The Future of the Study on the Internet in Thailand: the Philosophy of the Internet

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Abstract

The paper proposes a new area of study relating to the Internet, called the Philosophy of the Internet. The study enquires into the philosophical basis of the Internet as a medium of global communication. The questions which the study aims to ask, such as why we need the Internet or what the real purpose of its existence is, will help answer the more problematic questions the Thai society is now facing, such as how much freedom we should allow on the Internet, or what the extent of legitimate intervention by the government should be. The discussion urges the Thai society to reflect on the Internet at its most fundamental level and to try to understand the Internet as a social tool which may be used to achieve various aims. It is hoped that once the society is equipped with the true understanding of the philosophical basis of the Internet, it will be able to solve some difficult issues such as the proper usage of the Internet and its future direction.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เสนอแนวทางการศึกษาเกี่ยวกับอินเตอร์เน็ตแนวใหม่ ซึ่งเป็นการศึกษาปรัชญาของอินเตอร์เน็ต จุดประสงค์หลักของการศึกษาปรัชญาของอินเตอร์เน็ตนี้ คือการสร้างความเข้าใจอย่างลึกซึ้ง เกี่ยวกับความเป็นมาของอินเตอร์เน็ต ความจำเป็นของอินเตอร์เน็ตในสังคม และการใช้งานของอินเตอร์เน็ต รวมถึงการนำทฤษฎีทางปรัชญา สังคม การเมือง และกฎหมายมาทำความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับอินเตอร์เน็ต ซึ่งเป็นเครื่องมือสื่อสารอันทรงอานุภาพของสังคม การเข้าใจอินเตอร์เน็ตอย่างลึกซึ้ง จะมีประโยชน์ต่อสังคมเป็นอย่างมาก โดยเฉพาะปัจจุบัน ซึ่งสังคมมีปัญหาเกี่ยวกับการควบคุม และจัดการ การใช้อินเตอร์เน็ต

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When I was asked by a representative from Thailand's Netizens to write a short paper on the direction which the study on the Internet in Thailand should pursue, my thought immediately went to a book I read a while ago, called Netizens.[1] The authors, Michael and Ronda Hauben, were Internet pioneers in the 1990s and they published the book in 1997, when the Internet already became a popular medium of communication in America. Their book discussed the social phenomena caused by this global network of communication, such as the boom of Usenet and newsgroups. It also anticipated the 'future' of the Internet. Of course these discussions are now firmly confided in Internet history books. In the space of just over a decade, Usenet has been superseded by many new inventions. In the virtual world, time passes very quickly and new things become old in a matter of months, if not weeks. Accordingly, the task asked of me to examine how the study on the Internet might proceed in the future is very challenging. What is relevant now may not be relevant in a few years.

With this caveat in mind, the paper proposes an area of study which the author thinks has been rather neglected in Thailand. It is a study into the philosophy of the Internet. This study, in my view, is of major importance in any society, for it asks the society to reflect on the Internet at its most fundamental level. The questions which the study aims to ask, such as why we need the Internet or what the real purpose of its existence is, will help answer the more problematic questions the Thai society is now facing, such as how much freedom we should allow on the Internet, or what the extent of legitimate intervention by the government should be. Without the true understanding of the philosophical basis of the Internet, the society may struggle to determine the limit of its usage and its future direction.

In the following sections, the paper will outline the proposed study and discuss relevant resources which may support the study. The paper is written from the perspective of Anglo-American common law jurisprudence, with which the author is familiar.

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[1] Hauben and Hauben Netizens

The extent of the study

I propose that the study of the Philosophy of the Internet includes the following topics.

i.) *The history of the Internet.* It is of immense significant that students of the subject are aware of how the Internet was developed. For the purpose of philosophical debate, it is vital to recognise that the Internet started its life as a governmental project, funded and controlled by the United States Department of Defence. However, as it grew, it became available to larger groups of people and eventually to the world. It became the mode of communication which resists government censorship. This contradiction raises many interesting questions such as:

a. To what extent does the origin of something have an impact on its future development?

b. Can social forces resist government intention? If so, how?

c. Who, or what, affect or determine a course of development of a technological invention?

ii.) *The Internet as a mass communication tool.* When a technology is accepted by the public as their means of mass communication, it is transformed from a mere technology to a powerful social, cultural and political tool. Consequently, the way in which the society deals with such technology should reflect its characteristics. In the United Kingdom, the special status of traditional mass media such as television has long been recognised. There exists a long-entrenched perception that television is a vital medium in building citizenship, due to its unique feature of 'great power and intimacy…capable of addressing a mass audience in the privacy of their home'.[2] By recognizing this special characteristic of the medium, academics associate broadcasting with concepts such as public entitlement, citizenship, participation, freedom of speech, freedom of information, or the right to privacy. Similar questions should be asked of the Internet and its social, cultural and legal impacts. The questions may include:

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[2] *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC* (Cmnd 9824) Peacock Committee, July 1986, para 1.

a.   How has the Internet shifted various social paradigms?

b.   How may the Internet improve democratic participation?

c.   How may the society seek to balance between the right to free speech and the protection of privacy or individual reputation?

iii.) *The Internet and the law.* This section enquires into how philosophy might bridge the gap between the practicality of the Internet and the legal tools introduced to regulate it. Currently Thailand's virtual sphere is regulated by the Computer-related Crime Act of 2007 and other legal tools such as the Internal Security Act and the Emergency Decree. A philosophical enquiry should embark upon the questions such as:

a.   How may a national government claim the legitimacy in unilaterally asserting its legal rules on the Internet, which is a global medium of communication?

b.   Whether censorship is beneficial or detrimental to the Internet itself, and to the society which uses it?

c.   What is the appropriate boundary of Internet regulation?

d.   How may the international community reconcile conflict of domestic laws which purport to regulate the Internet?

Relevant concepts which should be discussed

To facilitate fruitful discussion of the Internet and its underlying philosophy, the subject should include the study on basic legal, philosophical and political concepts such as democratic participation, citizenship, entitlements, and human rights. Comparison should be made between how the concepts are interpreted and recognised in different legal systems.