

# THAI CITIZENS' UTILIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICES DURING THE BANGKOK GOVERNOR CAMPAIGN IN 2013

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## ABSTRACT

*The use of social media communication devices has increased dramatically in recent years, especially in metro areas of Asia such as Bangkok. Now these devices are being used in ways never envisioned before, such as to receive promotional messages about political candidates. This study has collected the data from four leading candidates from the 2013 Bangkok's governor election campaign to examine the effectiveness of the social media communication techniques used to persuade voters.*

*The qualitative approach has been employed to analyze the campaign materials and candidates interview. A survey was conducted to examine the correlation between respondents with different demographic profile and their use of social media communication devices during the election campaign period. Both sets of data are compared to see the consistency from the perspective of both campaigners and voters. The study provides recommendations for the most effective social communication devices to be used to persuasively communicate with Thai voters particularly in urban area.*

## INTRODUCTION

Bangkok election has been viewed as particular and different from the rest of Thailand. The nature of voters, the campaign styles and the candidate selection are viewed from the urban middle class perspective (Anek Lasothamatas, 1996). The perception of Bangkok residents and political communication can be identified as different from rural areas where the old-style election campaign still works to win the votes. In the tenth election for the governorship of Bangkok in 2013, the dynamics of election campaigns and candidate contest have created riveting ways of political persuasion particularly the innovative ways of media utilization including mobile phone device application and LED screen projector.

In the past, Thai political campaigns rely on vote canvasser who will persuade the voters whom to vote for (Chanttharakul, 2010). However, the middle-class voters cannot easily be convinced by this approach and they tend to rely more on the information of candidates' duty and national affairs. Thus, the election campaign has become more complex in urban area in order to win the votes.

The tenth election for the governorship of Bangkok in 2013 was won by incumbent governor M.R. Sukhumphand Paribatra of the Democrat Party. Despite his traditional ways of running an election campaign with billboard, public speech and roadshow, the current governor employed several new media including social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram with high number of followers. Interestingly, the other major contender, Pol. Gen. Pongsapat Pongcharoen, representing

the Pheu Thai Party, also used similar media with a higher number of followers. Still, the police general lost the election. This raises a question of how effective social media was during the election.

This paper will start with the review of how Thai politicians use media in their election campaigns. The concepts of new media and political persuasion will also be discussed to show the importance of the social media. The results include list of media used during Bangkok Governor Election campaigns collected from the major four candidates to identify what has been used the most. The interview has also conducted with the candidates and related persons to reveal their opinions on effective media to be used. Lastly, the discussion on Thai political communication and social media utilization will lead to suggestion of how to use social media in Thai election campaign.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF ELECTION MEDIA UTILIZATION IN THAILAND**

This research found that the role of the much-vaunted middle-class voters is not decisive, even in suburban areas of Bangkok. Even though political marketing has grown in importance in Thai elections, it has not displaced traditional electoral practices. It is also suggested that political hybridization is a key trend in Thai election campaigns.

Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party's 2001 and 2005 election campaigns can be considered as "a mixture of Thailand's old-style vote-canvasser networks and Western-style political marketing" (Chanttharakul, 2010). However, this Western approach did not and could not replace Thailand's old-style vote-canvasser or *huakhanaen* networks in election campaigns. Thai voters rely on this influencer to guide them who to vote for especially in rural areas more than in the urban area (Anek Laothamatas, 1996).

The voters are simply categorized into three groups: 1) closed, 2) open, and 3) semi-closed, semi-open categories (Chanttharakul, 2010). Bangkok voters are identified as open house, as part of urban middle class who expect MPs to concentrate on legislative duties and national affairs rather than the delivery of pork-barrel benefits. Thus, the election campaigns of political parties via mass media and television were the most influential methods to win votes in this "closed house" category. Vote-buying can hardly convince this particular group to vote.

Another way to identify the voters is based on whether those neighborhoods are "ours", "theirs" or "undecided". In Bangkok, there are 50 districts with prediction of more than 50% to support Democrat Party.

There are several media that political parties use in election campaign. They can be categories into three major groups: 1) printed media, 2) special media and 3) electronic media (Duangtip Worapan et al, 1993). The printed media range from individual reach such as brochure, pamphlet to mass distribution such as newspaper announcement and poster. The special media include the roadshow, t-shirt, house visit and public speech. The electronic media refer to radio and television. Thai political parties employ all three categories of these media to publicize and encourage voters to support them in hope for the synergistic effect.

Personalization of a candidate's individual leadership style was central to the political marketing campaign. The tactic has been initiatively employed by Thaksin Shinawatra for his national election campaign in 2001 and 2005 and resulted in his nationwide landslide victory. His political marketing is salient; yet its impact can be considered as more marginal because not all voters are convinced by this method. Still, the political marketing has to work vis-à-vis with Thai old-style local vote-canvasser networks to achieve the votes.

The utilization of advertising agency to create an election campaign, especially for Bangkok governor election, has been in use since 1989. In that year, Maj. Gen. Chamlong Srimuang who was supported by the business sectors, hired an advertising agency to plan a campaign for him. The result was a major success with 480,000 voters which can be considered as the highest number compared to the previous local election in Bangkok. The advertising agency built his image with honest, credible and

religious personality. In the following Bangkok governor’s election, Capt. Kritsada Arunwong na Ayutthaya also won the election with the same image strategy being portrayed as a sincere and capable candidate. This can be considered as the beginning of advertising agencies in political realm and has expanded their role to the national election afterwards.

Given the hefty budget needed to run an advertising campaign for election, the political advertisement as become more complex and creative in persuading voters. Candidates spend a huge amount to buy mass media including television time, poster and billboard production, and out-of-home media.

The advertising approach in political campaign views voters as consumers. The commercials are designed to build good attitude in hope for change in behavior. The persuasive technique from advertising perspective, therefore, aims to change behavior or lead the voters to vote rather than informing them. As a result, only half truth is presented to win the votes (Surapong Sotanasatien, 1999). Even though an advertising campaign can influence the exposure level of voters, it cannot guarantee a good quality of content in term of truth and credibility. From the advertising agency perspective, the production of election campaign is based on half-truth concept similarly to any typical product advertisements.

The result showed that political advertising has moderate influence on voters who agree that it is necessary to consider advertising of each party before making any decision (M.R. Juthathip Chayangkura, 1998). Moreover, the Bangkok voters revealed that they were neutral toward the statement “political advertising can change your decision”. Yet, they did not vote for the candidates whose advertising attract voters more. On the other hand, the image of candidates plays an important role on the voters’ decision making. It is found that image was more important than the issue. Thus, the voters tend to rely on the individual image rather than the party’s policy in order to make their decision. The most influential campaign media include speech on television, public speech and political advertng on television.

**NEW MEDIA AND ELECTION CAMPAIGN**

The internet is an integral part of politics in the twenty-first century as modes and channels of political participation, communication, and information (Jensen et al., 2012). For example, during the 2008 presidential election, the U.S. adult population used the internet for some type of political activities (Smith, 2009) resulting in an increasing political participation. Internet use is, nonetheless, associated with higher levels of voting and participation in election campaigns (Bimber, 2003).

Not only can new media reach wider groups of supporters, they can be used as tools to build positive image for candidates. Those who employ the new media will be considered as being modern and can attract younger generation.

Table 1: Social Media Record from the Four Major Candidates

Candidates	#16	#9	#11	#17
Facebook	123,348	112,614	216,378	58,664
Twitter	112,601	4,149	1,224	64,052
Instagram	1,023	1,114	222	9,727
Positive Feedback	69%	65%	73%	82%
Negative Feedback	31%	35%	27%	18%

Source: [www.realtime.zocialeye.com/bkk2013](http://www.realtime.zocialeye.com/bkk2013) collected from January 20<sup>th</sup> to February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013

It can be seen from these numbers that the high percentage of positive feedback online (82%) cannot bring the victory to the candidates. Thus, it is interesting to see how social media are used and positioned during the election campaign.

**METHODOLOGY**

This research has taken qualitative approach by employing document analysis together with the in-depth interview method. The document includes all campaign materials collected directly from the candidates’ channels including traditional media and digital media. The latter has been conducted with four interviewees representing the candidates and election related sector.

The campaign materials have been collected since March 2013 and are categorized based on the type of media. The information for each channel includes distribution quantity, and members. Since not all the media are used similarly among the candidates, only the common media will be analyzed for this paper.

The interview questions tackle the aspects of utilization of campaign media, effectiveness of chosen media and the relation between media and votes. The interview transcripts are analyzed with thematic categorization method, in order to find the main theme from each interview. The themes were analyzed as a whole to find the major, the minor and the noteworthy themes from all the interviews.

**SOCIAL MEDIA UTILIZATION IN BANGKOK GOVERNOR ELECTION CAMPAIGNS**

In March 2013, election for Bangkok Government took place with twenty-five candidates. MR Sukhumbhand Paribatra (number 16) of the Democrat Party won the election over his major contender, Police General Pongsapat Pngcharoen (number 9) from Pheu Thai Party. There were also two other interesting candidates who gained the votes in third and fourth place. Receiving votes at the third place was Police General Seripisut Temiyavet (number 11), former Commisioner-General of the Royal Thai Police and anti-corruption activist. The fourth position went to Suharit Siamwala (number 17), a DJ, music artist and business executive who was popular among younger generation. The number of voters turning out is 2,715,640 from total of 4,244,465 registered voters.

Table 2: The Voting Results from the Top Four Candidates

Candidates’ Numbers	Candidates’ Names	Votes
16	MR Sukhumbhand Paribatra	1,256,349 (47.75% of vote cast)
9	Police General Pongsapat Pngcharoen	1,077,899 (40.97% of vote cast)
11	Police General Seripisut Temiyavet	166,582
17	Suharit Siamwala	78,825

**THE MAJOR CANDIDATES**

MR Sukhumbhand, 60, is a core member of the opposition Democrat Party who campaigned for re-election on the slogan “Love Bangkok, make Bangkok a metropolis for all.” He previously served as deputy foreign minister and was elected the 15th Bangkok governor in 2009.

Pol. Gen. Pongsapat, 57, a Pheu Thai Party member, served as deputy police chief and secretary-general of the Office of the Narcotics Control Board before resigning to run for governor. His campaign slogan “working with the government seamlessly” suggests that he plans to zero in on what he sees as MR Sukhumbhand’s failure to work closely with the Pheu Thai-led administration.

Pol. Gen. Sereepisuth Temeeyaves, 64, was a former national police chief. He was the national police chief under the late Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej and was removed from his position to open way for his successor. Pol. Gen. Sereepisuth asks the people to help change Bangkok together and bring eternal happiness to its people.

Mr. Suharit, 46, was a singer, musician and a well-known disc jockey for Fat Radio 104.5FM. He is also managing director of DHA Siamwalla Ltd which is his family's business, distributing stationary items under the Elephant brand. He launched his campaign via social media in August last year. His slogan was "Superb Bangkok, surprising Bangkok with Suharit."

### **CANDIDATE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

All major candidates applied Facebook as their main social media (see Table 3 for a summary of all social media usage by the four major candidates). All of them posted not only the status, but also include the photos and videos. The highest number of 'likes' belongs to Pol. Gen. Sereepisuth Temeeyaves (238,138). The highest number for talking about this is MR Sukhumbhand (146,294). This latter won the highest votes while the former received the third place.

All of the candidates had their own YouTube channels. Only one of them, Mr. Suharit, had activated his channel long before the election back in 2007. He used his channel for music purpose, but during the election, he turned it into campaign channels. The other three candidates have just started the channels in 2013. Thus, the highest video uploads and views belong to Mr. Suharit, as he has opened this channel the longest.

Only MR Sukhumbhand has provided Google+ and Mobile Application but each of the candidates used Twitter. The highest number of followers belonged to MR Sukhumbhand (115,328). The second highest number of followers was Pol. Gen. Pongsapat who had the highest number of tweets compared to others. While all candidates used Instagram to pose photos and messages, the highest number of followers and photos belong to Mr. Suharit. Each candidate had their own web links where they collect the campaign materials as well as news source for their campaigns. Only Pol. Gen. Sereepisuth Temeeyaves employed Augmented Reality (AR) technology in his election campaign.

### **THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON VOTING**

Most of interviewees prefer Twitter, as it is fast and provides space for dialogue. They prefer using it to argue or make comments on something. Facebook, however, has also been seen as a useful gate for information distribution. This channel provides technology that can collect messages, photos and videos, as well as having a room for opinion exchanging. However, Facebook, when compared to Twitter, most interviewees commented that Twitter was faster in sending your message out. People also use Twitter for political information, while Facebook is likely to be used for personal outlet.

They all agreed that social media was new to this Bangkok governor election compared to the one run 4 years ago. During that time, social media were not as popular as it in 2013. Despite the low budget use for social media, most candidates except one still had to hire a team to handle the online media.

Social media are convenient and attractive. However, most of candidates said these channels could not determine the voter's choices. The numbers of likes, followers, or subscribers did not correlate positively with voting numbers. "Anyone from anywhere can click likes. They may not be Bangkok residents who can vote," said one of the interviewees. Moreover, those who are exposed to the candidate's social media may be younger generation who are not eligible to vote. These people can even include those Thai living abroad, but would like to update with the election. Most candidates agree that social media are fast and cheap, but cannot assist in predicting the votes. What they could do for this election was offering alternative ways to communicate. The voters still rely on face-to-face communication such as roadshow and community visit to help them make a decision.

Table 3: Summary of Social Media Utilized by the Four Major Candidates

Cand. Number	Facebook	YouTube	Google+	Twitter	Instagram	web link
9	Likes: 129,888, Talking about this: 64,125	Pongsapatbkk Channel Subscribers: 2,064 Video uploads: 43 Views: 479,077 First Activated: Jan 13, 2013	No	Username: Pongsapatbkk Tweets: 756 Followers: 5,012	Username: pongsapatbkk Photos: 88 Followers: 1,734	www.pongsapatbkk.com
11	Likes: 238,138, Talking about this: 38,154	Sereepisuth11 Channel Subscribers: 14 Video uploads: 9 Views: 6,100 First Activated: Jan 31, 2013	No	Username: Sereepisuth Tweets: 196 Followers: 1,745	Username: Sereepisuth Photos: 192 Followers: 258	www.sereepisuth.com
16	Likes: 158,769, Talking about this: 146,294	Sukhumbhand Paribatra Subscribers: 346 Video uploads: 41 Views: 174,067 First Activated: Jan, 11 2013	45 circles 79 followers	Username: sukhumbhand p Tweets: 6,312 Followers: 115,328	Username: sukhumbhand p Photos: 312 Followers: 1,328	www.sukhumbhand.com/
17	Likes: 128,871, Talking about this: 69,492	Suharit Siamwalla Subscribers: 5,797 Video uploads: 51 Views: 2,566,067 Activated Jan 14, 2007	No	Username: Suharit Tweets: 36,711 Followers: 76,110	Username: Suharit Photos: 522 Followers: 10k	http://www.suharit.com

**DISCUSSION**

Various media were utilized during the Bangkok Governor’s election including both traditional campaign media and digital channels. However, results show that the current Bangkok governor did not have a high number of likes, followers, or subscribers in all social media. Yet, he managed to defeat his opponents in this election.

Even though social media are not considered as being useful in gaining voted based on the interviews, these channels are still needed for election campaigns. Social media and other useful digital channels can play important roles in building images of the candidates. By employing these channels, candidates can be portrayed as being technological savvy and ready to adapt to a new era. Moreover, the fast pace of social media provides an opportunity for candidates to directly have dialogues with potential voters. This creates a friendly sphere where strong relationship can be built among voters and candidates. Thus, campaigns should continue utilizing social media despite its low power in predicting voting results.

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