

Social media use soars in flood-hit Thailand

By Michelle Fitzpatrick (AFP) – 1 day ago

BANGKOK — Thais struggling to make sense of the kingdom's deadly flood crisis are turning to social media like never before, spurred by confusing official information about the disaster, experts say. From Facebook photos of overflowing canals to tweets warning of snakes on the loose and YouTube videos of what to pack for an evacuation, the Internet is awash with up-to-the-minute details of Thailand's worst floods in decades.

Thais are stepping in to fill a need for real-time, practical information that is not always met by the authorities or traditional media, although social media themselves are often rife with misinformation. The three-month-old disaster, which has claimed more than 440 lives, has been plagued by contradictory statements from local and national officials about areas most at risk and how best to deal with the floodwaters.

"Right now, the government is not meeting the demands of the information that the public is waiting for," said retired Thai academic Somkiat Onwimon, a former senator and news anchor who has more than 68,000 Twitter followers.

"So there are a lot of people who organise their own blogs or use websites like Twitter."

Social media expert Jon Russell, Asia editor of tech website The Next Web, agreed.

"The Internet as a whole has been important during the flood with many news sites recording record traffic and blogs telling individual accounts of escaping from rising water," he said.

But commentators said that, while warnings of dangers lurking in the water or calls to donate blood served a purpose, the incessant flow of unedited, unchecked information risked adding to confusion and further rattling nerves.

"Social media can be as misleading as they are helpful and that has been true at times during the Thai floods," said Russell.

"While it is useful to be able to look up locations and get updates from reporters and civilians on the scene, there is no validation of information and misleading statements can be passed around as fact very easily."

And exchanges on Twitter about the floods have at times descended into mud-slinging between users. Despite the presence of some "unprofessional citizen reporters", the benefits of social media far outweighed the downsides in the circumstances, said Somkiat.

"You have negatives and positives but for the floods the government has not provided good enough information," he said.

Twitter has enjoyed a 20 percent spike in user numbers in Thailand in the past two months, according to McFiva, a digital media agency that holds the advertising rights to the site in Thailand.

The jump from 600,000 users in September to 720,000 in October is directly linked to the floods, said the firm's managing director Supachai Parchariyanon.

"Before the floods happened it is less than five percent growth month-on-month," he told AFP, also noting that #thaiflood was currently the "number one hashtag" in the kingdom.

The #thaiflood keyword has notched up more than half a million hits in the past month, dwarfing the second-most popular hashtag #Ch3, a Thai television station, with just over 82,000 hits over the same period, according to Thai Trend, which analyses tweets in the country.

And as run-off water from northern and central parts of the country slowly closes in on Bangkok, threatening the low-lying city of 12 million, the #bkkflood search term has steadily been climbing the rankings.

Meanwhile, Facebook membership has soared to more than 12 million people -- 18 percent of the population -- from just over seven million at the start of the year according to Socialbakers, which compiles data about the site.

Internet users have also been flocking to video-sharing website YouTube.

Amid criticism that the government has failed to give easy-to-grasp tips on how to prepare for the inundation, a quirky cartoon from independent filmmakers comparing the mass of floodwater to the weight of 50 million blue whales proved a huge hit on the site.

The first instalment of "Roo Su Flood", which translates as "Know, Fight Flood" and gives clear and simple instructions in Thai and English on how to deal with floodwaters, racked up more than 870,000 hits in under two weeks.

Politicians have also ramped up their online presence to try to highlight their efforts to deal with the crisis, with Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and her aides posting daily updates about her trips to flood-hit areas on Facebook.

But Somkiat said social media sites were at their best when they provided detailed, localised content to residents wanting to know how the floods will affect them, such as a picture of the water level in a canal.

"All we want is information about our area and what's to come," he said.