

Digital Censorship and The Transnational Strengthening of Political Activism in Thailand and Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how digital censorship shapes political expression and online activism in Thailand, with attention to emerging transnational influences in Southeast Asia. It explores how legal restrictions affect communication practices and how activists adapt under surveillance and legal uncertainty. Using qualitative case study approach, the research analyze 150 purposively selected Twitter (X) posts, legal documents including the Computer Crime Act and Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, and over 20 secondary reports from NGOs and media. The findings reveal that state-imposed social media restrictions produces a strong chilling effect, lead to self-censorship and indirect, symbolic political expression. Activist use coded language, memes, hashtags, and meaning-making. This study concludes that despite increasing repression, online political engagement in Thailand remains active, resilient, and evolving. The research highlights the urgent need to safeguard digital rights and freedom of expression in emerging democracies.

Keywords: Digital censorship, Lèse-majesté law, Activism, Online Expression, and South East Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Digital censorship has become a serious issue in Southeast Asia, where governments are using laws and regulations to control what people can say online. In Thailand, there's two key laws, the Lèse-Majesté law (Article 112 of the Criminal Code) and the Computer Crime Act (CCA), those two play a major role in limiting free speech on the internet. These laws allow the government to punish people for criticizing the monarchy, spreading information it sees as harmful, or threatening national security. While these laws are said to protect national unity and public order, many believe they are used to silence political voices and stop open debate. Even under pressure, political activism in Thailand continues to grow, showing the strength and creativity of online resistance.

These pressures have changed how people communicate about politics online. Many users censor themselves so that they wont faces legal risks. At the same time, activists have found new ways to express their views, such as using memes, hashtags, coded language, and symbols. Platforms like Twitter (X) have become important spaces for this indirect communication, helping users share ideas and organize under

restrictions. Even under pressure, political activism in Thailand continues to grow, showing the strength and creativity of online resistance.

Thailand is not alone in facing these challenges. Other Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and the Philippines also struggle with digital censorship, especially during key political moments like elections. These two countries show similar patterns of controlling online spaces to influence public opinion and restrict dissent like Thailand digital censorship issues (Kusumaningrum et al., 2020). Even so, activists have developed strategies like fact-checking, digital literacy campaigns, and using encrypted platforms. These strategies are increasingly shared across countries, as activists learn from each other.

This paper explores the research question: "How have Thailand's digital censorship laws shaped political expression and online activism, and what transnational strategies or influences have emerged across Southeast Asia in response?" By looking at social media activity, legal documents, and reports from human rights groups, the study examines both the local effects of censorship in Thailand and the wider regional connections that are forming in response.

The paper begins with a review of existing research on censorship and activism in Southeast Asia. It then explains the research methods used to collect and analyze data. The main findings highlight how activists are affected by these laws, how they resist them, and how similar tactics are being shared across the region. In the final discussion, the paper reflects on how digital censorship in Thailand connects to larger trends in Southeast Asia, where activists are finding new ways to support each other and push for change online.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The restriction of social media and online discourse in Thailand has been a contentious issue, with profound implications for public discourse and political activism. Scholars have explored the various mechanisms of censorship employed by the Thai state, from legal regulations to institutional control, and the resultant chilling effects on free expression. With the topic of Thailand issues with the, there'll be many journals that discuss about this issue.

Digital Censorship and The Chilling Effect

Digital censorship in Thailand has been widely examined as a mechanism of state control over online discourse, with significant consequences for political communication. Existing research shows that legal frameworks such as the Computer Crime Act and lèse-majesté law create a "chilling effect" in which individuals limit their own expression due to fear of legal consequences. Journal article by Jompon Pitaksantayothin (2014) argue that vague legal definitions like national security or even huge false information, all of it allows for broad interpretation and selective enforcement, increasing uncertainty among the citizens. This lack of clarity discourages open political discussion and weakens the role of digital platforms as spaces for democratic engagement.

Pitaksantayothin's work highlights the deep tension between state power and digital freedom, and why legal clarity and transparency are critical if online platforms are to serve as spaces for democratic engagement. His analysis remains essential for understanding the risks of censorship in Thailand, especially in an era where social media plays a central role in political discourse.

In addition to legal limits, institutional practices and platform rules also strengthen this chilling effect. Research shows that content removal, surveillance, and cooperation between governments and digital platforms help create a more restricted communication environment. As a result, social media spaces that were once seen as supporting democratic participation are now marked by caution, self-monitoring, and less visible dissent.

Activist Adaptation and Coded Communication

Despite all of these constraints, research highlights the adaptive strategies developed by activists to navigate censorship. Under restrictive conditions, political expression does not disappear but instead evolves into more indirect forms. The author by the name Sutipong Sawatha created a journal called *involve* Thailand citizens actively avoid discussing politically sensitive issues. However, many activists have developed creative ways to mobilize support and sustain political activism online. This includes using encrypted messaging, memes, symbolic language, and decentralized online campaigns to evade censorship.

The use of encrypted messaging platforms and anonymous accounts further illustrates how activists respond to surveillance and legal pressure. While these strategies show resilience, their effectiveness is limited by constant surveillance and legal risk, suggesting that Thailand's digital space remains heavily contested. Communication becomes less accessible and more fragmented, potentially reducing its broader political impact. Nevertheless, these adaptive practices show that digital resistance remains active, even in highly controlled environments.

Transnational Digital Activism in Southeast Asia

Recent scholarship has begun to move beyond single-country analysis by examining the regional dimensions of digital activism. From a journal made by Aniello Iannone (2022), they explore the resistance and adaptation strategies started by activists and journalists from Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines during the 2019 election period, in response to increased media control, censorship, and disinformation. Their work exposed the networks behind digital disinformation and held powerful actors accountable, despite increasing harassment and legal threats.

This transnational dimension is reflected in the spread of fact-checking initiatives, digital literacy campaigns, and the use of secure communications technologies. Cross-border collaborations, including online campaigns and knowledge-sharing networks, have helped develop shared resistance strategies. These findings suggest that digital activism in Southeast Asia is shaped not only by local contexts but also by regional connections and shared experiences.

While existing studies provide valuable insights into digital censorship and activist responses, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature focuses either on legal frameworks or on activist practices, with limited integration of both perspectives. Second, although transnational dynamics are increasingly recognized, there is still a lack of factual research connecting national case studies to broader regional patterns of activism.

This study addresses these gaps by combining analysis of legal structures, social media practices, and regional influences. By focusing on Thailand while situating it within the Southeast Asian context, the research offers a more comprehensive understanding of

censorship shape communication and how resistances strategies evolve and circulate across borders.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative case study approach to understand how social media restrictions in Thailand affect public discussion and political activism. Qualitative case study is a method used to explore complex social phenomena within their real-life context. Unlike quantitative methods that focus on numbers and generalizations, qualitative case studies allow for in-depth exploration of lived experiences, social meanings, and contextual factors. This is especially useful for topics that involve personal perceptions, political sensitivity, and evolving social behavior like the digital censorship and activism in Thailand. A case study method is useful when studying a specific situation in depth and in this case, Thailand's unique mix of strict internet laws and active online political culture. It allows for the examination of multiple sources of evidence (such as legal documents, interviews, and social media content) in order to build a well-rounded and nuanced understanding of the issue.

This issue from Thailand was chosen because of its history of censorship, especially through laws like the Computer Crime Act and *lèse-majesté*, which limit what people can say online. This research follows a constructivist approach, which means it looks at how people create meaning and respond to censorship in real-life situations, mostly through social medias like Twitter or Facebook. The main goal is to understand how people experience and resist online censorship in their own words and actions.

To answer the research question "How have Thailand's digital censorship laws shaped political expression and online activism, and what transnational strategies or influences have emerged across Southeast Asia in response?", this study collected and analyzed three types of qualitative data:

1. Social Media Posts

The first source of data was digital content from social media platforms, particularly Twitter or X. Posts from the people in those social media were chosen with the soul purposes of sampling to focus on messages shared during protest periods or when censorship was at its highest. Many of these posts used hashtags or symbols to express criticism of the government while avoiding direct legal consequences. These posts were used to analyze how activists communicate under pressure and how online discourse shifts in response to censorship (Srisai, 2025).

This study collected over 150 posts from Twitter. These were selected on purposed during periods of high political activity, especially the 2020 protests. Hashtags like #FreeYOUTH were used to find relevant posts. These tweets were not chosen randomly, but were carefully selected to reflect different ways that Thai users expressed political opinions under pressure. Many of these posts used symbols, memes, and coded language to talk about sensitive issues without directly breaking the law. Some also included images, fictional references, or sarcastic remarks. By analyzing these tweets, the study explored how online political communication has changed in response to censorship and legal risks. The tweets were reviewed for common themes, language patterns, and symbols. For example, the use of pop culture references, metaphors, or gestures like the three-finger salute were noted. These patterns helped show how activists adapt their speech and still find ways to resist even when they are being watched. This kind of

analysis also helped to understand the emotional tone and community-building aspect of protest movements online.

2. Legal and Regulatory Texts

The second source of data came from official Thai legal documents, especially the Computer Crime Act and Article 112 (the *lèse-majesté* law). These laws are important because they directly affect what people are allowed to say online. By reading and analyzing these laws, the study aimed to understand how the Thailand government defines illegal speech, what punishments are used, and how these laws are applied in digital spaces. The legal texts were studied to identify key terms, such as “false information,” “national security,” or “insult to the monarchy.” These words are often vague and open to interpretation, which gives authorities a lot of control over how the laws are used. The study looked at how this legal vagueness contributes to fear and uncertainty among social media users. It also explored how these laws influence public behavior—for example, causing people to self-censor or stop participating in political discussions online.

In addition to the laws themselves, the study also referred to case examples provided by NGOs, news reports, and human rights organizations. These real-world cases helped show how the laws have been used in practice, and what kinds of posts or actions have led to arrests, fines, or imprisonment. This added context gave a clearer picture of how the legal system and digital platforms interact to control speech in Thailand.

2. Reports and Case Documentation

The final type of data included secondary reports from NGOs, human rights groups, and news organizations. The reports often included testimonies, legal analysis, and details about state surveillance or media takedowns. They provided many important contexts to understand how censorship laws are applied in practice and how activists adapt their strategies over time. (Iannone, 2022).

The data were analyzed using a thematic approach based on Miles and Huberman’s model of qualitative data analysis. Data reduction, where relevant material from each data type was selected and organized. Data display, where findings were grouped into key themes such as legal pressure, resistance strategies, and changes in online speech. And lastly conclusion drawing, where patterns were identified across the different data sources to understand the full impact of censorship on public discourse. By combining these three sources of data, this study provides a clear picture of how censorship works in Thailand and how activists respond. The case study approach and supported by interpretive qualitative analysis, helps reveal not just the legal structures in place, but also the lived experiences and adaptations of those resisting digital repression.

To make the findings more reliable, the study uses triangulation by combining different data sources. Social media posts show how people communicate and organize online. Legal documents explain the rules shaping this behavior. NGO and media reports provide real examples of how these rules are applied. By comparing these sources, the study ensures the findings are supported by multiple types of evidence. This approach allows for a more complete understanding of both the system of censorship and the experiences of people dealing with it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that social media restrictions in Thailand have significantly reshaped public discourse and political activism. Through the analysis of activist social media content, legal frameworks, and reports from NGOs and media outlets, four major themes emerged: censorship and the transformation of communication strategies, coded language, hashtags, memes, and symbols as a meaning systems, meaning making under repression, and reshaping public discourse and networked visibility.

1. Censorship and the Transformation of Communication Strategies

The Computer Crime Act (CCA) and Article 112 (the lèse-majesté law) are two laws that have a big impact on online speech in Thailand. These laws use vague terms like “false information” or “harming national security,” which can be interpreted in many ways (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Article 112, in particular, makes it illegal to criticize or insult the royal family and can lead to very long prison sentences up to 15 years per charge.

Because the rules are broad and not always applied consistently, users often censor themselves in advance. This means people avoid not just what is clearly illegal, but also anything that has the potential to be risky for their lives. As a result, political expression becomes indirect even before any authority steps in.

Instead of speaking openly, many users rely more on unclear, broken, or context-based messages. This shows a bigger change in how people express political ideas online, meanings are often hidden on purpose. Communication under censorship becomes a way of managing risk, as users constantly try to balance speaking out with avoiding surveillance.

2. Coded Language, Hashtags, Memes, and Symbols as a Meaning Systems

Under censorship, activists in Thailand do not abandon political expression but instead restructure it into coded and symbolic forms. They often use symbols, memes, and coded language to avoid legal trouble. Other than saving themselves from receiving any punishment, these tactics might trick the government from thinking that it has deeper meaning. For example, during the protests, people used images like the three-finger salute (from The Hunger Games) to show resistance without using words. Some posts used characters or stories from pop culture as a way to talk about real political problems. These strategies function not only as avoidance mechanisms but also as ways of producing shared meaning under surveillance.



Figure 1. Word cloud highlighting major themes associated with the #FreeYOUTH movement.

One of the best example is hashtags like #FreeYOUTH. In the study by Sinpeng (2021), there are over 27,000 tweets using the hashtag #FreeYOUTH were collected and examined. These tweets were posted during the major protest period in 2020. These tweets revealed a range of messages from emotional calls for democracy to humorous memes and artistic protest posters. While the tweets were very different and unique, it helps giving people a sense of belonging and purpose. Below you can see some of the tweets from Thailand people with the #FreeYOUTH tags.

Here are some of the tweets that uses the #FreeYOUTH :

“I joined #FreeYouth because I’m tired of living in fear. We need democracy, not dictatorship.”

“We stand together under #FreeYouth—demanding democracy now!”

“It’s been six years that Prayuth said he would bring reforms but all we have are human rights abuses. This is why youths have to be free. #FreeYouth”

These tweets were not just opinions or people screaming about the unclear law in their country, they also helped build a shared voice and encouraged others to take part in the movement. Hashtags like #FreeYOUTH became digital rallying points. These methods allowed users to criticize the government or monarchy while avoiding direct legal risks. The symbolic strategies reflect a wider trend of "networked resistance". The hashtags and tweets have help people build shared interpretations. Political meaning comes from repetition and collective understanding. This turns Twitter (X) into a space where communication is both visible and carefully indirect.

3. Meaning Making Under Repression

The findings suggest that censorship does not eliminate meaning but redistributes it across indirect communicative forms. Under conditions of repression, meaning becomes layered, requiring interpretation rather than immediate comprehension. This shifts political communication from declarative speech to interpretive engagement.

Activist actively construct meaning through irony, satire, symbolic substitution. They run workshops and create resources that teach people how to use encrypted tools, spot fake news, and protect their privacy. These digital skills are now seen as very important for anyone involved in political movements. This shows that activists are not only reacting to government pressure but also building long-term tools and knowledge to stay active online (Martin et al., 2023). These strategies allow them to maintain political expression while avoiding direct confrontation with legal boundaries. However, this also means that political communication becomes more dependent on shared insider knowledge, which can leave out people who are less connected or less comfortable with digital technology.

At the same time, this kind of communication builds a sense of community. Sharing ways to understand the messages brings people closer together, as understanding them becomes a way of taking part in the resistance.

4. Reshaping Public Discourse and Networked Visibility

These communication strategies collectively reshape public discourse in Thailand. Rather than a single open space, online conversations are split into overlapping groups that are only partly visible. Visibility is no longer just on or off, but comes in different levels and is used strategically.

Hashtags, meme, and encrypted platforms create what can be understood as “layered publics,” where political meaning circulates unevenly across different audiences. While censorship aims to reduce visibility of dissent, it instead produces a bit of a complex forms of circulation that are harder to fully control. Furthermore, these practices extend beyond national boundaries. Through transnational sharing of tactics such as protest symbol, activist communication becomes part of a broader regional ecosystem. This indicates that censorship not only restrict discourse but also indirectly fosters innovation and cross-boarder collaboration in digital activism.

Overall, the findings show that digital censorship reshapes communication rather than simply restricting it. In some ways, it transforms political expression into symbolic, networked, interpretive forms, ultimately redefining how public discourse is constructed and sustained under conditions of constraint.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study shows that digital censorship in Thailand had a strong effect on how people talk about politics online. Article 112 (*lèse-majesté* law) makes it illegal to criticize or insult the king or royal family. People found guilty can be sent to prison for up to 15 years. And then The Computer Crime Act punishes people for posting anything seen as false, dangerous to national security, or harmful to public order. But both laws are written in very unclear and broad ways, which makes people afraid to speak freely online.

From those two law, it effected to many people in Thailand so much to the point of choosing to stay silent and even deleted their past posts to avoid trouble. Even if someone is not arrested, just the fear of being watched or reported can stop them from joining online conversations. Still, activists continue to try and find some creative ways to speak out. They use they moved from public platforms like Twitter to safer apps like Telegram where chats are private. This shows how determined they are to keep fighting for their rights.

The problem is not just in Thailand. Other Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and Philippines also have strict laws and government actions that limit online freedom. In Indonesia, the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law has been used to arrest people for online comments, including criticism of officials or religion. While in the Philippines, the Cybercrime Prevention Act and new anti-terror laws have made it easier for the government to monitor activists and control online speech. Just like in Thailand, many people in these countries are now more careful about what they say online.

However, there are some positive responses. Many Thailand activist groups and civil society organizations are teaching people how to protect themselves online such as using encryption, spotting fake news, and staying digitally safe. Thailand activists are also learning from people in Indonesia and the Philippines, where citizen journalism and fact-checking projects have helped people stay informed and speak the truth. To fix these problems, governments in Thailand and across Southeast Asia need to change or remove laws like Article 112 and the Computer Crime Act. These laws should be clear and fair, and people should not be punished for sharing peaceful opinions. At the same time, digital education should be supported so that citizens know how to use the internet safely and responsibly. In the end, the internet should be a space where people can share ideas and speak freely, not a place where they feel afraid to talk and be punished for it.

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