

The role of online social media in influencing opinions on public policies of Thai youth

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Abstract

The internet has made online media an integral part of human daily life and has created online social platforms as spaces for exchanging information and expressing identities. Therefore, online social media is cross-linked to public opinion by serving as a gathering place for diverse thoughts, knowledge, experiences, and ideas of the public. Thai youth are part of this trend, utilizing online social media to exchange opinions, information, knowledge, and news about politics and society extensively due to global political instability and changes in societal norms. This demonstrates the significant interest Thai youth have in Thai politics which we can see that they access online social media to enhance their knowledge and establish their identities through expressing political opinions and various public policies. Consequently, it can be concluded that online social media plays a crucial role in shaping opinions regarding public

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policies concerning Thai youth. Therefore, the government and relevant stakeholders should pay attention to these opinions and consider them in formulating appropriate public policies or adapting existing ones to meet the needs of the youth. Additionally, the government can utilize online social media as a communication channel to reach all citizens, ensuring transparency and providing rapid services

Keyword: Social media, Public policy, Thai youth

Introduction

Nowadays, the world is undergoing rapid changes, or one might say it is in a state of globalization, leading to rapid changes and transformations in various aspects. Online social media is also considered another high-impact factor and is as influential as the five human senses. (Biocca, 2000) In the past, accessing online social media was difficult due to high costs and lack of popularity, resulting in only a small number of people who could use or access online media, mainly working-age groups or those with sufficient income. However, nowadays, people of all ages and genders can easily access online media due to the diversity of service providers and lower prices resulting from market competition. Additionally, there are various formats of media to choose from, such as online social

media, online communication, games, websites, or various entertainment media. This raises questions about whether online media tends to influence the thoughts of people in society, especially children and adolescents who may still have limited qualifications or experiences and may engage in risky online media usage schemes. One interesting point is that these young people are members of the society and will also join in the social workforce in the future. Therefore, the online social media that Thai youth use and access may influence their thoughts, including their political participation desires, which may change the policies of governments or political parties both currently and in the future. Thus, there must be adjustments and changes to meet the needs of the future workforce. Therefore, studying online media that may affect the opinions of youth regarding public policies and political issues may have positive implications for society in the future.

Therefore, studying the role of online social media in shaping opinions on public policies concerning Thai youth is highly intriguing, as it is associated with various factors from the perspectives of the population, politics, and the society.

The rapid change of technology

At present, rapid technological advancements and internet connectivity have greatly accelerated the exchange of information and news globally. The use of online platforms or the internet as a primary means of

communication has multifaceted social and communicative implications (Mossberger et al, 2007). The speed of information dissemination enables news to be published and distributed worldwide rapidly via the internet without the need for printing or traditional distribution channels. Additionally, there is a wealth of primary information sources such as television, radio, newspapers, and various online news websites, allowing people to access information from multiple sources, thereby facilitating diverse perspectives. (Biocca, 2000) One interesting point is how the internet facilitates two-way communication, enabling individuals to express opinions and share information quickly through online platforms such as social media, blogs, forums, or even through commenting on various channels (Kulachai et al, 2023). This has led to the creation of online communities where individuals with similar interests can connect and foster knowledge, understanding, and exchange experiences. Regarding political and social issues, the internet is a vital tool for disseminating political and social news and can have various impacts. (Bennett, 2007)

However, despite the widespread proliferation of the internet, the issue of concern lies in the importance of verifying and validating the information due to the dangers posed by the dissemination of inaccurate or irresponsible online information. Additionally, emphasizing the importance of being knowledgeable readers and engaging in analysis and critical

thinking is crucial in aiding individuals to understand information accurately and value constructive feedback.

Online Media

Online media refers to media that is disseminated and accessed through the internet. This form of media is diverse and rapidly evolving alongside digital technology advancements, encompassing various types such as news websites and blogs, social media, videos and channels on YouTube, podcasts, social news, online games, eBooks, and online articles. This diversity highlights the significant role of online media in communication, information sharing, and accessing educational and entertainment content. Therefore, the choice of using online media affects users' awareness of information and expression of opinions. (Loader, 2007) However, the basic knowledge of Thai youth and their ability to access online media, which are in conflict, may affect their awareness and caution in receiving news and information through this type of media.

Social Media

Apart from the term "online media" mentioned earlier, online media also encompasses a subset known as "social media," which refers to digital platforms enabling people to communicate, exchange information, and connect via the internet. Examples of popular social media platforms

include Facebook, the world's largest social media website, used by a vast number of users globally for sharing information, following friends, and creating groups or pages of interest (Vromen, 2008). Twitter, or X, a platform focuses on short text posts (tweets) with limited character counts, allowing users to follow each other. Instagram, a platform emphasizing photo and video sharing, features various features such as Stories and IGTV. LinkedIn serves as a platform for business networking and creating profiles focusing on skills and professional experiences. YouTube provides opportunities for uploading, sharing, and viewing videos. TikTok, a platform focusing on creating and sharing short videos with added effects and music. Snapchat, a platform focusing on sending photos and videos with limited time duration and stories. Reddit, a social media website designed for discussion, sharing information, and posting content by users. WhatsApp, a messaging platform, voice calls, and video services for communication between individuals or groups. Discord, a web application commonly used for chatting and gaming. These platforms demonstrate that social media is a powerful tool for communication, community building, and information sharing in today's society (Mossberger et al, 2007). Therefore, the use of all these platforms significantly impacts the lifestyles and communication cultures of both individuals and organizations. Hence, if governments or political entities understand and effectively utilize online social media, they can effectively catalyze social influence. (Bennett, 2007) But at present, it

is still clear that the Thai government still does not have access to social media widely. Only some sub-agencies have started informally communicating with the public, including youth, through Facebook and X. But there are still websites and agencies that are not very popular among the public because there is no timely update of information or communication.

The difference between online media and social media

The above information illustrates that the distinction between "online media" and "social media" may not be entirely clear-cut, but there are key differences between them. On one hand, when compared to "social media," the term "online media" is often used to describe all types of media existing on the internet, including news websites, blogs, online videos, and may not involve social interactions or direct engagement with others as much as "social media". On the other hand, "social media" refers to platforms or services that facilitate direct communication, information sharing, and connection with others online. Online media typically presents information without much interaction from users (Fisher, 2012). In terms of usage, online media often involves users in the role of content providers, and users can access content as they desire. Social media platforms have characteristics of user interaction and communication that differ from general online media, with various forms of content and extensive user

interaction and exchange. Social media content often relates to daily life, entertainment, and personal experiences. In terms of communication and sharing, online media tends to involve one-way communication, while social media platforms foster more on-going interactions and sharing opinion among users (Ceron, 2015). Users on social media platforms often play a significant role in creating content and activities, leading to differing user objectives, with online media users often seeking educational or informational content, while social media users often engage in social activities such as sharing personal information, connecting with friends, or creating engaging posts (Tsagkias et al, 2011) Therefore, if the government can differentiate between social media and online media, both in terms of their working characteristics and the users of both types of media, it will allow the government to communicate with the public appropriately and effectively, especially for the youth group who have unlimited access to this type of media and tend to use this type of media as their main source both now and in the future. However, on the contrary, if the use of both media cannot be controlled and managed appropriately, it may cause more harm to the government than benefit.

The role of social media for the general public

When the internet serves as a medium for information and brings people together, it also creates online social media as another important

channel for the general public in many aspects including communication, sharing information, connecting, and receiving information. Nowadays, online social media plays various roles in our society, whether it's communication and exchanging information. Online social media is a platform that allows people to communicate directly, whether it's chatting, posting statuses, or commenting on others' posts. Moreover, people can exchange information and experiences from around the world instantly. Additionally, online social media can continuously connect and create virtual communities (Vromen, 2008). Moreover, online social media is also a place where people can connect with others from distant places and create communities of shared interests. This allows the general public to participate in activities, conversations, and share experiences with people from different locations at any time. Furthermore, online social media serves as an endless source of information where people can learn about stories, news, and global events (Dylko and McCluskey, 2012). Therefore, nowadays, online social media has a significant impact on society and politics as it is a source of news and a channel for expressing opinions on various issues widely. Therefore, the use of all these online social media platforms has both positive and negative impacts, so it is important to use and manage the data properly for appropriate benefits. To add up, online social media can also be an interesting political tool (Mossberger et al, 2007). Moreover, online media can be both a representative image of

government agencies and the government, presenting an image of speed, modernity, and also includes the presentation or exchange of opinions, communication, and the ability to collect information from the public. It is a very useful tool if used effectively, especially to make the public and the government closer and more accessible to each other.

Social media, politics, and public policy

Since online social media is significantly related to politics and public policy, as it serves as a crucial channel for disseminating information, shaping public opinions, and providing a space for the collective expression of citizens' voices (Bennett, 2007). The reasons for its influence on driving political and public policy changes are manifold, including:

1. Information dissemination and communication: Online social media serves as a crucial channel for disseminating information and communicating about issues and opinions regarding politics and public policy. People can quickly share news, developments, and critique government policies or officials through online platforms (Fisher, 2012).
2. Community and group formation: Online social media allow people to come together in groups with similar opinions or behaviors regarding politics and public policy, which may support activism or instigate change (Keating & Melis, 2017)

3. Making the public's voice part of decision-making: People can use online social media to express and communicate their opinions about public policies, which may influence decision-making processes of policymakers or politicians (Loader, 2007).
4. Creating connections and fostering participation: Using online social media to create connections among populations and provide space for diverse opinions is crucial for fostering participation in political decision-making processes and public policy (Dylko and McCluskey, 2012).
5. Acting as a mediator: Online social media often acts as a mediator providing information and events that enhance understanding of politics and public policy, resulting in increased awareness and responses, leading to deeper learning and understanding (Mossberger et al, 2007).
6. Fostering organizational and government responsibility: Utilizing online social media to respond to public opinions and suggestions can increase transparency and accountability of organizations and governments towards the public. (Masiya & Lubinga, 2023)

In summary, politics and public policy are closely related to online social media, as online social media plays a role in disseminating information, building communities, and creating an environment conducive to the collective expression of citizens' voices regarding politics and public policy.

The Youth

When online social media becomes accessible to everyone, an interesting and large group in society is the "youth". Here, "youth" refers to people in the transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood, which may vary in definition from country to country or society to society (Jitsaeng & Tuamsuk, 2022). In some countries, youth may be defined as individuals aged 15-24 years or those who have not yet reached legal adulthood. Meanwhile, the United Nations defines "youth" internationally as individuals aged between 15-25 years (Rossi, 2009). Therefore, this term is often used in theory, education policy, and social issues related to this age group. The youths play a significant role in societal development and are often seen as a key force in community and national efficiency, thus emphasizing the importance of developing skills, education, and readiness for adulthood. Apart from this, the youth have the ability to impact social change, innovation, and play a crucial role in culture.

Thai Youth

Similarly, Thai youth refer to the group of people in the transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood. Currently, they are receiving significant attention regarding their social roles, as Thai youth play a crucial role in the development and creation of society through educational opportunities, work, and participation in various social activities at the

community, societal, and national levels (Jitsaeng & Tuamsuk, 2022). With increased access to education over the past 50 years through educational policy development, education has played a significant role in the development of Thai youth. This has led to support and promotion of educational, life, and social skills through literacy, enabling youth to study, acquire knowledge, and analyze various issues independently. Additionally, there are opportunities for careers and work in various fields greater than in the past, leading to entry into the labor market as fully equipped workers (Sinpeng, 2017)

Furthermore, Thai youth are increasingly demonstrating their participation in social activities, whether it be through election involvement or collaborating with social organizations, which has positive implications for societal development. Thai youth utilize social media and technology to exchange ideas, create online communities, and work with groups that share similar interests. Research findings suggest that while Thai youth face pressures in education, economic challenges, and potential social issues, they are motivated and challenged to participate more in politics and society. This increased interest stems from the necessity to confront educational pressures, economic obstacles, and potential social problems. Consequently, Thai youth are interested in issues related to development and supporting youth to improve the quality of life for the entire Thai society for a better future (Thanapornsangstuth & Anamwathana, 2022).

The Youth's usage of social media

Thai youth express various opinions through the use of online media, which has diverse characteristics and impacts on the culture and behavior of this demographic. Thai youth primarily use social media as a main and crucial means of communication, utilizing platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others to share experiences, connect with friends, and follow the activities of others. They also create diverse content through posts, videos, and images, mostly of a personal, creative, and impressionable nature (Ceron, 2015). A key aspect of Thai youth's use of online media is expressing opinions on various issues, especially in the current context where they feel a greater sense of political and social involvement (Ekström & Östman, 2015). This can be observed through statistics on content sharing, conversation topics, and even in the recent 2023 elections, where a significant phenomenon of online social media usage related to elections occurred. Additionally, Thai youth use online platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, or Instagram to shape their social identities and increase their inclination to follow others, including news and online trends. Moreover, they utilize chat applications like LINE, WhatsApp, or Messenger for live messaging with friends and groups, facilitating the rapid dissemination of news or ideas among youth (Thanapornsangsoth & Anamwathana, 2022). Thai youth also engage in online learning resources, such as online courses, educational videos, and shared educational content

across various platforms, along with participating in online groups and communities related to their interests or similar activities, through platforms like Facebook Groups or Reddit. This demonstrates that Thai youth's use of social media has significant effects on communication culture, connection, and the creation of online community sentiment (Mossberger et al, 2007).

The expression of opinions and political participation of the youth

Over the past decade, it has been evident that the online world has significantly contributed to societal and political changes. However, most often, opinions or information are provided by the working-age or adult population, or experts. Nevertheless, there is data indicating that youth are increasingly interested in social and political issues because they are aware of the relevance and impact on themselves. Therefore, the expression of opinions and political participation of youth is crucial in creating a society with inclusive decision-making and improving political situations (Jenkins, 2016). The youth often use online social media platforms to express their opinions on political stories or social issues they are interested in (Fisher, 2012). Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, or others serve as channels for expressing views and disseminating information they care about to others privately. Additionally, youth are increasingly participating in rallies and political activities, either by physically attending protests, speeches, or

political events to express dissatisfaction or support for the political narratives they believe in. This participation is often scheduled or expressed continuously through online social media, demonstrating a phenomenon of increased youth political participation (Kulachai et al, 2023). Some of them participate onsite and those who cannot be physically present join online lives which clearly proves the desire to participate (Loader, 2007). Furthermore, youth engage in organizations or groups with political affiliations and participate in various activities to support and promote their beliefs. Youth also listen during political decision-making processes, whether it's participating in discussions, debates, or joining groups involved in decision-making. Clear political participation of youth is evident in their involvement in elections. In the recent elections in Thailand, although the number of eligible youth voters were not the majority on the country, we can see from the statistics that the youth were clearly active, highly interested, and voted according to their rights (Ekström & Östman, 2015). This may be caused by the fact that the youth are informed and educated about political narratives through education, research, or collaboration with organizations involved in online political learning. Moreover, digital skills are utilized to create a sense of political participation and to disseminate their opinions online, such as tagging or creating various groups. This illustrates the importance of youth political participation in creating a fair and just society, and it aligns with their desire for opportunities and support.

Supporting youth political participation helps promote a political culture that strives for justice and respects privacy, meeting the needs for the country's development according to their aspirations (Keating & Melis, 2017).

The use of online media by youth in politics

Therefore, we can see that the use of online media by youth has an impact on politics in various aspects. Whether it is expressing opinions and stimulating awareness, youth play a crucial role in voicing their opinions on political events through online media. The use of social media, blogs, or other platforms enables them to stimulate awareness or change societal perspectives on political narratives by sharing political information and news. Predictions, analyses, and sharing information from various perspectives can stimulate discussion and change in thinking, leading to the use of online social media to help unite youth interested in political narratives (Jenkins, 2016). Many have the opportunity to come together, set intentions for change, or present their ideas in a moderate way. Furthermore, youth also use online social media as a platform to combat fake news and unreliable media, developing skills in verifying and analyzing information to prevent politically harmful actions. However, on the other hand, youth who lack analytical skills may fall victim to false information or easily incited information. Therefore, the use of online social media by youth undoubtedly has both positive and negative impacts on politics and society

(Loader, 2007). Additionally, online media opens opportunities for youth to debate or argue about political narratives, transmitting opinions through comments, posts, or created videos, promoting discussion and idea exchange. Youth have the ability to support political movements they believe in, supporting them through data sharing, participating in activities, or stimulating political movement (Keating & Melis, 2017). This leads to tangible results, such as using social media to promote their involvement in the electoral process, sharing voting information, disseminating information about candidates, or being part of election campaigns. This demonstrates that the use of online media by youth influences change and fosters a politically participatory society. This is both an opportunity and a challenge for governments, state agencies, and political parties to consider in order to ensure that the use of online media has a constructive and transformative impact on society (Riaz, 2010)

Public policy and the people

Especially regarding the creation or modification of various public policies, as public policy is closely related to the population, given that in policy theory, public policy aims to create the best outcomes for the majority of the population. Therefore, understanding and listening to the opinions and needs of the people are crucial in developing effective and appropriate public policies that suit the current societal and communal situations. Public

policies often have multifaceted impacts on people's lives and rights, such as in education, healthcare, economic management, and the environment. By formulating suitable policies for the overall benefit of society, it is essential to consider the needs and existence of the people in the policy-making process (Mossberger et al, 2007). Furthermore, democracy is closely-linked to public participation in decision-making processes regarding public policies, emphasizing the importance of democracy in listening to people's opinions and involving them in policy-making. Providing opportunities and space for people to express themselves and participate in decision-making processes is crucial in creating sustainable and beneficial public policies for everyone in society (Riaz, 2010). On the contrary, involving the public in decision-making processes regarding public policies may help build trust and understanding between the people and the government or organizations implementing those policies. This, in turn, can contribute to strengthening and fostering confidence in the governance system (Thanapornsangsuth & Anamwathana, 2022).

Summary

Therefore, online social media is an important part of everyone's life today. When studying the additional roles of online social media and the opinions of young people regarding public policy, it is found that online social media plays a crucial role. This is because online social media,

including online media itself, helps young people gain more knowledge about public policy, politics, and society than they would through traditional educational processes. Through various information dissemination channels, along with communication within online social media, young people are exposed to diverse sources of knowledge. This increased knowledge diversity leads to greater interest and desire among young people regarding public policy. For example, they may want to change or improve existing public policies, such as policies related to living expenses, military criteria, healthcare, and more. They may also be interested in potential new public policies that could arise in the future, such as marriage equality or additional legislation similar to what other countries have.

From the results of surveys on online social media, it is found that young people have an increasing desire to participate in politics because they are aware of the importance of public policies and their impact on their lives. Although they may not be fully developed as adults yet, the exchange of knowledge and opinions through online social media enables young people to understand the future implications of their actions as they grow older and enter the workforce. Consequently, young people express themselves through online social media, both privately and publicly, including political participation. Whether it's opinions, questions, or personal desires, they are more open about expressing them. Thus, it can be said that online media makes young people become more active citizens.

Additionally, it is observed that when young people discuss or show interest in social issues and public policies, they gain more attention and acceptance from their peers because they feel connected and interested in the same issues.

Hence, when young people are a significant group in society and are considered the future workforce for the government, government agencies, and various political parties that need to plan and formulate public policies, they should pay attention to the opinions and desires of young people expressed through online social media. This serves as a guideline for creating transparency and understanding in governance. The government can use online media for various benefits, including:

1. For regular communication: Using online media as a channel for communicating about public policies that the government is developing or policies that affect the public. Posting political news or policies on government or managerial online platforms can increase transparency and understanding of those policies.
2. For connecting with the public: Using online media to create channels for direct communication with the public, allowing them opportunities to comment or provide suggestions on policies under consideration. This can help the government gather necessary information for decision-making in policy formulation.
3. For understanding and listening: Using online media to create understanding and listening in public relations with the people

about public policies by providing clear and easily understandable information about the objectives and benefits of the policies being implemented.

4. For understanding and acceptance: Using online media to create understanding and acceptance in public relations with the people about the outcomes of public policies by promoting positive information about the benefits derived from those policies.

Overall, using online media to communicate about public policies helps the government to create transparency, understanding, and public participation in decision-making processes to formulate beneficial policies for society as a whole. Therefore, the government should not overlook the role of online media in influencing the opinions of young people regarding public policies, as every opinion holds significance and can indicate the direction or trends of public preferences.

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