

Political Communication Network Building by Journalists in Songkhla Province

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were to study 1) forms of political communication networks built by journalists in Songkhla Province; and 2) the topics and content that were transmitted through those networks. This was a qualitative research based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 2 groups of key informants. The groups consisted of (1) 16 administrative-level journalists, including news editors, managing editors, TV or radio station directors, enterprise owners, and division heads or other policy makers, with 4 administrators from each type of media studied, for a total of 16; and (2) 16 operations-level journalists, including reporters, program hosts, and people responsible for website content. Data were analyzed by descriptive analysis. The results showed that 1) there were 2 main forms of political communication networks: (1) formal networks that were officially established networks with shared activities and exchanges; the networks that were formed via group-making on the Line application were rather tightly bonded with a large number of members representing various parts of society. This type of networks were compatible with the principles for building, maintaining and expanding official networks. The government public relations department personnel in Songkhla invited these networks to press conferences and issued press releases to them from sources they considered reliable, such as the governor or deputy governors. (2) Informal networks, which were naturally-occurring, freely formed networks usually originating from people working at the same place and forming friendships or being acquainted in some other capacity. 2) The topics and content transmitted through these networks were (1) news to encourage the public to participate in politics, especially by voting in local and national elections; with news about the elections presented neutrally; (2) news and information directly from the Election Committee; (3) news about how politicians in Songkhla were following through with implementing their policies, both on a local and national level; and (4) news about citizens' problems or concerns that should be addressed by the local administrative organizations.

Keywords: network building, forms of journalistic networks, news topics, political communication

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Introduction

Advances in telecommunications technology together with globalism and capitalism have brought about many changes, and those changes have brought about new ways of life. Limitations to communications in society have been reduced. Communication can happen in a very short amount of time and can reach audiences in a very broad range all over the world. News travels extremely quickly so tangible new realities arise instantaneously. Besides their functions of reporting news, informing, educating, and providing forums for exchanges, journalists also have the duty of being mediators in presenting the viewpoints of all parts of society and every political group with fairness so that the opinions of all sides will be represented fairly and the amount and quality of news meets the needs of the populace. The press should act as a representative of the public, communicating on behalf of the public with the benefit of the common good in mind. Most importantly, the press should create a space for conversation and exchanges among people from all walks of life, should build knowledge and understanding about democratic decisions, and should indirectly promote democracy by playing a role in social development, because the press can make people in communities aware of social problems by way of reacting and adapting to social movements (Bao Nakorn, 2011; Office of the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defense, 2017).

In the age of globalization, the process of political communication has changed. It has become digitized in many forms, including through the Internet, satellite radio and television direct to listeners and viewers, and social media. The influence of marketing and advertising concepts in the stream of globalization has widely impacted new forms of political marketing communications all over the world. Communications business conglomerates have become the most influential corporate groups in the age of globalization and they have been able to build up political communication networks that can control society in many ways. It is communications imperialism (Nattagan Goonnarong, 2008). Journalists play 3 roles in political participation in Thailand: 1) transmitting political news and information; 2) acting as political auditors; and 3) providing a venue for debate and coordinating efforts to build political understanding. The degree to which journalists can perform these roles completely depends on the period of time and who is in power. Over the years, different governments have come from different backgrounds such as coups d'état, military backed oligarchies (especially in the past when the military was very politically involved) or democratic elections. Journalists have experienced difficulty in playing their roles because various factors have impacted their ability to fully fulfill those roles. For instance, often journalism enterprises are mainly focused on financial profits. Diverse new media have sprung up, and modern communications technology cannot be controlled with the existing control mechanisms (Lerpope Soratana et al, 2011).

Online media technology and social media have changed the news reporting process and the role of journalists in many ways. For example, rather than being one way communications, news reporting increasingly takes the form of two way communications. Decisions about what is in the news are no longer the exclusive domain of the editors and media organizations. The general public, as message receivers and news consumers, has a greater say in directing what issues should be in the news and in public debate. This can be seen in the way journalists nowadays often

take issues from online conversations and events as the subject of mainstream news stories. Also, people's news reception behavior has changed. News consumers can choose to read, watch or listen to news more selectively from many channels. This has made the media react by becoming more convergent, trying to present news on every platform. Since interactions are fast and easy on online media and social media, there has begun a process of increased cooperation between message senders and message receivers in news reporting. This cooperation takes many forms, such as fact finding, identification and prioritization of news stories, and fact checking by online communities (Sakulsri Srisarakham, 2017).

As you can see, journalists play an important role as political communications networks performing various functions. The researcher was interested in studying the way these political communication networks are built up in the mass media so that related plans can be implemented and evaluated to improve political communications in the future. The press play a role in building knowledge and understanding about democratic decisions and indirectly promoting democracy and social development by making communities aware of social problems. People who want to bring about social change need to network with the mass media as well as government agencies and other social sectors. It is thus very relevant to study the role of journalists in building political communications networks. The objectives of this research were to study 1) forms of political communication networks built by journalists in Songkhla Province; and 2) the topics and content that was transmitted through those networks. The findings will be used to develop political communications by helping form guidelines that can be implemented and evaluated, and they will be beneficial in the creation and improvement of content in the STOU Faculty of Communication Arts' graduate courses in communication innovations for politics and local administration.

Literature Review

Communication Networking

Several researchers have given similar definitions to the term "network" (Sontaya Polsri, 2007: 207; Seri Pongpit, 2005: 8; Kriengsak Jareonwongsak, 2000: 28; Phramaha Sutit Ahpagaro [Oboon] 2004: 44): a collection of interlinking relationships between members in the form of person to person, individual to group, group to group, group, or network to network when large networks consist of sub networks. Links within networks are not just common connections; there is a degree of organization and the member groups, organizations and individuals engage in some activities together to meet their common goals. The joint activities might be ad hoc activities as necessary, and when the mission is accomplished the network may dissolve and reform at a later date when a new need arises or not; or the network may have a long-term schedule of regular activities. Networks tend to work by exchanges, extracting the strong points or advantages of each member and learning together with mutual support and complementing each other for synergy, or in other words, in a formula that is not $1+1 = 2$ but $1+1 > 2$. The work quotient from a network must be greater than the sum of its parts, greater than letting each member work independently. An important point in the definition of "network" is that the relationships are voluntary and the activities take place on an equal basis or in the form of mutual exchanges. Being a member of the network must not affect the independence or identity of the individuals, groups and organizations that are members.

A pseudo network is a group that is mistakenly believed to be a network but is actually just a social club or gathering of people and/or groups who do not have a common goal and don't intend to engage in joint activities together. It may be a gathering for fun or a trend with no clear objectives. In a pseudo network there is no coordination.

It is important to understand the components of a true network so that members can form a real network and not a pseudo network. A real network has 7 components: 1. common perception; 2. common vision; 3. mutual interests/benefits; 4. stakeholders participation; 5. complementary relationships; 6. interdependency; and 7. interaction.

Every network arises or is created or founded in a different way. There are 3 types of networks: 1) Naturally forming networks- this kind of network comes from like minded people who do similar work or face the same problem. They come together to exchange ideas and experiences and seek out better new alternatives. Each member of the network is internally motivated to work in the network. This type of naturally forming network is normally based in one locality where members are relatives or neighbors with a shared culture and sense of community. They might first come together as a club with shared activities and expand their area of operation as more members join. Or they might expand their goals or reasons for coming together. Then they will grow into a network that can more broadly meet the needs of the members. This type of network normally takes a long time to come into shape, but once it is formed it is strong and sustainable and tends to grow larger. 2) established network- most officially established networks have to do with a government policy or government operations. They are founded under a conventional framework of using government mechanisms to get tangible work done quickly. Usually the allies or members of an established network don't share the same background, needs, ideas, understandings or viewpoints for establishing a network. They come together temporarily for a specific purpose. Usually the network is not continuous but tends to fade away unless it has good leadership and works methodically to create mutual understanding and a sense of mutual ties that will hold the members together in a real functioning network. Nevertheless, even if the network continues to exist it will usually lose some members and get smaller than in the establishment period. 3) evolving network- an evolving network doesn't come together naturally at the start, nor is it established, but it arises through a development process. It starts with a group of people and/or organizations that join for a broad objective they have in common. They support each other and learn together without clearly defined goals in the beginning. Alternatively, an evolving network may begin by being inspired by an external idea such as hearing of or seeing the work of another network, and deciding to make a network agreement for mutual aide and development. At first this kind of network might not be formed directly by internal drive, but if the members have good intentions borne of good conscience, then with the proper support and stimulation they can develop into a strong network almost like a naturally formed network. This type of network is quite common, for example elderly networks, and school health promotion networks.

Networking means creating contacts, supporting the exchange of information, and encouraging voluntary cooperation. Networking should facilitate friendly but independent relations among members rather than relations built on interdependence. Networking does not mean building a system of one-way transmission of news and

information such as publishing and sending newsletters. There must be a two-way exchange of news and information.

The role of the press in the democratic political process

Brian McNair (1995:21-22, cited in Bukaree Yeehama, 2007:191) wrote that society has the following expectations about the ideal role of the press in the democratic political process:

1. Surveillance and monitoring of the situation to inform the public of what is going on;
2. Educating the public about what the events mean and the significance of the facts;
3. Presenting topics of debate to create political discussion over policies and invite public comments, especially making space for different diverse sides to air their views, which is central to democracy;
4. Auditing the work of the government and all the other political institutions to make sure they are fulfilling their duties; and
5. Acting as a channel for the broadcasting of political ideas, such as helping political parties inform the public about their policies and projects.

James Curran and Jean Seaton (1991: 277-278) said a libertarian theory proposes at least 3 political communication roles for the press:

1. The press provides a forum for public debate. On an everyday basis the press tries to monitor and reflect public sentiment and pressures the government to act on the majority's wishes. In this role the press gives an opportunity for individuals to audit the government.
2. The press teach and inform the citizens and equip them with information so they can make informed choices when voting. The press is a free and unbiased channel for political communication amongst diverse groups in society.
3. The press raise awareness and encourage the people to oppose any misuse of power by the authorities and to criticize any inappropriate or inefficient government operations.

All the aforementioned clearly show the duties of the press in a democracy, but politicians, especially those in power, are concerned about popularity ratings and keeping votes, so they dislike the monitoring and auditing roles of the press who watch their every move.

In a democratic system it is very difficult for use propaganda or other shallow methods to dominate the thinking of the public and keep up their popularity ratings. Nowadays many governments use new techniques to tailor the news about their government that reaches the people so it will serve their purpose as much as possible. This is known as "news management" and has the following interesting details (Heywood, 2002: 206-207):

1. They scrutinize all the news releases carefully and prepare watertight reasons, explanations or evidence before releasing it to the press.
2. They control who is allowed to talk to the press and assign only the top administrators for each area to give out information.
3. Each statement to the press is short and condensed without lengthy explanations.

4. They only provide press releases to journalists who are on their side.
5. They give out news at the end of the working day or close to press time so as not to allow much time for fact checking or searching for additional information.

However, even though governments may use these news management techniques, that doesn't mean the press are always on the defensive. The press needs the government as a source of news but the government also needs the press to disseminate its information. The press pressures the government to provide information that is newsworthy, not just the information the government wants to disseminate.

Journalists and news reporters come in many sizes and flavors, but one thing they all have in common in a democratic society is that they are all working for business organizations under a capitalist market system that need to remain profitable and hope to grow. This is a major constraint that makes it difficult or impossible for the press to fully and freely fulfill its many roles.

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988:2) affirmed this idea, pointing out that the working limitations of the press come from the following factors or conditions:

- 1 size of the business and who owns it
2. Mass media are profit making enterprises that get most of their income from advertising
3. they rely on information from the government for much of their content along with other political leaders, businesses and experts in various fields
4. Journalists are sensitive to public sentiment and this holds them back from reporting some things the way they want to or the way they think is right

Methodology

This was a qualitative research based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 2 groups of key informants. The groups consisted of (1) 16 administrative-level journalists, including news editors, managing editors, TV or radio station directors, enterprise owners, and division heads or other policy makers, with 4 administrators from each type of media studied; and (2) 16 operations-level journalists, including reporters, program hosts, and people responsible for website content. Data were collected through interviews and observation. At the focus group discussion the informants were given the opportunity to exchange ideas related to the research objectives, and follow-up questions were asked on interesting points. Data were analyzed by descriptive analysis.

Result and Discussion

As for the building of political communication networks by journalists in Songkhla, they built up a network by first joining in the same activities and having professional exchanges. There are not very many journalists working in Songkhla and they run into each other all the time at the same events and jobs. They regularly meet each other at press releases or statements to the press by branches of the government. They are normally invited to these press conferences by e-mail or telephone or Line application. The journalists Line group is the major group in the Songkhla journalists' political communications network. It was started by the Songkhla Province Government Public Relations Office, which is the office that coordinates sending

press releases from various government agencies and from private sector organizations or state enterprises when they have interesting news they want to spread. When they are planning any events or have any announcements, they will let the Songkhla Province Government Public Relations Office know. The office lists the news items in a daily news bulletin. Most of the news comes directly from the governor or deputy governor of Songkhla. Other agencies also contribute news and the public relations office puts it on the daily news bulletin. There are over 300 members of the Songkhla journalists' Line group, including department heads, administrators, and journalists. Members come from the public and private sectors. Journalists look at the Line group to decide which news they'd like to report on. When some agencies arrange activities, they might send messages about it directly to the press through the Line group. This is the work method of the office of public relations. This is consistent with the work of Tidinan Boonpahp Common (2013) about the role of new media in creating social values and adolescents' identities in Bangkok, where he reported that modern digital media play a role in building both positive and negative values in youth. Modern digital media are also tools and spaces for adolescents to search, survey, test out and evaluate their identities. Modern digital media also play an indirect role in socialization. The findings are also consistent with those of Pongsathorn Singnoy (2013), who wrote about the role of communications in networking and promoting public conscience in young male volunteers. He studied two groups of volunteers that were founded to react to crisis situations that arose in Thailand. This was a new social movement. The youth freely decided to join the groups and were not forced in any way. Communication was very important in forming the newer group of volunteers, in maintaining relations in the first group, and in expanding the network to cooperate with other volunteer groups. They worked as in a three-legged race. Communications to build, maintain and expand the groups was an important process to let the network survive.

As for factors involved in network building, the network of journalists in Songkhla was both a naturally forming network and an established network. The Line group of journalists has members from many groups from different municipalities as well as Songkhla media, Had Yai Office of Government Public Relations, Kor Hongs and 8-9 other groups. Most of the journalists belong to Songkhla Media, the group of the provincial PR office, and the group of the PR office of Had Yai Municipality, as well as Songkhla PAO News, which is the group of the provincial administrative organization. There is also the Newspaper Association of the Southern Region of Thailand, the Mass Communications Association, the Community Radio Association, and the Radio Club. The Kim Yong website and other websites that publish news are not opposed to network building, so the network can disseminate news. The network was built up by the journalists themselves, meaning journalists working in newspapers, newspapers, radio, TV, or websites all together.

The content and topics covered by the network included 1) promoting political participation – journalists promoted political participation by campaigning to get people to vote in local and national elections. They presented news about the elections neutrally with no bias for either side. Within the network there would be exchanges of news and other assistance, such as sending each other photographs or information. First, each journalist would decide if the news was interesting to their target audience at that time or not. Most journalists put priority on news about nationally or locally famous public figures. The content of the news should inform the public with accurate

information. The news should support the work of the Election Committee and encourage people to vote, including voting on referendums like that for the new constitution in 2017. This also relates to the work of Wasant Limratanapatarakul (2015), who affirmed that there is a growing trend for citizens to call for more political participation, which is a revival of older forms of self-governance in rural Thai communities. People are seeking ways to solve present problems by building up a sense of civic duty in communities and giving people a feeling of greater responsibility for their own administration rather than just waiting for government assistance and intervention. To build political participation and self-administration among local communities, it is necessary to apply and mobilize social capital that is already available, meaning mutual trust, confidence in the goodness of humanity, and family and neighborly relations. This social capital cannot be converted to cash but is indispensable for supporting the desired new development of grass roots democracy, as has been proven from developments in different localities with diverse bodies of knowledge that have been models for this evolution. Their experience can serve as lessons for other areas.

2) Political news and knowledge- The press plays a role in promoting political participation, and journalists in Songkhla broadcast news from the Election Committee to the public as well as reporting on news from local and national politicians and political parties. Before the referendum for the new constitution in 2017, journalists in Songkhla informed citizens about what was in the proposed draft and how it would affect them and encouraged people to vote in the referendum. Their first go-to news is usually news from the government PR office about what the national government and local government are doing and how people will benefit. 3) News about how political parties in the province and localities are proceeding with the implementation of their policies and grievances or problems of local people. Besides reporting on the good things the government has done, a major thrust of the news and the ultimate goal is to build up good understanding in the communities so there are no conflicts or concerns. If there are matters of concern, the press will interview the relevant individuals and issue news stories that focus on the issue at hand. If there is an issue that impacts society or if there is a demand from some group then the journalists will investigate. They will try to find the facts and will report on what is a hot issue at each moment. They will also use their network. If Kim Yong or another website publishes the same story, they will not object. It is useful to have a wider network to spread the news further. The network is one they have built up themselves. 4) As mediators, journalists in Songkhla will act to create understanding between local and national level politicians and the citizens in Songkhla. There are journalists that specialize in political news in the center, but there are not any specialized political journalists in Songkhla Province. The general image is that journalists in Songkhla will shy away from very political stories. Journalists in southern Thailand are afraid of being used as political tools. They see their responsibility as reporting on the issues only. Usually they will report on issues that show the government or the citizens in a positive light, with the ultimate goal of creating good understanding between different groups. In the case of conflicts or concerns, they will do interviews with the relevant people and broadcast news about the issues. They want to deliver the facts about conflicts to the national and military leaders.

Conclusions

There are two forms of network building by journalists in Songkhla: 1) an official network, which is an established network with shared activities and exchanges. The Line group is quite tightly knit. It has a large number of members coming from all different sectors. It follows the principles for building, maintaining and expanding a formal network. The Songkhla Province Government Public Relations Office invites the journalists in the Line group to press conferences, mostly by the governor, and provides news stories from sources the journalists trust, such as the governor and deputy governor. 2) an informal network – this is a naturally-forming network of groups that came together freely. Their associations developed from working together and they became friends and colleagues, or else they may have been previously acquainted.

Content that is communicated and transmitted in the networks is about 1) promoting public participation in politics by encouraging people to vote and presenting news neutrally; 2) news from the Election Committee; 3) news on the implementation of policies by political parties in the province and on a national level; and 4) news on the needs and demands of local people and on the duties of the local administrative organizations.

Recommendations

Policy recommendations

1. The government public relations department- The office in each province should establish a Line group of journalists to enable quick communication with and among journalists.
2. The Election Committee - The committee in each province should establish a Line group of journalists to enable quick dissemination of news to the people about elections.
3. Politicians – Politicians and political parties in each province should establish a Line group of journalists to enable quick communication with the people.

Practical recommendations

1. The government public relations department needs to communicate to build a network of journalists to disseminate news.
2. Election Committees in every province should set up Line groups to communicate with the press.

Recommendations for further research

1. Similar studies should be done about the building of political communication networks by journalists in other provinces, like Chiang Mai and Ubol Ratchathani.

2. A study should be done about the role and duty of journalists in building up business news networks and communicating business news.
3. A comparative study should be done on small, medium and large political communication networks.

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