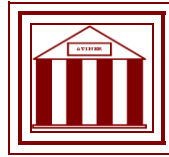


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MED2014-1025

**The Role of Alternative Media in
Strengthening, Preserving, and
Promoting Identity and Culture:
A Case Study in Eastern Thailand**

**Pisapat Youkongpun
Student Researcher
Griffith University
Australia**

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Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr
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**The Role of Alternative Media in Strengthening,
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Abstract

Arguably, the mainstream media experiences definitely in dealing with the issues relating ethnic groups in every part of the world. Thailand is no exception. Exploring the role and the use of alternative media produced by local people in eastern Thailand will help to reinforce the idea that alternative media have provided a much more effective communication channels for local people. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate and analyse the role of alternative media in information distribution in the Riverside community, Chanthaburi province, Eastern Thailand. Recently, this strong community has been identified as a cultural tourism destination. The community has started to produce its own media, and to use social networks to promote itself and its attractions to the nation. This project advances knowledge of the role of alternative media in a community environment in the Thai public sphere. Furthermore, it strengthens knowledge of the role of alternative media in its broadest sense as an important form of cultural production. By using ethnographic action research as a methodology, this research gains strength through a rich understanding of the community by following an ongoing research cycle of planning, doing, observing and reflecting. Beyond that, this study reflects the idea of 'hyperlocal' media. With approximately a hundred households on which to focus, it is much easier for hyperlocal media to reach and attract local people by providing local news, covering local politics and engaging local people in the affairs relevant to their area. As a result, the findings of this thesis will reinforce the idea that 'hyperlocal' communication has played a much more proactive role in the community context.

Keywords: Alternative media, hyperlocal and community

Introduction

This research will focus on the idea of multiple public spheres where locals have the ability to intensify their participation by creating alternative spaces in which they are able to speak in their own voices and express their cultures and identities using their own idioms and styles (Fraser, 1990). The Riverside community is one local community in Thailand which produces its own media to serve the community members' needs, especially that of cultural preservation which is critical for the local tourism industry. It is essential to know how media discursive activities can unite and strengthen members from culturally diverse backgrounds in this community, specifically Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese. With more than a hundred households in the community, each local communication medium, in other words, each alternative media plays a significant role in creating, sustaining and promoting a strong community. Through the age of digital technology, 'hyperlocal' or 'space of community' matters on the internet have been much more influential towards the local community sector in every part of South-East Asian countries, including Thailand.

Methodology

I have adopted a case study approach in this project in order to observe the media activities in a community. I have chosen this approach because it is a unit of human activity in the real world (Bill, 2010). I will use a small and single case study of the community, centered on the small Riverside community — a popular cultural tourism destination — in Chanthaburi province in eastern Thailand. This community is about 300 years old. There are approximately one hundred households in the community. Historically, it was a trading point. Thais normally farmed the land while the Chinese and Vietnamese inhabitants were traders and merchants. This is why nowadays, people can see a multicultural mix of Thais, Chinese and Vietnamese in the community. In 2009, the community was chosen by Chanthaburi's Office of Commerce to be a new cultural tourism destination in Thailand. As a result, community members have started producing their own media to promote their community and themselves to the nation.

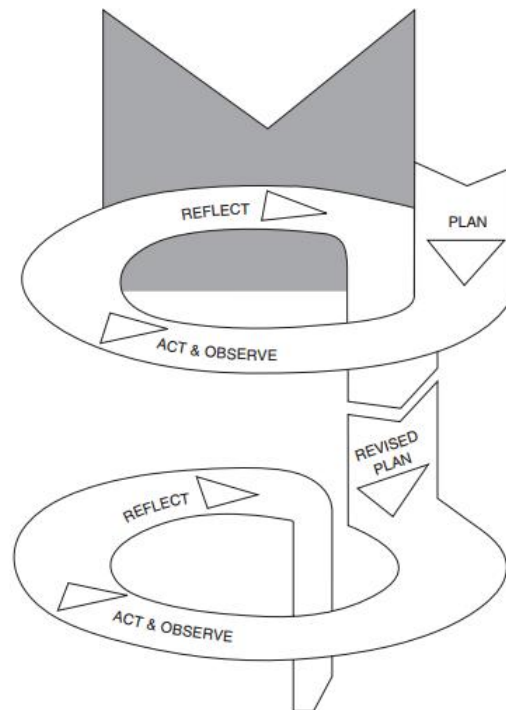
A key element of my methodology is ethnographic action research or EAR. It was designed to discover the benefits of ethnography in the development of a transferable methodology for monitoring and analyzing media and communication for development initiatives (Tacchi et al., 2009). In order to understand the nature of this research plan, I will examine the two key components of this research tool: ethnography and action research.

Ethnography is a scientific approach to discovering social and cultural patterns and meaning in communities, institutions, and other social settings (Schensul et al., 1999). Ethnography is designed to document the culture, the perspectives and practices of the people in these settings. The aim is to analyze

how each group of people sees the world (Reeves et al 2008). Tacchi et al. (2003) also state that ethnography is based on long-term engagement with the field of study which the researchers can truly understand and analyze the subject of the study.

Ethnography can be fit with action research because it is the way to understand the particular community and the project work simultaneously. Action research, or sometimes called participatory action research, is used to improve practices, and it involves action, evaluation, critical reflection which is based on the gathered evidence, and changes in practice (Koshy et al., 2011). As Streubert and Carpenter (2002) assert, this type of qualitative research is to seek action to improve practice and to study the effects of the action that was taken. The features of the action research involve a spiral of self-reflective cycles as represented in the following figure:

Figure 1. *Kemmis and McTaggart's (2005) Action Research Spiral*



Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) also demonstrate in this figure that real practice might not be neat as this spiral containing planning, acting, observing, and reflecting suggests. These stages will overlap, and initial plans will become obsolete in the light of learning from experience. In fact, the process is likely to be more fluid, open, and responsive. The success of this action plan does not depend on the faithfully following these steps, but is achievable through a strong sense of evolution and development in the researcher's practices and understandings.

In other words, EAR is a research method which integrates ethnography – presenting a culture – into the action research plan –developing a project. EAR

is an approach that can be employed to develop the project through a rich understanding of the community (Tacchi et al., 2003; Tacchi et al., 2009).

Media and the Public Sphere

The Notion of the Public Sphere

This study will utilize the notion of the public sphere based on the work of Habermas (1989) and others (Calhoun, 1992; Fraser, 1990). The concept of the public sphere was originally elaborated in the book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in 1962 by Jurgen Habermas, a German sociologist and philosopher in the tradition of critical theory and pragmatism. Habermas' theory of the bourgeois public sphere is part of Enlightenment, liberal political philosophy which addresses the question of what can make democracy work. The public sphere is an arena where individuals come together and freely discuss ideas which influence political action. As Habermas (1989) argues, capitalism requires a public space where information can be freely exchanged. Not only information about business but also culture and politics might be freely discussed (Habermas, 1989). In evolving public sphere institutions such as salons and coffee house, he argued that conversation took place among equals whose private interests and inequalities were suspended. As a result, it allowed for rational discussion and debate on questions of state action and policy. Habermas (1989) asserts:

By 'the public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest (p. 49).

The public sphere was expanded into four dimensions: equality of access to the arena of debate; diversity of opinions and topics relevant to a particular debate; reciprocity or the degree of interaction between people involved in a debate; and the quality or degree to which participants contributed information relevant to the topic. The notion of the public sphere, I believe, is a critical framework that helps many scholars to analyze whether nowadays, society can meet its own expectations.

These characteristics of Habermas' s concept have been criticized. As time passes, rapid social changes, social developments, literacy growth and industrialization have decreased the importance of his particular construction

of the public sphere, thereby challenging its relevance. A clear distinction between public and private, identified by Habermas, is no longer exists. Dahlgren (1991, p. 4) argues that “a blurring of the distinction between public and private in political and economic affairs, a rationalization and shrinking of the private intimate sphere (family life) and the gradual shift from an (albeit limited) public of political and cultural debaters to a public of mass”. Furthermore, there is no equality; reason is not the main and necessary basis for discussion and debate and all citizens cannot be guaranteed access to the public sphere anymore (Butsch, 2009). As a result, the ideas of alternative and multiple public spheres have been introduced by many critics.

One of the most influential criticisms of Habermas’ theory of the public sphere comes from Nancy Fraser, an American critical theorist. Her work, *Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy*, was firstly published in 1992 after the publication of the *Structural transformation in English*. From Fraser’s point of view, the concept of the public sphere is not adequate for the current forms of democracy which exist in late capitalist societies. She does not agree with the four dimensions proposed by Habermas and identifies inequalities that continually operate in democratic societies (Fraser, 1990). She points out the absence of subordinate groups, including women and lower classes in bourgeois public sphere institutions (Calhoun, 1992). The “absence of reference to the complexities and contradictions of meaning productions” is used to describe Habermas’s idealization of the bourgeois public sphere (Dahlgren 1991). Moreover, according to the notion that the common good should be promoted by rational debate in the public sphere, Fraser denies that there should be no restriction on topics debated and neither should there be a guarantee that the outcome of such debates will be for the public good (Fraser, 1990).

Fraser considers that the idea of a multiplicity of publics is much more preferable to the concept of a single public sphere (Fraser, 1990) with each sphere likely to overlap to some extent. She argues that individuals have moved away from the universalizing ideal of a single public and participate in other spheres or overlapping public discourses. The move away from the ideal of a single public sphere is important in that it allows recognition of the public struggles and political innovations of marginalized groups outside traditional or state-sanctioned public spaces and mainstream discourses dominated by white, bourgeois males (Squires, 2002). A single public sphere does not provide a space for subordinated groups in which they can discuss their own ideas and assumptions about the world. Minority group members have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics, or subaltern counterpublics, in recognition of the impossibility of keeping societal inequalities out of the public sphere process. Fraser (1990, p. 66) asserts that “they (subordinated groups) would have no venues in which to undertake communicative processes that were not, as it were, under the supervision of dominant groups”. Multiple public spheres have the ability to intensify their participation by creating alternative spaces in which people are able to speak in their own voices and to express their cultures and identities using their own idioms and styles.

The Emergence of Alternative Media

Habermas evaluates mass media as an environment which supports the idea of the public sphere. As Curran (1991, p. 29) notes, “the media are thus the principal institutions of the public sphere or, in the rhetoric of nineteenth-century liberalism, ‘the fourth estate of the realm’”. The emergence of the mass media as the dominant element of the public sphere historically coincided with the development of mass-based democracy in Western countries (Dahlgren, 1991). By being the main channel and means of distribution of information, mass media works in providing a space between government and society where individuals can express their opinions and criticisms and exercise formal and informal control over the government through elections and public opinion. The gap between the public condition of mass media production and the private condition of consumption has been bridged by the mass media. Mass media have the ability to set a social agenda and to lead citizens to discuss topics introduced by the media. Agenda setting is a method of framing the elements of news which are not only plain facts but also a set of values that help people to ‘make meaning’ of the ‘facts’. Therefore, it can be assumed that the mass media successfully tell citizens what to think about.

The information that is framed and shaped by the media is a double-edged sword. The bias evident in framing media stories negatively affects some groups, especially minorities in the societies. One significant question around the concept of the public sphere is how much mass media processes — especially journalism — help citizens to gain information, debate and reach informed decisions in their societies. Although the mass media arguably benefits majorities, some minorities suffer from its dysfunction. The failure of mass media in dealing with minorities and the appearance of racism and discrimination will be analysed to understand why it is a key reason for the emergence of alternative media.

There is an absence of subordinated groups represented in the broad sweep of mass media. For example, my own research findings revealed that mainstream newspapers in both Australia and Thailand regularly demonstrate bias, racism and stereotyping in relation to representing Islam in their news coverage (Youkongpun, 2012). These newspapers mostly give space in their coverage to the role of police and other officials. In contrast, the voice of Muslims is rarely to be heard in news stories. Moreover, some mainstream media organizations encourage misunderstanding through racist attitudes towards indigenous people. For instance, journalists from *The Telegraph*, the national British newspaper, were sent to Holman Island in the Canadian Arctic to produce a photo essay about traditional Eskimos hunting. “Dressed to Kill: Hunting with the Eskimos of Holman Island,” was used as a headline of the story. It told English readers that the Inuit hunters have no honour and are merciless (Alia, 2009). This story was produced without understanding Inuit culture. Such unfair treatment happens because mainstream media often fails to incorporate Aboriginal peoples’ perspectives.

As a result, it can be assumed that the mass media, characterized as the public sphere, have largely failed to accurately and fairly report minorities’

issues and to deal with subordinated people. I feel that Nancy Fraser and others' critiques and suggestions of the concept of multiple spheres seem to be more reflective of today's complex media environment. Many alternative media are characterized as creating the various minor spheres in society which serve the needs of a vast array of citizens.

The Term of 'Alternative'

Alternative media are circulated in many different ways. There are many ways of defining 'alternative media': terms such as "radical", "independent", "citizen", "tactical", "autonomous" and "activist" are sometimes more preferable (Downumt, 2007). The use of these names depends on their various functions and objectives. For example, "citizen media" is preferred by Rodriguez (2001) who produced a video documentary for people living in a rural area of the Colombian Andres so that they could see their own images and analyse their lives and struggles via the footage. She asserts:

Citizen's media implies first that a collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations; and third, that these community practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where transformations and changes are possible (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 20).

In another example, the term "activist media" is used to encourage readers to become involved in social change but does not necessarily include a sense of the local. Langlois and Dubois (2005, p. 17) conclude that "By directly confronting the mainstream corporate media, or by taking direct action to bypass them together, media activist facilitate the spread of social movement rhizomes."

The term "community" media is also used to particularly describe a connection to a geographic place. Here, "community" is defined as "a geographically based group of persons and/or a social group or sector of the public who have common or specific interests" (Bonin & Mensah, 1998, p. 13). However, the term "community" used to describe a geographic territory is problematic in wider academic discussion in this digital age (Hess, 2012). It is dismissive of community and its link to geography. Many scholars argue that although people might be engaged in similar communication channels or reside in the same geographic locale, it does not necessarily mean they are part of the same community (Cohen, 1985; Massey, 1994; Foster, 1996; Lee and Newby, 1983). The emergence of the internet has enabled people to easily access communication channels through many online media. People from anywhere can receive information from community online newspapers although they are not part of those communities in geographical terms. Thus, use of the term "community" cannot assume that audiences live in the same area. Media serving communities are no longer necessarily united by geographic territory

but by audience participation and activities (Eckert, 2000). Instead, “community media” are arguably more accurately defined by their functions in serving people’s needs. Howley (2009, p. 2), for example, defines community media as “an alternative to profit-oriented media which serves the diverse tastes and interests of ethnic, radical and cultural minorities that are often ignored, silenced or otherwise misrepresented by mainstream media”.

As a result, the term “alternative media”, perhaps, is the most common label. “Alternative” seems to be the only term which can encompass the different media people refer to variously as community, grassroots, radical, citizens and independent because it is not too specific. Alternative media may also include any type of communication which is not produced by the mainstream media (Forde, 2011).

‘Hyperlocal’ Media

Arguably, hyperlocal journalism focuses on the stories and articles which larger mainstream media organizations avoid. It serves the interests of community-wide and regional audiences. Hyperlocal media have much in common with community media. They both focus on even smaller geographic areas than national media. Nevertheless, most hyperlocal media tend to be online. One of the most interesting definitions of hyperlocal media is provided by Howley (2009):

Hyperlocal implies something beyond the traditional confines of ‘community media’, defined as ‘a range of community-based activities intended to supplement, challenge, or change the operating principles, structures, financing, and cultural forms and practices associated with dominant media (p. 2).

With a small area on which to focus, it is much easier for hyperlocal media to reach and attract local people by providing local news, cover local politics and engage local people in the affairs relevant to their area. Kurpius, Metzgar and Rowley (2011, p. 774) argue that hyperlocal media operations “are geographically-based.....and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement”. Hyperlocal sites can make engagement easier for some locals to deliver input when they cannot make it to a public meeting. It has also can lower the obstacles so that people can more easily launch community news sites on their own.

It can be clearly seen that the widespread demand for local journalism remains undiminished as a number of community websites have sprung up in every part of the world. Unsurprisingly in the UK, for instance, the use of websites for local content increased by 16 per cent while the use of commercial websites increased to 33 per cent in 2009 (Purvis, 2009). Because of the rising demand for hyperlocal news, some mass media organizations have tried to develop their own media strategies to gain more grassroots audiences. The

Daily Mail and General Trust, a British media conglomerate, launched fifty hyperlocal community websites in the South West of the England in 2009. These local content websites were created to encourage interaction by allowing users to create their profiles, write and publish stories, upload images, form groups, and rate and review other content and message each other.

There are also examples of hyperlocal sites emerging in many other countries. One example is News Community Media's 'whereilive.com.au' website in Australia. This website allows people to type in their postcode and to source their local area news. Up-to-date information about local politicians, interests, clubs, police and resident action groups is provided to audiences. Clark (in Sinclair, 2010, p. 1) concludes: "(Whereilive) is based on a newspaper. This is less of a journalistic approach. It tends to publish a lot more raw information, leaving it to the community to say what they think."

Another example of a hyperlocal media site comes from the United States. A hyperlocal news and culture blog called 'OurChinatown or www.ourchinatown.org', launched by the Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA), was created to serve the needs of more than 100,000 residents living in particular parts of New York. Most of these residents are Chinese. The goal of this project is to provide a public place for Chinese who are unique in background and perspective to access local information and to be able to express their voices to the nation.

We see this as an opportunity to give a voice to a community that traditionally hasn't had one, and to talk about news and issues from a point of view that's relevant to and resonant with members of this community (Rosario-Tapan, 2011, p. 1).

Hyperlocal journalism is also popular in many Asian countries. For example, in Singapore, Straits Times Online Mobile Print (STOMP) is an Asian citizen-journalism website. STOMP won the world newspaper association's IFRA award for Best in Online Media in 2008 for its use of citizen journalism content to meet the changing needs of readers. This site is hyperlocally successful in engaging Singaporeans in a style and approach that is different from conventional news websites.

To conclude, the hyperlocal offers an alternative communication channel for local or grassroots people to gain and perceive their own community information. This new wave of local online news sites has become a public arena where people are provided with a voice which they have not previously had. Although local journalism has been criticized for its lack of journalistic standards, there is no doubt that it works well for local people.

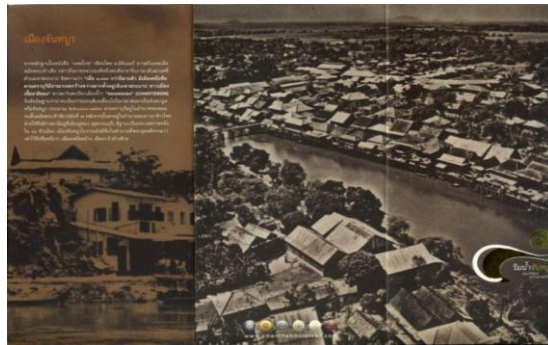
Discursive Media Activities in the Riverside Community

The Riverside community has been formed and shaped by alternative media discursive activities. Foucault's (1966) theoretical elaboration on

discourse is also useful in identifying a variety of media discourses which are used at the local level. Discourse in this case, according to Foucault, essentially allows for the inclusion of a complete range of media discourses — online services, social media, posters, bulletin boards, performances and even people themselves. Consequently, I will use the term media as discourse to include all manner of public communication used by members of this local community. I have already observed some alternative media produced locally by community members.

Discursive activities

Media can be everything.



This is an example of the Riverside's Voices newsletters. The purpose of newsletters is to provide community member with the updated and valuable information of the community. They also included the community history and old architecture.



These are the information boards and posters through the community area that are used to present the historical background of each old building. The aim of these media is to promote historical sightseeing to the tourists.



Screen-printed T-shirts are produced by the Riverside Community Development Association. It is one of the ways to promote the community, and also to improve the association's financial stability.



The coffee place is located in the center of the community area. Most of the older people always spend their leisure time here with coffee, newspapers and Ska (traditional game similar to chess). It shows that Habermas's traditional public sphere such as the coffee house can still be found in the small community.



The community learning center is the community meeting point where the members come along and discuss towards community matters.



Community events including religious and commercial events are the other ways to strengthen community. Buddhist events are for uniting Buddhist members in the community. Most people move out of their houses into the street in order to provide food for the monks. Differently, the commercial events mainly aim to attract tourists from surrounding communities. The members sell street food and handmade products along the community street.



As the root of Vietnamese Catholicism, the religious performances are mainly conducted by the Catholic Church in the community. It is to strengthen Catholic people in the community. It also opens to the public to promote Catholic beliefs.

Hyperlocal media



This is the official hyperlocal website for this community. There is updated information about events, attractions, interesting photos relevant to community activities, and the information of the Riverside Community Development Association



Facebook is the space for community members to receive and promote the information about each upcoming community event. Moreover, it is a forum for community member to discuss community problems such as neighbourhood noise and teenage alcohol consumption.

Conclusion

As I have been describing, this study emphasizes the failure of commercial mass media in serving the local people's needs. This case study refers to the inclusion of all media activities produced locally, and are much effective in allowing community members to become empowered, to preserve cultural background, and to promote themselves to the external environment. In addition, the hyperlocal online activities have become more essential in serving the interests of community-wide and local audiences. Innovative hyperlocal media models are gathering increasing attention in many other countries. It illustrates that, while the internet obviously breaks down geographical boundaries, hyperlocal media is the tool to deepen the meaning of a place and to deliver a range of new and better local services.

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