New Media, New Partisanship:
Divided Virtual Politics In and Beyond Thailand

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Since the military coup of September 19, 2006, Thailand has been characterized by deeply divided politics. This article examines the rise of partisan television channels closely associated with mass protest movements: ASTV, Asia Update, and Blue Sky. Leading figures of each protest movement became media celebrities in their own right: Thai politics became a form of reality TV, while popular entertainment became a mode of politics. As time went on, mediatized populism fueled use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to promote partisan political stances. Each movement invoked its own competing notion of "the people," offering highly selective and self-serving definitions of what constituted the public sphere and who was entitled to inhabit and, indeed, occupy this space. Partisan electronic media and new media have empowered citizens and deepened popular political engagement. But they have also stoked profound social division and discord, sometimes spilling over into violence. New media have helped generate dangerous forms of populism that undermine social cohesion and that demonize political adversaries.

Keywords: media, protest, rallies, populism, Thailand

Mediated populism is a global phenomenon: As Chakravartty and Roy (2013) persuasively argue, the recent rise of 24-hour news cycles and online partisanship have facilitated "distinctive projects of 'people-making' with contingent political outcomes that cannot easily be classified as participatory, democratizing or resistant" (p. 314). In conditions of mediated populism, the usual distinctions between media and politics often break down, along with such customary categories as election rally, campaign speech, protest movement, and indeed daily governance. Mediated populists often profess to act in

concert with ordinary citizens, rhetorically bent on curbing establishment privileges and countering corruption. Media spectacles morph readily into political developments and vice versa. Politics becomes a form of reality TV, while reality TV may resemble a mode of politics. Understanding these dimensions of media involves adopting a skeptical view of much conventional wisdom in the field of communication studies. Here, scholars of Western media can learn from efforts to analyze the often murky and ambiguous partisan media networks that are widespread across the developing world, at a time when heightened partisanship is fast becoming the global norm (see, e.g., the discussion of India in Chakravartty & Roy, 2013, pp. 258–266).

A careful examination of politics and media in Thailand over the past decade will elucidate many of these trends. Although it has certain distinctive features—including an influential monarchy and an unusually interventionist military—Thailand's recent political history has much in common with a range of other Asia-Pacific nations (McCargo, 2003, pp. 19–49). Like neighboring Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan, Thailand experienced what was hailed as a "democratic transition" around the end of the Cold War, a transition associated with the emergence of a more assertive and outspoken media sector. But along with other transitional societies across Asia and beyond, Thailand suffered several governance crises and democratic setbacks in the decades that followed, developments that illustrated the shortcomings and limitations of mass media as progressive political actors.

Thailand is a country in flux: Since the onset of the current protracted political crisis in 2005, it has seen eight prime ministers, two military coups, five general elections (two of them annulled by the courts), three full-scale constitution-drafting processes, five rounds of huge and protracted street demonstrations (one culminating in mass violence), two contentious national referendums, and the 2016 death of the world's longest-reigning monarch. Few notional democracies have experienced so much upheaval in just over a decade. Yet atypical though it may seem, Thailand's political trajectory nicely illustrates the rise of mediated populism. In Thailand's extremes we may see some future directions of media and politics: and they do not work terribly well.

Prior to the political polarization of the post-2001 era, when Thaksin Shinawatra became prime minister, Thailand's media landscape was characterized by "partisan polyvalence"—a mode of journalism found in many parts of the developing world (McCargo, 2012a). Leading Thai-language newspapers typically retained a stable of political commentators who maintained close personal connections with leading power holders in parliament, the bureaucracy, the military, and civil society. The best-selling daily *Thai Rath* epitomized this approach: Each of the paper's 20 political reporters, editors, and columnists cultivated bonds with a specific clique of politicians and power holders, ensuring that they received regular and broadly positive coverage (McCargo, 2000, pp. 44–46).[2] As result, whenever there was a change in power or national political direction, as a result of a coalition reshuffle, an election, a military coup, or a mass protest, *Thai Rath* already had a contact in place who could serve as a bridge to those now ascendant. Although the newspaper might take a broad political line, its various columns spoke with multiple voices, which could be either toned down or turned up as political conditions changed.

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[2] This section draws on participant observation fieldwork and numerous interviews conducted at *Thai Rath* in April 1995.

Partisan polyvalence was a highly adaptive media strategy well suited to an unstable and uncertain political order, and it served the Thai press extremely well during the rotating-door administrations of the 1980s and 1990s. Comparable modes of doing media and politics could be found in other countries; a striking example was *Tempo* (Time), the best-selling Indonesian weekly newsmagazine, which for two decades was both a creature of General Suharto's semiauthoritarian regime and a source of coded dissent (see Steele, 2005). *Tempo*'s editors became masters at playing the insider–outsider card, making themselves invaluable as a feedback loop for the regime.[3] When Suharto finally lost patience with *Tempo* and banned the magazine in 1994, the end was in sight for his hold on power.

There was no clear-cut divide between print and electronic media even in the era before mass Internet access. For the most part, terrestrial television had been formally or informally controlled by the Thai state: Core Channels 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11 (later renamed NBT) were in the hands of governmental agencies (including the military) or run by long-term concession holders with impeccably conservative credentials. But following the turn of the millennium, the highly opinionated views of newspaper columnists were increasingly heard on air, albeit filtered through moderators such as the staggeringly popular news show host Sorayuth Suthassanachinda, himself a former political editor of *The Nation*, whose morning programs on Channel 9 (later Channel 3) involved reading aloud newspaper clippings and discussing them with studio guests. Sorayuth's rapid transformation from newspaper journalist to TV personality epitomized the shape-shifting nature of the media class in Thailand.[4] Thais are not big readers: Total daily newspaper sales even at the height of the country's 1990s print media boom probably never exceeded 2 million from a population then of 60 million (McCargo, 2000, pp. 1–2). But there was no need for Thais to read—let alone buy—newspapers for them to be influenced by the opinion columns of popular dailies: Sorayuth and numerous imitators were happy to summarize columns for the much larger viewing public, so laying the foundations for a more opinionated and emotional style of TV news.

The rise of controversial telecoms-magnate-turned-premier Thaksin Shinawatra—and the post-2005 anti-Thaksin backlash—made partisan polyvalence more difficult to sustain (on Thaksin, see McCargo & Ukrist, 2005). Instead of a multiplicity of political parties and actors jostling for position, Thailand was now firmly divided into two camps: Thaksin supporters and Thaksin opponents. Despite the existence of two large political parties, a pro-Thaksin party and the pro-establishment Democrat Party,[5] Thailand's party system remained weakly institutionalized (McCargo & Ukrist, 2005, pp. 70–77): Parties were ideologically lightweight, and members played little role in important decisions. Rather, the two leading parties functioned mainly as vehicles for personalist and regional interests. The political economy of the media underwent a similar bifurcation: In the early 2000s, outlets sympathetic to Thaksin enjoyed insider status, but after the 2006 military coup that removed Thaksin, the position was reversed. Newspapers were forced to make their political orientations more explicit rather than practice the studied fence-sitting of the polyvalence era. *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* moved gradually into the pro-Thaksin camp, whereas the English language *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* followed *Phujatkan* over to the anti-Thaksin side.

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[3] Goenawan Mohamed interview, August 4, 1997.

[4] Sorayuth's spectacular career ended in tears: He was jailed for 13 years on fraud charges in August 2017.

[5] Thaksin's original Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thai) Party became the Palang Prachachon (People Power) Party in 2007 and then the Pheu Thai (For Thais) Party in 2008.

In the electronic media, the emergence of partisan satellite TV was mirrored by the growing significance of community radio. In 2012, there were an estimated 4,000 community radio stations in Thailand, many of which were deeply implicated in the country's political struggles. Leaders of the grassroots pro-Thaksin redshirt movement in the overwhelmingly Thaksin-supporting northeast, such as Udon Thani's Khwanchai Praipana,[6] built their support networks around highly partisan community radio stations, often broadcasting mainly in Lao (euphemistically known as *phasa isan*), which central Thai government officials and security officers were unable to follow. Community radio stations did more than simply broadcast news: The Ubon Ratchathani–based *Chakthongrop* (Ready to Fight) station, for example, served as a fundraising operation for protests in Bangkok and provided basic welfare provisions, self-help groups, savings cooperatives, and social amenities for around 10,000 members.[7] As internal polyvalence declined and partisanship increased, media moved much closer to their audiences, providing a wider range of voices. A new media class of highly partisan radio hosts with close links to national politics emerged. Yet these voices also formed part of a growing cacophony of anger and frustration in which reason and moderation diminished. Many community radio stations pandered to the prejudices and biases of their self-selecting listeners rather than served a wider public interest purpose.

Ideas of journalistic professionalism were overshadowed by the rise of partisan redshirt presenters, many of whom were not even college graduates, let alone the products of university communication faculties. The rise of these nonprofessional—even antiprofessional—journalists reflected a wider transformation in Thailand's class structure, as upwardly mobile urbanized villagers with roots in the provinces were empowered by successive pro-Thaksin governments to challenge the hegemony of the national elite and the Bangkok middle classes (Naruemon & McCargo, 2011). These urban–rural hybrid citizens formed the core of what Chatterjee (2006) would term an emergent "political society" (pp. 40–41). Although the rise of partisan media saw previously marginalized subaltern groups taking up arms, it is difficult to idealize the resulting disorderly publicness as an improvement over the era of partisan polyvalence. As in the Indian case, Thailand demonstrated "new logics of political mediation, and the distinctive political forms and idioms that they have introduced into national political life" (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015, p. 313).

Media and the Political

The Arab Spring of 2011 was the high-water mark of cyberoptimism: Social media and the Internet could help undermine authoritarian regimes, ushering in greater political liberalism and even transitions to democracy (Curran, 2012b). But as the optimism surrounding the Arab Spring turned to alarm and finally to despair, more and more questions have been raised about the political nature of new media. A major U.S. Institute of Peace study suggested that new media did not play a central role in galvanizing collective action during the Arab Spring but were crucial in promoting political and social polarization (Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides, & Freelon, 2012, p. 6). If new media are as much a means of articulating political partisanship as a way of spreading values of tolerance, it would be unwise to invest too much hope in the spread of communications technologies as a way of fostering progressive political

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[6] Interview, Kwanchai Praipana, Udon Thani, June 10, 2015.

[7] Field notes: Site visit and interviews at Chakthongrop radio station, January 18, 2012.

change. Indeed, by articulating political partisanship, these technologies may even promote intolerance and social division. This does not prevent new media from being hailed as founts of democracy by multiple sides engaged in partisan struggle and infighting. To assess the political impact of these media requires a healthy degree of skepticism about the ways language is appropriated and deployed in such struggles.

A widely shared assumption is that new media have novel social and political characteristics. But what if new media tend to replicate and even to exacerbate the worst features of old media? And what if old media continue to loom larger than new media, especially in content generation? People may access news through smartphones, Facebook, and Twitter, but what they see and read still comes from traditional media organizations: newspaper companies and television stations (Aday et al., 2012; Curran, 2012a, p. 21). Where such organizations suffer from serious problems of balance, partisanship, and weak professionalism (on the Bangladesh case, see Parvin, 2012, pp. 170–209) the rise of social media may amplify and magnify the shortcomings of traditional modes of news production rather than channel the dissemination of news in progressive directions.

Similar problems apply to new political movements themselves: Simply because large groups of people take to the streets to protest does not make their demands progressive, or even reasonable. In recent years, conservative movements have appropriated tactics such as building occupations, nonviolent protests, and election boycotts previously associated with progressive politics. Such ideological makeovers have perplexed media commentators and analysts by disrupting linear narratives of democratic transition and liberalizing transformation.

In many regimes inhabiting the broad spectrum between democratic and authoritarian impulses, politics is extremely dynamic. Democracy is not an either/or but a constant renegotiation. Individual countries' politics may become more or less dynamic over time, often as a result of incremental shifts in the political order. In such conditions, political order can readily shift from a business-as-usual party mode—where politics is conducted by the elite through the legislature and the executive—to a crisis-inflected rally mode, where large numbers of people take to the streets in an attempt to topple a troubled regime.[8] The ready recourse to rally mode, sliding easily from normality to a state of exception, is a symptom of anocracy. Although rallies may be hailed as progressive attempts to empower citizens and push through positive change, the reality is that such politics can often be regressive —while also destabilizing the political order and delegitimating public faith and confidence in key institutions, contributing to an erosion of democratic principles and mechanisms (McCargo, 2012b).

Thailand's Mediated Populism

Thailand epitomizes the intense political partisanship that now pervades many societies and states. Since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, Siam/Thailand has alternated between civilian rule and military dominance.[9] During the past 85 years, Thailand has experienced more military coups— and drafted more new constitutions—than any other country in the world. Recent decades have seen the

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[8] My notion of "rally mode" expands Bruce Graham's (1993) coinage, "rally drive" (pp. 83–84).

[9] For an excellent overview of Thailand's modern political historiography, see Ferrara (2015).

rise of two parallel but contradictory developments. On one hand, elections grew in importance, as newly enfranchised voters in the countryside became more politically aware and began voting in line with their collective interests. On the other hand, the monarchy became increasingly salient, as evidenced in a cult of hyperroyalism centered on the person of the aging King Bhumibol, who ultimately passed away in October 2016 aged 88 (Thongchai, 2016). For a decade, the traditional elite and the Bangkok middle classes literally rallied around the ailing crown, calling on the army to halt the rising tide of untrustworthy provincial voters.

In 2001, police officer turned telecommunications magnate Thaksin Shinawatra was elected prime minister. Sometimes compared with Silvio Berlusconi, Thaksin was a can-do politician who distrusted the powerful bureaucracy and who found formal rules and regulations inconvenient obstacles to the pursuit of his goals (see McCargo & Ukrist, 2005; Pasuk & Baker, 2009). Those goals were a heady mix of national rebranding—in the wake of the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s—and enlightened self-interest. Thaksin had a powerful appeal to large electoral constituencies, notably in the north and northeast. Critics argued that Thaksin's pro-poor policies amounted to populism: They included a subsidized health-care scheme, a moratorium on farming debt, and village-level development funds. Over time Thaksin alienated support from the Bangkok elite and middle classes, ultimately antagonizing the country's two most important institutions: the military and the monarchy. By appealing directly to provincial voters, Thaksin had tapped into the support base of the monarchy, which had sought to secure the loyalty of rural communities by adopting the role of patron to the peasantry. But Thaksin—using modern survey techniques and focus groups—realized that many of those registered to vote in the provinces had split identities as "urbanized villagers" (McCargo, 2017). These voters often spent much of their time working in and around Bangkok and, despite their rural origins, were thoroughly urban in their outlook and aspirations. Bangkokians found themselves outnumbered and outvoted by the urbanized villagers they had long patronized and even disdained. Despite his landslide reelection in 2005, anti-Thaksin movements soon mobilized in an attempt to force his government from office, accusing the premier—with some justification—of serious abuses of power (Pye & Schaffar, 2008).

In the years that followed, Thailand experienced near-annual street protests, during which parts of central Bangkok were blockaded and major government buildings occupied. Huge demonstrations took place in 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2013–14: Each major protest inspired passionate support from one side and intense loathing from the other. The country's population was polarized along pro- and anti-Thaksin lines. Anti-Thaksin protestors, wrapping themselves in nationalist and royalist symbols, became known as "yellow-shirts," though over time their palette also embraced light blue and pink, colors also closely associated with the monarchy. In a deliberate countermove, Thaksin supporters donned red garb, creating a national mass membership movement popularly known as the "redshirts." Thaksin was removed from office in the September 2006 military coup, and in 2008 went into self-imposed exile to avoid serving jail time. But despite the best efforts of the establishment, pro-Thaksin parties decisively won general elections in 2007 and 2011. Following further rounds of huge protests by "prodemocracy" protestors who sought to bring down an elected government and prevent the holding of elections, another military coup removed Yingluck Shinawatra (Thaksin's sister) from her 33-month premiership in May 2014.

The Thai political system has proved remarkably difficult to characterize. During the 1990s, Thailand boasted one of the most open and vibrant media and civil society sectors in Asia. A political reform process symbolized by the landmark 1997 constitution led to new rules of the game and a set of independent agencies that were intended to curb abuses of power (see McCargo, 2002). But over time, the Thai variant of this new constitutionalism proved unable to deliver either political stability or accountability.[10] Although frequent mass protests appeared to testify to the dynamism of Thai political life, in practice, many of these protests featured authoritarian underpinnings or aspirations. In this respect, Thailand closely resembled several other societies featuring high levels of political polarization, and the conjunction of democratic and authoritarian tendencies—such as Turkey (McCargo & Zarakol, 2012). For advocates of agonism such as Chantal Mouffe (2013), intense conflict animated by human passions contains positive potential for democracy; yet at least in the short term, extreme polarization has been highly destabilizing for Thailand.

Over the past decade or so, the phenomenon of mediated populism (for a theoretical discussion, see Mazzoleni, 2003) has seen a remaking of the political in Thailand largely because of burgeoning manifestations of dissent and a new and growing sense of national anxiety that has created space for a much wider range of voices than before. Facing intensely polarized politics linked to vibrant street protests, media outlets have ceased to be the preserve of the traditional elite and the nouveau riche. Nevertheless, much of Thailand's new mediated space has been occupied by crass chanting and sloganizing rather than by reasoned political debate.

Media Polarization

The emergence of the anti-Thaksin movement after 2005 coincided with the rise of a new generation of political media entrepreneurs. The leading figure in this category was the media magnate Sondhi Limthongkul, whose *Manager* (*Phujatkan*) newspaper group had shaken up Thailand's print media during the early 1990s (McCargo, 2000).[11] Sondhi saw himself as an Asian Rupert Murdoch figure: He established not only a Thai-language daily business newspaper but also vernacular weekly and monthly magazines. These ventures were followed by a local English newsmagazine, a regional English-language monthly magazine (*Asia Inc*), and then an English-language daily (*Asia Times*). At one point, Sondhi tried to buy the international press agency UPI. He later established a radio station that gained considerable popularity with the Bangkok middle classes and created a partnership with the BBC World Service Thai-language operation. But Sondhi was not simply a businessman: He set out to influence his country's political direction. His publications played an important role in opposing the rise of former coup leader Suchinda Kraprayoon to the position of prime minister in 1992 and provided strong backing for the May 1992 protests that forced Suchinda from office after considerable bloodshed. Sondhi then forged close personal connections with several leading politicians: The seven-party Banharn Silpa-archa coalition government that took office in mid-1995 was assembled in a safe house belonging to Sondhi.

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[10] On the concept of new constitutionalism, see Hirschl (2004).

[11] This section draws on participant observation fieldwork and numerous interviews conducted at *Phujatkan* in September and October 1995.

Sondhi Limthongkul had much in common with Thaksin Shinawatra. Both hailed from Sino-Thai families in northern Thailand, both had studied in the United States, both mixed business and politics, and both were adept at deploying nationalistic rhetoric while benefitting from the globalization of capital. But whereas Thaksin became much wealthier as a result of the Asian economic crisis of 1997, Sondhi went bankrupt and never fully recovered. His business empire was mired in debt, and his more grandiose ambitions to become a regional media mogul were permanently thwarted. During the early years of Thaksin's premiership, the two men were firm allies. Sondhi was given a coveted slot hosting a talk show on state-owned Channel 9 television, but he was never awarded control of a TV station, one of his main goals. When relations between the two men soured after 2004, Sondhi began to use his program to criticize Thaksin and soon found himself ousted from the airwaves (Pasuk & Baker, 2009). In other words, the conflict between Sondhi and Thaksin began with media questions and centered on access to television audiences. Sondhi responded by launching his own satellite channel, ASTV, and a protest movement that convened initially each Friday evening at Bangkok's Lumpini Park.[12] Participants sported yellow T-shirts provocatively declaring "Return Power to the King."

Sondhi's movement soon transformed itself into the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), a mass organization dedicated to opposing the government of Thaksin Shinawatra. Officially, the PAD had five leaders, but in practice Sondhi led from the stage: Night after night, he would address massed crowds as the final speaker of the evening's rally. Sondhi specialized in aggressive, highly partisan, and increasingly vicious personal attacks, often singling out prominent individuals (including former friends and close associates) for particular denunciation. This mode of speech had no direct precedent in oral Thai political discourse, except perhaps for the knockabout style used during annual parliamentary no-confidence debates. But it resembled the writing styles adopted by popular newspaper columnists in mass-market publications such as the best-selling *Thai Rath* newspaper in pre-Internet decades (McCargo, 2000). Sondhi's creation of the PAD had the effect of coarsening public discourse: PAD speakers, publications, and even T-shirts echoed the same vitriolic messages. Because ASTV carried live broadcasts of all major PAD rallies and speeches, this culture of vitriol was not limited to those physically present: PAD supporters convened their own events all around the country in front of large TV projectors, fueling the vicarious consumption of defamatory bile.

In the past, whatever appeared in the print sector, the major national broadcast media had maintained at least a façade of political neutrality while confining themselves largely to reporting official pronouncements and elite perspectives. Sondhi and ASTV opened up a new mode of engagement between television and the public: While claiming to embody a revolutionary form of citizen empowerment (Suwicha, 2008), ASTV had transformed television into a source of incendiary provocation. Thais could now select viewing options that reflected and reinforced their own prejudices. Before long, Sondhi was being widely imitated. Other PAD leaders adopted the same aggressive speaking style, vilifying their opponents constantly.

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[12] This and subsequent paragraphs draw on my observations of Thai political rallies in 2005, 2006, 2008, and 2014.

Subsequent protests emulated and refined the 2006 PAD rallies created by Sondhi and his allies. Immense rally stages featured dawn-to-dusk speakers alternating with performances from popular singers and musicians, spectacles that lasted for weeks or months on end. The well-financed 2014 People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) Bangkok Shutdown featured 11 stages at key intersections around the capital, all offering live entertainment projected onto giant TV screens. The distinctions between political rally, live broadcast, and pop concert became hopelessly blurred—much like Imran Khan's election rallies in Pakistan.[13]

Thai Politics as Reality TV

In the wake of the September 2006 military coup, Thailand's political polarization continued apace. The Constitutional Tribunal dissolved Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party and banned 111 executive members (including Thaksin himself and virtually all his former ministers) from holding political office for five years. Undaunted, the party relaunched under a new name and proceeded to win the December 2007 election, only to suffer another dissolution and mass banning a year later. During 2008, representations of politics through television became an integral part of Thailand's political upheavals. Anti-Thaksin groups were furious that despite the 2006 coup, pro-Thaksin politicians had regained control of the country. Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej, whose popularity derived largely from his moonlighting as a celebrity TV chef, was removed from office in September 2008 by the Constitutional Court (McCargo, 2009, p. 19). His opponents had argued that Samak's TV cooking show violated constitutional provisions forbidding serving officeholders from holding other employment. The case illustrated the absurdity of Thailand's politicized legalism, but it also exemplified the power of television to legitimate political leaders on various levels.

An extraordinary episode in August 2008 illustrated the blurring of the boundaries between media and reality. A group of masked protestors armed with sticks, linked to Sondhi's PAD, broke into the government-controlled NBT television station and took some staff hostage. Their mission? To change the channel on the entire nation's television sets by feeding ASTV through the NBT transmitters, much as Thailand's military normally commandeered radio and television studios during their regular coups d'état. In August 2008, the PAD failed to change the national channel: The transmitter master switches were elsewhere, in the Baiyoke Tower. Yet the moral remained the same: The medium was now the message (McCargo, 2009, p. 7).

Why the special interest shown by the PAD in the NBT station? In the wake of Sondhi's highly successful ultrapartisan ASTV, pro-Thaksin commentators began to play the same game. During 2008, the Samak government had launched an NBT news program known as *Truth Today*,[14] which featured outspoken hosts Veera Musikapong, Jatuporn Prompan, and Nattawut Sai-kua. Nattawut originally made his name on the hysterically entertaining *Sapha Jok* (Joke Parliament), a TV parody of Thai parliamentary

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[13] See Mulla, this Special Section.

[14] In Thai, ½×Ñ¿¼×¾Ê£â

shenanigans that satirized the language and behavior of the country's politicians.[15] Along with Veera and Jatuporn, in 2008 Nattawut obtained airtime on a government television station to offer highly partisan political commentary. The three presenters of *Truth Today* subsequently became the three core leaders of the pro-Thaksin redshirt movement.

Jatuporn and Nattawut became legendary—or notorious—for their aggressive speaking style. In one infamous YouTube clip, Nattawut can be seen apparently inciting the crowds to set fire to buildings in the Thai capital—words that came back to haunt him after a series of arson attacks in May 2010.[16] During the 2011–14 Yingluck administration, Nattawut was appointed deputy minister for agriculture and later for commerce. He had made the transition from comic actor satirizing politicians on TV to TV presenter discussing politics to rabble-rousing protest stage demagogue to parliamentarian and finally to member of the cabinet. Nattawut's metamorphosis from TV comedian to cabinet minister paralleled Sondhi's transformation from newspaper magnate to populist rabble-rouser, illustrating the symbiotic relationship between media and politics in Thailand and the persistent blurring of representation and reality.

New Partisanship

The single most important trend in Thai media since 2005 has been the rise of partisan satellite TV channels, for which ASTV was the model. Sondhi Limthongkul's ASTV changed the mold of Thai television, introducing a current-affairs station that was unapologetically partisan, in the manner (if not the style) of Fox News. There was no clear distinction between the PAD movement's anti-Thaksin campaigns and ASTV's news coverage: No serious attempts were made to adhere to principles of journalistic neutrality, balance, or distance. ASTV viewers were Sondhi supporters: ASTV subscription packages were sold at PAD rallies and were openly touted by speakers from the protest stage. ASTV made little attempt to engage with alternative viewpoints, and most of those appearing on the channel espoused strongly anti-Thaksin views. Several friends reported to me that pro-PAD relatives had ASTV turned on throughout their waking hours and endlessly repeated the anti-Thaksin slogans that they were hearing. ASTV offered a handy set of mantras (Thaksin epitomizes corruption and treason, Thaksin and his family are stealing the nation; we need to defend the monarchy, Thailand's borders are under threat, politicians are inherently untrustworthy, elections alone do not produce democracy), a totalizing discourse that many viewers found deeply compelling. At the same time, ASTV preached entirely to the already converted, reinforcing their preexisting views and prejudices.

It was not long before pro-Thaksin forces began emulating the ASTV model for their own purposes. New satellite channels such as Asia Update and Voice TV replicated the same formula with a "red" twist and were soon in huge demand in the populous north and northeast regions, strongholds of pro-Thaksin sentiment and electoral support, while ASTV was strongest in the greater Bangkok area and the upper south. Redshirt rallies and broadcasts also used familiar themes, notably: Thailand is not a real democracy, we need "edible democracy" (a political system that benefits us directly), no more military

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[15] *Sapha Jok* (ⓘⒹ⚅⚄ was first broadcast in 2002 on iTV, appearing intermittently on a series of channels until 2014. It satirized the previous day or week's parliamentary proceedings.

[16] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvbUVCopKec.

coups, down with the aristocrats, Thaksin should be allowed to return to Thailand and then to power, and the Thai justice system uses unfair double standards. As political tides changed, ASTV became insolvent, suspending satellite operations in 2011. But much of ASTV's audience soon switched to the new Blue Sky Channel, closely associated with the proroyalist Democrat Party; Blue Sky later became the standard-bearer for the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), a new anti-Thaksin movement that staged mass demonstrations in central Bangkok in 2013–14.

Lèse-Majesté and Beyond

Thailand's anonymous newspaper column culture, in which political commentary is published mainly under pen names, reflects a society of taboos, where criminal defamation laws are frequently used by well-connected individuals to silence their critics, and where criticism of the monarchy is punishable under strict *lèse-majesté* laws, which have few equivalents in the rest of the world. Parallel legislation protects the Buddhist monkhood (sangha) from critical scrutiny. David Streckfuss (2011) has argued that Thailand seeks to manage defamation through a "defamation regime" (p. 24) of social and legal sanctions, a regime that has become more draconian in recent decades. For much of the 20th century, Thailand's *lèse-majesté* laws were rarely enforced, though penalties were increased in the 1970s, bringing the maximum jail term for each offense under the controversial Article 112 to 15 years. In the period following the 2006 military coup, numbers of cases increased dramatically. There were 164 new cases in 2009 alone. Although leading figures on both sides of the political spectrum were charged, including Sondhi Limthongkul himself, the majority of *lèse-majesté* defendants were associated with the pro-Thaksin movement.

In early 2010, the redshirt movement staged mass demonstrations in the Thai capital. In an attempt to discredit the protestors, the military issued a diagram purportedly depicting the key actors in an antimonarchy plot: Most of those named were involved in the pro-Thaksin movement. Following the violent suppression of redshirt demonstrations by the military in April and May 2010 (see Montesano, Pavin, & Aekapol, 2012)—in which more than 90 people were killed—numerous pro-Thaksin figures were arrested and accused of a range of treason-related crimes, including *lèse-majesté*. Many of those charged had been named in the antimonarchy plot diagram, although the authorities later admitted that the plot was a fabrication designed to discredit the country's political opposition (Bangkok Pundit, 2011).

In the wake of the September 2006 coup, the military junta pushed through the draconian Computer Crime Act, which criminalized the posting of materials that could violate ill-defined notions of national security and the preservation of order (Sawatree, Siriphon, & Orapin, 2012). In effect, the Computer Crime Act became a surrogate *lèse-majesté* law, requiring a lower burden of proof and attracting less domestic and international opprobrium: It was widely used to target those with pro-Thaksin political views.

Online Defamation

Just as partisan polyvalence has declined as the dominant political mode of the Thai-language press, narrowing the range of permissible public opinions, the emotive and defamatory norms long

epitomized by anonymous leaflets and newspaper columns have assumed new modes of existence in the online world. Initially, poor infrastructure limited Internet penetration in Thailand. But the growing affordability of smartphones and especially the inexorable rise of Facebook have made Bangkok a major focus of online activity in recent years.

The early waves of mass participation in the online realm began with news bulletin boards, which assumed huge importance in Thailand in the years immediately following the 2006 military coup. The popular websites panthip.com, MTHai.com, and sanook.com and Web boards linked to media groups such as *Manager* permitted registered users to add comments on news stories and threads devoted to topical issues. But the outspoken, even aggressive, sentiments to be found on these boards often reflected the polarized state of Thailand's offline political world. A 2012 study of online responses to insurgent violence in Thailand's deep south found numerous examples of hate-filled anti-Muslim diatribes posted on popular boards, mainly by Buddhists resident in Bangkok who had apparently never visited the Patani region where the conflict was taking place (Phrae, 2012, pp. 181–182).

A rather different kind of discourse emerged on the comment sections of Web boards of the independent *Prachatai* news agency and of *Fah Diao Kan*, a radical bimonthly political journal. Here, commentators critical of the monarchy and the conservative establishment felt more comfortable posting their views—until the webmasters of both publications turned off the comment boards on their sites after falling afoul of the Computer Crime Act. It soon became clear that a double standard was at work: Commercially oriented Web boards were permitted to carry some vitriolic political content, so long as it was broadly conservative, but politically oriented Web boards that attracted more radical and dissenting comments would be targeted by the authorities under new legislation.

Every blog has its day: By the second decade of the 21st century, Web board wars were old hat. The action was moving to more dynamic modes of social media: to Twitter, to Instagram, and especially to Facebook. In 2012, Bangkok had the largest number of Facebook users of any city in the world. The great majority of users were under 35. New Facebook accounts were being added at the rate of 170,000 per week, and Facebook penetration of the country's Internet users stood at 122.28%: In other words, there were more Facebook accounts than people online.[17] By 2015, there were 30 million active Facebook users in Thailand, 20 million of whom logged in daily (Monlamai, 2015). In their great tradition of anonymous commentary, Thais took to creating multiple accounts under different names: Facebook polyvalence. Some Thai Facebook names are transparently fabricated ("Somchai-I-love-the-King"), while others exude a misleading air of verisimilitude. Facebook has struggled to maintain its real-name-only policy for accounts in cultural contexts that assign lesser value to formal naming—a feature Thailand shares with many other developing countries.[18]

Whereas the real names of Thai Facebook users are often illegible, their political preferences are not (see Aim, 2017). As one Chinese scholar has argued, "social media is political media" (Anbin Shi,

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[17] This data was downloaded from Facebook in late 2012.

[18] In Indonesia, for example, most people traditionally used only one name. Surnames are very recent inventions.

2012). The intense polarization of the post-Thaksin era has penetrated social media deeply. The rise of Facebook polyvalence reflects a divided and highly polarized society. The relative popularity of Facebook over other forms of social media is driven partly by the difficulty of policing it: Governments cannot readily close accounts down, so content may be posted there with relative impunity. In Burma/Myanmar, online newspapers migrated en masse from regular websites to Facebook to avoid the threat of censorship. After the 2010 crackdown on the redshirt movement, pro-Thaksin groups moved much of their communications to Facebook, which had previously been seen as a largely conservative and royalist terrain. By penetrating this *hi-so* (high society, upper class) enclave, pro-red forces had claimed new virtual space for themselves, upgrading their claims to be taken seriously and placed on an equal footing with other social forces.

Conservative royalists typically liked and shared images of King Bhumibol and Princess Sirindhorn, especially around the numerous royal birthdays or state occasions. Thaksin supporters posted statuses featuring red themes: supporting the holding of elections or satirizing the military or the judiciary, for example. Many Thai Facebook users have two accounts: A neutral account using some approximation of the user's real name, which does not display any very overt political stance, and a fake-name account on which the user posts more outspoken views. Most news appearing on social media is not original, citizen-generated content but the reposting of news stories and commentaries produced by ever more partisan newspaper and TV outlets. Increasingly, Thais share their political views on social media with like-minded connections, evicting those who disagree from shared virtual space or not inviting them to join inner-circle Facebook groups where mutually reinforcing sentiments are freely exchanged.

Technologies such as Facebook provide a surrogate political space and a mode of political participation. They are characterized by the use of improbable pen names, gossip, venomous personal attacks, and highly partisan stances on issues of the day. Central to their appeal are the ability use to multiple identities and the carte blanche that their façade of anonymity offers to those wishing to engage in acts of online defamation.

Exclusion from virtual space does not always occur discreetly. Two alarming trends have emerged in recent years. The first is the rise of online bullying of those with dissenting political views, which has become a relatively normal practice in Thai social media circles. Such bullying can occur on an individual basis, but a more troubling phenomenon is the rise of organized anonymous groups that threaten Facebook users with "social sanctions" should they post critical content about the royal family, for example, and countermovements such as Social Witch Doctors that seek to "sanction the sanctioners" (Thaweeporn, 2011). The sanctions and countersanctions in question have included contacting parents and employers of targeted individuals and posting their personal details online. In some documented cases, people allegedly posting antiroyalist comments online have been fired from their jobs as a result of these sanctions. While the original social sanctions movement was a clandestine, hacker-style operation, later on a well-respected medical doctor called for a similar campaign of "garbage collection" to remove offensive material from the Internet and expose those responsible to public humiliation. Similar ideas were embodied in the 2013–14 whistle-blowing of the PDRC, protestors who helped trigger the downfall of the Yingluck government through their street demonstrations and occupations of Government House and other key buildings (McCargo, 2015, 388–340). The PDRC acted out a parody of engaged citizenship in

which self-appointed representatives of the populace mobilized themselves to challenge both abuses of power and modes of dissidence to which they took exception. Following the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej in October 2016, some people whose social media accounts failed to conform to dominant narratives of collective mourning were flamed online and even subjected to physical attacks (Yu & Ross, 2016).

Virtual rally politics has become a parallel phenomenon to the physical rallies staged regularly on Bangkok streets since 2005: Just as central areas of the capital such as Rachadamnoen and Ratchaprasong have become contested spaces, cyberspace has become the focus of intense virtual contestation. Facebook and Twitter have become the loci of vitriolic exchanges. For example, Twitter comments about the *lèse-majesté* law by then U.S. Ambassador to Thailand Kristie Kenney in December 2011 prompted not just an actual demonstration outside the gates of the embassy but also a deluge of flame tweets denouncing Kenney.

Whereas the Thai news cycle in the pre-Internet era was driven by the ebb and flow of particular *krasae* (news currents), typically with a shelf-life of no more than a few days, recent years have seen the rise of social media flurries that might last no more than 48 hours, and often much less. Social media allow Thais to follow—and themselves to fuel—a constant series of short-lived valence issues involving stand-offs between opposing camps and contributing with their own likes, links, and no-holds-barred comments. During the relatively open period of the 2011–14 Yingluck government, Facebook celebrities such as Chermsak Pinthong (yellow) and Sombat Boongananong (aka Nu Ling, red) vied with one another to make hot topics their own while wannabe online celebrities—people trying to build their own brands—competed to outdo one another with witty, informative, or merely insulting responses. Trivial valence issues—emerging daily—offer scope for fresh polarizations and the manipulation of negative and defamatory emotions in a competitive, pejorative atmosphere.

More alarming still, under governments of various political persuasions (including pro-Thaksin administrations), the authorities have sought to criminalize critical online commentary, making use of the Computer Crime Bill, Article 112, and other forms of legislation. Hundreds of social media users have been investigated and prosecuted under these provisions, in a trend that has escalated dramatically since the military coup of May 22, 2014. The criminalization of dissenting views forms part of Thailand's growing political polarization, reflecting attempts by the military and the conservative establishment to suppress dissent in the name of forging unity, "returning national happiness" and reasserting the supremacy of an imagined primordial "Thai-ness" over alternative values such as the respect for diversity and human rights (McCargo, 2015, pp. 345–347). A revised Computer Crime Bill giving the authorities expanded powers to criminalize online activity was passed by the military-appointed parliament in December 2016 (Chooi, 2016).[19]

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[19] Efforts by civil society organizations such as the Web-based news service *Prachatai* and the activist group Thai Netizen Network to monitor and highlight both online abuses and government interference with the Internet, though laudable, are proving to have limited effect.

Partisan polyvalence remains an aspiration for mainstream media in a highly contested political landscape such as Thailand, where media outlets need to maintain connections to various sides of a deeply divided social order. But as political polarization intensifies, the fundamentally illiberal character of partisan polyvalence becomes apparent: Though superficially similar, polyvalence was never equivalent to tolerance or pluralism. Partisan polyvalence was a pragmatic media stance, a survival technique rather than a progressive ideological position. As the media become more partisan, the range of audible voices declines sharply. In recent years, multiple modes of partisan monovalence have now emerged: one-sided community radio, polemical satellite TV stations, and self-reinforcing social media circles. Since the May 2014 coup, the military has sought to silence—indeed to drown out—all dissenting voices with authoritarian messages of its own. Megaphone media has become the order of the day.

In short, newer forms of media have simply replicated the worst features of the old media they have begun to replace. The primary function of social media in the Arab Spring was arguably to exacerbate political polarization rather than to support collective action (Aday et al., 2012). The Thai example further illustrates that new media is no more inherently democratic than other forms of media. By giving voice to the previously voiceless, new forms of highly partisan media have also fueled a culture of polemic, defamation, and hate speech. Thailand's rally movements, including the PAD, UDD, and PDRC, have both raised and dropped the bar, boosting political participation but reducing the public discourse to the lowest common denominator. For all its faults, the earlier system of partisan polyvalence offered at least a rudimentary framework for the hosting and management of political conversations, preserving some pretense of civility. The inexorable rise of rally politics, partisan TV, and no-holds-barred social media attacks has created a climate of intolerance that is fueling Thailand's authoritarian turn.

Mediated Populism Beyond Thailand

Many of the trends reviewed here have salience well beyond the borders of Thailand: They are evident across countries and continents, from Malaysia and the Philippines to Morocco, Pakistan, Tunisia, and Turkey. Mediated populism has seen a blurring of the boundaries between media actors and political actors: Across the globe, such cross-dressing is becoming the norm rather than the exception. Protest leaders, media practitioners, and elected politicians may be one and the same. Notions of media ownership have become increasingly murky and ambiguous; it is often hard to determine who owns and controls particular news outlets and who is behind messages appearing widely on social media. In contexts such as Morocco, Thailand, and Turkey, agency is hard to define: The military or the monarchy may play informal and clandestine political roles. Contestation for electoral power is intense, as is contestation to topple elected governments through judicial, military, or other modes of coup d'état. Violence is a looming feature of political life: lurking below the surface or more overtly in the form of intimidation and even assassination. Contentious politics is fueled by a culture of rumor and defamation, which coexists uneasily with persistent but often empty rhetoric about democracy, participation, and citizenship. Mediated populism thrives in conditions of ideological incoherence and emotional vehemence, accompanied by the rise of new, highly partisan modes of electronic and social media. Frequently, partisanship in the virtual sphere is mirrored by an increasingly uncivil rally politics. And these trends toward intense polarization, verging on anocracy, are not limited to the developing world. They have numerous echoes in the June 2016 British Brexit vote, in the extraordinary youth cults of aging left-

wingers Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, in the rise of right-wing populists across Europe, and of course in the American presidential campaign and subsequent incumbency of Donald Trump, another transplant from reality TV to real-life electoral politics.

Mediated populism, characterized by appeals to emotion rather than reason, looks here to stay. By engaging larger numbers of voters, mediated populism offers the prospect of broadening and deepening political participation. But as Thailand exemplifies, the rise of populist politicians, the regular recourse to rally politics, and the transformation of political demonstrations into live entertainment risk inflaming divisions and fueling polarization—especially in societies with high levels of social media penetration.

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[20] In accordance with Thai conventions, first names are included for Thai authors, who are also alphabetized by first name.

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