social media roadmaps exploring the futures triggered by social media". VTT Tiedotteita - Valtion Teknillinen Tutkimuskeskus (2454): 13. Cited in Wikipedia's definition of Social Media
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media#Classification_of_social_media>
- [³] Information from a company called Ahead of Time, a Germany agency in social media business. The information was presented as a video clip posted on YouTube on April 6, 2010, retrieved on June 29, 2010 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4J4Ynp9AvYk>
- [⁴] Information from YouTube titled "The Social Media Revolution 2012-13" posted by TheTotalprofit on Oct 23, 2011, retrieved on March 15, 2013 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eUeL3n7fDs>
- [⁵] Stephanie Mlot. Infographic: 365 Days of Social Media. Posted on January 3, 2013
<<http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2413807,00.asp>> Retrieved on March 15, 2013.
- [⁶] According to ZocialRank.com homepage, ZocialRank is a group of people who are in love with Social Network and Data Analysis. They rank all social network service such as, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Foursquare. The web site conducted and on April 29, 2013 published its findings on social network via <<http://blog.zocialinc.com/social-network->> The same information was cited and can be found on <<http://blog.zocialinc.com/sample-page-2/#sthash.POBSgHva.dpuf>> Retrieved on July 23, 2013
- [⁷] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User-generated_content>
- [⁸] <<http://www.tkc.go.th/index.php/menu-knowledge/menu-online-threat/44-7>>
- [⁹] <<http://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/>> Published May 20, 2013
- [¹⁰] <<http://en.lineblog.naver.jp/>>
- [¹¹] <<http://www.it24hrs.com/2012/warning-apple-id-password-hacked-by-thai-hacker/>> Published November 29, 2012
- [¹²] <<http://www.maesod.info/news/>> published July 23, 2013
- [¹³] <<http://news.sanook.com/1199921/>> Published July 30, 2013
- [¹⁴] <http://thainews.prd.go.th/centerweb/News/NewsDetail?NT01_NewsID=WNICT5512250020003> Published December 25, 2012
- [¹⁵] Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media_literacy#Education>
- [¹⁶] The definition appeared in Sheila Webber's blog. Webber is a faculty member in the Information School, University of Sheffield, UK and Director of the Centre for Information Literacy Research, together with Bill Johnston they defined 'information literacy' which was quoted in Webber's blog <http://information-literacy.blogspot.com/2011/08/media-and-information-literacy_14.html> Retrieved August 5, 2013.

