

# Participation in Community Radio in Thailand: Crossing the Thai-Laotian Border

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The study found that although survey respondents participated in listening to, making phone calls to, writing letters to and sometimes sponsoring community radio, and that the results mostly reflected a positive opinion about community radio, the community radio audience was generally seen by community radio practitioners as a passive audience. It was thought, in general, that community radio played its part in the Thai-Laotian relations through entertainment and the provision of information on affairs. Laotian participation was generally seen as appropriately at a very low level. Although participation in communication can be considered both a communication right and a primary human right, there is a need to ensure that people are informed about the two-way communication philosophy of community radio, and encouraged to exercise their rights in this way. Participation in community radio functions in fostering Thai-Laotian relations.

## 1) Introduction

A major characteristic of participatory communication is that the media are from the community, operated by the community, with socially horizontal communication conducted in the local dialect (Nyamnjoh, 2000, p. 156). In 2003, panel members at UNESCO's International Experts Brainstorming Meeting on Development Communication noted that "communication for development has not made full use of the potential of radio, which in some regions could be the most effective participatory tool". The panel went on to suggest that, despite the paucity of studies in participatory community radio, "It is not too late to rediscover radio. In particular, the public radio has [the] proven ability to make participation effective and sustainable" (UNESCO, 2003, p. 30). Participatory community radio can be seen as addressing "... concepts of community, linked to that of 'participation', which is the basis of community media" (Council for the Development of Community Media, 1977, p. 396) or participatory media. This form of radio has now become significant for research, and it was the aim of this study to examine the various concepts that have contributed to the emergence of this particular form of radio within the context of a study of community radio use by Thai people living along the Thai-Laotian border. The study aimed to ascertain whether or not and why Thai people living along the Thai-Laotian borders in Nong Khai (NK), Nakhon Phanom (NP) and Mukdahan (MD) provinces participated in community radio, to find out the degree of participation in community radio, and to assess their

perspectives and recommendations on the role of community radio with regard to Thai-Laotian relations. A research strategy which combined a general survey of three hundred randomly-selected individuals (100 in each province) with in-depth interviews of selected individuals was implemented between 1 December 2004 and 31 January 2005. A combination of open-ended and semi close-ended questionnaires was designed as a research instrument. Respondents of the general survey were asked to answer the questionnaire. The in-depth interview technique was applied to forty-six individuals, all of whom participated in community radio. The interviews were semi-structured, and were conducted in conversational style. Not all questions in the in-depth interviews were applied to the survey questionnaire. Questions on community radio roles in Thai-Laotian relations and perspectives on the kind of role community radio might play in strengthening/fostering of the relationship were not employed for the survey study.

**II) Participation is a Primary Human Right and a Communication Right**  
MacBride (1983, pp. xv-xvi) claims that "'[f]reedom of expression' was always regarded as a fundamental ancillary right to all other human rights ...[and] the right to communicate was recognized implicitly in the first universal code of human rights ever to be adopted". According to the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, "communication needs in a democratic society should be met by the extension of specific rights such as the right to be informed, the right to inform, the right to privacy, the right to participate in public communication - all elements of a new concept, the right to communicate" (1980, p. 265). Communication, in terms of 'right to communicate' conceptions, is a participatory, interactive and horizontal method (Martelanc, 1983, p. 40). I suggest that participation in communication is both a communication right and a primary human right.

#### 4 III) Listening is a form of participation

Scholars and organizations, in attempting to classify participation, have specified differences in the types and levels of participation and in the degrees of participation. Such participation concepts have shaped the current study. Participation in community radio takes many forms. Listening, in this particular study, is taken to be an active form of participation because it "is a creative act, one that involves conscious effort" (Bickford, 1996, p. 144). Corradi Fiumara refers to "...the capacity for attentive listening ...the proper hearing which completes any saying..." (1990, pp. 11-15s), suggesting that listening is an essential, and participatory, element in communication. In essence, listening is a voluntary active perception action. It "seems particularly apt for describing listening as a practice of citizenship" (Bickford, 1996, p. 24) because citizens by listening are at least holding their governments accountable. Listening is the most essential mode of verbal communication. Without it, communication cannot occur. Wolvin and Coakley insists that "the role of listening in interpersonal, as well as in group and public, communicative situations has become more significant in the economic, political, social, mental and spiritual phases of our lives" (1982, p. 9).

#### IV) Participation in Community Radio Along the Thai-Laotian Border

The study revealed that a majority of survey respondents (65.33% or 196 of a total of 300) participated in community radio by listening. About ten per cent of respondents did not participate in listening to the radio because they watched television instead. Nearly half (47.96%) of those respondents who participated by listening to community radio listened every day. They participated in listening because they loved the DJs, or because the DJs played their favorite songs and were well-spoken. A large majority (81.12%) of the survey respondents who participated in listening to community radio had positive views on community radio. Nearly twenty-four per cent considered that the programs were good. Approximately twenty-two per cent said the community station provided useful information. Of the nearly nineteen per cent of listeners who had negative views, most complained about the lack of professionalism of the presenters: the DJ spoke too much, was of little or no value, had a bad voice and produced shoddy work. Apart from participation through listening, some survey respondents also participated in making phone calls to request songs. They said that they wanted to listen to favorite songs and wanted to request songs for a loved one. Some survey respondents also participated by sponsoring the station. The in-depth interviews of individuals who were actively involved in the operation of community radio showed that there were six types of this form of participation in community radio: participation in management and administration, participation in station planning, in production, in sponsorship, in publicity, and in evaluation. Few interviewees participated in governance activities such as station planning, management and administration. Almost all interviewees participated in production activities such as pre-production, production and post-production. Some interviewees participated in station publicity and evaluation. Local businesses such as shops, restaurants and shopping malls participated in sponsorship. These local enterprises were allocated announcements and/or spots in return. Slightly more than one third (34.09%) of the interviewees said that they had received an invitation to produce a program from the director or station manager of the community station. They participated by producing programs to publicize information about their offices or work. Nearly thirty per cent participated in community radio for reasons of self-interest: they wanted to be DJs, or wanted to work in the local area, or wanted to have a go at producing radio programs. Approximately nine per cent said that they participated in community radio because of a personal relationship, either through their families or other connections. Approximately nine per cent said that their reason for participating was to benefit the community, the society, the people and the nation.

125

#### V) Community Radio and its Role in Thai-Laotian Relations

Nearly one quarter (24.32% of 37) of interviewees claimed that the role which community radio played in Thai-Laotian relations was mostly for the benefit of Laotian listeners, who, by listening to the radio, received Thai information on issues such as travel, law and regulations, traditional events, education, trade, politics, health and hospital services. Both the central Thai language and local dialects were used in producing programs in community radios in NK and NP provinces. Only the central Thai language was used in programs in MD community radio. All radio presenters in the three provinces were Thai except for the presenter of an English program in NK province. There were two programs in NP province aimed at Thai and Laotian listeners. The study found that Laotian people did participate in

Thai community radio, usually by listening, making phone calls to request songs and visiting community radio stations. Requested songs could be dedicated to either Thai or Laotian listeners. Although Thai songs dominated community radio air times, Laotian songs were also played. Laotian people who crossed to visit the station sometimes brought presents such as food. Nearly nineteen per cent (18.92% of 37) of interviewees noted that community radio played its role in fostering Thai-Laotian relations by entertaining Laotian listeners via music programs. However, nearly eleven per cent mentioned that community radio benefited both Thai and Laotian people, in particular by providing information about both Thai and Laotian activities or events for the two neighbors. Approximately five per cent mentioned that using north-eastern local language in the radio bonded Thai-Laotian relations. However, approximately eight per cent expressed uncertainty about whether community radio played a role in Thai-Laotian relations. One respondent considered that this medium could play only a very little role in Thai-Laotian relations because of the restriction of the frequency.

## VI) Attitudes towards Community Radio Role in Strengthening/Fostering Thai-Laotian Relations

All forty-six interviewees believed that community media had a crucial role to play in the strengthening/fostering of Thai-Laotian relations. Approximately seventy-eight per cent believed this strongly, while approximately fifteen per cent expressed moderate belief. Nearly thirty-five per cent of those who believed strongly, explained that community media had a crucial role in providing information about Thai education, Thai and Laotian laws and regulations, careers, cultural events, social activities, personal announcements, Thai hospital services and trade, which helped to strengthen/foster the relations between the two countries. Approximately thirty-nine per cent further commented on the capacity of the frequency at which Laotian people could access programs, the professional production of the radio, the popularity of the radio among Laotian listeners and the program format of community radios. Approximately fifteen per cent of those more moderate believers considered that radio had a crucial role to play in the strengthening/fostering of Thai-Laotian relations, but believed that this was because of the location of the stations, which were close to Laos, as well as the attributes of the radio and its ability to provide information from both sides.

126

## VII) Participant Recommendations for Furtehring Community Radio's Role Regarding Thai-Laotian Relations

The in-depth interviewees all (of 29) made recommendations about what community radio should do regarding Thai-Laotian relations with regard to content, programs and activities. In general it was felt that community radio should broadcast content on communication, transportation, trade, the Thai-Laotian relationship, Buddhist doctrines, Thai and Laotian events, news, information, and government announcements. Programs should provide for greater Laotian participation by involving them in production and interviews. The station should also exchange information, knowledge and radio personalities and arrange joint activities between the two countries. Some, however, argued that community radio should just provide entertainment for both sides because having other roles could possibly be

harmful. They also believed that experts should produce programs on relations. Slightly more than one fifth (21.00%) of the three hundred survey respondents suggested that community radio should foster good relations. Some ways in which this could be done were also recommended: the radio could be a panel for exchanging information, provide information on the two countries and provide information to enhance understanding.

### VIII) Conclusion

It could be considered that people in the three provinces along the border believe that community radio plays a part in the fostering/strengthening of a good relationship, but it was thought that community radio played this part mainly through entertainment and the provision of information on things which affected the locality. Laotian people clearly appreciated the provision of Thai community radio. They participated in listening and by making phone calls to request songs and visiting station. Two community radio stations were seen as playing a role in preserving local dialects while one station acted as an English educator. In general, community radio was viewed positively. Many listened to it every day. They saw it as a positive way of meeting their desire for entertainment, news and information. However, apart from listening, making phone calls, writing a letter or sponsoring a station, survey respondent participation occurred at a low level. Of those in-depth interviewees who had a more active involvement, almost all participated in program production: few participated in station management, administration or planning. Participation was also generally as a result of invitation or because of self-interest. Respondents believed listening to community radio had beneficial effects both on themselves and on others and were happy to express opinions about how such effects could be fostered or maintained. While some expressed doubts about the best use of community radio in terms of fostering good relations between Thailand and Laos, all respondents seem to consider community radio a valuable resource. However, the community radio audience was generally seen as a passive audience. This sender-receiver or one-way model reflects the need to ensure that the philosophy of community radio as a two-way, participatory, communication medium is promoted when community radio is being considered as a tool of participatory communication. The study also emphasizes how positions at the station were won through family or relationship connections. Hierarchical and vertical influences are therefore pitted against notions of genuine participation in community radio, suggesting that, under pressure, the degree of participation could end up being reduced. More effort needs to be made to ensure access to anyone who wishes to participate. The study also showed that relations between Thai and Laotian people in terms of their participation were generally not seen as equal or horizontal. There were no Laotian participants involved in the actual running of the stations. Laotian participation was generally seen as appropriately at a very low level. Thai-Laotian relations can be strengthened by Thai and Laotian participation in community radio. Although participation in communication may be considered both a communication right and a primary human right, it requires both encouragement and a clear understanding of the philosophy behind the medium if it is to attract wide, horizontally based levels of participation, especially across cultures. As White (2001, p. 233) points out, "it is important to build community media concepts and principles into the philosophy of communication, which constitutes the foundation for communication values".

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