

INTERNET AND POLITICS: THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET AND CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT IN THAILAND'S DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

POLITICAL SCIENCE

MAY 2013

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Keywords: Internet, digital divide, democratic development, civic engagement, political participation

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It would be very difficult, if not impossible, for me to complete this dissertation within 2 years without the guidance and support from my dissertation chairperson, Prof. Richard Chadwick. In Prof. Chadwick's care, I was able to do the research of my interest, not to mention being treated with kindness and respect as a graduate student. At every stage of the dissertation writing process, he pitched many valuable questions at me, and pointed out many aspects that had eluded me. I valued very highly the fact that he always reminded me of how the people in my country, Thailand, would benefit from my study. If anyone asks me what kind of professor I would like to become in the future, I would definitely mention his name as my answer.

Special thanks also go to the dissertation committee members, Prof. Ehito Kimura, Prof. Kate Zhou, both from the department of political science, Prof. Tongchai Wongchaisuwan, an emeritus professor from the department of political science, Thammasat University, and Prof. Yean Ju Lee, from the department of sociology.

Prof. Kimura was the one who shaped my knowledge in the field of comparative politics. His knowledge on Southeast Asia is without doubt extensive. Prof. Zhou also gave me hints to look back at what "political participation" would be, and how to define it in Asian contexts. Prof. Wongchaisuwan, my committee from Thailand, was always ready to support me with his background information on Thai politics. I felt very much indebted to him as he had to spend a lot of wee hours Bangkok time to catch up with the rest of committee members in Hawaii. My knowledge on social statistics and research methodology would not advance much without taking classes with Prof. Lee. Again, I wish to express my profound gratitude and highest regards to all of them.

In addition, I would like to thank the Matsunaga Institute for Peace & Conflict Resolution, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, and the East West Center for providing me the research funding which enabled me to conduct the research survey covering all of the regions in Thailand.

I am very thankful to Prof. Waleerat Sangchai, a lecturer at Mahasarakham University, Prof. Watcharapol Supajakwattana, from Naresuan University, Prof.

Udomluck Hoontrakul and Prof. Pipad Krajaejun, both from Thammasat University, and Abeedeel for helping me carry out the research survey; and also to Prof. Chantima Ongsuragz, another emeritus professor from the department of political science, Thammasat University, whose personal network connection greatly contributed to my success in conducting in-depth interview with some Thai Parliament members; and also to a very close friend of mine “Yai” for helping to brush up on my English.

My dissertation would not be wholesomely complete without the cooperation from all respondents participating in this research. Their information tremendously contributed to this dissertation. I would like to express my sincere appreciation for their time and insightful information.

Last but not least, I wish to thank my family. Thank you all very much for always being there with me.

ABSTRACT

Given the rising number of Internet users and online activities in Thailand, this dissertation asks how the Internet impacts the Thai society and how it contributes to the development of democracy in Thailand. The dissertation has two main objectives. The first objective is to study the repercussions of the Internet upon Thai society, focusing on the issue of equality of Internet access among various social groups in Thailand. The second objective is to analyze the Internet's role in regard to the development of Thai democracy. Here, we focus on the Internet's impact upon political participation among Thai citizens – both the general public and the policy-makers. Our study employs both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to answer these research questions.

In regard to the first objective, we find people who had never accessed the Internet were more likely to belong to the have-not stratum in the society. Even among the Internet users, those with lower socio-economic and educational background had less experience in Internet use. As for the second objective, our study revealed a negative correlation between the Internet and political participation. In other words, the Internet did not contribute to the development of democracy, as some scholars expected. In fact, people who used the Internet were more skeptical and engaged less in politics. Having analyzed the content of websites of political parties with parliamentary seat(s) in Thailand, we found that the elites' adoption of ICTs was at a rudimentary stage. One could hardly find a Thai political party that attaches any significance to using the Internet as a tool to accumulate needs or demands from the citizens, and to transform them into public policies. Interviews of the sample parliament members yielded similar results.

In Thailand's case, if there were no adjustment in behavior and attitude of the Thai people and power elites on Internet usage, it is probable that the Internet would yield a negative impact on the Thai society. That is, it would not only broaden the existing inequality gap, but would also inhibit the overall development of democracy in the country.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

On Christmas Day 2006, the Time magazine honored Internet users as the Person of the Year, reasoning that all online activities – be it playing games, campaigning for democracy, or data-mining – led to changes in people's life the world over. This is hardly surprising for the academics who kept a close watch on the internet's impact upon societies. For them, the Internet as a new media has a strong potential to bring about socio-political and cultural changes (e.g. Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

Overall, the Internet as a communication means differs from the traditional media in several aspects. First, it allows users to conduct a two-way communication in real time (Kaid, ed., 2004, p. 510). Regardless of location on the planet, a user is able to interact with another person, if he or she so wishes. This is not possible with regard to the traditional media such as radio, television or newspaper, as the latter do not have a two-way communication capability, not to mention the possible time-lag while waiting for reactions/feedback from the other end.

Secondly, the online world is a virtual reality world that is very expansive, almost limitless perhaps, not to mention the fact that it observes no state boundaries. This feature makes it quite difficult for a government to control the flow of information and the activities of its people, not to mention their access to the Internet. Moreover, the Internet users can choose whether to reveal or conceal their identity. This, obviously, allows them a much greater freedom to express their opinions, compared to other media.

Thirdly, despite intervention by government authority to control or close down channels of access to information on the Internet, especially in dictatorial countries, the Internet users on the whole still have more choices in regard to sources of information, compared to other media. Furthermore, regardless of who the users are in the real world,

once he enters the virtual world, his status is no different from the other on-liners. He can visit any website and share information as much as he wants to. As such, the online world is a virtual world where everyone enjoys equality (Jordan, 1999, p. 60).

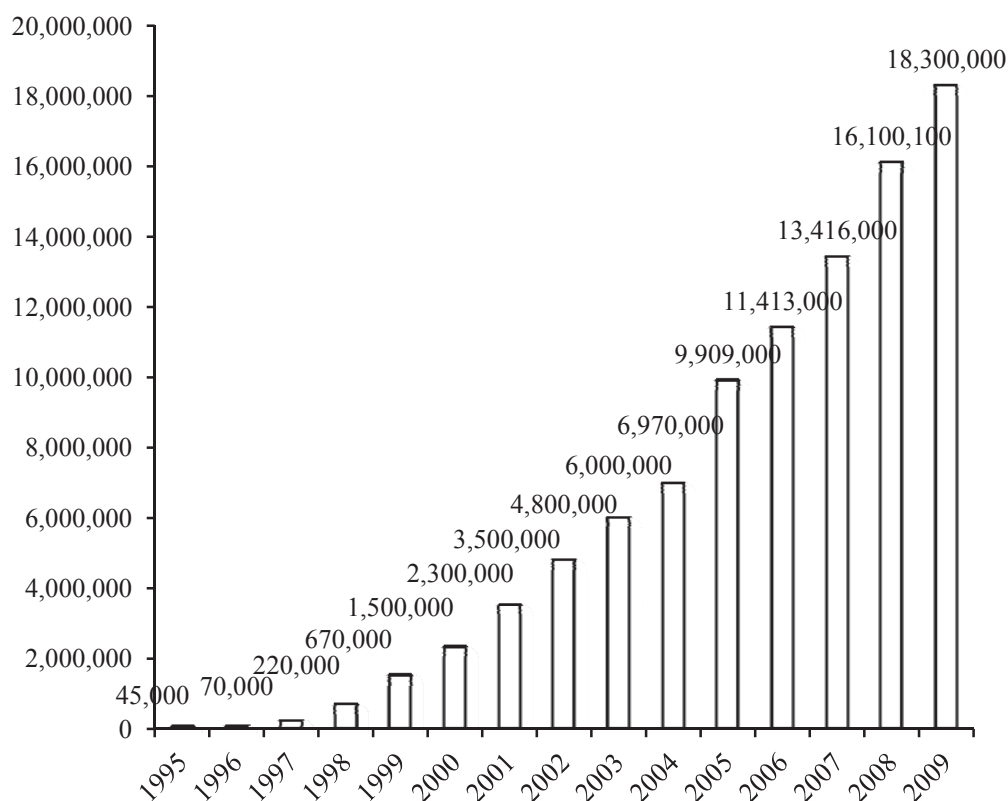
The Internet users' activities in the virtual world may be divided into three main categories, namely: information inquisition, interpersonal communication, and entertainment and leisure activities (Weiser, 2000, p. 168). Reflecting on these activities, academics such as Pippa Norris (2001), Paul DiMaggio, Eszter Hargittai, Coral Celeste, and Steven Shafer (2004), and Eszter Hargitai and Steven Shafer (2006) conclude along the same line that, apart from broadening the users' knowledge on new horizons and offering information in a much easier way, the Internet has also provided its users' with social capital. All of these results from the fact that Internet allows its users to connect with other online "netizens" who either have ideas, beliefs and interests that are similar or otherwise. And these connections subsequently grew to become an online network, one that could later transform into a network in the real world.

Transforming a country into a more democratic society constitutes another important contribution made by the Internet. By its own nature, the Internet provides what James C. Scott called a "social space" for the general public to express their concerns and anxieties. In his words, the social space is "a neutral medium within which practical and discursive negotiations may grow" (1990, p. 118) and a place in which "the unspoken riposte, stifled anger, and a bitten tongues created by relations of domination find a vehement, full-throated expression" (p. 120). People could freely express their "real" thoughts through the expression of language in this space, and could form a group of people who share the same opinion or experience. Possibly, their opinion might in the end turn out to be a norm in the society and create changes (p. 119). Significantly, the circulation of discussions in the Internet could transform into political actions, increase political participation among the ordinary people, and create a society more conducive to democracy in the future.

In Thailand, the Internet was first introduced at the Prince of Songkla University and Asian Institute of Technology in 1987. In 1988, the Prince of Songkla University registered for an Internet address, and received srtrang.psu.th as their online address

(NECTEC, 2008). It was the first Internet address in Thailand, and “th” officially became Thailand’s domain ever since. At the beginning, the public had a limited use of the Internet. Only students and professors in certain universities in Thailand could access the Internet.

Figure 1.1 The statistics of Internet users in Thailand



Source: NECTEC, 2010.

The Internet for commercial use in Thailand started in 1995 when the Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT), Telephone Organization of Thailand (TOT) and National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA) established the Internet Thailand Cooperation to provide Internet service to the public (NECTEC, 2008). Since then, the Internet has been widely used among Thais.

According to statistics from the National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC), in 1995 there were only 45,000 Internet users in Thailand. The number increased to 18,300,000 in 2009 – a growth of three digits every year in the last fourteen years. In other words, about one in four of Thai population entered the World Wide Web in 2009.

Significantly, “discussion” based websites are very popular among Thai people. Looking at the top-ten most-visited websites in Thailand, all of them provide discussion boards for its users. Ranked number one is www.sanook.com with 12,763,652 page views and 646,039 users per day (Truehits.net, Dec, 2009). News media website www.manager.co.th ranks number seven on the list. Being the first news media to provide space for its users to exchange their opinions at the bottom of each news page, it becomes the most famous news’ website in Thailand (while selling only about 20,000 copies of its newspaper a day). Manager newspaper’s website attracts 255,416 users and 1,668,607 page views a day (Truehit.net, Dec, 2009).

Given the rising number of Internet users and online activities in Thailand, this dissertation asks how the Internet impacts the Thai society, and how it contributes to the development of democracy in Thailand. This study will go beyond merely presenting the basic history of the Internet used in Thailand, but will offer also an analytical assessment of how the Internet transforms Thai society and affects Thai people’s political behavior and attitudes. It is hoped that the completed study will help to illuminate the role of the Internet in changing society, and to expand democracy in developing countries, particularly Thailand.

In a word, this dissertation has two main objectives: first, to study the impact of the Internet upon Thai society, focusing on the issue of equality of Internet access among various social groups in Thailand. A previous study has found that the Internet, being a new and important communications technology, can be employed by the users to boost their own personal social and economic values (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001). Theoretically speaking, therefore, Internet users have a greater opportunity to develop or increase their potentiality compared to those without an Internet access. Such a disparity between the two groups could create undesirable social consequences, namely, a social inequality – or a “digital divide” in academic language – between these two groups. In

order to find the truth in this matter, it is essential that we identify the Internet users in Thailand. Specifically, we need to ascertain whether Internet usage is concentrated within a particular group of population. If such a concentration occurs, one can reasonably be certain that Thailand is having “a digital divide,” and thereby needs a policy to remedy this situation.

The second objective of this dissertation is to analyze the Internet’s role in regard to development of democracy in Thailand. Here, our focus will be on the Internet’s impact on political participation among the Thai citizens – i.e., the general public as well as policy-makers. Our analysis will proceed from the assumption that the Internet allows its users to acquire political information and to send messages and their opinions on political issues to other groups of people in the society, leading to an awareness of their rights and duties as citizens of a democracy, one that could subsequently grow to become civic cultures – a crucial foundation of all genuine democratic societies.

To achieve these two main objectives, we need to answer the following three research questions (*RQs*).

RQ₁: Does the Internet create a new social division, namely “a digital divide,” in Thailand?

An answer to this *RQ₁* will help us achieve the first objective of our study. And, in order to answer his question, we need to identify the Internet users in Thailand. In addition, we have to identify the demographic factors that may impact on the access or usage of the Internet. If there is any population group that obtains greater access to the Internet than others, this will indicate that the Internet has caused a new kind of inequality – a digital divide in Thailand.

RQ₂: Does the Internet increase political participation among its users?

An answer to this *RQ₂* will help us achieve the second objective of our study. At this point, we hypothesize that the Internet usage will change the Internet users’ political behavior/attitudes. However, not all Internet activities would contribute to such changes. Hence, this study will focus on how the Internet affects its users’ political behavior/attitudes, and what online activities cause such transformation in its users. The result would indicate whether or not the Internet would install and strengthen the democracy in Thai society.

RQ₃: How do political elite groups in Thailand respond to the Internet?

It would be impossible to achieve our second objective without answering the *RQ₃*. This is because the democratization process requires a transformation among the general public as well as the decision-makers. In our present study, the focus will be on Thai political parties and policy-makers/law-enactors/parliamentarians. We will survey their opinions and attitudes toward the Internet and its impact on their political decision-making activities.

Our study will employ both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to answer these research questions. We will deal with the methodology aspect following a discussion on democratization theories. The first chapter will conclude with a brief pointer of the outline and content of our dissertation.

1.2 Theories

In this section we will consider first the theories of democratization, and then the Internet and political participation.

1.2.1 Democratization Theories

Many political scientists have advanced strong arguments to the effect that democracy is an attractive system of government. Adam Przeworski, for instance, has revealed statistical evidences showing that democracy correlated to a stable level of economic development. In his research, Przeworski found that people from more advanced democratic societies were less labor-exploited and benefited more from technology than those under dictatorial regimes, even though political regimes did not affect the growth of population income, (2004, p. 323). More importantly, Ronald Inglehart discovered that people who lived in a democratic society were happier than those living in other types of government regimes (2000, p. 225-227).

Given such an attractive outcome that democracy promises to bring about, many scholars have long been searching for the answer on how to install and strengthen democracy in all the countries around the world. The transition to democracy, in

summary, is their main inquiry. However, so far, they could not agree on the “grand” answer. As things stand, there are many different perspectives and ideas to achieve the goal. Nonetheless, we could categorize these perspectives into three major schools.

1.2.1.1 School of Institutional Structures

The theorists in this category believed that, to transform any given society into a democratic one, it was important to first establish the democratic institutions (McMahon & Nussbaum, 2002; Burnell, 2000; Mainwaring & Scully, 1995). These institutions would generate the rule of law and a democratic environment within the society. The changes come from the top of the society pyramid. In other words, scholars in this school believed that democracy is a “political construct” (Burnell, p.4). When the democratic rules and institutions are firmly established, people would practice accordingly. In the end, a democratic practice would be common and adhered to by most people in the society. Evidently, the scholars in this school focus on electoral and parliamentary processes, system of justice, and the rule of law (e.g. Fish, 2006; Cheibub & Limongi, 2002; Mainwaring, 1997).

In general, the transformation of institutional structures is caused by foreign interventions – either by outright foreign occupation or pressures from international organizations. Foreign involvement would foster the development of democracy, especially in developing countries where the concept of such an ideology does not exist. Peter J. Burnell indicated that through international co-operation and assistance, well developed countries could promote or establish democracy in developing countries. In addition, democratic institution-building is a sure way to foster the democratic transition and democratic consolidation (p. 9).

The problem with this approach, many scholars pointed out, is that the changes in institutional structures might not lead to democracy. Institutions alone could not guarantee democratic transition within a society (Inglehart, 2000; Putnam 1993). In fact, authoritarian regimes sometimes used the creation of institutional structures as evidence proving that their regimes are democratic. By claiming that they hold regular elections and form government through a representative system, the Singaporean leaders

proclaimed their country a member of the democratic world. In reality, it is difficult to agree that Singapore is democratic, given the strict policy of control over its citizen's political rights and a de facto one-party government system. In short, by simply creating the right institutions and adopting the right laws does not necessarily lead to democracy, or help spread it throughout the society, or making it last a long time.

1.2.1.2 School of "Socioeconomic Factors"

According to this school, there is a strong correlation between the level of economic development and democracy (e.g. De Soto, 2003; Diamond, 1992; Becker, 1984). Looking into the history of western countries, one observes that democratic regimes emerged right after the industrial revolution. In other words, economic success is a pre-condition underlying the progress of democracy.

Barrington Moore, Jr. (1966) indicated that social and economic factors are the determinants of state types. For example, if the peasantry was strong and the upper landed class supported the capitalist and democratic systems, a state would transform into a democracy like in England. Moore concluded that an absence of a strong capitalist class is the principal reason contributing to a failure in democratic development in various Third World countries. And history has shown many times that the weak capitalist classes involved, instead of cooperating with the masses to oppose the ruling dictators, preferred to side with the latter to destroy the masses, in order to protect their interests.

David Becker (1984) stated that the acute underdevelopment of Third World democracy results from a severe economic exploitation of the lower classes by the capitalists. And this has led to a serious conflict between social classes in the Third World societies. The capitalist class itself is extremely reluctant to allow the lower classes to hold political power or play a part in the governing process, fearing that the latter might use the newly acquired political power to "get back at" them. The only alternative left to this class, therefore, is to continue limiting the political roles and power of the lower social classes.

The weakness of this “theory” lies in its belief that the middle and lower classes cannot do anything to affect the economic structures under the capitalists’ control. Such a belief implies that in constituting a stable democracy, a society needs an economic growth and cooperation from the capitalists. In short, the middle and lower classes have no significant role whatsoever in the society’s democratic transition process, i.e., everything has to wait for the approval or support from a more powerful class.

Nevertheless, many case studies have shown that economic growth fails to bring about democracy. Thailand has several times proved this school wrong. In 1991, while her economy was rapidly advancing – the GDP of the country ran up to two digits, the civilian government of Thailand was toppled by a military coup. Then again in 2006 when the Thai economy has just recovered from the 1997 Asian economic crisis, there was another military coup. From Thailand’s example, it is apparent that economic success does not always help to stabilize or advance the transition to democracy.

In addition, by giving too much emphasis on the economic factor as a pre-requisite for political development, many governments see an opportunity not to turn to democracy. They claimed their country was not yet ready for democracy. They argued that they needed to control the power at the center in order to push forward the economy and to control the citizen’s political rights in exchange for their well-being. In this sense, economic development offers the authoritarian regimes a rationale to seize and/or hold onto political power.

1.2.1.3 School of “Socio-cultural Factors”

While the first school –Institutional Structures – pointed out that democratic changes must come from above, theorists in the school of socio-cultural factors insisted that democracy must develop from the bottom up. In order to establish or strengthen democracy in any given society, the people must share certain basic values and cultures. Without these cultural foundations, democracy would not last very long. This school emphasizes that people’s attitudes and behavior influence the way their society evolves (e.g. Putnam, 2002, 1995, 1993; Diamond, 1993; Dahl 1971; Almond & Verba, 1963). In

other words, what the people think and do in regard to each other affects the transformation of democracy.

Here, there are two questions these theorists need to answer before going any further, namely: (1) what are the “helpful” values and cultures they had in mind; and (2) which ones of these values and cultures specifically contribute to the advance of democratic ideology.

Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba summarized that “the set of attitudes concerning confidence [or trust] in other people” would lay the foundation for “collective problem resolution” (1963, p. 366). The significance of Almond and Verba’s work is that it stated that trust in other people could be learned and created. However, they did not answer the “how to” question.

Alexis de Tocqueville (trans. 2004) is one of the scholars who answered the “how to” question, advising us to build such a trust among the common people. Analyzing the reason for the success of democracy in the United States, he found the correlations between participation in social associations and democratic skills among the Americans. Building upon de Tocqueville’s work, Robert Putnam (1995) constructed the concept of “social capital” and explained how it contributed to the development of democracy.

In the first place, networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. When economic and political negotiation is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism are reduced. At the same time, networks of civic engagement embody past success at collaboration, which can serve as a cultural template for future collaboration. Finally, dense networks of interaction probably broaden the participants’ sense of self, developing the ‘I’ into the ‘we’ or...enhancing the participants’ ‘taste’ for collective benefits. (p.66)

In summary, the relations between “social capital” and democracy could be described in the following flow: civic engagement → social capital → advance of democracy. That is, in order to strengthen the democratic ideology, it is necessary to

promote civic engagement. Conversely, if the progress of civic engagement among the citizen is strong, democracy will also advance.

The school of socio-cultural factors seems to best explain why democracy effectively blossoms and spreads in one society, but fails to do so in many others. As a society comprises of people, it is only logical that we start our present study with people's attitudes and behavior. Human beings in this school are more active and capable of changing their political environment. Moreover, compared to the other two schools, this one offers a more practical framework to foster democracy.

1.2.2 The Internet and Political Participation

To build social trust or “social capital,” it is necessary to increase the socio-political interactions between citizens inside the society. In the past, face-to-face interaction was the only way possible. However, as technology advanced, new communication technologies – specifically, the Internet – have been introduced to the masses. Unlike previous earlier-generation (or “old”) media – i.e., newspaper, magazines, television and radio – the World Wide Web is a new kind of communication that allows its users a two-way communication, and to form and expand their “social” networks. Given these advantages, many scholars assumed that the Internet would increase participation among the citizens and contribute to the advance of democracy.

In summary, a number of academics believed that “social capital” could be accumulated through people's activities conducting online interactions. In fact, there were many studies undertaken in the past ten years confirming the linkage between Internet usage and the increase of “social capital” (e.g. Kang & Gearhart, 2010; Kittilson & Dalton, 2009; Soon & Kluver, 2007; Jensen, Danziger, & Venkatesh, 2007; Xenos & Moy, 2007; Kobayashi, Ikeda, & Miyata, 2006). Yet, not all activities conducted in the Cyberspace enhance the civic skills and attitudes of the users.

In Howard Rhiengold's study, it is pointed out that people could form a “virtual community” – i.e., “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationship in cyberspace” (quoted in Jensen, Danziger, & Venkatesh, 2007, p. 41). And

it is emphasized that only this “virtual community” could enhance the level of political participation among its users.

More importantly, while the “traditional” form of political participation empirically declined in many societies (Putnam, 1995, 2002), the Internet provides a platform that brings about new groups of people who interact with one another. Moreover, the Cyberspace transcends one of the major obstacles that prevent people from engaging in the interactions – i.e., resources. Jensen, Danziger, and Venkatesh (2007) discovered that participants in online engagement come from all social classes and economic status. In “traditional” political participation where people interact in a social group, social and economic status played a very important role in limiting the number of group members. However, such a correlation was not found in the online case.

Nonetheless, counter-arguments have been raised against the conclusion on correlations between the Internet and civic engagement. Scholars from this camp have indicated in essence that online political participation did not generate any new kind of activity or civic skills (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004; Krueger, 2002; Norris, 2001). All activities conducted in the cyberspace are all “old” behavior. It is, in other words, “old” activities enacted in the “new” medium. Hence, they concluded that the Internet did not produce changes leading toward a democratic development. Although their argument seems sound, I personally did not find any of them offering a single “empirical” evidence to support their hypothesis. In fact, they grounded their argument on the weaknesses of the Internet rather than what really took place in the cyber world.

More importantly, the aim of my research is not to find “new” behavior on the Internet, but to see if online interactions among the WWW’ users could increase their political participation and civic attitudes in their real life. How the “new” communication technology helps to advance democracy, in short, is the main concern of my study. The discussion on “new” or “old” behavior has little bearing on this research.

Another counter-argument is that the Internet did not bridge the gap between people, but widen them (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Hindman, 2009; Norris, 2001). These authors claim that, when people surfed the Internet, they would go to particular websites that suited their own interest. Furthermore, when forming a “virtual community,” they

would engage only with individuals who shared the same political ideology/background. As a result, the Internet could only polarize public opinion.

Their assumption might hold true. However, the academics who believe that the Internet would create division in online world seem to have overlooked one thing. That is, division in the online world is not a unique phenomenon. In offline reality, individuals tend to associate with those who have similar ideas or background. They tend to discuss/exchange their knowledge only on the issues they are interested in with like-minded individuals. Discussing the same topic does not necessarily mean that they agree with every opinion raised during the exchange. This is because no two people are alike in every aspect. In any grouping of people, diversity and conflict is natural. The point is how that particular online community deals with the problems that crop up during the exchange/interaction. It depends on each community member's ability to learn how to dissolve their differences and to build mutual trust among themselves.

It is this skill that is most crucial, as it leads to the accumulation and expansion of the "social capital." Once a mutual trust has been solidified, people from diverse walks of life and origins, with only a common interest in certain socio-political topic binding them together, it seems quite probable that such an attitude of trust would also be applied, in some degree, in their exchange of opinions with people outside of their own circle. As such, it is only logical to conclude that online communities tend to help reduce social fragmentation rather than encouraging it.

What we should concern ourselves with is that social networks in the WWW offers a great opportunity for people who might not be able to meet in the real world, but share the same interest/ideology/political perspective, to interact with one another and exchange opinions. It is not important that they only engage within their shared interest group. The skills and attitudes they develop while associating with one another online is much more significant, as it leads to the accumulation of social capital and democratic development.

1.3 Methods

The nature of our research questions requires us to apply more than one approach to obtain the answers. To answer the first and second research questions, we used a

qualitative methodology. As for the third research question, we used a quantitative methodology.

1.3.1 Quantitative Research Method

In order to answer whether or not the Internet creates new social division – namely, “a digital divide” in Thailand, and increases the political participation among its users, an opinion survey was employed as the principal technique. The population in this study is the Thai legal voters. It refers to all Thai citizens who are 18 years old and over. Based on the Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, by June 2011, there are 46,636,048 Thai voters. With the margin of error 3% and 95% confidence level, Glenn D. Israel’s sample size determination suggested the sample size of 1,111 for our study.

Table 1.1

Proportional Sample Size for Each Region in Thailand

Region Number	Region Name	Number of Voters	Proportional Sample for Region
1	Bangkok	4,167,438	99
2	Northern	8,796,034	210
3	Northeastern	15,721,476	375
4	Eastern	2,775,906	66
5	Central	8,949,494	213
6	Southern	6,225,700	148
<i>Total</i>		46,636,048	1,111

Source: ECT, 2011.

The Office of the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) divided Thailand into 6 election regions, namely, Bangkok, Northern, Northeastern, Eastern, Central and Southern regions. To decide how many samples would be selected from each region, we distributed the sample of each stratum to the number of voters of the regions. The table below shows the proportional sample size for each region.

Table 1.2

The Number of Provinces Selected in Each Region

Region Number	Region Name	Proportional Sample for Region	Number of Selected Provinces
2	Northern	210	6
3	Northeastern	375	11
4	Eastern	66	2
5	Central	213	6
6	Southern	148	4
<i>Total</i>		1,012	29

Bangkok is considered to be a special province in Thailand. As a region, it is an area comprised of only one province – Bangkok. As a result, it was an exception in this selecting process.

Meanwhile, the remaining five regions encompass 76 provinces. To determine the number of provinces to be selected was a major issue in this research design. To choose only few provinces would result in the greater standard errors, as the sample would be clustered in each region. However, selecting a large number of provinces would cause the small sample size in each province, and the cost of collecting sample size from this method would be very high.

Table 1.3

The Skip Interval in Each Region

Region Number	Region Name	Number of Provinces	Number of Selected Provinces	A Generating Number
2	Northern	17	6	3
3	Northeastern	20	11	2
4	Eastern	7	2	3
5	Central	18	6	3
6	Southern	14	4	3

Compromising between these two methods was our solution. From 76 provinces in 5 regions, we selected 29 provinces. Each province from these 5 regions had a sample

size total at 35. Below is the table showing the number of provinces selected in each region.

Table 1.4

The List of Provinces Selected in the Opinion Survey

Region Number	Region	Province Selected	Sample size for Province
1	Bangkok	Bangkok	99ba
2	Northern	Chiang Mai	35
2	Northern	Nan	35
2	Northern	Phitsanulok	35
2	Northern	Mae Hong Son	35
2	Northern	Sukhothai	35
2	Northern	Kampheang Phet	35
3	Northeastern	Khon Kean	35
3	Northeastern	Nakorn Phanom	35
3	Northeastern	Bueng Kan	35
3	Northeastern	Maharakham	35
3	Northeastern	Yasothon	35
3	Northeastern	Loei	35
3	Northeastern	Sakon Nakorn	35
3	Northeastern	Nong Khai	35
3	Northeastern	Amnat Charoen	35
3	Northeastern	Ubon Ratchathani	35
3	Northeastern	Chaiyaphum	35
4	Eastern	Chon Buri	35
4	Eastern	Rayong	35
5	Central	Nakhon Nayok	35
5	Central	Pathum Thani	35
5	Central	Phetchaburi	35
5	Central	Samut Prakan	35
5	Central	Saraburi	35
5	Central	Ang Thong	35
6	Southern	Trang	35
6	Southern	Pattani	35
6	Southern	Phuket	35
6	Southern	Songkhla	35

Then, we ordered the provinces in each region in Thai alphabetical order, and applied the simple random sample technique to select the provinces. To calculate a generating number, we used the number of provinces in each region divided by the

number of selected province in each region. The Table 1.3 represents the skip interval in each region.

The interval skip were applied to a list of provinces in the Thai alphabetical order. Starting from the first province in the list, we selected a province falling in a generating number. The province selected was taken out from the list, and we ran the random until we obtained all the samples needed. The table below shows the list of provinces selected by this random technique. Undergraduates were recruited to interview the respondents in each province.

To obtain demographic information about the respondents, the survey asked their age, gender, marital status, education background, income, and occupation. The respondents, then, were queried whether or not they had ever used the Internet, where they used the Internet, and how long had they been using the Internet. To measure the level of their political participation and civic attitudes, the survey asked about political participation activities that the respondents had conducted during the past five years, along with their civic attitudes (i.e. how strong they agreed with following statements: whatever its faults may be, democracy is still the best form of government for you; they can trust the central government to usually do what is right; and others can influence the formulation of government policies more than themselves).

The respondents' answer would reveal who are the Internet users, and indicate whether or not a digital divide exists in Thailand. Also, it will pinpoint whether or not there are correlations between the Internet and political participation in the real world. The main question here is to find the linkage between online activities and their civic skills and attitudes.

1.3.2 Qualitative Research Method

The qualitative research technique was employed to find an answer our RQ_3 : how do political elite groups in Thailand respond to the Internet? As mentioned earlier, the Thai members of parliament (MPs) were selected to represent the political elite groups in

this study. From the list of parliamentary representatives, we randomly selected 30 respondents and conducted an in-depth interview. The selected House of Representatives MPs were asked whether they had ever gone online and used the Internet as a channel to communicate with people. The interview questions also queried about their sources of information, and whether or not they included online political opinions in their decision-making process.

Also, we have made contents analysis of the political parties' website in Thailand. All parties with the seats in the House of Representatives have been checked whether or not they own the official parties' websites.

From a combination of these two research methodologies – quantitative and qualitative, our dissertation has covered both how the Internet political participation impact on ordinary subjects and elites. As a result, it would offer a clearer picture of how the Internet helps to socially and politically transform the society, along with the extent of such transformations.

1.4 Outline of the Dissertation

Our dissertation comprises six chapters, the contents of which are as follow:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter will discuss how the Internet came into existence in Thailand, starting from the latter part of the 1980's, when the country's Internet system began to take shape, up to its current state at present. It also explains democratization theories and the Internet, and the Internet and political participation. The research methodologies are also explained.

Chapter 2: Internet Users in Thailand: A Digital Divide?

The question: "Does the Internet create new social division, namely 'a digital divide,' in Thailand?" will be answered in this chapter. The Internet users in Thailand will be indentified. Statistical analysis will be employed to find correlations between demographic factors and Internet usage. At the end of the chapter, we will discuss

whether or not there is a digital divide in Thailand, and what the policy-makers can do to solve the problem.

Chapter 3: The Impact of Internet on Political Participation in Thailand

Here we will deal with the impact that political participation in the Internet has on individuals. Specifically, we will try to ascertain whether or not the Internet increases the citizen's interest, knowledge and political activities in the real world. In addition, we will try to determine whether the Internet, on the whole, has positively or negatively influenced the development of Thai democracy.

Chapter 4: The Internet, Political Parties and Policy-Makers in Thailand

This Chapter 4 deals with Thai political parties and MPs' use of the Internet for political purpose, as well as their attitudes toward the use of Internet and online political participation. The study hopes to reveal how the Internet influences the Thai political arena, and whether or not it helps to strengthen Thailand's democratic system.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this section, the result of the study will be summarized. I will discuss some policy recommendations to improve the use of Internet for democratic development in Thailand. In addition, a number of suggestions for future studies will be proposed.

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CHAPTER 2

INTERNET USERS IN THAILAND: A DIGITAL DIVIDE?

2.1 Introduction

It is clear that the Internet offers tremendous benefits to its users. Unfortunately, only its users can benefit from it.¹ The fact is not everyone on this planet can access it, or use its potentials to the fullest extent. As a result, it is quite probable that the Internet might lead to a widening social gap between its users and non-users, with the former standing to gain more than the latter – either in terms of access to a larger amount of information, or membership in a wide variety of social groups and connections.

Within academic circles, the gap between Internet users and non-users is called “a digital divide.” The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2001) has defined it as:

...the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities. (p.5)

The above definition gives us a glimpse of the origin of “a digital divide,” as it assumes that demographic, socio-economic and domicile disparities are probably the principal factors contributing to the use or non-use of the Internet.

¹ True, those who cannot access the Internet may still obtain its benefits indirectly, for instance, knowing about the goings-on through relatives or friends. This study, however, focuses on the individual’s ability to access information and to obtain benefits from it by her/himself. In the final analysis, the more an individual can rely on her/himself in regard to Internet usage, she or he would have more freedom and alternatives in accessing information, including freedom of action in cyberspace, compared to those who cannot do so.

Furthermore, it reminds us of the diffusion theory which deals with the dissemination of new technologies throughout societies. This theory points out that at the outset, new technology would concentrate in the hand of certain social groups only. These are people who benefit the most from new technology, and will try to use such leverage/access to new technology to solidify their newly obtained social and financial status. Their leverage will still remain effective even after the new technology has spread far and wide to other social groups in the society, thanks to their longer “flying hours” and a more efficient technological know-how. It is, therefore, not surprising that some scholars hypothesized that new technology has become a means to hold on to socio-political and economic power, and to bequeath it only to their own kind within this group (i.e. Rogers, 1995).

It follows that to reduce the gap/divide between users and non-users, one needs to determine first whether there is a disparity of Internet access among social groups in a society. If the answer is “yes,” one then needs to delve deeper to identify the group(s) who has leverage in regard to access to this new information technology.

Proceeding from the fundamental concepts of the diffusion theory, Pippa Norris (2001) surveyed the differences between Internet users and non-users in developed and developing countries. She found that within the same country, there is a statistical probability that people with higher education and socio-economic status will become Internet users. However, comparing between developed and developing countries in Europe, Norris (2000) observed that there are more Internet users in the former than in the latter. In addition, subsequent studies have confirmed along the same line that Internet users tend to be male, young, well-educated, wealthy, and belong to a majority ethnicity in a country (e.g. Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008).

Be that as it may, past studies aimed at finding connections between social group disparities and Internet use tend to concentrate on data collection in developed countries such as the United States, England Australia and Japan. As for data in developing countries, the surveys tend to favor those within Europe, such as Romania, Bulgaria and Spain (e.g. Codoban, 2005; Liu & San, 2006).

There are relatively very few studies of a digital divide in the developing countries of Asia. In regard to Thailand, studies on this subject are practically non-existent. The present study is among the first that aims to find out whether there is a digital divide in this country. Furthermore, it intends to identify the social groups that have no access to the Internet in this country. It is hoped that this study would also help to fill the gap on studies of digital divide in our present-day world.

The current chapter's aim is to study the digital divide in Thailand, by way of answering the following key questions: 1) Who are the Internet users in Thailand?; 2) Is there a digital divide in Thailand?; and 3) If there is a digital divide, what are the contributing factors?

To answer these questions, a survey had been conducted among eligible Thai voters in 2011. In the questionnaire, apart from demographic data which all respondents are required to answer, there are also question asking them to declare whether they had use the Internet at any time, along with the total number of years they have been using it. The data obtained from this section are then analyzed to find correlations between the demographic variables and Internet usage. However, it is admitted that the questionnaire does have some measurement limitations, and that data interpretation needs to be done with special care.

The content of this chapter is divided into four parts:

- *Data and Research Methods*: details on dependent and independents variables will be discussed. Then, we will explain data and statistics techniques used in the study.
- *Who Were Online in Thailand?*: this part tries to answer the first and second questions stated earlier. In regard to the question “who are the Internet users in Thailand?,” descriptive and logistic regression analysis will be used to explain the answer. And statistics will also be used in finding out whether there is any demographic similarities or differences between the Internet users and non-users in Thailand. All this will go to prove whether there is a digital divide or not in this country.

- *Inequality among Thai Internet Users:* in the third part, an attempt is made to answer the second and third question. Given the fact that statistical comparison between Internet users and non-users alone is not sufficient to conclude whether there is a digital divide or not in a society. Scholars who study the Internet and its impact on societies have suggested a study of aspects beyond the disparity between Internet users and non-users (e.g. Hargitai & Shafer, 2006; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004). These scholars have pointed out that a digital divide may even exist within the Internet users group. To address this aspect, the second part of the chapter will use statistics to ascertain whether there is a disparity in regard to the length of time each user has been using the Internet. This portion will also analyze the factors that impact on the starting time and the overall length of time of Internet use which accounts for the disparity. In this regard, our study will focus on the demographic variables – for instance, gender, age, domicile and socio-economic status.
- *Summary:* the final section of the chapter presents a conclusion on Internet usage and a digital divide situation in Thailand, and an analysis of future trends. This concluding observation may be of service to those who would like to close the digital divide in Thailand, and possibly applicable to some other developing countries in similar situations as well.

2.2 Research Methods and Data

2.2.1 Data

Two government agencies are responsible for monitoring the number of Internet users in Thailand, namely, the National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC) and the Thailand National Statistics Office (NSO). It seems that they use different methods of calculation. The NECTEC uses the annual increase in Internet

bandwidth to calculate the number of Internet users (Koanantakool, 2007), while the NSO uses population sampling. As a result, the NECTEC method yields a considerably higher figure than the NSO's.

Unfortunately, NECTEC has stopped providing the Internet user figures in 2009. The NSO began surveying household use of information technologies and communications in 2001. But these were households connected to the Internet, not the number of its users. It started providing the Internet user population in Thailand in 2011, placing the figure at 14,800,000 (NSO, 2012).

In regard to Thai Internet users' demographic data, the NECTEC did not have much to share. The NSO, on the other hand, collected samplings from the whole Thai population, interviewing head as well as members of the households from age 6 on up (NSO, 2012).

The NSO has also published the Internet users' demographic data such as gender, age and domicile, but offered none regarding education and socio-economic status. To obtain a more comprehensive set of data, this study has designed a questionnaire survey for 1,111 samplings, focusing on Thais aged 18 on up in all regions of the country. While collecting data, we tried our best to make sure all samples genuinely represent the whole eligible voters in Thailand. For instance, we have selected sample groups that reflect the general population distribution in each region (as discussed in Chapter 1). However, our samples cannot possibly address the population demographic characteristics in every dimension, thereby making it one of the limitations of this study.

2.2.2 Research Methods

Descriptive analysis was employed to provide descriptive characteristics in Section 2.3. Both bivariate and multivariate techniques were then performed to examine the associations between dependent variables – namely, Internet usage and duration of Internet usage, and independent variables – namely, gender, age, ethnicity, religion,

education attainment, domicile and family income. In section 2.3, Chi-square test was used to study the relationship between the Internet usage and demographic characteristics in the bivariate analysis. Then, multivariate analysis – namely, stepwise logistic regression – was employed to identify which independent variable is the most effective in predicting the dependent variable.

The objective of section 2.4 is to study whether or not the digital divide existed also among the Internet users. The relationship between the length of Internet usage and demographic factors was tested. Linear regression analysis is the main statistics technique employed in this section. The SPSS software was used to analyze the data.

2.2.2.1 Dependent Variables

As mention earlier, Internet usage is the dependent variable being tested in section 2.3. The respondents in the survey were asked whether or not they had ever used the Internet. The Internet usage is a dichotomous, yes or no, variable. From 1,111 subjects in the survey, 763 reported they had had experience using the Internet.

In section 2.4, the dependent variable being examined is the length of Internet usage among the Internet users. The total number of years since the respondents first used the Internet range from 1 to 23 years. The mean is 8.199 and standard deviation (S.D.) is 4.026. *N* is 753 respondents.

2.2.2.2 Independent Variables

The independent variables in section 2.3 and 2.4 are the same. These are: gender, age, ethnicity, religion, education attainment, domicile and family income.

Gender: A total of 470 subjects from 1,111 or 42.30 percent of the respondents were male. The gender proportion in the survey was slightly different from the Thai

population, where men comprised 48.40 percent of the whole population aged over 18 (Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, 2006).

Age: Respondents were categorized into 4 groups, 18-25, 26-40, 41-60 and 60+ years old. The age of the respondents in the survey ranged from 18 to 84 years old. The mean was 35.46 and S.D. was 12.83 (N=1,111).

The subjects aged 18-25 comprised 26.90 percent of all respondents. Also, there were 440 respondents aged 26-40 years old. A total of 30.10 percent or 334 respondents were 41-60 years old. As for senior citizens (60+), they comprised only 3.40 percent of the whole respondents.

Ethnicity: A total 1,045 out of 1,111 or 94.10 percent of the subjects are Thai. There were 13 Thai-Chinese, 41 Thai-Muslim, and 12 other ethnicity.

Religion: In terms of religion, 94.00 % of the respondents counted themselves as Buddhist, 4.50 percent or 50 subjects as Muslim, 1.40 percent were Christian, and 1 subject reported himself as having other religion.

Education Attainment: Those with a bachelor's degree constituted a total of 46.30 percent – the largest portion of all respondents, followed by high-school graduates at 17.70 percent, users with a graduate degree 6.60 percent, junior high school graduates 7.50 percent, and elementary school graduates 14.20 percent. Only 0.50 percent or 6 respondents reported they had no education.

Domicile: The majority of the respondents lived in the Northeastern region – 33.80 percent, followed by 19.20 percent in the Central region, 18.9 percent in the North, 13.30 percent in the South, and 5.9 percent in the East. The respondents who lived in Bangkok accounted for 8.90 percent of the total. These figures reflect the actual distribution of Thai population throughout the country, where most of them lived in the Northeast and least in the East.

Family income: Looking at the respondents' family income, those earning less than 20,000 baht a month make up the largest group, or 51.80 percent of the total. Those in the higher family income constituted 48.20 percent (N = 1,111).

2.3 Who Were Online in Thailand?

To answer who the Internet users in Thailand were, one needs to have a comparative statistics of Internet users and non-users. As such, the calculation of cross tabulation and Chi-square test had been employed to prove that there were differences among the various social groups, using gender, age, domicile, ethnicity, religion, level of education, and family income as criteria determining group membership.

All in all, the null hypothesis (H_0) of this portion of our research states that, on average, there are no differences between the Internet users and non-users, using demographics characteristics as predictors. If the statistical analysis indicated that is true, it means that a digital divide did not exist in Thailand. On the contrary, if the result contradicts H_0 , the study would confirm the existence of a digital divide in the country.

Table 2.1 presents the associations between demographic characteristics of Internet users and non-users in the survey, and the results of Chi-square test. An extended discussion of each factor and their implications follows.

2.3.1 Gender

The first demographic variable this research looks into was gender. When a new technology was introduced into a society, women were more reluctant to take on (Bimber, 2000; Codoban, 2005). The reason might be that a new technology was more male-friendly, being developed mostly by men. Also, men were more likely to occupy a better economic status than women. Hence, they did not have any economic restraint in trying new developments in information and communication technology.

Table 2.1

Demographic Characteristic of Internet Users and Non-Users in Thailand and Chi-square Test

Have You Ever Used the Internet?	Yes	No	Total	Chi-square
Gender:				.31
- Male	327 (69.6%)	143 (30.4%)	470 (42.3%)	
- Female	436 (68.0%)	205 (32.0%)	641 (57.7%)	
Age :				299.78***
- 18-25 years old	278 (93.0%)	21 (7.0%)	299 (26.9%)	
- 26-40 years old	349 (79.3%)	91 (20.7%)	440 (39.6%)	
- 41-60 years old	133 (39.8%)	201 (60.2%)	334 (30.1%)	
- Over 60 years old	3 (7.9%)	35 (92.1%)	38 (3.4%)	
Education:				562.00***
- No education	0 (.0%)	6 (100%)	6 (.5%)	
- Primary school	14 (8.9%)	144 (91.1%)	158 (14.2%)	
- Junior high school	21 (25.3%)	62 (74.7%)	83 (7.5%)	
- High school	105 (53.3%)	92 (46.7%)	197 (17.7%)	
- 2-year college	70 (87.5%)	10 (12.5%)	80 (7.2%)	
- Undergraduate	481 (93.6%)	33 (6.4%)	514 (46.3%)	
- Master	68 (98.6%)	1 (1.4%)	69 (6.2%)	
- Ph.D.	4 (100%)	0 (.0%)	4 (.4%)	
Ethnicity:				19.42***
- Thai	713 (68.2%)	332 (31.8%)	1045 (94.1%)	
- Chinese-Thai	12 (92.3%)	1 (7.7%)	13 (1.2%)	
- Muslim-Thai	35 (85.4%)	6 (14.6%)	41 (3.7%)	
- Others	3 (25.0%)	9 (75.0%)	12 (1.1%)	
Religion:				10.78*
- Buddhism	707 (67.7%)	337 (32.3%)	1,044 (94.0%)	
- Islam	43 (86.0%)	7 (14.0%)	50 (4.5%)	
- Christianity	13 (81.3%)	3 (18.7%)	16 (1.4%)	
- Others	0 (.0%)	1 (100%)	1 (.15%)	
Domicile:				84.94***
- Bangkok	79 (79.8%)	20 (20.2%)	99 (8.9%)	
- North	158 (75.2%)	52 (24.8%)	210 (18.9%)	
- Northeast	191 (50.9%)	184 (49.1%)	375 (33.8%)	
- East	50 (75.8%)	16(24.25%)	66 (5.9%)	
- Central	164 (77.0%)	49 (23.0%)	213 (19.2%)	
- South	121 (81.8%)	27 (18.2%)	148 (13.3%)	
Family Income				88.28***
- Less than 20,000 baht a month	323 (56.1%)	253 (43.9%)	576 (51.8%)	
- 20,000 baht and over	440 (82.2%)	95 (17.8%)	535 (48.2%)	

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, and ***p < 0.001, N=1,111

In many research studies, women tend to use the Internet less and access the Internet later than men (e.g. Li & Kirkup, 2007; Dholakia, Dholakia, & Kshei, 2004;

Brosnan & Lee, 1998; Durndell & Thomson, 1997). However, some other researches revealed no differences between men and women in Internet usage (Ono & Zavodny, 2003; NITA, 2002; Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001). The result was mixed, and to some degree dependent on analytical techniques and questions formulated in the surveys.

The result in Table 2.1 revealed no statistically significant association between male and female in Internet usage in Thailand. A total of 470 respondents or 42.3 percent of 1,111 respondents were male; and 69.6 percent of all male subjects reported that they had Internet experience. The percentage of male Internet users was very close to the female Internet users. From the survey, 641 respondents were female. 68 percent or 436 female identified themselves as an Internet user. The result of Chi-square test showed no relationship between gender and Internet usage (.581).

2.3.2 Age

In research conducted earlier – mostly in Western countries, i.e. the United States, Britain, and Australia (Thompson, 2001; Bucy, 2000; Zeffane & Cheek, 1993) – it was pointed out that age was a crucial indicator of the subjects' Internet use, and found that the elderly used the Internet less than a younger generation. An important reason leading to this phenomenon was the fact that Internet users needed to have certain basic computer skills such as typing, browsing, along with some grounding in software functions. These skills were mostly learned in either schools or higher educational institutions, where computer and IT skills had been included in the curriculum only recently. Apparently, they did not have the opportunity to learn these skills while in school. In addition, given their physical conditions resultant from old age, it was difficult for them to concentrate on the goings-on on computer monitor, to type from a not-so-large keyboard, or to move the mouse about. All these factors, naturally, could only help to discourage Internet use among the elderly.

In regard to overall Thai Internet users, research results point in the same direction as those studies in the past, namely: age was a crucial indicator of the subjects' Internet use or non-use among the respondents. The young accessed the Internet more than those in the older age groups. While 93 percent of the people aged 18-25 used the Internet, only 7.9 percent of the 60-year-old and older were interested in or actually make use of this information and telecommunication technology.

2.3.3 Educational Level

In previous studies, educational level had a strong and significant correlation with Internet usage (NITA, 2001, Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001; Thompson, 2001). Individuals with higher education were more likely to surf the Internet. The studies in Thailand also confirmed the findings in previous research. There was a wide educational gap between Internet users and non-users in Thailand. Only 25.3 percent of those who finished junior high schools (left school at age 15) and 53.3 percent of those graduated from high schools had acquired the Internet skills. However, the percentage of the Internet users increased to 87.5 percent and 93.6 percent when people studied at a 2-year college and university.

2.3.4 Ethnicity

According to the 2012 edition of CIA World Factbook, a total of 75 percent of Thailand's population are Thais, 14 percent were Chinese-Thais, and 11 percent belonged to other ethnicity groups, i.e. Muslim-Thais, Mon-Thais, and Indian-Thais. However, in this study, 95 percent of the respondents reported they were Thais. Many Chinese-Thais were reluctant to indicate their Chinese ethnicity. In fact, the line distinguishing Chinese Thais from Thais in Thailand is hazy in practice. Hence, employing ethnicity in a study

might not reveal any significant information regarding the differences in Internet usage among ethnicity groups in Thailand.

2.3.5 Religion

A total of 67.7 percent of Buddhists in Thailand reported they had used the Internet. The percentage of Internet users among Muslims and Christians increased to 86 percent and 81.3 percent respectively. A Chi-square test shows a statistically significant correlation between ethnicity and Internet usage in Thailand. However, considering the fact that the majority of Muslim and Christian respondents in the survey lived in urban areas, the correlation found in the study might not reflect the differences in terms of religion, but rather their domicile. The issue, in other words, revealed an inequality arising from domicile – between those living in urban and rural areas – rather than from their religions.

2.3.6 Domicile

Domicile proved to be an important factor associating with Internet usage in our study. From Table 2.1, respondents living in the Southern region of Thailand score the highest percentage in Internet usage (81.8 percent). Respondents from Bangkok reported a slightly lower percentage than those in the South at 79.8 percent. The percentage of Internet users in the Central, East and North were not much different from the other two regions at 77, 75.8 and 75.2 percent respectively. However, the percentage of Internet users dropped dramatically to 50.9 percent in the case of respondents from the Northeast region.

In some studies, the Northeast region was found to lag behind in the country's overall social and economic development (Bird, Hattel, Sasaki, & Attapich, 2011;

Feeney, 2003). About 40 percent of the poor in the country lived in the Northeast region (p.1). In short, the Northeast was the poorest region of Thailand. As new information and telecommunication technology, namely the Internet, spread in Thailand, her Northeast region again failed to catch up with the progress.

2.3.7 Family Income

Economic and social resources constituted an important predictor of Internet access in various countries around the world (Norris, 2001, p.77). People with high income and came from a higher social class were more equipped with knowledge and opportunities to benefit from new telecommunication technologies than other groups of individuals in a society. Using the subjects' family income as a predictor, our study found a significant correlation between socioeconomic status and Internet usage. A total of 82.2 percent of respondents with family income 20,000 baht or over a month used the Internet. The percentage of Internet users dropped to 56.1 percent in the case of those with family income less than 20,000 baht a month. The data thus revealed a huge gap between the rich and the poor on the issue of Internet access in Thailand.

The evidence so far suggested that gender did not influence the use of Internet in Thailand. Both male and female were equal in accessing the cyber space. Age turned out to be an important predictor of Internet use. The younger generation used the Internet more than the elderly. The level of education also influenced whether or not individuals in the survey would use the Internet. The respondents with higher education accessed the cyberspace much more than those finishing only junior high school (the minimum mandatory level of education in Thailand). People living in more developed areas – i.e. Bangkok, the Central and the Southern regions of Thailand also had a higher Internet access rate. This reflected a very strong regional disparity in the country. Finally, the socioeconomic factor – i.e., family income – strongly influenced the use of Internet.

The Chi-square test only tells us the association between variables in the bivariate analysis. To examine what factor influences the Internet usage in Thailand the most, we employed the stepwise logistic regression analysis. The independent variables, age and education attainment, were re-encoded. Now age was categorized into two groups, 18-40 years old and over 40 years old. Education attainment was also divided into two groups – junior high school or less and higher than junior high school.

Before running the stepwise logistic regression analysis, we checked whether or not there was multicollinearity between the variables. Gender which failed to reach the significant level in the Chi-square test in Table 2.1 was excluded in this analysis. No multicollinearity was found, since none of the independent variables included in the stepwise procedure had a standard errors larger than 2.0. In short, no independent variables themselves are highly correlated.

In our stepwise logistic regression analysis, ethnicity, religion, and domicile were dropped from the model as they did not reach a statistically significant level. In other words, education attainment, family income and age satisfied the statistical criteria for entry in our stepwise logistic regression ($p < 0.05$). Table 2.2 reveals the relationship between Internet usage and the independent variables – i.e., education attainment, family income and age.

From Table 2.2, education attainment of the respondents is the most effective independent variable in predicting Internet usage. In Model I, without controlling for other independent variables, a respondent who had higher than junior high school education is 5.355 times more likely to be an Internet user ($p < .001$). On the other hand, those with junior high school diploma or lower are only .165 as likely to be an Internet user. Model I predicts that 84.25 percent of people with higher than junior high school diploma would be an Internet user, and only 14.52 percent of those with junior high school degree or lower would use the Internet.

In the second model, the education attainment of the respondents remains strong after adding the age independent variable. These two independent variables show a significant association with Internet usage ($p < .001$). In Model II, a respondent who had

higher than junior high school education and age over 40 years old is 1.62 times more likely to become an Internet user. However, an individual having the same level of education with age between 18-40 years old has a greater chance – 10.26 times – to become an Internet user. The result in Model II tells us that younger people tend to use the Internet more than those in the older age group. The probability that an individual in Thailand with higher than junior high school diploma and aged over 40 years old will use the Internet is 61.83 percent, while 91.12 percent of younger people with the same level of education would be an Internet user.

Table 2.2

Stepwise Logistic Regression Analysis Showing Relationships between the Use of the Internet and Demographic Characteristic

	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)		
	Internet usage = YES		
	<i>Model I</i>	<i>Model II</i>	<i>Model III</i>
Main independent variable			
Education: more than junior high school =1	3.479***	3.132***	2.792***
Other independent variables			
Age: over 40 =1		-1.848***	-2.159***
Family income: less than 20,000 baht = 1			-1.255***
<i>Constant</i>	<i>-1.801</i>	<i>-.804</i>	<i>.290</i>
<i>Number of observations</i>	<i>1,111</i>	<i>1,111</i>	<i>1,111</i>
<i>% Correct Prediction</i>	<i>84.6</i>	<i>84.6</i>	<i>85.1</i>
<i>Model-Chi Square (df)</i>	<i>427.484 (1)</i>	<i>537.884 (2)</i>	<i>580.117 (3)</i>
<i>-2 Log Likelihood</i>	<i>953.848</i>	<i>884.448</i>	<i>801.215</i>
<i>Nagelkerke R Square</i>	<i>.449</i>	<i>.539</i>	<i>.572</i>

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, and ***p < 0.001

Looking at a respondent who had a junior high school diploma or lower with age over 40 years old, his chance to become an Internet user is about 0.07 time. The likelihood that a respondent having the same level of education aged between 18-40 to become an Internet user is higher at 2.23 times. Model II predicts that the probability of people with a junior high school diploma or lower and aged over 40 years old would use the Internet is 0.07 percent, and 69.04 for those aged between 18-40. The -2 Log Likelihood statistic in Model II dropped to 884.448 from 953.848 in Model I. It indicates

that, after adding age into the Model, Model II is doing a better job in predicting Internet usage than the Model I.

Then we added another independent variable – family income – into Model III. All independent variables in Model III have a significant correlation to the use of the Internet ($p < .001$). People with higher family income (20,000 baht or over a month) would be more likely to use the Internet than those with a lower family income. The -2 Log Likelihood statistic in Model III decreased to 801.215, signifying that this model is much more effective in predicting the dependent variable in our study.

At Block 0 with no independent variables, the proportion in the largest group is 68.7 percent. The by chance of accuracy rate is 0.569. In order for Model I, II, and III to be characterized as a usual model, their accuracy rate should be 25 percent higher than the by chance accuracy rate. In other words, the Model I, II, and III's accuracy rate must be higher than 71.12 percent. The statistics in Table 2.2 revealed that all of these models have a higher percentage of prediction accurate than the by chance of accuracy rate. It is interpreted that our independent variables – education level, age and family income – could be characterized as useful predictors.

In order to test the validity of our results, we performed a 75/25 percent cross-validation. We randomly selected 75 percent of the cases and set it as the training sample. It, then, was compared to the stepwise logistic regression on the remaining 25 percent of the cases (the validation sample). We found the same independent variables were presented in Table 2.2, the training sample and validation sample (education attainment, age, and family income). The validation analysis supported the generalization of the findings to the population represented by the sample in our data set.

2.4 Inequality among Thai Internet Users

Many studies on the digital divide tended to focus on finding the different characteristics of the Internet users and non-users. However, the digital inequality may

not exist only between the users and non-users of the Internet. Even among the users themselves, inequality may also occur – i.e., certain groups may be able to use the Internet better than others in terms of efficiency, thus gaining more benefits from the new technology. This section, therefore, has been designed to find out if there is any disparity in Internet use among the Internet users.

Eszter Hargittai (2002) studied the relationship between the number of years using the Internet and the level of Internet skills among Internet users. It was found that there was a positive correlation between these two factors. In other words, the longer the subjects went online, the more they became accustomed to all Internet functions. The length of Internet surfing hours, therefore, is an appropriate measurement of the quality of Internet usage among users in Thailand. The linear regression analysis has been employed as principal statistical tool to determine the relationships between the length of Internet usage, demographic factors and socioeconomic status.

In the survey, the respondents were asked how many years they had been using the Internet. It was required in the survey that the subjects must have at least a year of experience in Internet surfing. In other words, one year was set as a minimum requirement to eliminate the Internet beginners, who might not have enough proficiency in using the Internet, and therefore might not absorb enough impact from the Internet to affect any changes in their behavior and attitudes.

Before running the linear regression test, we checked the normality of the dependent variable. The skewness of the dependent variable (the number of years using the Internet) and the Kurtosis of the distribution are .155 and -.502. Both values are between -1.0 and 1.0, indicating the normality of our dependent variable. After that, we examined the outliers. Any outliers detected were removed from the test.

The number of cases in this statistic test is 741. The total number of years since the respondents first used the Internet range from 1 to 18. The mean is 8.007 and standard deviation (S.D.) is 3.758. On average, the respondents had been surfing on-line for about 8 years.

We also included new independent variable, namely internet activities, into the regression model. These activities are: sending or receiving e-mail, following news/information online, joining online social network such as Facebook, Twitter, and Hi5, and participating in online political discussions. Of all Internet users in the survey, 85.6 percent indicated they sent or receive e-mail at least once a week. A total of 96 percent said they followed news or information online, while 78.6 percent reporting they accessed the Internet for online social networking, and 22 percent engaging in online political discussions.

Table 2.3

Linear Regression of Demographic Characteristics and Online Activities in the Number of Years the Respondents Had Been Using the Internet

User Characteristics	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)
Gender	
■ Female +	
■ Male	.418
(constant)	7.827
R-Square	.003
<hr/>	
Age (per 1 year increase in age)	-.054**
(constant)	9.676
R-Square	.021
<hr/>	
Education	
■ Primary School +	
■ Junior High School	-.905
■ High School	.613
■ 2-year-college	.204
■ Undergraduate	2.284*
■ Master and Ph.D. Degree	2.361*
(constant)	6.286
R-Square	.065
<hr/>	
Ethnicity	
■ Thai-Muslim +	
■ Thai	.914
■ Thai-Chinese	.969
■ Others	.581
(constant)	7.086
R-Square	.003
<hr/>	
Religion	
■ Muslim +	
■ Buddhism	.769
■ Christianity	.952
(constant)	7.279
R-Square	.002

Table 2.3 (Continued)

Linear Regression of Demographic Characteristics and Online Activities in the Number of Years the Respondents Had Been Using the Internet

User Characteristics	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)
<i>Domicile</i>	
■ Bangkok +	
■ North	-.395
■ Northeast	-2.177***
■ East	-1.523**
■ Central	-1.111*
■ South	-1.561**
<i>(constant)</i>	9.211
<i>R-Square</i>	.039
<i>Family income</i>	
■ Less than 20,000 Baht a month +	
■ 20,000 Baht or over a month	.525
<i>(constant)</i>	7.706
<i>R-Square</i>	.005
<i>Internet Activities</i>	
■ Sending or receiving email (yes =1)	2.728***
■ Following news/information online (yes=1)	-.301
■ Joining social network (yes=1)	1.323***
■ Engaging in online political discussion (yes =1)	.884**
<i>(constant)</i>	4.743
<i>R-Square</i>	.130

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, and ***p < 0.001

*N=732

In most of the research studies conducted earlier, descriptive and cross-tabulation analyses were employed to study whether or not gender difference existed in Internet usage. These studies compared whether or not men were using the Internet more than women (e.g. Li & Kirkup, 2007; Codoban, 2005). Very few of them used regression analysis as the main instrument. In Hiroshi Ono and Madeline Zavodny's work, logistic regression analysis was used to find an association between the place people used the Internet and their gender. Even though the longitude technique was employed, their research did not tell whether gender inequality existed in the realm of Internet usage. They merely indicated that men and female preferred to use the Internet at different places. In other words, their study showed that women in a particular year were more likely to use the Internet at home than men.

Our research explored a different track, asking Thai individuals to identify how long they had been accessing the Internet. Using a linear regression analysis, one could spot gender difference in actual Internet usage. Many believed that computer and the Internet were made for males, and that males were better at using it. Contrary to what people thought, the data revealed no difference between genders in regard to Internet usage. From Table 2.3, there was no significant association between gender and the number of years using the Internet among the subjects. Our result went along the same line as recent studies in the same field. Many researchers found, as time progressed, that gender no longer had any significant influence on Internet use, as women gained more knowledge on the Internet and computer literacy (i.e. Ono and Zavodny, 2003; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005).

2.4.2 Age

The next demographic factor shown in Table 2.3 is age of the Internet users. It was found that age would create a negative effect in the number of years Internet usage experience. With one year increased in age, the number of years using the Internet would reduce 0.054 year. The result was consistent with many studies conducted earlier in either developed or developing countries, which found that the young were likely to access the Internet more than the elderly people (e.g. Jones & Fox, 2009; Rhee & Kim, 2004).

2.4.3 Educational level

Our study found that educational attainment played a part in determining how many years the respondents had been using the Internet. Respondents who were studying at a university had a statistically significant longer experience in Internet use than those with lower education. The constant (respondents with primary school attainment) is

6.286 years. The year total the respondents with undergraduate and graduate degree had been using the Internet increased from the constant by 2.284 and 2.361 years. Clearly, the result confirmed that Internet usage strongly depended on the respondents' education attainment. The higher the education attained by the respondent, the longer they had been using the Internet. In other words, age is negatively correlated to the number of years the respondent had been using the Internet.

2.4.4 Ethnicity and Religion

Our study could not find correlation between ethnicity/religion and Internet usage in this country.

2.4.5 Domicile

From Table 2.3 on domicile characteristics, it is found that respondents who lived in Bangkok had longer experience in Internet use than respondents from other regions. Those from the Central, Northeast, East and Southern regions of Thailand had been using the Internet less than their Bangkok-domiciled counterparts by 1.111, 2.177, 1.523, and 1.561 years respectively. The constant is 9.211 years. The regression analysis supported the hypothesis that Bangkok is more developed than other regions in terms of ICT. Again, the Northeast region of Thailand proved to be far less developed than others. The number of years respondents from the Northeast region had been accessing to the Internet is the lowest – 7.176 years.

In addition, the result is consistent with findings in the previous section, namely: respondents who lived in Bangkok tend to access the Internet more than their counterpart in less developed areas. Even among the Internet users, there was such a digital divide as well: those in the cities are more likely to have longer Internet-surfing experience.

2.4.6 Family Income

Our regression analysis reveals no significant correlation between the respondents' family income and the duration of Internet use. It was likely that the Internet users in our survey came from families with little difference in terms of family income.

2.4.7 Internet Activities

Our inclusion of online activities as an independent variable for predicting Internet usage duration is based on the following hypothesis: “an interest in certain online activities constitutes a motivation or stimulus for the respondents to decide to learn more, and to try to access the Internet so they can perform those activities.”

If online activities are related to the duration of Internet use, the finding would allow us to use those activities as a motivation to induce people who currently are not Internet users to perceive its various benefits, and to transform them into users, and thereby closing the technological gap between these two groups.

In other words, their interest might influence their decision to use or not to use the Internet. The variation in the way people use the Internet might limit or expand their social, cultural and economic opportunities/potentials in their real lives. That is, not all online activities would enhance the Internet users' social, financial and human capital (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004). Hence, it becomes significant to study their uptake in online activities and their Internet usage duration. The results present the following online activities strongly correlate with the duration of the Internet usage, sending or receiving email, joining online social network, and participating in online political discussion. The respondents conducting these online activities tend to have longer experience in Internet usage than those who used the Internet for other purposes.

It is important to note here that the R^2 value in our statistic test is very low. Hence, we should interpret the results with caution. It is likely that there are other

independent variables which could explain the length of Internet usage better than the demographic characteristics employed in this study.

From the seven independent variables – gender, age, education attainment, ethnicity, religion, domicile, family income and online activities, only four were proved to significantly correlate with the time length one used the Internet. These independent variables are age, education attainment, domicile and online activities. In order to examine which variable is the most parsimonious set of predictors in predicting the duration of Internet usage, we employed the stepwise linear regression analysis. Table 2.4 illustrates our findings.

Table 2.4

Stepwise Linear Regression of Age, Education Attainment, Domicile and Online Activities in the Number of Years the Respondents Had Been Using the Internet

	Untandardized Coefficients (B)			
	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
Sending or receiving e-mail (yes=1)	.331***	.263***	.267***	.263***
Joining social network (yes=1)		.180***	.171***	.153***
Domicile: Bangkok (yes =1)			.103***	.106**
Engaging in online political discussion (yes =1)				.101**
<i>constant</i>	<i>4.901</i>	<i>4.253</i>	<i>4.146</i>	<i>4.107</i>
<i>R</i>	<i>.331</i>	<i>.371</i>	<i>.384</i>	<i>.397</i>
<i>R-Square</i>	<i>.110</i>	<i>.137</i>	<i>.148</i>	<i>.158</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>729</i>	<i>729</i>	<i>729</i>	<i>729</i>

*Note:**p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, and ***p < 0.001

Based on the stepwise regression analysis in Table 2.4, the best predictors of the duration of Internet usage are the online activities the respondents conducting online – sending or receiving e-mail, joining online social network, and engaging in online political activities – along with the place where the respondents lived. The *B* coefficients in Model IV are all positive implying a direct relationship between the duration of the Internet usage and online activities and domicile. The respondents' age and education

attainment failed to reach a significant correlation with the duration of the Internet usage in the stepwise analysis.

The *R*-square increased as the SPSS added more independent variables into the models. In Model IV, the *R*-square is .158. The increase in *R*-square as we included independent variables into each model was statistically significant ($p < .01$). The Multiple *R* for the relationship between the independent variables included in the analysis and the dependent variable was .397, which would be characterized as acceptable (greater than .20).

The Durbin-Watson statistics from the analysis is 1.746. The value falls within the acceptable range from 1.50 to 2.50. Our analysis passes the assumption of independence of errors, and there is no serial correlation. As for multicollinearity, the tolerance values for all of the independent variables in the table of excluded variables are greater than .10, passing the minimum requirement. All in all, our analysis is statistically valid, and the independent variables in Table 2.4 could be used to predict the duration of Internet usage.

2.5 Summary

As mentioned at the beginning, this chapter aims at answering three key questions: 1) Who are the Internet users in Thailand?; 2) Is there a digital divide?; and 3) What are the factors contributing to this digital divide? The first question has been answered in section 2.3.

From the questionnaire focusing on population aged 18 on up, it is found that most Thai Internet users belonged to the 18-40 age group, well educated (higher than the 9-year mandatory level), and economic better off.

As for the second question asking whether Thailand had a digital divide, the answer had been given in sections 2.3 and 2.4. Section 2.3 examined the demographic differences between Internet users and non-users. A statistical analysis of the survey data

indicated that there was a disparity of Internet access among various social groups in Thailand. Specifically, only certain groups were able to access the Internet, and thereby obtained greater benefits from it.

The strongest predictor for the Internet usage in Thailand is education attainment. Using the junior high school as a base line, our study found people with junior high school or lower education degree tend to be a non-Internet user. Age and family income are two other independent variables influencing whether or not an individual would use the Internet.

In section 2.4, the analysis delved deeper into the Internet user group to see whether any difference or digital divide existed among them. And we found that a digital divide in regard to Internet use did exist here as well. Unlike the result between Internet users and non-users, age, education attainment, and family income did not associate with the length of Internet usage. The result could be interpreted that most of the Internet users in Thailand belonged to the same demographic group. The factors contributing to a digital inequality among Internet users were the type of online activities people conducting in cyberspace, and domicile.

Among the Internet users, we found that domicile was significantly correlated to the length of Internet usage. The data confirmed the existence of regional disparity in the country. However, it also shed some light to those trying to promote digital equality in Thailand.

Compared to other regions, people in Bangkok could access the Internet easier and at a much cheaper expense. Bangkokians who did not have Internet connection at home could conveniently access the Internet at other places. At almost every corner of the city, one could access free Wi-Fi funded by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, or pay about 10 to 20 baht (.32 to .63 US dollar) per hour to use computer and connect to the WWW at “Internet café,” a shop providing computers and Internet access for customers. Connecting to the Internet at home for Bangkokians was quite convenient and not very pricey, as almost all basic ICT infrastructures had been well developed in this area. The spread of low-cost Internet connection throughout the

city had allowed people from all social classes to use the Internet. The finding provided hope that with the plummeting cost of Internet relating equipments, either in terms of hardware or software, and “proper” interventions by the government – i.e. cost subsidy and the equal distribution of the low-cost and wide spread Internet connection, the gap in Internet access between the economic haves and have-nots might be reduced.

Results from the survey indicated that the haves in Thai society had an upper hand in the form of access to a much wider range of information on cyberspace. This might not be surprising, as disparities seemed to exist everywhere in Thailand. Being able to access the Internet might not be a life-threatening issue in the society. As a new media, many academics still had doubts whether the Internet constituted a significant factor that could shape or change societies (Norris, p. 49). However, nobody could deny that the ability to access information via the Internet would give people more opportunities and choices regarding their lives. Hence, it is important to pay attention to the digital divide.

All in all, this chapter pointed out that the Internet distribution was not equal among Thai population. The digital divide in Thailand is likely to reinforce existing social inequalities. People who had never accessed the Internet were more likely to belong to the have-not group in the society. As connecting to the Internet would provide opportunities to its users in terms of information access and human capital development, the haves would possibly be even more equipped to leap further and accumulate more advantages. Hence, it is likely that Thailand might encounter a new technological division in the society, adding more problems to the already heavy loads of social, economic, and political divisions she currently experiences.

Regrettably, the “digital divide” issue had not received the attention it deserved from the Thai government. In addition, the general public itself is not conscious of this on-going problem. Within the Thai academic circle, while studies on Internet use from the business and political perspectives existed, the issue “equality of access to the Internet among Thai people” was hardly explored. Accordingly, it is imperative that an awareness of this issue be instilled among policy-makers at the national as well as grass-root levels.

Another important factor contributing to the scaling down of inequality in regard to Internet access among Thais was educational attainment. Our study had indicated that Internet use among the respondents tended to increase along with their level of education. We also found that those with an education higher than the mandatory level tended to use the Internet more than their compatriots with only mandatory education. This inevitably raised concerns over the country's basic educational system, specifically its inability to provide sufficient skills and experience in Internet usage to the population. As such, the government should consider making Internet education a top priority at the mandatory level.

In addition, the Thai government should pay more attention to educational programs outside of the official system, aiming at reducing inequality in Internet use between the young and the middle age on up.

Data in section 2.3 indicated that respondents in the 41 and over age group registered a very low level of Internet use. Since formal education system could no longer reach them, it seems necessary that the government provided additional educational programs outside of the official system to raise their level of skills in Internet usage

Our study has indicated that there is a digital divide among the Thai population, and that it is an important issue requiring a positive intervention by the Thai government. We have also offered some suggestions to remedy the situation. However, it seems appropriate to point out that the study has a number of limitations. There are two most obvious and important ones: First, the respondents were 18 years of age on up. Accordingly, this was not quite a comprehensive reflection of the Internet users all over Thailand, as users could begin accessing the cyberspace at an age younger than that. Besides, a study of the Internet users 18 years of age on down might shed more light on the efficiency of Thailand's mandatory education system in regard to Internet usage.

Secondly, our division of population along domicile line in Bangkok and other regions was approximate, without specifying whether it was in urban or rural areas. Furthermore, the study had left out infrastructure features from our domicile category. As

such, our analysis could only indicate in effect the disparity between Internet users inside the capital city and those outside, and not quite between urban or rural areas.

A research project that delves into the detailed features of urban and rural areas would enable us to see the character of IT distribution in all Thailand much more clearly and accurately. Accordingly, more studies on the digital divide should be conducted further on along the line suggested above.

CHAPTER 3

THE IMPACT OF INTERNET ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THAILAND

3.1 Introduction

Whether or not the Internet influences political behavior and civic attitudes is an important research topic many scholars are recently interested in. Past studies offer mixed results over the effects of the Internet on citizens' political participation. Some of them confirm that the Internet usage increased political participation and efficacy, while others pointed out that it had a negative or null effect.

Matthew Nisbet and Dietram Scheufele (2004) found participating in online political discussion and political campaign was positively correlated to political knowledge. The result of their research is similar to the work of Barry Wellman, Anabel Quan Haase, James Witte and Keith Hamston (2001). In the latter research, the Internet usage was associated with the increase in number of voluntary organizations and political participation. Along the same line, Caroline Tolbert and Ramona Mcneal (2003) studied the Internet users in the United States and found that, after controlling for socioeconomic status, those Internet users who seek online political news were more likely to go voting than those who did not. Their result is very similar to Kate Kenski and Natalie Stroud's research (2006) on the relationships between seeking online information about the US presidential campaign and the users' political knowledge, efficacy and participation. They found that the correlation between these variables were statistically significant.

Also, the study in Britain showed that the Internet promoted political participation among younger generations and the have-nots (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005). In Taiwan, Song-In Wang (2007), employing a pathway analysis, confirmed that the use of Internet for political purposes increased the subjects' political interest, level of trust in government, and their political efficacy. His finding remained significant even after

controlling for demographic variables – i.e. gender, age, education attainment and income.

The five works mentioned above are among many studies finding that the Internet usage increased political participation among its users. Most of these studies applied quantitative research methodology and used statistical analysis as a principal technique. When it comes to the reason why the Internet fosters political participation among its users, most scholars ground their theory on social capital (i.e. Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001; Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001). Based on Robert Putnam's definition (1993), social capital refers to:

...features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions. (p. 167)

Significantly, social capital is vital for democracy as it lays groundwork for people to interact and build trust with one another, and forms civic networks. As regard the question how to establish and strengthen the social capital in a society, Putnam suggested that we look into associations between people in their daily lives. In his study, people learned to trust others and developed their organizational skills via their interactions with others in their networks. In networks, people would interact, trade off their positions, and tolerate different perspectives.

However, not all networks contribute to the social capital. In general, there are two types of networks: strong-ties or bonding, and weak-ties or bridging networks (Granovetter, 1983). A strong-ties network refers to an association of close friends and relatives most of whom know one another. It is a closely knit community. On the contrary, a weak-ties network is a group of acquaintances, few of whom know one another. Each individual in weak-ties networks tend to have their own strong-ties networks. As a result, weak-ties networks play a crucial role in connecting and expanding the closely knit communities. In short, weak-ties networks help form a society more conducive to democracy (Putnam, 2000; Son & Lin, 2008). As weak-ties networks spread out, individuals would transcend a sense of "others," and turn it into "ours."

Public affairs are no longer other people's business, but ours. This attitude is fundamental for civic engagement.

All in all, scholars in this camp perceive the Internet as a key communication channel to bridge people from different spectrums. They explained that the Internet allowed its users to accumulate information and resources, and reach people outside their immediate social network or strong-ties network (Zuniga & Valenzuela, 2011).

However, there are other researchers in the field – the “pessimists” – who disagree with the results of the above-mentioned studies. Robert Kraut, Michael Patterson, Vicki Lundmark, Sara Kiesler, Tridas Mukopadhyay, and William Scherlisterly (1998), for instance, stated that, as the usage of Internet increased, the users' offline social contacts significantly decreased. Moreover, Internet usage was positively correlated with depression among users. They explained that it was common among Internet users to experience stress when making contact with other online people. Moreover, when posting comments or interacting with other people online, the Internet users in most cases cannot control the ensuing outcomes. Getting disturbing reactions, comments, or information was an unavoidable phenomenon online. After experiencing such incidents, a certain number of Internet users alienated themselves from others. They not only withdrew themselves from the online world, but also from others in face to face relations.

In his work, Anthony G. Wilhelm (1999) rejected the hypothesis that the interactions in online political discussion forums would cultivate political knowledge and participation. He stated that people participating in online discussions were not be able to establish any network there as they only encountered one another on the digital virtual world, and the duration of their relationship was too short to form any real commitment. Also, applying content analysis in his study, he found most online discussions were shallow, incoherent, and not useful (p. 169-175). The vast information in the online world may confuse the user, and make them feel overwhelmed. Indeed, it may even lower the users' confidence and their self-efficacy, leading to the users' decision to disengage from politics (Norris, 2001). As for empirical findings, there are many studies showing nil or

negative correlations between the Internet use and political participation activities (i.e. Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003).

Clearly, the findings of past studies mentioned above on Internet usage and political participation point in the opposite direction, causing confusion among academics as well as public policy-makers. The divergence may have been caused by two important factors. First, each study collects population samples in a different time frame. Some of them obtain samples in the period when the Internet was just becoming popular, while others obtain theirs after the population has been using the Internet for quite sometime. It is this exposure duration that accounts for such a divergence. That is, in the first batch of studies, the samples' Internet exposure might be too short to cause any change in their political behavior.

The second factor deals with categories from where the samples are collected for comparison of the Internet's impact. Some studies compare, for instance, the differences between the Internet users and non-users. Others focus on the differences in political participation among the Internet users themselves. It is only logical to expect that, using a different category of samples would lead to a different set of research findings.

Learning from the limitations of past studies, ours has introduced "the duration of Internet usage" as an independent variable, in search of correlations between Internet usage and political participation. In addition, we will also compare the differences in political behavior among the Internet users and those with no prior experience in this matter, as well as among the Internet users themselves.

Another highlight of our present study is its focus on a country whose "democracy" is still in the formative process, as evidenced from the sporadic military coup d'états in the past 80 years, with the most recent one taking place in 2006. As such, finding factors that will help promote political participation among the population constitutes an important contribution to the building of a stable and self-sustaining democracy in the long run. The principal aim of this chapter is to answer the *RQ*₂: Does the Internet increase political participation among its users? And its content is divided into three sections:

- *Analytical framework*: here we will discuss the dependent variable “political participation scores,” focusing on the derivation of its total. This will constitute the “main indicator” with which to analyze relationships with other independent variables. In addition, we will also explain the indicators of other dependent variables, namely: individual resources, demographic characteristics, Internet usage, duration of Internet usage and Internet activities.
- *Political Participation and the Internet*: here we will try to ascertain the relationship between the people’s Internet usage and political participation, and to verify the significance of Internet usage in regard to political behavior of the sample population, keeping other variables under control.
- *Summary*: An analysis of the impact of Internet usage on political participation in Thailand, its direction and trends, as well as the limitations of our study.

3.2 Analytical Framework

It is only logical that we begin with definition of the dependent variable, the political participation scores, and independent variables individual resources, demographic characteristics, Internet usage, duration of Internet usage and Internet activities. The objective is to make crystal clear the scope of our study in the search for correlations between political participation and Internet usage in Thailand.

3.2.1 Defining political participation and scores

Political participation is one of the key elements in democracy (Dahl, 1998). However, what it is or comprises of is still an on-going debate among scholars in the “democratic theory” domain. It is, therefore, important to clarify what “political

participation” refers to in this study. Here we have adopted the broad and commonly used definition coined by Sidney Verba, Kay L. Schlozman, and Henry Brady (1995) as follows:

...activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies. (p. 38)

Accordingly, this study deals with action made by people inside a society aiming at influencing public policies and decisions of those in power. This definition is broad enough to include all activities that any individual could possibly conduct. At the same time, it excludes those activities that may contain political implications but do not have an intention to change public policies/decisions, such as going to a government agency to register a new member of a household.

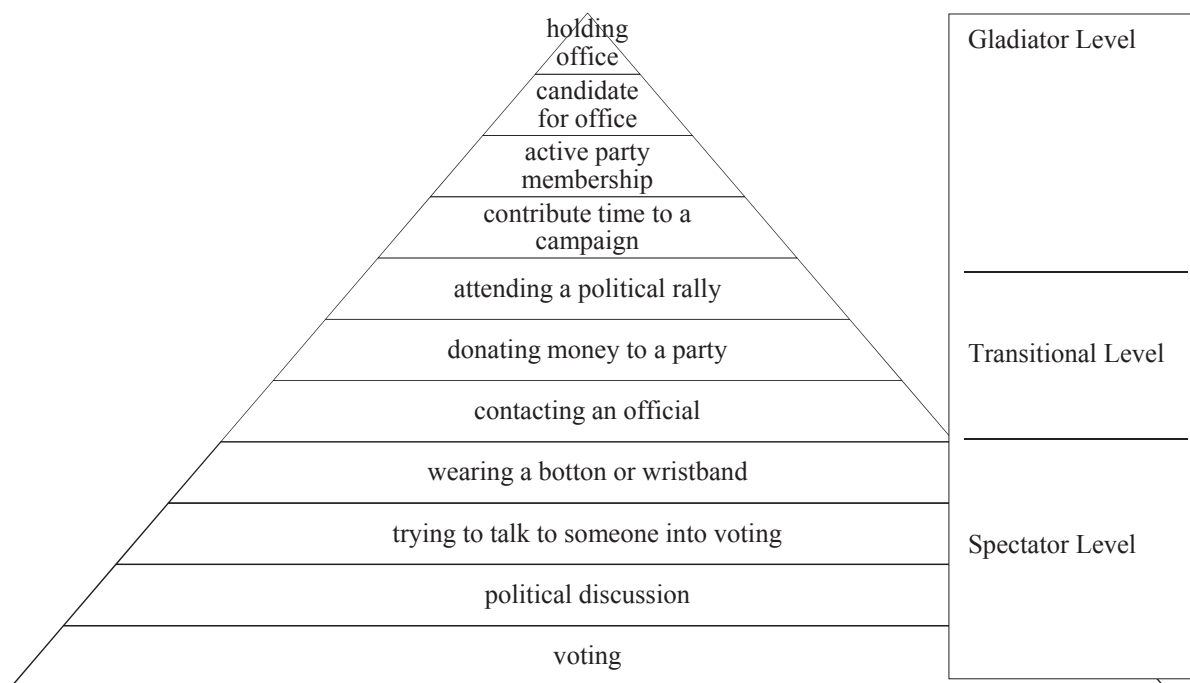
Another aspect of political participation is that not all activities are equal in terms of its influences on the policy-makers. Also, some activities require more resources – for instance, time, money, and knowledge – from the persons who perform those activities. Political participation, therefore, comprises of many actions that can be categorized in a hierarchical order. Based on such concept, Lester Milbrath (1965) developed a political participation hierarchical model. Figure 3.1 below shows political participation activities categorized into three groups: spectator, transitional, and gladiator levels.

According to Milbrath, spectator level is the lowest and most common form of political participation. Time, economic factor, knowledge and skill are factors limiting people from performing some political activities. In other word, moving to other levels in the model requires certain resources and qualifications from the citizens. Whether or not the individuals possess such resources is a crucial factor in their decision to participate in politics. Milbrath summarized: “persons who engage in the topmost behavior are very likely to perform those lower in rank also” (p. 17-18).

Following Milbrath’s model, the survey asked the subjects in Thailand to report whether or not they conducted the political activities described in his model in the last five years. After testing the model in a pilot test, we adjusted and put more details into

some activities in the actual survey. For political discussion, the question in Thailand was changed to whether or not the respondents have ever “initiated political discussion.” And, we put “having political stickers” as another medium to show the respondents’ political stand. As to contacting officials, we elaborated the question as whether or not the respondents have ever “contacted a public official or political leader to solve community problem.” The reason for the changes is to clarify the questions in order to avoid the respondents’ confusion, and make the questions more understandable in Thai context.

Figure 3.1 The Milbrath’s model of political participation



Source: Adapted from Milbrath, 1965.

The percentage of respondents in Thailand saying they had conducted each political activity at least one time in the last five year is illustrated in Figure 3.2. The most common political activity the Thai people conducted was to go to vote (91.4 percent of the respondents went to vote). The latest general election in Thailand was in July 2011, 4 months before the survey conducted. Also, it is important to point out that under

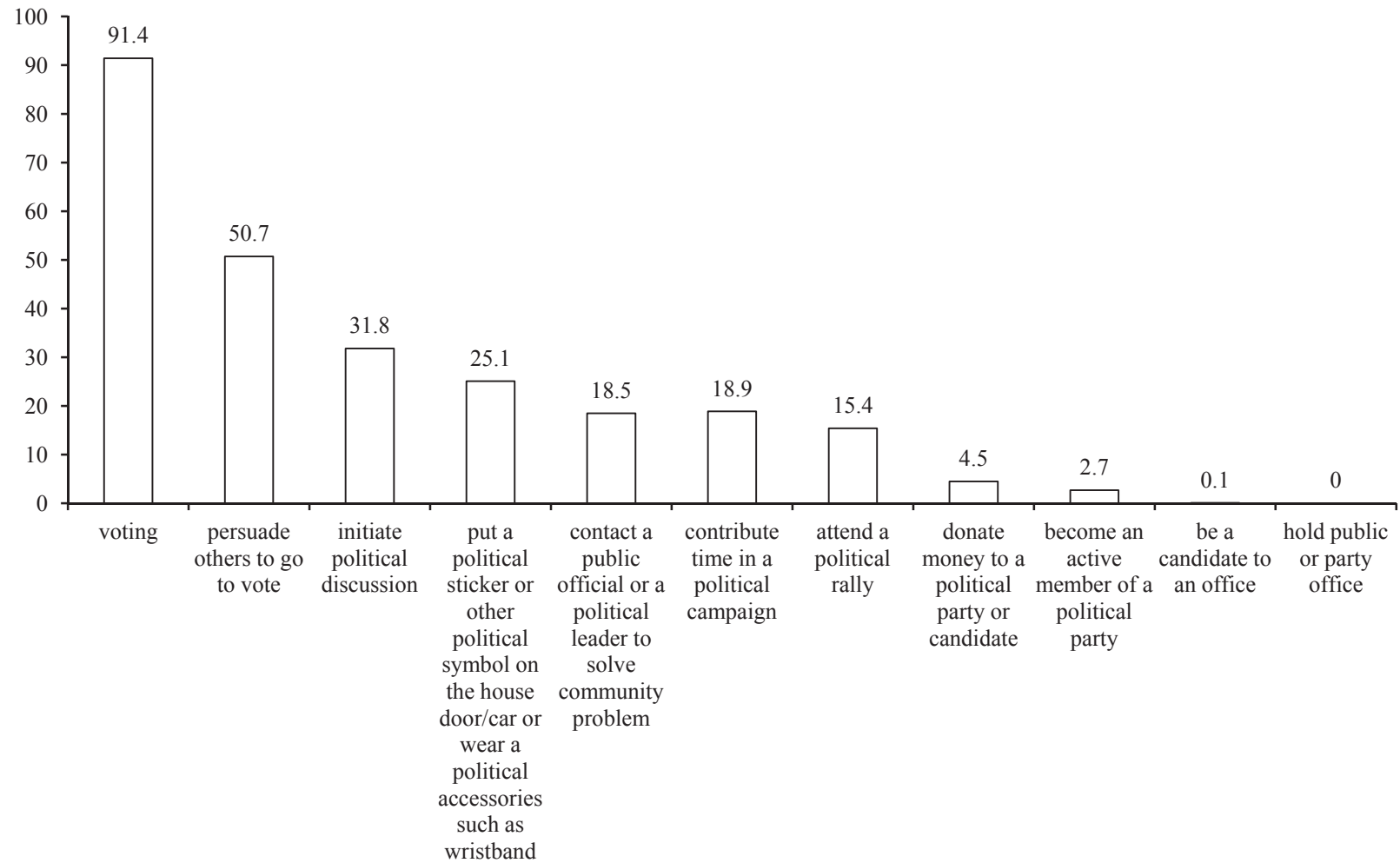
the 1997 and 2007 Thai constitutions, voting was mandatory. As a result, the voting turnout rate in Thailand might be very high. Persuading others to go to vote was the second common political activities in Thailand. It could be summarized that most political activities the Thais engaged in were at the spectator level, or the lowest level of political participation.

Looking at the transitional level, the percentage of respondents contacting a public official or political leader to solve community problem is not much different from those attending a political rally – at 18.5 percent and 15.4 percent, respectively. Making monetary contribution to a political party or candidate is the least popular activities at the transitional level. Only 4.5 percentage of respondents reported performing this political action.

At the gladiator level, no respondent reported they hold a public or party office. Also, only one respondent or 0.1 percent of all subjects in the survey indicated he had been a candidate to an office. The most common political action the respondents conducted at this level is to contribute their time in a political campaign at 18.9 percent. The second common action is to become an active member of a political party. A total of 30 out of 1,111 respondents or 2.7 percent reported performing such political activity.

It appears that the pattern of political participation in Thailand coincides with that in other countries. In other words, people tend to participate more in political activities at the spectator level, and less at the higher levels. However, the percentage of people participating in each activity at the transitional and gladiator levels in Thailand was lower than those in developed countries such as the United States. For example, 18 percent of Americans (Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009) donated money to a political party or candidate, whereas only 4.5 percent of Thais conducted the same activity. Only 18.5 percent of Thai people contacted an official or a political leader to solve a community problem. On the contrary, about 30 percent of the US citizens did try to resolve community issues with a local or state government official. The Americans also participated more at the gladiator level.

Figure 3.2 Percentage of respondent performing each political action in Thailand



Note: N=1,111

While 15 percent of Americans were active members of a group that tries to influence public policy, only 2.7 percent of the Thais became active members of a political party. The difference in the number of people participating in transitional and gladiator activities seems to be one of the reasons why democratic development in Thailand progresses very slowly up to now.

The distribution of political participation activities in Thailand concentrates at the spectator level. “What holds back the Thais from political participation at higher levels?” This is the next question to be discussed. To facilitate our analysis, we need to organize our data first in the form of “single scale,” so as to make them malleable to subsequent advanced statistical evaluation.

Counting the total scores of all types of political participation seems to be the easiest and most convenient solution. But there is a risk that statistical analysis might not yield a true picture, given our three-level classification of political participation, with each having a different value of easiness/difficulty score. As such, we need a gauge to measure the level of political participation, one that will reflect the differences at each of the three levels.

Accordingly, to composite the scores in this study, we decided to convert the summary of activities in each political participation level to z-scores. Then, we added up the z-scores which have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, and came up with a final composite. With this composite technique, the low level of political participation activities would not overweight other activities in the composite, and the composite is more reliable as a result.

In the composite scores, “holding public office or party office” variable has been excluded, as there were no respondents reporting having performed this activity. The minimum score in the new composite is -2.87, and the maximum score is 9.72. The Mean is 0 and Standard Deviation (S.D.) is 2.34. The S.D. reveals that the political participation scores curve is skewed to the left. It reflects that Thai people do not participate much in politics, and, when they do, they conduct only those activities at the spectator level.

3.2.2 Internet usage and Internet activities

There are three main indicators employed to analyze the impact of the Internet on political participation scores in the study. The first indicator is whether or not the Internet users had experience in using the Internet. From 1,111 respondents, 68.7 percent said they were an Internet user. Details on who are Internet users in Thailand have already been discussed in Chapter 2.

The second indicator is the duration of Internet usage that the Internet users reported. The total number of years since the respondents first used the Internet range from 1 to 23. The mean is 8.199 and standard deviation (S.D.) is 4.026 ($N=753$).

The last indicator in this category is the activities the respondents conducted online. The variation in the way people use the Internet might limit or expand their social, cultural and economic opportunities/potentials in their real lives. In other words, not all online activities would enhance the Internet users' social, financial and human capital (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004). Hence, it becomes significant to study their uptake in online activities.

In the survey, the respondents were asked to identify the online activities they conducted at least once in a week. The activities listed in the survey are: 1) sending or receiving e-mail 2) playing games online 3) following news/information online 4) downloading entertainment media online 5) participating in social network 6) participating in online political discussion. The respondents were also asked to list other online activities they conducted in space provided in the questionnaire. However, less than 1 percent of the respondents chose to provide other online activities. As a result, the data on other online activities was excluded in Table 3.1.

The online activities listed in Table 3.1 could be categorized into three groups. The first category of online activities is for information acquisition. In the survey, the online activity that belongs to the first category is to follow news/information online. The second category is to access the Internet for interpersonal communication. These activities include: 1) sending or receiving e-mail 2) participating in social network 3) participating in online political discussion. The third category is the activities for

entertainment and leisure purpose, playing games online and downloading or watching entertainment media online (Weiser, 2000, 168). It is important to note here that the line between these three categories is blurred. For example, there is a possibility that those playing games online could interact to other players and build their own network based on the online friendship. However, the main objective of playing online games is for entertainment. Hence, it is included in the second category.

Table 3.1

Online Activities the Respondents Reported Conducting by Percentage

Do you do the following online activities at least one time a week?	Yes	No
<i>1. Information Acquisition</i>		
... following news/information online	731 (96.1%)	30 (3.9%)
<i>2. Interpersonal Communication</i>		
... sending or receiving e-mails	651 (85.8%)	108 (14.2%)
... participating in social network	595 (78.6%)	162 (21.4%)
... participating in online political discussion	166 (22.0%)	588 (88.0%)
<i>3. Entertainment and Leisure Purpose</i>		
... downloading or watching entertainment media online	614 (81.1%)	143 (18.9%)
... playing games online	425 (56.1%)	333 (43.9%)

Note: N=763

The online activity most of the respondents in the survey conducted is to follow news/information. A total of 96.1 percent of the respondents reported they follow news/information online. The second most popular online activity is sending or receiving e-mails. A total of 85.8 percent of the respondents did this activity at least one time a week. We also found that 81.1 percent of the respondents who accessed the Internet downloaded or watched entertainment media online from the website like Youtube, and online television; and that 78.6 percent of the respondents indicated they participated in online social network such as Facebook, Twitter and Hi5. About one quarter of the respondents (22 percent) accessed to online political participation web boards in Thailand.

In general, Thai people went online for information acquisition, interpersonal communication and entertainment purposes. Nonetheless, from the data in Table 3.2, it

seems the number of Internet users in Thailand who spend time online for activities that could enhance their social capitals is slightly higher than those focusing on entertainment online activities. In this study, we will test three online activities – following news/information online, participating in social network, participating in online political discussion; and then correlate them with the level of political participation.

3.2.3 Individual resources measurement

Having in hand the political participation scores, we now move on to analyze the correlations between the respondent's political participation scores and their resources. Based on Milbrath (1965) and Brady, Verba, and Schlozman (1995), individual resources refer to socioeconomic status, education attainment, political efficacy, and organization skills each individual possesses. In their study, resources are the main factors constraining the individual's political participation.

Socioeconomic status: we use a household income as an indicator to determine the respondent's socioeconomic status. The National Statistical Office (NSO) reported that in 2009 the average household income in Thailand was about 20,903 baht per month (NSO, 2012). Our study rounds the average household income to 20,000 baht a month for the convenience of data collection. The respondents who had household income below that amount represent those less well off in term of economic status. From the 1,111 respondents, 576 or 51.8 percent reported they earned less than 20,000 baht of household income a month. On the other hand, 535 respondents or 48.2 percent had 20,000 baht or over monthly family income.

Education attainment: The level of education discussed in this chapter is classified into two categories: junior high school or lower and high school or higher. Using the junior high school as base is in accordance with the Education Act of 2002, which specifies this level as compulsory. From our survey, 247 respondents or 22.2 percent of all subjects completed junior high school or lower. The majority group in this survey, 864 respondents or 77.8 percent, attained a high school diploma or higher.

Political efficacy: To measure the respondents' political efficacy, the questionnaires asked them to measure how much they agreed that others had a better understanding than them of the important political issues facing Thailand. The respondents put their answer in a 7-scale score in which 1 means they thought others had absolutely less understanding than them. This, in turn, indicates they believe themselves having high political efficacy. The mean is 4.177 and S.D. 1.553. In short, Thais are more likely to think that others had a better understanding of politics than themselves – that is, they do not have much self-efficacy.

Organization skills: As for organizational skills, we have borrowed Putnam's organization skills measurement technique. In the questionnaires, the respondents were asked how often they participated in religious activities at a temple, church, mosque, or other place of worship. When visiting those places, people tend to interact with others, and practice organizational skills (Putnam, 2000). The more often they visit those religious places, the more likely they will have a higher level of organizational skills. In the survey, 389 respondents or 35 percent of all respondents said they conducted religious activities at their place of worship three to four times a month or more often. A total of 661 respondents reported conducting the same activities one or two times a month or less, while 5.5 percent of the subjects either did not answer this question, or reported they did not know.

3.2.4 Demographic Characteristics

Individual resources alone may not cover all variables that influence the respondents' political behavior. Hence, this study has included demographic variables into the analytical model as well. These demographic characteristics include age, gender, ethnicity and domicile. Table 3.2 illustrates the distribution of respondents in four demographic categories.

Table 3.2

The Percentage of Respondents by Age, Gender, Ethnicity and Domicile

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Age: 18-40 years old</i>	739	66.5
<i>over 40 years old</i>	372	33.5
<i>Gender: male</i>	470	42.3
<i>female</i>	671	57.7
<i>Ethnicity: Thai</i>	1,045	94.1
<i>others</i>	66	5.9
<i>Domicile: Bangkok</i>	99	8.9
<i>other regions</i>	1012	91.1

Note: N=1,111

3.3 Political Participation and the Internet in Thailand

The main research question in this chapter is: Does the Internet increase political participation among its users? Here, we have assigned higher weight to the Internet usage, as a factor leading to change in the level of political participation among population. From this perspective, an analysis using hierarchical regression statistics seems most appropriate, as it can verify the relationship between a set of independent variables and the dependent variable, when controlling for the other sets of independent variables on the dependent variable.

From our research question, we develop the first hypothesis (H_1): the Internet does not make any impact on political participation among its users. The dependent variable, as stated earlier, is political participation scores. The independent variable is the usage of the Internet. The controlling variables are organized into two blocks – demographic characteristics and individual resources. Here we employed the hierarchical linear regression analysis, not the stepwise multiple regression analysis, in order to test our hypothesis that the use of Internet as the effective predictor after controlling for other independent variables. Unlike the stepwise multiple regression analysis, in hierarchical

multiple regression, the independent variables are entered in an order prescribed by us. Outliers were excluded in the analysis. Table 3.3 shows the result of the hierarchical regression analysis run by SPSS program.

Table 3.3

Hierarchical Linear Regression of Political Participation Scores, Demographic Characteristics, Individual Resources, and Internet Usage

	Standardized Coefficients(β)		
	Model I	Model II	Model III
Demographic characteristics			
Gender: male = 1	.114***	.118***	.122***
Age: 18 to 40 years old = 1	-.203 ***	-.195***	-.126***
Ethnicity: Thai = 1	-.100**	-.094**	-.103**
Domicile: Bangkok = 1	-.069*	-.073*	-.073*
Individual resources			
Family income: 20,000 baht or more = 1		-.028	-.063
Education: junior high school or lower = 1		-.028	-.137**
Political efficacy		-.080**	-.067*
Organizational skills: attending religious activities 3-4 times a month or more = 1		.097**	.081**
Internet usage			
Use Internet: yes = 1			-.237***
<i>Constant</i>	.497	.631	.945
<i>R</i>	.259	.288	.334
<i>R-Square</i>	.067	.083	.111
<i>Change R-Square</i>	.067***	.016**	.029***

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, and ***p < 0.001

N=1,017

3.3.1 Political Participation and Demographic Characteristics

The reason for placing demographic characteristics in the first block and treated them as control variables is to show that the Internet use remains an important factor influencing the respondents' levels of political participation. The change in R^2 from each block tells how much predictive power is added to the model from the previous block.

The percentage of variability goes up from 6.7 percent in demographic characteristics block to 8.3 percent in individual resources block. And it increases to 11.1 percent in the last model. The null hypothesis that change in R^2 equaled to 0 was rejected. The R^2 increase in each additional block of variables indicates that the independent variable – “Internet usage” – is a significant predictor for political participation scores, even when control for other variables in the model. Also, the Durbin-Watson statistic was performed to test for the presence of serial correlation among the residuals. We found the Durbin-Watson statistic at 1.808 which falls within the acceptable range (1.50 - 2.50).

In demographic characteristics block, it is found that gender, age, ethnicity and domicile contribute to the change in political participation scores. Men participate more in political activities than woman ($\beta = .122, p < 0.001$). The result is in line with previous research studies on gender and political participation (i.e., Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001; Jennings, 1983). Age is negatively correlated with political participation scores. The respondents aged between 18 to 40 have lower political participation scores than those older than 40 years old ($\beta = -.126, p < 0.001$). Domicile is another significant predictor in demographic characteristics block. Living in Bangkok is negatively associated with the levels of political participation ($\beta = -.073, p < 0.05$). However, ethnicity (-.103) shows strong association to the political participation scores ($p > 0.01$). The Thais tend to engage less in politics than other ethnicities.

3.3.2 Political Participation and Individual Resources

Individual resources block shows the correlations between political participation scores and individual resources. Three variables in the block education attainment, political efficacy, and organization skills variables are proved to be a powerful predictor of political participation scores. The respondents who believed “others had more understanding of political issues facing Thailand” engage less in politics ($\beta = -.067, p < 0.05$). In short, people with more self-efficacy are more likely to be active in political activities. The respondents who performed religious activities at a temple, church, mosque, or other religious places 3-4 times a month or more are more likely to engage in

civic activities ($\beta = .081, p < 0.01$). Education attainment is a significant predictor for political participation scores. Those with a junior high school degree or lower were less active in politics ($\beta = -.137, p < 0.01$).

Household income fails to reach the significant level at 95 percent. Hence, we conclude there are no correlations between these two variables and political participation in our study.

3.3.3 Political Participation and the Internet

The H_1 hypothesizes that the Internet does not make any impact on the levels of political participation among the respondents. Table 3.3 shows that the H_1 is rejected, as the β coefficient is not equal to zero. The result reveals that the Internet users in Thailand engage less in politics ($\beta = -.237, p < 0.001$). The Multiple R for the relationship between Internet usage in the analysis and the political participation scores is .334. This would be characterized as acceptable (greater than .20). To sum up, when controlling for demographic characteristics and individual resources variables, the Internet users in Thailand significantly have lower political participation rates than the non-users.

Now we move on to discuss whether any differences exist among the Thai Internet users regarding their levels of political participation. In other words, is there any group among Thai Internet users that participate differently in the country's politics? Here, our study employs the duration of Internet usage and online activities as key predictor. Consequently, we have another two hypotheses to test as follow:

H_2 : the duration of the Internet users' exposure to the Internet does not affect their political participation levels.

H_3 : the activities the Internet users conducted online do not influence their political participation levels.

To prove both hypotheses, we hold on to the hierarchical regression statistics as our principal tool. In addition, we also employ the same set of control variables that was

used to find correlations between Internet usage and political participation of the population. Table 3.4 shows the correlations between the duration of Internet usage and online activities and political participation scores.

Table 3.4

Hierarchical Linear Regression of Political Participation Scores and the Duration of Internet Usage and Online Activities

	Standardized Coefficients(β)			
	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
Demographic characteristics				
Gender: male = 1	.110**	.107**	.101*	.062
Age: 18 to 40 years old = 1	-.156	-.070	-.082*	-.134***
Ethnicity: Thai = 1	-.367**	-.096*	-.103**	-.081*
Domicile: Bangkok = 1	-.066	-.068	-.076*	-.052
Individual resources				
Family income: 20,000 baht or more = 1		-.015	-.024	-.025
Education: junior high school or lower = 1		-.002	.008	.040
Political efficacy		-.085*	-.079*	-.018
Organizational skills: attending religious activities 3-4 times a month or more = 1		.104**	.100**	.091**
Internet usage				
Duration of Internet use			.091*	.021
Online activities				
Joining online social media: yes = 1				.073
Following news/information online: yes = 1				.047
Engaging in online political discussion: yes = 1				.415***
<i>Constant</i>	.203	.308	.197	-.252
<i>R</i>	.182	.226	.243	.488
<i>R-Square</i>	.033	.051	.059	.238
<i>R-Square Change</i>	.033***	.018*	.008*	.179***

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$

$N=676$

The sample size in Table 3.4 is 676, and the ratio of valid case to the number of independent variables is 56.33 to 1. The ratio is greater than the minimum requirement ratio at 5:1. Hence, the sample size is satisfied in this study. The R^2 in each block increases from the previous one. In summary, the variables in Model IV have a significant correlation with the political participation scores. The model accounts for 23.8 percent of all dependent variable variance. The Durbin-Watson value falls in to the acceptable range at 1.763, revealing the presence of serial correlation among the residuals did not exist in our model.

In Model IV, we find no significant correlation between the number of years using the Internet and the respondent's political participation level after controlling for demographic characteristics and individual resources. The H_2 : "the duration of the Internet users' exposure to the Internet does not affect their political participation levels" is supported.

Of all three online activities put in the model, only "participating in online political discussion" show a strong association to the levels of political participation ($\beta = .415, p < 0.001$). "Following news/information online and participating in online social network" do not contribute or constraint the respondent from performing civic engagement ($p > 0.05$).

The H_3 is rejected in the case of the Internet users who participating in online political discussion.

3.4 Summary

The findings of this study reveal a low level of political participation among Thai voters. It is true that the percentage of people participating in spectator activities was high. However, Thai people did not engage in the higher levels of political participation. Asked in an interview why they did not participate in transitional and gladiator levels, the most common answer was they did not know they could engage in such activities. For many of them, participating in politics referred to going to vote. They did not have the knowledge that political participation meant something more than that.

On the factors contributing to political participation, we find gender and age gaps positively correlate with political participation. Being male and older contributes to more civic engagement. People with higher organizational skills and self-efficacy are more active in political activities. However, socioeconomic status does not support or constraint people from political participation. Both the haves and have-nots do not differ significantly in their decision to engage in politics. The finding in Thailand, in others words, confirms that social capital, i.e. organizational skills, are a key factor supporting the development of democracy.

Many scholars in political science and communications believed that the Internet – as a new technology and medium – could bring about stable democracy in Thailand. However, the result of this study challenges that hypothesis. It is found that the Internet negatively correlates with political participation. In other words, the Internet does not contribute to the development of democracy, as some scholars expected. In fact, people who used the Internet were more skeptical and engaged less in politics.

The results of our survey conducted in Thailand approximate those in the developed countries. In the initial phase, Internet users had a lower rate of political participation compared to the non-users. After an interval, however, Internet usage began to affect positively their political participation. And there is a trend pointing to Internet users swinging around to become more active participants in the political process compared to non-users. It is not surprising to hear the question: Why did the Internet users have a lower rate of political participation than the non-users in the initial phase? To answer, it is highly probable that the Internet users, particularly those surfing for data, have encountered a large quantity of negative information regarding politics, or unpleasant experience in cyberspace. This gush of negative and unpleasant encounters may have given the initial Internet users a bad impression of the political world, may make them feel discouraged, and finally cause them to withdraw from political participation. However, gaining more experience in this virtual domain, the Internet users later on could better handle the negative information, leading to a sounder understanding of politics, and a return to the political processes as active participants. Consequently, a

longitude study should be developed to follow the change resulting from the Internet's impact on political participation in Thailand.

Also, the finding suggests that certain online activity contributes to the development of democracy – namely, participation in online political discussions. Though statistically significant, this conclusion has a limitation, as it cannot indicate whether the sample population participating in online political discussions had had a high level of political participation prior to their use of the Internet. The relationship between each variable might point in the direction of already “having a high level of interest and a high level of political participation,” and as a result decided to participate in online political discussions. Given this limitation, a further study is needed to ascertain the direction of association between these variables.

In regard to social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Hi5 – online media that allow the users to build their own network, the expansion of which signifies an increase in social capital – our study found nothing to suggest that usage of these media generates changes in the users' political behavior. This is expectable, as social media have been developed just recently, and its popularity among the majority population remains to be seen. However, its current imperceptible impact could become more pronounced in the future, once these media have been widely accepted.

Another issue not addressed in our study is the question: “Do social media encourage the expansion of weak-ties network?” Or perhaps, in reality, the Thai Internet users use social media merely to mingle with people in their network? If the latter were true, the results of our study would reconfirm that strong-ties networks do not help generate social capital, nor subsequently advance the development of democracy.

To sum up, given its limitations, this study provides a sound starting point for those interested in the relationship between Internet usage and political participation in developing countries, where democracy remains precarious and Internet usage is not widespread among the citizens. More studies in the future on this aspect would further contribute more jigsaw pieces leading to a fuller understanding of this issue.

CHAPTER 4

THE INTERNET, POLITICAL PARTIES, AND POLICY-MAKERS IN THAILAND

4.1 Introduction

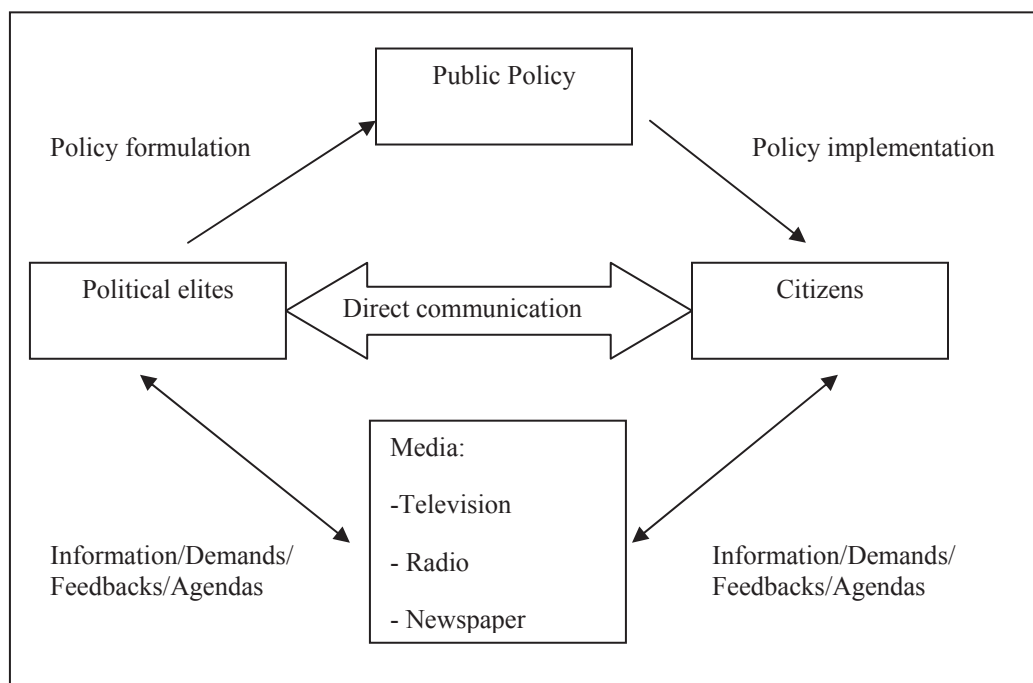
In the preceding chapter, we discuss the impact of the Internet on political participation at the individual level, and find the Internet significantly correlates to the lower political participation among its users in Thailand. In this Chapter, we move on to examine the influence of the Internet on other political actors, namely political parties and policy-makers. As pointed out earlier, more and more Thai people are online. Many of them turned to the Internet as an alternative source of information. Some echoed their political opinions and concerns on the online political forums and social media. And later on it became a normal practice for the traditional mass media such as television and newspapers to report about online activities and opinions. Consequently, it becomes an interesting issue how those in power use this new information-communication technology, and react to the societal changes brought about by the Internet.

Many political science scholars believe political leaders are the most important actors driving a society toward progress – i.e., every move they make would subsequently lead to social and political transformations. In *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (1936), Harold Lasswell described political elites as those with a final say in all political matters. They could shape the society in the direction they think best, and determine what should go to who and how. The study of what Thai political elites perceive and do is another element that will contribute to a much fuller picture of how the Internet impacts the Thai political world.

We have pointed out in the preceding chapter that individual's political participation aims at influencing political elites' actions – to do or not to do certain things. However, political elites do not function simply as information receptors, processors of the public's needs, and translators of these needs into public policies. Actually, they are in a position to define a political agenda, to transmit their own needs

upon the public, and use the public's positive reactions to legitimize their own policies (Domhoff, 1998; Wright, 1996; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002). The communication flow between political elites and citizens in policy-making processes is shown in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 The communication pattern between political elites and citizens in policy-making processes



Source: Adapted from Norris, 2001.

From the above diagram, when forming public policies, political elites and citizens exchange their information/opinions/demands/concerns/agendas through direct and indirect communication. In direct communication, political elites and citizens have a face-to-face, real-time, and two-way communication. Unfortunately, only a small group of people can engage in the direct communication at any one time.

In indirect communication, political elites and citizens express their opinions through the mass media – i.e. television, radio, newspapers. In this mode, information can reach a very large audience. However, as information passes through media, certain

details are distorted or lost during the process. Since the traditional media have limited space or time to broadcast all information, it is necessary for them to select only a fraction of incoming information. Normally, their editors will select only those that are either “big” or “hot” issues.

The Internet, on the contrary, has all the virtues of both direct and indirect communication, but none of their limitations. Political elites are still able to send their messages to the masses without having to go through any traditional medium. As a result, there is very little chance that their messages will be distorted or lost along the way. Likewise, citizens can rapidly transmit without limitation their needs and wants, along with political opinions – no matter how trifling – to the political elites via the Internet.

Apart from offering citizens a wider range of choices for political participation, the Internet also makes it possible for political elites to be directly informed of the public’s requirements and opinions, and to respond faster and more effectively to them. Given these virtues, some scholars believe the Internet will be in a much better position, compared to its traditional counterparts, to promote and improve the representative democracy system (Norris, 2001; Gibson, Nixon, & Ward, eds., 2003).

Research on correlations between political parties, citizens, democracy and the Internet began at almost the same time as the latter spread through various parts of the society. In the early phase, the studies point out there is a possibility the Internet could help bridge the widening gap between political parties and citizens. Scholars in this group view the citizens’ distrust in political parties as part of the problem facing a representative democracy system (Diamond & Gunther, eds., 2001). In the era of urbanization, there are meager direct communication between political parties and the citizens, resulting in constrained and distant relationship between them, one that ultimately leads to mutual distrust. The Internet’s advancement has brought with it new alternatives for direct communication between political parties and the citizens, thereby leading these scholars to believe the Internet could bring these two parties closer together again (i.e. Tsagarousianou, 1999; Rash, 1997; Morris, 1999).

However, when started out, they did not have much empirical evidence to prove their hypotheses. The situation changed in their favor later on when political parties in developed countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom began to develop their websites and use them as campaigning tools, and also as media through which to disseminate party platform information and to listen to the public's feedback. In this way, the scholars began to accumulate databases and samples that can be used to study correlations between the political parties' use of the Internet and the re-appearance of popular political participation, as well as to undertake researches to prove their hypotheses.

The results of their studies can be divided into two groups. Those in the first group show a rather low and limited impact of party websites and the Internet, used as a political communication tool (Davis & Owen, 1998; Margolis, Resnick, & Levy, 2003). Scholars in this group study, for instance, the form and content of the political parties' website, focusing on the existence of channels through which opinions can be exchanged between the party or party representatives and members of the public. Studying the use of political parties' and candidates' websites in the US, Richard Davis (1999) found that the information found there are not different from those disseminated to the traditional media. The flow of information is top-down. Even if a channel – i.e. e-mail – is opened for direct communication between the political parties and the citizens, not many interactions took place between them.

Davis' findings are confirmed in the research conducted by Klinenberg and Perrin (2000). The latter two scholars find that in the 1996 US presidential elections, there was not any Republican candidate who allow the voters to exchange or air opinions on their websites. But their survey took place when the culture of Internet use was just taking shape. Not many people are well-versed in its technology, including user-friendly website design and management. Consequently, it is highly probable that the political parties and personnel concerned at that time were not fully aware of the benefits of this kind of direct communication with the general public.

Pippa Norris (2001) called the authors of studies in the second group the "optimists." As their name implies, these scholars discover positive correlations in the

communication between political parties, citizens and the development of political democracy (i.e., Norris, 2003; Rommel, 2003; Foot, 2002; Van Selm, Jankowski, & Tsaliki, 2002). Examining the content of websites of political parties, particularly those in the US and Europe, they found these portals being extensively used to connect with the general public and their own party members. Information on the websites covers items like “General topics” and “Party history,” as well as “Party activities” and “Party policies,” past and present. More importantly, these political parties have improved their channel of communication with the general public through the Internet, making it even more speedy and convenient. This includes an opening of online discussion forums for those wishing to express their opinions on political issues.

True, as Norris has observed, it is possible those expressing their political views on a political party’s website could be the very same group of people who are already interested in politics. In other words, the Internet merely provides one more channel of communication to the same old politically active groups, and not a channel to engage the politically passive. And even if it is still not quite clear whether the Internet could help bring back into the political process those politically passive and those who have already turned their back to politics, one cannot deny that the content and activities on websites of political parties studied by these scholars do not contribute to a development of democracy.

Another interesting point is that scholars in the second group, studying the correlation between website usage and development of democracy, find that small political parties obtain quite substantial benefits from using websites as a channel of communication between themselves and the general public (Norris, 2003; Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003). For instance, it is common knowledge that the traditional media generally ignore or give scant space or airtime to information generated by small political parties. Comparing the cost of media buying against website construction and maintenance, the latter alternative is much cheaper. Furthermore, it offers them a more direct access to the general public, not to mention a channel through which they can pass on larger quantity of party information to and exchange opinions with wider groups among them. Looking from the public’s point of view, they stand to gain from having

more alternative sources of information, thus increasing their political choices, which is an important feature of a consolidated democracy.

In the case of Thailand, studies on the relationship between Internet usage by political parties and the development of democracy do not receive much attention from scholars, either in political science or mass communications. Most of the researches done in this area focus on: (i) the use of Internet as a channel to air political views or to advance a political agenda by citizens and (ii) the Internet's impact on political behavior of the general public (i.e. Pratheepwatanawong, 2011; Bunyavejchewin, 2010; Thammo, 2009). No attention was given to Internet usage and its impact on political elites. Our present study is the first in Thailand to focus on this particular issue.

The aim of this Chapter is to evaluate how the political elites in Thailand are responding to the Web, and to identify the extent to which they use the Internet's potentials to communicate with Thai citizens. In other words, this Chapter deals with the third research question (RQ_3): how do political elite groups in Thailand respond to the Internet?

As a group, "political elites" consist of a large number of persons, groups of people and political organizations. Given the time and resource limitations, it is difficult to study all of the political elites. This study, therefore, has chosen the political parties and policy-makers as representatives of the political elites group. Our choice is based on an understanding that in a representative democracy, they are the focal point where the public's needs are transformed into public policies and subsequently implemented (Lofgren & Smith, 2003).

Accordingly, this Chapter is divided into three parts, as followed:

- *Thai Parties online*: identification of Thai political parties that go online, along with their activities there. In particular, we will analyze the manner and extent to which Thai political parties use the Internet to engage the general public, and to evaluate whether or not it contribute to political participation.
- *Thai policy-makers and the Internet*: do the MPs in Thailand use the Internet as a medium to communicate with their constituency? And what do they think

of the Internet? We will also look into the reasons behind their decision to provide or not to provide online communication channel for such an engagement.

- *Summary:* findings on Thai political elites' use of the Internet, specifically, whether or not their use of this medium helps boost political participation and strengthen democracy in Thailand.

4.2 Thai Parties Online

As of February 27, 2012, data from the Office of the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) show that there are 57 registered political parties in the country. We used a search engine – Google – to check whether these Thai political parties have an official website. Of all these 57 parties, only 11 won seats in the House of Representatives in the latest electoral contest on July 3, 2012. And only 8 among these 11 winning parties have a website, or 72.73 percent (not counting those having a Facebook or Twitter account).

Among the 46 unsuccessful parties, six have their own website (not counting one that is a dead link), or 13.04 percent. It is clear from these data that political parties with seat(s) in the House of Representative tend to use an Internet website as a channel of communication with the public, as opposed to their unsuccessful counterparts. In addition, it is quite probable that the former have more abundant resources than the latter, thus making it easier for the bigger parties to finance the development of their websites.

However, the mere number of political parties having its own website is not sufficient for a conclusion that political parties' usage of websites contributes to popular political participation, and by extension, the development of democracy in Thailand. In this study, we have developed a comparative study and content analysis technique to deal with the issue.

First of all, we shall compare the content of websites belonging to parties with seat(s) in the House of Representatives, focusing on the difference in size and their websites' form and content.

Based on Norris's study, the size of parliamentary parties could be classified into three categories (2003, 28).

- 1) *Major parliamentary parties*: those with more than 20 percent of all seats in the House of Representatives. The Thai parliament currently has a total of 500 seats. Parties having more than 100 Members of Parliament (MPs) are the Democrat Party (159 seats) and Pheu Thai Party (265 seats).
- 2) *Minor parliamentary parties*: those with 3 to 20 percent of all seats, or having 15 to 100 seats in the Thai parliament. Parties in this category are Bhumjaithai Party (34 seats) and Chartthaipattana Party (19 seats).
- 3) *Fringe Parties*: Those with less than 3 percent of all seats. These are Mahachon party (1 seats), Matubhum Party (2 seats), Rak Thailand Party (4 seats), New Democrat Party (1 seat), Rak Santi Party (1 seat), and Phalang Chon Party (7 seats).

Of all the 11 parties with seats in the House of Representatives, three do not have an official website, namely, New Democrat Party, Chart Pattana Party, and Phalang Chon Party.

In analyzing the content and activities of Thai political parties' websites, we have divided their content into two components – deliberation/communication interactivity and information provision. These indicators have been derived from Norris' study of political party websites worldwide (2001, p. 161-163). In addition, we have discarded four indicators: (1) information dissemination; (2) channel of communication with party candidates; (3) report on election results, as there was no parliamentary election in Thailand when our survey was conducted; and (4) usage of third language (other than English). In connection with deliberation or communication interactivity, there are altogether 12 indicators; and 17 indicators for information provision.

Table 4.1

The Contents of Website of Parties with Seats in the House of Representative: Communication Interactive Function

	Major parliamentary parties		Minor parliamentary parties		Fringe Parties			
	Democrat	Pheu Thai	Bhumjaithai	Chartthaipattana	Mahachon	Matubhum	Rak Thailand	Rak Santi
Can email party officials	X			X		X		X
E-mail contact address for Web master								
Join party		X		X		X		X
Submit message form	X		X		X	X	X	X
Joint discussion/listserv								
Can e-mail party leader	X					X		
Search facility	X			X				X
Volunteer services	X							
Can sign up for regular electronic newsletter	X							
Can e-mail elected members of parliament	X							
Donate money	X					X		
Buy party goods	X							
<i>Total number of activities</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>4</i>

Note: Data collected from May 2012 to July 2012

4.2.1 Deliberation of the Party Websites

By deliberation/communication interactivity, we refer to "...the opportunities for citizens to take part in politically oriented debates..." (Van Selm, Jankowski, & Tsaliki, 2002, p. 190). Table 4.1 presents the contents in the Thai political party websites.

In regard to "deliberation," which has 12 indicators, the Democrat Party has the largest number of activities – 9, or 75 percent. The Pheu Thai Party, Bhumjaithai Party, Rak Thailand Party and Mahachon Party each has only one activity pertaining to communication with the public.

The mean of number of activities in party websites' communication function stands at 3.13, and standard deviation is 2.85. The shape of distributions is skewed to the right. This means most of the Thai parties with parliamentary seats do not provide online activities or channels for direct communication with the citizens. The most common activity these party websites shares in regard to communication interactivity function is to allow the people to submit online messages to the parties – that is, 6 out of 8 party websites or 77.78 percent provide this function. However, sending messages through party websites does not guarantee the senders will receive a response from the party.

In order to test whether or not the parties providing online message form respond to questions from the citizens, we submitted a message to all party websites. In the message, we ask them about their political activities in the coming month. After 30 business days, we did not receive a response from any of them. Most likely, it seems these parties place the online message form there as a showcase. They do not intend to use this channel as a communication tool.

The second common activity in Table 4.1 is allowing people to join the party and to send e-mails to an appointed party official. A total 4 out of 8 parties or 50 percent have these functions on their websites. As for joining a party online function, it does not actually mean that people can submit their membership application online. The websites

merely provide online documents in which interested individuals need to print out the form, fill it out, and send it via regular mail to the party offices.

Most strikingly, none of the party currently holding seat(s) in Thai parliament has a discussion forum that allows its supporters or the general public to exchange ideas or opinions with party officials, even if this could significantly help promote greater political participation among the population. As it is difficult to control the content of the exchanges, posts or criticisms that might touch on sensitive issues, thus breaking the Computer Law, they therefore decided to play safe by shutting down this channel.

In summary, even though the IT knowhow is there to accommodate greater exchange of ideas and opinions between political parties and the public, my impression from the interviews with some political elites is that there is a distrust that people would offer them genuinely beneficial ideas. As a result, Thai political parties do not use the Internet to its fullest potential. We will discuss in detail the attitude of the Thai political parties and a majority of Thai politicians toward popular expression of opinions through the Internet in section 4.3.

4.2.2 Information Provision by Party Websites

Regarding information transparency function, Table 4.2 shows website contents of the parties with seats in the House of Representative. Information transparency refers to the ability of citizens to access to information made available on parties' websites (Van Selm, Jankowski, & Tsaliki, 2002, p. 190). Again, the Democrat Party scores highest at 13 out of 17 or 76.47 percent. Mahachon party has the lowest score in this category – 0 out of 17. The mean score is 6.63. From these figures, it seems that Thai political parties concentrate on information provision rather than interaction with the public.

Table 4.2

The Contents of Website of Parties with Seats in the House of Representative: Information Transparency Function

	Major parliamentary parties		Minor parliamentary parties		Fringe Parties			
	Democrat	Pheu Thai	Bhumjaithai	Chartthaipattana	Mahachon	Matubhum	Rak Thailand	Rak Santi
Party history	X		X	X				X
Party's manifesto, statement of principles	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Press release								
Party organization	X	X	X	X		X		X
Links to external websites	X					X		
Leadership information or speeches	X		X	X		X	X	X
Party constitution and rules	X	X		X		X		
Website in English	X							
Parliament candidate information i.e. biographies	X	X	X	X		X		
What's new section	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Party conference or convention								X
Schedule of events	X							
Other affiliated organization section	X		X			X		
Any multimedia/audio	X		X	X		X	X	
Youth section	X							
Women section								
Union section								
<i>Total number of activities</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>6</i>

Note: Data collected from May 2012 to July 2012

All political parties in Thailand provide party manifesto or statement of principles on their websites, along with other basic information such as party organization, party statute and rules, leadership and MP information or speeches, as well as other common information published on most party websites. The information there is not much different from what they published in their party brochures and pamphlets.

The next information item appearing on Thai political party websites is called “What’s New.” Of all existing 8 party’s websites, 7 have this section. Here, one finds information on activities of the party concerned in the preceding period.

The activity information updates are few and far in between. Photos of party activities are posted on the websites at least a week after they occurred. No political party websites update its “What’s New”/activities section real-time, or right after the events.

Also noteworthy is the fact that 7 out of 8 parties do not have a schedule of events section on their websites. In other words, they do not use the Internet as a means to mobilize people to join their activities.

It is clear from our content analysis that websites of parties with seat(s) in the Thai parliament, both large and small – with the exception of the Democrat Party, hardly differ from one another regarding the form and content found on their websites. Most of these websites provide information concerning the sponsoring party to the public, which is in fact the principal aim of the undertaking. And such information is hardly different from those disseminated to the traditional mass media. Furthermore, the Thai political parties do not pay much attention to usage of party websites as a channel for direct interaction with the general public.

Such an attitude leads us to an interesting case: how come the Democrat Party’s website is richer in terms of contents and activities? What distinguishes this party from the rest? An explanation that the Democrat Party has more financial and ICT/technical human resources than other parties may sound credible, if one compares it to the medium- and small-size parties. But this does not account for the conspicuous differences in terms of website content and activities between its website and that of the Pheu Thai Party, both of which belong to the same “major parliamentary parties” category. Besides,

there is not much difference between them in regard to overall party funding, as evidenced in the party-list candidates electoral expenses both declared to the Electoral Commission following the July 3, 2011 general elections – 165,420,868.94 baht and 93,846,296.45 baht for the Democrat and Pheu Thai parties respectively.² Evidently, funding is not the reason why Pheu Thai Party could not match the Democrat on website development aiming at communicating with the public.

Another factor is the technical capability needed to build a website. Given the fact that Pheu Thai Party grew out of Thai Rak Thai Party and People Power Party, which were dissolved by the Constitutional Court in 2007 and 2008³ respectively. The Thai Rak Thai Party was founded and financed principally by multi-billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, a former prime minister who built up his financial status from telecom business concessions. His image as the country's ICT leader and skills in using ICT media to address his supporters during the 2008-2009 turmoil in Thailand from abroad is well known. As such, it seems naïve to say that Pheu Thai Party lacks the ICT knowhow to design a website that can effectively interact directly with the general public.

To restate our question: Why is it that the Pheu Thai Party's website performs worse than the Democrat Party's in terms of communication and interaction with the general public? The answer probably lies in the electoral bases of each party.

In Bangkok which has altogether 33 MP seats, 23 went to the Democrat Party, or 69.70 percent, and 10 to the Pheu Thai Party, or 30.30 percent. In the North, the Democrats won 13 seats out of 67, or 19.40 percent. In the Northeast, they collected only 5 out of 126 available seats, or 3.97 percent, while its archrival gained 101 seats, or 80.61 percent. In the Central and Eastern regions, the Democrats won 25 out of 96 seats, or

² The integrity of all financial statements and funding sources of Thai political parties is difficult to ascertain. The donations they receive monthly, for instance, need not be reported unless each exceeds 5,000 baht.

³ Based on the fact that following the dissolution of Thai Rak Thai Party and People Power Party, the majority of their parliamentary members have become members of Pheu Thai Party. In addition, the address of all these three parties remains the same at 1770 IFCT Building, New Phetburi Road, Bangkok, Huay Kwang, Bangkok 10310.

26.04 percent, while Pheu Thai scored 41 seats, or 42.71 percent. However, in the South where the Democrats have their home base, they won 50 out of 53 available seats, or 94.34 percent. The Pheu Thai Party won only one seat, or 1.89 percent.

Table 4.3

The Distributions of District Representatives Elected on July 3, 2011 by Parties

	Bangkok	North	North East	Central & East	South
Democrat	23 (69.70%)	13 (19.40%)	5 (3.97%)	25 (26.04%)	50 (94.34%)
Pheu Thai	10 (30.30%)	49 (73.13%)	101 (80.16%)	41 (42.71%)	1 (1.89%)
Bhumjaithai		2 (2.99%)	13(10.32%)	13 (13.54%)	
Chartthaipattana		2 (2.99%)	1 (0.79%)	11(11.46%)	1 (1.89%)
Chart Pattana		1(1.49%)	6 (4.76%)		
Phalang Chon				6 (6.25%)	
Matubhum					1 (1.89%)
<i>Total number</i>	<i>33 (100%)</i>	<i>67 (100%)</i>	<i>126 (100%)</i>	<i>96 (100%)</i>	<i>53 (100%)</i>

Source: Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, 2011

It is evident from the above statistics that the Democrats have a home base in the Bangkok and the South, while the Pheu Thai Party enjoys popularity in the North, Northeast, Central and Eastern regions. Looking back at the characteristics of Thai Internet users described in Chapter 2, we saw that users in the Bangkok and Southern regions spend more time online than those in the other regions. The Pheu Thai's Northeast, on the other hand, has the lowest countrywide percentage of time spending on the Internet. As such, it is not surprising that the Democrat Party tries very hard to cater to the "city people," who are on the whole more IT sophisticated than those in the outlying regions. The Pheu Thai Party, on the other hand, does not need to try as hard, since its "target groups" use the Internet relatively much less. In other word, the Internet website is not "cost effective" as a communication channel for this party to interact with "its public."

To sum up, in regard to the promotion of democracy issue, our content analysis of websites belonging to political parties with seats in the Thai Parliament shows the following: their content and activities are limited in scope. The parties do not use their website as a channel to engage the public in discussion or to interact on political issues. It

inclines toward a one-way dissemination of information. That is, these parties prefer to disseminate their information selections through their website to the public, rather than making them a forum or a sounding board of the latter's opinions and needs or to exchange opinions with them. Consequently, Thai political party websites contribute only minimally to political participation and overall development of democracy in the country.

However, using websites minimally as a communication and interaction channel does not mean that Thai political parties do not in any way use the Internet to its advantage. There still are a large number of online activities serving political purposes that cannot be included in this study, for instance, social media usage and agitation through online discussion forums. And these represent another limitation of our study – one that colleagues in this field need to consider in their future works.

4.3 Policy-Makers and the Internet

An analysis of Thai political parties' websites reveals some of the political elites' attitudes toward political participation of the Thai public. It should be pointed out, however, that some of the findings are inferences drawn from available evidence. As such, certain errors could still remain. To minimize them, we have chosen to do in-depth interviews with members of the Thai parliament.

According to Section 93 of the Thai Constitution 2007 Amendment No. 1, 2011, the House of Representatives consists of 500 members, 375 of whom are from the election on a single-member constituency basis, and another 125 from the election on a party-list basis. The voters will cast their vote for a candidate in their constituency, along with a political party they wish to support. A candidate receiving the highest number of votes becomes the representative of that constituency. As for representatives from the party-list, Section 93 specifies that their number be calculated from the proportion of votes each party receives countrywide, considering the whole country as one single constituency.

Our study interviewed a total of 30 members of parliament (MPs) – 20 in the single-member constituency category, and 10 in the party-list category – so as to diversify the samples as much as possible in terms of electoral origination and party affiliation. The interviews took place from December 2011 to January 2012.

The principal aim of our interviews is to verify whether these politicians use the Internet to communicate or interact with their constituency, along with their attitude toward Internet usage. Our main queries are: do these MPs use the Internet?; do they use it to communicate with their constituency?; if they do, what kind of online activities do they engage in?; apart from the Internet, do they use any other channel to communicate or interact with their constituency, or to help promote popular political participation?; and what are the impact, if any, of the general public's opinions found on other websites and online media upon their political decisions?

4.3.1 Single-Member Constituency MPs

Six from a total of 20 MPs in this group, or 20 percent, say they have never used the Internet at all. All of the six are elected either from the Northeast or Northern regions; and all are in the 50+ age group. Asked why they do not use the Internet, four in six indicate they do not have time to learn how to use the Internet. However, all six say they learn of the voters' opinions through the social media such as Facebook or Twitter, with the help of people close to them, who either recount or sometime print out the messages for them, not to mention reports from TVs, radio and newspapers.

The remaining 14 MPs who use the Internet say their activities are mostly sending-receiving e-mails and reading online news, from newspaper websites such as Matichon.com or Thairath.com. Two MPs in this group report that they do not regularly follow news on the Internet, due to lack of time. A total of seven MPs say they learn how to use the Internet from family members, and two indicated that their party arranged a course on Internet usage for them and other party members.

In regard to using the Internet to communicate with voters, only three MPs in the single-member constituency group say they use the Internet, via Facebook.com. Two of them indicate that at the beginning, Internet or Facebook use was to maintain contact with family members and friends, not for communication with their voters. Only later did some voters ask to be added as friends, thus changing the function of their Internet usage into communication with voters. The third MP begins using Facebook at the suggestion of his assistant, with him in control of the content details to be communicated to his public. Most of the information so disseminated has been designed either to PR his works or to publicize his political activities.

The majority of single-member constituency MPs interviewed (17 out of 20 or 85 percent) does not use Internet as a channel to communicate or collect voters' opinions. As reasons for not doing so, 10 MPs say it is because voters in their constituency either do not use the Internet or rarely use it. Followings are parts of their explanation:

“My popular base are people at the grass root level...they don't use the Internet.”
– female, age 36 interviewed on December 23, 2011.

“The majority of people in my constituency are grass root people...they don't use the Internet or things like that.” – male, age 48, interviewed on January 8, 2012.

“The internet is available only in the municipal area. In areas further away, the majority of people there do not use it.” – male, age 50, interviewed on December 19, 2011.

In regard to their normal channel of communication with their voters, all of the 20 single-member constituency MPs give essentially the same answer: mostly through speeches during the campaign and direct meetings with the people. Nine of them said they give their phone number to the voters, printing it in their campaign brochures. In addition, voters can submit petitions or voice their opinions through their party's offices in the constituency. Some of their friends (4 MPs) say the voters can contact them through their vote canvassers. And one of them says he has assistants embedded in various communities to listen to voters' needs and demands and report to them. Another

three remark that they have a program on community radio through which they can PR their works and listen to the people's needs and complaints.

“It is exactly our job to go out and meet with people in the constituency. If the parliament is not in session, we work full-time in our constituency...attending wedding, funeral or other religious ceremony. People prefer to contact us directly.” – female age 34, interviewed on December 19, 2011.

“I give them my mobile phone number during the campaign, telling them they can call me anytime...and my phone is on 24 hours a day.” – male age 58, interviewed on December 30, 2011.

“I made available my mobile phone number during the campaign... Some of the voters would like to contact us, and they call us...I don't know how they get hold of [our phone number]...some got it from our vote canvassers.” – male age 63, interviewed on January 13, 2012.

Eight of the MPs in this group opine that direct exchange with the voters is the best and most effective way to communicate with them.

“Talking on mobile phone is quite all right...but it is much more effective talking face to face. The voters feel they are close to their MP.” – male age 71, interviewed on January 13, 2012.

On the question of issue raised most frequently by the voters, 17 of the MPs interviewed identify “help,” “complaints,” especially against government officials' performance of duties.

There are very few exchanges of views on various political issues or public policies. And those exchanges that take place are on policies that have a direct impact on the voters who raise them up, such as agricultural product price guarantee/“rice pawning” policy.

“Most calls want some sort of help like being arrested, kids got jailed, poor road conditions, water supply stops running. They call for our help, and we try to

arrange for a solution with the government agencies concerned.” – male age 57, interviewed on December 23, 2011.

“They file complaints...daily life problems, public facilities not sufficiently convenient, earnings and expenses, general problems...They are not interested in public policies as such...their stomach is still not full. They are not interested in things far away from them.” – male age 58, interviewed on December 30, 2011.

“If you are not happy with government policy like rice pawning policy, file a complaint through me, for example, being unable to sell rice at the guaranteed prices set by the government.” – male age 71, interviewed on January 13, 2012.

In regard to keeping one’s ear open for voter opinions on political issues through online channels like Facebook or online discussion forums, 13 single-member constituency MPs acknowledge that some of them do use such channels. Their assistant, family members, friends or other MPs informed them about this. But they themselves did not personally follow such activities. The principal reason cited is “having limited time”. In addition, six MPs say the Internet generates rumors rather than providing useful information. And some of them believe people who air their views in online discussion forums are politically organized elements, thus not a genuine public opinion.

4.3.2 Party-List MPs

All ten Party-list MPs interviewed for our study indicate they have Internet experience. Most of them, like their counterpart in the single-member constituency group, use the Internet to receive and send e-mails, as well as to keep up with the goings-on. Six of them confide they do not regularly follow the goings-on in online media, as the amount of information is huge and they have a limited time. Regarding usage of the Internet to communicate with voters, eight out of ten say they use social media to PR their political works and activities. One of them points out that he has a political website under his name. All, however, stress that online media are merely one of the

communication channels, and not the principal one through which one can communicate with the public.

“Online media are useful in the period of disorderly situation...when media like TV and newspapers are being controlled [by the government]... It [the Internet] does not reach the majority people...media like TVs can have a wider impact.” – male 47, interviewed on December 23, 2011.

In regard to communication with the public, MPs in this category believe their situation differs from the single-member constituency colleagues'. As party-list MPs, they really need not visit a constituency or have a direct contact with voters. Meeting with the latter can be arranged through activities organized by their political party, rather than through an individual's personal events. And concerning the principal aim of communication with voters, the party-list MPs give more weight to their party's PR activities propagating its public policies, along with information on political actions taken by the party, hoping thereby to win their trust and loyalty for future general elections.

The party-list MPs do not differ from their single-member constituency colleagues in one respect, however – i.e. they do not attach adequate significance to listening what the public has to say or to exchanging political views with the latter. One of them say Thai people are still not knowledgeable and can be easily persuaded, and as such cannot have any credible political opinions to express or exchange.

“Thai people are still not well educated. Their political thinking and ideas are still not developed [or well] reasoned...we must help educate [them].” – female age 72, interviewed on December 15, 2011.

On the issue of attitude toward expression of political opinions through online channels, and the impact of movements on the Internet upon their political decisions, 8 out of 10 party-list MPs gave answers essentially similar to their single-member constituency colleagues. That is, they view opinions aired online with distrust, and believe most opinions to be unreasonable. They think those who post opinions do not necessarily have to be responsible for them, thereby making online opinions

untrustworthy. In this light, online opinions cannot be expected to impact on their political decisions.

To sum up, our data shows that sample Thai members of parliament in this study rarely use the Internet as tool to communicate with the public. Face-to-face contact between the two parties remains the choice channel. Noteworthy is the finding that the principal aim of communication with the public is not to exchange views on political issues leading to public policy decisions, but to exchange services and support. The voters conveniently get what they need, such as rapid solutions to the community's problems, through the politicians' contacts with government officials. To return the favor, the voters cast their ballot for the politicians concerned in the next election. This favor-for-favor or reciprocity relationship between politicians and voters demonstrates that the age-old patronage system is still prevalent in Thailand, and that policy-makers do not really care much about the general public's political views.

In regard to the Internet's influence on Thai politics, we find that this online media play a negligible role, or exercise hardly any influence on the sample MPs' political decision-making. Furthermore, they have adopted quite a negative attitude toward the general public's political participation through online channels.

4.4 Summary

Theoretically, one cannot deny that the Internet does not have the potential to act as communication tool leading to increased political participation of the general public, and better relations between political elites and the citizens. In practical terms, there seem to be quite a few obstacles to using the Internet as a means to promote democracy, particularly in a society where IT knowhow clusters around a selected group of people only.

Having analyzed the content of websites of political parties with parliamentary seat(s) in Thailand, we find that elites' adoption of ICTs is at a rudimentary stage. The

format and content of Thai political party websites focus on disseminating general information about the sponsoring party and its policies. Parallel to this, one can hardly find a Thai political party that attaches any significance to using the Internet as a tool to aggregate needs or demands from the citizens, and to transform them into public policies. Interviews of the sample MPs yield similar results, namely, the majority are scantily interested in political goings-on and opinions aired online. In other word, the people's voice in cyberspace has no influence whatsoever on the Thai politicians' political activities.

The Thai political parties' and MPs' decision not to effectively use the Internet's potentials is based on a rational choice. Given the political parties' and MPs' ultimate objectives of winning a parliamentary majority and re-election, along with their resources, appointed target groups and politico-cultural environment in Thailand, it is only natural they decide not to attach significant value to the Internet as a channel to communicate with the general public.

Political parties and MPs, particularly those with an electoral base outside the municipal areas and a low level of access to the Internet, can readily conclude that websites and other online channels of communication do not provide them with an access to the desired target groups. Besides, given the electorate whose political culture prefers reciprocity of interests between them and the politicians to public policy-making matters or the "public goods," usage of the Internet evidently will not help them reach their objectives. It is not surprising, therefore, that our study finds the Thai political parties' websites and other online channels contribute very little to the country's political participation strength and overall democracy development.

Nevertheless, with the growing popularity of Internet usage among the Thai public, it seems likely that Thai political parties and politicians will adjust their strategy accordingly. The Democrat Party provides a good example in this direction. Responding to mostly urbanite electoral bases, it has decided to re-organize its website in a modern format, providing all of the important information that should be there. In the future, it is possible that Thai political parties will rely more on the Internet as a channel to interact

with the public, leading eventually to a more positive transformation of political culture and political communication structure.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 Results Summary

This dissertation has two main objectives: 1) to study the impact of the Internet upon Thai society, focusing on the issue of equality of Internet access/usage among various social groups in Thailand; and 2) to analyze the Internet's role in regard to the development of democracy in Thailand. In order to achieve the dissertation goals, we have developed three research questions (*RQs*), as follow:

RQ₁: Does the Internet create a new social division, namely “a digital divide,” in Thailand?

RQ₂: Does the Internet increase political participation among its users?

RQ₃: How do political elite groups in Thailand respond to the Internet?

For *RQ₁* we employed an opinion survey as principal research method to obtain the answer. It was found that “a digital divide” did exist in Thailand. Analyzing the sample population classified by gender, age, education, domicile and socio-economic status, there existed a rather substantial divergence among them regarding Internet access. Starting with the gender category, here we found no divergence in our samples, which are classified into two genders (female and male). Proceeding to our second variable “age,” this has a significant impact on the Internet usage ($p < 0.05$). Our samples in the “over 40” years of age use the Internet less than those in the lower age categories. In regard to the third variable “educational level,” we found that samples with education higher than “junior high school” level use the Internet more than any other groups. “Domicile,” the fourth variable, also affected Internet usage among our sample population as well. Those living in Bangkok tend to access the Internet more than their fellow countrymen in other regions of the country. Samples having domicile in the Northeastern region, which stand at the bottom of Thailand's economic development scale, registered the lowest level of Internet usage in the country. The last variable in our

study of digital divide here is socio-economic status, using family income as the principal indicator. We found that those with a monthly family income of 20,000 baht or higher tend to use the Internet more than those with lower family income.

We employed a stepwise logistic regression to obtain the most effective predictor in predicting whether or not the respondents were an Internet user. Of all the independent variables mentioned above, only education attainment, age and family income passed the significant correlation test, thereby signifying that the Internet users in Thailand were more likely to be young, well-educated and economic well-off.

We also went beyond comparing the Internet users and non-users in Thailand, and tried to look for the differences in usage characteristics among the Internet users themselves. Here, we measured the amount of time they spent in cyberspace. Using a stepwise multiple linear regression analysis, we found that the best predictors for predicting the duration of Internet usage are: (1) online activities – sending or receiving e-mails, joining online social networks, and engaging in online political activities; and (2) the place where the respondents lived.

To sum up, we found that the factors impacting on Internet usage affect the users and non-users differently. Age, education attainment and economic status had a significant correlation with Internet access of the Thais, while the nature of online activities and domicile determines each Internet user's overall length of experience in cyberspace.

Thais living in Bangkok tend to have longer experience in cyberspace than their counterpart in other regions, on account of being at the center of Thailand's economic and technological progress. On the negative side, this research finding reveals a gap in the country's development. On the positive side, however, it suggests to the government that the construction and proliferation of information technology infrastructures to other outlying regions would significantly help reduce the gap in Internet access among the Thai population.

To obtain answers for RQ_2 , we also used an opinion survey. Our finding shows that the Internet has a negative impact on political participation of the Thai citizens. Here,

we also used an opinion survey. Our findings show that, after controlling gender, age, education level, domicile and socioeconomic variables, the Internet has a negative impact on political participation of the Thai Internet users. In other words, the Internet users' total political participation scores are significantly smaller than the non-Internet users'. And among the Internet users themselves, our study shows that their activities carried out in the online world tremendously affected their political participation. That is, those participating in online political discussions have a higher rate of political participation than other groups of Internet users.

All in all, it seems prudent to interpret with extra caution the Internet's impact on political participation among the users and non-users in Thailand. The samples in this study were collected during the time of sharp division among the population following the 2006 coup d'état. During that period, there were political propaganda and agitation among the masses by supporters of both the government and its opposition through community radios and satellite televisions (Siriyuvasak, 2007). It seems persistent attempts to mobilize people in the rural areas had helped to increase remarkably the overall level of their political participation. This is evidenced in the higher proportion of people from the North and Northeastern regions, compared to townspeople or those living in Bangkok, joining political rallies and demonstrations during 2009 and 2010 (Petty, 2010).

From our findings in Chapter 2, the majority of Thai Internet users domiciled in Bangkok had a higher income and better education, relative to their counterpart in other regions. During periods of political struggles, they were not the principal target group that the protagonists tried to induce into political participation. On the contrary, their principal targets were the Internet non-users. They tried to mobilize and entice the latter into expressing their political opinions and participating in political activities under their leadership. As such, it was not surprising to find that the Internet non-users had a higher political participation score than the Internet users. In other words, the on-going political situation in Thailand could be an important external factor that significantly impacts on the level of her population's political participation.

To answer the last *RQ*₃ of our study, dealing with impact of the Internet on Thai political elites, we have opted for a different set of research methodology. Specifically, we use contents analysis to analyze the contents of websites belonging to Thai political parties, along with in-depth interview to determine the Thai Members of Parliament's (MPs) attitude and experience in using the Internet for political communication purposes. The findings on both items – Thai political parties' website and MPs in-depth interview – all went in the same direction. That is, the Thai political elites did not make use of the Internet for political communication and for promotion of the general public's political participation. Furthermore, our sample MPs in this study had a negative attitude toward using the Internet as tool for the people's expression of their political opinions.

As in the case of our answer to *RQ*₂, given the extra-ordinary political situation while collecting data, this researcher personally thinks that the Thai politicians interviewed had intentionally avoided using the Internet to make contacts with their constituencies. This is because this kind of media allows both their supporters and opposition to use the spaces in their political websites. And, understandably, it is rather difficult to channel the public's expression of political opinions in the direction they prefer. In the worst case scenario, a provision of space on their websites for the general public's airing of political opinions could amount to handing out to their political opponents a golden opportunity to attack or defame them. Considering the trade-offs, it is only logical that Thai politicians prefer to avoid using the Internet, or to use it minimally as a communication tool between them and their voters.

In summary, the results of our study further highlight Thailand's long-existing social inequality. It seems that in the era where ICTs has significantly increased choices regarding information access channels, this social gap has widened even further. The haves are among the first who accessed the Internet, and used its technological knowhow and other leverages to maintain their advantage and to further widen this social gap. The Thai governments from past to present have tried to reduce the social inequality between haves and have-nots, as evidenced in the National Economic and Social Development Office's various five-year plans since its first in 1961. Nevertheless, Thailand is still struggling to narrow down this inequality gap under the current 11th Plan.

While social inequality continues to widen, the Thai governments seem contented only to solve this problem piecemeal, instead of devising long-term solutions in advance to accommodate the ICTs' rapid development. Admittedly, apart from lack of vision, most Thai governments also have an economic and political stake in this venue – i.e., maintaining their advantageous social and political status quo. As a result, they paid more attention to controlling the people's access to ICTs, rather than offering them greater freedom of Internet access.

In regard to economic variable, the Telephone Organization of Thailand (TOT) and the Communication Authority of Thailand (CAT) were, in the earliest phase, two government agencies responsible for the construction of this technology's infrastructure. As government agencies, they were naturally interested more in their own economic performance than spreading the technology to the largest body of Thai population.

In 1995, when Thailand started to commercialize the Internet, CAT made a decision to reserve its right to control the Internet infrastructures and networks. It demanded any private company wishing to become an Internet Service Provider (ISP) in Thailand give 35 percent of its total equity for free to the CAT (of this equity, 2 percent goes to the CAT staff). In addition, the CAT required all ISP to buy leased circuit to the Internet only from or through them (Palasri, Huter, & Wenzel, 1998).

Meanwhile, the TOT whose landline telephone network plays a crucial role in Internet connection nationwide has chosen to monopolize this business through market-price control. In 1991, the Thai government initiated the 3-million-landline project to expand the telephone network throughout the country. But this "expansion" of home telephone project concentrated in Bangkok and other big towns in the various regions only – two million numbers in Bangkok and one million to the remaining provinces nationwide (Palasri, Huter, & Wenzel, 1998). As a result, the Internet access fees at the beginning were rather expensive, and available only in city or big town areas. Furthermore, only a few selected groups of Thai population were capable of paying for the service linking them to the Internet.

It was not until 2001, when the National Broadcasting and Telecommunication Commission was established to oversee the telecommunication business, did a reasonably free and equitable market of telecommunication services come into existence, with an aim to offer maximum benefits to the general Thai public. The CAT and TOT were also privatized in that same year. Consequently, more Internet Service Providers entered the market, leading to a much cheaper service fees, and an exponential increase of Internet users in Thailand ever since. But all this happened after the fact that technological inequality between the haves and have-not had already caused damages to the Thai society.

Besides, apart from focusing on immediate economic interest, the Thai governments seem to distrust the Internet, either as a channel of information dissemination or a channel of expression of political opinions.

Since the coup d'état in 2006, the Internet had become an important channel of communication used by the general public and those interested in political activities to access information and to express their political opinions.

One of the examples proving that the Internet could be used to support political participation and engagement is the chain of events following the September 19, 2006 coup d'état in Thailand. While the “old media” were gagged that day, many Thais used the Internet as a channel to search for the “truth.” Minutes after all national and private television channels played only the Thai national anthem, many Internet users posted questions on popular Thai-language discussion websites – for instance, Sanook (www.sanook.com) and Dek-d (www.dek-d.com), Manager (www.manager.co.th) and Pantip (www.pantip.com).

At Pantip, within an hour, many discussion pages were created in order to inquire about the situation. Many of Pantip's members then discussed the various possible causes of the coup. As time passed, more people posted about the things they saw. Some members claimed they saw tanks in the streets near the Government House. Many even posted pictures of tanks and soldiers. Moreover, some members started translating and posting news about the coup as reported from online foreign media agencies at the Pantip website. A member of the website told a story of soldiers seizing the Shinawatra III

Tower where the ITV station was located. Within two hours of the shutdown of TV stations, many members proceeded to discuss whether or not they should support the coup, and who they wanted to be the next prime minister. Obviously, activities on this website indicated that the Internet users still had full control of their political rights and freedom of expression.

As a result, it was not surprising to witness the Thai government enacted the computer-related crime act in 2007. The main aim of this legislation is to control the people's activities, particularly political ones, in the online world. As evidenced in the wordings of section 14 (2) and section 20 as follow:

“Section 14. If any person commits any offence of the following acts [, he/she] shall be subject to imprisonment for not more than five years or a fine of not more than one hundred thousand baht or both:...(2) that involves import to a computer system of false computer data in a manner that is likely to damage the country's security or cause a public panic;...

“Section 20. If an offence under this Act is to disseminate computer data that might have an impact on the Kingdom's security as stipulated in Division 2 type 1 or type 1/1 of the Criminal Code, or that it might be contradictory to the peace and concord or good morals of the people, the competent official appointed by the Minister may file a petition together with the evidence to a court with jurisdiction to restrain the dissemination of such computer data...”

It is evident that this law leaves much room for interpretation, and does not specify very clearly which activities will “damage the country's security or cause a public panic.” Accordingly, the Thai government will have an upper hand in dealing with those holding political opinions different from it or against it. Following the promulgation of the 2007 computer-related crime act, the government has used Article 20 to block out 81,213 URLs from July 2007 to December 2011. A total of 60,790 URLs or 74.85 percent were blocked because they contained statements insulting or defaming the King, the queen and the heir of the Kingdom of Thailand. The law enforcement agencies interpreted this as an act undermining the country's national security. Of all 325 cases

pending trial at the court of justice, there are 6 national security cases (1.85 percent) and 40 lèse-majesté cases (12.31 percent) (Suksri, Kusonsinwut, Yingyongpathana, 2012).

The above statistics point rather clearly that the Thai government is quite interested in the people's activities on the Internet, but not in the direction of promoting their participation in the political process as such. Rather, its intention is to control the people's expression of political opinions. Given the law's relatively harsh penalty and strict enforcement, it is not surprising that certain groups of people chose to avoid the Internet, thus further widen the existing digital divide, and add more obstacles to Thailand's progress toward democracy.

Thailand changed her political regime from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy in 1932. The country's democracy subsequently established was not very stable, given a total of 9 coups d'état (the latest one in 2006) and 12 coup attempts over a period of 80 years since then. Our finding highlights one of the causes of Thai democracy's instability, namely, a rather low level of political participation and low self-efficacy among the general public. In addition, the Thai political elites' attributes are not very helpful either. Specifically, their attitudes and actions do not encourage the people's participation in politics or policy-making process, even if the ICTs have availed itself as a convenient channel for the general public to do so. Given these two negative factors, it is not surprising to see democracy in Thailand regressing on and on.

All in all, it is difficult to deny the reality that, in Thailand, the Internet has minimal potential to improve political communications among the citizens and between power elites and citizens; to engage more people in politics; and to enrich democracy. In any case, the Internet's potential itself is at risk, being merely a tool. By itself, it cannot make any impact on the society and political world. It is the people using it who are going to make the necessary transformations.

In Thailand's case, if there were no adjustment in behavior and attitude of the Thai people and power elites on Internet usage, it is highly probable that the Internet would yield a negative impact on the Thai society. That is, it would not only broaden the

existing inequality gap, but would also inhibit the overall development of democracy in the country.

Followings are the recommendations aiming at promoting Internet usage to encourage political participation and to strengthen the Thai democratic system as a whole.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

In order to employ the Internet as tool to consolidate the country's democracy, the government of Thailand should try to promote, regulate, and organize the Internet usage among Thai citizens. Furthermore, the Thai government should also create a new political norm, requiring policy-makers to engage more with online citizens.

5.2.1 Promoting Internet access to all citizens

It is practically impossible for the Internet to help promote political participation in a situation where a large number of people have no access to this communication channel. The first step, obviously, requires that the Thai government make available this technology to all Thai citizens.

At present, it seems the Thai government is well aware of the disparity in Internet access among its citizens, and is trying to remedy the situation. The current Thai government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Yingluck Chinnawatra has proposed and implemented the One Tablet PC per Child Project, beginning in 2012. Her government has distributed a computer tablet to all first graders nationwide, as well as established a wireless Internet network linking it to all schools in the project, so that the students can access this communication technology. This is a good beginning, offering

children at all levels of economic standing an opportunity to learn and make uses of the Internet.

However, it seems the Yingluck government has ignored one group of people in the Thai society. Our study has indicated that they are Thai citizens age 40 on up. When these people were at school age, the computer and Internet technologies were either unknown to them, or in some cases not yet well developed. Most of them, therefore, do not have skills to use computer or the Internet. The government's emphasis on promotion of Internet usage among children, overlooking this latter group of people, will surely create a technology gap between them in times to come.

The Thai government needs to equally open up access to this technology to all groups of its citizens. In this case, what can be effectively done is to arrange special training courses for people age 40 on up – for instance, through the Ministry of Education's non-formal education centers, public libraries, or other local governmental agencies, including TV programs aiming at providing the citizens more educational alternatives.

Apart from providing knowledge of computer and Internet skills, the government should also help supply computers and other necessary equipment so that people can readily access the Internet through service nodes nationwide, considering that not all groups of people can buy or own a computer, or pay for an Internet connection service fee.⁴

In addition to Internet connection through computers and tablets, the current advances of ICTs have enabled people to link through other channels like smart phone, for instance, which are not too costly. Accordingly, the Thai government should expedite its plan to upgrade the country's wireless Internet network to the 3rd generation of mobile telecommunications technology (3G). Once accomplished, the general public would stand to gain from the new system's speedy access to websites on their 3G-compatible mobile phones, which is up to 30-35 times faster than the current EDGE system currently

⁴ On average, the fees for landline Internet connection in Thailand stand at about 600 Baht a month (about 20 US dollars), not including initial expenses for installation and Internet connection.

in use. If the government were successful in this endeavor, it is likely that Internet usage would increase by leaps and bounds, given a range of choices much wider than previously the case.

5.2.2 Regulating the Internet

One important obligation of a democratic government is to protect its citizens' freedom of expression. In the case of using the Internet to express one's political opinions and to participate in the country's political process, it seems that the Thai government has not fulfilled this obligation to its fullest capability. Indeed, it has moved in the opposite direction. True, it has the duty to make sure there are civilized conducts in public spaces and to protect national security and interest. In practice, however, it seems the Thai government has gone beyond keeping order in the society, and into inducing a feeling of "anxiety" to engage in political activities among its citizens.

It follows that the Thai government should make crystal clear its stand on the 2007 computer-related crime law, one that indicates its genuine approval and respect for the people's right to express their political opinions. It should also tolerate political expressions that use indecent or distasteful words, provided they do not fatally encroach upon national security, leading unmistakably to the State's dissolution. And the government should also have in hand convincing supporting evidences, not mere suppositions, for its suspension of this citizen's right and subsequent legal actions against the offender.

In regard to criticism, if it unlawfully violates or cause damage to any individual, the latter is entitled to sue the offender through the Civil and/or Criminal Court. Taking rights violation matter to court, however, should be done with the utmost care. In any case, the citizens are entitled to criticize public figures – holders of political offices or high-ranking government officials – on matter of public services and policies. But they

do not have the right to criticize the latter in affairs unrelated to their official responsibilities. And those who do cross this line can be sued in court.

Clearly, the more a society allows information exchanges, the more its people will benefit. In a democracy, logically there is no public figure, services and policies that cannot be scrutinized or criticized. If an exception is made in these matters, the political regime in that country simply cannot be called a democracy, because it lacks transparency, especially inspection, evaluation and comments by the citizens – the true owners of the country themselves.

5.2.3 Organizing online political discussion forums

In order to increase channels through which the public can express their political opinions and participate in the country's public policy-making process, as well as exchanging knowledge, opinions and information among themselves, the Thai government should set up online political discussion forums under its or the Parliament's sponsorship. In addition, there should also be a body charged to oversee these forums, and to digest the general public's opinions and send them to the responsible government agencies or the Parliament.

The government's online political discussion forums should be opened to all citizens to participate. The responsible government agencies must be able to provide knowledge, understanding, and preliminary advices regarding the government and concerned entities' policies, perhaps in the form of answers to the "Frequently Asked Questions," so that they are familiar with the issues to be discussed at the forum beforehand. Furthermore, an online center to answer queries from the interested public should be set up as well. In the event members of the general public raise a question not covered by the forums, the above-mentioned agencies must allow its discussion, and provide resource persons to answer them.

The agencies responsible for online political discussion forums have another duty to perform – acting as moderator. When disagreement of opinions occurs at the forums, the moderator must intervene, but not to stop or curtail expression of views. He or she must either reconcile the differences, or set a framework to facilitate an exchange of opinions, while encouraging the parties concerned to learn to respect the other’s differing opinions. This kind of practice will help the society as a whole to build up and accumulate social capital, an indispensable asset with which to build a stable democracy in the long term.

Furthermore, the government agencies concerned should not monopolize the moderator position. Instead, they should pass on moderation skills and techniques to interested members of the general public through classes or training courses, and give them opportunities to practice live online. Apart from opening up political discussion channels online, all political parties and local governments nationwide should adopt a similar policy on this matter, with an aim to encourage genuine and effective political participation by the Thai people at all levels.

5.2.4 Increasing engagement from Thai political decision makers

Political participation alone, however, is not sufficient to effect a significant political transformation in a society. When the citizens transmit inputs in the forms of demands, opinions or concerns into the political system, the political elites – and policy-makers in particular – should ponder them and factor them into their policy calculus, aiming at accommodating their wishes. Our study indicates that this kind of government behavior very rarely occurs in the Thai political system.

The political elites need to adjust their attitude and adapt themselves to the ongoing transformations, and open their heart more to the people’s participation in politics. On the issue of providing greater opportunity to the general public to express their political opinions online, the policy-makers are logically required to listen to the

public's opinions expressed through that channel. As it transpired, they chose to ignore these opinions as input for their decision-making process, claiming that data to be considered was massive, and that they had a limited time.

In reality, they obviously do not have to read every citizen's opinion. As suggested in recommendation 5.2.3 above, the government should set up an agency to oversee the online political discussion forums. One of the responsibilities of this body is to collect, summarize public opinions on various issues, and present them to the power elites. In Parliament, a special committee might be set up to listen to public opinions in the online world, and subsequently use them in Parliamentary discussions or policy-making process.

Taking online public opinions into its deliberation process would suggest to the general public that they have the capability or power to impact upon, or effect changes in, the country's politics. This constitutes a solid foundation upon which the citizens could accumulate self-confidence and perceive the significance of their participation in the country's political process, leading in the end toward a strengthening of the Thai democratic regime.

5.3 Limitations and Future Work

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this dissertation is one of the first research studies to expose the Internet's impact on Thai society, along with its role regarding political participation of the general public and political elites. As a result, the questionnaire format and its questions are referenced from those conducted earlier in other countries, particularly in the United States and Europe. Despite the fact that our questionnaire had been tested in a focus group to determine its validity and reliability before going into the field, and that we have done our best to build a questionnaire suitable to the sociopolitical context of Thailand, there nevertheless remains a possibility that our samples might have misinterpreted and misunderstood some questions in the questionnaire. As such, it is only

prudent for future researches to adjust some of the questions' wordings and make it more suitable to the context at hand.

In regard to political participation behavior in this study, our questionnaire could not indicate whether or not the samples had changed their behavior following exposure to the Internet. Our research had merely indicated that there was a difference in political participation behavior between the users and non-users of the Internet. To provide a clearer picture on how the Internet affects people, further studies could focus on political behavior and civic attitudes before and after people have been exposed to the Internet.

Likewise, our study have found that people who engaged in online political discussions tend to participate more in the political process than those Internet users with no experience in this matter. Here we cannot say also whether the members of this sample group were already interested in politics, knowing that this attribute might have been the principal cause of their involvement in online activities in the first place, and of their higher level of political participation compared to other groups of Internet users. On this issue, more emphasis on qualitative research, such as in-depth interview, could shed some light on the matter.

In regard to contents analysis of the Thai political parties' websites, this research has focused mainly on their contributions to the development of democracy in Thailand. In practice, these websites could well have other political purposes. Researchers interested in the issue of using websites for political purposes might also want to study, for instance: the use of websites for election campaigning; the influence of political party websites on the voters' political decision-making and behavioral change; and the use of Internet by political parties through channels other than official party websites – i.e., televisions and radios – especially in situations where expressions of political opinions are curtailed.

Longitude study is also necessary for following up trends in behavioral and attitudinal changes among the Internet users and non-users in Thailand. This type of study should also cover the political elites group, since the latter cannot possibly escape the ramifications of any political change occurring in the country.

In addition, a longitude study could suggest whether or not the people's political participation behavior would change, given a political situation in Thailand that is different from the current one. And the resultant findings might yield a sounder answer to the Internet's impact strength on people's political participation, compared to a study that focuses on a single time interval like ours.

Finally, studying the Internet's role and impact on societal change and democracy development is a relatively new branch of academic research. And the Internet itself has not yet spread to all sections of the society. Its impact is at best transitional. As a result, there are several jigsaw puzzles remain to be identified and understood, many questions need to be answered, on the way to making improvements in our methodology and to building up a more solid body of knowledge that will make contributions to our society more genuinely meaningful.

APPENDIX A: THE QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE INTERNET AND CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT

Part I: Personal Background

1. What sex are you? (Please mark x in only one box.)

Male

Female

2. You are.....years old.

(18 is a minimum requirement.)

3. Please indicate the region where you are registered as a voter? (Please mark x in only one box.)

Bangkok

Central Thailand

Northern Thailand

Northeastern Thailand

Eastern Thailand

Western Thailand

Southern Thailand

Outside Thailand: _____

4. What is your ethnicity? (Please mark x in only one box.)

Thai

Chinese-Thai

Indian-Thai

Laotian -Thai

Cambodian-Thai

Vietnamese-Thai

Malay-Thai

Mon-Thai

Other: _____

5. What is your religion? (Please mark x in only one box.)

Buddhist

Muslim

Christian

Hindu

Other: _____

6. How often do you go to Temple, Mosque, Church or other religious congregation to conduct religious activities?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Never | <input type="checkbox"/> Less than once a month |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 to 2 times a month | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 to 4 times a month |
| <input type="checkbox"/> More than 4 times a month | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know |

7. What is your highest level of education? (Please mark x in only one box.)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> No education | <input type="checkbox"/> Primary school |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Junior high school | <input type="checkbox"/> High school |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2-year-college | <input type="checkbox"/> undergraduate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> M.A. | <input type="checkbox"/> Ph.D. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> other (please identify):..... | |

8. What is your occupation?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student | <input type="checkbox"/> Government official |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Working in private sector | <input type="checkbox"/> Working in agricultural sector |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Doing your own business | <input type="checkbox"/> Housewife |
| <input type="checkbox"/> unemployed | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:_____ |

9. To which of these groups does your current total monthly family income, from all sources, belong? (Please mark x in only one box.)

- Up to 9,999 baht
- 10,000 to 19,999 baht
- 20,000 to 29,999 baht
- 30,000 baht or over

Part II: Sources of Information and the Internet

10. Have you ever used the Internet? (If “yes”, please answer questions 11 to 12, then go to Part III. If “no”, please go straight to Part III.)

- Yes No

11. You have you been using the Internet foryears
(1 year is a minimum requirement.)

12. Do you usually conduct the following activity/activities on the Internet? (Please mark x on your answer.)

(“Usually” means you do the following activity/activities at least once a week.)

	Yes	No
Sending or receiving e-mails		
Playing games on-line		
Watching or downloading movies, music, or other entertainment media		
Gathering or following news and information		
Participating in a social networking site such as YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, or Hi5		
Participating in political discussion on discussion or message boards		
Other activity (please identify): _____		

Part III: Level of Civic Engagement

13. Have you ever conducted the following activities in the last 5 years? (Please mark x on your answer.)

Have you ever been conducting the following activities?	Yes	No
...Initiating a political discussion.		
...Trying to persuade others to vote		
...Going to vote		
... Putting a political sticker on the house door or the car or wearing political accessories such as wristband.		
...Contacting a public official or a political leader to resolve community problems.		
...Making a monetary contribution to a party or candidate.		
...Attending a political meeting or rally.		
...Contributing time in a political campaign.		
...Becoming an active member in a political party.		
...Being a candidate for office.		
...Holding public and party office.		

14. Please evaluate how strongly you agree with the following statement. (Please mark x on top of the number that best describes your feeling.)

You...	Strongly disagree Strongly agree							Don't know
	←-----→							
...Think whatever its faults may be, democracy is still the best form of government for you.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
... Think you can trust the central government to usually do what is right.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
...Think others can influence the formation of government policies more than you.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
... Think others have a better understanding of the important political issues facing Thailand than you.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

.....

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APPENDIX B: THE PARLIAMENT MEMBERS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you use the Internet? If so, where did you learn how to use the Internet from?
2. What kind of activities do you conduct on the Internet?
3. Please explain your methods to communicate with voters? And, what kind of people do you want to reach or send information to?
4. How do people contact you, and for what purposes?
5. Have you been using the Internet for political objectives, and how long? Do you have your own website/blog, or Facebook/Twitter that you use for political purposes?
6. Why did you turn to use the Internet as your media, and what do you expect to gain from using the Internet?
7. How does the Internet help you to achieve your political objectives?
8. Do you listen to what people say in the Internet and use the opinion in the Internet to frame your decision-making?

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