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Another radio is possible: Thai community radio from the grass roots to the global

ABSTRACT

Access to the radio spectrum most often has become tightly controlled by nation-states and military bodies around the world, available to citizens only under stringent licensing and leasing frameworks. This article examines one aspect of the growing global community radio movement which makes an alternative ownership claim on this resource. Taking place at a small-scale grass-roots level, this movement is nevertheless worthy of attention from media scholars. By considering the example of community radio development in Thailand, we can see this movement represents a new communications paradigm in formation, one that fundamentally alters the manner in which the broadcast frequency spectrum is monopolized by state and commercial interests and, consequently, the manner in which people will allow themselves to be governed, as radio becomes a vehicle for marginalized communities to stake a claim in territory heretofore unquestionably ruled by the centre.

KEYWORDS

community radio
Thailand
media reform
social change
civil society

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS COMMUNITY RADIO AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

Physically, community radio typically operates via low-power transmitters, often on FM bands ranging from 5 or 10 W up to 1000 W. The broadcasting equipment may be housed in a radio station, a person's home or even

a specially designed suitcase. Philosophically and structurally, it is volunteer-directed, and takes on a wide variety of social aims according to the collective goals of the participants. The sector's global networking body, the Association Mondiale des Radiodiffuseurs Communautaires/World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), provides the following general definition as part of its membership criteria:

> A community radio station is a station that responds to the needs of the community, which it serves and contributes to its development in a progressive manner by promoting social change. It promotes the democratisation of communication by facilitating community participation in communication. This participation may vary according to the context in which the radio operates.
>
> (AMARC, www.amarc.org, under 'Becoming a Member')

There is no precise global headcount of community radio stations; if there were, it would doubtless change on a daily basis. Since AMARC was formed 25 years ago, its membership has risen from a handful of radio enthusiasts to more than 3000 member stations in 118 countries, with regional coordinating networks responsible for Africa, Asia-Pacific and Latin America, as well as an active presence in North America (AMARC 2007: 5; AMARC n.d. 'What Is AMARC?'; AMARC, *Montreal Declaration* 2008b). However, it is safe to say there are many more stations than there are AMARC members; Indonesia alone had an estimated 3000 community radio stations in 2005 (Sanyoto 2005: 3). Where community radio flowers, the bloom is often rapid and unruly. In Thailand, for example, community radio began with a single station in 2001; within one year there were more than 100 stations on air (Ubonrat 2005: 62). In 2004, Thai governmental and non-governmental estimates placed the number of stations at 2000. By 2005, the number most frequently reported in the press was in the 3000 range (Macan-Markar 2006). In 2009, the Royal Thai Army estimated there were 5000 stations (Komsan 2009), while the Prime Minister's Office placed the number at 7000 (IFEX 2009).

Given the significant numbers being reported, clearly community radio is a phenomenon worth the close attention of media scholars and communications planners. But, as with all grass-roots media activities, it is more than numbers that tell the tale of community radio, its meanings and its impacts. Looking at the example of Thailand, this article will provide a concrete example of the political, regulatory and social issues that have accompanied sudden – and at times unforeseen – community radio emergence within heretofore highly controlled radio environments. The specific case of migrant-worker radio will illustrate community radio's contribution to precipitating communications at the margins of society, and the new dialogues and tensions this activity engenders. Finally, I will explore how community radio practitioners view themselves as participants in a global social movement concerned with the democratization of communications and, consequently, the fundamental change of existing power structures. This stands in contrast to the view of international donor agencies, which tend to regard community radio endeavours as rather quaint rural extension projects to be harnessed for the dissemination of development education. I will argue that support for community radio is not the same as digging a well or promoting an immunization campaign. Rather, community radio must be understood and

defended as a change agent with the potential to engender political and social tensions.

RADIO AS DIALOGUE: A FRAMEWORK FOR GETTING TO KNOW COMMUNITY RADIO

Some of the ideas about community radio hearken back to the imaginings of Bertolt Brecht, who wrote in 1932:

> The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him.
>
> (Brecht 1932: 1)

The potential of radio was revolutionary, Brecht suggested, in that signals could be both given and received, opening the door to 'change the apparatus over from distribution to communication' (1). Admitting this was a utopian idea, he acknowledged the world is ruled by 'vast institutions' that 'cannot do all they "could," and not even all they want' (Brecht 1932: 1). Rather than trying to convince these monoliths to practise radio in a new way, he recommended 'resistance by the listener', who should simply seize the technological possibility and start talking back (1932: 1).

To all appearances, however, radio remained a tough monolith to crack, a closely guarded, heavily regulated tool of dictators, national governments and media industrialists. As part of a radio research project of the late 1930s, Theodor Adorno posited that the technology itself allowed no other outcome:

> When a private person in a private room is subjected to a public utility mediated by a loudspeaker, his response takes on aspects of a response to an authoritarian voice even if the content of that voice or the speaker to whom the individual is listening has no authoritarian features whatsoever.
>
> (Adorno 2006: 113)

While Adorno dismissed attempts to include audience participation as a disingenuous manipulation of untalented amateurs, a small core of radio amateurs in Latin America held to Brecht's contrasting 'utopian' vision of participatory radio. Believing that radio held, by virtue of its ability to both send and receive signals, a democratic potential, these early activists began mapping out a new approach that invited the audience to take over the microphones. In 1948, Bolivian tin miners established Radio Sucres in the mining town of Cancaniri and Radio Nuevos Horizontes in the southern city of Tupiza (Buckley 2000: 182). Supported by union dues and worker-controlled, the radio stations represented 'an extension of literally centuries of struggle by workers against the exploitative oligarchy' (Huezca 1995: 151). Thus a community radio model emerged that was ideally audience-controlled, autonomous and concerned with challenging power. As Brecht had suggested, grass-roots radio operators advanced this new radio paradigm simply by seizing the technology and using it differently.

Although the earliest community radio predated Paulo Freire's published works, later Latin American practitioners easily adopted his ideas of 'Dialogue' and 'Cultural Action for Freedom', making works such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Education as the Practice of Freedom* central to community radio discourse (Freire 1976: 134–35; 1972: 78). This vision remained consistent as community radio began to expand globally, riding the crest of late-twentieth-century trends that included liberalization of the airwaves, increased access to cheap radio components, a supportive 'communication for development' movement among international development agencies, rising indigenous and ethnic narratives, the global progression of civil society and the emergence of new transnational social movements.

Today, some seven decades after Brecht's observations, grass-roots radio operators are in the process of taking an ageing technology and turning it upside down, changing it over from an instrument of broadcast to an instrument of communication. This much has not changed, however: for the most part, radio remains a heavily controlled field; its riches still lie with the state, which imposes regulatory regimes designed to protect state and commercial broadcasting. Yet, as Brecht predicted, the very act of innovating a new form of radio on a small scale in multiple locations is forcing regulatory debate and change in almost every corner of the world, most recently including Thailand.

THAI COMMUNITY RADIO, MEDIA REFORM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

In the opening decade of the twenty-first century, Thailand, like several of its Southeast Asian neighbours, became home to a rapidly flourishing community radio sector. The idea that citizens might seize the airwaves and begin broadcasting without permission was a development the state failed to anticipate, as it moved to liberalize media under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (Elliott 2007: 40–42). The arrival of unfettered voices from the margins of society via community radio was deeply unsettling to Thai officialdom, containing a challenge to the official script of what it means to be Thai *(khwan pen thai).*

Since radio's advent in Thailand in the 1930s, broadcasting has been closely tied to the formation of a modern national identity, based on central Thai lowlands culture and language, and on a discourse of modernization and industrial development (Thailand Public Relations Department 2007). In law, the broadcast frequency spectrum was made the property of the state, with access to frequencies enforced under the Post and Telegraph Act (1940). In 1955, the Radio and Television Act clarified that actual ownership of radio and television stations was the exclusive privilege of the Public Relations Department (PRD) and the Ministry of Defence, which in turn assigned ownership to various divisions of the Royal Thai Army (Ubonrat 1994: 105). Later, the Mass Communications Organization of Thailand (MCOT), an agency under the Prime Minister's Office, was added to the list (Lucksana 2004: 81). Effectively, the system operated as a dual monopoly, with the army and government radio stations at times battling one another and at times working in concert, depending on the politics of the day. The army turned its piece of the airwaves into a highly lucrative business, leasing broadcast concessions and airtime to private interests (Elliott 2007: 41). Under this system, 524 AM and FM radio stations enjoyed legal sanction in 2006 (United States. Department of State 2006: 13). The result was radio that looked and sounded free – delivering a heavy diet of pop music

and consumerism – but was not free, because the government and the army held the keys to the studios.

This broadcast landscape was openly challenged for the first time in December 2001, when Wittayu Siang Chumchon/Radio Community Voice took to the air in December 2001 (Lucksana 2004: 214). Using a 10 W transmitter situated in an orchard, the station reached an estimated 20,000–40,000 villagers in Kanchanaburi province (Gonzalez 2002: 3; Uajit, interview, 2004). Its founders had become socially active during protests against a Thai-Burma gas pipeline; they perceived radio had great potential to give voice to this and other local concerns. Echoing the early ideas of Brecht, radio host Boonsang Jansongratsamee explained: 'This station is about two-way communication and listener participation. We remind people about their rights to access the media and encourage them to make use of the airwaves' (cited by Gonzalez 2002: 3).

Station volunteers were responding to a new opening in the regulatory regime. Media reform had vaulted to the forefront of public discourse about democratization after Thailand's army-controlled broadcast media refused to report on the violent oppression of mass pro-democracy street demonstrations in May 1992 (Eng 1998: 28; McCargo 2000: 13; Ubonrat 1994: 102). This incident – known as Black May – led to the army's brief retreat from the public sphere. In 1997, a civilian government drafted a new constitution – popularly referred to as 'The People's Constitution' – that set forth protection of the media from censorship (Thailand 1997, Article 39), as well as recognition of 'liberty of communication' as an expressly stated right (Article 37). Further, Article 40 contained what would become a watershed statement: 'Transmission frequencies for radio or television broadcasting and radio telecommunication are national communication resources for public interest.' The article promised 'an independent regulatory body having the duty to distribute the frequencies under paragraph one and supervise radio or television broadcasting and telecommunication businesses as provided by law'. No longer would access to the airwaves be doled out by a closed cabal of generals and government officials. Yet this prospect did not sit well with all sectors of Thai society. In 1999, General Kasemsak Pluksawad expressed the army's position clearly: 'In the past, the government allocated the frequencies for us. But now we are being pushed out. We were given the land deeds and they would be taken back for resale. This is dangerous for us . . .' (cited by Ubonrat 1999: 7).

Meanwhile, civil society organizations took heart in the proposed changes. Encouraged by the constitutional promise, a new advocacy group called the Campaign for Popular Media Reform (CPMR) went into high gear, pushing for concrete measures to uphold Article 40. The campaign's goal was summarized by CPMR Secretary-General Supinya Klangnarong: 'We are asking for freedom of speech and freedom of expression; also we are fighting for space in the media [for a] voice of the voiceless' (Supinya, interview, 2004).

Passed by the Parliament in 2000, The Organization of Frequency Wave Allocation and Supervision of Radio Broadcasting, Television and Telecommunications Enterprises Act contained a significant nod to CPMR's work. The act stated the National Broadcasting Commission should set about allocating frequencies, with 20 per cent of frequencies expressly allocated to public access radio and television (Supinya, interview, 2004). An interim Frequencies Allocation Committee was created to appoint members to the commission. Encouraged, media activists and community organizers began informing Thai citizens – particularly in rural and marginalized communities – about their right to the airwaves under Article 40. This forward-looking and, in hindsight, rather

innocent education campaign led to an explosion in community radio, in turn leading to direct conflict with powerful interests that saw little reason to give up their iron grip on the airwaves, despite promises made on paper.

With a modest amount of encouragement and very little direct financial support, more than 100 community radio stations were on the air within two years of Article 40's proclamation (Ubonrat 2005: 62). Although the law allowed only the state to own and sell transmission equipment, it was easy to find the necessary parts in Thailand's grey markets. If the equipment could not be cobbled together in rural areas, it could be found in Bangkok's Klong Thom market, a centre for pirated electronics (Supinya, interview, 2004). Typically, community donations and labour were the main ingredients in creating a station: if a new building were needed, villagers came forward to clear land and provide wood (Uajit, interview, 2004). Thus farmhouses became broadcast studios. Temple grounds were another popular site for radio stations, because their hilltop locations provided greater broadcast coverage of the surrounding area. Buddhist clergy welcomed the community stations and participated in broadcasts. Ethnic languages and agendas never previously heard on the air found a voice. Although the reliance on donations and volunteer labour made staying on the air a constant struggle, it ensured authentic roots in the community. Wichien Kuttawat, a volunteer at Wat Praesen Community Radio and a coordinator of the National Community Radio Network, described the relationship to the community with a simple equation: if the community supports the radio station, it will exist; if the community does not support the station, it will not exist (Kuttawat, interview, 2004). One of community radio's most distinctive features was, and continues to be, its emphasis on two-way on-air communication, through open line shows in which people not only shared important community information but at times also spoke out against local authorities. Also important was its multilingual, multi-ethnic challenge to the officialdom's more centralized concept of national identity, modernization and national development.

Emanating almost exclusively from rural villages and marginalized communities, tiny, volunteer-run, low-power FM stations put flesh to the bones of a media reform movement that heretofore had been defined primarily by urban academics and professional journalists. Rural participants responded to Article 40 with a vigour that surprised not only government authorities but even the reformers themselves. Few anticipated how quickly the promised reforms – not yet fully realized in law – would translate into grass-roots citizen journalists taking radio into their own hands and challenging the powers that be. From this point forward, the agenda was set and pushed to its limit by ordinary people living 'outside the gaze and powerful control of the centre' (Ubonrat 2005: 62).

Despite the constitutional promise of 1997, the Thai Army and its commercial broadcaster clients were able to stall implementation of a new broadcast regulatory framework, a tactic that ensured community radio remained illegal under the 1955 Radio and Television Act. In February 2002, the Public Relations Department sent out its first cease and desist letter. Wichien Kuttawat recalls: 'When community radio in Kanchanaburi went on the air, there was a warning letter. And we said that we were not illegal. We are unregistered, but we are not illegal' (Wichien, interview, 2004). What followed was a struggle that continues to this day. In September 2006, the 'People's Constitution' was abrogated, and in June 2008 the 20 per cent guarantee of public access was excised in a redrafted broadcast bill (AMARC 2008a). Significantly, the aspects that have attracted the most backlash from authorities are the practice of two-way

conversation on the air – banned immediately after the 2006 coup – and ethnic language broadcasting.

MIGRANT WORKER RADIO: VOICES FROM THE 'OTHER' THAILAND

In 2004, I met with Shan and Karen migrant workers from Burma who had become involved in community radio in northern Thailand at the same moment that a crucial divergence was opening up between state-controlled and community radio. This moment in time was reflected in their experience; many were simultaneously involved in state and grass-roots radio, and were thus able to reflect critically on the different broadcast paradigms from the perspective of highly marginalized ethnic/migrant communities. The radio volunteers included three women and four men of Karen ethnicity, and two women and two men of Shan ethnicity.[1]

The workers had begun their involvement with radio through ethnic language programmes aired on the state-run Radio Thailand. At the time, the Thai government's response to public pressure for more diverse voices on the airwaves had been to expand existing ethnic language programmes into a state-managed version of 'community radio' that invited community participation but not control. Broadcast slots ranging from one hour to fifteen minutes were set aside daily on Radio Thailand for ethnic representatives to address prescribed topics such as HIV-AIDS education. The Migrant Assistance Programme (MAP), a Chiang Mai-based NGO concerned with the conditions of migrant workers from Burma, began creating pre-recorded Shan language programmes for Radio Thailand in 1996, adding on Karen, Akha and Lahu as resources allowed (Manning 2003; Informant 1, interview, 2004). The project began with two cassette recorders, a microphone and four unpaid volunteers who took a one-day training session with Radio Thailand professionals. In addition to expertise, Radio Thailand offered a strong AM signal and a vast broadcast radius, reaching throughout northern Thailand, and across the border into Burma's Shan and Karen states. However, Radio Thailand only allowed certain topics to be addressed – focusing primarily on aspects of health care and crime prevention – a list that narrowed as time passed. In addition, to protect Thai-Burma relations, all material had to be addressed as if the sole audience were Thai ethnic peoples, not migrants or people still inside Burma. Thus the programme hosts could never clearly state their prime concern: the rights and conditions of migrant workers from Burma.

The first link to Thailand's emerging community radio sector occurred in 2001, when a Shan volunteer (Informant 10) joined the Northern Community Radio Network. Although Informant 10 had no station to operate, he recognized the potential of community radio as an on-air voice for migrants, and independently took a two-week training course jointly sponsored by the US Embassy and the Campaign for Popular Media Reform in July 2003 (US Embassy interview, 2004; US Embassy in Thailand, 2003). After the workshop, he contacted a Thai-run station, Voice of the Community FM 99, to find out if they would consider inviting migrants on air (US Embassy interview, 2004). The response from FM 99's volunteer committee was unexpected: migrant workers could begin broadcasting right away; live airtime slots of one to two hours were available for community groups that could demonstrate they represented a particular constituency, such as students or the disabled. After years of being restricted to ten to fifteen minutes a week pre-recorded on tightly prescribed topics, the offer was overwhelming (Informant 10, interview, 2004).

1 Due to the current security situation in Thailand, names have been withheld by mutual agreement, interview details have been removed from the reference list and some information has been omitted in consultation with the participants.

On 27 February 2004, the Shan radio programme *Saeng Tham Hang Mai/Strong Voice, New Energy* took to the airwaves for the first time. Within weeks, the programme hosts were inundated with appreciative letters (Amporn 2006). The programme was especially valued by some of the community's most isolated members:

> Most of the audience are domestic workers because they work at home . . . also, people who are in prison. They say all the Shan prisoners in Mae Rim run to the roof because they can get a better signal. All the Shan, they call each other to go up there to listen to the radio. They are longing to listen to a programme like this.
>
> (Informant 9, interview, 2004)

Informant 9 and other volunteers stressed the connection was deeper than language. Audience approval had more to do with the style of radio on offer: communication, as opposed to mere information. The programme provided an opportunity for a previously silent community not only to listen but to tell, via letters, live on-air phone calls and topic suggestions. 'The radio programme is actually to give the power to the people. The people are the radio station. The radio station belongs to the community. We are them and they feel like they are us,' explained one radio host (Informant 9, interview, 2004).

The diversity of topics and questions that came forth from the community immediately set the broadcasts apart from the Radio Thailand spots. While the state identified prevention of disease and drug use as the priorities for Shan broadcast, the migrants' concerns were much broader and more connected to the reality of their daily lives, ranging from unfair workplace practices to how to cope with the relatively chilly Chiang Mai weather (Informant 10, interview, 2002). The breadth of topics was liberating for the programme hosts, who were finally able to openly address issues that greatly impacted migrants' lives.

Despite the air of freedom, the radio volunteers understood FM 99's uncertain legal status, the unsettled nature of Thai politics and their own precarious situation as migrants on temporary residence permits. In an unwritten agreement with the audience, direct criticism of the host country's policies was avoided. Also, hosts provided running Thai translation of their programmes, to avoid accusations of fomenting rebellion in an unknown language. Yet, despite these precautions, it was unavoidable that FM 99 – and by default migrant-worker radio – should be swept into Thailand's wider political struggles, including the battle for control of the airwaves.

THE BACKLASH: COMMUNITY RADIO AT THE CROSSROADS

In September 2006, the growth of Thailand's community radio sector was cooled considerably by a military coup. Within days of the coup, the new military government ordered 300 stations off the air in northern Thailand, including FM 99. In the first week of November 2006, the station resumed broadcast, but now operated within an even more constrained political atmosphere. A nationwide ban on call-in shows was enacted and all community radio stations were put on notice that the 1997 constitution was abrogated and, consequently, Article 40's guarantee of public access to the airwaves was rescinded (*Manila Times* 2006). All stations still on air were ordered to broadcast military-prepared news three times a day and the national anthem twice a day, and to translate

and submit all non-Thai content to the Public Relations Department (Crispin 2007). At the same time, Thailand's provincial governments – including Chiang Mai – began drafting decrees to restrict movement and communication among migrants, including the use of mobile phones and motorcycles (Sai Silip 2007). In light of these actions, an expansion of community radio activity is unlikely in the near future. However, the seed of a new type of communication has been planted – not only in Thailand but also in Burma:

> In the future, if we have democracy in our own country, we want to have a community radio station so we can talk about our own issues on our own station. Maybe when we go back there, it will be easier. We won't need to train.
>
> (Informant 3, interview, 2004)

It is worth noting that, despite the restrictive environment, community radio remains a popular communications option for migrant workers. In 2008, MAP began broadcasting from its own community radio station on the 99 frequency, and ceased contributing to the official AM station. By 2009 they had expanded their operations to Phang Nga in southern Thailand and Mae Sot on the Thai-Burma border, and in January 2010 MAP opened its own community radio station in Mae Sot at FM 102.5 MHz (Sei Sei 2010). Clearly there remains a sense that community radio has great potential, even in the face of sporadic official pushback.

Today, as Thailand continues to waver between democracy and military control, and between competing definitions of what it means to be Thai, community radio remains a point of contention. In June 2009, a formal registration process began, requiring all community radios to step forward and register or face legal sanctions (Komsan 2009). The state imagines a system of controlled content and far fewer stations; however, there is still no regulatory body to oversee the sector (Sennit 2009). Despite these setbacks and stresses, communications scholar Ubonrat Siriyuvasek points out that the small radio stations have revealed possibilities and alternative voices that, once presented, cannot be denied in the long run: 'It makes everyone aware that change is on the way' (Ubonrat interview, December 2004). This sentiment is echoed by CPMR's Supinya Klangnarong:

> What we successfully did was that we changed the paradigm . . . of the thinking of people in Thailand. We could challenge the authorities that now the airwaves don't belong to you anymore. They belong to the people.
>
> (Supinya interview, December 2004)

COMMUNITY RADIO'S GLOBAL PROJECT

The army's swift move to control community radio prompted the *Bangkok Post* to note that 'community radios are now seen as a significant threat to the [junta's] authority' (cited by Macan-Markar 2006). If this is so, it raises an important question: why should Thailand's power centre feel threatened by scattered, mostly rural, community radio projects? On the surface, low-power FM radio seemed an outmoded, geographically limited technology subject to heavy government control. Its key participants included some of the country's

most powerless citizens – farmers, slum dwellers, minorities, children, women and migrants. Yet, obviously, it had power to deeply unsettle the dominant discourse.

As the Thailand example illustrates, radio's migration from a closed system to the open commons brings new voices to the air, providing a site where the centripetal forces of state-sponsored culture and language collide with the centrifugal forces of local, ethnic and class culture. In recent decades, this dimension has been recognized, articulated and theorized by community radio and alternative media networks like AMARC, which states: 'One of the strengths of community radios is their *horizontality* and *diversity*, which shows they are built from the bottom up, thus reflecting a network of multiple languages and the expression of differences' (AMARC 2007: 22; this author's emphasis).

In the past two decades, AMARC's network has steadily expanded, taking on the dimension of a decentralized transnational coalition, mirroring developments in other sectors of global civil society. During this time, the organization evolved from a few people sharing technical information into a global movement deeply concerned with the democratization of communication, and networked with like-minded civil society organizations and social movements. This evolution is illustrated in international charters and statements developed by AMARC activists. On 26 February 2003, an International Charter of Community Radio was ratified in Kathmandu, Nepal. The charter marked a significant expansion of community radio concerns, broadening the field of discussion to all media forms, and to communication as a universal human right. Signatories from around the world pledged to 'exercise the human right to communication and facilitate the full and equal access of all social sectors to radio and television, and other media, including new information and communication technologies (ICTs)' (AMARC 2003).

This evolution has kept pace with similar theoretical developments in other social movement and communication rights fora, such as the World Social Forum, the Platform for Democratic Communication, the People's Communication Charter and the Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) campaign. Thus, through a combination of local practice and globally networked activism, thousands of grass-roots media producers around the globe have arrived at certain key concepts, which at their simplest level are

1. that communication is the source of human existence;
2. that communication is therefore an inherent social right;
3. that this right is best achieved by seizing opportunities to communicate at the local level, forcing national and multilateral bodies to respond.

The third point takes the 'declaration' of a right into the realm of the 'exercise' of a right, moving theory into action. It is here that community radio generates political conflict and creates momentum towards media reform and, ultimately, political and social reform.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE GRASS ROOTS: AN EXPANDED VIEW OF MEDIA POWER

Although today's community radio is practised in many ways, in many different locations and with many different goals, it remains intrinsically linked to what

Kac identifies as 'the political dimension of dialogism' (1999: 5). This dimension arises from the fact that the simple act of speaking dialogically contains within it a critique of those who speak monologically (Kac 1999: 5). Thus grass-roots community radio producers who would not identify their aims as political – perhaps joining community radio as cooking show hosts or music deejays, for example – often find themselves drawn into wider struggles connected to the right to communicate and to express one's identity.

Downing notes that, more than 30 years ago, C. B. Macpherson presented us with the idea that the public has 'capacities' to create viable social arrangements, but he further notes that Macpherson tempered this with the statement that 'the public's ability to activate them is widely shackled' (Downing 2001: 43). Today these shackles are being thrown off around the world, in places such as Thailand and, in the long view, even in highly repressive states like Burma. Our inability to clearly see these movements in action arises from theoretical frameworks of media power – such as those articulated by Horkheimer, Adorno and Foucault – that tend to deny agency to ordinary people as meaningful media producers. Additionally, in recent years, many of the most prevalent academic discussions of media power have occurred within a burgeoning cultural studies field. Here the heavy focus on virtuality and cyber-reality (Everett and Caldwell 2003; Hayles 1999), the privileging of visual images over spoken-word culture (Mirzoeff 1998), the obsession with spectatorship and celebrity (Marshall 1997; Rogoff 1998) and the question of reality versus hyper-reality (Baudrillard 2002) are valuable for understanding some aspects of the Western media culture. However, these lines of inquiry are in danger of leaving behind the vast majority of the world's poor and stateless, the very people who produce some of the world's most diverse, culturally rich and influential media. This is a significant oversight: if one follows the trajectory of global population growth and economic trends, the possibility arises that the cultures arising from slums, barrios and refugee camps are poised to become the dominant cultures of the world.

This calls for a much deeper examination of the media of the poor, which has been steadily developing along a more nuanced trajectory than communications planners have thus far understood or anticipated. As White observes:

> It is these [civil society] groups which are increasingly pushing the communications agenda beyond efforts of governmental bureaucracies and the scientific-rational approach of the North Atlantic nations, bringing in humanism, religion and deeper philosophical dimensions.
>
> (1993: 24)

On the fringes of official forums like the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS 2003) and in their daily activities, grass-roots media practitioners gather, debate, develop and articulate an understanding of media not as a commodity or a technology, but as an extension of collective social goals and an agent of social change. Through this process, media is transformed from the realm of hard technology – where a privileged few hold the greater power – into the realm of human interaction, where grass-roots communications networks ultimately hold the greater power.

Thus a stroll through Bangkok's Klong Thom electronics market unveils a wider picture of who creates and disseminates media products. The matter of

'who' is highly important. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the 'who' is comprised of dictators and capitalists, a view reinforced by the complementary works of Marx and Gramsci. Drawing on the latter, communications rights theorist Aliaa I. Dakroury presents a media landscape divided into two camps: great powers who own the media, and individuals who do not. This, in turn, leads one to ask if 'these individuals, with their lack of resources, are in any way able to confront the giant powers of the world' (Dakroury 2004: 47). From a communication rights perspective, this problem may at times seem insurmountable indeed.

Looking at the example of community radio, however, I would argue that the people are not under-resourced when it comes to communicating with each other. In fact, in many ways they are better resourced than the captains of media industry. This is particularly evident in recent decades, which have witnessed the rapid dissemination of basic communication tools into a widening array of hands and, accordingly, into a widening field of unforeseen uses, actors and ends. People have proven themselves highly adaptive and creative when it comes to building communications networks, seizing on whatever technology is close to hand. Pulling back the curtain to reveal media 'ownership' in its full variety opens up the possibility that communications power is ultimately situated along much broader, deeper networks than the space occupied by seemingly all-powerful vertical structures. This is well illustrated by examples like Indonesia, where Suharto's iron control over the country's mass media ultimately could not compete with small-scale media, in the form of photocopied emails, deployed among traditional grass-roots communications networks (Lim 2003: 273–88). It is also illustrated by the case of Thailand, where a sudden explosion of community radio development clearly caught the state off-guard and helped lead the country to a crisis point over the matter of media freedom. One might conclude from these and myriad similar examples that people's media is not so much under-resourced as it is overlooked. In other words, yes, individuals are more than able to 'confront the giant powers of the world'. They have done so throughout history and are doing so today.

This is an important perspective to bear in mind for those who would support community radio development. By engaging in participatory, dialogic communication, and by speaking from the heart of marginalized, culturally diverse communities, community radio's very existence is a challenge to forces of state control. Its practice inevitably involves the presentation of voices that are alternative and/or oppositional to the status quo, which may at times include opposition to national development objectives. Therefore government bodies that set out to encourage community radio must at the same time be prepared to accept challenges without engaging in reactive oppression and censorship, while development agencies must be prepared not only to assist community radio materially but also to defend community radio and its practitioners socially and politically.

As the Thai example demonstrates, community radio is more than an interesting use of a quaint technology. It is a process of social change centred around the question of whether or not the airwaves can be claimed as free public space. For those who are attentive, the ongoing struggles of community radio around the globe offer an opportunity to see a new communications paradigm in formation. At its most basic level, community radio has played a crucial role in the evolution of Thailand's public discourse on media and society. Beyond this level, the emergence of tiny community radio stations in Thailand is part of a global phenomenon with lasting consequences for the manner

in which radio frequencies are claimed, monopolized and commercialized by states. This phenomenon also holds consequences for the manner in which people allow themselves to be governed, as oppressed communities become more empowered, assertive and networked through community radio. In this manner, community radio occupies a space beyond the mediascape as part of the rich fabric of human experience, offering a framework of empowerment and agency that fundamentally challenges the bleakly dehumanized landscapes of dominant media discourse.

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Note: Thai names are referenced as they are commonly used in Thailand, employing the given (first) name as opposed to family (last) name as the main identifier of an individual. For example, Ubonrat Sirayuvasek is identified and alphabetized under the name 'Ubonrat'.

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