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Red or Yellow, Peace or War: An investigation of an online discussion forum during the 2010 political unrest in Thailand

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Abstract

The 2010 political unrest in Thailand manifested countrywide divisions between the Red supporters of the ousted prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, and the Yellow supporters of the government. One of the few places where these two sides communicated is online political discussion forums. This chapter examines one such forum using coding for civility and argumentation, corpus analysis, and qualitative discourse analysis to see whether the forum promotes agonism or antagonism. The findings show that messages generally focus on attacking others' beliefs rather than justifying own beliefs, and that the forum is dominated by antagonistic Thai Yellow contributors with most Red contributors being foreigners. The confrontational discourse suggests that reconciliation between the two sides is unlikely.

1. Polarisation of Thai Politics

Redshirts do them all. They are double standard. They are violence. Of course, they are liar. Just gather people as much as you can them do anything against the law, liar ... very very big liar.

You are so ignorant. Why don't you learn, pick up a book, turn off your TV, and inform yourself.

The red shirts they don't know about democracy, Their democracy is everything that can give them a money. They are selfish and don't care anyone. They need "money" not "democracy".

Quotations such as these from an online discussion forum illustrate the deep societal divisions and political polarisation in Thailand. The extent of the polarisation has been influenced by how the Thai people tolerate differences and how they react to various political events. In recent

years, Thais' reactions have proved to be antagonistic in nature lessening the chances of reaching a compromise and solving the problems of a polarised society (Askew, 2010b).

In 2001, Thai billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra won a landslide electoral victory. He became the first Thai Prime Minister to serve a full term and was re-elected in another sweeping success in 2005. Thaksin's popularity was derived from extensive campaigns to improve rural living conditions and responded to social demands, such as support for small and medium enterprises, debt relief, and a cheap health-care system (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2008). However, he also faced several criticisms, including extrajudicial killings in his war on drugs, excessive control of the media, systematic corruption, and possible disrespect for the monarchy.

In April 2006, Thaksin won further snap elections, which were boycotted by the opposition and later nullified by the Constitutional Court. A coalition of protesters, called the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and symbolised by their yellow shirts, was formed. Their sole interest appeared to be to topple Thaksin. At midnight on 19 September 2006, the Royal Thai Army staged a coup against Thaksin and his government while he was attending a United Nations General Assembly in New York. This "different" coup's aims were purportedly to remove threats to the monarchy and to counter excessive corruption (Pathmanand, 2008).

Although the bloodless coup was welcomed by the Bangkok middle class, Thaksin's fan base remained grateful for his pro-poor policies (Connors, 2008). Before the 2006 coup, his supporters had rallied against the anti-Thaksin group and after the coup they showed their loyalty by voting for his proxy party and in a few cases, engaging in extreme demonstrations, such as crashing a taxi into a tank.

On 23 December 2007, national parliamentary elections were held. The People Power Party (PPP) supporting Thaksin won again. Thaksin returned from exile in Britain to Thailand, leading to new demonstrations by the anti-Thaksin group. Thaksin and his wife were issued with arrest warrants on tax charges and again left the country. Tensions escalated between the government and the Yellow shirts, with raids on government buildings in Bangkok in August 2008. The prime minister was disqualified from office on technical grounds and replaced by Thaksin's brother-in-law. The Yellow protests continued but were now confronted by a pro-Thaksin group, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) wearing red shirts. The conflicts turned violent and Bangkok's two airports were seized by the Yellows. In December 2008, the PPP were disqualified for electoral fraud by a court ruling.

Politicians started to change alliances, and a new prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, of the main anti-Thaksin Democrat party, came to power with some prominent Yellows taking positions in his government. The Reds led violent anti-government rallies in March and April 2009 which were stopped by the Army.

In February 2010, after a 10-month period of calm, the Supreme Court ruled that Thaksin must surrender \$1.4 of \$2.3 billion in frozen assets. In response, the Red Shirts launched new anti-government street rallies to overthrow Abhisit's coalition government in the name of democracy.

On 7 April, Red Shirts stormed into Parliament House in Bangkok, many of them violent and armed. Abhisit's car was attacked by Red shirts but he managed to flee without being hurt. A state of emergency was declared the same evening allowing the government greater control of the media. Websites were closed because they contained purportedly inappropriate content and discussion boards were blocked for security reasons (Askew, 2010c).

Tensions grew from 10 to 28 April, with increased confrontations until the army conducted an initial crackdown resulting in twenty-five people killed and more than 800 injured. The Red protests continued until, on 19 May, the Red Shirts leaders announced the end of their protest rally in Bangkok after the army broke through the outer barriers of their protest site in central Bangkok. However, the protesters responded to the announcement by smashing, looting, and burning down buildings including two of Thailand's largest shopping centers. A further 65 people died and there were numerous injuries.

The social and political context in which these events occurred suggests that Thailand is in a state of crisis. From the most recent available Fund for Peace country report (2007), Thailand was rated as being in a state of warning on 6 of 12 indicators: demographic pressure, group grievance, uneven development, legitimacy of the state, security apparatus, and factionalised elites. The events of 2009 and 2010 suggest that these warnings reflect a real crisis in the country.

The unrest during April and May 2010 has been labeled by both sides as "war" (Askew, 2010b) and by the government as "terrorism" (Askew, 2010c). Other discourse used to campaign by both sides exhibits strong emotions and aggression such as "nation in danger", "selling the nation", "the monarchy in danger" (Askew, 2010b), "conspiracy theory" and "savages" (Askew, 2010c). Such extreme antagonistic language reflects a polarisation that means that people from the opposing sides rarely talk to each other, even if they are members of the same family. Admittedly, a few attempts have been made to reduce the polarisation through negotiation, including televised attempts by Abhisit and the Reds leaders in March 2010, but all these attempts failed confirming "the uncompromising character of political positions in the country" (Askew, 2010b: 37).

The Red shirts are predominantly from the north and north-east of Thailand, mostly rural, whilst the Yellow shirts are dominant in Bangkok and the south. The Red Shirts believe in bringing back Thaksin, the only person who they believe can better their lives and bridge the gap between

the elites and grassroots. They view the Abhisit government as illegitimate since it was formed through defections of politicians from one side to the other. The Yellows are opposed to Thaksin and do not wish to see his cronies and family run the country. The Yellows believe that Thaksin's supporters are uneducated peasants who sell votes (Montesano, 2009) and only the elite truly knows what democracy is (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2008). The middle class and elites do not acknowledge the poor's needs and keep their relationship distant (Rojanaphruk & Hanthamrongwit, 2010).

2. Online political discussion forums

With Reds and Yellows becoming more polarized, one of the few places where they can interact and engage each other in political discussion is online discussion forums. Political online forums can act as an information source, a communication medium and a virtual public sphere for political participation (Polat, 2005). As an information source, discussion forums can provide authorities with information about public opinions (e.g. Ranerup, 2000). As a communication medium, online forums can act as a tool to enable social actions. For instance, forums have been used to organise aid following Hurricane Katrina (Palen, Hiltz & Liu, 2007) and to organise the activities of democratic groups during a political crisis in the Ukraine (Kvi, 2005). As a virtual public sphere for political participation, forums can serve a range of functions from allowing direct public participation in political decision making as part of the ideal of a democratic utopia (Papacharissi, 2004) to simply enabling an exchange of ideas and exposure to different political viewpoints. It is the last of these that is the purpose of the online political discussion forum that is the focus of this study.

Political discussion forums can allow "the exchange of diverse and often controversial viewpoints among citizens" (Yang, Chen & Liu, 2010: 5871) or provide a means for like-minded individuals to communicate (Chau & Xu, 2007). In other words, the community participating in a forum can be heterogeneous or homogeneous in beliefs. Where a homogeneous group discusses issues through a forum, the discussion may lead to reinforcement of beliefs, such as perpetuating stereotypes (Steinfeldt et al., 2010). There is, however, evidence that most online discussions involve heterogeneous communities where the forums provide exposure to differing viewpoints (Kim, 2011) resulting in greater involvement in political issues (Skoric, Ying & Ng, 2009). Indeed, most participants in online discussions prefer interacting with those with dissimilar political views (Stromer-Gally, 2003).

Heterogeneous online political discussion has the potential to lead in two opposing directions. In some cases, the discussion may form part of a broader reconciliation process. For instance, Tanner (2001) shows how online discussion following the 1998 arrest of Chilean ex-dictator Augusto Pinochet provided a public space for political debate, and especially for the reforming of collective memories, to move beyond the abuses of the military government. On the other hand,

divergent views expressed in online forums can result in defensiveness and further antagonism, generating “a stand-off between the two camps” (Wright & Street, 2007: 849).

As we have seen, the polarised political beliefs of Reds and Yellows concerning the political crisis in Thailand means that online forums where both groups contribute are heterogeneous in nature, and thus, could lead to some measure of reconciliation or to increased antagonism. Within the context of the Thai political crisis, the numerous failed attempts at negotiation suggest that reconciliation is unlikely. Rather than hoping for reconciliation, a more realistic goal in the current Thai context is agonism (Charoensin-o-larn, 2009). Where antagonism views opponents as enemies to be beaten, agonism considers that opponents have the right to their ideas, but that efforts need to be made to change these ideas. To identify whether the online discussion between Reds and Yellows is agonistic or antagonistic, we will need to look at the civility of the discussions with less civil contributions likely to be antagonistic (Ng & Detenber, 2005; Papacharissi, 2004), and at the level of argumentation with more substantiated argumentation indicative of agonism (Fuchs, 2006; Tsaliki, 2002).

If online discussion between Reds and Yellows could be agonistic or antagonistic, what factors are likely to lead to one or the other? Clearly, the participants themselves and the nature and strengths of their beliefs will be a key factor, but there are several other issues that can influence whether the discussion will be agonistic or antagonistic. These include the political culture in which the discussion takes place, the topic under discussion, whether the forum is a major or minor public space (in other words, whether the discussion is likely to have an effect on real-world events), the communicative structure of the discussion forum such as whether it is synchronous or asynchronous, whether participants need to share their identity, and how the agenda for discussion is set (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Ng & Detenber, 2005). In any investigation of reconciliation and conflict through discussion forums, these issues need to be considered before assigning sole responsibility for the outcome to the participants themselves.

In this chapter, then, we will investigate the interaction and communication on one online discussion forum concerning the Thai political crisis of 2010 where both Reds and Yellows contribute. We will focus on whether the forum promotes agonism or antagonism by examining the civility and argumentation of postings to the forum by contributors from both sides.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 The data

To investigate the attitudes of Reds and Yellows and how they communicate with each other, we need an online political discussion forum where both Reds and Yellows make a substantial number of contributions. Furthermore, the forum should be lightly moderated and not overtly biased so that contributors do not feel constrained in their comments. Unfortunately, because of Thai government control of the media, we believe that these criteria cannot be satisfied through a

forum based in Thailand, and thus we searched for externally based forums discussing the Thai political crisis.

CNN was chosen as a potential source as it is well-known in Thailand, lightly moderated and not overtly biased, although the need for postings to be in English may provide a slight bias in favour of the middle-class, better-educated Yellows. The CNN website contains numerous news stories with accompanying discussion forums. One such story for which the discussion forum received a large number of postings concerns the events of 7 April 2010 when the Red Shirts stormed Government House and a state of emergency was declared (see <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/04/07/thailand.protests/index.html?hpt=T2>). The discussion on this forum is the data for our investigation.

Looking at the factors which can influence the nature of online discussions, the forum is asynchronous and is a minor public space. Although contributors are required to register and use a login name, all contributors used pseudonyms and so cannot be identified. The agenda for discussion is partly decentralised, whereby an initial starter was set by the organiser in the form of the news story, but contributors were free to start threads on new topics (as evinced in the forum analysed of discussions of American politics and anti-CNN postings).

The page where the data comes from starts with a news story which is a description of events, not an opinion column. At the time the data was downloaded, there were 378 postings on the forum. Three of these postings were not in English (two in Thai, one in Chinese) which might not have been comprehensible by the audience, and a further three messages were repetitions of previously posted messages, so these postings were not included in the analysis. Thus the data set consisted of 372 messages with 24,023 words (approximately 65 words per message on average). Based on username, there were 173 contributors to the forum, and most contributors to the discussion posted 5 or fewer messages, with only 3 contributors posting more than 10 and none more than 20. The postings were a mixture of separate messages and threads of messages. The data is primarily text-based in English with almost no emoticons, but some paralinguistic use of punctuation and capitalisation. To allow comparison between messages especially for the corpus analyses, Romanised spellings of Thai names were conventionalised (i.e. both 'Taksin' and 'Thaksin' were treated as the same word), but the original spellings are given when messages are quoted.

3.2 Data Analysis

In approaching the data, we followed Janssen & Kies' (2004) assertion that "a complete evaluation of online forums' deliberative potentialities requires a mixed methodological approach" (p. 11), and so used both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative analyses aim to provide an overview of the data, to identify patterns running through the whole data set, to guide more objective identification of salient issues (Watson Todd, 2006) and to

enable unbiased further analysis (Biber, Connor & Upton, 2007). The qualitative analyses examine the data in depth.

3.2.1 Quantitative analyses

First, the data itself contains some quantitative measures which require little analysis. Each message on the forum provides a count of 'Likes' showing the number of message viewers who rated the message positively. The number of 'Likes' may be indicative of the views of the whole website community, not only the contributors. In addition, the length of each message in words can be counted, on the basis that longer messages are likely to be more informative.

Each message was then coded by both researchers separately on three dimensions. First, the message was coded for whether it exhibited the beliefs of the Reds, the Yellows or was Unclear or neutral. These codings were checked by examining multiple messages from the same pseudonym which are likely to be coded in the same way.

Second, all messages were coded on a 4-point rating scale for level of civility (where 1 = uncivil; 4 = civil). In this chapter, we view civility as behaviour that enhances democratic conversation, and thus civility is not the same as politeness which is related to etiquette in general (Papacharissi, 2004). Uncivil messages treat the other side as inferior and may involve unmotivated rudeness due to lack of control over language especially for second language speakers, or motivated rudeness which is intentional such as insults and cursing (Long & O'Sullivan, 2009). Most previous work on civil communication has identified civility intuitively (Ng & Detenber, 2005), but in this chapter, while still acknowledging a certain need for intuition, we used three criteria to identify civility: amount of verifiable information in a message, use of lexis or phrasing with clear affective connotations, and paralinguistic uses of punctuation and capitalisation. Generally, more civil messages are likely to be agonistic, and less civil messages antagonistic.

Third, messages were also coded on a 4-point scale for level of argumentation (with 1 = no argumentation; 4 = clear argumentation). To identify level of argumentation, we identified possible components of arguments, such as warrant, backing, concession, counterargument and explanation-oriented questions (Toulmin, 1958; Lewis, 2005; Lu, Chiu & Law, 2010). Messages lacking these components, such as simple claims, agreements and disagreements with no evidence reflect poor argumentation. We also considered whether a message presents a one-sided or two-sided argument (Coffin, 2004) with two-sided arguments showing higher levels of argumentation. As a general rule, clearer argued messages are more likely to be agonistic.

The three ways of coding messages, together with the number of 'Likes' and the word counts, allow us to see overall patterns in the data. For example, we can compare Red or Yellow messages against number of 'Likes', level of civility and level of argumentation using point

biserial correlation to see differences in the types of messages the two colours post and the community's reactions to them (and calculating effect sizes following Cohen, 1992). We can also compare the earlier postings in the forum with later postings to see if the nature of the discussion changes.

The various codings of messages treat each message individually, but we can also examine the data as a corpus. To compare the language used by the Reds and Yellows, we created two corpora: one of messages coded as Red, the other of messages coded as Yellow (messages coded as Unclear/Neutral were not included). The relative frequencies of different words in these two corpora were compared using log likelihood (Rayson & Garside, 2000) to identify the keywords associated with each colour in our data. Keywords reflect the content or stance of a particular text or corpus through their high relative frequency (Scott, 1997; 2000). The keywords of each colour provide an indication of their concerns, their identity and the way they are communicating.

Finally, from the full data set we identified words or phrases with strong affective connotations likely to be indicative of an antagonistic stance. In judging the affect, we also considered paralinguistic features (such as use of all capitals) which can increase affect. Those words or phrases identified as being affectively strong were examined to see who used them and how.

3.2.2 Qualitative analyses

While quantitative analyses can provide an overview of the data set, quantifying data obscures the specific details of messages and their contexts. Therefore, qualitative analyses are also necessary. We took two main qualitative approaches to the data. First, to examine how the various codings were manifested and how individual messages are constructed in a given context, we examined individual messages and present a representative sample below. Second, to see whether continued discussion becomes more agonistic or more antagonistic, and how Reds and Yellows communicate with each other, we examined the discussion threads (usually consisting of 3 to 8 messages) focusing on how the discussion changed through a thread.

4. Findings

4.1 General characteristics of the messages

From the 372 messages, 55 messages were categorised as Red, 188 as Yellow and 129 as Unclear/Neutral, suggesting that the forum is dominated by Yellows. To see if there were differences in the nature of the messages from the two sides, the length of messages, number of Likes, and levels of civility and argumentation for Red and Yellow messages were calculated and are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Average numbers of words, likes and levels of civility and argumentation

	All messages	Red	Yellow

Average no. of words	56.94	83.93	57.35
Average no. of Likes	5.45	4.78	7.06
Average level of civility	2.74	2.84	2.13
Average level of argumentation	2.25	2.78	1.99

Table 1 suggests that Red messages were generally longer, were more civil and contained more argumentation, but that Yellow messages attracted a greater number of positive ratings (perhaps due to the greater number of Yellows in the forum community). To see if these patterns are significant, point biserial correlations were calculated and these are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Significance values of differences between Red and Yellow postings

	r_{pbi} for Red v. Yellow	p value (N = 243)	Effect size
Average no. of likes	0.150	$p < 0.05$	Small
Average level of civility	-0.328	$p < 0.0005$	Medium
Average level of argumentation	-0.372	$p < 0.0005$	Medium

The findings in Table 2 suggest that the differences between Red and Yellow messages for civility and argumentation are real, but that the difference in length is minor. If this pattern is true, then archetypal messages for the two sides would be civil, well-argued messages for Reds and uncivil, poorly argued messages for Yellow. Examples of well-argued civil Red messages include:

I don't support Taksin or Abhisit. I 've nether chosen Thai Rak Thai or People Power Party nor Democrat ,I never take part in PAD or UDD demonstation but now I disquist nowadays Thai fake society and it fake morality as well as the government who never do anything for civilien but for themselfe. The one who blame another one but does it themselfe and stand firmly in the public w/o hesitation are the type of people I hate most. So now, I agree with red-shirts and support non dramatic violent demonstation as they do this time.

It's interesting how many of the people posting here that the protesters are illegitimate and have no reason to protest conveniently forget to mention that the new election "rules" ban the old majority political groups from running for election. That would be like democrats declaring they'd "won" elections fairly after refusing to put and republicans on the ballot.

Examples of uncivil, poorly argued Yellow messages include:

Finally PM Abhisit and the government is doing something to stop the red shirts from ruining the country. Thaksin and his family can go to hell.

The red shirts are not the peace lover nor democratic, they are tyrant's cronies. They don't even respect the law, they do every single act against the law. Thailand is absolutely not democracy. They are also ignorant nor patriot...just the money hunger.

While examples such as these in some ways present stereotypes of the two sides (there are some civil, well-argued Yellow messages, for instance), they do represent the overall patterns in the forum. At first glance, then, it would appear that Reds are agonistic and perhaps showing some respect for the beliefs of Yellows, while Yellows are antagonistic and perhaps exacerbating the crisis. To see whether agonism or antagonism was promoted through the discussion, we examined the differences between early postings and later postings on the forum, and these are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Development of characteristics of messages through the forum

	First half of forum (postings 1-186)	Second half of forum (postings 187-372)
Number of Red messages	13	42
Number of Yellow messages	123	65
Average level of civility	2.51	2.97
Average level of argumentation	1.99	2.51

Table 3 suggests that, as a higher proportion of messages came from Reds as the forum developed, the overall discussion became more civil and contained more argumentation. This could imply that the forum is acting, in a minor way, as a tool for reconciliation. However, there is also some evidence, as shown in the following messages, that many of the Red messages were posted by non-Thais, especially Americans, while most Yellow messages were posted by Thais.

Does Thailand have the exact constitution as the US? No? Then my comment means exactly what it says. Americans should be thankful for the protections we have. If you want to be defensive and feel like I'm attacking Thailand, that's fine.

RED SHIRT have been using this propaganda and hidden agenda to worsen the situation. Please be with us to support our PM Abhisit to solve this crisis without blood. Although we are frustrated of what Red Shirt has done so far BUT we are all people, we are Thai. I do not see the reason to hurt anyone by the difference of politics views.

The increase in civility and argumentation through the forum, then, may represent a change in the personal characteristics of the contributors rather than any move towards agonism. The

foreign contributors, for whom the events under discussion have less personal impact, can afford to be more civil in their discussion. Nevertheless, the overall pattern is that Yellow messages are generally more antagonistic than Red messages.

4.2 Lexical features of the forum

While the coding of the data provides a useful overview of the characteristics of the forum, it does not clearly show how the contributors expressed themselves. For this, we will look at the lexis used in the messages in two ways, first by examining the keywords used by Reds and Yellows, and second, by focusing on those words with strong affective connotations.

To identify keywords, we treated the Red messages and the Yellow messages as two corpora, and identified words which were used significantly more frequently in one compared to the other using log likelihood. The top ten keywords identified for Reds and Yellows are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Keywords for Reds and Yellows

Ranking	Red Shirts		Yellow Shirts	
	Keyword	Log likelihood	Keyword	Log likelihood
1	Democrat	27.037	Red	39.025
2	middle	19.240	shirt	24.180
3	military	18.771	we	21.375
4	the	17.913	our	20.487
5	PAD	16.835	very	14.292
6	supported	13.676	please	13.577
7	bought	12.149	democracy	12.463
8	party	12.072	leaders	12.148
9	because	11.222	peace	12.148
10	or	10.883	bring	10.719

One salient pattern emerging from the keywords in Table 4 is that the content of both Red and Yellow messages focuses on the other side. Reds discuss the *Democrat party* (the main party in the current government led by Abhisit), the *middle class*, the *military*, and the *PAD* (the Yellow group that organised demonstrations when Thaksin was prime minister). The Yellows write about *Red shirt leaders*. Focusing the discussion on the opposing side is more likely to lead to antagonistic discourse than talking about one's own beliefs. Another pattern confirming previous findings is that the Yellows use lexis that increases the strength of their statements: *very* and *please* (when used with an imperative). Finally, there is also some confirmation that the Yellows are predominantly Thai (through the use of *we* and *our*) and that the Reds are foreigners (the use of *the*, since Thais tend to use far fewer articles in English than speakers of other languages).

The keywords give us an idea of the frequently occurring content of the messages and some idea of their strength. To gain further insight into the strength of messages, we identified words with strong affective connotations in the messages, and Table 5 summarises the most frequently used of these.

Table 5 Frequencies of words with strong affective connotations

Word	Overall frequency	Red frequency	Yellow frequency
peaceful	19	1	14
mob	15	0	15
destroy	13	1	11
chaos	9	0	9
criminal	9	0	8
hate	9	4	5
ignorant	9	1	4
beloved	8	2	4
terrorists	7	0	7
liar	6	0	6
terrorist	5	1	4
thugs	4	0	2

Although the words given in Table 5 were identified intuitively, they still illustrate some interesting patterns. First, words with negative affect far outweigh those with positive affect, reinforcing the conclusion that the discussion forum is generally antagonistic. Second, Yellows are the main users of words with strong affect. Some of the earlier examples in this chapter and the following messages (with frequent words with strong affect given in italics) show how the Yellows use these words.

Red Shirt, this is not right way at all, please go home and make Thailand *peaceful* as always. Taksin is not good person, wake up and GO HOME.

Fact is that the protests have been based on the threat of violence and red foot soldiers running around launching grenades. They were urged to come to Bangkok ready to burn it to the ground. Does that sound *peaceful* to anyone?

These *mobs* have been manipulated by Thaksin.They only 'talked' about 'democracy', while what they 'did' have been totally opposite.

Actually there is not a real fight. Just A bully Redshirts *Terrorists destroying* the peace.

Thai red shirt people are low education and poorness in this country. I think it's so sad that these totally *ignorant* followers of the *criminal*.

Examples such as these highlight the strength of feeling of many Yellows, whereby even words with positive affect such as *peaceful* can be used sarcastically to imply the opposite. Generally, the analysis of lexical features reinforces the interpretation that the forum, and especially Yellow contributions, is promoting antagonism rather than agonism.

4.3 Analysis of threads

The analyses of the general characteristics and of the lexical features examine messages or words in isolation. A key feature of discussion forums, however, is that messages link to each other. It is therefore also important to look at threads of messages. A thread comprises a starter message and the various replies, either to the starter or to other replies. In the forum, there were 77 threads ranging from 2 to 9 messages in length. Although it appears that overall the forum is antagonistic, it may be that individual threads are agonistic. The following thread (with our codes for civility) is an example that suggests that this could be the case.

Sample thread 1

This is not democracy. The Red Shirts represent nothing but Mob rule. Hell bent on making the entire Kingdom of Thailand surrender to them - no quarter. They should be treated as traitors and shot. (coded as civility = 1)

Really? I think the person who led the military coup to over through the original Prime Minister and not hold elections for the new role should but treated as traitors and shot. This could all be solved if he dissolved the parliament and let the people vote for who they want to lead them. (civility = 3)

That would probably increase the violence, not diminish it. (civility = 4)

really? LizardKing87? [username] This is false information. The election has been hold and two governments have been formed. This is the third government from the same election. Please do some research in wiki- the information is out there man. (civility = 3)

Thais are peaceful people, you sound like you have hatred in your heart. (civility = 3)

Yes! Nothing better than using force to solve an issue of "force"! This would be like saying that since the previous ruler made so many mistakes

that it entitles you to make the same mistakes again....since of course the previous ruler got to do it? Right? Its ironic. And childish. (civility = 2)

In this thread, we can see how cohesion is created through repetition of phrases, such as *treated as traitors and shot*, and by directly addressing content of previous messages (such as the third reply addressing the issue of elections introduced in the first reply). In terms of antagonism, the antagonistic starter leads to conciliatory replies which imply that the initial posting is excessive. Such threads which may promote agonism are, however, outnumbered by threads which promote antagonism, such as sample threads 2 and 3.

Sample thread 2

My guess is that this could turn into another Tiananmen Square. Let's hope not. (civility = 1)

It is the red protesters that behave more like fascists by intimidating any group that dares to oppose their agenda. A government crackdown would be an improvement over the anarchy on the streets now. Everyday citizens are the victims here and they are only oppressed by the red shirts. It is a completely different scenario than Tiananmen Square. (civility = 3)

Sample thread 3

Red shirt are not the majority of the whole population, however if there is an election the current government will lose by big margin because the red are the majority of the people who can register to vote. This problem in Thailand is an accumulation of social injustice that exist in the country for many many years. It is not just Thaksin and his money. The problem is real and it needs long time to solve and heal. The poor are fed up with inequality in the country. (civility = 1)

what!?! red shirt are the majority of people who can vote? such a liar. Even until this stage they still use abused information to stir the mop up for more violence!!! this's not DEMOCRACY!! you are to destroy our country!!! I still remember what you did last summer!!! you burnt our CITY!!! NO MORE RED SHIRT!!! (civility = 4)

No doubt, Thaksin is behind this mob. The evidence is his appearance on the red shirts stage's monitor and display. He is the symbol this mob. His true democracy is to dismiss all his criminal cases, to return all of his corrupted money and to bring him back to the power. I believe that all Thai people have the same opportunity. For example of Mr. Thaksin, he was a normal people but now he is a billionaire. Is there no opportunity? (civility = 3)

In these two threads, a reasonable agonistic starter draws responses which appear likely to exacerbate feelings. The fact that such threads outnumber those which move towards agonism again suggests that the discussion forum promotes antagonism.

4.4 Unclear/Neutral messages

The findings presented so far have focused on messages coded as Red or Yellow. It is worth briefly considering the messages coded as Unclear/Neutral. Generally, these messages are shorter (average length is 44.61 words), attract fewer Likes (on average, 3.38), are more civil (average level of civility = 3.45), and have a very mixed level of argumentation (average level of argumentation = 2.38). Some of these specifically try to find a middle ground:

I love Thailand and lived there for years - it is very disappointing to see such immature displays of protest. Thai democracy still is in its infancy and needs to grow up. I support neither red nor yellow - I would love to see someone start an orange movement (red+yellow=orange) to show that Thais can find a middle ground to discuss and move forward like a mature democracy.

For most of the Unclear/Neutral messages, however, it is either difficult to understand them or they concern a topic of little relevance to the forum:

If this was Star Trek, they'd all be dead by now

Are there ANY good Thai place in Phoenix?

5. Discussion

The overall pattern emerging from the analysis of the forum is that the discussion is dominated by Yellows and is primarily antagonistic. These two characteristics are interrelated as it is the predominant Yellow messages that are the least civil and that contain the poorest argumentation. More worryingly, the antagonistic Yellows are more likely to be Thais than other contributors to the forum which suggests that the crisis could be long-lasting.

There are, however, three major caveats to this broad conclusion. First, the nature of the particular forum analysed may not have promoted agonism. Asynchronous communication is likely to be less informative and persuasive than synchronous communication, a forum acting as a minor public space is likely to contain less justification and respect than one acting as a major public space, and the use of pseudonyms is disinhibiting in communication (Janssen & Kies, 2005), all characteristics that could lead to more antagonistic discourse. Second, by focusing much of our analysis on the messages coded as Red and Yellow, we may have overlooked any impact on the discussion from Unclear/Neutral messages, although our brief analysis of such

messages suggests that their impact is likely to be minimal. Third, the identification of the Yellows as being primarily responsible for the antagonistic nature of the discussion forum may reflect the fact that they are more likely to be Thai than that they are Yellow. Most of the contributors of the Red and Unclear/Neutral messages appear to be foreigners, and their distance from the events gives them less cause to be antagonistic. Thais who are Red may be equally as antagonistic as Thais who are Yellow, and some evidence to support this can be found in communications from other sources. For example, some speeches made at Red rallies contain equally inflammatory language (e.g. “They just look for a chance to blame us. What morons! Manipulated the angle so people can’t see it’s just a toy gun then posted this to fool buffalos [synonymous with stupidity in Thai culture]. If it is a Yellow website, I won’t waste my time anyway.” “The kind of coup d’état that doesn’t respect the voting majority is shameless. Bastards!”).

Bearing these caveats in mind, there are still some interesting implications to be drawn from the analysis. Even though the Red messages are generally more civil and better argued, both sides focus more on attacking the views of the other side than on presenting and justifying their own views. Similarly, both sides tend to label key participants associated with the other side pejoratively and often use the same terms to do this (both the Reds and the former Yellows who are now in government have been called “traitors and terrorists”, see Askew, 2010a). Intertextually, the pejorative language used, such as the words with strong negative affective connotations, is associated with hate messages and the language of conspiracy theories (as shown by an Internet search for these words). Furthermore, there is a clear conflict between the content and the style of their communications. For instance, the Yellows claim that they want a return to a previous state of peace, but their method of communicating this is generally the opposite of peaceful. These aspects of the discussion do not bode well for attempts at reconciliation.

A further barrier to hopes for reconciliation is that much of the discourse has changed little over the past few years. For example, in 2006, the Yellows accused Thaksin supporters of being ignorant and selling their votes, ironically a view described as “a sociological ignorance that bordered on bigotry” (Montesano, 2009: 10), and the 2010 discussion forum investigated in this chapter repeats the same accusation. Interestingly, such repetitions of discourse are used by the opposing sides depending on which is in power at the time. In the run-up to the 2001 election, Thaksin campaigned on the premise of saving “a nation in danger”, a phrase also used regularly by the Yellows in their 2006 demonstrations against Thaksin (Askew, 2010b); in 2006, Thaksin accused the Yellow demonstrators of promoting “mob rule” (Montesano, 2009), an accusation repeated against the Reds in the CNN forum. These similarities in discourse over time and between sides suggests both that the divisions in society are deeply entrenched and that the conflict is at least as much about which side is in power as it is about ideological differences. Without a major shift in the Thai political context, there appears to be little hope for reconciliation.

In this study, we have examined the discourse of one political discussion forum on the Thai crisis of 2010 as a place where Reds and Yellows can interact and which is not subject to Thai government control. This has allowed us to see the views and attitudes of the 173 Thai and foreign contributors to the forum. Most analyses of political issues either focus on the views and attitudes of the leaders of the various sides and infer from these the views of the general population or conduct surveys of various kinds to find such views. Studying discussion forums can provide a practical method of gaining some insights into the views and attitudes of a particular section of the population (those who are politically interested and computer literate) and may be of particular importance in evaluating how extreme and vehement this section of the population can be when granted anonymity. Political discussion forums also provide insights into the views and attitudes of a group largely ignored in political analyses but of potential growing importance as the world becomes more globalised - people outside the population immediately affected by the issues, in other words, foreigners.

The insights provided by the forums may be of use to authorities and other interested parties, meaning that a discussion forum initially acting as a virtual public sphere for political participation can become an information source, not for the views of the whole country but for the views of a specific group. Such a source could, for instance, allow popular misconceptions, both within and outside the country, to be identified and addressed. Governments already monitor many discussion forums for such purposes, but this study shows that it is easy for such monitoring to lead to simplistic conclusions and provides some tools for avoiding this. The potential of online political discussion forums as a space for interaction between opposing groups, to either exacerbate or ameliorate a crisis, is still not fully explored.

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