

The Impacts of Information and Communication Technologies in Thai Society

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Communication technology plays a distinctive role in the world economy and is obviously the driving force that brings about change to every society in this global environment. Technology has been the most essential element that transforms traditional values and practices into the mode of a global-based economy, culture, and lifestyle. A number of studies confirmed that information and communication technologies have become a basic component of today's beneficial and non-beneficial change. Especially when cyber technology is largely practised and has almost become the heart of the world communication system.

There is no objection to the fact that the changes brought about by technology have significantly influenced and affected everyone in society; socially, culturally, and politically. It affects people's living styles, beliefs, social values, education, information acquisition, ways of thinking, etc. In this competitive world, information and communication technology is the focal force of development and competition. It may also cause a positive and/or negative outcome for participating agencies.

This paper is intended to explore the advantages and disadvantages of such technology in many ways and tries to pinpoint its impacts on social change in all aspects. While information technology provides vast opportunities for development, it could also be a threat that could create a wider social gap between the haves and the have-nots due to the inequality of economic and infrastructure factors. Technology in this paper is defined as both information and communication technologies as the tool for communication in different levels and purposes. More emphasis will be given to online technology; Internet and some others that cause changes within the Thai cultural context and environment.

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1. Introduction

Both information and communication play a distinctive role in the current world economy. Technology is the driving force that brings about changes to every society in this global environment. Information Technology transforms traditional values and practices into the mode of a global-based economy, culture, and lifestyle. The mode in which everyone, every society, and every development is becoming more involved and interdependent. There has been a number of studies on the convergence of information and communication technology as basic component of all beneficial and non-desirable changes. The role of communication technology has been the topic of discussion for the past decade, especially that of cyber technology which is becoming the heart of the world communication system.

The convergence of information and communication technology has influenced and changed society in one way or another. This paper is therefore intended to discuss the impact of new communication technology on human behavior, especially in the case of Thai society. It will look more into digital technology and the Internet, as a tool of communication at both ends, senders and receivers. The advantages and disadvantages of using this magical tool are dependent upon many conditions and factors that could also be mentioned. Attempts will be made to respond to questions that pertain to the impact of information/communication technology on social values, lifestyle, culture, etc. Does this technology really bridge the gap between the rich and the poor? Will it equalize the freedom of information, the right to access, as well as the right of expression? Do they have any conditions that burden the true value of communication technology for social development? Communication technology, here, will also refer to information technology and other related technologies, that make communication possible.

There is no objection to the statement that communication

technologies are playing an increasingly important role in economic development, education, health, and governance. The exclusion of billions who are poor, illiterate, rural or non-English speaking from the evolving global information infrastructure has serious effects and the digital divide is fast becoming a critical issue for developing countries.¹ It gradually changes the ways of living in every society socially, culturally, politically, etc. It affects people's living styles, beliefs, social values, education, ways of thinking, etc. Ironically, communication technology has proved its strength as a focal force of development in most developing countries as well as a major force of world economic competition.

The power of communication technology has been confirmed in a report, "Asian lifestyles, habits affected by Net,"

Asian are spending less time with their family and friends as a result of their Internet addiction. This was revealed by a survey conducted by MasterCard International.

Among the Internet users surveyed, 20 per cent from India, 21 per cent from Indonesia, 18 per cent from Singapore and 17 per cent from Taiwan, claim that they were spending less time with family and friends due to the Internet. Across the Asia-Pacific region, 12 per cent have similar observations.

Almost 60 per cent of those surveyed also believed that the Internet had radically changed their lifestyle and habits. People of Hong Kong seemed to be affected the most, with almost 84 per cent of those surveyed there reporting an altered lifestyle due to the Internet revolution.

E-mail is the most popular and used feature of the Net. Eighty-three per cent of those surveyed cited this as the main reason to log on.

¹ <http://www.oneworld.net/campaigns/digitaldivide>>.

Virtually all (90 per cent) of Indians and Japanese respondents go online to send mail.

Other findings revealed that while consumers in the Asian region used the Net to collect or receive information (55 per cent), read the news (53 per cent) or just leisurely surf the web (51 per cent), Indians mostly used the Net for getting news (64 per cent) and research for collecting information (68 per cent). (source: Observer of Business & Politics, republished in Asian Mass Communication Bulletin - AMCB, V. 30, No. 3, May-June 2000)

2. Communication Technology's Background

Apart from geographical and economic similarities to other ASEAN nations, Thailand is a homogeneous society with one major language and a strong belief in Buddhism. According to some scholars, the unique political character and mass media system is more or less due to its non-colonial experience.² Thai society has very strong cultural and traditional values in which the relations in the family are considerably tight and warm. Hierarchical respect is one of the dominant social characteristics. It has been proved from past experience that cultural and traditional values have been continually affected by rapid development of communication technology. People's way of life was largely affected because of boundless technologies. It creates a wider socio-economic gap between the rich and the poor. Opportunity to reach and receive information is certainly dependent upon individual economic power.

As much as new communication technology is moving to serve commercial competition, the rich have far more opportunity to get all kinds of information that the poor would never have a chance to get.

² Suphadiloke Boonlert (1983) *Role of communication in socio-cultural development*. A report presented to ASEAN Regional Seminar on the Role of Communication in Socio-Cultural Development, BKK, Thailand.

Consequently, the wider economic gap in the country will be one of the obstacles that the right of access to information and the right to know will be strongly questioned particularly in the so-called digital age. Just as Graeme Osborne, a professor in the Faculty of Communication, University of Canberra, once said; "Economic, political, social and cultural 'invasion' is an almost inevitable consequence of the emergence of major new information and communication technologies. So, too, is economic, political, social and cultural change. Both sets of consequences are largely inescapable. The principal questions that arise concern the nature and efficacy of attempts to manage such change consciously and the intrinsic or unconscious capacity of a total culture to transform or dilute the influence of invading technologies..."³ The impacts of communication technologies on Thai society can be separated in two domains, in metropolitan areas including those in big cities and in remote rural poor areas. The situation, according to Bangkok Post report⁴;

"Currently, there are some 2.3 million Internet users in Thailand, accounting for 3.6% of the population. However, Internet usage was concentrated in Bangkok and in major cities. According to the NITC (the National Information Technology Committee), 30% of Internet users are in Bangkok and suburban areas.

At present, the government promotes the concept of universal access through state enterprises and other public organizations. In the future, this needs to change in line with the privatisation of state enterprises..."

According to a research specialist, "The most critical problem for the Internet in Thailand was the monopoly by the

³ Graeme Osborne (1994) All roads lead to home or home is where the mart is: information superhighways, Human Resources and the Toynbee Dilemma. *Information Superhighways and Cultural Diversity: Communication and Local Culture in the Global Age*, pp. 98-142.

⁴ Bangkok Post, July 18, 2001.

Communications Authority of Thailand, which led to increased service charges. This needs to urgently be liberalised.”

The proposal is part of an Internet policy study conducted by the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI).

According to TDRI's research, Internet policy covers regulations on Internet access and services; universal services; service fee and quality of service, Internet security; and privacy policy.

Generally, governments in most countries do not regulate the Internet and telecom value-added services as strictly as other telecom infrastructure, noted TDRI research specialist.”

However, telecommunications infrastructure in Thailand is rapidly changing. Large investments are being made by the government and private sectors in various communication technologies, telecommunications systems, mobile/cell phone, cable, computers, etc. This has made a vital impact on all mainstream media. Appropriate policy formulation to make the most from advance technologies and management is necessary. Attention has been paid to the development of software appropriate to the country's needs. The National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC) was set up under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment to be responsible for national communication technology policy and planning in the short and long terms.

Thailand underwent rapid changes in communication technology development during the peak economic expansion period between 1984-1996. Some prominent developments can be dated from 1986 where the country had only about one million telephone lines which had increased to 6.5 million, with several mobile phone systems, at the end of 1996. Three satellites, THAICOM-1, THAICOM-2, and THAICOM-3 were launched into orbit. The numbers of paging systems, Internet Service Providers and Internet users also significantly increased. Since the launching of the first

Thai Satellites, Thai society has become more aware of the advantages of telecommunication and the benefits of communication technologies.⁵ It brought about rapid growth of technologies, which mostly took place during that boom period.

Thai people had been strongly aware of the advantages of communication technology evidenced from the Bloody May of 1992, a historical and political event where most broadcasting media were censored and closed down. The democracy protestors hence tried to organize themselves by using cell/mobile phones as their channel of communication and information circulation to gather and fight with military coup makers. In that event, a number of protestors were shot on the street and so led to a groundswell of support for democratization in the broadcasting system in Thailand.⁶ Thai society then was moving towards more political stability and was attempting to make all efforts from all sectors for political as well as broadcasting reform. In October 1997, the new Constitution was successfully formulated by the Drafting Committee elected by the public, government, NGOs and private sectors. This was the first time that ordinary Thai people had an opportunity to voice their opinions about their Constitution through a public hearing process.

Concerning broadcasting reform, Article 40 and related articles (especially Articles 39, 41, and 58) of the Constitution aimed principally at setting up a National Broadcasting Commission, an independent body which would allocate frequencies for radio and television (including cable TV stations). All these articles have one clear objective: to benefit the

⁵ Chairojkanjana Hataitip, Boonsiripunth Malee and Cusripituck Sethaporn (1997) *Issues in Telecommunications Development in Thailand*. Paper presented at the joint conference on Crossing Cultural Frontiers: The Communication Industries in the Asia Pacific Region, Canberra, Australia.

⁶ Murray, David (1996) *Angels and Devils*. Bangkok, White Orchid Press. Cited in: Lewis, Glen (2000) *Communication Deregulation and Democratization in Thailand*, presented at AMIC 9th Conference on The Digital Millennium: Opportunities for ASIAN Media, June29-July1, 2000 Singapore.

people at both national and local levels and in all areas of education, culture, national security and public interest via free competition and fair play.⁷ Interestingly, Thailand is also the only developing country in East Asia with a Freedom of Information Act, passed in October 1997.⁸

Thai media are relatively free and have greater diversity in contents in news and other entertainment programs compared to its neighboring countries. Since the country has faced the problem of critical economic decline during the past few years, the development of communication technology had been slow. Several telecommunication infrastructure projects were cancelled, but this did not delay the expansion and the emergence of technology. The Internet has gradually expanded and increased in the numbers of servers and users. Today, Internet, second to the mobile/cell phone, has become the most popular channels of communication for private or commercial purposes, especially in Bangkok and other big cities. While digital technology provides the best advantages, it also demands a certain hardware investment in which communication can be possible. Therefore, some questions concerning opportunities and threats of this superb communication technology arise when serious economic inequality between the rich and the poor, as well as between the metropolitan middle classes and the rural poor in Thai society still remain.

3. The Impact: Opportunities and/or Threats?

It is obvious that the advance technologies do provide positive support to the quality of life of the people and increase numerous opportunities for society's development in many ways. It makes the world open, shrink, and connect into a global environment with an efficient

⁷ Metheekul Surat (2000) *The Nation*, December 12, 2000.

⁸ Chongkittavorn Kavi *Thailand - A troubled path to a hopeful future*. In: Williams & R. Rich (eds) *Losing Control*, ANU, Canberra, *Freedom of the Press in Asia*. Cited in: Lewis, Glen (2000) *Communication Deregulation and Democratisation in Thailand*, pp. 219-239.

communication technology network. Online technology provides great enhancement with globalization and so to democratize mobility. Believing that globalization will be beneficial to all desired developments in most nations, it should equally benefit every one in every society. But the fact is that the well-to-do, particularly in the developed world, have enjoyed economic, educational and cultural gains from globalization, while many poor people in the developing world do not have an opportunity to enjoy it and are left behind. Globalization comprehended as a consequence of technological advance in fact creates marginalization in some societies, leading to some barriers for those disadvantaged. Digital technology and the Internet thus offers both opportunities and threats in the process of change. As president of State of the World Forum, Jim Garrison indicates⁹;

"The speed of information flows has increased fluctuations around the world and influenced opinions toward global issues in real time. The percentage of people with access to telephones, television, the Internet and radio is at its highest level ever, empowering many with information they never had access to before. Globalization has become a powerful force to be reckoned with...It is fundamentally changing every aspect of our lives, from the way we conduct business to the way we define our communities. It has as much power to change lives as the move from monarchy toward democracy that took place in the 20th Century. The spread of democracy has been widely credited for increasing human rights across the world and opening doors for economic and human development. Like globalization, the democracy movement was also partly due to advances in communication technology. Decreased printing costs and the proliferation of radio, television and telephone services, for example, empowered communities to better share information, which ultimately led to popular organization. In 1900, not a single

⁹ <http://www.oneworld.org/slejf>

country in the world had universal adult franchise (voting rights for all adults). Today, fully 70 percent of countries have universal adult franchise, according to the United Nations Development Program. The trick will be to make sure that globalization has as positive an effect on the planet as democratization has had in the last 100 years. A lot of what globalization has to offer is good, but unless we work to protect all of its diverse stakeholders, we are in danger of leaving most people behind."

Thai people have a lot of opportunities to be exposed to all kinds of new technologies. Communication technologies have given opportunities to improve the quality of life. Many human resource development projects had been implemented, for instance, distance teaching and learning, tele-schooling, inter-university networks, tele-medicine, schoolnet, remote sensing, broadcasting, etc, in which a sufficient telecommunication infrastructure is required. However, the problem in a developing country with a low-income, is the limitation of basic infrastructure resources. Considering in terms of economic returns, telecommunications infrastructure investment has been ranked as low in some disadvantageous areas compared to the areas that are relatively well-developed. Therefore, the rich areas become richer in technologies, while the poor areas are left with insufficient telecommunications resources. So, the consequences are not only the gap of social, economic, education, and political participation but also the inequality of information access and right to communicate.

During the digital decades, the Internet has been recognized as a channel that could overcome geographical problems and serve as a possible link for development. But most popular users are in big cities where infrastructures are far more complete. Like other developing countries, about 80% of the population live in remote rural areas while the rest are living in urban metropolitan areas. The socio-economic and cultural differences are obvious between rural areas and the Capital City. The saying, "Thailand is not Bangkok and Bangkok is not Thailand" implies a

gap in Thai society. Digital technology has been widely acknowledged as a highly beneficial tool of information allowing many development projects to be achieved, i.e. education, information, communications, culture, economics, environment, health, human development, trade, etc. The Internet technology revolution has increased interaction of peoples, governments and businesses without limitation. It also provides a tremendous effect on traditional lifestyles as well as great opportunities for development.

Thai people are highly exposed to new communication technologies; cell/mobile phone, personal computers, movies, music, etc. Pictures of young people talking on mobile phones in public are visible everywhere. The interruption of cellular phones is always heard either in classrooms, meetings, and other formal functions, which used to be considered as impolite for Thai culture. Because new generations are relying more on digital technological advantages, Thai society is beginning to worry about the values of traditionalism and wealth of warm family ties where social merits are initiated. It is felt that these family ties would become fragile.

On the other hand, certain attempts have been made by the government to utilize information technologies to support grassroots community development, particularly for agricultural improvements. According to an article in *Bangkok Post*,¹⁰ the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) will establish pilot projects, in conjunction with the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Electronics and Computer Technology Centre (NECTEC) to set up the Agricultural Information Network (AIN) in five provinces. The AIN comprises five major systems: an agriculture knowledge base, risk assessment, warning system, crop information and customer database, utilizing the Internet, a data warehouse, geographical information system (GIS) and remote sensing. The clients can access the AIN via field offices, radio, touch screen

¹⁰ Sasiwimon Boonruang (2001) *Bangkok Post*, November 27, 2001.

kiosk, telephone, or WAP phone. It is a mixture of technology and information utilization at the grassroots in which the locals and the farmers can either do it by themselves or through local agencies like Tambon administration, local school and communities.'

For educational advantages, a project has been set up for Thai students in rural areas to have a chance to use the Internet as a bridge to access information and World Computer Exchange (WCE) - a US based non-profit organization - to provide free second-hand PC's to all schools throughout the country. With WCE support, schools will be encouraged to develop and share websites that portray their own history and culture. Students participating in the programme will then be able to make friends internationally, practise different languages and learn different cultures. Through such virtual exchanges, students from participating schools will receive valuable knowledge and cross-cultural understanding, which will benefit them in their future careers.¹¹

Looking at the impacts of new communication technology in Thai society, focuses on online technology as sender- receiver benefits. Raising the newspaper industry as an example of sender consideration; lots of efforts attempt to enlarge its circulation to reach the market of Internet users. Most newspaper organizations in Bangkok convert, transfer and transform their content into the Net to capture the online target. There is no particular online journalistic writing style explored to suit digital media appropriate to Internet readers' habits. Neither can a formal study indicate the time spent on online that could predict the success of online journalism in Thailand. The amount of time spent on online content is not much different from reading a regular newspaper. This could be one threat that mass media managers have to be aware of.

Although digital technology offers great advantages for media businesses, the possible limitation, may be the perception and faith of tradi-

¹¹ Suchalee Pongprasert (2001) *The Nation*, November 6, 2001.

tional journalists on new technology and/or ability of editorial staff to apply professional journalism concepts with technical presentation on the Net. The proper online journalism presentation form requires skillful exploring and studying. Therefore, how to bridge the nature of journalism to the highly technical media channel is also the question of opportunities and limitations in mass media industry.

On the receiver end, Thai people realize tremendous advantages of the Internet as a communication tool, i.e., e-mail, e-commerce, e-business, e-finance, e-government, bank of information and education, etc. As the number of Internet users has dramatically increased every year, most users, who are mostly young, use the Internet only for chatting and entertainment purposes. Others enjoy their access to the Net (including other communication technologies) because of its convenience, shrinking their time, eliminating their loneliness, economizing, fast, fulfilling their inner feeling of inferiority/superiority, broaden their world, and it's a wonderful channel of communication. All of such are the technological advantages that Thai people never deny or reject.

Nevertheless, access to the Net, needs some anticipating factors; (tele) communication infrastructure, and an adequate economic requirement to obtain hardware necessities. Since the country's infrastructure is apparently not sufficiently invested in as well as the economic gap still existing, a large number of Thai people in remote areas are left behind due to geographical disadvantages and economic inferiority. The issues of the right to know, the right to communicate, freedom of information, and equal access to information, are at the topics of consideration. Since access to communication technologies is an opportunity to bolster the economy, therefore, equal opportunities could be real in a developing country only if the society has a strong stable economics capacity to build a sufficient (tele) communications infrastructure system. So, being able to provide equal participation to all sectors can only strengthen the benefit of information and communication technologies in developing societies.

Otherwise, the opportunities and threats of new communication technologies will continue, and lead to dual threats as the world is moving toward more competition to commercialization. Pessimistically, the future world would thus be divided into two economic poles, excessive haves and desperate have-nots!

If major requirement of accessing to information technology is economic status, and if the statement is true, 'Information is the Power.' How can new technology relate to economic and cultural patterns of Thai society? What kind of social, economic and cultural adjustments are required so that technology and society can develop in harmony? How can new communication technology facilitate democracy mobilization? Let's be positive for the best of new technology to blend the world into one global atmosphere, the interdependent belief may be taken into consideration. But is this really possible?

Again, Jim Garrison clearly gives a picture of the impact of new information and communication technologies in developing countries¹²:

"In the developing world, where 80 per cent of the world's-population resides, the negative effects of globalization are being felt even more acutely. The lack of access to modern communications systems has contributed to much slower economic growth in developing countries and the largest ever income gap between developed and developing nations. The average GNP per capita in high-income countries is now \$25,510, while it is only \$520 on average in all low-income countries...The cultural issues surrounding globalization are also dramatic. The increase in communications flows from the developed world to the developing world necessarily results in the exposure of traditional cultures to Western values. Furthermore, American companies such as Starbucks and McDonald's have proliferated around the world in

¹² Op.cit.

the last 10-20 years, bringing U.S.-style products and services to regions and cultures that had never experienced them before. Similarly, American and other Western television and radio programming can be found in every country of the world, exposing audiences to Western values and epistemology...

...The growth in Internet traffic has been dramatic, but it has been limited primarily to those in developed economies. This trend is also true of the number of phone lines per capita in countries around the world. Hence, the economic and educational benefits that these technologies provide are effectively being kept out of the hands of the vast majority of those in developing and transition economies. Furthermore, there is often a large gap in teledensity (phone lines per 100 inhabitants) within countries. In Thailand, for example, the teledensity in urban areas was 27 in 1995, while it was only 2.6 in rural areas. Meanwhile 81 percent of the country's population lives in rural areas. The advance of communications technology and the globalization of economics have remarkably influenced all cultures. Cultural influence among developed, technology-savvy countries has been reciprocal, with trade in arts and literature, fashion, movies and television and news information moving across borders freely. However, those in the developing world have experienced a largely lopsided exposure to Western culture...."

4. Author's Remarks

There is indeed a strong imbalance of telecommunications development between the haves and have-nots. To discuss the impacts of information and communication technologies doesn't mean that we should deny or neglect the existence of such a fantastic innovative invention. Communication technologies do exist as part of our way of life whether we like it or not. Technologies do provide advantages, which are

acceptable with both favorable and unfavorable impacts. Positive impacts bring about better quality of life and faster national development. The only concern is how can we use technologies as essential tools for society's-improvement, or a willingness to change according to what it demands. Should technology be a human tool or a human master? Opportunity and threat are partly due to how people perceive and use it, and partly due to strength and weakness of itself. How to convert threats to opportunities are the matter of the users' awareness, and the wisdom of the ones who command it.

The impacts of technologies are also dealing with certain micro- and macro-economic conditions as well as the management ability of one's government. A responsible government must seriously take priority to formulate intensive and extensive efficient and sincere policy and planning on telecommunications infrastructure, to re-regulate and reform appropriate laws and legislative procedures in order to facilitate the most from this new technology. The investment of telecommunications technology should not only consider economic regains, but also sincerely provide basic foundations to motivate people's right. By all development plans could be possible through proper channels of information share, information access, hence, people participation in all areas, particularly political participation that can strengthen the national democratization process. The newest communication technology, the Internet, should be the means for extending and confirming human rights, the right to be informed, the right to communicate that can bring about support to sustainable development at all levels.

Even though Thai peoples' habit of utilizing communication technology is more likely to be exposed to new technology on the receiving end rather than initiative ones. Thus bringing them to be keen users more than producers or inventors. There is also a number of technological talented creators in the field of information technologies found among the young generation. This confirms the belief that 'good policy and good

planning' can decrease opportunity inequalities and develop efficient human resources for national development.

The Master Plan on Telecommunications Development clearly explains the development of telecommunications industry, human resources and related telecommunications laws. But if the government fails to draw clear concrete plans to be able to be actively operated, the intention would cause a wider gap between the rich and the poor which will be another obstacle of social development.

Thinking of Thai society as transitional period of change, hoping that political reform and broadcasting reform under the new Constitution could bring more realistic information and communication technology policy and planning in which extensive opportunities of participation from all sectors will be achieved. Minimizing the opportunity gap of information and communication technology accessibility is among many expectations that Thai people hope from the reform. "How can information technology ensure equalization of communication opportunity and bridge the gap between the rich and the poor?" is not only a challenging question for developing societies, but also for all information technology reached countries in this globe.

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