

Community Radio Movement: Towards Reforming the Broadcast Media in Thailand

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Grassroots groups and civic organizations were so exhilarated when the first community radio went on air last December. It was right here at Kanjanaburi that the precedent was set for others to follow (Jud Prakaai, Krungthep Turakit, 18 April, 2002). By mid-2002, one hundred and forty five groups are prepared to switch on their home-made transmitter at any moment. Despite the threat from the Public Relations Department and the Post and Telegraph Department to close down the ‘unlicensed station’ community radio around the country are ready to exercise their right to freedom of expression (Jud Prakaai, Krungthep Turakit, 18 September, 2002).

Community radio leading the way for media reform

In the Thai society, the initial idea of community radio or a non-commercial and non-state owned media sector came into center stage during 1998 when the reform agenda was hotly debated. In 2000, the People’s Agenda for a Free People proposed to participate in the media reform process in the hope that it will strike a new balance on communication rights and freedom for the people. Among its mission statement on the People’s Media the Working Group on the People’s Agenda has committed itself to “*lay the foundation of the people’s organizations in order for these organizations to own and participate fully in the people’s media sector at the community, regional and national level.*” Two years on, the voices of the people have broken the silence with the inception of the pioneering community radio. On October 10, 2002, 145 community groups from 10 sub-regions gathered in the main auditorium of Thammasat University to attend the 1st National Assembly of the Confederation of Community Radio of Thailand. They are leading the way for the society to untangle the media reform agenda with or without the government political will (Matichon, 12 October, 2002).

The thrust for reform came from community and civic groups who felt the need and the relevance of community radio. In the first instance, some grasped the idea without any

hesitation. Some could not believe that the opportunity to own and operate a community station is real. It is too good to be true. Some were rather uncertain that the community would have the capability to produce programmes. During September 2000-2002, dozens of training workshops and seminars were held throughout the country. This was supported by the Social Investment Fund (SIF), Civicnet Institute, Local Community Development Institute, Community Development Institute and Friedrich Naumann Stiftung (FNS). The training was aiming at preparing members of the community and civic groups to learn the basic of radio broadcasting, station management skill and to organize the community to participate in this process (Uajit Wirotetrairat, 2002).

After several workshops were held the idea began to catch on. Many community groups joined the project due to two reasons. There was a real need for a local medium. Kanjanaburi's Conservation Group which fought against the Thai-Burma gas pipeline project in 1995-1997, for example, concluded that community radio is an essential medium to voice their opinion and to mobilize public support. In addition, some communities have had prior production experiences on Radio Thailand local stations.¹ During 1998-1999, air time was given to civic groups in Ubon Ratchatani, Petchaburi, Songkla, Nan, Korat, for instance, to produce current affairs and cultural programmes for the community. These programmes laid the groundwork for would be broadcaster as well as for the pioneer communities (Community Radio : Media Reform for Society, 1999). Secondly, the new Frequencies Act enacted in 2000 stipulated that 20% of the frequencies must be allocated to community broadcast. Hence, the legitimacy provided by the Frequencies Act has become the ultimate flagship that encourage grassroots groups to organize and set up their community radio.

By contrast, the reluctance of the state and the long drawn process of media reform since 1992 has placed a great deal of pessimism for those who expect to see a new horizon for media and citizen freedom and their right to communicate. Even though the recent economic downturn has put the commercial media into the quagmire large media corporations prefer the privilege concessions under the structure of patronage relationship to a more liberal and democratic structure outlined in the Constitution of 1997. It appeared, also, that the Public Relations Department, one of the last bastions of the authoritarian regime has been

¹ The previous government set up a community radio pilot project for some 56 stations in the 2-year duration in order to deter the demand that the state must allocate the frequencies to the people to have direct access to this public resource.

un-yielding to public pressure to reform. Putting the two together the mainstream broadcast media are prepared to resist the reform agenda at all cost but not unless they could demand some legal guarantee for a larger share of benefits. The ongoing reform process for a more democratic media structure has, thus, been seen as a threat rather than a progressive move.

The development during the last 5 years shows that the dynamics of the media reform process is, undoubtedly, driven by forces outside the state political structure. An alliance between grassroots groups, civic groups, non-government organizations on the media, the academia and professional organizations² have been forged to make way for community radio to materialize. The voice of the voiceless has spoken in Kanjanaburi, Innburi, Pichitr, and many more will be heard. From this very moment, the top-down communication model and the monopoly of the state and the media industry can hardly hold back the deluge of change from grassroots community radio. The democratization of the media structure is at its critical turning point. But it is the state who, unashamedly, reject the mandate set forth in the Constitution.

Community radio as a movement

“Community radio responds to the needs of the community it serves, contributing to its development within progressive perspectives in favour of social change. Community radio strives to democratize communication through community participation in different forms in accordance with each specific social context.”

World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC), 1998

The cries of the voiceless for a medium that would be ‘*a voice of one’s own*’ have been with us for centuries. Recent history showed that the poor and the oppressed of Latin America, Africa and Asia were silenced through torture and murder. And not least, through local and international economic plunder and sanction. Self-organizations were impossible and their lives were under the complete control of the capitalists and the ruling classes. Their

² The Reporters and Journalists Association of Thailand and the newly established professional association, the Thai Broadcast Journalists Association, were actively involved with organizing seminars in the regions as a move to gain public support for the reform agenda as opposed to the media corporations’ professional organization, the Federation of Broadcaster of Thailand.

right to communicate among themselves, to the public in general and to the world is unheard of. The mainstream media only publish the commercial messages or political propaganda irrelevant to the lives of those wretched of the earth.

From UNESCO's Community Radio Handbook (2001) community radio in various parts of the world emerged sporadically. In Latin America, the Miners' Radio in Bolivia which began in 1947 marked the beginning of a new era of trade union radio. Twenty-three stations were set up. Miners' Radio helped unite the miners in their struggle against the appalling working conditions and the owning barons of these tin mines. The financial support of Miners' Radio came from the miners contribution but the management of the station and the programming policy was set by the union. However, they could easily take part in the programme since the stations were located close to the mining community. In the 1950s-1960s, their radios were often destroyed or equipment confiscated by the dictator governments. They also had to fight against the mainstream propaganda at the height of the ideological confrontation of Marxism and capitalism.³ In Columbia, Radio Sutatenza/Acción Cultural Popular (ACPO) was set up in an Andean village for peasant education. The initiative by the Catholic priest, Joaquin Salcedo, in 1947 became widely popular. The education broadcast organized groups of peasant to listen to what was called Radio School. There were approximately 20,000 Radio Schools and some 200,000 enrollments. Sutatenza was part of the Latin American Educational Radio Broadcasting Association (LER).⁴

Moving to contemporary history, the South African experience after the fall of the apartheid regime paved the way for a social movement followed by other African nations. In the 1990s, Mali, Burkina Faso, Namibia and South Africa have started to free their airwaves and promote community radio as part of the national broadcasting spectrum. The post-apartheid South African government has initiated a new broadcasting policy in the hope that the broadcast media could help reconcile past conflicts and to build a democratic and

³ In the early 1980s, the miners called a massive strike that ended the dictatorship rule in Bolivia. In 1985, the government close down a large number of the tin mines and 20,000 workers were unemployed. Some Miners' Radio were passed on to peasant groups and less than 10 are still operating.

⁴ ACPO was supported by Catholic groups in Europe and the Columbian Roman Catholic Church. However, it was not owned or managed by the peasant community. In the 1970s, ACPO faced serious problem with the Church when it brought up the issue of responsible procreation in the radio programmes. The Church ceased its support and APCO could not sustain itself on borrowed funding. In 1987, APCO sold the station, including a publishing house, music record pressing plant and a 14-storey office block in the capital city to a commercial radio network in order to pay the debt.

pluralistic society. It set up an Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) in 1993, a judicial body, to regulate the broadcast media. It also enacted a new broadcasting legislation that promote the provision of a diverse range of public, private, and community broadcasting services on a national, regional and local level which are responsive to the need of the public. The concept of the South African legislation is a model similar to the undertaking of the Thai Frequencies Act of 2000. However, one major difference is that the Thai legislation did not receive much support from the governments. Even after the enactment of the new legislation there has not been any clear pronouncement of a democratic broadcasting policy.

In the US where free market force and large media conglomerates reign Pacifica Foundation and its listener sponsored radio, KPFA, was at the forefront of the public intellectual forum on the air in 1948. Pacifica's initiation had opened the way for a non-commercial public radio sector which broadcast alternative news and information, music and a wide range of cultural programmes from ethnic communities. There are approximately 2,000 public radio stations on the FM dial and some of these stations formed themselves into the Grassroots Radio Coalition in the 1990s (Durlin and Melio, 2000).

During 1980s-1990s, a new movement emerged in the US. The Free Radio Movement of low-power stations or micropower radio, spearheaded by WTRA station (Tenants Rights Association) in Springfield, Illinois in 1986, are mostly organized by black African American groups in the ethnic and poor communities across the country. These unlicensed stations challenged the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for their constitutional rights to broadcast. Free Radio Berkeley, Human Rights Radio, Black Liberation Radio, Zoom Black Magic Radio, Excellent Radio, Seattle Liberation Radio seen themselves as the frequencies of resistance. Their political position is distinctively critical of US expansionism and its war campaign (Sakolsky and Dunifer, 1998). Since these stations have a low start up budget they have developed a low-cost transmission kit that is accessible for those who want to join the movement. The accessibility of the technology helped bring the idea across the Atlantic to the Netherlands (Radio Vrije Keizer or Radio the Free Emperor, Amsterdam), to neighbouring Mexico (Truth Radio, Chiapas) and other parts of the world whose people are oppressed and without their own voice.

The above examples is but a glimpse of the people's need to move away from the state and corporate enclosure towards a free and democratic media system. As a matter of fact, community radio has grown in size and depth. It is not only a local or national network.

But it is evidently a worldwide movement as AMARC or the World Association of Community Broadcasters attested during 1983-1998. There are now almost 3,000 members and associates in 106 countries (<http://www.amarc.org>).⁵ The up-coming 8th world conference on community radio will be held in February 2003 in Kathmandu, Nepal with [Radio Sagarmatha](#) as the local host. Community radio is, therefore, gaining a worldwide significance and having a strong foothold as the alternative people's medium. It is the magic voice for those whose freedom of speech has been a political, social and cultural taboo. The community radio networks in the Thai society is actively moving in solidarity with this global movement for a more democratic media culture.

Endnote

On October 31, the police seized the transmitter of Angthong community radio while the manager was attending a meeting elsewhere. Despite the on going negotiation between the government and representatives from the Confederation of Community Radio of Thailand for the 'experimental community broadcast' to be on-air during the legal transition⁶ the Public Relations Department and the Post and Telegraph Department used their authority to enforce the out-dated 1955 Broadcasting Act and Radio Communications Act. The Confederation has made public statement against the seizure based on the constitutional right of the people to communicate and to have access to the airwaves (article 40).

20 November 2002

⁵ AMARC is an international non-governmental organization serving the community radio movement, with its goal is to support and contribute to the development of community and participatory radio along the principals of solidarity and international cooperation. See more details on amarc website.

⁶ The Cabinet resolved on 16 July 2002 that a committee under the Office Attached to the Office of the Prime Minister be set up to open the way for the experimentation of community broadcast during the transition period.

Community Radio : A Chronology of Event
2000-2002

2000

8 March The enactment of the Frequencies Act

2000-2002

Training workshops, seminars, regional meetings were held for community and civic groups around the country

2001

November Kanjanaburi and Innburi, Singhburi Province set up their experimental community radio.

19 December Kanjanaburi Community Radio 100.75 FM went on air using a 10 watt transmitter reaching a radius of 20 sq.km.

2002

12 February The Public Relations Department (PRD) told Kanjanaburi and Innburi community radio to cease their transmission because they broadcast illegally according to the Broadcasting Act,1955.

25 February –
15 July Kanjanaburi and Innburi, Singhburi community radio petitioned to the PRD and the government against the closure. At the same time, both stations sought help from 10 regional community radio networks, the Senate Committee on Public Participation, the Speaker of the Senate, the Sub-committee on Education & Media Intervention, the Human Rights Commission. The Senate Committee on Public Participation and the Human Rights Commission each set up its inquiry committee and met with the representatives of the community radio networks, the PRD and the Post and Telegraph Department to mediate the conflict. Both failed to convince these state agencies that community radio has a constitutional stance.

16 July The Cabinet resolved to set up a sub-committee under the Office Attached to the Prime Minister's Office to lay out an ad hoc arrangement for the unlicensed community radio issue.

22 August Ten sub-regional community radio network proposed to the government to have their members represented in the above sub-committee.

1 September –
10 October A national campaign, in the East, Northeast and Bangkok, on the constitutional right of community radio was launched. The 1st National Assembly of the Confederation of Community Radio of Thailand attended by 3,000 members declared their legitimacy to broadcast on their community radio.

31 October The transmitter of Angthong community radio was seized by local police.

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