



When Nothing Mainstream Works: Thai Women Manage Despite the Media

by Nina Somera

Thailand is among the Southeast Asian countries whose media landscape is fraught with so much struggles. In the last few years alone, Thailand became a perfect case of an alarming media ownership, where news of extrajudicial killings especially in the south were muzzled while the more courageous media practitioners were slapped with multi-million dollar libel suits, that were impossible to be paid within a single lifetime.¹

Khaosan Road is a strip where many tourists, including backpackers mill around restaurants, pubs, book shops, linen stores, and the wares being sold along the sidewalks especially at night. It is also home to familiar and global sights, fast food chains, pharmaceuticals, and convenience stores. Its otherwise bohemian and lively atmosphere was affected by the curfews and the sight of military vehicles at both ends of the road during the recent martial law period.

Photo from Wikimedia Commons

Things may have improved after former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra was ousted from office. But change has yet to be felt by grassroots women, even as more than 3,000 “community radios” have sprouted in just three months.² Likewise, mainstream media has yet to deliver the information that matters to communities. Neither has it become more gender-sensitive.

Nonetheless, grassroots women still find personal and political empowerment in the more traditional and sometimes inconspicuous communication tools, modes, and spaces.

Members and partners of the Foundation for Women (FFW) further

discussed the linkages between communication tools and empowerment. Participants at the focus group discussion (FGD) validated the gaps in the production and processing of information in mainstream media. While affirming the difficulty in deriving empowerment and confidence from most television and radio programmes, grassroots women have found refuge in fora, films, theatre, radio, and surprisingly, letters.

Deconstructing Dialogues

Meetings which gather women were deemed critical in forging sisterhood and solidarities, especially among individuals who happen to share experiences of

oppression. To a certain extent, meetings function as a healing process, aside from allowing women's participation in governance issues. FFW organises fora and small meetings with their members in the community particularly for legal education. Albeit Thai laws are in the local language, people's access to the law remains inadequate owing to low levels of literacy and the absence of spaces where ordinary individuals may learn these laws.

As one participant from Amnatchareon Women's Friend, a people's collective in Northeast Thailand described, "As poorly educated local villagers, we cannot understand academic analysis and ambiguous texts in codes. When we attend fora, the academics explain to us how those texts can be interpreted and how they can affect our lives. They [the academics] always ask for our opinions, but without directing our thinking, which we admire."

Fora and meetings also serve as opportunities to discuss otherwise sensitive and controversial issues and at the same time correct popular media projection of certain issues. An example of such issues are the tensions in the south, between the military and Muslim settlers, including the separatist movements. At the height of the violence in Pattani, Thakshin implemented "emergency measures" in the region, leading to curfews, warrantless arrests, wiretapping and censorship, among others.³

"I found that some of our friends in the Northeast had some misconceptions about the situation in the South. They perceived the situation through news programmes on television depicting not so accurate a picture. We told

them that what they learned from TV were just partly true. They did not understand and we started to explain to others about real situations," one FGD participant said.

Aside from the censorship implemented by the Thakshin regime in Pattani, market dynamics in the publishing industry may have also played a role in the inadequate and sometimes sensationalised reportage of the conflict in the south, as observed by Dr. Mark Tamthai, author of *Dynamic Diversity of Southern Thailand* and *History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani*.⁴ Tamthai stressed the need to avoid the false dichotomy of "them vs. us" and focus on the role of locals in the peace process.

Life in Moving Images or Stills

Film was likewise considered an attractive communication tool since it is capable of showing images which have an emotive appeal to various audiences. In fact, in a survey among intermediary groups, it emerged as the most used communication tool, followed by land line, radio, internet, poster, computer, and fax machine. As an informant put it, "The technology helps to reveal the truth in motion picture which raise(s) more awareness among the villagers."

FFW has produced video documentaries which depicted the harrowing ordeals of children recruited for prostitution in tourist hubs like Phuket. Such documentaries have been an effective tool in public awareness campaigns. The environmental group, Resource Management for the Southern Coastline, likewise appreciate films as its visuals are sometimes self-explanatory. The handiness of VCD also makes it easier to be shown in other places.



Supinya Klangnarong, then secretary general of Thailand's Centre for Popular Media Reform, traced the astronomical increase of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra's wealth to his Thai Rak Thai party. Shin Corporation, a conglomerate owned by Shinawatra's family sued Klangnarong and the Thai Post for 400 million Bhat in 2003. Three years later, the court dismissed the case.

Source: Extra Virgin Film Collective, producer of the documentary "Truth Be Told: Cases Against Supinya Klangnarong."

But language sometimes poses a barrier that forces organisations to invest in translation services so as to further disseminate their films. Another limitation is the tool's reliance on electricity services, which are not available in the more remote areas. To sidestep such limitation, some organisations have resorted to media kits or kub-fai which can guide the villagers through the discussion of certain issues.

Theatre of the Oppressed

Among the lasting impacts of the Thai Community Theatre Project of the Centre for Girls lies in its advocacy around HIV-AIDS. For them, the theatre is more than a tool but also a process that can effect concrete changes particularly in the acceptance of communities of people afflicted by the disease. One of their plays featured a school's refusal to admit a child who was afflicted with HIV-AIDS. Staged around the community, the play eventually led to the community's acceptance of people who are HIV-positive and the child's admission in the local school.

Another NGO, Fai In See likewise considers theatre as an effective tool in reaching out to individuals especially those of the older generations. By incorporating folk and traditional forms and motifs in their production, they have managed to sign up individuals 35 years or older in their campaigns on organic farming and local trade.

Despite the gap being filled by theatre, the Centre for Girls and other organisations using theatre and other media in their advocacy and campaign lament that the government has not given them the necessary support.

“We get funds from foreign and domestic

non-government organisations... Not a lot support us in the communications field. So we would like to ask agencies to pay more attention on work about the media.”

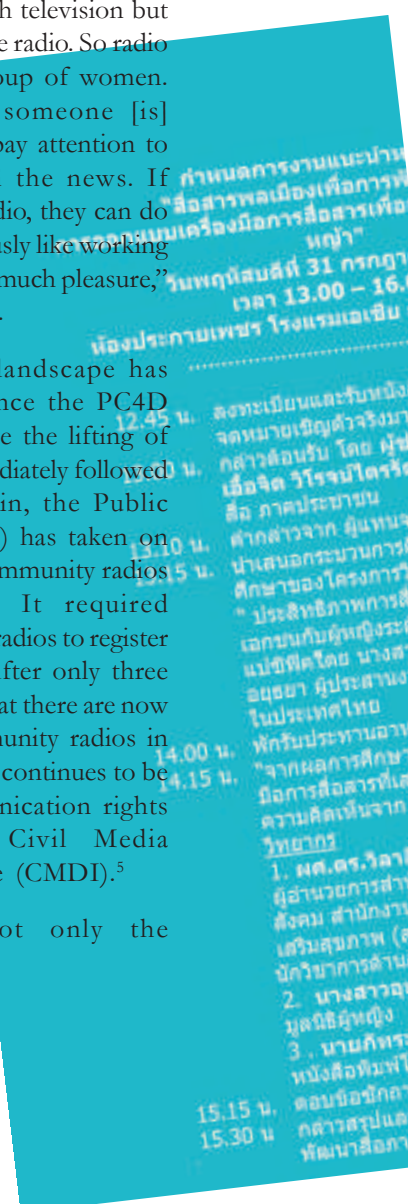
Radio Boom: Boon or Bane?

Radio was cited as the most accessible tool mainly because the leisure of listening to radio programmes may be done simultaneously with tasks in the household and the fields. Radio even becomes more effective when it tackles issues that are important to the communities such as health, child rights, trafficking, drug abuse, parenting, among others.

“The elderly rarely watch television but they enjoy listening to the radio. So radio can be used with a group of women. For example, when someone [is] awarded, villagers will pay attention to [it]. They will spread the news. If villagers listen to the radio, they can do other things simultaneously like working which makes them have much pleasure,” an informant expressed.

However, the radio landscape has drastically changed since the PC4D FGD in Thailand. Since the lifting of Martial Law which immediately followed the ouster of Thaksin, the Public Relations Bureau (PRB) has taken on the task of regulating community radios across the country. It required prospective community radios to register and pay license fees. After only three months, PRB claimed that there are now more than 3,000 community radios in the country, a point that continues to be questioned by communication rights advocate like the Civil Media Development Institute (CMDI).⁵

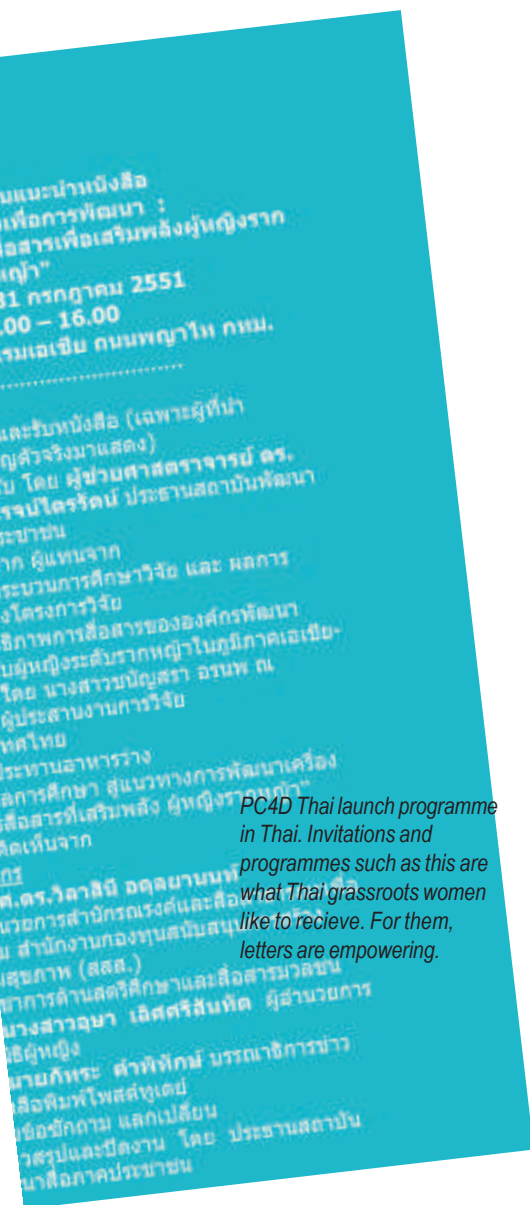
CMDI criticised not only the





Civil Media Development Institute

CMDI is one of the three institutes under Civicnet Thailand Foundation, which was established in 1997 with the main purpose of promoting civil society in Thailand through training and a variety of interactive activities, including media of various kinds and levels as well as social movements. Civicnet Thailand Foundation strongly believes in democratic dialogue and the significance of “public space,” both physical and via radio waves, for promoting civil spirit and involvement, civil interactions and participation in public issues. Most of all, Civicnet aims to strengthen civil politics in order to balance the representative political system. CMDI runs capacity-building activities on community radio, promotes broadcasting and media reform, conducts research on community self-management, and engages in media monitoring and media literacy.



PC4D Thai launch programme in Thai. Invitations and programmes such as this are what Thai grassroots women like to receive. For them, letters are empowering.

registration requirement but also the option of PRB-registered community radios to air advertisements. “If you are going to be under a bureaucratic organisation, how can you be a community radio? You can’t do [advertisements] in a community radio because your work is supposed to be voluntary. The community must be the one supporting us and paying the electricity bills and so on. It must be the censor,” Dr. Uajit Vitrojtrairatt, executive director of CMDI pointed out.

Vitrojtrairatt claimed that due to the swell in registered community radios, people have begun to complain that lousy programmes and loud music have saturated the airwaves. With their refusal to register with the PRB, the 300 pre-coup community radios have been forced to ride on other frequencies.

Letters of Confidence

The FGD among Thai grassroots women have also yielded an unexpected finding. However nondescript at first glance, invitation letters are empowering for women, particularly who have limited mobility owing to their roles in the household and position in the community.

Vitrojtrairatt, who organised the FGD recalled that the facilitators were surprised as some participants named letters as an empowering communication tool. For them, invitation letters function as a license which can convince their husbands to let them attend meetings.

One participant remarked, “I consider the letter very important. It provides me evidence for my husband. If I only receive the information via telephone, he will question me a lot, but the letter confirms that it is really about work.”

This logic also highlights the rootedness of patriarchal structures, practices and perception in the communities the participants belong. During the FGD, most of them admit that their development and organising work have made their communities suspicious, rather than appreciative of their contribution. It is for this reason that they consider invitation letters as badges of honour, a proof that they are not going out “for something bad.”

Way Forward

PC4D’s call for an enabling environment for community media has been validated by the patterns in Thailand’s political history. Media is always among the first assets to be controlled whenever a coup erupts.

In a country where nearly all media establishments and infrastructures are practically owned by the government, pieces of information inevitably undergo censorship, which may result to the skewing, if not silencing of voices. As of this writing, tensions are once more erupting as protesters continue to swarm the government palace in Bangkok, forcing an embattled prime minister to content himself in a

makeshift command center.

During the launch last July 2008, women remain unsatisfied with the spaces for articulation that are available to them at the moment. Despite the changing of the guards and residents of the government palace, the mainstream media has not only been unreceptive to their issues. It has been unkind.

Usa Learsrisantand, executive director of the FFW lamented that there are issues which have yet to be publicly discussed due to shame and denial.

“There are issues which women are still afraid to discuss such as human trafficking, safety in the workplace, HIV-AIDs, and others. Some still consider these issues as personal issues,” she said.⁶ Sometimes the media take up these issues but always projecting the women as “victims.”

As FFW previously said, “Some government TV, radio and newspaper are controlled, [so there is] less freedom. The consumers, including women and villagers, get the information controlled by ones who hold monetary power. That’s why it is very important for civil society to get into, seize more segments of mainstream media in order to diversify the content.”

During the launch, the newly created Public Broadcasting System was being eyed as a possible space where women can talk about themselves, their bodies and their concerns on their own terms.⁷ Albeit media advocates are not united in accepting the PBS, some still hope that it will survive the current political turbulence and eventually earn its legitimacy.

Nina Somera, represented Isis International during the Thai launch of PC4D on 31 July 2008 in Bangkok, Thailand. Isis, together with its partner, the Civil Media Development Institute (CMDI) had the chapter on Thailand translated from English to Thai.

Endnotes:

- 1 Among those who survived Shinatwra’s harassment was Supinya Klangnarong and the editors of Bangkok Post who were sued for libel. Shinavatra also demanded 400 million Bhat compensation. WACC (March 2006). “Supinya Acquitted.” URL: http://www.wacc.org.uk/index.php/wacc/publications/media_action/267_mar_2006/supinya_acquitted
- 2 Somera, Nina (August 2008). “A Battle for the Airwaves, A Battle for Legitimacy: Community Radio in Thailand.” URL: http://isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1087&Itemid=204
- 3 The Bangkok Post (July 17, 2005). “Thailand: Journalists Condemn Executive Decree.” URL: <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=26851>
- 4 Tamthai, Mark (2005). *The Role of the Media in Bringing about Reconciliation in Southern Thailand*. URL: http://www.silkwormbooks.com/Connections/book_connection.htm
- 5 Somera, Nina (August 2008). “A Battle for the Airwaves, A Battle for Legitimacy: Community Radio in Thailand.” URL: http://isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1087&Itemid=204
- 6 Usa Learsrisantand was a reactor during the Thai launch of PC4D, along with Dr. Wilasinee Aduyanont of the Thai Health Promotion and a Women Studies and Media professor and Pattara Khampituk of the Post Today.
- 7 Somera, Nina. “Thailand’s Controversial Public Broadcasting System.” URL: http://isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1088&Itemid=204