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From Chat Room to Video Clips and Camfrog: Getting to Know Online Life

In 2006, negative events related to various forms of high tech communication forced Thai society to take a look at technological advancement with distrust. In this age of technology where almost everyone has a mobile phone, the internet is an important tool in accessing information and a shortcut to experiencing the world. Whether or not we approve of indecent clips, suggestive chat and Camfrog, the new generation is living a part of their life online.

The Online Lifestyle of Thais

Using high tech gadgets is the craze of millions of Thais, especially the Thai youth. According to a report on computer and internet users nationwide by the National Statistical Office, there are 15.4 million computer users, or 26 percent of people aged 6 and above. There are 8.47 million internet users, or 14 percent of people aged 6 and above. Youth between the ages of 15-24 years are the highest internet users compared to other groups. The survey also asked about the type of internet used in the household. It was reported that 52.8 percent of households had high-speed internet.

According to a survey conducted by the National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC) in 2005, youth under 20 years old who used the internet increased from 12 percent in 2004 to 21 percent in 2005. The average number of hours spent on the internet was 9.2 hours. The websites most frequently visited by children and youth were entertainment websites (30 percent) while access to educational websites was only 2 percent.

In the area of regular telephones, there is an increasing trend in the number of people applying for telephone numbers. The number of public telephones to the population is also on a rising trend. Most important, mobile phone use has jumped from 22.5 percent in 2002 to 36.7 percent in 2005. In 2006 when there was a survey of people aged 6 and above nationwide, the number of mobile phone users (excluding PCT) was 24.7 million people nationwide, or 42 percent.

It is not surprising that negative impacts from using these high tech equipment have been revealed. In 2006-2007, high tech communication that was the talk of the town was online chat, video clips, and Camfrog.

Is Online Chatting Dangerous?

Online chat can be categorized into 2 types' chatrooms on websites and instant messaging programs that are installed on personal computers. The most popular instant messaging program is MSN Messenger. Because online chat allows internet users to communicate with each other real-time, it is very popular among internet users.

In November 2006, shocking news about the murder of an English teacher from Ubon Ratchathani Province brought Thai society's attention to cyber chatting. The young female teacher met the murderer through online chat, arranged to meet with him in Bangkok and was later killed. Her family had never known the criminal before. The brutality of the murder was not of great interest to the public as the reason why the teacher came to meet the stranger. There were opinions on various websites that the teacher wanted to have a foreign boyfriend so she decided to meet the stranger

which eventually led to her death. Other opinions were that online chat is dangerous because it can be used as a tool for deception.

Soon after, news about a female student who filed a police report against a monk for sexual harassment increased society's concern regarding online chat. The couple met each other through online chat and the monk pretended that he was also a student. The monk deceived the woman to meet him at the temple and threatened to call his friends to gang rape her if she refused to sleep with him.

In addition, there is also chatting via regular telephones and mobile phones in the form of audio text. Examples include "Chat Line 1900-1900-xxx" and "1900 xxx xxx For Lonely People." The market for chat via phone is larger than internet chat. The Missing Persons Center of the Mirror Foundation reported that for the first half of 2006, twelve young girls were lured out of their home after they chatted via phone. They were all girls below 15 years old. The number of children that are deceived from chat lines in the form of audio text has been increasing.

The Clip Culture: Personal Rights, Violations and Sexual Crimes

Video clips or short movies that are filmed using mobile phones are very popular among teens and young adults. Video clips of various events such as female students fighting, clips revealing relationships, personal clips that became public and black mail clips were frequently in the news throughout 2006.

Clips from Hidden Cams, Clips that Slipped: Out In mid 2006, there was news about the spread of a 3 minute video clip in which 2 female students were gang raped by 5 male students in a province in the central region. Less than a month later, there was similar news about a female student who was gang raped by fellow male students and the video clip was uploaded on the school website. At the end of the year, there was news about a grade 6 student who was raped by a 14 and 17 year old boy and the video clip was sold to shops that load video clips in the Sampeng area.

Clips Revealing Relationships: Most are about people with close relationships who filmed video clips to watch themselves. But later when the relationship went sour, the video clips are "revealed" or released as a bargaining tool, to get revenge, or to cause embarrassment. For example, there was a case in which a man released pornographic video clips of his ex-girlfriend on various websites because he was angry that his ex-girlfriend had broken up with him. There was also news about a woman who used her mobile phone to film herself having sex with an abbot in a resort. She used the video clip as evidence to prevent the abbot from seeing other women. After they had an

argument, she used the video clip to threaten the abbot, but he pretended not to care, saying that he had connections with a prominent provincial figure. This prompted the woman to release the video clip in public.

Video clips have been connected with people's sexual lives, particularly in using it as a tool in seeking sexual or other benefits. Examples include sexual violation and filming video clips to threaten the victim, love triangles and using clips to reveal the relationship, and clips that slipped out into other people's hands and are commercially sold.

Video clips have also been used to expand social networks. The research "Creating Identity in Online Picture Albums" analyzed 200 online albums on three websites that are frequently used and have a lot of pictures. There was an interesting finding that because online albums allow people to freely select names, songs, pictures to represent themselves, characters, clothes for characters and backgrounds, it provides an opportunity for owners of the online picture album to reveal their true identity. The pictures that are posted are the good-looking pictures and have been touched up before being included in the online album. Different techniques are used to attract viewers. The album owners usually ask viewers to vote for their album. The scores from the votes measure acceptance from this community and are also used as a tool to create relationships with others, whether finding friends or dates.

The Business of Selling Video Clips is Continuously Growing: There are three main sources that sell video clips. The first source is the websites. It is estimated that there are hundreds of websites in which video clips can be downloaded for free or for a price. The price for the download depends on the type and length of the video clip. The second source is mobile phone shops that sell video clips as an additional service in order to attract customers to install other programs, such as programs to listen to music or watch movies and programs to look at pictures. The price of video clips is around 100 baht for 5 clips. The last source is shops that sell VCDs or CD clips. Each VCD costs around 100-200 baht and has many video clips inside.

Who Watches Video Clips?: The online community has created numerous websites related to the show and exchange of video clips. A part of that exchange has turned into business which has become an important factor contributing to the growth of the video clip market. On the other side, many people have access to the internet and live like in the real world, becoming an online community. They create their own personal space such as online diaries and online photo albums in the online community. What's interesting is that many like to openly display their own sexual lifestyle, as well as, closely follow other people's information.

Camfrog: The Grey Area between Personal Rights and Social Violation

"Camfrog" is the name of a computer program for chatting online. The user can chat as a group and see images at the same time. The Camfrog program was launched 2-3 years ago and was adapted for use in many forms such as videoconferencing and chat rooms sharing the same interests. However, Thai society first heard about Camfrog from newspapers as a form of pornography media or a channel to display obscene sexual behavior. Examples of some news were:

"Teenagers in Khon Kaen love to play Camfrog Live Chat Line which is like a radio station. There is a DJ who does seductive acts and also broadcasts live on the internet. Some teenagers skip school to play. The police don't know who to arrest because it is just a gathering of mentally-disturbed people."

"The owner of an internet shop asked the Ministry of Culture to close down or block the Camfrog program as fast as possible. Camfrog is a program for communication. There are many chat rooms, Thai and international. However, the most popular chat room is the one that has obscene shows pornographic movies, strip shows, seductive dancing and sexual intercourse. In the past 2-3 months, almost a hundred thousand people have become members."

"Shocking news! Thais are the third highest users of Camfrog in the world, after Americans and the Chinese. The President of the Thai Webmaster Association explained the problem and urged the National Legislative Assembly to quickly push through the anti-cybercrime legislation. The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology should shut down the program as fast as possible."

What is "Camfrog?"

Camfrog Video Chat is a program created by Camshare LLC that allows users all over the world to broadcast live streaming audio and video. This popular software is known best for the ability to allow over 1,000 users in a live streaming videoconference room. Camfrog is different from other video chat software because it allows users to host their own video chat rooms using the popular "Camfrog Server" software. At present, there are many Camfrog video chat rooms related to travel, sports, language, culture, online games, and sex.

Camfrog has many chat rooms. The chat rooms are categorized according to the conversation topic, for example, rooms for speaking English, Italian and German, rooms for sign language, rooms for talking about songs, and rooms for ghost stories. However, the most use of Camfrog is for watching and performing sexual acts on the internet. Thais are the third greatest users of Camfrog in the world; some use it watch porn on the internet or to perform obscene acts themselves.

Source : <http://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/camfrog>

The Reaction of Different Groups

Throughout 2006, as well as in 2007, reaction from the government sector towards this high tech form of communication was rather negative and aimed to use government authority to control or eliminate this communication technology which is viewed as a problem. The Ministry of Science and Technology said that it would close down websites that sold pornographic video clips. But the Thai law is unable to promptly deal with the problem. Therefore, parents are advised to use the House Keeper program to block children from viewing inappropriate websites. The anti-cyber crime legislation is being pushed through the National Legislative Assembly in order to solve this problem and will be enacted soon.

The Center for the Protection of Children, Youth and Women, the Royal Thai Police explained that the present law can also be used to punish those who sell or distribute pornographic video clips as they are violating Section 287 of the Thai Penal Code. If the police catches anyone selling or distributing pornographic clips, they can arrest them immediately without a plaintiff filing a report. Therefore, distribution via the website, loading into customers' mobile phones, and forwarding pornographic clips to friends are all illegal. The punishment is imprisonment not exceeding three years or fine not exceeding 6,000 baht, or both. If there is text in the video clip that causes damage to the person in the clip, the punishment will be more.

Blaming the Players Does Not Work: The Law is Out of Date

The Association of Internet Businesses clearly stated that it was against using the Camfrog program for sex shows and condemned internet shops that had the program to serve customers. The Bureau of Technology and Cyber Crime of the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) stated that it would prosecute the group of women who showed their bodies using the Camfrog program. Most of them were businesswomen and company employees. DSI will be the plaintiff in this case as these people have brought damage against the government.

The Ministry of Culture also has the same stance. Director of the Culture Watch Center Ladda Tangsupachai stated that the Center has followed this issue for 2-3 months already as there have been complaints from parents, Child Watch and internet shops. Evidence and information about the service providers and users have already been collected. This case will not be dropped because it occurred in Thailand and was organized by Thais. The server is in Thailand. The police will make the inspection by using Section 287 of the Thai Penal Code that prohibits distribution of obscene pictures to the public. The offenders will be jailed not over three years and fined not over 6,000 baht. However, this punishment is very little, so there are a lot of offenders. There is also the problem of the law being unable to catch up with technology. Mr Poramet Minsiri, Project

Chief of thaicleannet.com, stated that this problem is about technology being state-of-the-art and the government laws and regulations being outdated. However, the anti-cyber crime legislation is being reviewed by the National Legislative Assembly and it is a good time to push this law through with severe punishment.

In relation to this issue, Mr. Siripong Witayaviroj, an expert writer about the internet, wrote about the latest situation concerning Camfrog in Thailand in February 2007. Rooms showing obscene acts have disappeared. Only regular chat rooms remain. If the chat room has users who don't follow the rules, the room monitor will "kick" that person out. The best way to look after the internet community is like any other community, that is, members must regulate it themselves. Government control is unlikely to bring any benefits.

Addressing the Fundamental Causes of Online Dangerous

With regards to the occurrence of the use of technology to find information or express oneself concerning sex, one thing that the government units and the media still need to do more is to support the children and youth in the chat rooms and educate them about the dangers of the pornography business.

This occurrence is about people who live in cyberspace and feel that is full of freedom to express themselves and seek new information, especially with regards to sex which is prohibited in real life society. This occurrence is also about businesses that profit from these people using their freedom of expression. Therefore, reaction that criticizes people in cyberspace as having different sexual behavior from those in real society and trying to regulate cyberlife is a view and reaction that does not completely cover online lifestyle, whether the internet or mobile phones. On the other hand, businesses that drive the expansion often neglect and violate personal rights.

The Safe and Creative Internet Fair 2007 at the Thailand Knowledge Park on February 13, 2007, suggested a roadmap to protect youth from becoming online victims. The roadmap included four strategies: 1) *Eliminate evil*, that is using legal processes to regulate and punish; 2) *Expand good*, that is supporting the use of the internet for creative learning; 3) *Create immunity*, that is create campaigns for children and parents be aware of internet danger; and 4) *Develop processes*, that is funding and network support.

Whether we like it or not, the online world has surrounded the lives of both users and non-users. For people in society, the skill to spend their life online safely and without harming others is essential in this era of technological advancement. For the online community, regulation of online businesses, fair rules and regulations, and control of cyber crime is important, necessary and very urgent.