

## A Content Analysis of Online Political Conflict

### Discussion

การวิเคราะห์การสนทนาประเด็นความขัดแย้งทางการเมือง  
ในสังคมออนไลน์

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### Abstract

Political conflict in Thailand in the year 2010 spurred me to conduct an analysis of the content of online political conflict discussion in order to suggest strategies to build understanding in society. The content analysis to investigate political communication and conflict discourse in Thai online social networking on [www.pantip.com](http://www.pantip.com) shows that the specific themes of the blogs related to conflict discussion consisted of the outcome/expected outcome theme, the impact theme, the understanding theme, the conflict signal theme, the problem solving theme, the ideology/belief theme and the conflict management style theme. Interestingly, the findings on the specific themes show that the topics that the majority of bloggers discussed in terms of conflict management styles during the political crisis were the conflict management through confrontation style theme (28.8 %) followed by the conflict management through the reduction of conflict style theme

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(28.3 %), the conflict management through compromise style theme (22.7 %), the conflict management through coercion style theme (16.7 %), and other conflict management style themes (3.5 %). Based on the thought of communication theorists, the use of opinion leaders to disseminate ideas for reduction of conflict is one strategy for building understanding in the society (Bord, 1975; Burt, 1999; Valente & Davis, 1999).

**Keywords:** political communication; conflict discussion; content analysis

## บทคัดย่อ

ความขัดแย้งทางการเมืองใน พ.ศ. 2553 กระตุ้นให้ผู้วิจัยวิเคราะห์การสนทนาประเด็นความขัดแย้งทางการเมืองในสังคมออนไลน์เพื่อเสนอกลยุทธ์ในการสร้างความเข้าใจอันดีในสังคม การวิเคราะห์สารเพื่อศึกษาการสื่อสารทางการเมืองและการวิเคราะห์ห้วงการความขัดแย้งในสังคมออนไลน์ของไทย ในเว็บไซต์ [www.pantip.com](http://www.pantip.com) แสดงให้เห็นว่าประเด็นสนทนาหลักที่เกี่ยวกับความขัดแย้งในบล็อก ประกอบด้วย ประเด็นเรื่องผลลัพธ์/ผลลัพธ์ที่คาดหวัง, ประเด็นเรื่องผลกระทบ, ประเด็นเรื่องความเข้าใจซึ่งกันและกัน, ประเด็นเรื่องสัญญาความขัดแย้ง, ประเด็นเรื่องการแก้ปัญหา, ประเด็นเรื่องอุดมการณ์/ความเชื่อ, และประเด็นเรื่องการบริหารจัดการความขัดแย้ง ที่น่าสนใจคือผลการวิจัยในหมวดประเด็นเฉพาะพบว่าหัวข้อเกี่ยวกับการบริหารจัดการความขัดแย้งที่บล็อกเกอร์ส่วนใหญ่สนทนากันคือ การบริหารจัดการความขัดแย้งแบบเผชิญหน้า (28.8%) ตามมาด้วยการบริหารความขัดแย้งแบบทำให้สถานการณ์ของความขัดแย้งลดลง (28.3%), การบริหารจัดการความขัดแย้งแบบประนีประนอม (22.7%), การบริหารจัดการความขัดแย้งแบบบังคับ (16.7%) และการบริหารจัดการความขัดแย้งแบบอื่นๆ (3.5%) บนพื้นฐานแนวคิดของนักทฤษฎีด้านนิเทศศาสตร์นั้นการใช้ผู้นำความคิดเพื่อถ่ายทอดแนวคิดเรื่องการลดความขัดแย้งเพื่อเสนอ

กลยุทธ์เพื่อลดความขัดแย้งเป็นกลยุทธ์หนึ่งในการสร้างความเข้าใจอันดีในสังคม (Bord, 1975; Burt, 1999; Valente & Davis, 1999)

คำสำคัญ: การสื่อสารทางการเมือง; การสนทนาประเด็นความขัดแย้ง;  
การวิเคราะห์สาร

## 1. Problem Statement

Communication has become a key tool to support the development of conflict resolution effectiveness. However, most of communication practitioners also recognize several factors affecting development and effectiveness of conflict resolution communication: social support, education, culture, or gender (Agustiana, 2005). Malala Yousafzai, the 2014 Nobel Prize winner (UNESCO, 2014), inspired me to consider the role of the female opinion leader in supporting the development of conflict resolution effectiveness in Thailand. The questions raised as: How could I, as female communication scholar, understand and evaluate the practice of communication in the conflict resolution process? What is the conflict? How do female opinion leaders create and maintain a peaceful society through communication? How can female opinion leaders use communication as a tool to deal with conflict? Interestingly, Yousafzai's speech at the United Nations conference in New York on 12 July 2013 reaffirmed that peace-builders play a major role in promoting better understanding by adopting a set of communication strategies designed to maximize the conflict management (CBCnews, 2013; PeaceDirect, 2013). Specifically, Yousafzai's statements (2013) and professional communication skills confirmed that communication is a key success factor to foster community unity and identity.

Agustiana (2005) suggested that effective communication can motivate social members to feel as though they are a part of the peace-building team and can be willing to work in crisis periods. Moreover, Chulapimpan (1999)'s rhetorical study focusing on the role of women in Thai politics has motivated me to consider the roles of female opinion leaders in promoting national consolidation and unity. As influencers or opinion leaders are more central to a crisis, referred to as political actors, using these central people or opinion leaders as champions for cascading the reconciliation in peace-building project can remove barriers to (re)create understanding in the conflict situation.

As Segev, Villar, & Fiske's (2012) study noted, bloggers are opinion leader within their communities. The problem solving direction from bloggers' views, thus, could be presumed as public opinion. In order to achieve the desired end of communication in crisis situation, I conducted the content analysis focusing on the specific theme of the blogs related to conflict discussion in order to understand and to uncover feelings of bloggers during political crisis period (Kaid, 2004: 157; Maiese, 2006: 192).

## 2. Literature Review

### **Roles of communication professionals**

As political crises are resulted from misunderstandings and a gap between subjective viewpoints, communication professionals such as academic journalists, public relations professionals, political public relations officers, politicians, political media--should be taken into account as third party or mediator to maintain understanding between conflicting parties. Moreover, Himes (1980), Semlak (1982) and Agustiana (2005)

proposed that trust, willingness to communicate, and communication styles were found important in developing of conflict resolution effectiveness. I am, therefore, interested in the role of the female opinion leader, as a peace-builder, in fostering the development of constructive conflict management, I would challenge communication professionals to implement the use of female opinion leaders into their reconciliation plan to strengthen effective communication during political conflict situation. Importantly, communication professionals should be aware of the timely appropriate content presented to the receivers. I believe that the concept of female opinion leaders must be effectively integrated into the national consolidation campaign in order to achieve peace when the Thai government and political protester leaders have to agree to end political conflict. This integration is necessary in order to resolve the differences between the conflicting parties and to reach out to all ethnic groups, clans, tribes, social classes, and cultures in Thailand.

### **Opinion leader and conflict resolution**

Conflicts are often distinguished into three main categories: interest, understanding, and/or ideology/beliefs. The conflict communication among bloggers presents a complex pattern of the conflict discourse system. There are many forms of communication relating political talk: conflict in diverse societal and cultural setting, the political communication in public sphere and the contemporary cultural study understanding of conflict in the context of political identity. Therefore, type/s of conflict discussion is/are presented in blogs such as: outcome/expected outcome, impact, understanding, conflict signal, problem solving, ideology/belief or conflict management style reflected

individuals' motives for communicating in a virtual community to resolve the controversy (Blau, 1964: 91).

Arno (2009) proposed in *Alarming reports: Communicating conflict in the daily news* that understanding conflict discussion enables researchers to identify influencers or opinion leaders who are more central to a crisis, referred to as political actors. Therefore, using these central people or opinion leaders as champions for cascading the reconciliation in peace-building project can remove barriers to promote behavior change through peer networks (Rogers, 2003: 322). The opinion leader concept is evident in many domains such as agriculture, mass media, advertising, public health, technology adoption, political and social movements, professional practice and health professional education. Valente and Davis (1999) suggested that opinion leaders have a huge impact on other people's opinions, actions and behavior even without formal authority. Finally, Valente and Davis (1999) conceptualized opinion leaders as role models in peer groups and as the theoretical underpinning to peer educational programs and interpersonal influence within the groups. Furthermore, in a different dimension, Bord's (1975) thought in "Toward a social-psychological theory of charismatic social influence processes," using techniques of charismatic leadership, diccovered the social influence process between charismatic leaders and their followers. Bord (1975) asserted that charismatic opinion leaders often try to persuade audiences by using storytelling and stage performing to get audiences' involvement and emotional arousal leading to positive attributions of the speaker as the charismatic. Lastly, Ronald S. Burt (1999) concentrated on the idea of in and out group contacts. He stated that "opinion leaders in the network structure of contagion are more

precisely opinion brokers who transmit information across the social boundaries between status group" (Burt, 1999: 47). According to Burt, opinion leaders gain influence not only because they have contact within the group but also because they have contact with members outside of the group. As a result, if opinion leaders gain influence through their advantages relative to other citizens, then these contacts provide opinion leaders with unique access to potentially valuable information. In other words, communication between those people to result in contagion occurs through a social network and strong relationships or frequent contacts as group members' enduring desire to continue relationships with their opinion leaders (Burt, 1999). In conclusion, Burt (1999) described opinion leaders as people whose conversations influence information diffusion for the people with whom they speak.

### 3. Scope of the research

To understand, the political conflict and to enhance conflict resolution effectiveness, the content from major national website in Thailand (Wikipedia, 2014), Ratchadhamnern café in [www.pantip.com](http://www.pantip.com), from August 2, 2010 through September 30, 2010 (60 days) was investigated to analyze its political communication pattern. Actually, content analysis was only secondarily interested in the political issues that the bloggers was expressed in blogosphere. The content analysis shows us the characteristics of conflict discussion during period of political crisis (see Table 1). Moreover, this study is concerned the conflict discussion that served to elaborate methods for conflict resolution in Thai society. As a result, in my research, I investigated the most prominent theme that

bloggers discussed about in terms of conflict management style during political crisis (see Table 2).

#### 4. Findings:

##### 4.1 What type/s of conflict discussion is/are presented in blogs?

The research results related to the specific theme of the blogs could be explained as follows:

No	Conflict discussion	Percent (%)	Frequency (blog)	Cumulative percent
1	Impact	38.9	77	38.9
2	Understanding	31.3	62	70.2
3	Conflict signal	11.1	22	81.3
4	Outcome	10.6	21	91.9
5	Problem solving	5.1	10	97.0
6	Conflict management style	11.1	22	81.3
7	Ideology/belief	1.0	2	100.0
8	Withdrawal	0.0	0	100.0
Total		100.0	198	100.0

Table 1: The specific topic of the blog: Conflict discussion

The analysis revealed that the bloggers deal with the impact theme the most (38.9%) followed by the understanding theme (31.3%), the conflict signal theme (11.1%), the outcome/expected outcome theme (10.6 %), the problem solving theme (5.1%), the conflict management style theme (2.0%), and the ideology/belief theme (1.0%).



Communication of conflict among bloggers presents a complex pattern of the conflict discourse systems. There are many forms of communication relating political talk for example conflict in diverse societal and cultural setting, the political communication in public sphere, and the contemporary understanding of conflict in the context of political identity. In reference to this analysis, the concentration of political content in the blogs is mostly about political conflict and the color-based protest movements in Thailand.

#### **4.2 What are the topics that bloggers discussed in terms of conflict management style?**

The research results related to the specific theme of the blogs could be explained as follows:

No	Conflict management style	Percent (%)	Frequency (blog)	Cumulative percent
1	Confrontation	28.8	57	28.8
2	Smoothing	28.3	56	57.1
3	Compromise	22.7	45	79.8
4	Forcing	16.7	33	96.5
5	Other	3.5	7	100.0
Total		100.0	198	100.0

Table 2: The specific topic of the blog: Conflict management style

The analysis revealed that the bloggers, concerns are conflict management style theme (28.8%) followed by the smoothing conflict management style theme (28.3%), the compromise conflict management style theme (22.7%), the forcing conflict management style theme (16.7%), and the other conflict management style theme (3.5%).

Online social networking performance is their preoccupation with conflict and alarm, a potential positive side is their role in conflict management. The themes mentioned in the blog are as follows:

1. Confrontation (e.g., to take over government house to block a cabinet meeting, social movements, strike action, clash with military)
2. Smoothing (e.g., call for third party such as the coalition parties, the Election Commission)
3. Compromise (e.g., resolved peacefully, sign agreement)
4. Forcing (e.g., violence, gun, knife, bomb)
5. Withdrawal (e.g., gave up the protest and go home)

From the results shown above, the confrontation conflict management style theme is the most prominent political communication theme in Thai online social networking discussion during the Thai political crisis period in the year 2010.

#### **4.3 What are the topics discussed by the bloggers in terms of problem solving?**

The research results related to the specific theme of the blogs could be explained as follows:

No	Problem solving	Frequency (blog)	Percent (%)	Cumulative percent
1	Good governance	60	30.3	93.4
2	Conflict resolutions	45	22.7	43.4
3	Truth	41	20.7	20.7
4	Democracy	39	19.7	63.1
5	Peace building	13	6.6	100.0
Total		198	100.0	100.0

Table 3: The specific topic of the blog: Problems solving

This table shows that 41 blogs (20.7%) mentioned the truth theme, 45 blogs (22.7%) mentioned the conflict resolutions theme, 39 blogs (19.7%) mentioned the democracy theme, 60 blogs (30.3%) mentioned the good governance theme, and 13 blogs (6.6%) mentioned the peace building theme.

In this category, I am interested in how bloggers explicit attitude, toward resolving conflict such as willing to work hard to overcome conflict, is expressed.

The topics that bloggers discussed in terms of problems solving are: bloggers call for truth (bloggers call for a fact-finding committee), bloggers call for conflict resolutions (bloggers are willing to work hard to overcome conflict, bloggers call for the coalition parties), bloggers call for democracy (bloggers call for new national election to get the new government supported by the majority of the Thais, bloggers call for the Election Commission), bloggers call for good governance (bloggers proposed curbing rampant corruption, bloggers suggest that parliament should work for the sake of people not self-interest), and bloggers call for peace (e.g. bloggers suggested that the Thais should be more patient and let the Abhisit Vejjajiva government work its four-year term, bloggers proposed to pray for peace building).

From the above results, the good governance theme is the most prominent political communication theme in Thai online social networking discussion during the Thai political crisis period in the year 2010.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

Though digital communication technologies tend to widely expand, content in the online social networking extremely affected political communication between citizens and political actors; such as government officials, party leaders, interest group advocates, or others (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004: 15). In addition, Internet use opens more forum and e-communication in challenging national policy (Holtz-Bacha, 2004: 232; Donsbach & Patterson, 2004: 264). As a result, it is necessary for communication professionals to implement political communication as ways to advocate social changes and to strengthen the health and future of democracy (Swanson, 2004: 54). The communication professionals in Thailand should investigate political communication and conflict discourse in Thai online social network in order to understand the issues of interest among those in the blogosphere. The blogosphere is an online political forum that enables potentially effective two-way communication between the Thais concentrating on the political crisis examined in this study and people who need the public's reaction to the indications of citizens' demands (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 41; Kriesi, 2004: 192). As people are seeking for channels to communicate with others and the state, therefore, online virtual communities and blogospheres emerged and permeated the lives of those Thais who chose to participate in online social media. Through their strong interest in political issues in Ratchadhamnern Café, their political communication behavior also revealed their great concern about outcome/expected outcome, impact, understanding, conflict signal, problem solving, ideology/belief and conflict management style related to political crisis (see Table 1). During the political crisis period, an online political discussion forum can create a new political space in which the

alternative political ideas are proposed for creating and recreating understanding in the society (Mallette, 2005; Ockey, 2009) (see Table 3). Therefore, the government units had to pay attention to the most prominent theme that bloggers discussed in terms of problem solving during political crisis.

As Thai citizen, I agree with bloggers that peace-building concept can help resolve the political controversy. Based on findings in table 3, peace-building campaign is important for Thailand as it can improve public understanding. Peace-building was introduced to the international community by United Nations Secretary General Boutros-Ghali (1992) in An Agenda for Peace as action to identify and support structure that will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse in conflict (Agustiana, 2005). As awareness regarding the importance of conflict prevention significantly impacts the way Thai people make certain political decisions, I would suggest communication practitioner of the peace-building campaign to encourage Thai society to be aware of political conflict caused by sharing the information relevant to the truth, the conflict solutions, democracy and good governance.

Moreover, the analysis in table 3 shows that conflict resolution is the theme talked by bloggers in regards to problem solving during the political crisis. At the same time, some bloggers are likely to choose confrontation as a conflict management style, (see Table 2). The findings show that during political crisis period there were a number of bloggers (28.8 % or 57 blogs) who posted their political opinion in demanding a confrontation. On the contrary, there are a number of bloggers (28.3% or 56 blogs) who posted their political discourses calling for smoothing

conflict management style. Thus, this online political communication forum still faces challenges in building toward a consensus with respect to how the political crisis influences citizens' lives. This may explain the presence of Thai unity promotion campaigns tailored for specific target groups to promote healthy democracy in Thailand. As an example, the "Conflict Prevention" campaign is important for Thailand because of its potential improvement of Thai democracy and unity. The objective of this campaign is to share political information and encourage Thai society to be concerned about the effects of political conflict. The issue of conflict prevention has attracted the attention of Thai people. As indicated by the results some of the bloggers, at least, promoted direct confrontation in resolving the political crisis. Unity remains an illusory, though positive, goal. Social support was present within the blogger's conversation for both confrontational action and alternatives to the direct conflict.

Based on communication theorists' thoughts, the use of opinion leaders as champions for cascading the conflict resolution concept is one strategy to enforce understanding in the society (Bord, 1975; Burt, 1999; Valente & Davis, 1999). However, applying the female opinion leader concept to support the development of conflict resolution effectiveness in Thailand, female opinion leader could (1) assist with information seeking; (2) provide instrumental (moral) support; (3) give acceptance and validation; and (4) encourage a positive perspective (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004: 305).

This integration is necessary in order to renew the message of the "understanding" theme, as shown in table 1, 62 blogs (31.3%) noted this issue in relation to reward (Blau, 1964), in reaching out to all political

groups in Thailand. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the social and cultural conditions in which they live are factors affecting the ideal of “understanding.” In order to achieve the desired end of communication in crisis situation, the communication practitioners must make his/her language comprehensive for his/her audiences. The content of Thai value must be effectively integrated into the national communication campaign in order to achieve peaceful ends, thereby gaining reward for those participating in the crisis related blog. Therefore, the power of language plays a major role in sustaining the community as evident in the common characteristics marking them out as an inalienable social and political group. On the other hand, the current wave of political conflict discussion in Thailand portrays the political culture of the people in Thai social context. I believe that the national communication campaign is able to formulate a message that will resonate with an authentic community in Thailand. Meanwhile, I also believe that if female opinion leaders apply the content of Thai value to solve the political conflict situations in Thailand, peace should be restored. Moreover, language is a conventional sign whereby human beings agree to show to one another how to convey ideas and feelings. We should realize that the language of the bloggers are on coded in conventional signs which demand decoding when we convey the ideas and feelings buried within that domain.

In conclusion, the social and cultural conditions in Thailand are significant factors affecting perception and interpretation of political communication among Thai people. In order to play our roles in the community of believers and society under a crisis situation, we should find the best way to manage certain conflicts across all barriers. The data suggest individual representatives were using the World Wide Web to

communicate with constituents in direct ways. The use of national unity in the discourses of the Thai value is the effective tool for this case.

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