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

Kritiya Rujichok

Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat UNiversity, Thailand

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Abstract

The research found that the online media services of both Twitter abd Facebook impacted the news agenda items of both Thairath and Matichon newspapers. Analysis of both Twitter and Facebook entires was conducted throughout the year 2011. In addition, extensive interviews were conducted with sub-editors and reporters from said newspapers. It was also found that the online media services examined helped to create a network of political influence. Both newspapers adopted a similar methodology for commenting on news items. They would observe the extent of interest exibitied online about a particular news item of the day and compare it with reports prepared independently by their reporters. By content analysis of that media focus on and agenda the online news extent on the section of a newspaper page. The results show that the majority of newspapers featured political news on the negative rather than the positive phase of politician. In this approach Thairath and Matichon have similar how to figture the online issue. For the making news, the two of newspapers have all the same method as follows. The first is selected news online have the most commented, the second, the online news are compared with the news daily by interesting to consider the issue of the credibility of news source and content accuracy. Finally, also will lead journalists to write news headlines and lead paragraphs news in the next step. For political network online, the political groups that are seen as a political comment on the posts where they have a conflict will be removed from the online press.,

Introduction

The influence of political communication networks in the online world is the new empirical phenomenon spreading across the world. For example, in terms of t he 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, co-creator of the social-political blog in the States, said that Obama's political success is 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 Almacy, one of the internet service team members and 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, 2007) and understood the dynamic interactions between multiple communities to create the Obama campaign as well.

Not only does social networking have a powerful impact on politics in the United States, it has come to significantly affect politics in Malaysia as well. For example, after recent elections in Malaysia 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.

In addition, social networks have also come to have a considerable influence on politics in Thailand. An obvious example is from the political 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 political change in Thailand.

Social networks are not only important for political communication, 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 space 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 create new messages. (Thanapruek, 2007)

Many scholars have studied the role of social media in affecting change in various situations in order to understand the interaction in the phenomenon and the results of network communication. This research has drawn attention to the creation of social networks, media effect, media performance and how to integrate the online media agenda in newspapers.

The purpose of this research is to study the influence of social networks, in the form of online political communication networks, on the agenda setting of the front page of Thai newspapers by using qualitative and quantitative analyses. To collect qualitative data, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with editors and journalists who made the news selection. The quantitative research included analyzing the political news items that appeared in both the online media and on the front page of Thai newspapers. The study used the second edition of the *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* newspapers daily. The research evaluated twelve months of news content, from 1 February 2011 until 30 January 2012.

Literature Review

In this research, agenda setting, the spiral of silence, and public sphere theories as well as communication technological determinism, computer-mediated communication, and virtual community concepts were used as the conceptual framework and can be summarized as follows:

Regarding Dearing and Rogers' agenda setting theory, there are three types of agenda setting: 1) Media agenda, in which the media determine the issue and present it to the public; 2) Public agenda, in which the issue is set by the public and the media presents it; and 3) Policy agenda, in which the elite policy makers select the issue and give its importance to the public via the media.

Apart from the messenger as the factor of agenda setting, the intensity of news exposure to the public can also set an agenda. There are three common methods to increase the news exposure. 1) Increase or expansion of news presentation area: The news with the big frame or big font size shows its prominence to the public. 2) Frequency of news report: If the news is presented frequently, it will receive more attention. 3) Length of time news is reported: The length of time that news is reported is similar and related to the frequency. If the news is reported frequently but for a short time, the agenda is terminated.

In this study, the researcher studied the presentation area of news stories that were Facebook issues and any subsequent changes (increases or decreases) on the front page of Thai newspapers' and how the news contents were expanded from the individual sources and documents. Furthermore, the frequency of news presenting was analyzed to explain how often and how long the Facebook issues were presented on the newspapers' front page.
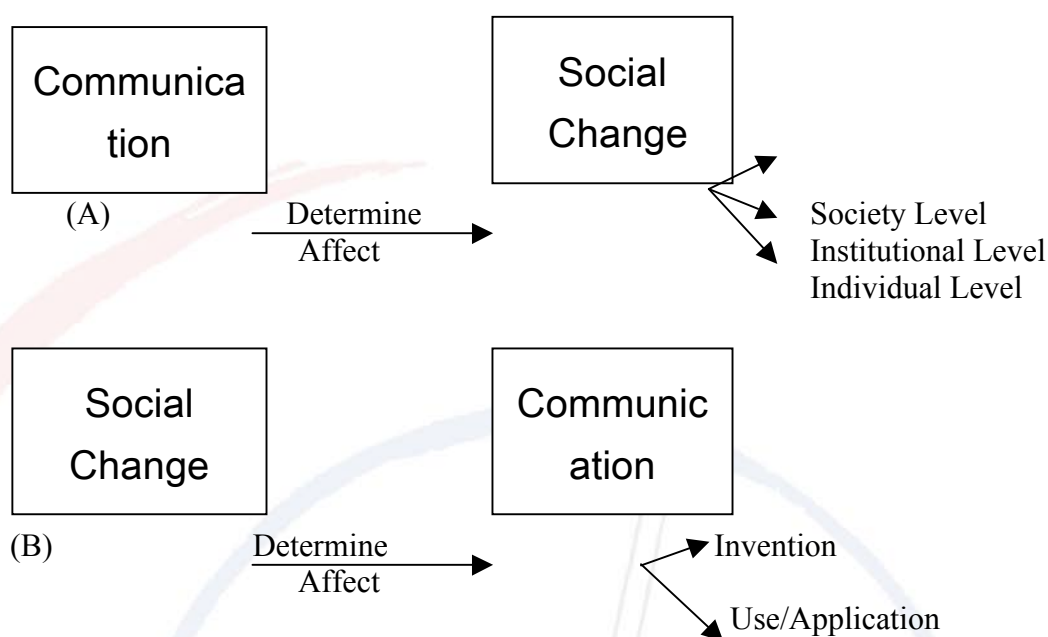
The spiral of silence theory was also utilized in this study as the online news was considered to be a silent cycle which affected the agenda setting on the front page of Thai newspapers, especially in terms of political issues. The concept of the spiral of silence was developed by Noelle-Neumann. The theory concerns the interplay between four elements: mass media; interpersonal communication and social relations; individual expressions of opinion; and the perceptions which individuals have of the surrounding 'climate of opinion' in their own social environment. The main assumptions of the theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1991 referred in Dennis McQuail, 2005) are: 1) Society threatens deviant individuals with isolation; 2) Individuals experience fear of isolation continuously; 3) the fear of isolation causes individuals to try to assess the climate of opinion at all times; and 4) the results of this estimate affect their behavior in public, especially their willingness or not to express opinions openly.

According to the spiral of silence theory, in order to avoid isolation on important public issues (like political support), people tend to express their views when they think they are on the same side of the public opinion or the majority. On the contrary, they tend to keep their attitudes to themselves or conceal their views if they feel they are against the majority. In this situation, individuals are caught in the spiraling effect, in which they cannot express their opposite views and have to act as part of the majority. However, they tend to show their true views when they feel safe, such as when voting in election booths. It is possible that people who post on Facebook sites feel safe because they can hide their identities and express their opposing opinions in a protected environment. It may also be true that Facebook creates social communities where people can state their views and not feel isolated.

This spiral of silence situation may be considered as a type of media influence in setting a public agenda, apart from agenda setting at the individual level. In this case the spiral of silence also reflects the relationship between the mass media and public opinion. In other words, the spiral of silence framework shows the silent power of people against the majority, which, after being expressed in places like Facebook, can have the power to set an agenda on the front page of Thai newspapers.

The individuals voice their opinions online and draw the attention of the media, including the newspapers, to present the issues and sometimes cover them continuously for many days. In this process, communication technological determinism was considered as the research framework in determining new communication methods which had an influence on the flow of information. The variables were derived from the model of the relationship between communication technology and political change.

Model of relationship between communication technology and political change

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┌─────────────┐              ┌─────────────┐
│ Communica   │              │   Social    │
│   tion      │              │   Change    │──→  Society Level
└─────────────┘              └─────────────┘──→  Institutional Level
   (A)      ────Determine────→              ──→  Individual Level
              Affect

┌─────────────┐              ┌─────────────┐
│   Social    │              │  Communic   │
│   Change    │              │   ation     │──→ Invention
└─────────────┘              └─────────────┘
   (B)      ────Determine────→              ──→ Use/Application
              Affect
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(Hinviman, Somsuk: 2003)

From the model, the communication technology is focused since it causes social change at both organization and individual levels. The social change also results in new innovations invented in accordance with the different group purposes.

Apart from the aforesaid theories, computer-mediated communication (CMC) was also reviewed in terms of the virtual community to create political communication on the Internet. According to Hiltz, the usage of CMC can be categorized as three types of phenomena: substitution, add-on, or expansion.

The substitution phenomenon takes place when CMC replaces an alternate method of communication. The add-on phenomenon occurs when people keep their use of alternate communication methods, and use CMC as another method. The expansion phenomenon occurs as an extension of add-on, where the use of CMC stimulates additional communication via alternate methods.

Additionally, the public sphere was applied to analyze the creation of a virtual community using online communication. This is because the public sphere is another communication channel where, for example, online users usually express their political opinions which can later influence the agenda setting in Thai newspapers.

Habermas believed that the modern public sphere should be the same as the public sphere in the past: information exchange; regular discussion; and face-to-face communication. According to Habermas, on webboards information is exchanged (to a large degree) and the members interact with each other regularly. However, face-to-face communication sometimes rarely happens in modern communication. Some people live in the online world and virtual community where lots of new public spheres are waiting for their participation. Because of the ease of access, equality, and freedom of communication, more people are eager to participate in these new public spheres than any other media in the past. Therefore, the definition of public sphere should be extended to

cover these kinds of communication. In addition, the new aspect of the modern public sphere, anonymous communication, is important to this study, particularly when people can voice their opinions anonymously online in opposition to the majority opinion and the issues later are set as a front page newspaper agenda.

Method

In research, we have two methods for collecting data: quantitative and qualitative. For quantitative data, the researcher chose the online political issues that were the most commented on each day from the *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* Facebook pages for twelve months between 1 Febuary 2011 until 30 January 2012 for a total of 256 pages. Next, whether the most commented on news which was chosen from online was also presented on the front page on *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* newspaper was checked. After that, the frequency of news reporting of the online issue and the news position on the front page of *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* newspaper was examined.

For the qualitative method, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of twelve persons: 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*. A standardized interview was conducted about the process of news making after deciding to select the political online news for the front of the newspaper: how to examine the content, sources, credibility, objectivity, the news positions, and follow-up using agenda setting concepts.

Research results

The study results are as follows. There were three main results from the quantitative method: first, the political news that was presented through *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* Facebook pages; second, the frequency and continuity of online news presented on the front page of *ThaiRath* and *Matichon* newspapers; and third, the communication style of the opinion group on the political network on *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* Facebook pages. The results from the qualitative method will include content analysis of the data and in-depth interviews about the influence of political online communication networks on the agenda of the front page of Thai newspapers.

First of the quantitative results are the political news issues that were presented through *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* Facebook pages. From the top five most commented on political news stories in 2011 from *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* Facebook pages, the most commented on political issue was "10 Things People (Rarely) Know About Yingluck Shinawatra!" Number two was "Yingluck Wore Burberry Boots through the Flood and Korn's Wife Wore Chanel Boots". The third most commented on was "Earn Kalyakorn's News: The Woman Who Rode the Horse through the Flood". The fourth on the list was related to the infamous issue of solving the mystery of the origin of the video clip of Prime Minister Yingluck's facial expression in the elevator, titled "Let's Haka". The final story in the ranking of the top five political news issues from online was "Suthep Accelerated Junction to Clarify to the Public after Backing Out More Conservatively against Thaksin". The news items can be seen in the following table.

Table 1: The top five most commented on online political news stories in 2011 from *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* Facebook pages

Ranking	Items
1	10 Things People (Rarely) Know About Yingluck Shinawatra!
2	Yingluck Wore Burberry Boots through the Flood and Korn's Wife Wore Chanel Boots
3	Earn Kalyakorn's News: The Woman Who Rode the Horse through the Flood
4	The video clip of Prime Minister Yingluck's facial expression in the elevator, titled "Let's Haka".
5	"Suthep Accelerated Junction to Clarify to the Public after Backing Out More Conservatively against Thaksin"

The second result is in regards to the frequency and continuity of online news presented on the front page of *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* newspapers. The most commented on online political news stories in 2011 with the most frequency and continuity in the *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* newspapers are as follows. The most frequent political issue was "Yingluck Wore Burberry Boots through the Flood and Korn's Wife Wore Chanel Boots" for a total of 15 times. Number two was "10 Things People (Rarely) Know About Yingluck Shinawatra!" for a total of 14 times. The third on the list was "Earn Kalyakorn's News: The Woman Who Rode the Horse through the Flood" for a total of 13 times. The fourth most frequent was "Suthep said that Sonthi should point out to the public why he appreciates Yinglak in spite of disliking Thaksin" for a total of 12 times. The final item in the ranking was the video clip of Prime Minister Yingluck's facial expression in the elevator, titled "Let's Haka" for a total of 11 times. The news items can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: The number and frequency of online political news shown on the front pages of *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* newspapers

News issues	The page position of news on the front page of newspaper/total of presented days				
	1	2	3	4	5
1. 10 Things People (Rarely) Know About Yingluck Shinawatra!	8	14	13	14	12
2. Yingluck Wore Burberry Boots through the Flood and Korn's Wife Wore Chanel Boots	6	15	12	12	13
3. Earn Kalyakorn's News: The Woman Who Rode the Horse through the Flood	5	10	12	10	12
4. The video clip of Prime Minister Yingluck's facial expression in the elevator, titled "Let's Haka"	4	10	11	10	11
5. "Suthep said that Sonthi should point out to the public why he appreciates Yinglak in spite of disliking Thaksin".	3	11	12	10	-

The third result is the communication style of the opinion group on the political network on *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* Facebook pages. From the three types of communication style of the opinion group on the political network, the highest frequency was Expressive Communication for a total of 36.39 percent. The second highest frequency of communication style was Interactive Communication for a total of 39.36 percent. The final on the list was Cognitive Communication with a total of 26.24 percent, as follows in Table 3.

Table 3: Communication style of the opinion group on the political network on *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* Facebook pages

Communication style	Percentage
1. Cognitive Communication	26.24%
2. Interactive Communication	39.36%
3. Expressive Communication	34.40%
Total	100%

Regarding the results of the qualitative research with in-depth interviews about the influence of political online news on the agenda setting process on the front page of *Thairath* and

Matichon Newspaper, both newspapers choose the news issues during the editorial staff meetings. The online political reporters also discuss with the newsroom day by day about other issues from the news area. The consideration of the choice of online news items is based on the same criterion as the newspaper.

As for the news producing process, after online issues have been chosen from the political communication network, the process is the same as general issues. However, the news credibility is focused on more than others news area.

For news processing, the credibility of news content selected from the political online network is consistently checked by *Matichon* and *Thai Rath* staff. Before reporting, it should be confirmed from other sources for reliability. This method prevents publication of defamatory or false statements by agitators or others.

In regards to the news presenting area, both newspapers give much importance to this issue. They compare the online issue with the news trend. If the issue is important and everyone is talking about it, it is chosen be the first news item on the front page. Other online and news area items are considered according to the priority of the issue.

In relation to the continuity of news reporting, how frequently the news is published in *Thairath* and *Matichon* depends on the interest of news consumers. Some issues are expanded and presented as articles or news scoops if the issues are continually focused on and people want to know more in-depth detail.

On the following day, the importance of where the online issue is set in the news presenting area depends on several aspects together with the consideration of the editorial staff: the meeting of editorial staff, public interest in the issue, content availability, likelihood of accuracy, source references, chance to present additional issues, and the news source credibility.

To publish the online news as articles, the two newspapers consider the researching ability of the news team, content size, information availability and news credibility. The important issue to be presented, visuals, additional content as well as interview necessity are also discussed.

When the news prominence of an online issue that has been published continually for a period of time diminishes, the criteria to reduce the news presenting area includes: less detail to present; the end of the issue or case; reduction of public interest; and the arising of new issues.

Conclusion

Regarding the influence of the political communication network, it can be concluded from the quantitative and qualitative research that the political issues that appear in online media can set the political agenda in the newspaper at a significant level. *Matichon* journalists agreed that online political issues can influence the important agenda of the society at a certain level. In addition, the journalists indicated that the political communication network has an effect on the

news gathering and leads to the news follow up, so it affects the agenda setting in newspapers to some extent.

Discussion

The political communication network had an influence on the agenda setting in political news in the aspect of content and the presentation area both in *Matichon* and *Thairath*, which was in accordance with the agenda setting theory. Moreover it affected the continuity of news presenting and the decision to publish issues in other forms, such as articles.

Additionally, the political communication network had an effect on the treatment of issues in the newspaper as the accuracy of news content was specially examined its before publication. This was because the online issues arose from the comments through the online system and were more controversial than other issues presented by journalists. The online news reporters had to make more of an effort to find the truth and gain the news credibility.

Consequently, the online political communication network that could affect the setting of the political agenda was created by virtual communication using the computer network where people could view or give comments about the events by online media, as mentioned in the virtual community theory. Online users, even those with opinions against the majority, could freely express their silent power using the political communication network, which was inconsistent with the spiral of silence theory.

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