



## Think Piece

# Internet rights, netizen's sub- culture, and gender perspectives during political transformation in Thailand

Supinya Klangnarong

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The **Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society** (CITIGEN) research programme, launched in 2010, aims to explore the notion of marginalised women's citizenship as a normative project or an aspiration for equitable social membership contained in the promise of an emerging techno-social order. Six research partners from Sri Lanka, Philippines, China, Thailand/Taiwan, Bangladesh and India are studying various aspects of the terrain. Also five eminent scholars of the field from Costa Rica, Pakistan, Thailand, Germany and South Africa, are writing think pieces delving into the research subject from their perspectives to further enrich the research process.

**Think Pieces** are paper contributions by prominent scholars and practitioners studying the intersections between the micro-context of community information ecologies and macro socio-political developments.

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## **1. Introduction**

The Internet plays a significant role in opening up spaces for citizens, regardless of their gender, to participate in political, economic, social and cultural life. However, since Thailand has been experiencing a transformation crisis, the main focus of the current public discourse is on civil and political rights. Gender or feminist perspectives do not get as much critical attention as a tool to analyse Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), as a mechanism to promote equal life chances. ICTs can be an effective means of development and democratisation and should not be viewed as an end in themselves. Thus, the question arises as to how the promotion of better access to ICTs can contribute to the promotion of democracy and sustainable development.

Gender is a dimension of justice. It asks the question of whether men and women have equal opportunities in life, and if not, which factors obstruct the pursuit of life chances. Gender and ICTs can be related to each other in two basic ways. First, access to ICTs gives people access to life chances. Second, widespread access to ICTs can trigger structural changes that produce greater gender justice.

## **2. Access to ICTs in Thailand**

Having access to ICTs helps people participate more effectively in political, economic, social and cultural life. Online news and social media give access to information and enable citizens to participate in deliberation and watch over those in power. Online marketplaces enable people to explore economic opportunities. Social media and communication connect people to one another across ethnic, religious and other hierarchical boundaries. Online and social media give access to music, arts, film and spiritual sources. In order to determine if men and women have equal access to ICTs, I will provide some factual data on the situation in Thailand.

### *A) Number of Internet users*

The number of Internet users in Thailand as of 18<sup>th</sup> August 2010 would approximately be 21,140,000, increasing from last year by 15.52%. The technology of broadband Internet access, which provides higher data connection speeds than a dial-up connection, is becoming more popular. The statistics from the Office of the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) has indicated that as of 1<sup>st</sup> September 2010, Thailand has 2,474,867 broadband Internet subscribers, representing a growth of 22.87% compared to the same quarter last year. In addition to Internet access via telephone lines like dial-up Internet connection and broadband or leased line, mobile phone users also connect to the Internet via wireless service. The largest service provider in

Thailand is the TOT Public Company Limited that initially released the service in December 2009 covering Bangkok and its perimeter. Service data by end of October 2010 showed 212,845 subscribers (Telecom Journal, 2010). Internet is not as prevalent as television or other traditional media. For instance, figures show that only 7 per 100 households have access to computer while colour TVs are present in 95.5 of 100 household (The Economist, 2010).

### *B) Social networks*

Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter provide a service that has become very popular over the past few years and have also played a significant role in the violent incidents during April - May 2010. As Internet users within the protest areas could use a mobile phone to take photos and distribute live reports about the situation through Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, it is considered a 'Citizen's media'.

Also in 2010, governmental, private and media organisations used social networks more widely to promote and publicise their work, events, news and information.

It is quite difficult to assess the statistics for Twitter users in Thailand because Twitter does not regulate users nor identify their country. As of November 29, 2010 the number of Facebook users increased to 6,579,700 users (3.35 times, or a 235% growth)<sup>1</sup>. We can say that 2010 is a major growth year in the number of social network users in Thailand.

Web 2.0 applications such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and international blog-hosting services like Blogspot are freely available and important spaces for political expression, including messages implicitly opposing the monarchy. All were within the top twenty most visited website in the country in 2010<sup>2</sup>.

Internet users are largely concentrated in urban areas and the survey (The Economist, 2010) demonstrates the following break up of the users according to educational level and employment status:

1. Education level: Bachelor 58.8%, Master 11.0%, High School 9.7%, less than high school 8.2%
2. Employment status: Employed 51.3%, Full-time student 29.8%, Employed Part-time student 10.3%, Unemployed 8.2%

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see: <http://www.facebook.com/advertising>, 3 November 2011.

<sup>2</sup> For more details see: <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/TH>, 3 November 2011.

Most Internet users from this survey work with private sector (42.9%) and the monthly household income is approximately 350-650 USD (26.4%).

The digital divide and Internet literacy in Thailand are still issues since the average income of the majority of the population is low. ADSL cost per month is 20 USD while minimum daily wage is about 7 USD. Additionally, the senior citizens do not access Internet as older generation are not keen to learn ICTs since Thai culture is based on oral communication rather than written. Compared to other Southeast Asian countries, Thailand is still lower in terms of Internet access. For example in Malaysia it is about 64.6% and the Philippines around 29.7% (Internet World Stats, 2011).

### **3. Gender and Internet access**

A recent survey on Internet usage in Thailand (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2009) found that female Internet users were much more responsive. Out of a total sample of 11,991 voluntary participants, 72.5% of women answered the survey, compared to only 22.5% men. The data showed that a typical Internet user in Thailand is a female student, aged 20-29, living in the Bangkok metropolitan area. Combined with a higher inclination to be employed in the private sector with a net gross income of less than 50,000 THB, the typical female Internet user shows a very distinct social profile. If the same data is visited from the other side of the social divide, the data shows that uneducated women in the rural areas have less access to Internet than their better off peers in the urban centers.

There is evidence that once Internet access is established in private homes, men and women have equal access to ICT. Men and women have equal access to ICT in Thailand: equal good access in the urban centers and equal bad access in the rural periphery. As Dr. Chadamas Thuvasethakul from National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC) says - "In Thailand there is no 'divide' between man and woman in term of the access to computer and Internet"<sup>3</sup>.

### **4. Gender inequality in ICTs usage**

If access to ICT is guaranteed, do men and women have equal opportunities to make use of the full potential of ICT? In other words, are there any legal, economic, social or cultural factors that prevent women (or men) to explore the new opportunities opened up by ICTs?

To answer this question, a deeper look into the situation of Internet freedom in Thailand must be taken. Firstly, I will analyse if Internet freedom is impaired regardless of gender, i.e. as a fallout of

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<sup>3</sup> For more details see : <http://www.mnet.co.th/main/content.php?page=sub&category=19&id=4>, 3 November 2011.

the political crisis. Secondly, I will determine if there are additional political, legal, economic, social and cultural factors that hinder women to make full use of the potential of ICTs.

Below are some points that emerged from the forum discussion on 'Gender perspectives on new media' hosted by Thai Netizen Network in November 24, 2010 at Sasa, Chulalongkorn University<sup>4</sup>:

1. Gender gap or bias in new media is not yet a critical issue in Thailand since the most crucial problem currently is censorship and curtailment of the freedom of expression, which is related to accessing civil and political rights.
2. Online spaces still represent the reality that exists in offline world including gender bias on cultural basis but it allows different facts and opinion to be expressed and accessed.
3. New media / Internet is an open space for sharing public information / discussion on controversial gender issues such as abortion, same-sex relationship, birth control, sexuality, etc.
4. LGBTs enjoy freedom of information and expression via new media / Internet much more since they are free to express themselves with more security.
5. LGBT movement is more active in using online media than women's movement in Thailand, with the users concentrated in urban rather than rural areas.

## **5. Gender limitation at policy-making level on ICTs development**

ICT policy documents mostly lack clear references to women's empowerment, both in language as well as in the attribution of funds. Neither have any strategies for increasing women's access to ICTs been included, nor are there any institutionalised capacity building programmes for women's empowerment. Observers have accused consecutive governments of this neglect, allegedly demonstrating a failure to live up to the promises made in various multilateral agreements.

Yet, the picture becomes less clear when the actual data of women's access to ICT is consulted. Various empirical studies show that women in urban areas have equal and sometimes even better access to ICTs than men. The same picture emerges when Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and other business opportunities related to ICT are considered: women in urban areas seem to make better and more successful use of ICTs. Of course, this does not apply to women in rural areas.

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<sup>4</sup> For more details see: <http://thainetizen.org/sites/default/files/netizen-gender-new-media-forum-2010-notes-draft.pdf>, 3 November 2011.



Yet, the lack of need for supporting women's access and use of ICTs does not mean policy documents should not reflect the gender dimension. Policy making is as much about discourse setting as it is about norm setting. Thus, the gender dimension should be clearly stated in ICT policy making.

This lack of gender awareness amongst policy makers could indicate a gender dimension in Thai society. Figures show a shockingly low rate of senior female policy makers compared to female leadership presence in the private sector. While amongst top enterprise owners and top management 45% are women (Boston Post, 2011), the percentage in politics is much less. This tendency has not been significantly altered with the election of the first female Prime Minister. This imbalance amongst policy makers mirrors the lack of gender awareness in policy making. This reflects the fact that politics is still dominated by the so-called network monarchy, a network of mostly powerful men in the bureaucracy, palace and the military and their patrimonial culture.

There have been differences between feminist thinkers and activists in Thailand regarding the significance of women leaders. While some attribute great symbolic value to the election of the first female Prime Minister, citing her as a role model for girls and women, others argue that form does not substitute substance, a female leader does not equal gender sensitive policies (Kaewmala, 2011).

However, to a certain extent, this divide only mirrors the bigger red - yellow divide in Thai society. The political conflict between opposing elite factions over the future order of the polity is fuelled by a deeper transformation crisis of Thai society. In a nutshell, there are two opposing ideas about 'just order'. While the red discourse calls for the emancipation of citizens, the yellow leadership calls for a return to the traditional moral order. In effect, the traditional order implies a vertical moral order in the social and political hierarchy. In short, leaders find legitimacy through their higher moral standard, and cannot be replaced by a mechanism such as elections with leaders from another social stratum. This thinking effectively blocks the emergence of women in politics - a glass ceiling that has to an extent been broken in the private sector.

The open and equal culture in the web empowers women in several ways. Firstly, the very practice of interacting across social and gender lines strengthens both the capacity and self esteem of women. The practice of communication in terms of deliberation, negotiation and the vocalisation of grievance and interests is a powerful way to strengthen women and open up space for women leadership. Secondly, the collective phenomenon of social interactions melts the boundaries that were constructed to uphold hierarchies, including a gender bias in the power structure of society.

## **6. The limitation of ICTs and freedom of expression in Thailand**

### *A) Internet blockage*

Media and freedom of expression in the Internet can be limited on the basis of two legal foundations - the Computer Crime Act B.E. 2550 (2007) which allows for the arrest of offenders and blockage of websites and services on the Internet; and the Emergency Decree on Government Administration in States of Emergency B.E. 2548 (2005).

Blockage or censorship of the Internet practiced in 2010 was different from the practices of the previous years because during the red shirt protest in April-May, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva promulgated the Emergency Decree on Government Administration in States of Emergency B.E. 2548 (2005) authorising the Director of the Centre for Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES) to shut down any website without requiring a summons. During the preparation of this report, the Emergency Decree is still effective in Bangkok.

The enforcement of the Emergency Decree on Government Administration in States of Emergency provides the government with more tools to block websites in addition to the existing Computer Crime Act B.E. 2550 (2007). The number of websites censored by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Justice by June 2010 was 43,000 sites, an increase from the 9,600 websites blocked by August 2009.

The cabinet passed a resolution on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2010, which proclaimed that the Bangkok metropolis, 7 surrounding provinces and 21 sub-districts shall be areas at risk of incidents affecting internal security of the Kingdom according to the Internal Security Act B.E. 2551 (2008). The resolution has been in effect since 11<sup>th</sup> March and designated the Centre for the Administration of Peace and Order (CAPO) as the responsible agency. This promulgation enhanced the power of the executive branch in accordance with 18 laws including the Computer Crime Act, B.E. 2550 (2007). This law granted power to the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT) to control the production and distribution of electronic information by means of the Internet and information technology systems, and the MICT has authority to accuse and command people to stop publishing, block broadcasting, or prosecute those regarded as committing a criminal offense (Matichon Online, 2010). Today, the Ministry of ICT receives complaints against 200-300 offensive websites per day on average<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to the attempt to block many websites through the enforcement of extraordinary laws, the government also called on the public to send complaints to government officers. In other words,

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<sup>5</sup> For more details see: <http://www.thairath.co.th/content/tech/76263> , 3 November 2011.

another approach was used to restrict the freedom of the individual on the Internet. This will have a deep impact on the nature of surveillance and the self-censure adopted by the net citizens because they are afraid of scrutiny or witch-hunts.

Resembling the trend for intensive surveillance of society, this so-called 'social sanction', is actually an act of vilification of those Internet users who express their political views about prohibited or sensitive issues. Although they will not face any criminal charges, they will face serious social punishment such as being scolded or hated or even being threatened. This phenomena reveals that the differences in people's views on highly sensitive issues are the cause of escalating tensions in society. There are many cases in which a clash of ideology has led to the violation of human rights and human dignity.

The control over Internet in Thailand is already a cause for serious concern. Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF) located in Paris, who monitor freedom of the press, ranked Thailand as one of the countries under surveillance because the Thai government perceives the Internet as a political enemy. In the report 'Countries under Surveillance' (2011) on 11<sup>th</sup> March, this organisation ranked the level of freedom of the media in Thailand, and it has dropped to 153<sup>rd</sup> in ranking from 130<sup>th</sup> in 2009<sup>6</sup>. Freedom on the net 2011 Report conducted by Freedom House puts Thailand into 'Not Free' status, the same as many communist and dictatorship countries (Freedom House, 2011).

#### *B) The reasons for Internet blocking and control*

Strict Internet blocking and control has arisen partly for the following reasons:

- It becomes a means by which the government can control the opposition. Particularly, it controls the opportunity for political expression through the Internet. Although the proportion of access is less than half the population, the government is concerned that this can increase the voice of opposition. Therefore, the government uses censorship, as it believes that this measure can curtail the voice of criticism.
- Since websites criticising or analysing the role of the monarchy have increased in number since the coup on 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006, the government must find measures to stop such growth.

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<sup>6</sup> Thailand was 124<sup>th</sup> in 2008, 135<sup>th</sup> in 2007, and 122<sup>nd</sup> in 2006.

- The social trend that puts pressure on the government to check people who use the Internet freely, especially content regarding personal values, beliefs, children, and youth, rather than creating societal mechanisms of control within the family and community<sup>7</sup>.

### *C) Internet freedom in the context of the broader political conflict*

Thai society is currently walking a tightrope because of the deep divisions between two groups which cut across elite, military, bureaucratic and business networks; and involve actors such as medical doctors, state enterprise unions, students, the media and grassroot movements. The first group, yellow camp, claims to act in order to protect the Nation and the King, the second group, red camp, claims to fight for a real democracy. Between these two groups lies a large silent majority who feel confused and frustrated by the continued conflict and are looking for a way out.

Media and tools of communication have become the battle ground of choice between the two camps; the intense social conflict has politicised the debate surrounding the role of the monarchy as never before in recent Thai history. A number of *lese majeste* cases have been brought up recently, against both Thai and non-Thai defendants. Even the royalists say that the unsparing use of law is not in the interest of the monarchy as an institution.

"I don't see the letter of the law as problematic, but the application of it is, when used in an all-encompassing way", says Prof. Thongthong Chandrangsue, a well-known royalist, expert on royal history. Well known historian, Nidhi Eiewsiwong, on the other hand argues that Thailand has yet to reach a consensus on the dividing line between the protection of the monarchy and the protection of citizens' rights to freedom of expression; with regard to what aspects of royal authority should be maintained and what should not, has been discussed since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, with no satisfactory consensus.

Eiewsiwong argues that the 'sacred space' where the monarchy was revered must be reduced to fit a democratic system. "If the sacred space is too large it will occupy and reduce the public's space". Eiewsiwong also urges certain political groups to stop using the fear of republicanism as a political weapon, saying that never in the modern history of Thailand had republicanism been a viable alternative. Kasian Tejapeera adds, "Those who support the protection of the monarchy principally through coercion, damage the monarchy. They may unknowingly shift towards fascism in the name of monarchy".

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<sup>7</sup> This is in accordance with the opinion of high ranking officials at the Ministry of ICT who perceive that handling of Internet content should be the responsibility of the family and blacklists are not an effective means. For more details see: <http://www.zdnet.com.au/our-blacklist-has-failed-us-thai-minister-339307333.htm>, 3 November 2011.

Internet and netizens are definitely included in this war of thought. On March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009, international scholars including Noam Chomsky, Immanuel Wallerstein, Stuart Hall, have called for the reform of Thailand's *lese majeste* law. The letter argues that "frequent abuse of the *lese majeste* law against political opponents, undermines democratic processes" and generates "heightened criticism of the monarchy and Thailand itself, both inside and outside the country"<sup>8</sup>. The petition had a huge impact on the political debates within Thailand, triggering outrage and skepticism with regard to the comments made on Thai tradition, Thai-style democracy and the revered monarchy, slamming the call for reform on *lese-majeste* led by international scholars as part of the fictional conspiracy. Arguments fielded by conservatives usually went along these lines - Thailand is not ready for parliamentary democracy as the majority of the population is illiterate, thus subject to manipulation by evil minded politicians. A columnist in *The Nation* put it this way - "President Obama may have started the age of e-democracy in the US, but in Thailand we are still struggling with the a, b, c" (Kanchanalak, 2009).

Since cyber-liberty is tied with the plight of democracy, it is dependent on the nature of Thai politics which could swiftly have some progress and then some reverses. Democratisation is never sustained in Thailand, though some might observe the current situation as progressive because of the discussion surrounding the role of the monarchy and the open discussion on *lese-majeste* laws, taking place frequently.

The Thai people are living in anxiety as Michael Connors, leading expert on Thai politics, states that "the crisis will remain intractable, perhaps until a rupturing historical event provides relief. One thing, though, is certain: the future of Thai politics will be extremely uncertain precarious and subject to momentous change once the current king's interventionist role, on the side of conservatism, is absent (Connors, 2009: 493)".

#### *D) In sum: Internet freedom critically impaired*

Thai men and women alike suffer significant restrictions in ICT usage. They face severe restrictions in being able to express opinions and there exists strong censorship with regard to information. In conclusion, the evidence shows that Internet freedom is critically impaired for Thai citizens, regardless of their gender.

### **7. Gender equality in ICT usage**

The Internet usage profile survey (MoST, 2009) shows that female Internet users are using ICTs more than men, to do research and to gather information. Women between 20-29 are the biggest

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<sup>8</sup> For more details see: <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/letter1.pdf> , 3 November 2011.

group following political information and watching Online News Reports. Women participate more than men in eLearning programmes. Women also make more use of chat services.

Besides the above mentioned restrictions that affect citizens regardless of their gender, there are no additional legal and political restrictions for women to make use of ICTs. However, due to the overall patrimonial culture, women face tougher social consequences on expressing controversial views online and offline. I will address this hegemony of the patrimonial discourse later in the paper.

In the more narrow sense of ICT usage, there are no additional factors hindering women from exploring the full potential of new media. Men and women in Thailand are equally able to make use of the opportunities provided by ICTs. Where legal and political barriers exist, they affect men and women in the same way. If anything, there is empirical evidence that women use information, social and communication media more than men.

### **In conclusion**

In conclusion, in Thailand there is no gender dimension in the access to ICTs and the ability to make use of ICTs as a means to promote equal life chances.

#### *A) ICTs trigger structural changes leading to greater gender justice*

Having access to information and social media exposes people to a wider range of ideas, knowledge, opinions and discourses than they can experience in their immediate social environment or via state controlled or commercial traditional media. Men and women alike are being introduced to people who have different perspectives on gender issues. Men and women are being exposed to discourses that question the hegemonic patrimonial discourse that attributes certain roles, qualities, rights and obligations to men and women.

Access to online and social media helps check the patrimonial bias expressed in Thai mainstream and traditional media. The Asian Media Barometer, which has undertaken an analysis of the media landscape in Asia, explains that in term of traditional media there are two lines of argument. One side opines that voices were fairly reflected in the media, particularly in women, fashion and entertainment magazines. Furthermore, women were given extra space if they happened to be victims of violence, such as in the case of the unrest in the Deep South. There are also women groups who defend the rights of women if their images or stories are unfairly reflected in the media. However, the other side argues that the mainstream media were biased in reflecting the voices of

women and men, and deeply biased in their representation of sexuality. Most media, they felt, were upholding the patriarchal worldview. It was observed that the gender and sexual representation in the media were largely circumscribed by the conservative worldview of the Thai society. For example, female students who become pregnant while in school are not permitted to continue their education after giving birth.

For the criteria given below, the average score is 3.4 from 5, hence the experts granted that the 'country meets some aspects of indicators' for gender balance in media representation(Asian Media Barometer Thailand 2010; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung – FES, 2011).

- The media had little gender awareness and they usually reflected the dominant conservative value that women should take the role of a wife and mother.
- The media often use negative language to portray women who challenge the domination of men.
- In the Thai social and cultural structure men are in control in the public sphere with their political power whilst the space for women is confined within the domestic sphere.

How the exposure to progressive perspectives and discourses works to erode the patrimonial discourse hegemony, could be observed in a recent public debate over an incident involving three underage girls. The New York Times ('Thais Are Shocked, Shocked by Topless Dancers', ....) reported:

“(...) a national uproar over several girls who danced topless in public during raucous celebrations at the recently concluded Songkran water festival has underlined the limits of acceptable behavior and the nuances of public morality here.

The dancers were filmed gyrating to thumping music in the heart of Bangkok on Friday, and video of it circulated widely. One clip was viewed by nearly one million people before being removed. Reports of the episode shot to the top of Thai news Web sites, and the police began an investigation. Suddenly, one of Asia's most socially liberal societies showed a deeply conservative side as demonstrated in the report below (Fuller, 2011):

“We will take legal actions against them,” a police official, Maj. Gen. Suwat Jangyodsuk, said [...] “This has damaged a traditional Thai ceremony. The charge is doing a shameful act in public by indecently exposing oneself.”

Thailand's minister of culture, Nipit Intarasombut, demanded that "society come out and criticise" the dancers [...]

Thailand has rules against vice, and the government regularly blocks Web sites deemed to violate Thai values. But weak enforcement and a general laissez-faire ethos undermine such controls. The country has a long history of men frequenting prostitutes; Bangkok is home to hundreds of so-called saunas, where male clients do more than just soak in hot tubs. [...]

Chalidaporn Songsamphan, an associate professor at Thammasat University in Bangkok, said Thais were uncomfortable when sexuality was displayed in public. And, she said, the anger directed at the topless dancers was a way for people to channel their frustrations about wider social problems [...]

The debate showed two things - the hypocrisy of the patrimonial mainstream and the cynical approach of the State that penalises underage girls instead of protecting their personal dignity. However, the following debate, especially in new media, was dominated by progressive criticism, clearly indicating that a majority of younger citizens of both genders are no longer prepared to accept the hypocrisy of self proclaimed moral institutions, but come out strongly in favour of the human rights of the victimised girls. This indicates that the erosion of the patrimonial hegemony is under way, a fact that even the conservative establishment has to acknowledge. This change of calculus, even for the wrong reasons, can work to change the posture of mainstream media and state officials in the long run, opening the path to greater gender justice.

If more people are exposed to counter discourses promoting gender equality and justice, the hegemony of patrimonial discourses will erode. It becomes possible for progressive actors to win discursive hegemony for gender justice narratives. Changing the imaginary, the perceptions and definitions of interests of people from the bottom up will have a significant long term impact on gender justice. By establishing hegemony for gender justice discourses, the perceptions of what is right or wrong, role models and educational models will profoundly change.

In sum, access to ICTs will expose people to gender justice discourses, which can erode the hegemony of patrimonial discourses - enabling progressive actors to win discourse hegemony for gender justice. In the long run, discursive hegemony for gender justice will have a significant impact on the behavior and perceptions of people. In short, access to ICTs can be a key means to promote structural changes that lead to greater gender justice.



B) ICTs make the modern sub-culture of Netizen's movement in Thailand.

While in the offline world the distinctions between man and woman or alternative gender are rather clear and obvious, in the online world when citizens have become 'netizens' it seems that the boundaries between genders is more fluid. The online languages, style, form are being used and shared by all genders to communicate. The unique symbols, language and sub-culture used among netizens in an online world is such that people inactive on the Internet would not understand it. Therefore, citizens with ICTs world over are moving beyond gender-oriented approaches and shaping themselves into what is called 'global citizens' in a 'free culture' concept. So, most active netizens share a common identity. In Thailand, the case of the Thai Netizen Network can represent this trend, where the core members of this group do not have a gender barrier when they work together. Somehow they share common values and styles of the modern sub-culture, of being 'netizens' in a 'free culture' paradigm.

### **8. The case study of Thai Netizen Network**

On May 29, 2009, the online statement supported by around 300 signatories to uphold the rights and freedom of expression on the Internet was released. Reference was made to a statement Thepthai Senpong, the Democrat Party's Assistant Secretary-General, who slammed 29 websites<sup>9</sup> as 'dangerous' by including *lèse majesté* content. He demanded that the government and the Minister of Information and Communication Technology take action against such websites. Therefore the group called for accountability and encouraged netizens to safeguard their rights. The statement said:

“We would like to invite all netizens and citizens to use our right and freedom of speech equitably and responsibly, to jointly monitor and protect the Internet so that it may always remain the common space for learning, seeking wisdom, and accepting diverse viewpoints of fellow human beings, *whether or not we agree with them.*”<sup>10</sup>

The Thai Netizen Network (TNN) consists of individuals from various sectors including computer-geeks, small and medium entrepreneurs on ICTs, social and political activists, academicians, lawyers, web masters, students and journalists. The founding members are prominent members from social-venture organisations such as Siam Intelligence Unit, ChangeFusion, OpenDream, Thoth Media, etc. The political views and affiliation among the group members are various, yet they have similar beliefs regarding freedom of expression.

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<sup>9</sup> 29 websites including Prachatai, Samesky and MidnightUniversity. For more details see: <http://www.prachatai.com/05web/th/home/12294>, 3 November 2011.

<sup>10</sup> For more details see: <http://gopetition.com/online/19589.html>, 3 November 2011.

TNN defines itself as below:

“We are a group of people gathered as a network of Internet users. We stand for rights to access, express opinions, show expressions, and protect our civil rights and liberty of online media. We gathered for policy campaigning in order to maintain, campaign and protect cyber-liberty which leads to netizens’ right and freedom of online media. TNN’s mission is based on 5 basic principles of cyber-liberty ; right to access, free expression, right to privacy, responsibility and common property”<sup>11</sup>.

TNN is supposedly the first group of Internet citizens in Thailand. Thus a very young and fresh movement, there are several expectations. To analyse and understand the prospects of this movement, it is important to understand the nature of its sub-culture.

TNN’s core members are mostly well educated, English speaking and computer-skilled. Their political views are liberal. Lawrence Lessig<sup>12</sup>, a law professor, who came up with the concept of ‘free culture’, is the idol for core TNN’s members. Freeculture.org defines their mission as follows:

“A free culture is one where all members are free to participate in its transmission and evolution, without artificial limits on who can participate or in what way. The free culture movement seeks to develop this culture by promoting four things: creativity and innovation; communication and free expression; public access to knowledge; and citizens' civil liberties”<sup>13</sup>.

By his devoted followers, Lessig is regarded as a ‘digital Robin hood’. His stance is that current copy rights laws curtail rights and freedom towards creativity and leave the control of our culture in the hands of a few powerful people in politics and finance<sup>14</sup>. In this light, TNN sees itself as ‘the leading civil liberties group defending your rights in the digital world’ in Thailand<sup>15</sup>.

TNN is mainly composed of liberal, educated, confident, well-oriented citizens, who may not represent the majority of Thai society. However, the quality and quantity of people within this sub-culture is steadily rising.

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<sup>11</sup> For more details see: [www.thainetizen.org](http://www.thainetizen.org), 3 Novemeber 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Lessig is a Professor of Law at Stanford Law School and founder of the school's Center for Internet and Society. Prior to joining the Stanford faculty, he was the Berkman Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, and a Professor at the University of Chicago. He clerked for Judge Richard Posner on the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals and Justice Antonin Scalia on the United States Supreme Court. For more details see: <http://www.lessig.org/info/bio/>, 3 November 2011.

<sup>13</sup> For more details see: <http://freeculture.org/>, 3 November 2011.

<sup>14</sup> For more details see: <http://www.fringer.org/?p=58>, 3 November 2011.

<sup>15</sup> For more details see: <http://www.eff.org/>, 3 November 2011.

In the current situation where Thai politics is currently dominated by the ultra conservative, having the sub-culture of TNN could help ensure a counter-balance in the public sphere. I would say the TNN has emerged at a momentous time. Though it might not lead to radical differences, at least it may direct the path of change based on reason and a modern way of thinking. Eventually it will somehow contribute to the progressive transformation based on democratic dialogue and negotiations.

The sub-culture of Thai netizens is encouraged by the concept of free culture and open society, despite the restricting laws and Thai norms, some of the netizens remain confident in defending cyber-liberty. Free culture versus Thai norms is the ongoing battle in the current scenario. Internet is a medium without frontiers. It is international and universal, therefore when it is obstructed by local constraints, it creates a tension and leads to resistance. Greater the resistance, greater the suppression.

It seems that Internet activists are quickly connecting online, they keep abreast of each others' activities via applications on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. News and opinion travels faster than ever before. Nonetheless, mobilisation towards political actions is rather slow -

1. This may be due to the nature of the Internet which represents the nature of citizens from different backgrounds, consensus is difficult to achieve unless those Internet communities are a hub of people aligned along similar terms.
2. Internet allows the individual citizens to virtually engage in online activism based on their interest through hundreds of web pages and applications, yet it is difficult to mobilise them into taking tangible action; for example, to attend street protests or hunger strikes.

This implies that the political agency of the Internet is very significant in democratic participation but it could contribute to political apathy in certain situations. Therefore mass rallies in Thailand still play a major role in bringing about critical changes. Internet is a tool to mobilise political supporters just as the other mass media, but there is no clear evidence that Internet is yet vitally influential in comparison with the role of traditional media such as television and community radio.

Nonetheless, Internet is the best and most liberal space for political expression. Its a space where people can seek alternative facts and opinions which are not available through other media. The users feel free to express anonymously, to exercise their right of expression which makes democracy healthier. In my opinion, Internet could lead to democratic changes in Thailand but not

too radically. Radical changes would come in other ways. Though it would not directly lead to radical changes, it has irritated established power creating fear and uncertainty, so regardless of any rationale, the authorities have attempted to use tough laws to abort the dynamics of new media such as Internet by punishing the citizens to pay for the high price of liberty. The suppression has inevitably turned Internet citizens into cyber-dissidents, no matter what their political stance might be, hence the number of potential defendants is increasing every day. If the police arrests all who are considered to be committing thought-crime in cyber space, more grand prisons need to be built.

In conclusion, netizens as a sub-culture created what can be referred to as a 'global citizen', which cuts across gender in Thai society. In this sub-culture, netizens value the concept of 'free culture' which leads to the openness and blends the gap between genders. Also this 'free culture' value challenges the traditional values such as the authoritarian / conservative mindset. When men and women have become active netizens and adopted free culture value, their gender status is not a barrier to connect and share. ICTs help in bridging the gap and blending different citizens into the common identity of a 'netizen'.

Netizen sub-culture may work to blur gender divides. ICTs connect individuals across gender and other divides, especially like-minded people who share a cause and interest, faster than before. These sub-culture groups can set an agenda for a debate in the society in term of political, cultural and social changes, like it has happened in several countries. The new sub-culture of the netizens, in a way helps gender equality in terms of opinion making and sharing on many issues. Men, women or alternative sexualities can also be equal in sharing ideas and taking action both, in the online and offline world.

## **9. Policy recommendations on gender and ICTs**

1. Reducing the obstacles to access ICTs will help in allowing all genders to enjoy the use of ICTs for a more fulfilling social, political and economic life.
2. Breaking the limits of content, providing information and promoting freedom of expression and diversity of opinion will help all genders access their right to communicate along with accessing other civil rights including the right to self-determination.
3. Not violating the rights of 'netizens' will help encourage the modern sub-culture of digital natives and immigrants to develop the capacity of all genders.

4. Assisting 'information literacy' will help all genders, especially women to make best use of ICTs and new media to promote well-being and self-esteem.
5. Empowering the marginalised women movements to use ICTs as a platform for sharing ideas will support their development and help them access justice in society.

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