

# Media and Politics

*Arunee Kasayanond*

Political Science Program, Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University, Thailand

E-mail: Yingper@hotmail.com

## Abstract

Aiming to examine political expressions and commentaries in the age of globalization, this study on media and politics looks into modern media available on the internet, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube. It is found that modern media play a major role in political expressions and commentaries made by the people, particularly with regards to the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where modern media, including Facebook and Twitter, were employed to communicate with the U.S. voters during the campaign. The study also highlights the influence of modern media that comes with the technological progress in the age of globalization, which has opened up a newer and more current domain for political commentaries.

**Keywords:** New Media, Political Domain, Donald Trump

## Introduction

At present, the world is in the age of globalization, an era where progresses take place on many fronts and technology becomes a new factor in people's lives. Technology brings about convenience and comforts in several ways, especially in the realm of communication and connection that can be made across the world in a blink of an eye. Human can shrink the world by being able to transmit news and information at a faster rate. Relying on the technological progress, we can learn about the situation on the other side of the world in a matter of seconds. We can also see each other, talk to one another, or publicize culture from the other side of the world in a few minutes. As such, we may call the world in this day and age "the world without borders" or "the globalized world".

Globalization is marked by the widespread usage of computers as an important mechanism and by the important role computers play as they are the tool that is able to quickly receive and process information without much limitation. Computers are used to store, record, organize, and transmit information from and to all corners of the world in a short period of time. In the past few years, the computer system has been greatly developed from a large and expensive mainframe to a personal computer that is small in size and easily portable, yet high in quality and capability as well as lower in price than before. In addition, the development in mobile phones has made them more capable than simply making phone calls, just as we call them smart phones.<sup>1</sup>

The advanced communication technology in the era of globalization also influences political behaviors exhibited by the people as the communication technology has increasingly come to play a role in the political system. Via the advanced media that quickly broadcast pictures or activities that take place, people have greater opportunities to follow the moves made by their politicians and their representatives in the parliament. In response, people can also easily use the media to question and criticize the government's work or even to petition and voice their opinions towards the government.

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<sup>1</sup> Smart phones refer to mobile phones that are functional beyond making or receiving phone calls, contain multiple applications for use, and are compatible with internet connection via 3G, 4G, or WIFI, through which social network and leading applications, such as Facebook, Line, and Youtube, can be used.

## **Printing Revolution: The Origin of Media**

Before the advanced technology that man is able to achieve today, man has come through many eras, where the potential of man and society is consistently developed and passed along to the following generation until today. Communication and the related technology began with the interactions in small groups of men using speech and development of alphabets. Then, in the Renaissance era came a new invention, that is, a press introduced by Johannes Gutenberg. With the introduction of press, dissemination of knowledge in various subjects became faster, resulting in a faster and wider spread of knowledge and academic discoveries. The invention of press also led to a production of replicates or a repeated production of the same product in a large amount. This repeated or mass production created a phenomenon where people were simply turned into recipients materialistically. In other words, people became slaves of materialism. In this way, the Gutenberg press marked the beginning of books as Johannes Gutenberg invented press to generate alphabets and, subsequently, books. Gutenberg's production of the world's first printed bible led to the availability of books for people to study today.

Thanks to the invention of press by Gutenberg, there are now a large number and a great variety of books which people can read and explore the world of knowledge from. Another consequence of the invention by Gutenberg is the availability of books, newspapers, and other publications that affect the way people around the world connect and communicate. The development of publishing enhances the cultural exchanges between nations, and allows people to absorb and translate information, including the visions in their heads or their imaginations, into letters and pictures.

Moreover, printing also brought about creativity that led to the publication of religious books, which in turn, led to the rise of the Reformation era and the beginning of the Modern era, part of which is also known as the Age of Reason or the Age of Enlightenment. During the Age of Enlightenment, the exploration of territories, the agricultural revolution, and the industrial revolution led to an expansion of influences exerted by the European superpowers and colonialism.

The impact of the invention of press can still be felt in the society today. As the press allows for mass production, the impact of the press has seeped into the mind and the society of man, who are now increasingly able to learn about different cultures and experience the spread of knowledge and new ways of thinking. The press has generated a great deal of impacts, economically, politically, and socially. Differing from what happened prior to the invention of press, where knowledge can only be spread by word of mouth, the printing press enables readers to take in knowledge in various subjects and allows later generations to build a new set of knowledge upon previous ones. For example, the spread of Christian teachings as a result of millions of copies of the bible being published and distributed to people all over the world has inspired thoughts about moralities, hard work, prudence, saving, love, and generosity according to the religious teachings. Therefore, it can be said that Gutenberg was very influential in the spread of Christianity. Printing also keeps the Renaissance arts alive by making them accessible to the public. With the availability of printing press, the limitation on knowledge dissemination as in the Middle Age would no longer happen and nothing would ever be lost. It has also contributed to today's world by triggering the evolution of printing from then on (Samakoses, 2013).

## **From Printing Press to Modern Media**

Media are the communication channels used to present contents, including news, entertainment, and advertisement to consumers. A technological progress brings about changes and improvements in the media formats. In the past, political communications in

Thailand usually remained in the hands of the governors or the political elites. Political messages and principles communicated from the governor to the governed are often one-way communication from top to bottom via traditional media. Because the government was able to control communication and traditional communication channels, such as radio, television, and newspapers, the government was also able to exert a complete control over the media and to maintain the governing power. The communication via the media which the government solely owned and had control over was intended to establish an alliance between the people and the government.

During the political struggles in May 1992, the military attempted to block and distort the information in hopes that it would make the people believe that the increasingly violent political movements were originated by the third party. When the military-supported government exited the power, the society started to demand freedom of television and radio from the government's control. At the same time, the new communication technology began to play a greater role in the Thai society. Information transmitted via satellite channels and the internet meant that there were more communication tools and that political communications could go through more channels.

With changes in the information technology according to the historical eras, the media may be categorized into two types depending on the way the media are used, that is, the traditional media and the new media (Sombatpanich, 2004: 4).

**Traditional media** refers to the media through which the sender conveys the information to the recipient, and the recipient cannot, in return, directly contact the sender. The traditional media can be made into two groups: those that transmit either letters or voices or pictures alone, such as newspaper, telegraph, and radio, and those that transmit pictures and voices together, such as television and film.

**New media** refers to the media through which the sender and the recipient can convey the information in the form of pictures, voices, and messages at the same time by combining the technology of the traditional media with the progress of new information technology. This allows for a two-way communication via the network and raises the potential of multimedia. In recent years, a wide variety of the new media has been greatly developed and well as popularized (Burnette and Marshall, 2003: 40-41).

News boards on the internet are the new media that has become highly popular in the age of globalization. They have provided multiple domains for a large number of discussion groups, which have been made more convenient for users by the functionality of today's internet system. Aside from many websites, users can form their own discussion groups using applications such as Facebook or Twitter. The communication via the new media has gained popularity as they are user-friendly, allow users to communicate and comment freely, conveniently, and quickly, and to choose to consume the news of their interest constantly.

New media and online media have received popularity among the public. The Thai Netizen Network indicated that in 2013 Thailand saw a constant increase of internet usage, with the number of internet users increasing by 15.52% and the amount of broadband usage increasing by 22%, even though the internet connection made via mobile phones at the time could be somewhat problematic.

In today's political contexts, many politicians adopt online social networks as the main channel of communication between themselves and the public. Among websites of many politicians, the first was the website of General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (Laowichaya, 2013). From these websites grow the current online social media. In the 2011 general election in Thailand, the politicians and the political parties used online media as a communication channel. Apirak Kosayodhin, the deputy leader of Thailand's Democrat Party has mentioned that the Democrat Party utilized online social media for various purposes including research and survey of people in communities so as to design appropriate policies. Online media such

as Facebook and Twitter were also available both in personal or party names. It was expected that there were more than a million of fans and followers. On part of the Pheu Thai (which literally means for Thais) Party, it ran a Facebook page called “Pheu Thai Party” aside from communicating messages via its website and other social networks. Focusing on reporting the movement of the Party with the motto “Pheu Thai is ready to run the country, and would like to think and act anew for all Thai people”, its Facebook page obtained more than 6,000 likes (Bangkok Biz News Online, 2011).

Many politicians have constantly used online media to communicate with their own target groups, such that they have gained a large group of followers. Back in 2011, the Facebook page of Abhisit Vejjajiva had more than 850,000 fans, whereas the page of Yingluck Shinawatra, the 28<sup>th</sup> prime minister of Thailand, had more than 500,000 fans. Both Abhisit and Yingluck consistently updated their movements on their respective pages, whether when they went to locations to visit their constituencies or when they participated in parliamentary meetings (Bangkok Biz News Online, 2011).

Today, almost all politicians in Thailand have their own Facebook or Twitter accounts, which earn many followers and fans. Also, each of the major political parties, such as the Pheu Thai Party and the Democrat Party, also has its own Facebook page, which they use as a communication channel and relate various information to the public.

### **Modern Media: Their Use as Political Spheres**

Not only do the aforementioned modern media utilize the internet as a platform, but the applications that come with the internet have also provided important spheres for people to communicate or make political commentaries. Because these applications have been designed with a focus on ease of use, convenience, and frequent use at all times and places, they can respond to people’s needs very well and have become very popular.

Kent Wertime and Jan Fenwick offer thoughts about the new media and define the new media as contents in digital form. The main characteristics of the digital contents can be defined in terms of five kinds of freedom.

- 1) Freedom from scheduling, where the digital contents allow consumers to receive or send information of their choice at any time, and eliminate the needs to view contents at any specified time.
- 2) Freedom from geographical boundaries, where the digital contents can be gathered from all over the world in a short period of time, which means that consumers can choose to receive or search for information from any country of their choice.
- 3) Freedom from scale, where contents can be abridged or expanded in terms of their size or the network size, such as an adaptation of contents so that they are suitable for global broadcast or suitable for certain target groups.
- 4) Freedom from format, where the digital contents do not necessarily adhere to any fixed format. In traditional media, television commercials shall not be longer than thirty seconds and publication must be half a page or a full page in size. On the other hand, digital contents such as files or clips recorded by mobile phones that are uploaded to the website may be of any length or any file quality.
- 5) Freedom from marketer-initiated, marketer-created, and marketer-controlled contents, where, in the midst of digital technological development, media owners cannot control the spread of contents like they did in the past. The contents found in blogs, video clips, Youtube, or other mixed media may be created by any consumers, and thus, the term consumer-created content or the content generated by online word of mouth.

The new media that people widely use to make political commentaries are the followings.

**Facebook:** Sureerak Wongtip (2013) has studied online activities of the U.S. people and found that the widely popular activity is to use social networks. Based on the Simmons

market research (Nakpongpan, 2012), 66 percent of the U.S. internet users reported using the social networks 20 percent more than they did in 2007. 43 percent of all the U.S. internet users logged in to use the social network more than once a day. Among all the social networks, the one that stands out and constantly grows is Facebook. There are about 125 million Facebook users in the U.S. and 901 million worldwide, with each user spending on average 405 hours per month on Facebook (Marketing Oops, 2012). In Thailand, Facebook gathers 13,276,200 users, 34,642 Facebook pages, 133,640,093 likes on Facebook pages, with 34 percent of users from 18 to 24 years old and 28 percent from 25 to 34 years old (IT 24 Hours, 2012).

**Blog:** Short for “web log”, a blog is like a recording of daily occurrences or a recording of diary items online. It is found that there are more than 164 million users of blog and more than 123 million readers. A notable quality of blogs is that the writers are able to receive feedbacks from and interact with the readers.

**Twitter:** Twitter is a micro-blogging service, where users may type or “tweet” messages, each of which cannot be longer than 140 letters, via web browsers or its smart-phone application. Twitter is similar to the status update on Facebook. However, a difference between Twitter and Facebook is that on Twitter, followers may follow any Twitter accounts without having to receive permission from the owners of those accounts. On the other hand, to follow someone on Facebook, one has to be accepted as a friend by the owner of the Facebook account.

**Line:** First offering the service in June 2011 in Japan, Line has expanded the service to many countries, such as Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Russia, Chile, and Mexico, become a very popular application, and attracted a large number of users.

**Youtube:** Youtube is a website offering video service on the internet. Each day, videos on Youtube are viewed more than 100 million times, accounting for about 29 percent of the video clip watching activity in the U.S. Each month, more than 65,000 clips are uploaded onto Youtube.

Statistics from Nielson/NetRatings, a world’s leading market researcher, indicate that each month Youtube gains about 20 million new members. Moreover, the Time Magazine in 2006 recognized Youtube as a well-known provider of video service on the internet and named it the invention of the year.

Cathy Bryan, Roza Tsagarousianou, and Damian Tambini (1988) suggested in “Democracy on the Internet World” the reasons people offer their opinions in the world of internet, including:

- 1) People may access information easily and effectively, so they have better control over information and are better equipped with information.
- 2) The opinions indicate people’s satisfaction in and responses to a certain situation.
- 3) The internet is a place that gathers political reactions.
- 4) It is a place where government intervention into the media can be avoided, thereby giving rise to a political sphere that is free from the power of the government and generating more of the horizontal communication.<sup>2</sup>
- 5) People may react and respond to the information more quickly.
- 6) The press and the politicians cannot distort information as conveniently as before.
- 7) The new media are better designed to serve people’s needs.

Bryan, Tsagarousianou and Tambini (1988) also pointed out the benefits of having modern media available on the internet, where the modern media encourage political commentaries,

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<sup>2</sup> This differs from the past, where vertical communication took place to a greater degree than horizontal communication. In vertical communication, the information senders usually monopolize the message and the recipients of information cannot respond and start a two-way communication.

particularly as people can own and produce the media as well as disseminate the information by themselves without having to depend on the press. This is consistent with the properties of Facebook, Twitter, blogging, and Line, where people can register for an account and use them at all places and times. The registration may require personal information of the intended users, but it also means that Facebook, Twitter, blogging, and Line provide a space for users to make comments fully and freely.

With the service publicly available in 2006, Facebook's popularity has constantly increased and become the most popular social network today. Having collected usage statistics of many of the social media, the Socialbakers website shows that Thailand has about 15.8 million Facebook accounts, which may include both Thais and foreigners, or about 23.75 percent of the country's total population. Among all Thai online population, 90.21 percent or nine out of ten internet users in Thailand have their own Facebook account, reflecting the popularity of Facebook in Thailand's online community (Wongtip, 2012).

The year 2010 was the year that Facebook first came into play in the world of politics in Thailand. Several groups and Facebook fan pages arose from the political conflicts, for example, such pages as "Sick of People's Alliance for Democracy" or "Confident one million Thais are object to the dissolution of the parliament". The demonstration by the "multi-colored group", where around 2,000 people gathered at the Victory Monument on 17 April 2011 and aimed to do so until the United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship would stop its own demonstration, was another example of political movements that use online social networks as a catalyst and a channel communication between members. In this particular political movement, video clips were used; groups were registered on Facebook to survey the number of people supporting the cause; and a chat program that allows for video and voice communication together like Skype was also adopted. (Suriyawongkul, 2012).

Beside using Facebook to gather people who share similar political opinions and then to arrange for further political activities, online social networks like Facebook also played a significant role during the political conflict in the months of April and May 2010. For instance, the demonstrators used the mobile phones that connected to the internet to film and immediately report what happened on the ground via Facebook. Political opinions were made by writing messages as well as sharing videos and photographs among one's own network of friends. Such expansion of political spheres brings more people of the same political opinions together.

Social network websites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are turned into the most important space for political movement these days, because these modern media have become parts of people's daily lives. Mobile phones can now serve as a portable computer that makes it more convenient for the users in various aspects of life. The mobile phones have, therefore, become another important factor in life that allows people to receive news and information in a matter of minutes. It can then be said that, chronologically, during the eighteenth century, most political conversations took place in restaurants and salons; publications, such as newspapers and journals, play an important role in the nineteenth century, while television and polls do so in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, however, the internet and the modern media are the most popular and most serve as the public space for political conversations.

## **Donald Trump and the Revolution of Campaign with the Use of New Media**

In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the fight between Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate, and Donald Trump, the Republican candidate, were highly heated. At one point, the probability that Clinton would win the election was as high as 85 percent, according to

the New York Times poll. A political website, fivethirtyeight.com, showed a poll result and offered an analysis that Clinton should win the election, citing that she was a 71 percent favorite to come out the victor. The set expectation turned into a worldwide shock when Donald Trump, at the age of 70 and with an extremely conservative leaning, an allegedly sexist and racist view, interest in neither the environment nor the human rights, and objection to immigrant workers, won the 2016 U.S. presidential election on 8 November 2016.

Following the landslide victory, Trump was sworn in as the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Despite widespread criticism, it has been analyzed that Trump is a conservative who had once again ignited the white population living in old industrial towns in the Midwest, the Northeast, and the Great Lakes regions to come out and vote. These old industrial areas that were once prosperous became old towns as they lost their competitiveness due to the technological progress, globalization, trade agreements, and global trades. They had experienced an economic downturn for so many years before Trump planned and utilized “the Rust Belt strategy”, which promises to bring back jobs and industries to the areas. These white voters, therefore, considered Trump their new hope, who would make the U.S. economy prosper again by keeping the U.S. competition with China or Korea out of the picture, and as a result, turned out to vote in a large number.

Another important strategy adopted by Donald Trump in this election was the use of social media or new media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Having spent just 91 million U.S. dollars in the campaign compared to Clinton’s campaign spending of 374 million U.S. dollars, Trump relied on these media to promote his cause. A reason why Trump’s campaign spending was relatively small is due to his usage of social media, particularly Twitter, where he built a large community under his account “@realDonaldTrump”. The account has about 12 million followers, compared to Clinton’s with only 3 million followers.

Trump regularly uses Twitter to connect with his supporters as if they are close allies. With each Tweet containing no longer than 140 letters, Trump tweets to campaign, to attack the opposite side, present his ideas, and paint pictures about his would-be achievements in case he becomes the president. While each of his Tweets is re-tweeted or resent a million of times, they are also mentioned and critiqued upon by mainstream media, such as newspapers and televisions, which allows Trump to gain the media coverage without spending much money. Specifically, in the first six months of 2016, the name Donald Trump was mentioned in Twitter conversations more than 130 million times, whereas the name Hillary Clinton was mentioned only 17 million times.

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