

Panel Title

Democratization of Communication and Communication for Democratization: Breakthroughs and Challenges in Thailand and Myanmar

Conveners

Chosein Yamahata (Aichi Gakuin University, Japan)

Terapatt Vannaruemol (Chiang Mai University, Thailand)

Discussant

Aye Chan Naing (Democratic Voice of Burma, Norway)

Description of Panel

People in Thailand and Myanmar have been facing a set of common struggles such as climate change, conflicts, pandemic, inequality, political exclusion, and social division. In response, an increasing number of people have started to take actions for their societal grievances. They use diverse instruments to communicate with each other, express dissenting views, and organize protests.

Through social media, they can extract an abundance of information in a timely and efficient manner, which is not available from conventional mass media, as well as establish their own platforms to disseminate information and mobilize public opinions. In addition, they can reach out to diverse population inside and outside their communities. Therefore, their grassroots social movements are often more inclusive and pluralistic cutting across ethnic, religious, geographical, social and the boundaries of all kinds. On the other hand, the roles of media also grow increasingly important in preventing unnecessary escalation of tension and public mobilization based on misinformation and fake news as well as promoting local soft power towards a more open society. Therefore, both democratization of communication and communication for democratization are essential for addressing challenges in both societies.

This panel is therefore designed to share the research findings in relation to communication and open society which address issues such as: post-coup or post-conflict community responses, disinformation related to elections, cooperation of media in network, multicultural socio-political processes, and tensions, podcasting in bridging generational divides, grassroots political engagement, and the practice of culture of peace.

Session 1

Presenter 1: Dr. Nantasit Kittiwarakul (Chiang Mai University, Thailand)

Title: **Golden North Film Festival: Enhancing the Potential of Filmmakers
in Representing Lanna Culture on a Global Scale**

Abstract: This project originated from research titled “A Research and Development Project Utilizing Lanna History and Culture for Enhancing Thai Film Production and Developing an Internationally Skilled Workforce.” The purpose is to explore guidelines for integrating Lanna culture into films, operated under the hypothesis that films is a soft power to persuade and influence people willingly. The project has started by inviting both student and professional filmmakers, who had not previously participated on the national stage. Participants submitted their film concepts related to Lanna culture through essays or video clips. The project attracted over 40 teams, but only 10 teams were selected. Specialized training session, focusing on integrating culture into film production and Lanna culture, were organized for the selected teams. Their task was to develop film project proposals that integrate the 5 F's of Lanna culture: food, fight, festival, faith, and fashion, along with other unique aspects of Lanna culture. Following this phase, five film project proposals were chosen to advance to the production stages, guided by experts in the fields of film and Lanna culture. The five films will be

showcased at the Golden North Film Festival, where awards will be announced for the winner of project. Additionally, these films will be promoted to be presented on the international stage. This project aims to enhance human resources and the entire direct and indirect supply chain within the film industry. The integrating Lanna culture into film production has the potential to not only encourage the development of tourism but also contribute to the development of various Lanna cultural products. The research process will collect knowledge gained from all project activities. The analysis of films produced by the project participants, including group interviews with filmmakers, feedback from viewers, will be used to develop guidelines for promoting creative Lanna culture through film production and may influence national policy in future.

Presenter 2: Dr Makiko Takeda (Aichi Gakuin University, Japan)

Title: **Engaging Democracy by Bridging Voices: The Role of KWAT in Multifaced Communication to Strengthen Civil Society**

Abstract: This presentation explores the alarming trend of democratic decline globally, transitioning from post-Cold War democratization optimism to a contemporary phase marked by the degradation of democratic institutions and practices. The decline, fuelled by populism, nationalism, and socio-economic disparities, has unevenly impacted various regions, with some areas of Asia-Pacific showing mixed results and nations like Myanmar facing significant reversals. Despite these adversities, a persistent demand for democratic legitimacy suggests an underlying potential for resilience and building of democratic norms. Additionally, the chapter delves into the evolution and resilience of civil society in Myanmar, spotlighting its critical role in social welfare, its adaptation to authoritarian challenges, and the emergence of women's inter-ethnic alliances aimed at combating gender inequality and violence. This resilience is particularly notable amidst the political upheaval following the 2021 military coup, underlining the persistent challenges and ongoing efforts for social advancement. Furthermore, the narrative emphasizes democracy's core principles—upward control, political equality, and adherence to democratic norms—and civil society's crucial role in actualizing these principles. Through Larry Diamond's ten functions of civil society in promoting democracy and the illustrative case of the Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT), the study showcases how Ethnic Women's Organizations play a pivotal role in mediating social divides and enhancing political participation, thus underscoring civil society's essential contribution to bolstering democratic processes and fostering inclusivity.

Presenter 3: Kyi Sin (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore)

Title: **Beyond the Digital Domain: The National Unity Government's Pursuit of Physical Presence**

Abstract: Three years after the establishment of the National Unity Government (NUG), it has successfully established a significant online presence on social media. However, its influence in the vast territories across the country, many of which have recently been liberated from State Administration Council (SAC) control, remains minimal. The NUG's operations on the ground are mostly conducted through online Zoom meetings, which has led to its nickname "Zoom government." While it has found more success in establishing representative offices abroad and securing Myanmar's seat in the UN General Assembly, these efforts are limited in garnering the international recognition the NUG urgently seeks without physical control over territories or solid support from key stakeholders within those areas. Since October last year, the tide of Myanmar's civil war has shifted significantly. Ethnic armed organizations and People's Defense Forces (PDFs) have taken the offensive, liberating more territories from SAC control, and putting the SAC on the defensive. In this changing landscape, reaching political agreements with ethnic armed organizations in peripheral regions and establishing emerging regional administrative units in the heartlands of Myanmar, along with communicating the right message, will play a major role in strengthening the NUG's role as the legitimate representative of Myanmar. This will also provide it an opportunity to affirm its legitimacy as Myanmar's representative and enhance its standing in international diplomacy amidst an increasing number of liberated areas.

Presenter 4: Dr. Michal Lubina (Jagiellonian University, Poland)
Title: **Will there be a place for power-sharing in post-coup Myanmar?**

Abstract: Myanmar never tried to implement any power-sharing model in full (it did, however, attempt to carry out some power-sharing aspects of governance in its short periods of democracy in 1948-1962 and again after 1988). Instead of power sharing, Myanmar has a constant power struggle that undermines the state, complicates nation-building process and at times—such as now—leads to anarchy. Theoretically speaking, Myanmar, then, represents a case study of a highly elite-driven nation where the dominant elites from the major segmental group do not believe in power-sharing arrangements, with fatal consequences for the country. However, the recent political developments in Myanmar—a direct consequence of the democratization of communication—give a slight hope that in a hypothetical post-coup Myanmar there might be a place for power-sharing.

Session 2

Presenter 5: Dr. Colm Fox (Singapore Management University, Singapore)
Title: **Protest and the Press in Thailand and Hong Kong**

Abstract: Recent pro-democracy protests in Thailand and Myanmar have received extensive media coverage from media outlets around the world. Drawing on these cases, this paper seeks to understand how the press covers pro-democracy protests and the degree to which their coverage legitimizes or delegitimizes the protesters and their democracy movements. This is an important area of study since media coverage of protests can potentially affect government leaders and public opinion, and ultimately the success or failure of protest movements. To date, a large body of literature has found support for the ‘protest paradigm’—a phenomenon whereby the media is hostile to protesters, presenting them as violent and confrontational rather than actors with substantive and legitimate goals. While most of this research comes from the West and concerns protests over government policies, there has been far less protest paradigm research on pro-democracy protests—protests that typically occurs outside the West. Intuitively, and counter to the protest paradigm, journalists might actually legitimize pro-democracy protests, as they rely on democracy to do their work. However, broader social, economic, and political constraints can also affect journalists and their reporting. To understand how journalists frame protests, I am working with research assistants to review the literature and code newspaper reports. While previous content analyses have tended to only focus on how protesters are framed, we will also code how pro-administrative forces (such as government or military leaders, or the police) are framed. Understanding how opposing actors are framed should offer a fuller account of coverage. From the literature, we identified a number of frames that can delegitimize and legitimize actors. While protesters and pro-administrative forces can be delegitimized by coverage that frames them as violent or confrontational, they can also be legitimized by coverage that attempts to explaining their goals and motivations. Beyond framing, we will also quantify the extent to which protest leaders and pro-administration sources are quoted in the reports. We studied media coverage from the Asian and Western press, gathering reports from newspapers published in Thailand and Myanmar, from the Asian press (China, Singapore, and Indonesia) and from the Western press (U.K. and U.S). Additionally, we chose both left-wing and right-wing newspapers from the U.S. and U.K. From these newspapers, I can investigate a number of factors that can shape press coverage. First, I can compare protest coverage in the domestic and foreign press. Second, I can investigate if the Western press, which operates under freer conditions, is associated with more favorable views of pro-democracy protests compared to the more constrained Asian press. Third, I can examine whether the left-wing press has more positive views on protest compared to the right-wing press. Finally, I can compare the kinds of themes that the different press outlets emphasize across the two cases. Ultimately, this research contributes to our understanding on how the media covers pro-democracy protest and how it might be perceived by publics home and abroad.

Presenter 6: Dr. Mon Mon Myat (Payap University, Thailand)
Title: **Navigating Digital Totalitarianism: Strategies of Myanmar's Independent Media in Promoting Democracy**

Abstract: The February 2021 coup in Myanmar represents just the latest chapter in a long-standing conflict that has spanned generations. While international attention has often been diverted to other global crises, such as the latest Israel-Gaza conflict or the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Myanmar regime has adeptly utilized social media platforms as powerful instruments for surveillance and propaganda dissemination. In the wake of the coup, the Ministry of Information has been transformed into the regime's principal propaganda apparatus. This has resulted in the closure of all independent media outlets, with the remaining media entities now under military control. Moreover, international telecommunications companies are gradually being supplanted by local business conglomerates with ties to the Myanmar military. Independent journalists who have managed to avoid detention have been forced into exile. The military's influence extends beyond traditional print, radio, and broadcast media, pervading various social media platforms. Despite the absence of a formal censorship apparatus—aside from oppressive laws targeting independent media—the regime strategically employs platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, and Instagram to monitor opposition groups, fabricate misinformation, and propagate its agenda. This study investigates how the Myanmar regime exploits these platforms for surveillance and propaganda, contributing to the consolidation of its totalitarian rule. It also examines the efforts of three independent media groups based in Chiang Mai to uphold the standards of professional journalism while operating in exile.

Presenter 7: Abhibhu Kitikamdhorn (Chiang Mai University, Thailand)
Title: **Dissecting Disinformation and Fostering Resilience: The Case of the Thai General Election 2023**

Abstract: Understanding the dissemination of disinformation during the Thai General Election 2023 is crucial for multiple reasons. Not only does it shed light on the impact of disinformation on public perception and election outcomes, but it also provides valuable insights into the development of effective strategies and policies to combat disinformation, safeguarding the integrity of future elections. This research project explores disinformation spread during the election (on Facebook, one of most popular platforms in Thai context) and regulatory measures to enhance public resilience in the Thai context. Literature on disinformation highlights the role of social media's personalized information feeding in exacerbating political polarization, potentially leading to post-truth communication—a state prioritizing personal beliefs over reality (Kelkar, 2019). In the US context, for instance, deep political polarization has given rise to an alternative information ecosystem on social media, where individuals often gravitate towards sources that reinforce their existing beliefs (Faris et al., 2017). Disinformation, especially during elections, poses a dual threat: undermining election integrity and fostering post-truth communication. In the 2020 US election, for instance, 70% of Republicans questioned its legitimacy due to disinformation spread by Donald Trump (Lewandowsky et al., 2023)). Similarly, the 2016 and 2022 Philippine Presidential Election revealed a network of "inauthentic behavior" social media accounts linked to Duterte's campaign, eroding election integrity (Ong & Cabanes, 2018; Sochua, 2022). Thailand, a nation characterized by deep political polarization, also witnessed the proliferation of various forms of disinformation during the 2023 General Election, manipulating opinion and distorting democratic processes. Examples include claims discrediting the Move Forward Party, assertions promoting support for Prayuth's government, and allegations of irregularities in the electoral process. Such disinformation has the potential to manipulate public opinion, erode trust in political institutions, and distort democratic processes. Facing disinformation challenges, the Thai government implements regulatory measures. The Anti-Fake News Center (AFNC) Thailand actively debunks election-related disinformation, collaborating with social media platforms for content removal and accurate information promotion. Beyond government initiatives, civil society organizations, exemplified by Cofact, contribute

by debunking disinformation and conducting media and information literacy campaigns tailored for political contexts, guiding the public on critical evaluation and source verification. Despite these efforts, studies suggest counter-narratives struggle to penetrate social media echo chambers (Kitikamdhorn & Ramasoota, 2023). The study's results may unveil the effectiveness of these measures in overcoming such echo chambers, providing valuable insights into countering disinformation in polarized environments.

Presenter 8: Dr. Ma Thida ((PEN International, Germany)

Title: **Activism and the Quest for Democracy in Myanmar: Creative Expression as a Tool for Freedom and Societal Change in Myanmar**

Abstract: Amidst heavy censorship and pervasive propaganda under successive military regimes in Myanmar, creative expression emerges as a pivotal tool for both liberty and social transformation. This presentation, part of a broader study, concentrates on the endeavors of the Myanmar people as they strive for the freedom that has been denied to them for too long. For the people of Myanmar, creativity lies not in the freedom they possess, but in the pursuit of the freedom they aspire to attain. Literature and various art forms serve as platforms not solely for aesthetic appreciation, but also for the promotion of humanistic and democratic values. Many young individuals who engage in reading, writing, and artistic endeavors become advocates for democracy. The significant impact of creative expression challenges and subsequently transforms society, yet simultaneously poses a significant threat to the power of military regimes. Consequently, successive regimes have endeavored to suppress creative expression through various means, including the enacting restrictive laws and unjust rules and harsh regulations, as well as persecuting cultural figures such as writers, poets, and artists, and establishing their own media and arts outlets.