Bolstering the Thai OTOP Model for Economic Development with the Social Media

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Abstract - The social media have over the last decade grown exponentially in pervasiveness and influence however their huge potential to contribute to development has not been realized. In this paper, the author investigates the contribution of the social media to two of Thailand’s major development initiatives, namely, the OTOP program and the establishment of a network of telecentres. An array of case studies shows that the social media is not yet used to its full potential.

Keywords - Development, OTOP, Telecentre, Social Media

1. INTRODUCTION

In September 2000, the General Assembly of the United Nations accepted their Millennium Declaration that inter alia made provision for poverty eradication and the protection of the environment [1]. A year later the road map for implementing the Millennium Declaration was formally unveiled. In Thailand a new initiative named “One Tambon, One Product (OTOP)” was launched in 2001. The initiative is based on the highly successful “One Village One Product (OVOP)” project that originated in Japan in 1979 [2]. The main aim of the project was to stimulate the rural economy by creating small economic hubs in each subdistrict (tambon). Each tambon (a municipal subdistrict) proposes one product to be its showcase. The OTOP initiative grew exponentially and a total of 85,173 products have been registered in 2010 [2].

The OTOP initiative was not the only huge success that occurred in Thailand since the turn of the century. The telecentre movement not only gained huge momentum, it was also creatively diversified to empower a large array of disadvantaged groups. This diversification as well as the integration of the OTOP initiative and the telecentre movement will be addressed in the paper. The role of the dominant force in cyberspace, social networking will subsequently be explored.

2. LITERATURE

A. The OTOP Model

The OTOP-model centers around a prominent product or service of the tambon to anchor economic development in that region. Noknoi, Boripunt and Lungtai [3] confirmed that OTOP uses local wisdom and community skills, and aims to support unique locally made products, by utilizing the indigenous skills and craftsmanship of the community combined with available natural resources and raw materials. Six product categories have been identified in the OTOP policy, namely (1) fresh and processed food, (2) alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, (3) clothes and garments made of natural and mixed fibers, (4) ornamental products including hats, scarves, bags and necklaces, (5) decorative and handicraft items produced from Thailand's forest resources, and (6) herbal products made of natural ingredients (Curry & Sura [6]). The success of the OTOP initiative moved government to utilize it as a national brand [3]. A network of OTOP shops has been established spanning all over Thailand from
small rural villages to elaborate product exhibition areas at all the Thai airports.

B. Telecentres

A typical telecentre is described as a place providing "connectivity and access to information via a range of information and communication technologies including phone, fax, computers and the internet" (Bailur [4]). By 2013, there were already 1879 telecentres in Thailand [5]. Most of them offered Internet access to members of the community who do not own a mobile device. At these telecentres disadvantaged members of the community can access the social media as well as the websites that could facilitate their access to economic opportunities.

C. The Social Media

The establishment and growth of virtual social networks such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, and, in general, all kinds of virtual communities, has dominated the ICT domain in the first decade of the new century. A detailed understanding of social networks and virtual communities is essential for interpreting current changes in the economic and business environment. The networking potential promoted by the new innovations, “drives all of society and corporations to work faster, create and manage more interdependencies, and operate on global markets “[7].”

The social media has become the primary communications platform in an economy where the importance of networks, partnerships, and alliances between firms and other agents is paramount.

According to Leerapong and Mardjo [8] the international research consortium, Nielsen announced statistics on the use of the social media in Thailand for 2011. The numbers displayed in an adapted version are depicted in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media</th>
<th>No. of people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>14,235,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi5</td>
<td>2,611,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>720,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linkedin</td>
<td>295,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foursquare</td>
<td>152,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. METHODOLOGY

The researcher strung a number of case studies together. The inclusion of multiple case studies in one research design is supported by Yin [10]. Eisenhardt and Graebner [9] explained that “each case serves as a distinct experiment that stands on its own as an analytic unit.”

The researcher used four of the six recommended sources of evidence that Yin [10] recommend i.e. documentation, interviews, observation, and participant observation. They visited a number of telecentres in Bangkok and Chiang Mai during the period 2010-2013. These telecentres all offered Internet access as well as a training facility. Although some of the telecentres served the general community, a significant number of them were aimed at serving special interests, i.e. the disabled, the aged and the prison population. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with telecentre operators, users and other stakeholders.

A number of OTOP centres were also visited by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers and/or personnel at these centres. Prof Kamolrat Intarat from Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Bangkok, Thailand acted as the interpreter for all these interviews.
The researcher also scanned the social networks and detected a number of relevant locations. The following collection will be discussed in the paper:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>TABLE 2</strong></th>
<th><strong>SOCIAL MEDIA SITES AND POSTINGS EXAMINED</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PLATFORM</strong></td>
<td><strong>SITE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Official fan page of OTOP Thailand (translated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Thailand OTOP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>OTOP Namkin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Telecentre.org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>Telecentre.org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>Thai Tambon Dot Com</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4. FINDINGS

Telecentres linked to OTOP activities have a better chance to become sustainable. Such telecentres don’t function as standalone business entities, therefore, don’t only rely on ICT activities to balance the books. The telecentre theoretically becomes a division of the OTOP business unit and is funded as such. It contributes to the marketing and promotion of the OTOP products that anchor that particular business unit. It also serves as a communication platform from which OTOP participants can access the social media.

Telecentres can play an important role in the empowerment of the disabled communities. The telecentre activities coordinated by the Foundation of Disability Empowerment in Bangkok to support this finding.

Telecentres can also contribute a great deal to add value to the lives of disadvantaged communities. The case studies dealing with the telecentres for the aged as well as the one for female prisoners validate this finding.

Telecentres can be implemented to serve major social responsibility causes. By linking a telecentre to the recycling industry through The Garbage Bank, a major environmental cause is served.

Telecentres can serve as hubs for local development activities. Stakeholder partnerships negotiated within the local context provide solid platforms for addressing local needs and circumstances. The case study in Lee proved that co-ordination of local interests can work to the benefit of all the stakeholders involved.

Volunteerism plays an important role in successful telecentre utilization. Telecentre champions often have daytime jobs. They dedicate their weekends to teach at telecentres. This phenomenon was detected at Kotharam Temple Telecentre on the outskirts of Bangkok.

Telecentres seems to be well-integrated into the framework that is offered by the Telecentre.org community. Furthermore, the strong Twitter support that this community enjoys, provides interactive support that seems to be lacking in the OTOP structures.

The researcher is of the opinion that the Young Entrepreneur Program that was recently launched in North of Thailand and Bangkok has got huge potential to become one of the strong drivers of SME initiatives in Thailand. He found that the course content is ideally suited to serve as a launching pad for young people who want to enter the SME business environment. The mix of technology and business skills that are taught in the curriculum met all the requirements for sensible market entry while the sponsorship from Microsoft bodes well for the expansion of the training program.
The use of the social media needs to be included as an integral part of the course, preferably as a standalone module. The researcher is of the opinion that this program, like the integrated OTOP model, has got the potential to be exported to other developing countries. It also needs to be linked to all available social networks in order to provide interactive involvement.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the viewpoint of Park and Lejano (2013) that successful ICT4D implementation needs a wide range of requirements, and this can be only satisfied through strategic alliances. The high levels of volunteerism as well social cohesion that earmark the Thai culture form the base of many productive strategic alliances. Major stakeholders like government in all spheres, religious institutions and the local communities seem to bond seamlessly into these alliances.

The researcher is of the opinion that the model in which a telecentre is linked to some form of market activity offers a highly sustainable option for economic empowerment of the disadvantaged communities. Although the researcher found little proof that this model has been formalized in the policy domain, it would be in the interest of Thai policymakers and politicians who are responsible for the stimulation of the Thai economy to develop and introduce this telecentre/OTOP model in their framework of development planning. OTOP activities not only relieve the economic burden on the linked telecentre, it also creates the proverbial win/win platform of cooperation. This platform can be vastly strengthened by linking it to the social media. Social platforms like Twitter, Whatsapp, and Facebook can play an important role in the organizational communication processes.

The Young Entrepreneur program, if effectively linked to the social media, and introduced on a national scale, can play an important role in guaranteeing sustainability to the OTOP success story. The youth’s propensity to live close to the social media validates this vision.

REFERENCES

(Arranged in the order of citation in the same fashion as the case of Footnotes.)


