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Abstract

As internet and smartphones have become more accessible in Thailand, a growth of social networking service (SNS) has been continuously increased. Twitter has ranked as one of the top SNS among other services for several years. With unique feathers of Twitter, it is worthy to investigate how Twitter is used by Thai users. Since politics in Thailand has always been one of the most discussed topic due to its instability, Thai politics was focused in this study. Here, the author aimed to determine a role of Twitter in Thai political communication. Furthermore, factors that influenced the role of Twitter were listed. Four data sets of tweets were collected during the time political incidents occurred. Three analyses were conducted, i.e., format of communication, distribution of user activity and content analysis. Results from the analyses showed that Twitter acted as an information disseminating tool. Most information was informative and it was spread widely among the users. Scale of event, reoccurrence of event and censorship were found to be the factors that affected the role of Twitter. The first two factors influenced size of data set and sentiments in tweets. The last factor affected sources of information and was likely to decrease the size of data set.

Keywords: Twitter, Thailand, Politics, Information dissemination, User activity, Content.

1 INTRODUCTION

Twitter was launched in 2006. Since then, Twitter has gained popularity and has become top social networking sites (SNS). As of 2015, Twitter had 3.2 million monthly active users worldwide (Twitter 2015). Twitter was ranked no. 2 in the most popular social network sites as of March, 2016 by EbizMBA (n.d.). In Thailand, Twitter had 4.5 million users as of 2015 (Vichienwanitchkul 2015).

Twitter has features like 140-character message and retweeting function, so it has potential to disseminate concise information. In addition, Twitter accounts are set to public by default making tweets available in public. Hence, communication on Twitter can go outside circles of friends. Furthermore, with availability of Twitter applications, Twitter is easily accessed via smartphones encouraging real time communication.

Many politicians have been using Twitter to support their political career by communicating with their supporters as well as attacking their rivals. One of the successful cases is Barack Obama (Wattal et al. 2010). In Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra, the former Prime minister of Thailand, is the first person who started using Twitter as his political tool since 2009 (Behnke 2010).

Although many people have been using Twitter and other social networking service (SNS) in political communication for a decade, there have been surprisingly few publications regarding SNS and political communication especially in Thailand. Hence, the author was strongly motivated to investigate how one of the most popular SNS in Thailand, i.e., Twitter was used by Thai users. Political communication on Twitter was focused in this study since politics has always been one of the most discussed topic in Thailand.

Thailand is widely known for its political instability. The political conflicts can be traced back for many decades. However, in this study, the author focused on contemporary Thai politics starting since Thaksin Shinawatra became the prime minister of Thailand. Since that time, internet and social media started to contribute to Thai political communication. Thaksin Shinawatra was the prime minister of Thailand from 2001 to 2006. He was favoured by people particulary from predominantly poor and rural North and Northeastern regions. At the same time, he was criticized from people mostly from urban middle class for his corruption and abuse of power. The criticism got more severe and led to protests. Eventually, the crisis ended with coup d'état in 2006. People were divided into many groups. The main two groups were red and yellow shirts. The red shirt was said to be the supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra while the yellow shirt was on the opposite side. After that, there were five prime ministers and several protests against the governments. Coup d'état happened again during the government of Yingluck Shinawatra in 2014. Prayut Chan-o-cha has become the prime minister since then.

The usage of SNS was seen to rapidly growth during significant political moments. During the coup d'état in 2006 and the confrontation between the red shirt and the military in May 2010, the number of users in social networking service (SNS) such as Twitter grew from 720,000 to 910,000 in one month, from January to February (Behnke 2010). One reason behind the growth of social media in Thailand was due to the limited and controlled sources of information enforced by the military and the government at that time. Thai media has often been controlled by the governments especially the military governments. After the coup d'état in 2014, the National Council for Peace and Order has made several announcements including the control of news and the using of social media (Dailynews 2014a). A lot of websites were closed and political activists who mostly used social media were captured (ASTV Manager 2014; Dailynews 2014b). In addition, lèse majesté law has been strongly enforced. There were 50 lèse majesté cases and 40 of them came from posting online contents in 2015 (Human Rights Watch 2015).

The research questions proposed in this study are as follows:

RQ1: What is a role of Twitter in Thai political communication?

RQ2: What are factors that affect the role of Twitter?

The paper is organized by starting from a literature survey section to introduce the publications related to this study. Afterwards, a methodology section on how to collect and analyze data is explained. Next, results are discussed in a results and discussion section. Lastly, a conclusion and future work are given as concluding remarks.

2 LITERATURE SURVEY

There has been only one research related to Thai politics and SNS. It was conducted by Pratheepwatanawong (2012). In her study, she reviewed the role of media in Thai politics starting from conventional media such as newspaper and television to new media, i.e. social media. Her research focused on Facebook and its impact on Bangkok governor election. She proposed to conduct the research by doing content analysis and interview. Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2012) investigated effect of sentiments in political tweets on retweetability. In addition, they examined how political discussion took place on Twitter during German elections. Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software was used to analyse the sentiments. Kwak et al. (2010) was the first group to conduct quantitative study on the entire Twittersphere and information diffusion. They collected user profiles and tweets that were related to trending topics. Small (2010) studied on how Twitter was used by Canadian politicians. Subsequently, Small (2011) conducted content analysis based on popular hashtags in Canadian politics.

3 METHODOLOGY

In this study, four political related data sets were examined. The first data set was collected during the protest against the government led by prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra, the younger sister of Thaksin Shinawatra. Her government tried to pass the amnesty bill that could remove the indiction of her brother as well as other politicians. There was a strong backlash from many people especially the anti-government group. The demonstration under the name "People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC)" started from October 2013 and lasted until May 2014. The second data set was collected slightly after the first one when Thai military led by General Prayut Chan-O-cha committed coup d'état in May 2014. The third and fourth data sets were kept during the end of October 2015 and the beginning of November 2015. Inspector Prakom Warunprapa as known as Inspector Iad and Suriyan Sujaritpalawong as known as Master Yong were detained and charged for Lèse majesté. While they were being imprisoned, both of them died. Inspector Prakom was reported to commit suicide by hanging himself. Master Yong who died about two weeks later was reported to die from Septicemia (Matichon 2015; Komchadluek 2015). All data sets were collected in the length of one week.

3.1 Data collection

Four political related data sets were collected using two services. The first two data sets were collected through the service provided by "http://scraperwiki.com". For the last two data sets, "GET TAGS" was used to collect tweets since scraperwiki stopped providing the service. Both services did the same thing that was sending queries to Twitter search API. After receiving the tweets from Twitter, the tweets were tabulated in an excel sheet or a google spreadsheet, and could be exported easily. The output from both services contained important information for social network analysis, e.g., the date and time of publication, the ID of users and tweets, text, follower count, etc.

To collect the tweets related to Thai politics, the strong-related keywords were inserted in search queries sent to Twitter. The keywords used in the search queries were the words frequently found in news headlines and political discussions on Social Networking Service (SNS), such as Facebook and Twitter. Most keywords were the names of public figures who received a lot of attention during the time the data sets were being collected. For example, the name of the previous prime minister of Thailand, Yingluck Shinawatra, the current prime minister who was the former military coup leader, General Prayut Chan-o-cha, and the prisoners charged for Lèse majesté, i.e., Inspector Prakom and Suriyan. The keywords used in this study are listed in Table 1.

As mentioned earlier, four politics related data sets were collected during the time political events occurred. The political events are listed as follows:

1st data set: The protest against the government led by prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra

2nd data set: Coup d'état

3rd data set: The death of Inspector Prakom Warunprapa or Inspector Iad

4th data set: The death of Suriyan Sujaritpalawong or Master Yong

1st data set	**2nd data set**	**3rd data set**	**4th data set**
Prime minister, Yingluck	Prayut	Prakom	Suriyan
Suthep	Democracy, Abbr. of democracy	Inspector Iad, Abbr. of inspector Iad	Master Yong
Abbr. of The Center for Maintaining Peace and Order	Coup d'état, Abbr. of Coup d'état		
PDRC	Revolution Dictatorship		
	Abbr. of National Council for Peace and Order		

*Table 1. List of keywords**

* All the keywords were written in Thai.

3.2 Social network analysis

There were three analyses conducted in this study. Firstly, format of communication that implied the role of Twitter in political communication was investigated. Secondly, distribution of user activity that determined the participation of Twitter users in the political communication was done by classifying the users based on their frequencies of tweeting. Lastly, content analysis was conducted to obtain the objective in using Twitter regarding the communication.

The first and second analyses were adopted from the study of Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2012) regarding the political communication in the case of German politics. The content analysis was conducted as well in their work using LIWC. Unfortunately, Thai LIWC dictionary has not yet been

available. Therefore, the third analysis was done following the study of Small (2011) that focused on Canadian politics. The content analysis that Small conducted was described to be suitable for e-research. In addition, it provided valid, rigorous, reliable and replicable results (Anderson & Kanuka 2003; Sampert & Trimble 2009).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Format of communication

The collected tweets were classified into four categories as follows:

- Retweet (RT): A tweet that starts with RT followed by -@sign and username
- Mention: A tweet that contains -@ sign followed by username
- URL: A tweet that contains link, pictures and videos
- Singleton: A tweet that does not contain RT and -@ sign

Direct message (DM) was omitted in this study since both services were unable to gather direct messages.

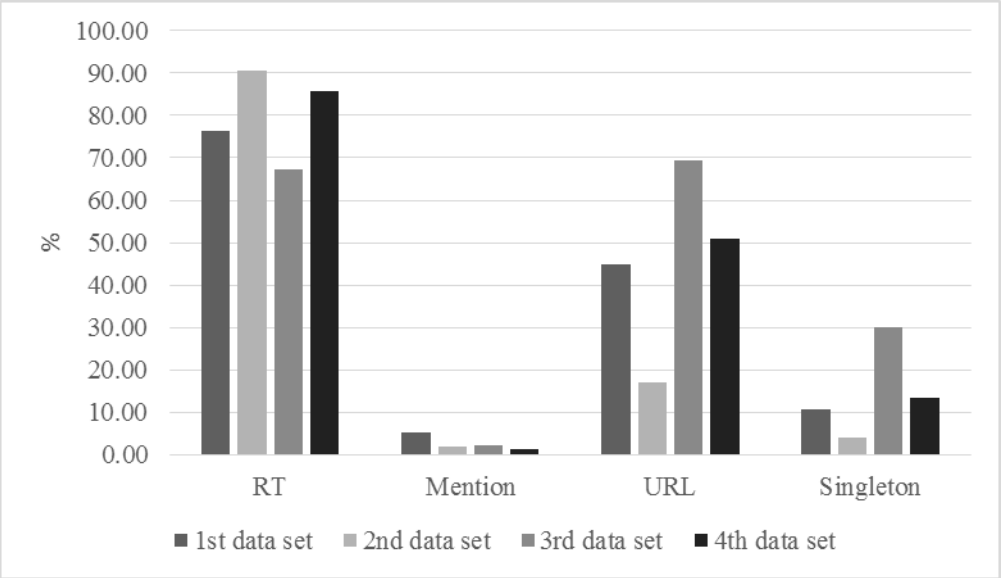

Figure 1. Format of communication

From Fig. 1, each data set exhibited the same pattern except the third data set that was slightly different. In every data set except the third data set, RT group was the largest. This indicated that Twitter was used as the tool to disseminate information through retweeting function. Moreover, URL group followed behind as the second largest. In the case of the third data set, it was the largest. Large percentage of URL tweets implied that sources of information, i.e., links, pictures and videos were frequently added to tweets. The media made tweets more reliable and easier to understand. On the contrary, the conversation did not occur frequently as can be seen from the smallest portion of Mention group in every data set. In addition, the strict law on communication enforced by the National Council for Peace and Order during the time the second data set was being collected affected the portion of URL group greatly as the size of URL group decreased significantly compared to the other data sets.

4.2 Distribution of user activity

Twitter users were classified into five groups depending on the number of tweets the users posted.

User group (no. of tweets)	Set 1 #Users (%)	Set 2 #Users (%)	Set 3 #Users (%)	Set 4 #Users (%)
One time user (1)	44869 (71.66)	168295 (60.25)	1273 (61.08)	4255 (63.19)
Light user (2-5)	13874 (22.16)	93835 (33.60)	617 (29.61)	2004 (29.76)
Medium user (6-20)	3348 (5.347)	15644 (5.601)	173 (8.301)	444 (6.593)
Heavy user (21-50)	469 (0.7490)	1314 (0.4704)	18 (0.8637)	30 (0.4455)
Very heavy user (50+)	55 (0.08784)	220 (0.07877)	3 (0.1440)	1 (0.01485)
Total	62615	279308	2084	6734

Table 2a. Distribution of user activity (users)

User group (no. of tweets)	Set 1 #Tweets (%)	Set 2 #Tweets (%)	Set 3 #Tweets (%)	Set 4 #Tweets (%)
One time user (1)	44869 (33.93)	168295 (27.27)	1273 (24.16)	4255 (28.73)
Light user (2-5)	37404 (28.28)	255123 (41.34)	1658 (31.47)	5524 (37.29)
Medium user (6-20)	32271 (24.40)	140159 (22.71)	1625 (30.84)	4120 (27.82)
Heavy user (21-50)	13909 (10.52)	38229 (6.195)	531 (10.08)	837 (5.651)
Very heavy user (50+)	3797 (2.871)	15286 (2.477)	182 (3.454)	76 (0.5131)
Total	132250	617092	5269	14812

Table 2b. Distribution of user activity (tweets)

Despite the difference in the size of data sets, every data set illustrated similar trend. From Table 2b, around 90% of all tweets came from one time user, light user and medium user groups. According to Table 2a, those groups were accounted for almost all users in this communication. These results indicated that the political communication was led by many participants.

4.3 Content analysis

A group of tweets was selected randomly in each data set for the content analysis. The content of tweets were classified into five groups as follows:

- Informative: A tweet that aims to provide information without feelings or opinions
- Commentary: A tweet that contains feelings or opinions on some topics, news, incidents, etc.
- Conversational: A tweets that contains -@ sign that indicates the conversation between users

- Others: A tweet that cannot be classified into the previous three categories such as jokes, an incomplete tweet, etc.
- Irrelevant: A tweet that contains the keywords that have completely different meaning and do not relate to politics at all

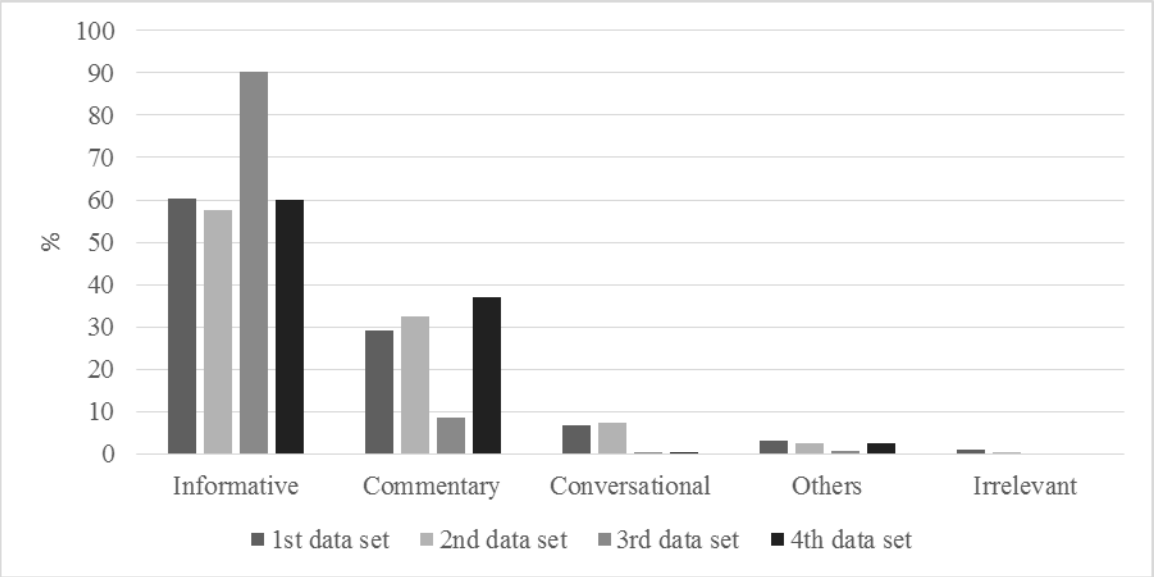

Figure 2. Content classification

From Fig. 2, every data set showed that more than half of all tweets were informative. In the case of the third data set, the informative tweets were very high as 90% of all tweets. In addition, commentary group was the second largest with around 30-40% of all tweets. Nevertheless, the third data set exhibited less than 10% commentary tweets compensating the extremely large portion of informative tweets.

To explain the different behavior of the third data set, the background of each data set was investigated. Firstly, the first and second data sets were related to national events, i.e. the protest against the government and the coup d'état. The well-known public figures such as the prime minister of Thailand, the commander in chief of the army and the famous politicians involved in these events. Hence, the incidents were discussed widely in the public resulting in the large size of data sets as shown in Table 2b. On the other hand, the third and fourth data sets were not on national scale and merely related to a few individuals. Furthermore, the prisoners, i.e. Inspector Prakom and Suriyan, were less well-known to the public compared to the public figures in the first two data sets. Therefore, the size of both data sets were significantly smaller. Furthermore, people were less likely to express opinions or feelings on the people they were not familiar with leading to a smaller number of commentary tweets.

However, as shown in Fig. 2, the percentage of commentary tweets in the fourth data set was quite high and the percentage of informative tweets was close to the first and second data sets. The similar pattern between the fourth data set and the first two data sets came from the fact that people were concerned over the reoccurrence of suspicious death. Therefore, many tweets expressed their sentiments regarding the unnatural death of the second prisoner, Suriyan, despite the fact that he was not a well-known public figure.

5 CONCLUSION

Through three analyses conducted in this study, two RQs could be answered as follows:

RQ 1: The role of Twitter in Thai political communication is disseminating informative information through retweet function. Firstly, most of the tweets came from retweeting as shown in Fig. 1. Secondly, the majority of tweets had informative content according to Fig. 2. In addition, since there was a large number of participants in the communication (Table 2a and 2b), it meant that the information were spread widely on Twitter platform.

RQ2: From this study, there are three factors that influence the role of Twitter as follows:

- Scale of event: National scale event brings more participants in the communication as can be seen in the large size of both the first and second data sets. In addition, the participants tend to express more sentiments in the national scale event because they are familiar with the event and/or the event has some impacts on their lives as shown in Fig. 2 where the group of commentary tweets was the second largest group following the group of informative tweets.
- Reoccurrence: The reoccurrence of an event brings more sentimental tweets as well as participants because people start to be aware of the situation. According to Fig. 2, the commentary tweets increased in the fourth data set compared to the third data set despite the fact that both data sets were related to the individuals.
- Censorship: The National Council for Peace and Order has made several announcements after the coup d'état in 2014 to control the usage of social media. The media that criticized the coup d'état were shut down or blocked. As a result, the sources of information significantly decreased as shown in the drastic decline in URL tweets in the second data set (Fig. 1). Furthermore, the censorship might lower the participants in the communication since people are afraid of being captured.

6 FUTURE WORK

In this study, the size of data sets were all different. Having the same size of data set for social network analysis might lead to new discoveries. However, it will require much amount of time to find the same size data set since the political events do not happen regularly even though it is Thailand. The other way is to study the relation between the size of data set and the results from the analysis. More data sets with various sizes are needed. In conclusion, it is worth applying this analysis to more data sets either with same or different data sizes.

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