Space of Exclusion and Subjugation but also Democracy: Social Media for Political Demonstration among Thai Youth

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ABSTRACT

Social media has often been anticipated as a promising space for political engagement, given its accessibility and interactive features. Yet, previous studies have highlighted its limitations, arguing that it fails to embody an ideal public sphere. Rather than reconciling these opposing views, this paper connects them by examining social media as a specific and localized space within the Thai context. Drawing on Habermas's (1989) notion of the public sphere and Lefebvre's (1974) concept of social space, the study explores how social media functions politically. Forty university students across Thailand were interviewed to capture their perspectives on using social media for political purposes. Findings reveal that while social media is not an ideal sphere of free and open participation—due to significant controls and structural powers—it nonetheless provides a practical space for democratic expression. For many Thai students, social media remains a promising arena for political participation and demonstration.

Keywords: Political Detention/Freedom; Public Sphere; Social Media; Virtual Space

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, social media use has become widespread. Social media sites have become the main platform for people to post information, receive information, and interact with the world. More importantly, it functions as a space to share and consume political content and ideology. However, it remains ambiguous whether social media can be a promising public space for political demonstration as part of what Jürgen Habermas calls the "public sphere" (1989).

The concept of social media generally refers to internet-based applications and services, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which enable users to communicate with other users, share content, and receive information virtually (Hari, 2014). It is called "social" due to its interactive and collaborative functions (Fuchs, 2014; Hari, 2014). Social media platforms can connect people in different places to a virtual space in real time. These digital technologies made possible a "self-mass communication" (Castells, 1996, 2007, 2009, as cited in Fratticioli, 2010). Social media provides a space for political demonstration, however, there has still been insufficient research on social media in relation to the idea of a public space and as part of the public sphere. Previous research has examined the question whether public spaces are to be considered a Habermasian public sphere or not. Some support the notion while many argue that the idea of the public sphere is abstract and ideal.

This paper, thus, critically examines existing notions of the public sphere in relations to three key research questions. 1) Should social media be considered as a virtual public sphere in Thai society, according to two

characteristics of the public sphere? 2) If not, what are the limitations of social media in Thai society that differentiate it from being a public sphere? 3) What does virtual space mean for young political participants? Specifically, we explore the perspectives of 40 young social media users on whether social media mean to be a promising public space or a public sphere.

THAILAND'S MIDDLE CLASS AND YOUTH POLITICS BACKGROUND

The post–World War II East Asian economic boom reshaped Thai society, fostering a new middle class of educated professionals and students (Muscat, 1994; Hakuhodo, 2015). This group became central to anti-military activism from the late 1950s to the 1970s, culminating in the 1973 uprising that ousted Thanom Kittikachorn (Kongkirati, 2012; Suwannathat-Pian, 2003). However, Cold War tensions and the 1976 Thammasat massacre suppressed student activism and enabled the return of right-wing dominance (Funatsu & Kagoya, 2003).

In 1992, middle-class protests during the Black May uprising led to the resignation of Prime Minister Suchinda Kraprayoon. A new upper-middle class, shaped by Western capitalist ideals, emerged, paradoxically supporting democracy while at times backing royalist coups (Lertchoosakul, 2021). Their influence contributed to the 2006 and 2014 coups against Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra, respectively (Santitniramai, 2017; BBC, 2014). While students participated, their role was less impactful than in the 1970s.

A political shift began with the 2018 rise of the Future Forward Party, whichh appealed to Gen Z through social media and opposed military and royalist power (Teerakowitkajorn, 2018). Although dissolved in 2020, its successor, Move Forward, won 151 seats in the 2023 election, reflecting a youth-led turn toward liberal-left politics (Bangkok Post, 2020; The Nation, 2023). The party's dissolution sparked university-led protests demanding greater democratic freedoms (Anamwathana & Thanapornsangsuth, 2023).

Social media has since become central to youth activism, amplifying marginalized voices and enabling students to challenge the royalist-right status quo. This emerging middle class now plays a key role in advancing liberal-democratic reforms in 21st-century Thailand (Sinpeng, 202).

From an Ideal Political Space: The Public Sphere

Habermas (1989) conceptualized public space as the public sphere—a domain in social life where individuals engage in critical discussion of public matters and state affairs. He traced its origins to the Renaissance, when merchants created spaces to exchange market information, later evolving into a bourgeois public sphere during the 18th and 19th centuries, fostering rational political debate and shaping public opinion.

The public sphere has two key features. First, it involves the notion of "the public"—a group confronting shared issues and engaging in collective dialogue (Dewey, 1927). Democratic societies depend on such open, accessible spaces that encourage political participation (Papacharissi, 2002). Second, it emphasizes communicative rationality, where opinions are formed through reasoned discourse and supported by transparent information flow (Habermas, 1989; Dahlberg, 2013). Habermas noted that educated middle-class citizens, through their engagement with literature and public debate, developed the capacity for critical opinion, thereby fostering democratic deliberation.

However, Habermas also acknowledged limitations in this ideal. The bourgeois public sphere was exclusive, accessible primarily to educated property owners. Fraser (1992) further critiqued it for excluding women and lower social classes, arguing that such a public sphere was either incomplete or never fully realized. As Staeheli, Mitchell, and Nagel (2009) emphasize, expanding inclusivity remains a challenge for the ideal public sphere.

To a Practical Space of Politics: Social Media

With the rise of social media, the public sphere shifted from a physical space to a virtual structure, allowing individuals to freely express opinions. Scholars often compare this transformation to Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere. As mass communication evolved, social media enabled broader, more accessible political participation (Habermas, 1991).

While some scholars celebrate this shift, views remain divided. Papacharissi (2011) and Saldaña et al. (2015) argue that social media fosters interactive dialogue, enhancing political awareness and transforming users from passive audiences into active participants. Conversely, Fraser (1992), English (2013), and Kruse et al. (2018) highlight inequalities in access and participation, noting that virtual spaces often privilege those with resources, undermining inclusivity. Fuchs (2014) further critiques these platforms as being controlled by states or corporations, limiting free expression. These critiques raise the question: is social media better understood through Lefebvre's concept of social space rather than Habermas's public sphere?

Lefebvre (1974) conceptualized social space as a product of capitalist and political forces, shaped by those in power to influence perceptions and behaviors. Similarly, social media spaces are shaped by developers for profit and by governments for control (Fratticioli, 2010). Users—including both protestors and pro-government actors—exercise power within these platforms, but governments also exploit them to suppress dissent and shape narratives (Peterson, 2001).

This paper explores whether social media constitutes a virtual public sphere or a controlled social space. Focusing on Thailand, it examines how university students use digital platforms to revitalize democratic engagement and reframe the meaning of virtual space in contested political contexts.

METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions, virtual-semi-structured interviews were conducted in March 2022 and April 2022. We interviewed young social media users who usually and actively use social media for political expression. The interviewees were 40 university students between the ages of 18 and 25 years old studying at six universities in Thailand in various disciplines (see Table 1 for a summary of the interviewees' characteristics). All participants used social media every day to receive political information and actively engaged in political demonstrations at least once a week.

The participants were initially recruited through social media. We posted a recruitment advertisement on our Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter pages; additional participants were recruited through individuals who had already participated in the study. Our methods of recruitment, allowed us to recruit participants with diverse backgrounds, at different universities, and in different social groups. We selected those who tend to engage in politics on social media. However, the pandemic restricted us from physical access to the participants; therefore, we recruited and interviewed them virtually through Zoom meetings.

The duration of each Interview was between 45 and 60 minutes. All interviewees were asked a series of questions regarding the power, strengths, and limitations of using social media for political demonstrations in Thailand. During the process, all respondents could decline to be interviewed or withdraw from participation at any time. We also asked for their consent to be recorded and published. To maintain the participants' anonymity, interviewees were assigned a participant number (i.e., PN1, PN2, … PN40) by the order they were interviewed. All interviews were fully transcribed, and all information was thematized. By doing so, the exploration and analysis are shown beyond.

Table 1: Population Characteristics of the Interviewees

Characteristics	Number	(%) n = 40
University		
Chulalongkorn University	22	55
Thammasat University	9	22.5
Chiang Mai University	4	10
Ramkhamhaeng University	2	5
Bangkok University	2	5
Kasetsart University	1	2.5
Discipline (major)		
Social Sciences and Humanities	30	75
Other Professions (Business, Engineer, Journalism, etc.)	8	20
Health Sciences	2	5
Age		
19	2	5
20	1	2.5
21	20	50
22	9	22.5

| 23 | 7 | 17.5 |
| 24 | 1 | 2.5 |

Thai Social Media as an Ideal Public Sphere

The Habermas's (1989) ideological public sphere consisted of two main characteristics, as noted in the theoretical section: 1) a public space in which citizens gather in one place for public discussion without boundaries where access is guaranteed to all, and 2) a space for democratic enhancement supported by open information flows and enabling logical discourse.

First Characteristic: A Public Space for All (Privileges)

Social media should be understood as a public space that is opens for all citizens. Participants almost unanimously consider social media to be a space. Here, they viewed space as where human activities and interactions occur; social media qualifies as it. Although this space is intangible, and we cannot physically experience it or be present in it to perform an activity, it is possible to perform several activities by placing our identity online, including sharing information and discussing a range of topics.

The participants considered social media to be a public space, noting that the main characteristic of being public is that others, even if only our friends, can recognize what we are doing or thinking and join in or commence a conversation with us. "What others see is not private anymore" (PN6). Social media can be considered a private space when users set their privacy settings to restrict access to a select group. In this context, participants view each other as human beings who can directly see their online posts. However, most participants contradicted the idea of privacy on social media, as they considered the controlling system of social media to be the others as well; "sometimes there is no privacy" (PN7). They argued that online actions leave a digital footprint, which can still be observed by the human controller behind the system. Additionally, the algorithm that governs content visibility on the site significantly affects privacy, as one of our participants pointed out. "Even though we are murmuring online to ourselves that we want to eat *moo kratha* (Thai-style barbecue), the system will record our status and present an advertisement for *moo kratha* later on our social media feed" (PN31). Thus, despite being an online system, social media users are still monitored, leading to the conclusion that it cannot be regarded as a private space. Instead, it functions as a "virtual public space" enabling participants to engage in activities without traditional geographical constraints, and making all online actions potentially observable by anyone.

Although social media supports easier accessibility for people to join in political conversations, regardless of geographical boundaries, it is genuinely not inclusive enough for all to access, similar to Crang points out (2000). The inclusion or exclusion of people using social media is shaped by lifestyle choices (Loader and Mercea 2011) and restricted by economic capital. Using social media requires two instruments: the internet and a device; however, having access to these also requires a decent amount of money. The participants unanimously agreed that lower-income people are generally the first group to be excluded from this space. Some participants added that the use of social media also requires technological skills, particularly the elderly and certain groups of people tend not to know how to use new technologies. These limitations make accessing social media a "privilege to those who have money and ability" (PN40), even though it is considered a public space.

Second characteristic: a space for Democratic Enhancement

Space of information circulation beyond the Limitations of Space and Time

One of the most marked advantages of using social media is that it makes it easy to access relevant information beyond the limitations of physical space and time. The participants unanimously agree that social media provides easier accessibility to information than traditional media—television, newspaper, or radio broadcast—as users can access from anywhere and at any time, with the internet and devices required.

Social media not only grants access to information but also broadens political participation by facilitating easy engagement in online political discussions. Its interactive features, such as commenting, sharing, and initiating discussions, empower users to express their desires and stay informed. Many participants prefer social media as their primary medium for engaging in various political matters. Moreover, the option of anonymity mentioned by some participants provides a sense of safety, encouraging people to be more politically active without fear of state retaliation. PN18 pointed out that "the limitations of physical spaces make voicing our needs online easier. Being anonymous, we might not get violent responses than if we voice them in physical spaces".

Social media's remarkable advantage lies in its difficulty to control, setting it apart from traditional media. Unlike traditional media, which faces time constraints for publishing information and is susceptible to state censorship,

"this makes the traditional media likely to be highly biased" (PN8), social media enables instant access and posting of information from anyone, anywhere, at any time without the limitations of space and time. This unrestricted flow of information makes censorship efforts challenging, leading to real-time news reception. Participants value this aspect as it allows them to access multiple perspectives, empowering them to form their own beliefs rather than being "forced to believe" (PN10) by the authorities with more in-depth and diverse views.

Thus, social media offers "a free space to easily spread various information even when we are far apart" (PN4) with using only fingertips, the flow of information becomes rapid. With reference to political participation, the flow of information was deemed reported as extremely important to the participants. This helps spark and motivate the expression of ideology and enables political movements to go viral. As noted by PN1, "because we all use social media and we receive the same messages [and ideology], the number of protestors will increase". Therefore, many, especially politically active citizens, use social media to expand the network of coalitions nationwide; people not living in Bangkok can support a protest and cause a similar protest within their province with the same ideology and aims.

However, social media might also restrict the circulation of information, trapping users with a subset of information and providing a narrow perspective, intensifying political polarization as in an echo chamber. The interviewees insisted that political polarization does not originate in social media but is intensified by it. Most participants noted that conflict and turmoil have existed throughout history, but "social media makes them more clearly visible; thus, we acknowledge the presence of the opposing sides" (PN7).

As a space of information flow, social media allows users to customize certain information to be visible or invisible to them by enabling them to freely choose to subscribe or follow only the accounts or pages that they wish to follow. This feature supports the natural human desire to select information that matches their pre-existing assumptions, making the social media users tend to stick to the set of notions that they endorse; hence, "their notions, when open to information from the opposing side, become more difficult to hold to" (PN10).

Although some have argued that this feature should also be a benefit in reducing the echo chamber, as the users can manually follow the opposite side, most have countered that social media's algorithms are the ultimate vital factor concerning the echo chamber. It is human nature that we only tend to react to the information that we align with, as noted by most participants. Although they followed the opposite side, they just read but rarely reacted to the messages, while they mostly reacted to the side that they endorsed because they of the positive feeling of having a bond and solidarity. "The social media algorithm therefore filters out and offers the content that we seem to have interest in or what we tend to engage it" (PN17), creating an echo chamber.

The echo chamber phenomenon in social media intensifies political homophily and is noticeable. Although political cleavages have been present for decades, such as the conflict between the yellow and red shirt groups, social media makes them more visible while also impairing them. The echo chamber phenomenon causes users to receive information only from the side that they are aligned; the longer that they remain on only one side, the harder it is to accept the information outside the chamber, "like fish swimming in the same tub" (PN18). Due to anonymity, which can make it difficult to identify accounts, people are becoming more aggressive toward the opposite side as they think no one knows their identity. Moreover, because users can block accounts that they are not comfortable with, this limits the space of the opposite side on their virtual space, which exacerbates political polarization (PN35). As PN28 stated:

The echo chamber limits our perspectives and also our ability to understand the opposite side. When both sides are stuck in their chamber without attempting to consider the other side's point of view, polarization become worse.

Comparing the advantages and disadvantages of social media, most participants agreed that even though social media makes political polarization more obvious, it crucially enhances democracy through its tremendous support of information flow.

Space Of Political Articulation Without Rationalization

The flows of information prompts social media users to engage freely in the discussion. Social media provides two-way communication instead of the one-way relationship that is entailed by traditional media. This type of communication, as noted by most participants, allows consumers to receive messages or information and "we can instantly share and comment [any topics] on social media, which would initiate a discussion; consequently, enhance a better political participation" (PN35). Even though the consumers may not be acquaintances of the post owner, they can also join in the discussion by commenting when it comes to their timeline. This also "makes it easier to discuss political matters, as it draws people with different political stances together" (PN12), which constructs a "virtual community". Therefore, we consider that social media does enable political debate to a greater extent.

However, all participants considered that social media is not yet a space for rational communication. Although social media provides a space to spark political debate, it has not completely reached the appropriate qualities that Habermas noted in his work: the quality of information and rational debate.

The lack of censorship on social media is a double-edged sword; on the one hand, its lack of censorship or fact-checking allows great latitude for information circulation; on the other, it is very difficult to prevent the spread of false information. Most of the participants considered false information to be a major obstacle to the reliability of the information they saw on social media because "when the news spreads very quickly, it may lack verification" (PN29). Unlike traditional media, where every piece of information must be verified before it is issued, although some important information could be censored, on social media, anyone can produce any information instantly.

Anonymity may encourage more people to engage in political activities, but sometimes people take advantage of it to cross the line in their behavior. *Tour long* [ทัวร์ลง] is a Thai slang expression that many Thai adolescents use to refer to users who together can bombard another user with criticism and insults. Some *tour*s hold a logical debate, but in most cases, they do not. In cyberbullying, many anonymous accounts feel that they have "a superiority that they can say anything because no one knows their real identity" (PN38); thus, instead of writing reasonable comments to create a discussion, such commenters tend to use hate speeches. "I once criticized one representative on Facebook, then his supporters abused me. I received many abusive direct messages" (PN2). The speed of social media flow attenuates users' equanimity and rationality—we must follow the flow unless we fall behind. PN23 noted:

When we see a comment or post from the opposite side, we tend to rebuke them without consideration, while we tend to be more considerate when we are discussing in a physical space.

Most respondents insisted that the features of social media are the key to these irrational actions. With the quickness and anonymity of social media, netizens tend to become less logical, thinking that they could say anything. Social media is an effective space for communication and political articulation but not for rational conversation.

Space for Supporting Democracy

Despite the limitations mentioned, all participants still considered that social media offered a positive change in a democratic way. The "example of the 'Arab Spring' and 'Milk Tea Alliance' in which social media played a crucial role in achieving democratic changes or gaining solidarity from overseas" (PN7) was acknowledged. Social media enables information to flow rapidly and over far distances (including beyond the borders of a national territory), resulting in massive groups of citizens gathering to protest.

In the context of Thailand, the clearest example was the beginnings of an anti-governmental protest that took place across the country in the second half of 2020, when crowds of people gathered on the roads and held protests criticizing the government, where the date and place of each protest was posted online. "When information on the protests was posted on Facebook more often, more people joined the ranks of the protest" (PN5). Thus, social media prompted more people to protest in physical space, as "they believed in the same way in becoming a part of the change" (PN23).

The abundance of information circulating on social media successfully created solidarity and reinforced popular sentiment between netizens and induced more people to embrace a democratic ideology. An issue that has not been of popular interest may become talk of the town after it has gone viral on the internet; when one person starts, others follow. As more issues are raised, social media becomes a heterogeneous space, where people with different needs voice them, and a positive change can be brought about. Citizens' voices could be easily heard, like "cases of mobs of farmers were not acknowledged much at first, but when it went viral, many sent support" (PN15). Consequently, where the voices are loud enough, the authorities will recognize this and act. For example, "after the royal family was harshly criticized on the internet, they adjusted themselves by trying to approach citizens, especially teenagers" (PN34), while at other times, "the state suppressed with violence or laws" (PN36). Some politicians used social media to listen to what citizens needed when planning their campaign for election or policy; this caused political participants to feel that they could reach the government by posting on social media.

Social media has significantly changed people's beliefs, due to its ability to provide rapid information flow and initiate articulations, "if there were no social media, changes would barely happen" (PN22). In addition, changes in cultural beliefs and social structures are considered necessary for long-term change. "Social media is only a single part of the change" (PN7); thus, social media should be used to support the democratic enhancement. "Every action always contributes a change, just much or few" (PN22).

In a nutshell, the participants mostly agreed that social media is promising in terms of a space to enhance democracy, even though it does entail a universally ideal public sphere, as it does not fit the following two main characteristics of the public sphere. First, social media does not provide equal access to all, although it is public. Second, social media is still incapable of providing a venue for rational communication. In this case, as from Thai

university students' perspective, social media does not completely conform to the notion of the public sphere (see also table 2).

Table 2: Public Sphere vs. Social Media

Similarities (Shared)	Differences	
	Public Sphere (Habermas, 1989)	**Social media (Thai context)**
Both are spaces for discussion (physical vs. virtual)	Equal access guaranteed to all citizens	Open but not equally accessible (requires money, devices, digital literacy)
	Open discussion space free from boundaries	Rapid information flow beyond space and time
		Virtual public space: activities occur online, leaving digital footprints
Both aim to enhance democracy	Democratic enhancement through deliberation	Democratic enhancement through online deliberation
		Echo chambers and polarization intensified
Both allow information sharing and public debate	Not influenced by algorithms or surveillance	Privacy limited by algorithms, surveillance, and corporate control
	Emphasis on reasoned argument over emotion	Discussions often irrational, emotional, or misinformed
	Logical-rational debate is central	Anonymity encourages participation but also hate speech, cyberbullying
Both can mobilize participation and movements	Create collective identity and solidarity for movements	Supports activism and protest mobilization

Power And Control: Characteristics of Social Media as a Virtual Social Space

Social media undeniably enhances democratic participation by facilitating two-way communication and generating emotional solidarity and collective sentiment, which can drive political change. As interviewees noted, social media influences public opinion by enabling users to share beliefs that others may adopt (PN1), giving voice to the previously unheard (PN8), and encouraging candid discussions about sensitive topics, such as the monarchy (PN9). A 2020 example saw a lawyer's social media post about the monarchy trigger a shift in public discourse, highlighting how circulating information online can generate power for users and potentially catalyze political transformation.

However, while social media disseminates information rapidly—often outpacing government censorship—it remains under state control. This reflects Habermas's (1989) notion of a "restricted" public sphere. Over half the interviewees acknowledged limitations and insecurities in using social media, citing risks of surveillance, censorship, and punishment (PN2, PN10, PN40). Users often self-censor to avoid legal consequences, knowing that online actions can result in real-world repercussions, including arrest (PN38).

Five key mechanisms of state control over social media emerged from the interviews. First, internet access is limited by economic inequality; only those with sufficient resources can regularly engage online. Second, technological literacy, particularly among the elderly, restricts participation. Third, physical limitations—such as lack of internet in remote areas—exclude certain populations. Fourth, legal frameworks, including the Cyber Act and Defamation Laws, heavily regulate online expression. Interviewees expressed fear of violating these laws, noting that even truthful posts could lead to prosecution (PN26, PN28, PN33). Finally, political control manifests both formally, through legal punishment (e.g., Article 112), and informally, as state employees self-censor to protect their careers (PN3, PN17).

In addition, political engagement on social media is shaped by user demographics and interests. Movements relevant to the middle class gain traction more easily, while marginalized issues, such as rural protests, receive limited engagement (PN20). This reinforces the idea of social media as a space where power and control are enacted, echoing Lefebvre's (1974) concept of social space as socially constructed and ideologically embedded.

Yet, social media also exhibits a temporal dimension not fully accounted for in Lefebvre's theory. While he emphasized space as lived, perceived, and conceived, he overlooked the enduring impact of time. Interviewees highlighted that digital footprints remain indefinitely (PN17, PN31), shaping users' identities in the future, even as political contexts and personal views change (PN18). Posts once deemed acceptable can later become problematic, leaving users vulnerable to retroactive judgment and political labeling.

Thus, social media functions as both a dynamic space of democratic potential and a controlled, ideologically loaded environment, whose influence spans both spatial and temporal dimensions.

Social Media: From An Ideal Space of Freedom to a Space Of Detention

Our case studies reflect the global phenomena of the internet world as a promising space where citizens can anticipate using as a medium to contest with the state and achieve a democratic regime, which matches Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere. As protesting in public spaces endangers their life and property, users of social media have the hope of reviving the ideal public sphere as described by various scholars. However, our study explicitly points out that some social media itself meets some needs for a public sphere, especially being a vital part in enhancing democracy and considered necessary for political change, it remains far from reaching the position of the ideal public sphere, due to its significant limitations.

In this Thai case study, social media is seen as a space of economic privilege, as it is only accessible to people with time and money and thus is not accessible to all. Its features—algorithmic presentation of materials and rapidity in information circulation or in engagement a particular post/debate—have also securely imprisoned netizens even further within an existing echo chamber, which ultimately exacerbates political homophily; most importantly, have drawn netizens from rationality in political debate that cyberbullying is more often be seen rather than a reasoned debate. This result is in agreement with the perspective that social media has too much power, both on the side of political demonstrators and that of the state or the authorities. Social media is constructed and controlled through politics, economics, legality, space, and technology. Consequently, it limits free political demonstrations or causes what Habermas defined as a restricted type of interchange.

This shows the transition of political ideology from the ideal, where social media appears as a promising space for political freedom, to the reality, where social media is a space of power where political demonstration is controlled and restricted. However, this study also shows that even though social media does not provide an unequivocal space for freedom, it retains a significant advantage as a medium for political articulation to enhance democracy, resulting in political change. From this point, it questions the classic demand of political activists, freedom of speech. This study observed that between freedom of political speech and political change, Thai university students see that the latter is more important. They agree that social media can offer some political change with less negative impact, but users need to be trapped in political detention, and economic/political institutions supervise their speech. They are willing to trade their freedom for the benefit of using social media for political change.

The study also indirectly reveals university students' perceptions of democratic enhancement. The interviewees recognized that social media in a Thai context is not a space equally available for all; they still see social media as a promising space for democratic enhancement. From the interviewees' perspective, those who cannot access social media are not important actors for enhancing democracy. In other words, these students agree that the space of democratic enhancement is acceptable, although those without a voice would remain without a voice in this space.

Finally, social media recalls the idea of social space as developed by Henri Lefebvre. Social media is constructed, controlled, and surveilled, but it contains a power that users can harness to their achieve goals. For Thai users, social media can be considered as a virtual social space, rather than a virtual public sphere. However, social media is a particular local space. It combines the characteristics of plurality, particularity, and locality (Arendt, 1970; Howell 1993). Social media, a promising space for democratic enhancement in Thailand, could be seen as an ideal public sphere or, on the contrary, a non-democratic space in other contexts.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent Statements

This research has been approved and conducted in accordance with the principles set by Office of the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects: The Second Allied Academic Group in Social Sciences, Humanities and Fine and Applied Arts (Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand). Research Project Number 640313, COA No. 020/65

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