

Inconvenient truths of censorship under globalisation

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Censorship is nearly always a form of denial, an attempt to hide a truth or limit its power. If someone wants to write or shout something quite meaningless or uninteresting, then nobody takes much notice anyway. Censors reach for the blue pencil, the scissors, and the off-switch when there really is something which most people want to know and a few people want to hide.

Every Thai government gets the urge to censor. In the political culture, there is a memory of the good times (for governments) when they could stop most criticism by one means or another. But over the past three decades, suppression has become more and more difficult. There is a growing audience of people who want to know what is going on, and hence an expanding business opportunity in supplying that demand. Even if government controls the mainstream electronic media and can heavy the press, there are other channels. Way back the popular method was leaflets. Then came faxes. Then SMS messaging and community radio. And now email, blogs, and websites. This sequence has an important feature: the old forms were local, the new ones are global.

But censorship is not what it used to be. Consider the case of the royal biography which was banned in Thailand before the book's publication in the US last year. Despite the ban, photocopied versions circulated widely in Thailand even before the publication date. Purchase through online booksellers has not been too difficult. Parts of the book have been scanned and placed on the web. Passages have been translated into Thai and also placed on the web or circulated in other ways. Cheap illegal photocopied version have been on sale furtively in the city. The content of the book has been widely discussed in web forums.

This book is expensive, heavy, and in English. Normally the readership of such a tome would be limited to those who have the money to buy it, the language skills to understand it, and the commitment to wade through it. Censorship often tends to raise a book's notoriety and hence its attraction. But in the new world of more open media, a ban can also increase a book's readership by making it cheaper, and more widely accessible.

Such censorship no longer achieves its supposed purpose of actually preventing people from gaining access to the information being provided. Rather such censorship amounts to a public statement of disapproval. Official authorities still seem to think they have to issue such statements of disapproval, perhaps because they are reluctant to admit that their power has diminished in practice. But such censorship can become a form of viral marketing which both advertises a product and expands its distribution channels.

The YouTube affair has followed the same pattern, with some added features. The attempt to suppress the first video posted on the site only gave birth to at least seven more. The wholesale blocking of the YouTube site in Thailand spawned a cottage industry for devising work-arounds and other forms of distribution. The prominence given to the issue in the press meant that the numbers who knew about the videos and who had a chance to see them multiplied many times beyond the few who regularly trawl YouTube.

In the international arena, the impact of the Thai official protests were even more virulent. Every day, hundreds of clips are posted on YouTube, but only a small fraction gain the kind of publicity and notoriety of this batch. The protests by the Thai government ran as major stories on CNN and BBC World, and appeared on the front pages of several international newspapers. Undoubtedly this boosted the numbers who viewed the videos around the world far above the average for a YouTube clip. Through these stories, many more people got to know about the Oliver Jufer case, the existence in Thailand of a lese majeste law, and the enthusiasm of Thai authorities for imposing censorship. These international media stories were usually scrupulous in pointing out that many people in Thailand found the videos very offensive because of widespread reverence for the king, yet as a whole these stories portrayed Thailand as a government struggling to impose its own repressive habits on the world.

Internally, however, the YouTube affair has been a massive success for the junta. Various government figures proclaimed that the clips were an attempt to undermine the monarchy, an attack on Thailand as a country, or a threat to national security. Of course, the clips were none of these things. They were very specifically protests over the Jufer case, which many people feel strongly is a legitimate object of protest (whether or not you agree with the sentiment or the method).

Many journalists and commentators, who would normally think of themselves as defenders of free expression in the face of censorship, joined the chorus calling for YouTube to censor the videos, and lambasting YouTube spokespersons for defending the principle of free speech. Some of these journalists and commentators have been highly critical of government censorship over past months, and had professed outrage at the closure of the Rajdamnoen Room chat site hosted by pantip.com site, one of the most popular and active political discussion sites in Thailand.

You could imagine the government censors grinning with glee. Here were some of their major critics lining up to call for censorship.

The people who have been put in the most difficult position over this affair are the Thai journalists, academics, commentators, and activists who truly support the principle of free expression. It has been almost impossible for them to come out against the call for YouTube to be censored. They would lay themselves wide open to be pilloried as anti-monarchist by those who like to act more royalist than the institution. Wisely they have kept quiet. But this has consolidated this incident as an enormous success for the junta in winning support for the principle of censorship.

P.S.

* From <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/inconvenient.htm>