Politics of the Clips: Private/Public Spaces

Notes from a talk on situation and freedom of online media, an opening session for Clip Kino Bangkok: Talk and Screening. Speakers: Prap Boonpan (Matichon Online newspaper), Mana Treerayapiwat (School of Communication Arts, University of Thai Chamber of Commerce), and Wanrak Suwanwattana (Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University). Moderator: Thaweeporn Kummetha (Thai Netizen Network). Saturday, December 18, 2010, 16:30-18:00, at The Reading Room, Silom 19. Organized by Clip Kino and Thai Netizen Network, as part of Netizen Marathon 2010. Supported by Heinrich Böll Foundation Southeast Asia.

Recorded in Thai by Anuk Pitukthanin. Footnotes and English translation by Arthit Suriyawongkul.

Thaweeporn Kummetha : The topic we going to discuss today is currently a fairly talk of the town. WikiLeaks and those video clips related to political issues in Thailand bring us to a question of What is Private[1] and What is Public ? What are the differences ? We will start first with the definitions of private and public from our speakers today.

Wanrak Suwanwattana : *The point is not more about the definition of these two words than the boundary line between the matter of concerns.* We define one thing to be an opposition of another. How we going to define the boundary line ? At this point, it is increasing blur. For example, in the cases of celebrities and public figures, they are considerably difficult to tell what is private space or public space. Or in the case of Facebook, where the separate line is hard to tell, there are overlappings among private and public spaces. Another issue is that, when we say this [Public vs Private] is increasingly a public issue, I curious about in which aspect it is increasingly the issue, and why we think it is increasingly so ?

Mana Treerayapiwat : When we look at the private or public matters. In the past, it is fairly straightforward, esspecially in the context of urban society. For rural society, it can be different. Since everybody almost know everyone else, there are less likely to have private matters. Another point is that, if it is about celebrities, most of the time we will think that we can involved in the issue. But if it is about our own matters, we don't like other people or the public to be involved.

Social media has fairly overlapping areas in itself about what is private and what is public. Sometimes we may just like to communicate with only few people, but eventually it goes wild far beyond our expectations. Which, in some cases, we can neither control nor limit the

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1 Translated from a Thai word "ส่วนตัว", which could be translated as "Personal", and sometimes "Individual" too.

circulation. There is a practice of tagging,[2] forwardingly on and on. The important questions are What, When, and How we can constitute the boundary or sufficiently define the meaning of the word. Which it is difficult to answer.

Prap Boonpan : I like to continue from that point. We treat Facebook or social media as a public space. For many comments that we made, we intend to made them public. *เวลา When we talking about private or public, we may need to look at the actor as well. If there's a private clip of a public figure, could it be a public matter ? If it is about public issue and related to wider society.*

Mana : At this moment, when we have social network, our personal opinions may have more "value", from the practices that we reveal ourselves or express our opinions through these new media.

Wanrak : Back to the issues of private and public, personally I think we can no longer clearly distinguish them. Because the interaction and connection between private and public matters, or between individual and news nowadays are going rapidly and conveniently. *We are not mere "audience", but we bring ourselves to involve with news or ongoing matters.*

Mana : I like to give an example from the case of "Joke Pai-kiew" clip[3]. If it was in the past, the reporter could report it along the pattern: Who doing what? When? How? And he could ask for the photograph to be edited. *But when we have "clip" or new media emerged, everybody can deliver news. Some events and truths are starting to have more than one perspective. Eventually to a point that we don't really know what is true and what is not.* The world from now on will getting more and more complicated, a truth has many perspectives.

Thaweeporn : Can we say that new media make private matters becoming public faster ?

Wanrak : I'm now thinking presently the definitions are not that fixed. In the past, when we talking about private or public, it based on space. But in the present time, it may be not that fixed.

Thaweeporn : If we talking according to dictionary definition, we can see that the main split of "private" and "public" words is depends on the space or the sharing (forwarding) of things. "Private" is sharing with few people. "Public" is sharing with more wider circle or the society.

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2   In online social network services, it allow us to 'label' a post. This label is also called a tag. It can be used to attached names of people to a particular post. General understanding is that, those people are related to the post. Like a person in a photograph. It can also be used to bring those people in the labels to the posts. A reference to a person in Twitter, using '@mention' practice, can also be considered as tagging.

3   Charnchai "Joke Pai-kiew" Prasongsil, a criminal suspect which believed to killed a boy named Phokin "Nong Tomee" Deephiu. The video clip of police extrajudicially killing "Joke Pai-kiew", in December 2010, went around the Internet and brought critical opinions from both human rights defenders and police supporters. Video clip: http://youtu.be/Hcguy0aPWsA

Wanrak : Now in the virtual world, these definitions could be already changed. We no longer have confidence that the thing we shared, forwarded, or posted will going to be "private" or "public". There is no guarantee that our intension and the outcome will oriented towards to the same direction.

Journalists nowadays can no longer have monopoly on news reporting. People have more participation [with the news] and able to report [their own versions of] news more than in the past. Another point is that, when they can report diversified stories or truths, it bring a problem of having no black or white, or a question of what is the moral standard ?

Thaweeporn : Personally, I still think it's clear what is private and what is public. But with technology, it makes the public-ization easier and this may bring a legal question: if we post or share matters privately with friends, it can still be illegal [as if we made it publicly].

Wanrak : I think it's not only changed the "speed" or "convenience", but it also changed the definition. "Private" may mean neither two nor several people, it could be hundreds people.

Thaweeporn : So this means the numbers of people is essential or related to the concept of private or public ? Or it doesn't ?

Prap : I think the numbers of people is important. For example, in present days, when we develop a news systems, we can know how many readers we have. This brought into the news planning. Some news are the hits in newspaper, but when they went online, they are not necessary the same. Online may also about numbers. Or the case of Facebook, which becomes a ground to choose issues to report, up to the interests of these websites' visitors.

Wanrak : In Facebook, sometimes we can see there're motions in a way that we can know which news are in the interest of the people ? Like, whether they got shared further or not ?

Mana : In the past, when we have holidays we may shoot videos. Once we share them in YouTube, they become more public. Particularly, if they got enough attention, they can go far further beyond what we can initially thought.

Thaweeporn : We come to the issue of privacy and the issue of the political. For example, the case that there're three men talking about public matters (in a private space) and the clip of the event has been posted on cyberspace.[4] What it leads to, or what it tells ? Does it a violation of privacy rights ?

Wanrak : Privateness or Publicness may not be up to the "definition" or "meaning" but may be at the "issue", does it a private or a public one. This brings toward the 2-way verification, which

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4   Video clips of Constitutional Court members discussing in a restaurant with a Democrat Party member about Democrat Party dissolution case. See: http://youtu.be/iP4r-1isXJs http://youtu.be/4mDnFau3UUQ http://youtu.be/bWQ9xT71sSU and more from http://www.youtube.com/user/ohmygod3009 (these urls are blocked in Thailand)

shaking the state. And the state try at its best to resists this.

Thaweeporn : In general, privacy should be a thing that got affirmed. But when it comes to the public figures or public issues, may the privateness be lessen down [in reverse variation to the publicness of the figures or issues] ? Or which parts that could be disclosed, and which parts that could not ?

Prap : It's difficult for mainstream media. If they have to keep relationships with the mass or the elites. When mainstream media discussed the coup' behind-the-scene stories, they made it indirectly or concealed it with another meaning. This could be seen as a self-censorship, therefore mainstream media have seen as they surrendered to state's power. But we need to consider that mainstream media have so diverse personnels and social networks. For some issues, there're people who like it and doesn't like it. The media [as an organization] need to manage the relationships, to keep these people living together. This could be a solution to the problem of people in the age of 50, and we may need to talk about how we're going to deal with a problem that come with new media. I think it may need a transformation of idea or a change of generation first, then the approach to reporting things may later change.

Wanrak : The point may be not the "courage" to report news. *Personally, I think the media now should be a matter of "opening up" the space, opening up more space to adequately accommodate diversity (from the state). New media has opened up this space more than it was in the past.*

Thaweeporn : Do you mean we don't have to care if mainstream media is going to report some stories or not, because we now have new media to report these new stories ? But doesn't the state trying to occupy these new media at the moment ?

Wanrak : All the time in the history, the state tries so hard to occupy alternative media or counter media. That always happens. But as Judith Butler[5] said, the state always has a crack, there is a way to survive for those who oppose the state.

Mana : I think when we talk about a clip in public space, sometimes the audiences have to be careful about it's presentation as well. For example, the clip that shows a teacher smashing down a BlackBerry phone to the floor, it's a marketing viral[6]. Or for political purpose, we also have the same. *We have to understand that the clip distribution could be part of some movements. The major problem for audiences is that we have to question this for every single clips, we can't seriously believed what we have seen any more.*

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5   Judith Butler (February 24, 1956), an American post-structural philosopher who has major
     contributions to Feminism, Queer Theory, political philosophy, and ethics.

6   A "candid" video clip of a teacher throwing a BlackBerry phone to the classroom's floor. It went wide
     spread on the Internet and became talk of the town. Later, people learned that it's a viral marketing
     campaign of Burger King restaurant.

Wanrak : A big problem in Thai society is that when stream of information got amplified by new media, how we're going to deal with this collective emotion?

Thaweeporn : Like a case when new media leads to the collection of people of the same mood, and then leads to a more intense and faster insanity and faster.

Mana : The point is who going to use it. In the past, it may be a marketing man. Now, it may be a politician. It's easier to spin things up. And it sometimes relates to Thai society that doesn't like anything complicated. Only right or wrong.

Thaweeporn : When we have media that reports things in this way, does it has more benefit to mainstream media or to news consumer ?

Prap : If we look at the benefit, there is: *journalists or news editors are no longer the news monopolizer. There are more "news". For example, the case of the film "Insect in the Backyard"[7], if there's no movement in new media, there's probably no space for it in mainstream media. It brings to a new way of submission.*

Thaweeporn : When it moves from new media to mainstream, does it still continue to have high popularity ?

Prap : It may be difficult to measure the numbers [of viewers]. But sometimes it can be measured from the result. For example, the case of the film King Naresuan's budget, which got over-sponsored. It [movement in new media] brings to a news in print media, and consequently lead to the financial support cut in the end.

Mana : *The problem may not be at the numbers of audience, but at the consequences to the making of policy or the amplification to public issues. In the past, we may need the number of people for demonstration. But now it's about the "issue", whether it can brings supports.*

Wanrak : In the social movement, to allow numerous diversified people to share and build up a virtual community, which can lead to an action and balance the mainstream power. For example, here when we gathering together in this seminar. In the past, we may need more and longer advertisement. But now it's faster and easier.

Participant I : Suppose that I walking in a public park with my girlfriend, and there's a person shooting a video clip and posted it on the Internet. In many countries, I can sue him. To what extend that the law should protect the privacy ?

Wanrak : *I like to give an example of where is the line between the individual freedom and*

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7   A Thai film directed by Thanwarin Sukhaphisit. The story is about relationships of family members, which also address queer issues. The film and video commission banned the film and restricted its distribution in November 23, 2010. For more information about the film and its movement, please visit its Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/insectsinthebackyard and Thai Movie Audience Network's blog: http://thaiaudience.wordpress.com/

the publicness. In United Kingdom, they have CCTV (close-circuited television), generally people there can accept it. But french people doesn't, and said it violates individual freedom – the state doesn't has a right to use CCTV everywhere – and this became consensus or norms of the society. We can see that there're differences among different societies, and this comes from the negotiation between the people and the state.

Participant II : The concepts of public and private have been around for a long time … how long is that long ?

Wanrak : I personally not an expert in this area. But I think it is probably a construction of 19th century. It may be emerged at the time of the birth of bourgeoise, which is itself unfolded from the feudal society.

Kasem Phenpinant (participant) : The separation between private and public, on one side, it could be a legacy from the battles between the modern state and the people in that state. The people start to feel that the state pushed itself to much into the life of the people. This brings to the need of association, but by conditions they cannot bring themselves together. So it leads to a making of a public space, a space that people can talk and exchange on public issues. Mass media later distribute and bring these talks up to public issues. *What is interesting is the issue of public space or private space has been "blur" for already long time. People can display privateness in public space, and vice versa, bring publicness to private space. New media is a catalyst to these ambiguity and blurriness. The growth of television and radio broadcasting bring the public to the private, and become a pattern, become a public. Media does more than only distribute the news, it also create dimensions of relationships.*

Tewson Seeoun (participant) : I like to exchange about the idea that say the mentioning about a fraction of WikiLeaks may tell that the media knows about it or people know about it. But doesn't a non-mentioning is also telling the same, that we know about it?

Participant III : Why mainstream media fear of the government ? Or fear of what will the government do ?

Prap : Mainstream media is not fear of the government. We fear the relationships with many different people. Our friends or people in the organization. How we're going to deal with them, if they are really that. It's difficult to handle. Mainstream media probably cannot do it. But there're new media like Prachatai, for example.

Wanrak : The request of "neutral media" is a strange phenomenon in Thai society. Because the media simply doesn't has it, the neutrality. *We should make people recognize that there is no such thing like neutral media, because it has relationships with many many things.*

Mana : *We have to distinguished between "neutrality" and "fairness". This means we need to open up spaces for different diversified opinions. Let the other sides speak, not only allow one*

side to speak, whether it be the government or the opposite.

Prap : The report itself sometimes is an evaluation of the media. For example, in 2009, there's almost no reports about the Red Shirts, but there are in 2010. This is because the media feels that Red Shirts is important and strong. *Another point is that, mainstream media may report a non-mainstream news, but may be not with the mainstream way.*

(End of the talk – after this, the participants joined the Clip Kino screening and discussed with clip presenters. During the event, they also proposed "related" clips and screened them. The event went over the planned time, and some planned clips were not screened, as the venue has to be closed.)