

Hybrid Platformism: Thailand’s Online Political Media Landscape

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Thailand’s digital media landscape has been transformed by hybrid platformism, a fragmented and dynamic ecosystem shaped by journalists, influencers, and activists operating across social media platforms. This study explores how hybrid platformism reconfigures journalism, blurs boundaries between reporting and advocacy, and reshapes media power. While digital platforms have enabled dissenting voices, they have also deepened structural vulnerabilities, including financial precarity and political co-optation. Tracing the shift from partisan polyvalence to platform-driven media, this article analyzes Thailand’s evolving media system from a comparative perspective, with parallels to Indonesia and the Philippines. Hybrid platformism emerges as both a site of contestation and fragility.

Keywords: hybrid platformism, Thailand, digital media, political protests

On October 15, 2020, at the height of student-led mass protests against the government, the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society and the Royal Thai Police issued a petition closing four online media outlets: *Prachatai*, *Voice TV*, *The Standard*, and *The Reporters*. The petition was dismissed by the courts—which deemed it unconstitutional—on October 21, and the platforms remained online. The four briefly-banned outlets were diverse: *Prachatai* was a long-established human rights-focused platform in the NGO space (<https://prachatai.com/>); *Voice TV* was the public relations mouthpiece of the powerful Shinawatra dynasty (<https://www.voicetv.co.th/>); *The Standard* was a leading online commercial media outlet with a

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large journalistic team (<https://thestandard.co/>); and *The Reporters* was essentially a one-woman breaking-news operation (<https://www.thereporters.co/home/>).

What did the attempted closures reveal about the evolution of Thailand's media? In short, the October 2020 banning order helped frame the emergence of a messy, ad hoc online media coalition that challenged the political status quo from a range of perspectives. This article conceptualizes the most recent form of online media order, which we dub hybrid platformism, and contrasts it with two earlier models of interaction between Thailand's media and politics: partisan polyvalence and mediated populism.

Thai politics have been confusing and turbulent since mass protests emerged against the elected government of then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in late 2005. Since then, Thailand has experienced two military coups, seven general elections, three constitutional referendums, and several waves of large-scale street protests. King Bhumibol, the world's longest-serving monarch, died in 2016. He was succeeded by his far less popular son, Vajiralongkorn, who spent his first years reigning largely in absentia from Germany. Thailand has become deeply polarized between conservative Thais who identify with the monarchy and the military and those who favor a more democratic political direction. The March 2019 elections were supposed to return Thailand to democracy following five years of military rule. Instead, they consolidated a semi-authoritarian regime still headed by former junta leader General Prayut Chan-o-cha, widely seen as a front for an unaccountable monarchy.

In February 2020, the extremely popular opposition Future Forward Party—strongly backed by younger voters—was dissolved by the Constitutional Court on tendentious legal grounds. This event triggered a wave of campus-based protests that lasted for three weeks. Although the COVID-19 lockdown helped halt the first wave of demonstrations, they resumed with a vengeance on July 18. More than 400 anti-government protests occurred in 2020, led mainly by university and high school students across the country (McCargo, 2021). Demonstrators called for Prayut's resignation, revision of the constitution to allow for greater democratic participation, and reform of the unaccountable monarchy. By openly challenging the monarchy, these protests differed considerably from other recent mass rallies.

The Prayut government struggled to respond effectively to these decentralized, social media-driven protests, fueled by an Internet-savvy Generation Z that outmaneuvered authorities in the digital sphere. Following initially cautious responses, authorities increasingly adopted hardline tactics, arresting protest leaders—some on charges of sedition and *lèse-majesté*—and twice dispersing peaceful crowds with dye-laden water cannons.

For much of August and September, mainstream media largely ignored the protest movement, particularly students' demands for monarchy reform, citing Thailand's draconian *lèse-majesté* laws, Article 112 of the Criminal Code. This was understandable: magazine editor Somyot Pruksakasemsuk served seven years in jail between 2011 and 2019 on *lèse-majesté* charges, while Chiranuch Permchaiporn narrowly averted a 70-year sentence under computer crime laws for permitting *lèse-majesté* content on *Prachatai's* Web board. Despite these risks, emerging hybrid online media outlets played a crucial supporting role in the anti-government movement.

Recent research on Southeast Asian politics stresses the importance of social media, which Lim persuasively situates within the analytical framework of platform capitalism (Lim, 2024, p. 7; Srnicek, 2017). Yet most of the endlessly reposted online content about, say, the 2020–21 anti-government street protests, or the contentious 2023 Thai elections, was not generated by individual social media users. The most popular political content comprised video clips and commentary produced by online media practitioners and by semiprofessional influencers. Far too little attention has been paid to the native habitat of these practitioners and influencers: the burgeoning realm of online media platforms, which constitutes a second core of media platform capitalism.

This article examines how hybrid platformism has redefined the boundaries of journalism and political communication in Thailand. It seeks to answer two key questions:

RQ1: How has hybrid platformism reshaped Thailand's online political media landscape?

RQ2: What broader implications does the rise of hybrid platformism hold for the relationship between media and political power?

The article proceeds as follows. The first section outlines the theoretical framework, introducing hybrid platformism through the lens of hybrid media systems. The second traces the evolution of the Thai media landscape across three phases: partisan polyvalence, mediated populism, and hybrid platformism. The third proposes a typology of six hybrid media actors. The fourth examines platform-specific logics across Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter/X, and Line. The fifth analyzes the role blurring between journalism, activism, and influence. The sixth discusses structural constraints shaping editorial sustainability. The conclusion reflects on the implications for Thailand and the wider Southeast Asian region.

Theoretical Framework

This article builds on the concept of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), which conceptualizes contemporary media environments as structured by interdependent relationships between legacy and digital media and political actors within complex and fluid communication environments. Rather than operating under a unified logic, hybrid systems are shaped by the interplay of journalistic, political, commercial, and technological forces. Within such environments, media actors act strategically, recombining formats, technologies, and genres to maximize visibility, influence, and legitimacy. These dynamics reshape not only the production and circulation of information but also the professional identities, practices, and trajectories of those who produce it.

Although initially theorized in Western liberal democracies, the hybrid media system framework can be productively applied to contexts like Thailand, where political repression, economic precarity, and institutional fragility profoundly shape media practices. Following Curran and Park's (2000) call to de-Westernize media studies, we challenge the universalization of Global North paradigms and foreground the structural specificities of post-authoritarian and hybrid regimes, such as informality, clientelism, and the instrumental use of media by political elites (McCargo, 2012). In these settings, hybridity is not simply a

matter of format blending, but a reflection of layered, unequal interactions between diverse actors and asymmetrical political and infrastructural conditions.

Consistent with comparative approaches that conceptualize media systems as dynamic and heterogeneous configurations rather than stable institutional equilibria (Hallin, 2020), this article treats Thailand's media system as historically contingent and continuously reconfigured through episodes of political disruption and technological change. This perspective allows us to analyze hybrid platformism not as a deviation from a normative model of journalistic professionalism, but as a situated configuration shaped by platform dependency, political constraint, and economic uncertainty.

To capture these transformations in the Thai context, this article introduces the concept of hybrid platformism. Platforms, conceived as sociotechnical infrastructures governed by algorithmic, commercial, and participatory logics (van Dijck et al., 2018), mediate how media actors produce, distribute, and monetize content. Hybrid platformism describes a media ecology in which journalists, influencers, activists, and political entrepreneurs operate across multiple platforms, combining editorial roles, funding models, and expressive practices. Rather than replacing earlier media arrangements, platformization intersects with existing political and professional structures, producing new forms of dependency and opportunity. This hybridity unfolds along three overlapping dimensions. Structural hybridity refers to the entanglement of legacy media institutions with platform-native formats and infrastructures. Functional hybridity captures the blurring of roles between journalism, activism, commentary, and influence. Economic hybridity denotes the coexistence of multiple monetization strategies, such as branded content, crowdfunding, donations, and political patronage. Together, these dimensions highlight how hybrid platformism reshapes both media production and professional boundary making in Thailand's digital media environment.

Following Farjam et al. (2022), we distinguish between traditional and social media based on scope, function, and curation. Complementing this, Theocharis et al. (2023) emphasize the platform-specific affordances that shape political expression and engagement. Facebook fosters bonding and closed-group mobilization; Twitter/X enables confrontation and cross-cutting visibility (see Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021); TikTok privileges emotional resonance and virality; Line supports encrypted, insular communication; and YouTube offers monetized, reputation-based visibility for key opinion leaders (KOLs), while leaving them extremely reliant on revenues from a corporate platform that lies entirely beyond their control. Platform choice preferences reflect factors such as age and gender among users (see Koc-Michalska et al., 2021). These affordances influence not only how messages circulate but also how editorial norms evolve, roles are enacted, and audiences are addressed in Thailand's hybrid media ecosystem.

Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative, field-oriented approach centered on semistructured interviews. Between 2023 and 2024, we conducted 31 interviews with key actors in Thailand's media landscape, representing a spectrum of Thailand's digital media ecosystem, from legacy journalists and independent creators to KOLs, influencers, and editors across both mainstream and alternative platforms. The interviews lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. Most were conducted in Thai. Twenty-eight interviews were held in person in Bangkok, and another three were conducted remotely via video conferencing platforms, based

on the interviewees' preferences. Around half of the interviewees requested anonymity. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to reflect a range of editorial orientations, professional trajectories, and levels of institutional affiliation, from legacy media journalists to independent content creators. In some cases, initial contacts were made through previous collaborations or informal networks, while others were approached following relevant media appearances or through personal referrals. This strategy allowed us to access both high-profile and lesser-known actors operating at different levels of the media ecosystem. The interviewees included most of the leading figures in Thailand's online news media landscape.

The interviews followed a flexible thematic guide encompassing seven key areas: (1) personal background; (2) motivations for engaging with digital platforms and future strategies; (3) perceptions of journalistic independence and ethics; (4) funding models and financial sustainability; (5) audience relationships and engagement strategies; (6) interactions with political and corporate actors; and (7) broader views on Thai society and politics. Rather than formal coding software, the analysis was conducted through thematic clustering and close reading to trace recurring patterns.

From Partisan Polyvalence to Mediated Populism

Thailand's media landscape has long been loud, argumentative, and excitable—as befits a country that holds world records for both the greatest number of military coups and the highest number of constitutions over the last century. Elections are staged regularly, but massive street protests challenging election results and outcomes have also been common in recent decades. From the 1970s onwards, the media has been dominated by government-friendly television stations (some state-owned, others operated by politically loyal commercial ventures) along with noisier privately owned newspapers. The big newspaper titles, especially *Thai Rath*, *Matichon*, *Khao Sod*, and *Daily News*, have crafted a mode of news coverage that McCargo (2012) terms partisan polyvalence, which features newspaper political teams assigning individual journalists to cultivate close ties with rival parties, factions, civil society groups, and bureaucratic actors, including the military (pp. 209–211). Regardless of who comes out top after an election, military coup, or protest, the newspaper already has insider access to the latest victor through its designated journalist. News is presented in a largely even-handed way, while comment columns are highly partisan (McCargo, 2000, pp. 136–137). Leading newspapers feature a cacophony of voices, often cheering for different sides on the same issue. Thailand is far from unique in this regard: Goenawan Mohamad, founding editor of the Indonesian weekly *Tempo*, argued that during the authoritarian New Order period, the magazine always featured “many voices, many colors, inside one publication.” In the Thai case, polyvalence, while seemingly pluralist, is a deliberate editorial strategy crafted in response to political uncertainty and revolving-door governments. The peak of partisan polyvalence occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, an era of factionalism and wheeler-dealing, where no single party or individual dominated. During this period, most newspapers lacked a conventional business model, relying on bribes, subsidies from political actors, or the promotion of stocks and shares during economic boom.

By the mid-2000s, partisan polyvalence had given way to a Thai variety of mediated populism (McCargo, 2017). Initially viewed as a specific modality of European electoral populism, mediated populism was subsequently reframed and reclaimed in the context of Asia and the Global South by scholars such as Chakravatty and Roy (2017, pp. 4073–4092). In Thailand, this meant a new media landscape that featured

highly partisan television stations adopting color-coded stances for and against the controversial Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his dynastic ascendancy. Although Thaksin himself was removed in the 2006 coup, he continued to overshadow Thai politics from exile in Dubai, successfully installing three different proxies to premiership between 2007 and 2011. These proxies included his brother-in-law Somchai Wongsawat (2008) and, later, his sister Yingluck Shinawatra (2011–2014), whose government was brought down by the May 2014 military coup. Anti-Thaksin protestors (known as yellowshirts) staged mass demonstrations in 2006, 2008, and 2013–14, while pro-Shinawatra demonstrators (known as redshirts) held their own huge counter-rallies in 2009, 2010, and 2014.

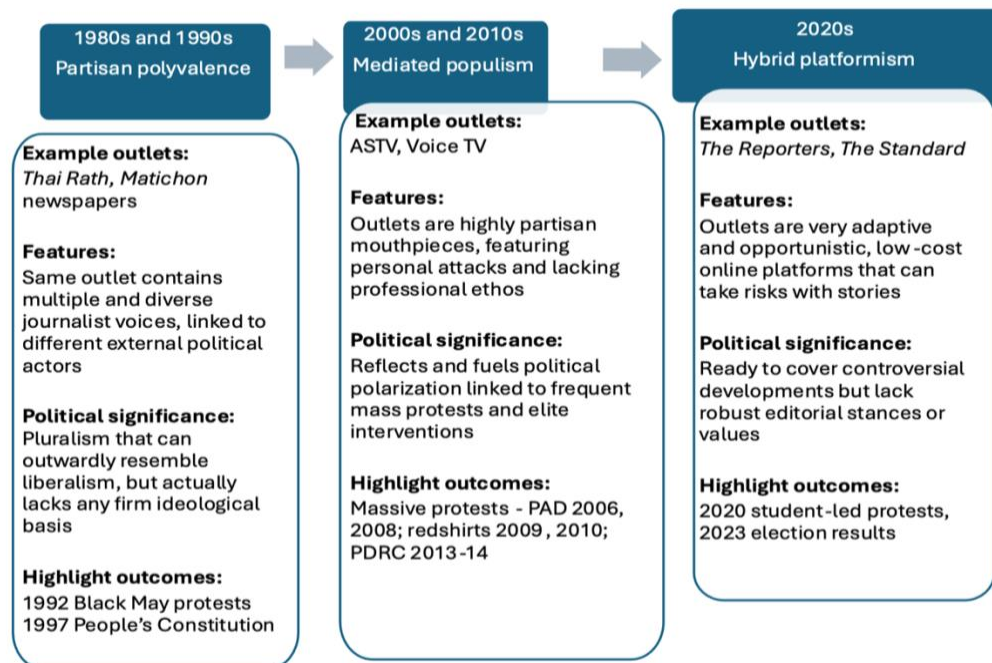


Figure 1. Thailand media and politics timeline, 1980s–2020s.

Under mediated populism, “politics becomes a form of reality TV, while reality TV may resemble a mode of politics” (McCargo, 2017, p. 4139). Leading political figures, including Thaksin, created their own satellite television channels to promote highly partisan political messaging. Charismatic television hosts and actors entered the political arena, some becoming MPs and ministers, while former elected politicians pursued new careers in the media space. Emotional exhortations and personal attacks were the new common currency of media discourse: Two yellow-versus-red echo chambers emerged, linked to rival protest movements, and resulting in a dialogue of the deaf. Developments in Thailand during this period had many parallels with the populist and polarized media turn across Asia, notably in Modi’s India and Imran Khan’s Pakistan. Ayesha Mulla termed Pakistan’s TV news networks during the second decade of the millennium a “performative enclosure,” fencing in a vociferous “illiberal electronic space” (Mulla, 2021, pp. 7, 10). Srirupa Roy (2024) sees what she calls “The *bahurupiya* vaudeville performances of Modi’s political theater” not as

an aberration, but as the latest and most outrageous incarnation of mediatized populist tendencies that date back many decades in Indian politics (p. 260).

Political and Technological Disruption (2014–2023): The Rise of Hybrid Platformism

The May 2014 military coup that installed General Prayut Chan-ocha as prime minister for more than nine years marked a turning point in Thailand's media landscape. The military seized control of television broadcasting, suspended regular programming, and imposed nationalistic content. Journalists were instructed not to provoke "confusion and unrest" (Prachatai, 2014), leading many to resign, face outlet closures, or undergo "attitude adjustment" sessions in military camps (South China Morning Post, 2014).

These measures accelerated an ongoing transformation, pushing actors toward digital platforms. This shift aligned with broader technological changes that reshaped Thai media: accelerating news cycles, diversifying sources, and new journalism practices. Digital-only outlets, or pure players, gained prominence by leveraging technology to bypass traditional restrictions. New entrants such as *CSI LA* (2014), *The Matter* (2016), *The Standard* and *The101World* (2017), *The People* (2018), *The Reporters* (2019), and *Thai Enquirer* (2020) contributed to a more plural information landscape. Meanwhile, legacy media developed digital extensions, such as *BBC Thai's* Facebook page, described by one journalist as "the legacy of Prayut's 2014 coup" (Tossapol Chaisamriptom, October 28, 2023).

Post-coup, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were widely adopted by political actors across the spectrum. Nyblade et al. (2015) described this as a "digital war" involving redshirt supporters, journalists, activists, intellectuals, and urban citizens who were critical of the coup. While pro-coup yellowshirts enjoyed greater technological access and visibility, redshirts were also active online despite facing surveillance. This proliferation of digital channels reflected a plural and contested media ecosystem.

Hybrid platformism gained traction during the 2020–2021 youth-led protests. Digital-native-favored outlets such as *The Reporters*, *Prachatai*, and *Voice TV* live streamed protests, including speeches on the monarchy, bypassing traditional editorial constraints. One media entrepreneur recalled: "When I started my media, I was very close to activists [. . .] it was a good moment to start because of the protests and because of Covid, everyone was watching social media" (Suramet Noiubon, September 21, 2023). The May 2023 election reinforced the centrality of digital engagement in Thai politics. The Move Forward Party, with its massive online following and youth appeal, gained 151 seats and became the largest parliamentary party. Yet the apparent openness of the hybrid media sphere masked structural fragilities that would soon become more visible across the media ecosystem. As in the earlier era of partisan polyvalence, hybrid platformism soon evolved into a crowded space dominated by personal brands, fragmented audiences, and opaque funding structures. While this diversification enabled a plurality of ideological positions, it also exposed deeper tensions around professionalism, credibility, and sustainability. Over time, the hybrid media environment came to resemble a noisy arena of competing soapboxes, dynamic but increasingly difficult to sustain.

Top News represents the conservative end of the spectrum. Founded by former *Nation Group* journalists after a damaging boycott, the wildly popular TV channel promotes Thailand's traditional three

pillars: nation, religion, and the king. One anchor described it as exemplifying “new generation conservatism” (*Top News Anchor*, November 6, 2023). Ideological polarization is now a defining feature of the hybrid ecosystem, which hosts both progressive and ultraconservative players.

Alternative media, as defined by Holt et al. (2019), have also expanded. Outlets such as *Prachatai* and *The Reporters* espouse NGO-style agendas focused on human rights and civic engagement. One editor in chief described their audience as “citizens who can participate in communication and social change” (October 17, 2023). *The Reporters* fits this logic, combining field-based coverage with newsroom routines grounded in journalistic norms.

A newer generation of hybrid outlets—including *The Matter*, *The Momentum*, and *The Opener*—seeks to balance editorial integrity with commercial viability. Often advertising-funded, they navigate between public interest and client demands. Among this group, *The Standard* has emerged as the most commercially successful player, appealing to urban professionals with a mix of lifestyle, business, and political content. Its growing popularity, particularly during the 2020 student-led protests, initially alarmed authorities.

Legacy media—such as *Thai PBS* and *Nation Group*—and more recent ventures like *TODAY* (2020), a new division of Workpoint TV have sought to adapt to new formats and platforms. Regional outlets, such as *Isaan Record* (Isaan), *Wartani* (Yala), and *Lanner* (Chiang Mai), add further diversity. While limited in scale, they provide locally grounded perspectives often absent from national coverage. Their presence underscores the decentralizing potential of digital media, even as financial and political pressures constrain their reach.

Despite these developments, many legacy outlets struggle to stay relevant in a landscape increasingly defined by metrics, influencers, and platform dynamics. The most profound shift lies in the rise of individual media figures. Veteran journalists such as Sondhi Limthongkul, Jomquan Laopetch, Sirote Klampaiboon, and Sutichai Yoon transitioned from institutional roles to independent creators. At the same time, newer influencers like 9arm (n.d.), Farose (n.d.), and Loukgolf (Kanathip Soonthornrak, n.d.) merged lifestyle content with political commentary, cultivating large followings across platforms.

Toward a Typology: Illustrative Cases

Hybrid online platforms in Thailand defy simple classification. This typology sketches six fluid actor types—public interest, polemical, commercial, citizen-led, KOL-based, and crowdsourced—shaped by political pressures, funding, audience targeting, and tech shifts. All combine structural, functional, and economic hybridity in varying ways. Rather than assigning fixed models, the typology illustrates how actors negotiate platform dependencies, editorial goals, and visibility constraints differently.

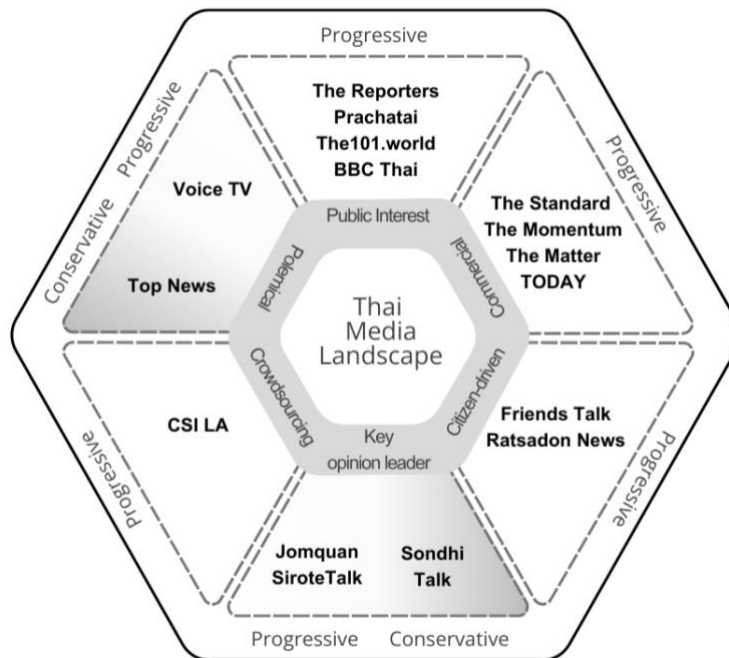


Figure 2. Thai online media landscape (created by authors).

Tag 1: Public Interest—The Reporters, Prachatai

These outlets present themselves as nonprofit operations serving the public good, often promoting freedom of expression and civic rights. *The Reporters*, founded in 2019 by long-serving Channel 3 TV reporter Thapanee Eadsrichai, emerged from dissatisfaction with mainstream media's constraints. *The Reporters* specializes in live field reporting from the scene of unfolding incidents, which can range from political stories to floods and crime. Thapanee's credibility and personal following have expanded the platform's reach to audiences beyond typical independent media consumers.

Founded in 2006, *Prachatai* operates as a nonprofit-style outlet covering human rights, freedom of expression, and *lèse-majesté* issues. Mostly in Thai (with an English section), it appeals to left-liberal intellectuals and former redshirt sympathizers. With limited resources, low salaries, and high staff turnover, *Prachatai's* content reflects an activist orientation, often at the expense of editorial polish. Public-interest outlets are also subject to platform logics, as their visibility depends heavily on them. As a result, they increasingly adjust their formats, topics, and timing to meet engagement demands, blurring the line with KOL practices and raising questions about the stability of this category.

Tag 2: Polemical—Voice TV, Top News

Polemical platforms openly embrace partisanship. *Voice TV*, owned by the Shinawatra family, was repeatedly targeted by the authorities post-2014 and suspended eight times before ceasing TV broadcasts

in 2024. It now published what amounted to online press releases for the Pheu Thai-led government, and several of its pro-Pheu Thai journalists have moved to the state-controlled *NBTC* channel. In early 2026, Voice TV showed renewed signs of activity with a new logo and tagline “Let People Understand Society,” and several prominent figures, including Lakkana Punwichai, Chuwat Rerksirisuk, and Sasipong Chatipoj, returned to produce new program segments for the channel. At the other end of the spectrum, *Top News*, launched by ex-Nation Group journalists, championed hardline conservatism and strongly opposed both the People’s Party (formerly Move Forward) and Pheu Thai.

Tag 3: Commercial—The Standard

Founded in 2017 by Wongtanong Chainarongsingh and Nitipat Suksuay, *The Standard* quickly became a leading digital news outlet with nearly 200 staff, gaining recognition for its incisive 2019 election coverage and innovative debate formats. While it emphasized protest reporting in 2020, it later forged ties with a wider range of political actors, adapting the older model of partisan polyvalence to a commercial logic. Despite branding itself with the tagline “Stand Up for the People,” media insiders describe *The Standard* as pragmatic and closely aligned with business elites and politicians. The outlet’s somewhat opaque ownership structure has not hindered its success; among the four outlets briefly shut down in October 2020, *The Standard* proved the most financially stable.

Tag 4: Citizen-Driven—Friends Talk, Ratsadon News

Emerging during the 2020–2021 protests, these outlets use mobile journalism and donation-based funding, operating primarily on social media. Initially focused on protest live streams, they now lean increasingly toward party-affiliated commentary.

Friends Talk, founded by Suramet Noiubon (*Friends Talk*, n.d.), evolved into a platform for political discussions, featuring prominent student activists like Parit “Penguin” Chiwarak and Patsaravalee “Mind” Tanakitvibulpon, as well as figures previously involved with progressive parties such as Piyabutr Saengkanokkul and Lisa Phakamon.

Ratsadon News, launched in 2021 by Natthaphong Malee (*Ratsadon News*, n.d.), covers a broad range of political content and events. Post-2023, it showed signs of increasing proximity to Pheu Thai and the new government. In 2024, it introduced a political talk show featuring former Voice TV personalities.

Tag 5: Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs)—Jomquan, Captainnerd23

The KOL model gained prominence during COVID-19, blending partisan journalism with social media influence. Jomquan Laopetch, formerly a star TV host for *Thai Rath*, launched a YouTube channel in 2021 featuring long-form interviews on political and social issues (Jomquan, n.d.). Her programs include regular guests, such as political commentator Sirote Klampaiboon, who has himself become a KOL. Alongside current affairs videos, Jomquan produces lighter content, such as “unboxing” videos of Chinese and Japanese model cartoon characters and other shows about philosophy and religion (see Jomquan, 2022).

Pasintas Silsophonngasame or Captainnerd23 (n.d.), has been active on TikTok since 2023, producing viral short videos that mix law, politics, and satire. With no formal journalism training but a background in law and e-commerce, his openly pro-People's Party stance resonated with younger Bangkok-based users. Like Jomquan (n.d.), he has developed a versatile personal brand that does not rely on a particular platform or media outlet.

Despite its remarkable rise, the long-term viability of the KOL model remains uncertain. While some KOLs sustain themselves through platform monetization, others appear to be shifting toward politics, entrepreneurship, or more institutionalized media ventures.

Tag 6: Crowdsourcing—CSI LA

In contexts where investigative reporting faces pressure, crowdsourcing offers a viable alternative. *CSI LA*, founded in 2014 by Pramuk Anantasin (aka David), operates mainly on Facebook and has 1.6 million followers, focusing on politically sensitive topics (*CSI LA*, n.d.). Despite challenges in verifying its content and uncertainty around its founder's identity, the platform has broken major stories, most notably a luxury watch scandal involving former deputy premier General Prawit Wongsuwan. Prawit was previously known for sporting high-end designer watches, which failed to appear in the asset declarations he was required to submit as a minister (*Bangkok Post*, 2018). Following the exposure by *CSI LA*, he stopped wearing the watches in public, claiming they had been lent to him by a wealthy friend, now conveniently deceased. Recently, *CSI LA* investigated the Chinese-owned company behind a high-rise building collapse during the March 2025 Bangkok earthquake.

Together, these six contrasting tags reflect the fragmentation and heterogeneity of Thailand's digital media landscape. Their development is increasingly shaped by platform-specific constraints and affordances that privilege certain formats, styles, and rhythms of engagement over others.

Platform Logics and Affordances

Thailand's high level of digital penetration has profoundly reshaped its media landscape and modes of civic engagement. With more than 64 million Internet users in 2025—approximately 90% of the population—Thailand is one of the most connected countries in Southeast Asia (DataReportal, 2025). However, hyperconnectivity does not lead to uniformity: Different platforms foster distinct forms of communication, audience interaction, and editorial practices. More than just technical tools, platforms shape how content circulates, how it is created, and who gains visibility. Across these diverse digital environments, all actors must find ways to remain visible, engage meaningfully, and sustain their presence.

Facebook remains the dominant platform for Thai news outlets. For many of them, it is more than a distribution channel: It effectively replaces the traditional website, serving as homepage, archive, and main interface with the audience. This is notably the case for *The Reporters*, which does not systematically publish content on its website, but uses Facebook to host nearly everything, from photo albums and short clips to long-form videos and announcements.

YouTube functions as a reputational and monetized space for key opinion leaders and former news anchors turned independent creators. With long-form video, subscription tools, and built-in advertising models, it supports branded journalism and personality-based storytelling, as exemplified by Jomquan (n.d.) and Sirote (Sirote Klampaiboon, n.d.). As Sirote explained,

I earned a lot of money from the platform because people follow me a lot. [. . .] Facebook and YouTube have many ways to provide income for you, like the subscription. But many people don't know how. . . direct financial support is the most convenient way, for them. (Sirote Klampaiboon, October 2, 2023)

Platform monetization now relies not only on algorithmic visibility but also on cultivating a sense of community and reciprocity between creators and their audiences.

Twitter/X, though smaller in user numbers, functions as a high-intensity discursive battleground for politicians, journalists, and activists. It enables real-time commentary, ideological confrontation, and exposure to counter-attitudinal content, functioning as both a space for political signaling and affective polarization and a venue for direct and personal clashes.

TikTok offers a different affordance: emotionally charged, rapid-fire content designed for virality. Its short, visually driven format lends itself to dramatized political commentary and satire, and it was actively used in the 2023 general election through brief "Yes or No" clips, in which politicians took quick positions on polarizing issues. The platform's aesthetic appeals especially to younger, more politically disengaged users, turning complex debates into accessible, stylized fragments. For KOLs, TikTok provides faster audience growth than other platforms: Captainnerd23 (n.d.), for instance, amassed more than 634,000 followers on TikTok within a year, compared with just 30,700 on YouTube. The format rewards punchy rhetoric, performance, and speed, but its apparent ephemerality hides a lasting digital footprint. As one creator observed, "Politicians now know they have to be more careful with what they say. We have all the footprints" (John Winyu Wongsurawat, March 27, 2023). TikTok thus functions both as a stage and an archive.

Line plays a dual role in Thailand's media ecosystem as both a private messaging tool and a centralized distribution channel for official content. It blends news, entertainment, and payments while facilitating both horizontal (peer-to-peer) and vertical (state-to-citizen) communication. Line groups have become integral to newsroom routines: All political parties and ministries have closed Line groups for journalists (Tossapol Chaisamriptom, October 28, 2023), providing real-time access to press releases.

Platforms such as Line have also contributed to political polarization by reinforcing echo chambers. The military has extensively used disinformation campaigns, euphemistically called IOs (Information Operations), to undermine opponents, an effort dramatically exposed in real time by the opposition Future Forward Party during the February 2020 no-confidence debate (McCargo & Chattharakul, 2020, p. 140). In October 2020, Twitter suspended 926 accounts linked to the Royal Thai Army for spreading false content. Meanwhile, exiled critics continued to influence digital political discourse, notably through extremely popular sites such as the Royalist Marketplace Facebook group (Royalist Marketplace, n.d.), which has more than 2 million members.

These platform logics reshape professional identities. Many platforms lack clear bylines or editorial signatures, blurring distinctions between professional reporting and personal opinion. Moreover, platforms themselves are unstable. Thai journalists must adapt rapidly to changing digital environments, often abandoning tools as quickly as they embrace them. For example, while Clubhouse became a prominent political space during the 2020–2021 protests, it has since virtually disappeared from the Thai media ecosystem. This instability renders tools, formats, and even journalistic labor eminently dispensable. One journalist recalled working on digital content for the state-owned Mass Communications Organization of Thailand (MCOT), only to later discover that the organization had changed its URL structure and deleted her entire archive without notice: "It's like you don't have value as a journalist" (Former editor, *Thai PBS*, September 25, 2023). Hybrid platformism demands flexibility and the capacity to detach from platforms and, sometimes, one's own work.

Actors and Roles: Between Journalism, Activism, and Influence

This blurring of boundaries raises important questions about the nature of journalism, the role of media in society, and the future of information dissemination. As engagement becomes a primary benchmark, many outlets prioritize reach over rigor. As one editor put it bluntly, "News media have hunger for engagement, so hungry that you forget everything: your ethics, your responsibility [. . .] to be a journalist you must be braver than this" (editor in chief, news platform, February 13, 2024). This cutthroat environment contributes to a credibility crisis, as distinctions between journalism, PR, and content production become unstable. As Carlson and Lewis (2015) argue, journalism today undergoes "boundary work," where professional definitions are renegotiated. In Thailand, this reconfiguration unfolds amid political polarization, economic insecurity, and rapid digital change, forcing journalists and media organizations to constantly reassess what counts as credible work. One editor stated: "Our purpose is to produce top journalism; this is what makes the difference." Another claimed: "We only have real reporters, not like other media" (Editor at international media outlet, August 8, 2024). Such declarations often reappear at the individual level, as when a former Thai PBS editor asserted: "They [other media] don't know how to analyze politics. I am the only one who can do that" (interview, September 25, 2023). Journalists' efforts to assert professional legitimacy and audience relevance in an increasingly fragmented information ecosystem often lead to exaggerated claims of superiority or exclusive expertise.

Several media professionals interviewed revealed that they had been approached by various political parties to join their ranks, stories they recounted to show that they were major figures in the public sphere. As one explained, "I was approached by both Move Forward and Pheu Thai. The Pheu Thai offer let me choose between a constituency or party list slot" (Sirote Klampaiboon, October 2, 2023). Digitization and commercialization have also led citizens, activists, and influencers to engage in "acts of journalism," challenging traditional boundaries (Stearns, 2013, p. 2). We interpret this as a redefinition of journalism, tied to digital environments. Thai platforms increasingly function as hybrid spaces: Politicians write op-eds, singers host interviews, and journalists become YouTubers. As one media figure explained, "I never know what to call myself. I do so many things [. . .] moderator, commentator, reporter, host [. . .] some call me a KOL" (Sirote Klampaiboon, October 2, 2023). These multifaceted roles challenge conventional understandings of journalistic professionalism; influence itself becomes a role: "I'm a political entertainer" (M.L. Nattakorn Devakula, February 6, 2024).

This transformation reshapes who sets the agenda. As one editor remarked, “Old media are either pro-government or pro-corporation. It’s the independent outlets and influencers who drive the conversation now” (Editor at *Top News*, April 30, 2024). Personal branding and algorithmic fluency matter more than credentials. Some influencers avoid overt politics to broaden their appeal. A TikTok creator explained: “If you focus too much on politics, you won’t grow your audience. It’s better to diversify” (TikTok Influencer, December 22, 2024). Yet their impact remains significant. As an editor at *The Standard* put it, “Today, it’s the time of the influencers” (Tanakorn Wongpanya, October 25, 2023). Younger journalists are also navigating this shift. Thot Limsodsai (Spring News, April 7, 2023), while affirming his identity as a reporter, explained that he planned to launch a TikTok channel. This reflects the tension between traditional journalistic norms and newer forms of visibility and engagement. As one senior editor remarked, this evolution affects not only how journalists work but also how they present themselves: “They don’t go on other channels to discuss politics. They only speak loudly in their own space” (Former editor, Thai PBS, September 25, 2023).

The evolution of media roles extends to civil society. iLaw, though a legal rights NGO, produces investigative content akin to journalism. As one editor said:

In Thailand, everyone seems to do work below their level. The prime minister acts like a secretary. The media serve power rather than holding it accountable. That’s why iLaw exists, because the media aren’t doing their job. (Noppatjak Attanon, October 10, 2023)

Many informants claimed that the media were falling short. One interviewee stated: “In Thailand, politicians act as media, and media act as PR” (Creator and host, YouTube channel, October 18, 2023). A *Voice TV* editor explained that their function was primarily to serve as a public relations tool: “They see us not as journalists, but as employees, people to spread good news” (Chayapon Malaniyom, November 17, 2023).

In this context, journalistic routines often default to reproducing official discourse. Information-sharing practices are normalized: “Everybody does it.” Another journalist added: “Reporters use Line chats to circulate safe stories. It becomes ‘he-said-she-said’ journalism” (editor in chief, October 17, 2023). Others lament the lack of editorial independence: “Thai media copy-paste government releases. You see the same headlines and articles across outlets. They don’t generate original content. That’s the difference with Western media” (Chayapon Malaniyom, November 17, 2023). These shifting roles and blurred boundaries are not only professional or symbolic; they are increasingly shaped—and often constrained—by structural pressures that weigh on the sustainability of independent journalism.

Structural Pressures and Editorial Sustainability

Beneath the surface of innovation and platform experimentation, Thailand’s hybrid media system remains structurally fragile: economically precarious, politically pressured, and increasingly marked by fatigue among both journalists and audiences.

Financing the News: Between Independence and Clientelism

Aside from a handful of commercially successful platforms, notably *The Standard*, most online news outlets in Thailand struggle financially. In this precarious landscape, many drift into a gray zone between journalism and PR, surviving by securing funds from politicians or elite actors. During the 2023 general elections, several parties offered money for favorable coverage, a scaled-up version of Thailand's long-standing "envelope journalism." Some platforms even formalized the practice by distributing PDF rate cards offering tiered prices for different promotional services.

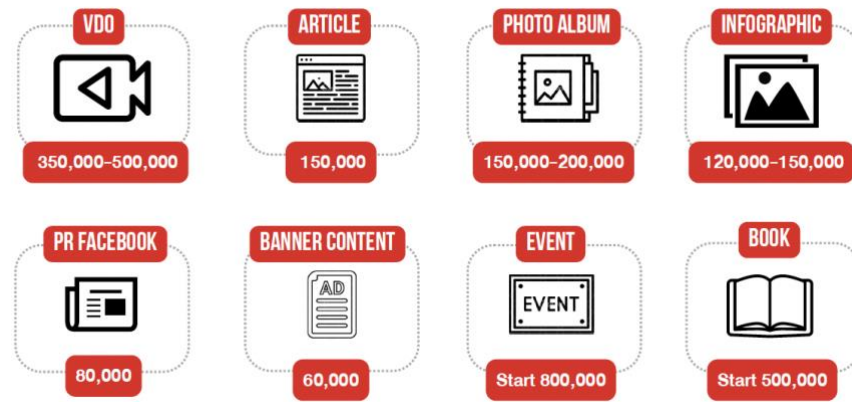


Figure 3. Rate card 2024 (amounts in Thai baht; source: anonymous online media outlet).

This erosion of editorial independence is widespread. According to Jiajanpong and Kularb (2025), 73.16% of advertising-funded content in Thai media—whether backed by government or private sponsors—is not clearly marked as sponsored (p. 112). Even media outlets positioned as pro-democracy are affected. "Even the most conservative parties approached me," said Suramet Noiubon of *Friends Talk* (n.d.). "They offered me money for promotion [. . .] but the guy didn't even know who I was" (September 21, 2023). The practice of accepting money from politicians or political parties for favorable coverage or damage control is widespread, though rarely acknowledged. Although rejecting such practices himself, Sirote acknowledged in an interview, "Some websites are relatively independent in terms of news report but they rely a lot on money from politicians. The other way is to take money from political party or politicians to do things that they call damage control" (Sirote Klampaiboon, October 2, 2023).

The acceleration of digital disruption has deepened financial precarity for small media outlets, now competing for funding with larger companies investing heavily online. As explained,

When someone like [popular TV news presenter] Sorayuth Sutthassanachinda goes fully online, big sponsors follow. Sponsors want big names, so small outlets get nothing. Those who've long been society's hope—*The Matter*, *101*, *Way*—are all struggling. Whether we survive will be decided this year. (editor in chief, independent media, February 13, 2024)

They added, "Four years ago, digital TV disrupted the industry. People had to sell their businesses. Now, as mainstream media move online, gossip and tabloid content flood the space. It's trashing the news and devaluing online journalism." This dual disruption, first from social media and then from legacy outlets entering digital markets, has intensified competition while eroding quality. The shift threatens not only the sustainability of smaller players but also the integrity and credibility of online news content overall.

This pressure is not limited to mainstream outlets. Alternative and hybrid platforms, which gained momentum after 2014, face similar dilemmas. Many rely on a mix of grants, donations, and sponsorships. Some explicitly diversify their content to expand reach: "We know that covering politics, conflicts, and human rights is not easy to make money," said an editor in chief. "That's why we also do concerts, entertainment, and K-pop. It helps our audience grow" (editor in chief, independent media, February 13, 2024). Others strike a precarious balance between advertising revenue and political content. "100 per cent of our profit comes from sponsorship," admitted a media professional. "We cannot just write about politics like *Prachatai* or 101; we have to advertise for clients. So sometimes we tone it down" (Supachat Lebnak, December 26, 2023).

Political Fatigue and Editorial Repositioning

These financial pressures shape editorial priorities and professional trajectories. Some journalists leave the profession or shift to more stable, but editorially limited roles. "Somewhere along the line, I forgot there is no money in journalism, so I started in the movie industry," confessed one journalist (Thanarith Satrusayang, September 8, 2023). Another changed outlets for improved benefits, but admitted, "At the new outlet, I don't feel like I'm using my skills to their full potential" (Thot Limsodsai, April 7, 2023).

Beyond financial concerns, political sustainability presents its own challenges, as media figures in Thailand often navigate the line between journalism and partisan advocacy. Overt partisanship has resulted in a landscape where the political "colors" of media outlets have become increasingly pronounced. This partisanship is evident in various forms. A notable example is Lakkana Punwichai, better known as Kam Phaka, a former host at *Voice TV*, who became a notoriously hardcore supporter of the 2023–2025 Pheu Thai government. In September 2020, she tweeted, "If Pheu Thai ever aligns with the Democrat Party, a party with blood on its hands, I'm done with them!" (Kam Phaka, 2020). However, in August 2024, the new prime minister and Pheu Thai leader, Thaksin's daughter Paetongtarn, invited the very same Democrat Party to join the new government and faced no criticism from Kam Phaka.

As political tensions continued to rise in Thailand, a pervasive sense of fatalism emerged among the population. Some media professionals interviewed highlighted the changes within the media landscape and their personal transformations during and after the 2014 coup, expressing a profound sense of responsibility and, at times, guilt about their role in shaping public opinion, as one of them reflected:

I couldn't believe it was happening again. I was so sure that 2006 was the last coup. Because it was so bad for Thai society, the Thai economy and even internationally. [. . .]
When the coup happened in 2014, I was online, and I saw that so many people were

supporting the coup. [. . .] I felt I let people down. (John Winyu Wongsurawat, March 27, 2023)

Nevertheless, Thai journalism has often thrived during severe democratic crises. Political restrictions created a void that digital media swiftly filled, offering alternative voices and perspectives that traditional outlets, under tighter control, could not provide.

Following the contentious 2023 election, after which the "losing" parties proceeded to form a government that excluded the "winning" Move Forward Party, many voters felt deeply alienated from politics. As a YouTube creator noted, "My followers are not interested in politics right now. Red, orange [orange being the color of the Move Forward Party, now the People's Party], they don't care. They're tired, maybe for the next election." Consequently, both media and content creators are increasingly shifting their focus toward entertainment: "In the Thai entertainment media, you can say more than if you're in the news media" (Creator and host, YouTube channel, October 18, 2023). Looking toward the future, Thai media might increasingly turn to humor and entertainment as vehicles for social and political critique. Using political infotainment and comedy to mask social criticism could help navigate repression more easily.

Limitations

While this study offers a grounded view of hybrid media practices in Thailand, several aspects could be further developed in future research.

First, while the interview sample is diverse in terms of political views and professional roles, it focuses exclusively on media producers. Audience perspectives and platform governance bodies are absent. Future research would benefit from a multiactor approach to better understand the interplay between content production, algorithmic dissemination, and reception. Second, Thailand's fast-changing political and digital environment limits the longitudinal generalizability of the findings. Patterns and categories identified here may shift quickly with new platform policies or political realignments. Finally, while a broader comparative perspective lies beyond this study's scope, the Thai case suggests productive lines of inquiry for other contexts.

Conclusion

This article has examined recent transformations in Thailand's political media landscape through the lens of hybrid platformism. By tracing the shift from partisan polyvalence (McCargo, 2012) to mediated populism (McCargo, 2017) and subsequently to a fragmented and platform-dependent digital ecosystem, the analysis highlights a reconfiguration of relationships between media actors, political power, and digital infrastructures. These transformations should not be understood as a linear process of technological adaptation. Rather, they reflect a heady mixture of political constraints, economic precarity, and platform logics that shape how media actors operate, survive, and compete for visibility.

The Thai case offers theoretical leverage that extends beyond its national or regional specificity. It provides a productive vantage point from which to examine hybrid platformism under conditions of

democratic fragility, characterized by recurrent political disruption, weak institutional protections for journalism, and a high dependence on commercial platforms for distribution, visibility, and monetization. Unlike accounts derived primarily from liberal democratic contexts, hybrid platformism in Thailand appears neither gradual nor stabilizing, but instead discontinuous, crisis-driven, and closely tied to moments of political rupture.

The findings confirm several insights from the literature on hybrid media systems and platformization, particularly the view that journalistic professionalism is increasingly defined through unstable and contested boundaries rather than fixed occupational demarcations (Carlson & Lewis, 2015), as well as the centrality of engagement metrics in shaping visibility and authority (van Dijck et al., 2018). At the same time, the Thai case complicates normative interpretations that equate role-blurring with professional decline or democratic erosion. Here, the overlap between journalism, activism, and influence emerges less as a breakdown of professional norms than as a pragmatic response to political pressures, economic uncertainties, and algorithmic dependency. However, this adaptive flexibility operates within a structure of façade pluralism. As in the earlier era of partisan polyvalence, hybrid platformism produces an appearance of diversity through multiple outlets, personalized voices, and dynamic content production that masks underlying fragility, including financial precarity, political co-optation, and weak institutional support for sustained independent journalism.

This tension runs across all dimensions of hybrid platformism. Digital platforms have expanded opportunities for dissent, visibility, and political expression, enabling new actors to challenge established power and bypass traditional gatekeepers. At the same time, they have intensified structural vulnerability through opaque monetization systems, algorithmic governance, and personalized regimes of visibility that expose media actors to heightened precarity. Hybrid platformism thus functions both as adaptation and as constraint. Journalists, influencers, and activists navigate platform dependencies strategically, yet remain structurally exposed to shifting platform logics, funding pressures, and political interference. The apparent openness of Thailand's digital media landscape, therefore, coexists with and is undermined by its structural weaknesses.

Several lessons emerge from the Thai case for scholars concerned with political communication, media systems, and platform-driven journalism in other regions. First, media systems operating under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian conditions should not be treated as marginal or exceptional cases, but as analytically productive sites for understanding dynamics that are increasingly visible elsewhere. Second, greater attention should be paid to the intermediary space occupied by hybrid media outlets, semi-professional creators, and key opinion leaders, whose influence operates between professional journalism, political advocacy, and popular communication. Third, the findings demonstrate that apparent diversity in digital media environments may obscure rather than indicate genuine pluralism, a distinction that is crucial for assessing political communication in fragile democracies.

Comparative developments in Indonesia and the Philippines suggest that similar configurations are emerging beyond Thailand. In Indonesia, the March 2025 protests saw independent outlets such as *Narasi* and *Project Multatuli* gain prominence. In the Philippines, *Rappler* has challenged successive administrations, while political vloggers played a central role in reshaping electoral discourse during the 2022 elections

(Bunquin et al., 2022). These parallels raise comparative questions about the conditions under which hybrid platformism strengthens rather than fragments oppositional voices and about how varying degrees of state capacity to regulate digital spaces shape the gap between apparent and actual pluralism.

Future research could pursue several directions, comparing the Thai case with media systems in Indonesia and the Philippines but across Asia and other parts of the Global South. Comparative studies across different political regimes could clarify the conditions under which hybrid platformism contributes to genuine media pluralization versus façade pluralism. Longitudinal analyses of professional trajectories would help illuminate how journalists, influencers, and hybrid actors navigate careers across media, platforms, and formal politics over time. Audience-focused research could further explore how citizens negotiate trust and credibility within environments characterized by visible diversity, but underlying fragility. Finally, the rapid evolution of platform infrastructures underscores the need for temporal analyses that capture media ecosystems as dynamic and continually reconfigured rather than stable institutional arrangements.

The Thai case demonstrates that hybrid platformism is best understood as an analytical lens for examining how apparent media diversity coexist with structural weaknesses in platformized media systems. It underscores the importance of analyzing platform dependency, political power, and professional boundary-making together, not to assess pluralism by counting outlets or voices, but to examine the material and institutional conditions that enable, or constrain, the possibility of sustained independent journalism in contemporary digital environments.

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