From Streets to Screens: The Evolution of Citizen Movements in Thailand's Digital Age

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From Streets to Screens: The Evolution of Citizen Movements in Thailand's Digital Age

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Abstract

This review article explores the transformative journey of citizen movements within Thailand, spotlighting the pivotal shift from traditional, physical protests to the nuanced realm of digital campaigns in the contemporary digital era. It harnesses insights from a broad spectrum of recent scholarly research to shed light on the profound impact that social media, digital platforms, and vibrant online communities have had in mobilizing, organizing, and significantly amplifying the voices of Thai activists. By weaving through various narratives and analyses, the paper reveals how these digital tools have become instrumental in fostering a robust democratic discourse, enabling activists to navigate around restrictive civic spaces and engage with a broader audience. However, this exploration also confronts the complexities and challenges inherent in digital activism, such as the issues of online surveillance, censorship, and the potential for misinformation. Through this balanced examination, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dual nature of digital activism, encapsulating both its empowering potential and the obstacles it presents in the quest for social and political change in Thailand.

Keywords: Citizen Movements; Digital Activism; online Surveillance; Social Media Mobilization

1. Introduction

The transformation of citizen movements in Thailand from conventional street marches to sophisticated digital campaigns epitomizes a global trend towards digital activism. This evolution is not merely a change in methods but signifies a profound shift in the essence of activism. Traditional Thai activism, rooted in the historical significance of street marches and public demonstrations, has leveraged the advent of digital technology to transcend physical and geographic limitations, fostering unprecedented levels of mobilization and engagement. This paper explores the pivotal milestones and mechanisms that have facilitated the transition of Thai activism into the digital realm, examining the broader implications of this shift on the dynamics of protest and political discourse within the country.

Digital activism represents a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses a variety of practices, from online petitions and social media campaigns to more covert forms of hacktivism. This digital shift has democratized activism, enabling broader participation across societal segments while also introducing new challenges, including surveillance, censorship, and the digital divided [1][2]. The landscape of digital activism is complex, marked by both innovative opportunities for mobilization and significant barriers to effective engagement.

The role of social media in mobilizing public opinion and coordinating protests has been pivotal in modern activism. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Line have become central to the organization of movements, allowing for real-time communication and

widespread information dissemination [3]. These digital tools have not only facilitated greater participation but have also fostered the development of online communities that sustain activist movements through periods of crackdown and suppression.

While digital platforms offer powerful tools for mobilization and advocacy, they also present new challenges. Issues of online surveillance and censorship pose significant threats to digital activism, with state authorities employing sophisticated technologies to monitor and suppress dissent [4]. Furthermore, the digital divide underscores inequalities in access to digital tools, potentially marginalizing certain segments of the activist community.

Despite these challenges, digital activism has empowered diverse groups, including those historically marginalized in political discourse. The ability to voice concerns, mobilize support, and engage with a broader audience has transformed the landscape of activism, offering new avenues for change and resistance [5].

The transition from streets to screens in Thai citizen movements reflects a broader global shift towards digital activism. This evolution offers both promising opportunities for engagement and significant challenges to overcome. As Thai activism continues to navigate the digital realm, understanding the dynamics of digital tools, platforms, and communities will be crucial in shaping the future of political and social movements in the country.

2. The Roots of Activism in Thailand

Thailand's political activism has played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's political evolution, displaying a rich tapestry of engagement, resistance, and reform. The historical roots of Thai activism can be traced back to significant turning points such as the 1932 revolution, which marked the country's transition from absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, setting the stage for modern political discourse [6]. This period laid the foundational ideals of democracy and people's participation in governance, themes that have continued to influence and inspire subsequent generations of activists.

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen a resurgence of activism, particularly with movements like the Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts, each representing different ideological and political spectra within Thai society. These movements have underscored the profound divisions and ongoing struggles related to Thailand's national identity, governance, and the role of the monarchy [7]. The polarization and mobilization of these groups highlight a persistent search for a democratic consensus amid a backdrop of military coups, political instability, and economic inequality [8].

Economic inequality in Thailand has been a significant driver of political activism, with disparities in wealth and access to resources fueling discontent and mobilization among the populace. The link between economic disparity and political activism became especially pronounced following the 2006 military coup, bringing to the fore the politicization of economic and political inequalities [8]. This period saw the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and the polarization of Thai society into pro-Thaksin (Red Shirts) and anti-Thaksin (Yellow Shirts) factions, further complicating the landscape of political activism and contributing to cycles of protest, repression, and reform.

The legacy of early activism has been instrumental in shaping the trajectory of contemporary political movements in Thailand. The enduring struggle between authoritarianism and the quest for democratic governance has been a central theme, with

recent years witnessing a radicalization of the mass protest movement, predominantly led by students and young activists. These movements have challenged the status quo, calling for reforms to the monarchy and the military's influence in politics, reflecting a deep-rooted desire for democratic freedoms and participatory governance [6].

The journey of political activism in Thailand has been fraught with challenges, including state repression, censorship, and the suppression of dissent. The history of activism reveals a pattern of state responses ranging from violent crackdowns, as seen in the Thammasat University massacre, to more recent attempts to quell pro-democracy protests through legal and coercive means [9]. Despite these obstacles, Thai activism has demonstrated resilience and adaptability, with digital technology and social media offering new avenues for mobilization, advocacy, and international solidarity.

The roots of activism in Thailand are deeply embedded in the nation's political and social fabric, reflecting a complex interplay of historical legacies, economic inequalities, and the enduring struggle for democratic governance. From the early calls for constitutional reform to the contemporary digital mobilization against authoritarianism, Thai activism embodies the persistent pursuit of justice, equality, and participatory democracy. As Thailand continues to navigate its political future, understanding the historical and ongoing dynamics of activism offers valuable insights into the possibilities for transformative change and the challenges that lie ahead.

3. Digital Platforms as Tools for Mobilization

The adoption of digital platforms for mobilization in social activism represents a paradigm shift in how protests are organized, communicated, and executed. These platforms, particularly social media, have emerged as pivotal tools for activists, enabling them to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, foster decentralized networks of support, and mobilize people on an unprecedented scale. This expanded content incorporates insights and analyses from recent scholarly research to provide a comprehensive examination of how digital platforms have revolutionized activism, focusing on their role in mobilization, the challenges encountered, and their implications for future movements.

Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Line have transformed the landscape of political activism by facilitating real-time coordination of protests, broad dissemination of information, and engagement of previously unreachable segments of the population. This digital evolution has expanded the reach and impact of movements, introducing novel forms of protest such as online petitions and hashtag campaigns [10]. The utilization of social media for organizing strikes and mobilizing support, as demonstrated by the 2015 strike organized by football players at the University of Missouri, highlights the organizational capacity of social media as a tool for social change [11].

Despite the advantages offered by digital platforms, activists face significant challenges, including issues related to platform algorithms, surveillance, censorship, and the digital divide. Dumitrica and Felt [10] underscore the tension between the expectations created by public discourse on digital activism and the actual experiences of participants, pointing to the enduring need for a well-organized, tech-savvy network to overcome the obstacles posed by digital grassroots mobilization. Furthermore, Hutchinson [12] discusses the process of micro-platformization, highlighting the content production and publishing strategies that digital activists must adopt to ensure visibility in a media-saturated environment.

Employing the concept of media affordance, Ahuja, Patel, and Suh [13] examined the influence of social media on collective action within digital activism. Their research categorizes the success of digital activism into partial or complete success based on the purposes of network building and synthesis, demonstrating how different media affordances relate to the success of digital activism efforts. This highlights the nuanced ways in which social media platforms can support or hinder activist objectives depending on their specific use and the broader strategic aims of the movement.

The evolution of digital platforms as tools for mobilization presents both opportunities and challenges for activists. The capacity to quickly mobilize support and disseminate information has democratized participation in activism, yet the complexities of digital platforms require activists to continuously adapt and refine their strategies. As noted by Cammaerts [14] digital activism is embedded within a broader context of social ties, networks, and the challenges of information and communication technology use, suggesting that future movements will need to navigate these dynamics carefully to maximize their impact.

The role of digital platforms in the mobilization of social movements underscores a transformative shift in how activists engage with the public, organize events, and advocate for change. While these tools offer unprecedented opportunities for mobilization, they also introduce a set of challenges that require careful navigation. As activists continue to leverage these platforms, understanding the interplay between digital tools, social networks, and collective action will be crucial in shaping the future landscape of social movements.

4. The Role of Online Communities in Sustaining Activism

Online communities have increasingly become pivotal in sustaining activism, especially in environments where physical gatherings may be repressed or logistically challenging. These digital spaces offer platforms for dialogue, strategy development, and information dissemination, playing a crucial role in maintaining the momentum of activist movements. This expanded section delves into the significance of these online communities, exploring how they support sustained activism, facilitate community building, and adapt to challenges, grounded in real-world examples and scholarly insights.

Online communities serve as crucial enablers of activism by providing safe spaces for dialogue and planning. These platforms offer a semblance of anonymity, which is particularly important in environments where open dissent may lead to legal or social repercussions. The digital realm allows activists to transcend geographical and temporal boundaries, fostering a more inclusive and continuous form of engagement [15]. This capability is essential in sustaining movements over long periods, even in the face of significant external pressures.

Digital forums facilitate the aggregation of shared experiences and the formation of collective identities, which are vital for sustained activism. These platforms enable the establishment of norms and the development of shared realities that align group members towards common goals. In the context of activism, such online spaces allow for the coordination of strategies and the pooling of resources, making movements more resilient and adaptable to changing circumstances [16].

While online communities are instrumental in sustaining activism, they also face challenges such as surveillance, data privacy issues, and the spread of misinformation. Activists must navigate these challenges while leveraging the benefits of digital platforms.

The adaptability of online communities is evidenced by their ability to evolve in response to external pressures, implementing strategies that mitigate risks while maximizing the impact of collective action [17].

Empirical studies have shown that online activism is often closely intertwined with offline actions, challenging the notion of "slacktivism," which suggests that online engagement is superficial and ineffective. For example, research on web-based backpacking communities in China has demonstrated that online platforms can foster significant civic engagement and support for democratic values without necessarily leading to physical protests [16]. Similarly, the #ConcernedStudent1950 movement at the University of Missouri illustrates how online mobilization can lead to substantial real-world outcomes, including institutional changes within the university [11].

Looking forward, the role of online communities in activism is likely to grow, driven by technological advances and the increasing integration of digital platforms into daily life. These communities will continue to evolve, finding new ways to support activists and influence social change. As they do so, the relationship between online and offline activism will become more complex and interdependent, reflecting a hybrid model of engagement that leverages the strengths of both realms [18].

Online communities are fundamental to the sustainability of modern activism. They provide essential platforms for engagement, strategy development, and community building, enabling movements to maintain momentum and adapt to challenges. As these communities evolve, they will continue to play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of activism, bridging the gap between digital interaction and physical action.

5. Challenges of Digital Activism

While digital platforms have greatly enhanced the capabilities for mobilization and organization within activism, they also present several formidable challenges. Issues such as government surveillance, online harassment, and the spread of misinformation pose significant threats to the efficacy and safety of digital activism. Furthermore, the digital divide—differences in internet access and technological proficiency—creates significant barriers to inclusive participation. This expanded analysis explores these challenges in depth, supported by recent scholarly research and real-world examples.

One of the most significant threats to digital activism is government surveillance. Many governments have developed sophisticated means to monitor online activity, which can lead to the identification, harassment, and arrest of activists. The visibility that makes social media effective for rallying support also makes activists vulnerable to state surveillance and repression [19]. Activists engaging in digital spaces often face severe online harassment, which can include threats of violence, doxxing, and coordinated attacks meant to intimidate and silence. Such harassment can have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and participation in digital activism [10]. The spread of misinformation and disinformation is a pervasive challenge in digital activism. It can undermine legitimate movements by sowing confusion and distrust. Misinformation can be particularly damaging when it manipulates the narrative of protests or when it is used by state or non-state actors to discredit activists [2]. The digital divide remains a significant barrier to the inclusivity of digital activism. Disparities in internet access and digital literacy can exclude significant portions of the population from participating in online movements, particularly those in rural or impoverished areas [20]. The effectiveness of digital activism is often at the mercy of

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platform algorithms, which can unpredictably affect the visibility and spread of activist content. These algorithms can deprioritize activist content, reducing the reach and impact of campaigns [4]. The transient nature of digital campaigns, often driven by viral trends, poses challenges for sustaining long-term engagement. Digital activism can struggle to maintain momentum once the initial surge of interest wanes, leading to questions about the depth and durability of such movements [1]. While digital activism offers new avenues for engagement, it also requires effective integration with offline activities to be truly transformative. The challenge lies in coordinating these online efforts with physical activism to achieve substantial and lasting social change [21].

The challenges facing digital activism are complex and multifaceted, involving technological, social, and political dimensions. To navigate these challenges effectively, activists must develop robust strategies that address these vulnerabilities while leveraging the strengths of digital platforms. This requires a nuanced understanding of both the potential and the pitfalls of digital activism.

6. Case Studies

The use of digital platforms for activism in Thailand offers rich case studies illustrating both the power and challenges of modern digital campaigns. Specific instances, such as the role of social media in the 2020 pro-democracy protests and the innovative use of digital art and memes, highlight the dynamic and adaptive nature of digital activism within the country. Below is an expanded analysis of these cases, incorporating scholarly insights to understand the strategies and impacts of digital activism in Thailand.

(1) 2020 Pro-Democracy Protests in Thailand: The 2020 pro-democracy protests in Thailand are a prime example of digital activism's significant role in modern social movements. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and encrypted messaging apps were crucial in mobilizing the youth, disseminating information quickly and organizing protests despite governmental crackdowns on traditional media. The digital nature of these campaigns allowed for real-time coordination and large-scale mobilization of protestors across various locations, illustrating the effectiveness of digital tools in challenging political repression [21].

2. Use of Digital Art and Memes: Digital art and memes have played a pivotal role in the political discourse in Thailand, serving both as tools of resistance and as means of evading censorship. Activists have leveraged the virality of memes to spread political messages, critique the government, and engage with a global audience. This use of digital media demonstrates the adaptability of digital activism, where humor and creativity intersect with political expression, making serious issues more accessible and relatable to the younger demographic [1][21].

3. Challenges and Limitations: Despite the successes, digital activism in Thailand faces significant challenges. Government surveillance and the threat of legal actions against activists are persistent risks. The 2021 crackdown on digital platforms and the arrest of key activists underline the precarious nature of digital activism under authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, the digital divide limits the reach of digital campaigns, as not all segments of the Thai population have equal access to digital technologies [4].

4. Strategic Implications for Future Activism: The case studies from Thailand underscore the need for a nuanced approach to digital activism. Future strategies should focus on enhancing the security and anonymity of digital platforms to protect activists from surveillance and repression. Moreover, building more inclusive digital campaigns that can bridge the digital divide within the country is crucial for sustaining the momentum of social movements [19].

Digital activism in Thailand illustrates the transformative potential of new media technologies in enhancing democratic engagement and political participation. By studying these movements, activists and scholars can gain valuable insights into the effective use of digital tools in activism and the ongoing challenges posed by state repression and digital inequalities.

7. Conclusion

The evolution of citizen movements in Thailand from traditional street protests to the use of digital platforms underscores the profound impact of digital technologies on activism. These tools have democratized participation, enabling rapid dissemination of information and mobilization of support across wide geographies, which has fundamentally changed the nature of engagement and protest. However, this shift is not without its challenges. Digital activism in Thailand faces significant hurdles such as government surveillance, the risk of online harassment, the spread of misinformation, and issues stemming from the digital divide. These challenges highlight the need for activists to adopt secure communication methods, counteract misinformation effectively, and ensure inclusive participation regardless of digital literacy or access. As Thai activism adapts to the digital age, the interplay between technology and social change continues to evolve, suggesting that the future of political movements will heavily rely on how effectively activists can leverage digital tools while mitigating associated risks. The ongoing journey of Thai citizen movements thus provides critical insights into the potential and limitations of digital activism, reflecting broader global trends in the pursuit of democratic engagement and social justice in the digital era.

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