

# บล็อกในประเทศไทยและประเทศมาเลเซีย: ความแตกต่าง เชิงบริบทและเชิงเนื้อหา

## Blogs in Thailand and Malaysia: Contrasting Contexts, Contrasting Contents

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### ABSTRACT

Governments in Southeast Asia have generally maintained stringent control over mainstream media, especially on matters related to politics, but the Internet's rise has enabled citizen journalists to bypass those controls. This study examined popular blogs in Thailand and Malaysia, two countries that have quite different political and historical settings, looking at the range of contents presented by blogs in each nation. We found that while Thailand has a policy blocking many Websites, Malaysia has maintained an open Internet policy in support of its Multimedia Super Corridor project. Blogging in both countries enjoyed a tremendous boost in popularity because of limitations imposed on mainstream media. In both countries, blogs tend to be associated with politics. And yet, because of government policies that influence information exchange, in neither country are bloggers free to freely exercise their rights of self-expression.

*Keywords: Blogs, Internet Policies, Lese Majeste, Thailand, Malaysia*

### บทคัดย่อ

โดยภาพรวมแล้วรัฐบาลของประเทศในแถบเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้มีการควบคุมสื่อกระแสหลักอย่างเข้มงวด โดยเฉพาะในส่วนของการนำเสนอข่าวสารด้านการเมือง แต่การเติบโตของอินเทอร์เน็ตช่วยให้นักข่าวภาคพลเมืองได้ช่องทางหลบเลี่ยงจากการควบคุมของภาครัฐ การศึกษาครั้งนี้วิเคราะห์บล็อกที่ได้รับความนิยมของประเทศไทยและมาเลเซีย ซึ่งประเทศทั้งสองมีสภาพการเมืองและประวัติศาสตร์ความเป็นชาติที่แตกต่างกัน โดยมุ่งศึกษาเนื้อหาโดดเด่นและหลากหลายที่นำเสนอในบล็อกนั้นๆ ผู้ศึกษาพบว่าในขณะที่ประเทศไทยมีนโยบายการปิดกั้นเว็บไซต์หลายแห่ง ประเทศมาเลเซียกลับเลือกใช้นโยบายเปิดเสรีเพื่อสนับสนุนโครงการมัลติมีเดีย ซุปเปอร์ คอริดอร์ เนื่องจากสื่อกระแสหลักถูกกดดันด้วยกฎต่างๆ การเขียน

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บล็อกในประเทศทั้งสองจึงได้รับความนิยมเป็นอย่างมาก บล็อกของทั้งสองประเทศมีแนวโน้มเกี่ยวข้องกับ การเมือง และด้วยเหตุนี้ นโยบายของรัฐจึงบังคับควบคุมการแลกเปลี่ยนข้อมูลข่าวสาร ผู้เขียนบล็อกของทั้งสอง ประเทศจึงมิได้มีอิสรภาพในการใช้สิทธิแห่งการแสดงออกอย่างแท้จริง

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## Introduction

Southeast Asian governments have generally imposed strict information restrictions, especially control and censoring of media content. This practice—commonly justified on the basis of “stable government” and “Asian Values”—has unquestionably been employed by political leaders to ensure that opponents do not use media to win supporters. Those who have wished to express ideas in opposition to authorities’ positions have had little means to communicate with broad segments of their societies until recently. However, beginning in the 1990s, a remarkable transformation of information technologies occurred in the Southeast Asian region. Mobile telephones and the Internet provided many new communication options such as bulletin boards, mail-lists, and Web-based information tools. A direct consequence of this technological change was an expansion in freedom of expression. This took place even though a greater openness was resisted by political elites, whose hold on power was threatened by the new forms of communication. In recent years, the entrenched political establishment has found particularly troublesome due to the rising tide of citizen journalists whose blogs present accounts at odds with official narratives. This paper examines the phenomenon of blogging and blog content in two prominent countries of Southeast Asia.

Neighboring Malaysia and Thailand share some cultural similarities that arise from their long

cultural interaction—portions of Malaysia were formerly part of Siam and the southern part of Thailand is populated by ethnic Malays. Even with these similarities, and even with comparably developed media, their democratic governments’ policies for the Internet present starkly contrasting philosophies. Thus we pose this study’s research question: *How have these policies shaped the way that blogs and blogging have emerged as factors in the democratization of media in these two nations?*

We will begin with a review of blogging as a mode of information sharing on the Internet, followed by an overview of the policies for online media that Thailand and Malaysia have adopted. We will then summarize the sorts of contents and presentational styles offered by blogs in Thailand and Malaysia, paying particular attention to the themes employed to provide information to their readers. We finally will compare and contrast the way blog contents differ from and sometimes challenge mainstream media in Thailand and Malaysia.

## Blogs and Blogging

Blogs (Web logs) are Websites to which postings of commentary, reflection, essays, and news accounts are made. These personal Websites, typically maintained by a single individual, have become a popular and important way to exchange ideas and information via the Internet. Blogs first emerged in the late 1990s, and soon the availability

in 1999 of the hosting Website Blogger.com made blogging easy. Blogging experienced a spurt of growth after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 when thousands felt the urge to share their opinions about the event. One report in 2007 suggested that worldwide about 120,000 new blogs were being created every day (“Mixed Opinions,” 2007). According to research conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 7 percent of US adults who surf the Web have created blogs and 27 percent of Internet users read blogs (“New Data,” 2005).

One Website that studies blogging practices and provides a search engine to locate and read blogs, Technorati, reported that bloggers were highly educated and well to do. According to its 2009 survey, three out of four blog writers had a bachelor’s degree and 40 percent had a post-graduate degree. According to Technorati, about one-third of the bloggers responding to its survey had annual earnings higher than USD \$100,000 (“Who Are the Bloggers,” 2010).

An interesting point is that a large proportion of bloggers are professionals who work in traditional media. Technorati found that about 35 percent of those they surveyed held jobs in print or broadcast media, including journalists, producers, and on-air personalities. Many of these bloggers used their postings to supplement or to augment their professional news coverage (“Who Are the Bloggers,” 2010). Conversely, journalists have been very much involved as readers. According to Trammel and Keshelashvili (2005), 51 percent of US journalists they studied regularly read blogs, and of these readers, about 53 percent used blogs to develop story ideas or to gain news sources. As time has passed, blogs have come to replace conventional media as news sources. Technorati’s study found that 48 percent

of all bloggers believe that within the next five years more people would get their news from blogs than from traditional media (Sobel, 2010).

### **Thailand’s Online Media Policy**

Although Thailand experienced rapid increases in per capita GDP over the two decades at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was not a commensurate growth in information technologies. At the time when Internet growth was most explosive during the mid-1990s, the official government view was that the network was mainly for the use of government offices and for academic research and communication. Consequently, Thailand soon fell behind its neighbors in the race for technology leadership. By 1996, Thailand’s ratio of Internet hosts to GDP was only 49.4, just slightly better than the Philippines (44.6) and Indonesia (41.7), but well below 165.0 in Malaysia and 284.2 in Singapore (Palasri, Huter, & Wenzel, 1999). According to Suriyasarn (2002, p. 113), by the end of 1995, there were only 60 corporate nodes connected to commercial ISPs in the country.

Thailand’s emerging online policies were formulated to provide stringent government controls, including an early requirement that every privately-owned Internet service provider must hand over 32 percent of their corporate shares to the Thai government. This was justified in a 1997 statement by Attorney General Office Prosecutor Shinnawat Thongpakdee: “There are several ‘rights’ involved with Internet information: the right to control access to information . . .” (Boonruang, 1997). In that year, the government attempted to enact simultaneously five laws to regulate the Internet. They were the Internet Promotion Act, Computer Security Act, Computer Privacy Act, Electronic Commerce Act, and

IT-Related Anti-Trust Act. Donald Heath, the president of Internet Society Thailand, a nonprofit organization formed to provide leadership in Internet development, complained that “we see a danger that the law could lead to a government censorship. The committee would attempt to exercise broad and heavy-handed control over the Internet” (Pietrucha, 1998). Apart from enacting laws, the Royal Thai Police Department (TPD) acting on behalf of the state, sought to employ other measures to check Internet usage. It requested that the Telephone Organization of Thailand disclose all local telephone numbers employed to connect to the Internet network (Boonnoon, 1998). CAT, acting as a shareholder of all Thai ISPs, forced local ISPs to utilize Internet filtering software to block pornographic Websites—and to apply software that would automatically cut connections to indecent Websites.

In 2001, Thailand welcomed new Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a telecommunications entrepreneur who brought neo-liberal economic practices to the government. Internet usage in Thailand expanded dramatically in response to the country’s economic growth as it recovered from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. One result was a boom in public access to the Web through Internet cafes that sprang up across the country. In addition, broadband services and related supporting technologies increased significantly (“Broadband Services,” 2002). The political power of ISPs grew through their financial strength and through the Internet’s increasing importance. With increased political muscle, ISPs asked for the return of CAT’s stake, claiming that government ownership hindered their development. At first, CAT balked at the suggestion (Mongkolporn, 2000). Eventually however, CAT agreed to release its shares through a buyback scheme in which all

ISPs but the largest would compensate the government in an amount of 1.25 million baht (about \$36,000 USD) and the largest would be required to pay double that amount (“CAT Agrees,” 2002).

During Internet’s growth phase, Thailand’s Internet policies changed little—they were established to curb content deemed indecent, justified on the basis of Thai morality. For instance, in December 2002, Thailand’s Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT) initiated a project intended to “clean up cyberspace, in terms of both morality and national security.” This campaign led to the suppression of more than 1,500 Websites, specifically targeting pornographic Websites, gambling Websites, and Websites related to *lese majeste*—that is, insults to the King and his family (“Thailand Blocks,” 2004).

Thaksin’s government supported many neo-liberal economic reforms, especially ones that benefitted corporations in which he and his family had interests. In time, his business and political moves made him one of the Thailand’s wealthiest men, but these actions backfired when they aroused a great public outrage that eventually led to his overthrow.

The coup against Thaksin occurred on September 19, 2006, bringing about a complete change in Thailand’s Internet scenario. Suddenly, the importance of the Internet as a channel for the expression of political viewpoints increased and many politically oriented Websites sprang up. Some of these opposed the military junta, complaining that the military takeover was a breach of democratic processes. Such criticism led the junta to tighten restrictions by authorizing TPD to oversee the political content of Websites and to maintain MICT’s responsibility for the

monitoring of Internet contents (“Thai Police,” 2009). The state acted aggressively during this period; when visitors to its Website were invited to post their opinions on the legitimacy of the coup, the Website <http://www.19sep.org> was shut down within 24 hours of its establishment. This was done under regulations provided by the Council for Democratic Reform (previously referred to as the Administrative Reform Council). Webmasters around the country received a warning from MICT that they would be held liable if their Websites hosted pages that might put at risk national security in any way, and they were charged with responsibility for ensuring that no content on their Websites would involve an infraction of *lese majeste* laws (“Thai Media,” 2006). Such steps as these presumably were taken by the military authorities to prevent political strife that might occur as a consequence of Thaksin’s removal from office. For instance, in 2008 the Crime Suppression Division (CSD) police searched the office of [prachatai.com](http://prachatai.com) and took into custody Cheeranuch Premchaiphorn, the Webmaster. She was detained under Article 15 of the 2007 Computer Crime Act for allowing *lese majeste* Webpages on her Website between October 15, 2007 and November 3, 2007 (“Prachatai’s Crime,” 2008). On September 2, 2008, MICT announced that more than 1,200 Websites violated the 2007 Computer Crime Act on grounds of content that harmed social peace. Subsequently, the court ordered MICT to close down 400 Websites, among which 344 were believed to have presented *lese majeste* contents. Later, Wikileaks, reported on December 20, 2008, that an additional 1,203 Websites based in more than 20 countries such as Canada, France, and Australia “had been blocked due to *lese majeste* infractions.” According to Wikileaks, it seemed

“apparent that many of the sites were not examined closely, however, and appear not to violate that particular law at all” (“Thailand Official MICT,” 2008).

Later still, on January 6, 2009, MICT’s Ranongruk Suwanchawee acknowledged that yet another 2,300 Websites were blocked because of *lese majeste* content. MICT also revealed that it had equipped a 24-hour-a-day “war room” for monitoring of Websites at a cost of 45 million baht (approximately US\$1.4 million) (“Thai Ministry Blocks,” 2009). This facility seems to have come into immediate use because on April 1, 2009 Aree Jiworarak, the Director of MICT’s Information Technology Supervision Office admitted that “the Ministry’s recently established Internet Security Operations Centre had blocked over 7,000 improper URLs or Web pages. . .” (“MICT Has Blocked,” 2009).<sup>3</sup>

### Malaysia’s Internet Policy Framework

A number of countries in Southeast Asia conceived the Internet as a business opportunity, and national policies were crafted in order to facilitate marketing of their highly skilled yet comparatively low-cost labor force in order to gain investment from abroad for their “knowledge industries.” One of the world’s most ambitious information technology projects for this purpose took shape in Malaysia with the establishment of its Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). This remarkable project was intended to propel Malaysia into a leadership position in the development of Internet technology and to

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, please read: Magpanthong, C. (2013). Thailand’s Internet policies: The search for a balance between national security and the right to information. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 23(1), 1-16.

provide benefits for the nation's business sector. The "corridor" was both a physical location in the central Peninsular region and a set of policies providing protection and support for technological enterprises operating anywhere within Malaysia.

An extremely important but possibly unintended consequence of the MSC's establishment was its effect of Malaysian Internet policy. Toward the end of the 1990s, the project developed rapidly through the creative vision of political and corporate leaders, leading to an unexpected set of policy initiatives. The chief purpose of the project was to attract foreign direct investment from major corporations around the world and to reap the benefits of the technology transfer that would accompany these investments. However, from the beginning, major corporations in the West were wary of placing funds in Malaysian assets because of the nation's tradition of censoring mainstream media. In order to allay concerns of potential investors, the government pledged to not censor the Internet. A new agency was created to oversee the project, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission. In the law creating this agency, the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998, Section 3(3) stated that "nothing the Act shall be deemed as permitting censorship of the Internet" ("Rise In Blog," 2007). Because of the law's adoption, government officials have been severely restricted in their ability to manage the Internet's contents, though authorities did try to find ways around these restrictions.

The impetus for the MSC came from hard-driving Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad who made the project's implementation a priority of his administration. He was a tireless and enthusiastic supporter of MSC and served as a spokesman for it, as he attempted to recruit

investors around the world. His support stemmed from his reasoning that "if the MSC is set up in this region, we can learn new technology and we may even be involved in the technology and be more adept in its application than others" (Ashraf, 1997).

The geographic portion of the MSC is a strip of land about ten miles by thirty miles (15km by 50km, a territory of 270 square miles) running from the Kuala Lumpur City Center to Putrajaya—the planned city selected as the new national capital and government administrative center—and to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA). This narrow band of land lies between the two major national highways that extend southward from the capital, the North-South Expressway and the Coastal Link Highway. Within these boundaries, resources for computing and information technology have been concentrated, making the MSC, it was hoped, a rich center attracting research and commercial enterprises from around the world.

The connection between the airport location and this MSC technology oasis might seem strange, but it fitted the central aim for the government project—to elevate Malaysia into the ranks of developed countries using technology as a springboard. The MSC project was part of a larger initiative known as "Vision 2020," that is, a goal to become a developed nation by the year 2020. The Vision 2020 project, associated with Prime Minister Mahathir and his close political allies in UMNO—the lead political party of the ruling coalition—was formulated in the mid-1990s. Vision 2020 was less a carefully crafted doctrine than a loosely coordinated set of economic principles meant to inspire the Malaysian public toward lofty but achievable goals. And it was truly inspirational, even for many who were

disinterested in politics and economics. The idea that Malaysia could rise to the same achievement level as Japan, or the nations of Europe and North America captured the Malaysian public's imagination.

Another facet of the MSC concept was the planned city Cyberjaya, touted as the region's "intelligent city." This showplace city was planned to be a twin of Putrajaya and together—according to Multimedia Super Corridor promoters—they would be known as Megajaya. An enraptured New Straits Times reporter Carolyn Hong (1997) explained it this way:

Cyberjaya's name says it all. This will [be] a city devoted heart and soul to the wonders of information technology. It will be a zone to link Malaysia to the world, in a big way and the MSC's backbone of development in IT and multimedia technology. A total of 7,000 hectares to the west of Putrajaya was set aside for this new city where the government pledged to establish a center containing resources for the most advanced information technology.

## Method

Our review of blogs employed an interpretive textual analysis method, in which we attempted to identify the main characteristics of Websites, including their design, structure, and textual content. Interpretive textual analysis can be compared with content analysis, a method that defines types of content *a priori*, then studies text to sort contents into defined categories in order to quantitatively test the influence of variables. In contrast, interpretive textual analysis is a qualitative method that makes no presuppositions about text, but instead allows the text to define its own meaning. Although not all blogs dealt with political issues, when they

did we were particularly interested in the way they were framed—that is, what did the stories say about political actions and actors, and what did the stories seem to be about? We also attempted to ascertain how authorities responded to Websites and their postings. This information we took is cues to assess the degree to which a blog contributed to democratic discourse in its national blogosphere.

In each country we selected four blogs for analysis. To choose them, we consulted sites that rated blog popularity in order to focus on blogs that enjoyed a wide readership, and we also attempted to identify those whose contents might have greater influence in the blogosphere. Also, as our purpose was the study of media democratization, we made an effort to examine political discourse in the blog items.

## Blogs and Blogging in Thailand

As one might expect, Thailand's blogs provide an important channel of political discourse, bypassing the gatekeeping and filtering that occurs on mainstream media. Unlike Malaysia, which has an incentive to keep the Internet free of censorship because of its Multimedia Super Corridor project, Thailand's officials have aggressively patrolled the Internet to restrict the range of viewpoints expressed in blogs. Prior to the September 2006 coup, blogs supporting and opposing former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra became significant information sources for those attempting to follow controversies surrounding his government. However after the coup, successive governments, including even the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva, shut down or blocked access to many blogs supporting Thaksin, the Red Shirt movements, or those opposing the monarchy. For instance, access to Thaksinlive.com was blocked altogether in

Thailand. Those attempting to visit this blog would encounter a pop-up window: “The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology has temporarily ceased the service to access this kind of information. . . .” Apparently because the Website is hosted outside Thailand, Thaksinlive.com can be conveniently accessed elsewhere, including in the U.S.

Such actions by the Thai government seeking to enforce strict restrictions have produced a chilling effect among bloggers. Although the popularity of activist blogs such as fringer.org and bact.blogspot.com has been boosted by the mainstream media’s self-censorship—limiting information and restricting coverage in order to avoid detention by authorities under national security regulations (Charoensuthipan, 2009; Limsamarnphun, 2006; Rojanaphruk, 2007) —bloggers in recent years have been confronted with government actions similar to ones faced by journalists and broadcasters, particularly those bloggers opposing government policies or defaming the monarchy. For instance, there was a case in March 2011 in which Tanthawut Tawee-warodomkul—a Web designer for www.norporchorusa.com, one of Thailand’s Red Shirt movement Websites—was sentenced to 13 years in prison for violation of *lese majeste* laws and the Computer Crimes Act (Farrelly, 2011). Tawee-warodomkul, allegedly a blogger using the name “Red Eagle,” posted a video piece entitled “*Thailand’s Way Out*” on www.norporchorusa.com. The clip was also broadcast on the Red Shirts’ satellite television channel—People’s Television (PTV). The government claimed that www.norporchorusa.com contained anti-monarchy materials. As of this writing in 2012, this Website was no longer accessible and PTV itself was blocked from time to time.

Such actions obviously threaten bloggers’ independence and freedom in Thailand, because the 2005 State of Emergency Act enables authorities to close down any suspicious Website without a court warrant (Worakirungrueng & Sri-uon, 2010, p. 61). For example, Worakirungrueng and Sri-uon reported that during the Red Shirt demonstrations in March-May 2010, more than 50,000 Websites were shut down (2010, p. 61).

Of course, not all blogs are political in nature, and many are simply personal journals perhaps related to music or travel. In the following discussion, we will attempt to illustrate the breadth of topics covered in Thai blogs by presenting four examples. We begin with Fringer.org as an example of a carefully crafted blog practicing a shrewd self-censorship. This blog provides interesting documents and reports, including ones about politics, but always claims to be impartial. Iannnnn.com is an example of a popular blog that has no involvement with politics whatsoever, and so, despite its popularity, has never attracted the attention of authorities. Can Thaimuang’s <http://www.oknation.net/blog/can thai> Website is an example of a blog that presents outspoken political opinion. The contents favor the former government of Abhisit Vejjajiva but denounce the present government of Yingluck Shinawatra, former Prime Minister Thaksin, and his Red Shirt supporters. Although many blogs supporting Red Shirts or Thaksin could not be accessed in Thailand because they were either blocked by MICT or redirected to irrelevant Websites (such as ones for Thai food recipes, foreign languages, and online commercial surveys), we identified one blog that remained accessible in Thailand for our analysis: “Red Shirts for Democracy.” The following provides an overview of presentational styles and the themes employed

in the four blogs in seeking to answer our research question: How have these policies shaped the way that blogs and blogging have emerged as factors in the democratization of media in these two nations?

Fringer.org is a Web blog mounted by Sarinee Achavanuntakul, an economist who became a social campaigner and online media activist. This blogger brings a thoughtful, well-educated perspective to her writings. She is bilingual (she has lived in the US for more than ten years) and so her blog combines both Thai and English text. The theme of her blog is “bilingual ruminations from the fringe” (Achavanuntakul, 2011). Using her excellent language skills, many thought-provoking essays, talks, and English news items have been translated into Thai to share with her blog’s readers.

The blog’s name refers to her claim that she is a fringer—a person who lives on the fringes of society and outside the mainstream. Her blog was begun in August 2005 and remains active today; it contains 870 articles under 17 categories as of this writing in late 2012. The topic most frequently covered by her blog is Thai politics comprising a total of 142 articles. In addition, her blog incorporates a “downloads” section for readers. In this sub-menu there are hundreds of other works by Thai and international scholars. Readers can download any of these files for reading, viewing, or listening either in Thai or English.

Achavanuntakul’s blog gained popularity and garnered wide attention when she published financial information concerning the Thai government just a week before the coup overthrew Prime Minister Thaksin Sinawatra on September 19, 2006. Achavanuntakul’s background in economics and her knack for nuanced writing

made her articles easy to grasp, particularly for those lacking much knowledge of Thai economics or finance. A document titled “*A Half Truth about Thaksin’s Government*” compiled information from many reliable sources to compare and contrast with claims made by Thaksin’s government.

Achavanuntakul’s presentational style in her blog is scholarly in nature and her articles often refer to Western philosophers and intellectuals. Her essays suggest that she is a rigorous reader whose interests are wide ranging. Her breadth of knowledge can be seen in the way that she makes philosophical topics into easily accessible essays. This blogger maintains an intimate writing style, communicating with her readers mainly using the first person pronoun. But the more noteworthy point is that her blog employs many other technologies to support her interaction with readers such as Twitter, Facebook, video and including audio files, and other assorted documents.

Lannnnn.com is a blog authored by Prachya Singhto who was trained as an architect. His blog focuses on new and cool technologies that are of interest to young people. He introduces and comments on the latest technological topics such as cell phones, Website designs, and online media. Singhto’s blog design is simple, spare, and clean. It is a good example of a blog to help an ordinary online media user become a message producer. The loose meaning and adaptable purposes of blogs make it possible for anyone to create their own place in cyberspace to express themselves to a wider community. Singhto’s blog informs his readers that he maintains a Website—<http://www.f0nt.com/>—that he created at a time before blogging became popular. It is a Website that he uses to share Thai script fonts that have been adopted by a great many people.

For instance, in 2011, more than 50,000 people on Facebook had “liked” f0nt.com, with the number shooting up to 167,228 by December 2012. According to Truehits.net, a Thai Internet ranking organization, f0nt.com won the Truehits 2011 Awards as the 12<sup>th</sup> most popular in its computer category with 137,328 page views (Truehits, 2012).

f0nt.com has amassed over a hundred Thai language fonts that Singhto and others have devised. These fonts may be downloaded without charge for personal use. Singhto has created 23 different styles of Thai fonts and over 7.4 million visitors have downloaded them (Singhto (a), 2011). In total, we found that fonts on this Website have been downloaded more than 68 million times by late 2012.

Singhto’s blog also indicated that he has another Website— <http://fail.in.th/>. This Website provides a page for public posting of amusing and odd photos. For instance, one visitor who signed himself as “Honsuke” posted a photo of an obviously overloaded truck that seemed to be in violation of Thailand’s highway weight restrictions. The driver had tied a cloth poster on the back of his truck stating: “BKK [referring to Bangkok city administration] today I have 20 baht [70 cents], please don’t stop me [meaning give me a ticket]” (Singhto (b), 2011). This Website is also popular, having gained 22.78 million page views in 2010 (Stats in Thailand, 2011).

Singhto’s blog also includes his journals, written in simple language understandable by all readers, concerning his reflections on Bangkok life and the Thai community at large. Regrettably, he does not update them regularly. On his 366<sup>th</sup> article, published on April 26, 2010, he wrote about former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. At that time, Thaksin’s supporters—Red Shirts—

were mounting public demonstrations and rallying mobs nationwide to oppose the government then in office. It was a time of intense political fervor. There was a speculation that Thaksin was dying of cancer outside Thailand. In response to that rumor, hundreds of Thaksin photos were disseminated through all kinds of online media showing that Thaksin was healthy and was merely traveling abroad. Many Thais believed that those photos were altered by computer manipulation. Singhto wrote on his blog on that day (April 26, 2010) that political divisions were unfortunate but there was no point for Thais to dislike each other. He suggested that Thais should find humor in the situation. To this end, he founded a group called “Over 60 Million Thais Not Sure Where Miao<sup>4</sup> Is” on facebook.com. He posted a computer-altered photo of Thaksin and asked his blog followers to post their own ironic artwork based on Thaksin’s photos on his Facebook page. The first response appeared on April 25, 2010. This page was open for public postings for 18 days and within this short period of time, there were 11,754 people who signed up as page members and 812 photos were posted (Singhto (c), 2011).

Another example is a blog posted on [www.oknation.net](http://www.oknation.net). This Website—[www.oknation.net](http://www.oknation.net)—was created by the Nation Multimedia Group, the corporation that owns *The Nation*, a well-regarded English language newspaper in Thailand. The Website [www.oknation.net](http://www.oknation.net) was intended as a hub for both professional and amateur journalists to host their own blogs.

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<sup>4</sup> Miao is a Thai word for Hmong tribespeople who live in northern Thailand. Newspapers used Miao as an oblique term referring to Thaksin whose his hometown was in the north.

Can Thaimuang is the penname of a blogger on [www.oknation.net](http://www.oknation.net), whose entries can be found at <http://www.oknation.net/blog/can thai>. A veteran journalist, his real name is Suwit Kotasin. As of December 4, 2012, his blog was ranked second in popularity on the oknation.net Website with 6,129,906 followers (Top 100, 2012). Kotasin started his blog on January 26, 2007 and by December 4, 2012, he had posted 4,401 articles. Kotasin focuses his writing almost exclusively on politics. On his blog, there are two other categories—entertainment and general, but each sub-category contained only a few articles. Kotasin's blog makes use of all kinds computer graphics and other images as well as video and audio clips to lend interest and to highlight important content. Varied fonts and character sizes are employed to emphasize messages.

Each day, Kotasin selects only one prominent story related to politics, and by this means it is made very clear to readers that his interest is in the political life of Thailand. His essays suggest that he is neither a supporter of Thaksin Shinawatra and the Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra (who is the younger sister of Thaksin), nor the Red Shirts and their associated groups. For instance, on December 3, 2012, he posted an essay about a Cathy Pacific airlines flight attendant who made an entry on her Facebook page confessing her loathing for one of her passengers, the daughter of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The flight attendant wrote that she would have liked to throw coffee on this passenger. Made aware of this posting, the Vice-Minister of the Interior Ministry asked the airline to investigate the case. Subsequently, the flight attendant notified her Facebook friends that she had resigned her position after 24 years with the airline ("Cathay Pacific," 2012). In his essay, Kotasin compared this

incident with one that took place at about the same time in the previous year. On December 3, 2011, on the occasion of his Majesty's birthday, Yingluck Shinawatra erroneously posted a photo of King Rama VIII on her personal Facebook page. Her mistake naturally sparked anger among those loyal to his Majesty King Rama IX. Kotasin noted that Yingluck suffered no consequences for her error and quoted a Thai proverb that "other people's faults are as big as a mountain, but ours is as small as a hair" (Kotasin, 2012). Obviously, Kotasin thus contrasted Yingluck's act of posting an incorrect photo as a rather greater matter than a flight attendant's mere thought of throwing coffee on Yingluck's niece. Ironically, the flight attendant was found guilty of breaching passenger information confidentiality on her Facebook page, but not of her feelings about her passenger. We found it interesting that Kotasin employed strong language in some of his articles about Yingluck, her family and her political associates. Outspoken commentary of this sort inspired followers to post replies echoing their negative views on these political figures. Finally, we were also struck the blogs reverential treatment of the King.

The fourth blog we studied was called "Red Shirts for Democracy." It is a blog hosted by a person using the penname "Red Shirts IL." This blogger indicates that s/he is associated with or perhaps is a member of the Union for Thai Democracy. This is a group that supports the Red Shirts movement and is based in Chicago, Illinois in the U.S. The blog started up in April 2009. As of this writing in December 2012, there were 1,763 articles posted on the blog. In 2009, the blogger posted 309 articles, in 2010 there were 689 articles, in 2011 there were 679 articles, but as of December 4, 2012, there were only 86

articles posted (Red Shirts IL, 2012). The articles mainly concern political issues supporting Thaksin Shinawatra and the Red Shirts movement. As would be expected, the postings expressed opposition to the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva and to supporters of the monarchy.

The presentation style of the Red Shirts for Democracy blog was quite simple and uncluttered. It offered blog archives and an abundance of related links, as just described. The blogger also used this Website to post upcoming events and a link to its Facebook page: Red Shirts Chicago. The blogger also suggested a boycott of listed products and persons. We found that this list was comprised of hundreds of individuals' names and of company names, which we surmised were people and companies supporting the monarchy and the Yellow Shirts movement.

In examining this blog we found that most articles were not authored by the blogger but rather were gathered from various news sources such as Agence France-Presse, Bloomberg, BBC, the Wall Street Journal, Bangkok Post, Thai ENews, Prachathai, and so on. Due to reliance on these sources, articles were presented in both Thai and English languages.

As nearly as we could determine, almost any blog that opposed the King and his family would be subject to closure or blocking due to *lese majeste* laws. We studied "Red Shirts for Democracy" and found that while some articles posted on the Website contained content related to the monarchy, there were only oblique references to the King. We speculated that its survival might be attributable to its careful use of neutral and unprovocative language. In addition, personal contributions and items that the bloggers

collected from other news sources were written with skill and the content seemed to be based on factual information written impartially. An article posted on his blog—Thailand's False Peace—written by Pavin Chachavalpongpun for the *Wall Street Journal* on December 30, 2011 is a good example. The author discussed the possible dissolution of *lese majeste* laws, which was a topic of controversy in Thailand at that time. Chachavalpongpun seemed to support the idea of negating the laws as he wrote that many people were sentenced for violations of *lese majeste*. However, he also showed intellectual even-handedness in scrutinizing both the monarchy and Yingluck:

Because the monarchy plays a huge role in Thai politics, misuse of the lese-majeste law threatens to limit the space for free expression. The law has been used as a weapon to undermine enemies as well as those with different political ideas. . . . Instead of promoting an open society, Ms. Yingluck has allowed her ministers to implement harsher measures against perceived anti-monarchy elements. The government has spent millions of dollars installing spy software to monitor antimonarchy websites. Chalerm Yubumrung, deputy prime minister and minister of interior, even boasted, "My government has closed down more websites than in the previous administration." . . . Puea Thai supporters suspect that Ms. Yingluck may have struck a grand bargain with the traditional elites: If she leaves the lese-majeste law alone, they will not overturn her government by street protests, court cases and military intervention, as they did previous pro-Thaksin governments. If this is

true, the class war is over and the Puea Thai has become an accepted part of the Thai elitist world (Chachavalpongpun, 2011).

On this blog's Website, there is a menu bar titled "Red Shirts Alliance Links" where readers can click on any of a number of other Websites affiliated with the Red Shirts movement. We found more than 60 links offered on the menu bar. Clicking randomly on some of these links we discovered that many Websites listed could not be accessed in Thailand. Analyzing the links further, we found three types of blockage.

First, some "Red Shirts Alliance Links" on the "Red Shirts for Democracy blog" were no longer available at the listed URL, such as D-Station blogspot and Free Thais. We could not confirm whether these blogs were deleted by the bloggers or by some other means. These blogs could not be accessed anywhere.

Second, some links were inaccessible both in Thailand and in the U.S. In these cases, clicking on the link took one to an unrelated Website. For instance, the link for ClubThaksin took us to a Japanese language site.

Third, some blogs could not be accessed in Thailand but were accessible in the U.S. One example of this sort was Hello! Siam. When we clicked on this link in Thailand, we were directed to this address: <http://58.97.5.29/annouce/ict.html>, and a pop-up window contained the message "The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology has temporarily ceased the service to access such kind of information."

We tested Hello! Siam in the U.S. and found that we were directed to "<http://hello-siam.blogspot.com>" where its page on December 3, 2012 was titled "Royal Shadows in the Land of Smiles." This article was written by Nicholas Farrelly on March 1, 2007 and it discussed Paul

Handley's *The King Never Smiles*—a book that was banned in Thailand. According to the blog, this article was obtained from *the Oxonian Review*, which is published by graduate members of the University of Oxford (About Us, 2012). Interestingly, we looked for this article on Google in Thailand and found that it was published in the "Liberal Thai" blog. We clicked on it and to our surprise we were able to retrieve the article.

At the same time, when we clicked the Liberal Thai blog from the link on the Red Shirts for Democracy Website, access to it was blocked in Thailand, even though it was accessible in the U.S. The article featured on the blog's front page was written by William Mellor for Bloomberg and published in October 2008. Curiously, while this article was not accessible on any sites within Thailand, it could be easily accessed in the U.S. on <http://liberalthai.wordpress.com>. The piece contained potentially offensive content discussing the King's stock market assets and comparing them to those of Thaksin.

Another example was a link to another Website titled "Political Prisoners in Thailand" which we could not access in Thailand but could be viewed in the U.S. An example of articles it contained that might help explain its blockage in Thailand was an item titled "King demands show of support." This piece claimed that the King might use his birthday on December 5, 2012 to test Thai citizens' loyalty ("King Demand," 2012). Of course, any Thai who felt reverence for the King would rate such content highly inappropriate, and it certainly cast a negative light on the monarchy.

### **Blogs and Blogging in Malaysia**

Of all the forms of online media, blogs seemed to have posed the greatest challenge to

Malaysian policymakers. The policies dictated by the commitment to a free and uncensored Internet as a result of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) were uncomfortable to a government accustomed to managing information, especially political information. Consequently, the official position on restricting blogs vacillated over time as authorities experimented with a range of tactics to stop bloggers whose work displeased them.

Malaysian online media have taken on significance precisely because they offer an alternative to mainstream media, all of which are operated directly or indirectly by interests tied to the ruling government coalition. As Raja Petra Kamaruddin, a political activist who operates the political Website "Malaysia Today" suggested, "as long as there is no real free speech, blogs will be popular" (Lau, 2007). Indeed, Raja Petra's blog became a particular source of irritation for the government as his Website pursued a muckraking style of journalism that regularly exposed politicians' misdeeds. In addition to his own blog, which is posted under the banner "No Holds Barred," his Website provides news reports, video clips, and related items with comments from readers.

The postings on "Malaysia Today" are in English and Malay and they are almost exclusively political in nature, frequently highlighting salacious themes. For example, in 2008 Raja Petra was held under Malaysia's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) and charged with defamation for three articles concerning Muhammad Shafee Abdullah, Legal Advisor to political party UMNO. These items were titled "Shafee Abdullah: Sodomologist Extraordinaire," "Money, Power and Sex: What Motivates Man," and "The Real Dalang [shadow puppeteer] Behind the Anwar Sodomy Allegation"

("Judge Orders Raja Petra," 2008). The ISA permits any person to be arrested and detained without trial or explanation. Two weeks after his detention, Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar extended Raja Petra's term for two years. Officials had tried to suppress his blogging by ordering Internet service providers to block his Website, but the blog was moved to a server outside Malaysia and on a mirror site ("CPJ Criticizes," 2008). Later, Raja Petra fled the country for Britain, fearing detention under ISA for a third time.

Although a particular gadfly for the ruling coalition, Raja Petra has sharply criticized the opposition coalition PKR as well ("Spats Eroding," 2010). Azmin Ali, a senior aide to PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim, a blogger himself, noted that blogs had become important in Malaysian politics because they represented the best way to reach young professional urbanites. He explained that blogs encourage "a free flow of ideas, and I can hear views which are opposite of mine as well" (Lau, 2006).

One Website has attempted to identify the most important Blogs in Malaysia. Titled "50 most influential blogs in Malaysia," it was compiled by Gaman (2010). Based on Technorati's data, it identifies the key blogs as defined by links to other Websites. According to this analysis, the most common types of blogs are personal in nature, making up 28 percent of the total. Politics and technical blogs each constituted 16 percent of these top blogsites. The Malaysian blog deemed "most influential" according to Gaman is titled "Kennysia" and it is strictly personal in nature. It is a colorful blog with plenty of photos and videos accompanied by amusing commentary. The writer, Kenny Sia, offers photos from his travels, including trips abroad, as well as personal observations and experiences that he had while away from

home. Although defined as “influential” the messages really do not advance arguments or propositions—instead, they tend to reflect a gentle wry worldview. For instance, reporting on a visit to a fitness center in Korea, Kenny Sia complained that “Korean men don’t cover up their bits when they change. I tell you, when I walked into the changing room, I felt like my eyes were soaked in kimchee. It was horrible. I can see the “seaweed” on their “bulgolgi” all dangling out” (Korean Gym, 2010).

The second “most influential” Malaysian blog, according to Gaman was a Website called SapiensBryan.com. This is a technology blog titled “Latest hi tech news & information,” that offers news and opinions on IT subjects of various sorts. It does seem to be a popular blog as a posting in March 2011 about screens of Nokia mobile phones got more than 5,000 readers in ten days. The Website offers other services besides blogs—a broadband speed test, information on online services, and links to a host of other Websites. The blogs on this Website are short, typically no more than 150 words, but accompanied by videos and images (SapiensBryan, 2011).

As noted, blogs have become a major channel for political discourse in Malaysia. The country’s former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad actually embraced the idea of blogging, setting up his own blog in 2008. It was a huge immediate success. His very first posting about Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi’s plan to oversee the appointment of judges attracted 1,132 comments. His subsequent postings and replies to postings were vintage Mahathir—tough, opinionated, and hard-hitting critiques (Jayasankaran, 2008)

Because of sometimes inflammatory postings, officials frequently sought to qualify the unimpeded Internet freedom guaranteed by MSC promoters. For instance, in 2006, Deputy Internal Security Minister, Fu Ah Kiow, suggested self-censorship was needed and pointed out that “we have the Sedition Act which can be used if the contents of a blog results in a crime” (Vasudevan, 2006). Somewhat later, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi affirmed that even though bloggers might not be restricted by censoring, they would be subject to laws of defamation. He explained that “they cannot hide or take advantage of a situation and do something against the law” (Anis, 2007).

A stir was created when Deputy Energy, Water, and Communications Minister Shaziman Abu Mansor floated a trial balloon in Parliament suggesting that Malaysian bloggers be “registered.” Not surprisingly, the blogosphere reacted angrily, forcing Shaziman to explain himself in a press conference the following day. He noted that registration was required of bloggers in Singapore and pointed to Thailand, along with China and Middle Eastern countries, as examples of nations where blogs are censored. He continued, “I only said ‘maybe’ we would do it [registration]. I never said the word ‘censor’” (“Blogger Registration,” 2007).

Nevertheless, is clear that government monitors blogs closely. Information Minister Ahmad Shabery Cheek admitted that “every week I submit a report on the issues raised on the blogs to the cabinet,” though he admitted that “naughty” operators comprised less than two percent of Malaysian bloggers (Sittamparam, 2008). As Deputy Energy, Water, and Communication Minister Shaziman explained “we just want to

know the number of bloggers, how many are active, how often they update their Websites, and what kind of info is posted” (Loh, 2007).

Even so, officials often spoke out against blogging. Tourism Minister Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor spoke derisively of bloggers at a press conference, claiming that they were mostly “unemployed women” (“Malaysia: Government Plans,” 2007). Shortly thereafter, Energy, Water, and Communications Minister Lim Keng Yaik speaking to the National Bloggers Alliance (an organization of Malaysian bloggers) denounced what he called irresponsible bloggers saying “the way they blog, with all that filth inside [their blogs], do you think they are responsible?” (“Blogger Registration,” 2007).

Political blogs in Malaysia may not be censored, but they are subject to other penalties. In January 2007, libel suits were filed against two Malaysian bloggers by *New Straits Times* staff members. Jeff Ooi was sued for failing to remove 13 allegedly defamatory posts. Meanwhile, Ahiruddin Attan reportedly was sued for a posting that asserted that the newspaper’s journalists were agents of the Singapore government (“Malaysia: Government Plans,” 2007). The following year, blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz was arrested under the Sedition Act 1948. His crime was permitting posts that urged readers to fly the Malaysian flag upside down as a sign of unhappiness over the nation’s political and financial troubles.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In addressing our research question: How have these policies shaped the way that blogs and blogging have emerged as factors in the democratization of media in these two nations, we conclude that:

Blogging in both countries enjoyed a tremendous boost in popularity because of limitations imposed on mainstream media. This occurred even in Thailand where blogs were rigorously controlled by government. Far fewer controls were exercised in Malaysia than Thailand due to a pledge to keep the Internet free and open. A survey by Microsoft in 2006 found that 1.76 million of Thailand’s 8.4 million Internet users were bloggers (Limsamamphun, 2007; Sukin, 2007). According to that study, readers and bloggers tended to prefer blogs of their acquaintances such as family members, relatives, friends, and colleagues. However, the survey also reported that Thai Internet users liked to browse blogs written by business gurus. Popular blog topics were those focused on technology, travel, education, and current events.

Likewise, in Malaysia the number of bloggers and blog readers are believed to have grown at a noteworthy rate. One expert, Julian Hopkins, estimated in 2009 that the number of active and inactive bloggers in Malaysia totaled about 100,000 to 150,000. In addition, the top bloggers emerged as stars and celebrities, attracting tens of thousands of readers to their postings each day. Project Alpha produced Web TV shows that recognized the achievements of bloggers and revealed who they were, how they lived, and what inspired their blog postings. Project director and producer Michael Lim noted that

there are blogs dedicated to travel, fashion, information technology and more, so we tried to cover a broad cross section of bloggers on Project Alpha. Having a TV show about bloggers raises their profile in Malaysia, and also arouses natural curiosity amongst non-bloggers (“Keeping Up,” 2010).

Meanwhile, in Thailand, Duangruthai Asanasatang, blogger of *a-wild-sheep-chase.bloggang.com*, whose blog was voted the best in “content” stated that “it’s an easy, fast and personal way [to communicate]. . . . I didn’t expect such popularity, but it felt great. We’re like a community of friends and family members online” (Sukin, 2007).

In both countries, blogs tend to be associated with politics, perhaps because of the notoriety of cases that have been pursued by authorities, most of which have been deemed either political or pornographic in nature. The expansion of Thai blogging community has been promoted as a form of online journalism as well. For instance, the Nation Multimedia Group publishing house’s Website was created for independent bloggers to post messages and create their own blogs. Its slogan “[A]nyone, anytime, anywhere” implies an open space for citizen reporters (Asawanipont, 2007). Taptim (2006) commented that “slowly but surely, digital journalists, their interactive readers and contributors are redefining ‘news.’”

Political blogging seems to have two contradictory aspects: political partisanship, especially strongly expressed ones, seemed to generate the most interest and loyalty among readers. Only in special cases, such as the Thai Fringer, did calm dispassionate political analysis seem to attract a wide readership. At the same time, it appears that outspoken political blogging was also most likely to provoke official retaliation. Examples include Malaysian Raja Petra who was forced into exile and the Thai anti-monarchy blogs that faced suppression and legal action.

In an interesting turn-about, the freedom of information available on the Internet was used as a justification for a suggested freeing of controls

on mainstream media. National Union of Journalists of Malaysia President Norila Mohd Daud observed that the “Internet and the concept of the uncensored ‘borderless world’ have made information more easily accessible to anyone.” She thus argued that “in view of this latest development, NUJ feels that the government should accord greater freedom to the local media by amending restrictive laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act, and Official Secrets Act” (“KL Urged,” 2007).

There are hints of abuses too. According to Duangruthai Asanasatang’s belief, some bloggers have been paid to write positive reviews of new products on their blog. According to her, blogs have become a new marketing tool. She said that “some customers believe that information from bloggers is more trustworthy than what comes directly from companies” (Sukin, 2007). Achavanuntakul added that “like other tools, blogs are a double-edged sword. Now, you still sort of embrace blogs at your own risk. The maturity of our society determines how best we can benefit from blogs” (Sukin, 2007).

However, the readership for Malaysian blogs are mainly young adults between 18 and 25 years of age, and their interests also include blogs about social topics such as partying, friends, and personal interests (Nurjehan, 2009). Thailand’s blogging community is equally a place for youngsters as nearly 60 per cent are younger than 25 years old, according to a 2007 report, and 91 per cent are under 34 years of age (Limsamarnphun, 2007). With this in mind, Sarinee Achavanuntakul remarked that a flood of junk blogs could be expected due to the lack of maturity of bloggers (Sukin, 2007).

And yet, in the end, in neither country are bloggers free to exercise their rights of self-

expression freely—though the restrictions in Thailand may be much more severe. In both nations, bloggers must concern themselves with the limitations that governments attempt to impose on them. In Thailand, the 2007 Computer Crime Act and *lese majeste* laws are examples of regulations that could penalize bloggers’ “different” points of view. And in Malaysia, the use of sedition, defamation, and libel laws, not to mention the Internal Security Act<sup>5</sup>, provide equally harsh penalties. It would be quite wrong to say that either nation is a land of online freedom.

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<sup>5</sup> Malaysia’s Internal Security Act is to be nullified and replaced by new legislation in 2012. Implementation by ministry officials is awaited as of this writing.

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<sup>6</sup> Please note that this link cannot be accessed in Thailand but it is accessible in the U.S.

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