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Social Media Use and Citizen Engagement in Local Government of Thailand

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Abstract

This chapter aims to present the situations of social media use for developing local governance in Thailand. The main objective is to study how social media can be applied for improving citizen engagement in local administration. So, this chapter would like to demonstrate these results through a case study, Phuket municipal. This study would present how Phuket municipal has applied social media to improve internal operations and relationship with people; how people can use social media for engaging with the municipal in several dimensions; and what are the impacts of those works in terms of local governance development.

Keywords: social media, local governance, citizen engagement, local government, S-government

1. Introduction

The growing of social media use in government and the interaction between citizens and government via government website encourage change in internal government bureaucracy. Lazer et al. [1] found that digital government data need to be analyzed and interpreted in order to understand to what extent they support government's mission. There is no prior study on social media use by local governments in ASEAN countries. Many agencies are however reluctant to measure their online interactions, or are even prevented by their interpretation of existing laws and regulations [2]. Even though social media improve the communication between citizen and government better than e-government sites, with a sense of personalization or community, it may hinder rather than facilitate the delivery of services [3]. In South Korea, social media connections had considerable influence on citizen engagement via Twitter that serves as a source of public information on important topics such as safety and health, but the government's efforts to connect with citizens are less effective in communicating with citizens and responding to their needs [4].

The application of ICT means profound organizational challenges to government agencies especially in two crucial respects: (1) restructuring of administrative functions and processes; and (2) coordination and cooperation between different departments and different levels of government [5]. However, in many e-governments, projects are not always good stories, not only in developing countries but also in developed countries. Chadwick [6] found out that the failure of the “TechCounty,” an online citizen project in the US, was due to the institutional variables: the e-government team was free-floating rather than embedded in the county executive’s office and was therefore unable to drive change; departmental rivalry and different decision-making cultures; ambivalence on the part of elected representatives; technologically-aware leadership was lacking; and, an eagerness to avoid bad publicity. Other researchers call for the concept of transformation in using ICT, including social media for government [7]. They conclude that transformation is a complex problem to which no universal approach exists and for which different types of models can be used [7]. Managers want models that help them realize the transformation, whereas policymakers are more interested in models that help them shape the right direction and identify relevant elements [7].

Meanwhile, there are very limited number of research on the relationship between technology and organizational form and function. Between 1996 and 2005, only 2.8% of 1187 research published in four leading journals focused on the relationship between technology and organizational form and function [8, 9]. In their research article, Zammuto, et al. concluded that it is very important to study how information is socially and organizationally made sense of because organizing takes place around those understandings and subsequent actions, not only around information acquisition and transmission, and to study how affordances emerge and evolve with changing technological and organizational features [8], and to understand the impact of affordances on boundary conditions. Zammuto et al. [8] use the term affordance that refer to affordances for organizing depend not only on the functionality characterizing the information technology, but also on the expertise, organizational processes and procedures, controls, boundary-spanning approaches, and other social capacities present in the organization.

Social media is one of the most popular digitalized tools that can support people to deeply participate with local government. Even though there are many ordinary tools such as public meeting, public hearing and referendum, but these kinds cannot make impact to local government as much as expectation. That mean they cannot be used to change local government more because they are always controlled by the local government.

This research investigates the impact of using social media on organizational form and function of selected local governments in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. What is the current level of social media use in three cities of ASEAN namely Bandung, Indonesia; Phuket, Thailand; and Iligan, Philippines? What are the challenges to the internal capabilities of Indonesian, Philippines and Thailand local government agencies in using social media and its contribution to policy making?

2. Theoretical review

2.1. S-government and organizational transformation

Oginni [10] said that social media can transform government organization into s-government. Transformation is capability to enable organizational change, which requires the management of projects or programs to develop or integrate systems, leadership and change in culture or organizational factor. There are some transformations that will happen as follow.

2.2. Organizational factor

Government organization is one unit of the social system and is strongly affected by it. In a social system, organizations conduct experiments that concur with our everyday experience with them [11]. According to Luhmann, organization belongs to the class of autopoietic system as a result of decisions and function, as decision premises for follow-up decisions, and is quite different from the normal textbook definition of “goal searching systems, goal realizing system, goal directed combination of capital, people, and information” [11]. Furthermore, Luhmann argued that organizations as merely consist of goals and/or means to realize them is to mistake results of organizing for organizing itself [11]. The theory of autopoiesis was developed by the two Chilean cognitive biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in the 1960s and early 1970s. The basic building block of social systems is communication. Communication consists of information, utterance and understanding, and is that which allows for a system's self-constitution. Luhmann defines social systems as being principally boundary-maintaining systems [12]. Luhmann [13] conceives of communication as a combination of three components: (1) information; (2) utterance; and, (3) understanding, each of which Luhmann conceptualized as selection.

What are the elements of organizations? Elements of organizations are communications that communicate a selection as a selection [11]. Communication has inner structure as a selection of a set of selectable options, and it can be recognized as a decision and connected to prior decisions and thereby can contribute to the self-production of the organization [14]. Organization needs a structure to support the production of elements by elements, namely decision premises. Decision premises involves three aspects: normative points of reference providing a focus for the production of follow-up decisions; decision premises contribute to the regulation of the production of decisions by marking decisions from them; and new decision take into account existing decision premises as presuppositions [11].

2.3. Membership

How do decision premises work in organization? There are eight types of decision premises namely: membership, communication pathway, decision programs, personnel, positions, planning, self-description, organization culture and cognitive routine [11]. In an organization, only members can contribute to the generation of decisions. However, using social media, citizens

influence direction and outcomes of government, improve the government's situational awareness, and may even help execute government services on a day-to-day basis [15]. In other words, citizens are members of government organization who can contribute to the generation of government decision on a day-to-day basis. Governments' transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 will require fundamental organizational and administrative changes as many of the emerging social-collaborative technologies sit uncomfortably with public sector hierarchies and decision-making processes McNutt [16].

2.4. Organizational culture and cognitive routine

Like other organization scholars, Luhmann [17] argues that organization has undecided decision premises, namely organizational culture and cognitive routine. Organizational culture as basic values woven into the fabric of the organization as well as undecided rules for decent behavior or for the attribution of blame or praise is also an example of cultural decision premises [11]. Cognitive routines are a by-product of ongoing practices in the organization's relation to its social and non-social environments. One character of the government is a joined-up or integrated government service delivery; governments have to deal with the problem of fragmentation of government within the constitutional, legal, and jurisdictional limits [18]. Today, the most significant barriers to social media adoption are organizational, cultural, and legal: not technological [16]. Government organizations should be willing to investigate whether more playful interactions with citizens can help to engage on serious issues [19].

2.5. Communication and organizational structure

The second type of decision premise is communication pathway, prescribing the "route" that should be followed in operations, to be counted as decision in an organization [11]. Luhmann [14] argued that communication pathway does not necessarily involve "hierarchy, but also a lateral communication one." Luhmann's fundamental idea was that organizations decide by themselves, which is considered as a decision [20]. This applies to decision communication as well. Personnel and position in public administration are organizational structuring variables [21]. Luhmann argues that competencies and experience are very important for decision premises. Another research recommended that government organization should implement its networking strategy by mobilizing Twitter accounts of various government institutions and promoting their cooperation instead of following Twitter accounts of citizens or networking with them [4]. In other words, Klievink and Janssen [7] proposed the integration of ICT into government organization. Integration in government can be defined as the "forming of a larger unit of government entities, temporary or permanent, for the purpose of merging processes and/or sharing information" [22]. Hence, integration extends to both process integration and information integration (sharing) [23] and pertains to the institutional dimension and in part to the high-level functional dimension [24].

2.6. Personnel and position

Personnel and position in public administration are organizational structuring variables [21]. Luhmann [20] argues that competencies and experience are very important for decision

premises. Information factors consist of communications and Information and Technology [25]. Those aspects are important variables regarding the relationship between government organization and citizen used to study Arlington County. The influence of ICT use on organization transformation process in the Netherlands confirms these previous findings [7]. Fulla and Welch [26] furthermore expect that the organization can choose among five options for response to an asynchronous query: non-response, generic response, direct informational response, referred informational response, and referred action.

Meanwhile, the response level is dependent on the performance of the virtual team in a certain organization, the link between virtual team members more social and psychological in nature [27]. The virtual teams are run on trust rather than on control, which requires lateral communication and active involvement from each individual under a flat organizational structure, participatory management practices and novel schemes of shared responsibility [27]. The Luhmannian perspective developed here helps us to address the relatively neglected questions of how the operating and strategy routines of an organization are related to each other, and how both are related to the generation of strategic change [28]. Social systems for Luhmann are not, therefore, systems of action, structured in terms of the thoughts and behaviors of individual actors, but systems of communications in which the communications themselves determine what further communications occur. Luhmann introduces his concept of episode in the context of societal change, and it does not feature explicitly in his accounts of organizations.

The insight, which again challenges the exceptionalist view, is that for the line management of an organization, strategic episodes are the routine focus of strategic practice. The other insight concerns the relationship between organizational strategy and the practices of 'strategists'. Government organization culture in the emerging "Digital Era Governance" (DEG) and "Transformational Government" (t-gov) paradigms is such that "citizens and businesses will increasingly co-produce most individual outputs using electronic processes, leaving agencies to provide only a facilitating framework" [28] and "citizen empowerment" [29].

2.7. Public policy making

Decision programs are regulative conditions for correct or incorrect decision behavior, namely goal program and conditional program [11]. Goal programs specify goals (desired) that should be pursued, depending on the circumstances or expected side-effect, and conditional programs have a general form that allows for different levels of specification [11].

When government organization managers face the growing demand from citizens via social media, they are not producing sequential decision, producing one decision after the other, but they can produce multiple coherent decisions at the same moment in time and at different moments in time [11]. Luhmann defines those decisions as planning. However, organizations have other means of integrating decision premises, namely self-description. Self-description function is a means to bring the multitude of decision premises to a unity [11]. This means organizations are not "sequential mechanisms" producing one decision after the other, but at the same time organizations must coordinate "event-like" (via social media) character of decision, called planning [11, 17]. In each stage of policy processes, technology has an important role to

play in the digital age. The policy process requires quality inputs, decision making and feedback mechanisms to be successful.

3. Impact of social media in the decision making of local public organizations

Social media was widely used by the Thailand government and citizens during the flooding crises in 2001, 2011 and 2012, where more than 13.6 million people were affected. Social media became an ineffective communication tool during the crises since many rumors were left to proliferate faster than the Thai government could control [30]. Evidences shown by a study suggest that people used Facebook to request for help, criticize government, and unveil suspicious activity of the Flood Relief Operation Center.

In order to present the situations of social media use in Thailand, this chapter would like to present a lesson from one municipal to be case study. It is Phuket city municipal. According to the head of Government Administration, the Phuket city municipality has been using many types of social media such as Line, Website, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The first type that got permission was a line application, namely, "PR Ted-sa-ban-na-korn-phu-ket." The subscribers are mass media groups in Phuket. This group, including teamwork of Phuket city municipality, has often connections within the group. The group has just been founded in 2015. In this line group also provides a service for customer complaints, namely, "Srang-ban-pang-muang." This subgroup includes heads from various public parts, members and committees from municipalities, etc.

The process for customer complaints is that a customer will post a complaint(s) in Line-Srang-ban-pang-muang. Once the problem complaint is shown up in the Line-Srang-ban-pang-muang, the office staff will print out the complaint statement to report the relevant departments. The complaints and their number will be reported in a meeting every month in order to find a solution and improve service.

Moreover, the Phuket city municipality has been managing public relations via the website – www.phuketcity.go.th for spreading it information. In the website, customer complaints can be done as well, including discussion board for general topics. Making a complaint via this website requires that a form that appears in its particular webpage is filled by the customer who complaints. The filled form would be printed out and sent to hierarchical higher administrators to make considerations every month. Subsequently, the administrator will make a decision that which department or person should take an action or a responsibility for that complaint. The assigned department or person needs to find a solution to solve that problematic complaint.

For Facebook, the Phuket city municipality created "Na-ri-sorn" as a fan page. The subscribers can give opinions, complaints, or information. Phuket city municipality has used this social media to make public relations for its activities as well. Presently, there are thousands of subscribers following Na-ri-sorn. Complaining via Facebook is not popularly used. The process is similar to other options mentioned above.

For YouTube, the Phuket city municipality has uploaded TV programs of the municipality in YouTube. The Phuket city municipality has also used Twitter; however, this social media is not popular and it is during development.

The office of the Phuket city municipality has information service center located in the first floor on the left. This center was established to serve “Official Information Act, B.E. 2540 (1997).” The Act stated that the center needs to provide the relevant documents such as municipal law, budget, development plan, and procurement.

Another channel for the customer service center is a phone call numbering 1132 and 119. The next channel is an annually activity report. It is made every year by the Phuket city municipality to declare budgets for projects, including future plans by post a notice at customer service center, the Phuket city municipality.

The last channel is Damrongtham center of Phuket city municipality where people can send a complaint to. Additionally, the Phuket city municipality has used a LED screen to spread information. The LED screen is located at the information counter service, Office of Civil Registration.

The advantages of social media are to expand communication channels, increasingly exchange information between people from different groups, access to target group easier, reduce PR cost, quickly report any activities of the municipality any time, and decrease traveling cost of customers who want to make a request or complaint. Also, social media enables the Phuket city municipality to response complaints effectively.

4. Impact of social media in the efficiency of local public management

Previously, the Phuket municipality received complaints by phone call 1132 and 199 for fire cases. However, that channel had a limited response. It did not serve all people with different needs. Thus, the Phuket municipality created the website. However, it seems that it served people quite not well. Later, the municipality created a Facebook account. Each office created its own Facebook account. With Facebook, the numbers of people who follow has been increasing. Lastly, Line, a two-way communication tool has been used as part of the Phuket municipality as well. Each office has its own Line either. Line has been used for subgroups (within municipality groups) such as an executive group, head of department group, civil-servant group, etc.

Social media group at community level refers to the group for people in the communities, namely, “Old Phuket Town.” This group includes executives and people in communities. Some social media may be created with a specific purpose; for example, the Line, an application, for improving environment that includes staff who have been working for environment within the group. This type of Line groups is informal and open for everyone. A formal Line group is “Sang-ban-pang-muang.” The subscribers are the members of public organizations. Line “Sang-ban-pang-muang” enables the staff to gather complaint issues and send to upper levels to find solutions. Civil defense volunteer has used social media for management, solve problems, and service the people in communities. This one helps in sending pictures. It can keep

and tract completed jobs. When a problem occurs, the person who needs help can send a picture via Line to show a cause of the problem, and then the group would help solve the problem. A complaint issue becomes more critical when a relevant picture is shown as strong evidence. Therefore, Line is more advantage than old phone call 1132 and 119.

In the past, when number of problems or complaints increase, some problems might be missing and then the problems did not be solved. Line helps spread the problems in a formal way (step by step); however, in emergency case, Line can quickly send the problem so that the problem will be fixed as fast as possible. For example, if line pumps are broken and then someone sends this problem in Line, the officer who usually watches out in the Line would perceive. It is possible that this problem may be fixed within just 1 day. Compared to other types of social media, Line is most effective. About 80% of all of the complaints/problems is via Line.

Presently, almost 100% of the people in communities have perceived that they can contact to the Phuket municipality by using social media. To illustrate, the group of "Old Phuket Town" includes 140 members from about 200 houses located on the Tha-lang street. The Civil Defense Volunteer Group that is responsible for the society has about 180 more members. However, some people such as elders do not know how to use IT. Complaining by elders will be increase later.

Typically, when people complaint they have often asked for solutions to fix the problems right away, but the Phuket municipality may not able to solve them in a short time. For example, when grilles on streets get damaged, the process may take time. When electricity power becomes blackout, the municipality can only pass the information to Provincial Electricity Authority-PEA, but cannot fix the problems. The problems of using bad words in written complaints or suggestions in social media tools often occur. Arguments between pros and cons may be sent back and forth. Consequently, other readers may be misunderstood in some issues and have negative attitudes to the municipality. The Phuket municipality will fix these cases by directly talking to the people. For example, putting water pumps into old trenches or buried electric wires under grounds was result in misunderstanding of some people. They thought that it could have been a cause of flood and made the story exaggerate later as they might not know that the municipality already put another pump to let water out.

In my personal view, I still agree that using Line for the municipality jobs is the right answer of the solution as it allows both pictures/images and letters, which help improve good connections. It is superior than typical phones that allows only sound. Previously, executives were afraid that using social media in organizations might have destroyed the systems or formal structures in the organization because employees might merely texting on Line or Facebook and then ignored their works. Ministry of Interior has announced to ban using social media during works. Rather, using social media in the organization makes works more effective and improves performances. This is because social media makes works faster, reduces cost of computer resource. With personal devices such as I-phone, I-pad, or other mobile phones of employees can serve using social media well.

One more interesting issue is that in a real practice employees cannot sit at in front of their computers all the time. Sometimes, they have to work outside the office. Social media would be benefit for such case too. Wherever they are, their boss can give their orders.

Using social media also is a good choice for the people who prefer texting to talking. In meetings, some people may feel not comfortable to speak in front of many audiences. They may feel nervous. Other people can communicate by using writing skill better than speaking skill. In such case, texting through social media would be a good alternative for them.

One benefit of using social media for communication is to protect face-to-face argument. When opinions of a group are different, a conflict and fighting via words may occur. Avoiding face-to-face conflicts by arguing on social media tools would be a good choice.

Social media has been used as an evaluation tool to track works of the municipality. People can see works and projects of the municipality via social media; for example, pictures of a road with construction ongoing. People can see the process or how much their works finished.

Social media may be used as a tool for census, pooling ideas, or voting. When the Phuket municipality wishes to start a new project, the municipality can ask for the communities' opinions before starting the project to protect future possible problems. For example, "Peun-Phuket group" concerns that if the development of the communities grows too fast, it is possible to get consequence impacts. This group will discuss in various impact issues.

For example, Facebook can provide statistics or percent of audience accessing as well. An advantage of social media is a new channel as communication innovation for people. Presently, it influences our society and is increasingly used. Embracing social media do not make us do more jobs; rather, it makes a complaint process and finding solutions for people easier. Solving problems for the people is our duty.

5. Social media and local governance

Development of social media allows people to communicate to each other faster and broader. It is a tool that makes people come closer together. The people can directly communicate, request, or complaint to the municipality. This makes a municipality perceive information and problems that lead to planning, making policies, finding solutions. Using social media helps increase communication channels. Previously, a few channels of communications between people were available. We are like blocked from information. With social media, there is no longer or harder to block information from people. Social media application, allows both images (pictures) and messages (letters); thus, it is better than regularly complaint approach.

Using social media in municipalities is not like using a communication tool. Rather, it seems to be a decision-making tool. It makes a decision faster. If a problem comes with a picture, it can be printed out as empirical evidence and ready to be sent out for further actions. It is obvious that Line is better than regular way as it will not waste time for filling a form.

Presently, almost all local public organizations use social media in communication between local public organizations and their people. All of them have their own websites and Facebook pages. Most of them use websites and Facebook pages to make public relationships of their completed and ongoing projects such as checking swamps and dragging canals.

Social media can create the power of community. When an important issue is posted, other members come into the group to share their opinions. For example, in case of excavating a tunnel, most of group members disagree. Thus, once the issue was posted, they gave messages to resist that project. They have a harmony. The power of community comes from the power of social media. Although social media cannot be panacea to cure all problems, it is a good tool for groups to send their voices to city council members or Mayor.

It may be a new thing in the context of Thai that leads to wrong usage. Sometimes, someone shares what posted without carefully thoughts. However, it is started seeing the development of using social media. Previously, people have wasted time for long meeting and traveling. But nowadays we can have a meeting in applications. Complaining in old fashion requires traveling to the organizations. People need to learn more using social media continuously.

Finally, using social media can drive dynamics of society to be better. Learning social media of Thai people should be supported. Social media in organizations is used not only for spreading the local government's information to the community but also create power of communities. This is the way to develop local governance to be happened in Thai societies continuously and sustainably.

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