Critical Reflection Essay

The transformation of Asian media in the digital public sphere

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The internet and its technological infrastructure has become an increasingly important element to call for action in a globalised society. New communication systems and platforms facilitated by the internet such as social media increase peoples' communication power beyond national borders, space and time to reach people in the most efficient manner possible, unlike traditional forms of mass media such as radio, television or newspapers (Chaisukkosol, 2010). With Asia making up half of the world's internet users and the increased penetration of mobile devices and internet connectivity (Devanesan, 2020), the spread of the internet has profoundly affected political participation within and across societies of the continent. The conventional method of political participation through voting or party activities and the spread of news through institutional channels has been challenged by nonconventional activist methods where people directly voice their opinions and challenge the government while government administrations attempt to meaningfully engage or oppose the public online (Huang et al., 2017). Media in Asia is in transition as prior concerns to the limited access of platforms has been resolved with the creation of a digital recursive public sphere. This transformation has led to the rise in online activism such as Thai protestors' 'Get out of Thailand' campaign that disapproves of the Thai government's slow Covid-19 response rate and their fight for monarchy reform. At the same time, the spread of memes on social media has turned media into a joint form of activism and resistance across Asian countries as seen in the Milk Tea Alliance trend which promotes pan-Asian collaboration and the notion of a global caring society.

Social media campaigning and smartphone usage are tools of resistance available in the public sphere for citizens to spread information on their declining trust in the government. The prominence of smartphones has shaped the way information on political news and agenda is being distributed across Asia. Access to the internet urges passive consumers of mainstream media content to become more vocal and active participants in political discourse (Tapsell, 2018). The use of a smartphone device has become a necessity and has led to the growth of online information dissemination in both rural and urban areas that were once dominated by traditional media such as television or radio stations and newspapers (Tapsell, 2018). Tapsell (2018) discusses how instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook are digital public spheres that incite and enrage viewers as citizens share eye-catching short headlines or audio visual media to support the opposition. The conversations within such instant-messenger chat groups were found to largely discuss politics on a national scale instead of local. Moreover, the material and content posted on Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups were of short campaign advertisements or short speeches and clips of political leaders where citizens respond and react to the coverage by instigating rumour and gossip as "symbolic resistance" (Tapsell, 2018). The 'Get out of Thailand' campaign has gained momentum as the Thai youth protest against the country's mismanagement of Covid-19, nepotism and corruption by creating a private Facebook group online named "Migrate" to vent their worries living in Thailand and discuss pathways for emigration (Freeman, 2021). Although some members online may not be firm in their decision to move abroad due to various reasons such as lack of funds or limited skill sets, the role of gossip amongst themselves achieves the expression of opinion, contempt and disapproval against the Thai government while minimising the risks of reprisal. Tapsell (2021) also explained how users share content on social media platforms to trigger and resonate with the emotions of one another. This element of emotional attribution to content corresponds with smartphones being "weapons of the weak" as it distributes messages on social media

without coordination or planning for it to draw public attention (Tapsell, 2018). Digitalisation has made the smartphone become an online portal to a public sphere where subversive communication on smartphones is identified as "weapons of the weak" since it is a partisan effort made by the society where the content shared is justifiable and circulates anti-government messages (Tapsell, 2018).

However, cybersecurity and online surveillance may pose a barrier to empowering the freedom of information and expression on the internet. In Southeast Asia, the government views of the role of social media platforms as a great concern (Tapsell, 2021). Lim (2017) outlines how both netizens and the general public spark collective anger provoked by the monitoring of online content as such practices continue to intimidate and repress public voices on social media platforms. In the case of Thailand, social media and computer mediated communication has been subject to the militarisation of the cyberspace. Various tactics of online and offline surveillance have been implemented to monitor the traffic and data of Thai citizens who are actively engaging on the internet (Laungaramsri, 2016). Cybercrime has been considered as a new security threat that requires a strict mechanism of control (Laungaramsri, 2016). The latest development of authoritarian state social media relations strategises social media suppression as a potential mechanism to regime resilience; new media has increasingly employed Thailand's regime to establish an absolute royalist and pro-military ideology (Laungaramsri, 2016). In regards to the 'Get out of Thailand' campaign, Thai students and young professionals have made use of the audio chat application Clubhouse to discuss reforms to the royal monarchy political system and the urge for Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's resignation (The Straits Times, 2021). As a result, Thailand's Minister of Digital Economy and Society ChaiwutThanakhamanusorn threatens to file lawsuits against users who distort information and labels the group as "nation haters" with ulterior political motives (Bangkok Post, 2021). This attempt to silence the online public shows how the dominating government actively uses social

media to neutralise oppositional voices and characterise them as disloyal citizens (Lim, 2017). Although cybersecurity may be an outward move towards external security threats, government agencies may have designed the mechanism to wreck online networks of anti-regime dissent and infuse public fear, making them turn against their own people.

Despite this form of victimisation caused by the government, heightened online activism continues to prevail as citizens ultimately resist and challenge the nation's narrative by maintaining solidarity online. The 'strength in numbers' dynamic has been a core motivating factor for citizens to establish various political protests in their country (Lim, 2017). This construction of organic communities to engage openly with political issues is initiated by means of users' announcing the call to participate on their friend-to-friend networks and through social media tools like Facebook posts or Twitter hashtags (Lim, 2017). One's online activity and role in sharing media in the community is regarded as a form of engagement in participatory activism as it emphasises on the need to expand knowledge and power to the online nation (Lim, 2017). Thailand Facebook group "Migrate" has become a platform for dissatisfied Thai citizens to seek advice on better job prospects other countries around the world can offer as compared to the job shortage and limited wealth opportunities in Thailand (Thanthong-Knight, 2021). With more than 800,000 members part of the Facebook group, the number is double the amount of likes connected to the Health Ministry's official Facebook page and is equivalent to the 28th most populated province out of the country's 77 provinces (Thanthong-Knight, 2021). Whereas speeches and discussions hosted by Thai critic Pavin Chachavalpongpun on the topic of monarch reform and the king were supported by over 70,000 users in his first five days on the platform (Thanthong-Knight, 2021). This shows how citizens are finding social media content more relevant and also more believable as it undermines content spread on mainstream media and other official information sources (Tapsell, 2021).

There is a need for citizens to attempt to find more online spaces and accounts where they are able to articulate their concerns and demands as the underlying objectives of such different approaches imply the society's desire for change in their government (Lim, 2017). This consistent sense of civic responsibility stems from the public's deep sense of disappointment in view of the political dilemmas in their country (Lim, 2017). The 'Get out of Thailand' campaign is an example of how the Thai youth are attacking the regime by insinuating their loss of hope and faith in the economic, political and ideological progression in their country (Thanthong-Knight, 2021). Thus, the unifying force in dismay on various social media platforms is how citizens strive to have their voices heard while showing their collective actions on the public sphere.

The transition of media has also shown how the creation of internet memes has become an new form of resistance through which the public can portray political protest. Online activity can be shaped in a playful form considering that memes can become indicative of political critique (Szablewicz, 2014). Since the internet has enabled the production of new desires, the online youth have taken advantage of digital media to reimage and exhibit alternative perspectives of success under a political context (Szablewicz, 2014). The Milk Tea Alliance is what emerged from a meme war which involved activists from Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan who used the imagery of the local milk tea beverages in their respective countries as a symbol of unity against Chinese extreme nationalist trolls on Twitter (Temby, 2021). Most of the Milk Tea Alliance memes that circulate on the internet illustrate the three different varieties of milk tea personified and hand in hand with each other (Leong, 2020). Szablewicz (2014) notes that memes rely on a combination of visual and textual material to construct humorous and entertaining parodies of existing issues. As the online public sphere helps to suspend power relationships while permitting political critique, memes have the possibility to bring visibility to issues which otherwise would have been

rendered invisible or censored by censorious governments (Szablewicz, 2014). The Milk Tea Alliance was also used as a movement to rally against the varying political issues between the three countries. The solidarity of the Milk Tea Alliance nations has translated into real-world action as they speak for each other's demands with Thailand demanding elections for a new constitution, Hong Kong fighting for political freedom under Beijing, and Taiwan against the Chinese Communist Party's pledge to reunify the island by force (Barron, 2020). This also symbolises the notion of a caring society as citizens from different nations show their care towards the different political issues aside from their own and willingly disseminate information regarding the agendas in both their online and offline protests (Lim, 2018). This caring society feels empowered to offer support to the other countries driving sub-movements in the spirit of solidarity. As the countries embrace the Milk Tea Alliance label to create a sense of online community, the power of the meme is strengthened through affective identification and becomes a visual medium that signifies new meanings in different contexts (Szablewicz, 2014). Meme sharing has been incorporated as a new form of participatory politics to the youth and has solidified the power of online address.

In conclusion, the role of media in Asia is in transition due to the rise of participatory politics and the access to an online public sphere. Social media campaigns have become tools of resistance that directly address the public concerning political issues on instant communication platforms such as Facebook. Online communities rely on their group solidarity to spread political information across platforms in various media formats in spite of cybersecurity laws which attempt to threaten online citizens' freedom of expression. Lastly, the network of interconnectivity made possible through memes have formed global movements and promoted the adoption of shared views and objectives regardless of geographic locations due to caring societies among Asian countries.

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