

Participation in community radio in Thailand: The case study of Mukdahan province's community enterprise radio station

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INTRODUCTION

My research was conducted in Mukdahan province (MD), Thailand, between 18 and 22 December 2004. In-depth interviews and survey techniques were employed. A purposive sample was used to select the respondents, who all live in Mukdahan province and have participated at some level in community radio, such as participating in producing radio programs. I conducted semi-structured interviews, involving 18 interviewees, in a relaxed, conversational style. A combination of open-ended and semi-close-ended questionnaires was utilised as a survey research instrument. The 100 respondents were selected by three trained research assistants and myself. The results of the interviews are identified by codes: for example 'MD-R18: 21 Dec 2004', in which 'MD-R18' indicates 'Mukdahan province, respondent number 18' and '21 Dec 2004' is the date of interview.

This chapter aims to ascertain the degree of local participation in community radio. It looks, first of all, at the background of the Thai broadcast media structure, radio's role in general, and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). Then the case study of the community enterprise station, the first community radio in Mukdahan municipal district, is analysed. Finally, perceived crucial issues are discussed.

BACKGROUND: BROADCAST MEDIA IN THAILAND

From the time it emerged in Thailand, broadcast media have been controlled by the government. Holding a state monopoly, the government has both legal control and authority to allocate frequencies to broadcasters. The government also has the authority to award concessions or to coinvest with private companies in the broadcast media.

The broadcast media's role tends more to be a political instrument, leaving other roles as yet unrealised. The role of radio in particular, which was Thailand's first broadcasting medium, is weighted more towards entertainment, musical programs and the like. One reason for this is that 'major record companies monopolise the airwaves. With big pockets and connections, they have found their way into almost [all of the] major airwaves in [the] major provinces' (Yong 2003).

The new Constitution of Thailand has been effective since 11 October 1997. Section 40 in Chapter 3 of the Constitution outlines its intention to establish an independent regulatory body, the NBC. The duty of this agency is to distribute frequencies for the public interest. The *New Frequencies Act* (NFA), passed in 2000,¹ states that 20% of frequencies are to be assigned to community broadcasting. Because the establishment of the NBC was delayed, several community radios operate solely under the NFA. Today, according to an article in *Matichon* (2005), there are more than 700 community radio stations broadcasting countrywide.

CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

What is community radio?

Community radio is a non-profit-making enterprise. Democratically diverse representative community governing boards, along with both paid and voluntary workers, make policies in general management and programming. Partridge observes that community radio also provides community people access to training, production and broadcasting facilities (1982, p.14). This form of radio 'operates chiefly on the community's own resources with programs which are based on audience access and participation. In effect, it reflects the special interests and needs of the community' (Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada 2002, p.70).

Servaes (1999, p.260) characterises community radio as follows:

Community radio is accessible; it is neither the expression of political power nor the expression of capital. It is the expression of the population. It is a third voice between state radio and private commercial radio. Community radio is an act of participation in communication. It is controlled democratically by the population it serves. It is based on a noncommercial relationship with its audiences.

Squier (2003, p.285) claims that radio 'is generally understood to be local programming that serves the cultural, civic, or informational needs of an audience that is either geographically or demographically limited ... is locally focused, locally programmed and locally owned ... [and] preserves a place for diversity, for it can afford to be interest driven rather than consumer driven'.

The Community Communications Group was officially founded in February 1977. This agency proposed the central principles of community radio in July 1979 (Partridge 1982, pp.14–15), drawing on the station membership rules of its American sister organisation, the National Federation of Community Broadcasters (Gray & Lewis 1992, p.162). Its aims are to:

1. serve recognisably local communities and/or communities of interest;
2. have a non-profit distributing legal form;
3. have a general management and programming policy made by a Governing Board which is democratically representative of the various interests in the community, including paid and voluntary broadcasting workers;
4. provide, within this democratic, non-profit structure, a service of information, education and entertainment, and enable two-way communication of diverse opinions;
5. be financed from a variety of sources which could include local loan capital, clearly defined spot advertising of limited duration, and central and local public funds;
6. recognise the right of paid broadcasting workers to join a union and the need for flexible demarcation of job roles, and allow the use of volunteers where suitable;

7. undertake to provide equal employment opportunities for women, and for ethnic and other significant social minorities;
8. be committed to providing local people with access to training, production and transmitting facilities;
9. transmit programme material that is predominantly locally originated;
10. have a programming policy which encourages the development of a participatory democracy and which combats racism, sexism and other discriminatory attitudes.

The concept of participation in communication and community media

UNESCO defines ‘access’, ‘participation’ and ‘self-management’ as follows (Berrigan 1981, pp.18–19):

Access refers to the use of media for public service. It may be defined in terms of the opportunities available to the public to choose varied and relevant programs and to have a means of feedback to transmit its reactions and demands to production organizations.

Participation implies a higher level of public involvement in communication systems. It includes the involvement of the public in the production process and also in the management and planning of communication systems.

Participation may be no more than representation and consultation of the public in decision making. On the other hand, self-management is the most advanced form of participation. In this case, the public exercises the power of decision making within communication enterprises and is also fully involved in the formulation of communication policies and plans.

The International Experts Brainstorming Meeting on Development Communication, convened in 2003, concluded that participation has five levels, namely management, decision-making, benefits, evaluation and implementation (UNESCO 2003, p.9).

Jorge Merino Utreras (cited in Peruzzo 1997, p.173) characterises participation in communication into three levels:

1. The production level. In this case, participation is possible in the production of messages and programs. It involves access to professional help, technical facilities and production resources.
2. The decision making level. This involves the management of the medium itself and it implies the participation of the community in deciding the programs (contents, time, schedule, etc.), and in controlling the administration and financing.
3. The planning level. This refers to the right of the populus to participate in formulating plans, policies, objectives, management principles, ways of financing, etc., as well as establishing plans for local, regional and national communications.

White (2001, p.232) suggests the following vis-à-vis participation in community media:

All sectors of a community should be given opportunities to actively communicate to the rest of the community what they feel is important information. Community-minded broadcasters have developed a multitude of formats for this: (1) programs open to the letters and telephone calls of the community; (2) programs inviting members of different sectors of a community to participate in sessions discussing key issues of the community; (3) turning over time slots to different groups to use as they wish, under the coordination of the directors of the medium. This is particularly effective for opening up a space for the voluntary, non-commercial expression of talents; (4) helping sectors of the community organize their own representative communication outlets and train them to represent themselves in the public forum ... Setting up a more democratic, consultative or participatory structure, which permits members of the community to be part of the policy-making body of community media ... Vesting the property rights and the responsibilities (of the community) for finance in a more democratic structure.

Mitchell (2000, pp.193, 197) provides information about women on 107 the Bridge, a women's community radio station broadcasting in the north-east of England. Women participate at the radio production level by making programs, and at the decision-making level in the fields of scheduling programs, sponsorship, the station's image and publicity.

RESULTS

Mukdahan province community enterprise station

Among other community radios across Thailand, the community enterprise station is owned and run by the Nakhon Thong Entertainment Co Ltd, which has its office in the capital city of Bangkok. This company has been in the broadcasting business for more than 20 years. Along with the station in Mukdahan province, the company operates another two community stations, in Mahasarakham and Saraburi provinces.

The community enterprise station was the first community radio station established within the municipal area of Mukdahan province. Geographically located in the north-east of Thailand due west of Savannakhet, the provincial capital of the Laos People's Democratic Republic, the station, which has been broadcasting since November 2003, identifies itself as 'multi-wave radio'. It airs music programs, five to ten minutes of news per hour, as well as public and commercial spots at the beginning of each hour. The programs go to air seven days a week from 6.00 am to midnight. On occasion singers/artists visit and give interviews which are subsequently included in station programs.

The radio's revenue source, which it draws from local businesses such as restaurants and shopping malls, is advertising. Local businesses that support the program are allocated announcements and/or 'spots' in return. The 'Rattiya', a Thai north-eastern food restaurant, for example, is one local business that supports the station, which in turn gives it a spot on air.

This particular community station is operated by five Nakhon Thong Entertainment staff members, i.e. the station manager, the head of programming and three technicians. All of these except the station manager 'double' as radio personalities. The station manager, who in the main manages the commercial radio station² in the nearby province of Nakhonphanom, visits the community station monthly, mainly to pay the staff salaries. The station head of programming, who is also the administrator, looks after marketing matters.

The station was dubbed 'illegal radio' during its first period of broadcasting because there were no regulations governing the community

broadcasting sector prior to the advent of the NBC. Furthermore, the station had to retune its airwave three times after the Mukdahan municipality lodged a complaint about frequency interference.

The station submits a letter to the main local government offices offering airtime for producing programs. Some local government offices participate in program production, including the Office of Mukdahan Education Area and the Office of Mukdahan Public Health. However, the station tends more to seek the participation of young people. According to one interviewee (MD-R18: 21 Dec 2004), in an attempt to wean the youth off drugs, the station suggests that they become involved in work on radio programs after study time.

Local participation in the Mukdahan province community enterprise station

Youth participation

The Mukdahan province community enterprise station has launched the 'Young DJ Against Drugs' project, one in which adolescents in Mukdahan province can participate. The project was announced during programs on the station, along with guidelines for applying. The station staff's role was to select the applicants with a view to training them to become radio personalities. The project series reached the third round of interviews in December 2004.

In this way young participants become involved in program production. This stage requires a pre-production sub-stage for preparation of content, and a production sub-stage for making programs. As a radio personality, each young person will run programs on weekdays after school, in the afternoons and on weekends during both daytime and evenings.

Music programs dominate the youth programs timeslots, with a small number of inclusions such as health and beauty. Some of the youth-run music programs include advertisements. Those among the young who can introduce a consumer/station advertisement for airplay are paid around 500-700 baht monthly,³ a payment known as 'cookie expenses'.

The majority of young respondents who participate as radio personalities still study at Mukdahan High School, considered one of the province's reputable high schools. It is located in Muang district along with 89 other schools (Office of Mukdahan Education Area 2005).

The majority of the young radio personalities define their participation in community radio as 'being a radio personality who produces programs for the community'. The respondents maintained that being a young DJ involved in program production equates with 'participation' (MD-R10: 21 Dec 2004). Some of the youths defined the term 'audience' as 'passive participants'. One of the young respondents explained participation in community radio as 'publicising information among the community' (MD-R3: 18 Dec 2004).

In terms of preference, the station was accepted as the community radio the majority of the young respondents preferred. One of the young referred to the station as 'idealistic'.

Local organisations as community radio participants

Apart from the youth, the community enterprise radio provides broadcasting time slots on weekends to various local organisations. The local government, the Office of Mukdahan Education Area (OMEA), runs a one-hour program between 2.00 pm and 3.00 pm each Saturday. This program, which broadcasts information about basic education, is hosted by the Head of the Public Relations Unit of OMEA. The Hope of Mukdahan Church, located next to the station, also broadcasts a half-hour program between 7.30 pm and 8.00 pm on Sunday evenings. Hosted by one of its members, the program includes readings from the Bible and hymns.

The local organisation representative describes participation in community radio as 'the way to convey useful information'; that is, 'bringing to the people useful information that will prove of the highest benefit to them' (MD-R15: 19 Dec 2004). The locals also suggest that participation is producing a program as the government sector [which is involved with the station] and providing recommendations to the station (MD-R8: 20 Dec 2004).

The locals prefer the community radio because (a) people have the opportunity to participate, and (b) it has a better-quality airwave. One respondent expressed a preference for community radio, stating that it

affords groups of people in the community a chance to participate in determining the direction of the station. The frequency covers many areas and has a better-quality airwave because the current community station airwave is sometimes either unclear or cannot be picked up. The programs should, locals said, be subject to a public panel discussion for distribution of information and airing of opinions.

Audience participation in community radio

The respondents to the survey research totalled 100 persons, 46% male and 54% female. The majority of the respondents were aged between 25 and 34 (22%) and 35 to 44 (22%). In terms of education, they were drawn mostly from upper elementary (grades 4–6) (24%) and upper secondary (grades 10–12) (21%).

<i>Gender</i>	
Female	54%
Male	46%
Total	100

<i>Age</i>	
25 to 34	22%
35 to 44	22%
45 to 54	20%
18 to 24	16%
55 to 64	12%
65 or over	8%
Total	100

<i>Education level</i>	
Upper Elementary	24%
Upper Secondary	21%
Lower Elementary	15%
Lower Secondary	15%
University	9%
None	8%
Vocational or Technical	8%
Total	100

Characteristics of the respondents

The results show that 66% of questionnaire respondents listen to community radio. The degree of male and female participation differs little. Adults aged between 25 and 54 listen to the station on average more than teenagers. The majority of the respondents have completed both upper elementary (grades 4–6) and upper secondary (grades 10–12) schooling.

I have suggested that listening is an active form of participation. Bickford refers to it as ‘... a creative act, one that involves conscious effort’ (1996, p.144). Corradi Fiumara describes it as ‘... the capacity for attentive listening ...the proper hearing which completes any saying ...’ (1990, pp.11–15). In essence, listening is a voluntary active perception response. Bickford claims that this ‘seems particularly apt for describing listening as a practice of citizenship’ (1996, p.24). Listening is the most essential mode of verbal communication: its role in interpersonal and group and public communicative modes ‘has become more significant in the economic, political, social, mental and spiritual phases of our lives’ (Wolvin & Coakley, 1982, p.9).

Some 20% of survey respondents not only participate by listening but also take an active role in programs, requesting songs or joining in radio games and competitions. One respondent, who participates in the sponsoring of the program, had paid 4,000 baht per month for a weekend program between 5.00 pm and 7.00 pm and spots (three times a day) over three months.

Because Mukdahan is geographically close to Savannakhet in Laos, the station also has the participation of Laotians. Ten of the survey respondents mentioned that Laotians call the station to request songs on community radio. However, they did not specify which station. Interviews established that all interviewees insist that Laotians listen to the Mukdahan province community enterprise radio. Fourteen added that Laotians also make calls to request their favourite songs. This indicates that Laotians also participate in listening to – and requesting songs to be played over – Thai community radio.⁴

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Mukdahan province community enterprise radio started broadcasting in late 2003. The majority of the survey respondents (66%) participate through listening. Some also participate in programs by either making phone calls to request songs or join in the playing of games and competitions. The highest level of participation of Mukdahan people in the radio is in the area of production. Some local teenagers, as well as local organisations, participate in the production of music programs. However, there is no participation at other levels, such as station planning, formulation of plans, policies, objectives, management principles and financing, management, promotion participation, station monitoring and station evaluation. There *is* participation in the form of sponsorship by some of the local stores.

Program production involves the preparation of content, usually songs. Some information is prepared at the pre-production stage of making programs and some at the production stage. The content and programs are carefully planned. However, there is no further local participation at the production stage; i.e. no participation in program decision-making, times, schedules and evaluation of programs was found.

Some youth groups gain broadcasting experience by participating in community station activities. This level of production participation to some degree prepares them for future careers in the broadcast media sector, either at the community, local or national level. However, their experience will be limited to a particular programming format. Whereas the music program format is produced, other types of programs such as talk-back or discussion are not. These programs allow the issues and problems that the young people and the community face today to not only be discussed openly: they encourage them to talk freely and exchange their personal opinions.

Slightly over 80% of households in Mukdahan province are engaged in agriculture. Poverty, and lack of agricultural production technology, marketing and administrative knowledge, are among the problems that

beset the province today (Office of Mukdahan Province 2004, pp.8, 22). Community radio should be a tool for development. In particular, it should serve to resolve problems such as these by focusing on broadcasting agricultural and related programs. Simply broadcasting the news and music programs is not the sole role that a community radio should adopt.

While the station attracts a large number of youths from Mukdahan High School, there are still other schools in the district. This indicates an imbalance in the distribution of opportunity. Other groups of young people could participate in the station activities, for accepting community radio as an effective tool for development but at the same time not broadening people's participation fails to effectively utilise all the station has to offer.

The station mobilises the local youth into the area of capitalism; the community enterprise station is a profit-oriented organisation sponsored by local advertisements. The station is financed by a Bangkok business company and subsidised by local business. Although the 'Young DJ Against Drugs' series supports the Thaksin government's 'urgent policy' on 'Drug Prevention and Suppression', it urges local teenagers to learn to publicise the problem themselves, in their own way and in their own programs. This could help enrich both privately or corporately owned business enterprises and at the same time promote the concept of capitalism among the young.

There are many factors that influence participation in the Mukdahan province community enterprise radio, of which ownership of the station is one. The radio belongs to the Nakhon Thong Entertainment Co Ltd; no local can be an owner or buy shares in the company. This leads to difficulties if one seeks participation at higher levels, for example at the management level.

Youth and local organisation participants describe the terminology of participation from the sender aspect, i.e. that audiences are passive participants. The majority of youth prefer to retain the current community radio format. The government and the NBC should take this into consideration, for their lack of knowledge vis-a-vis local participation in community radio inhibits the expansion of concepts of community radio participation among the Thai people, and, in particular, among the young.

Even though the Mukdahan province community enterprise radio provides community youth and local organisations with an opportunity to participate in producing programs while audiences participate in listening and requesting songs, there are still many kinds and levels of participation to be fulfilled in its role as a participatory community radio.

NOTES

1. *Organisation for Allocating Broadcasting Frequency and Supervising Radio/Television Broadcasting and Telecommunication Businesses Act*, B.E. 2543 (2000).
2. The network of the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand Public Company Limited.
3. About \$A16–23 as of 6 March 2005 (the basic wage is 137 baht a day [2005 rate]).
4. Please see my paper (in progress) on Thai community radio's roles vis-a-vis Thai-Laotian relations.

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