The Price for Using the Internet without Shame: The Internet Cafe as an Infrastructure and 'Bar Girls' in Bangkok

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This paper aims to examine one of the social functions of contemporary media such as personal computers (hereafter referred to as "PCs") and the internet in Bangkok by focusing on internet cafes (hereafter referred to as "ICs"). In general, the IC can be defined as a store which offers PCs and internet access at relatively low cost to anyone, so the IC is the most important infrastructure of PCs and the internet for relatively poor people. In this paper, through my empirical research on ICs in Bangkok, I will discuss that they play a role in maintaining existing social situations and relations by exemplifying the uses of PCs and the internet of 'bar girls' in Bangkok.

Firstly, I will introduce the concentrated areas of ICs in Bangkok according to my field survey. The statistical data provided by National Statistical Office Thailand shows that there were approximately 500 ICs in Bangkok in 2008. In my survey in 2011, the most concentrated area of ICs is Khaosan area (one of the most famous backpacker zones in the world) and the second most concentrated area is around BTS Nana station (one of the most famous nightlife spots in Bangkok). There are 38 ICs in approximately 0.5 km^2 of the central area of Khaosan and the 1.5 km^2 centered around BTS Nana station has 26 ICs. These ICs sometimes double as travel agencies or hostels for foreign travelers and their PCs are low-end, only for viewing webpages, e-mail or social networking service. Their fees are almost exclusively 1 THB per minute, or 10 or 15 THB as the minimum charge. Generally speaking, almost all PCs in ICs have Microsoft Windows XP English version installed.

Secondly, I will explain one of the main customers of ICs in above areas is bar girls by focusing on their extra services. For example, their shop assistants resize and upload pictures to websites, and translate bar girls' 'love letters' to foreign boyfriends which are written in Thai language to send by e-mail. In a shop, it costs 30 THB per mail or 50 to 70 THB per A4-size letter. A similar phenomenon can be seen in the previous medium. In fact, Dave Walker and Richard S. Ehrlich collected handwritten love letters to bar girls from their foreign boyfriends and published them as a book. At the beginning of the book, Walker writes 'as my Thai language skills improved, bar girls would bring me the love letters from their foreign boyfriends to translate' (Ehrich & Walker, 2000: 7).

Finally, I will argue some obstacles for bar girls to use PCs and the internet in ICs such as the problems of language or IT skill and related matters by referring to previous studies on them. And as a conclusion, I will consider the possibility that PCs and the internet play a role in causing social

innovations for bar girls.

Reference

Ehrich, R. S., & Walker D. (2000). Hello My Big Big Honey!, San Francisco, CA: Last Gasp.