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Community-Based Media in Promoting Identity and Culture: A Case Study in Eastern Thailand

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the role of community-based media in information distribution in the Riverside community, a cultural tourism destination in Chanthaburi, Eastern Thailand. It has started to produce its own media, and to use social networks to promote itself to the nation. Exploring the role of community media produced by locals will reinforce the idea that community media have provided much more effective communication channels for local people in a community environment. 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. Moreover, this study reflects the idea of ‘hyperlocal’ media. With approximately one hundred households on which to focus, it is much easier for ‘hyperlocal’ to reach local people by providing local news, covering local politics and engaging people in the affairs relevant to their area.

Key words

Community-based media, hyperlocal, Thailand, the public sphere

Introduction

This research focuses 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 activities can unite members in this community. With more than a hundred households in the community, each community-based media plays a significant role in creating, sustaining and promoting a strong community. Through the age of digital technology, 'hyperlocal' or 'space of community' issues on the internet have been much more influential for the local community sector in every country in Southeast Asia, including Thailand.

Methodology

I employ a small and single case study of a community, centred on the Riverside community — a popular cultural tourism destination — in Chanthaburi, Eastern Thailand. This community is about 300 years old and today encompasses approximately one hundred households.

A key element of my methodology will be ethnographic action research or EAR. 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 research project through a rich understanding of the community (Tacchi et al., 2003; Tacchi et al., 2009). It follows a traditional action research cycle of planning, doing, observing, and

reflecting which will be used to explore this in-depth case study. The research is designed to fit as much as possible into the everyday flow of village life to ensure maximum participation of community members with minimum disruption. This flexibility will encourage community members to speak freely about their views on alternative media and its impact on their lives. This research aims to better understand the role of community media in this particular community.

The Public Sphere

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 famous German sociologist and philosopher. The public sphere is an arena where individuals come together and freely discuss what influences political action. As Habermas (1989) argues, capitalism requires a public space where information can be freely exchanged. Information such as business, culture and politics might be freely discussed. He argues that, in evolving public sphere institutions such as salons and coffee houses, conversation took place among equals whose private interests and inequalities were suspended. As a result, it allowed for logical and rational discussion and debate on questions of state action and policy. Habermas (1989, p. 49) states:

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... 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.

With guaranteed access for all citizens in the public sphere, Habermas believes that these characteristics can enrich and advance a democratic state. I suggest that the notion of the public sphere is a critical framework for analysing whether nowadays, society can reach its own expectations. It allows the researchers to test whether the freedom of expression and public opinion are realized or limited by the distribution of the media resources.

However, as time passes, rapid social changes, social developments, literacy growth and industrialization have decreased the importance of the public sphere, thus, challenging the relevance of Habermas's concept. A clear distinction between public and private, identified by Habermas, no longer exists. In the 21st century, 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 idea of multiple public spheres is proposed by critics of Habermas's theory like Nancy Fraser, an American critical theorist.

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 the public sphere (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, regarding the notion that the common good should be promoted by rational debate in the public sphere, Fraser (1990) 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) considers that the idea of a multiplicity of publics is much more preferable to the concept of a single public sphere 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, p. 446). 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. 123).

In this sense, I argue that community-based media as multiple public spheres have the ability to intensify local people 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, and at the same time, challenging the mainstream.

Concept of Community

Concepts of community in today’s academic discussions are wide and varied. From a system perspective, the term ‘community’ seems like a living creature, consisting of various specialized functions. It works within specific boundaries to meet community needs. As exemplified by Thompson and Kinne (2011), a healthy community should have well-connected boundaries, comprising effective sectors which respond to problems and solutions and enhance its well-being.

Community is a broad topic within sociology, and the social sciences generally. Sociology as a special science is defined as: “the study of social aggregates and groups in their institutional organization, of institutions and their organization, and of the causes and consequences of changes in institutions and social organization” (Reiss, 1968, p. 1).

According to Bartle (2007), ‘community’ can be defined as a sociological construct based on a set of interactions and behaviours that have meanings and expectations between the community members. The actions are based on shared expectations, meanings, beliefs and values of individuals.

From the individual perspective, people have their own sense of community belonging. It is beyond the definitions of community applied by researchers and those in leadership positions. Minkler and Wallerstein (2004) assert that individuals may have a sense of membership to many communities, not limited to only one. This sense is changeable over time and may affect their participation in community activities.

It can be seen that each definition of community is directly influenced by people as the main characters. As a result, it is essential to know how many individuals fit the norms of a community’s construction.

Communities and Media Geographic Territory

Some communities are immersed in geographically defined areas. However, nowadays, community people rely more on computer-mediated communications. There has been less interaction between neighbours according to Lee and Newby (1983, p. 57), “There may be little interaction between neighbours. Rather it is the nature of the relationships between people and the social networks of which they are a part that is often seen as one of the more significant aspects of ‘community’”.

In this way, communities do not have to be solidarity groups of densely populated neighbouring countries. They might exist as social networks of friends or cousins who do not even live in the same neighbourhoods. This is why the term '*community*' has been problematic when related to media studies. The use of the term '*community*' can no longer assume that the audiences necessarily reside in the same geographical territory as exemplified in Kristy Hess's study, *Breaking Boundaries*. She asks an editor of a small online Australian newspaper about the readers of his site in Australia. He answers,

Who is our audience? It's difficult question really and we are still guessing. There are the usual suspects—the people who live here, but ... increasingly there are many more readers who don't live here, but they either most certainly once lived here, they still know someone who lives here ... or they want to come and live or work here (in Hess, 2013).

Instead of focusing on a geographic locality, nowadays, scholars have focused more on how media serve community by engaging participation, points of views and media activities (Eckert, 2000).

Rather than a notion defined by place, I argue that the term '*community*' can be interpreted as embracing social systems and relations which involve the sense of sharing of the same interests among people.

Community-Based Media

There have been suggestions to reconceptualise Habermas's notion of the public sphere shown in many studies of community and Indigenous media in Canada, Australia and the South Pacific (Avison & Meadows, 2000; Forde, 1997). They state that the term of overlapping and parallel public spheres –

space where people in the similar cultural backgrounds engage in the same interests and activities– should be more emphasized rather than adopting the ideal single public sphere. The activity called “across lines cultural diversity” (Fraser, 1993, p. 13) emerges when people articulate their discursive activities and formulate their opinion or positions on issues which are later extracted from their preferable minor spheres to a wider public sphere. As a result, Meadows and his colleagues (2007, p. 68) point out, “What we might term, a ‘community public sphere’ can be seen as a discrete formation or space that develops in a unique context and as a product of contestation with the main public sphere”. Community-based media clearly is already deeply implicated in representing the multiple public spheres. It facilitates various community public spheres which might be incorporate a process of cultural empowerment. As a result, it can be assumed as a supply of building multiple and complex cultural literacies and media through a localised and personalised participation scale (Meadows et al., 2007).

There are various definitions of community media. Berrigan (1981, p. 8) defines community media as:

...an adaptation of media for use by the community, for whatever purposes the community decides. They are media to which members of the community have access, for information, education, [and] entertainment, when they want to access. They are media in which the community participates, as planners, producers, performers.

Fuller (2007) shows that community media is the media in which its audiences have ready access to information to serve their needs, and can participate in the production level. She also describes community media as an alternative to mainstream media by providing a deeper level of local content.

To conclude, the community members are the key factor in facilitating the function of community media. There is a dynamic relationship between community media and community members.

Characteristics of Community-based Media

There are four essential characteristics of community-based media provided in this section – localism, diverse participation, storytelling and empowerment. The first characteristic is *localism*. Community-based media is created primarily with and by people of a specific geographic location. Johnson and Menichelli (2007) assert that community media helps define the places where people live and how they relate to one another, and which also reflect cultures and community values. Localism is a community broadcasting strength. The local audiences are passionate in their responses towards community radio and TV stations. They feel like they are the members of a big family by being offered channels or places where they can connect to each other and share a similar cultural background.

The second element is *diverse participation*. “Community media insists on the inclusion of diverse voices within the community, and their production and distribution processes emphasize community participation” (Johnson & Menichelli, 2007, p. 3). Examples include Chinese radio stations in New York, Thai radio programs in Brisbane and Islamic community radio in Southern Thailand. These community media serve and embrace their audiences, and create in collaboration with the community they live. Meadows et al. (2007, p. 71) also state “the instances of ‘micro-participation’ enabled by community media contribute to a broader ‘macro-participation’ as participants actively adopt civic attitudes and actions and perform a pivotal role in a healthy democracy”.

Storytelling is another characteristic. Hamilton and Weiss (2005, p. 1) states, stories is important because it can make people human. Community members reflect the community's history and culture through those stories for which community media is a channel. It allows the members to tell their story and experiences. Johnson and Menichelli (2007) point out that the stories can start a deliberative process among community people and unite them together.

The final element is *empowerment*. Dahl (1957) defines "power" in terms of the relationship between people and their ability to encourage others to respond to personal needs and desires. The foundation of empowerment is based on the idea that power can change and even be extended. Community media is a process of giving power to individuals. It aims to put communication tools in the hands of those people, to share access with non-professionals, and to support community building and self-expression. Community media empowers people by providing a voice to the voiceless (Hamilton & Weiss, 2005).

The Role of Community-based Media

Community-based media provides more in-depth exploration of the issues compared to mainstream media. The community media formats have weakened the value of the news productions of major media outlets. To illustrate, mainstream media, arguably, provides too simple media content while community media provides people more opportunity to explain everything in more details and also more power to control, as shown in the statement, "you are more likely to do live stuff on community radio than on commercial media and that means less chance of your stuff being edited. It can be more real with community radio" (4ZZZ community group interview).

Empowering cultural preservation and transmission is also one of the most beneficial roles of community media. Community media has been chosen as channels to represent, to strengthen and to reinforce a unique ethnic identity as exemplified in Australia. The term 'Indigenous', 'First people' and 'Aboriginal' media and communication are employed to emphasize that those media are produced by them and for them. The power of Indigenous media can strengthen traditional ways of thinking, culture and identity. Zellen (1998, p. 2) demonstrates that the major reason for the interest in Indigenous radio is the opportunity to present the Indigenous language and to rescue them from extinction. Indigenous people have been using various media such as radio, video and film as new tools of internal and external communication; beyond that, they use them to resist the outside cultural domination.

Community media has been identified as a key factor in creating community connectedness and a sense of community well-being (Forde et al., 2009). An example is the benefit of community radio. Community radio programs also act as a channel of connecting disparate sections of particular ethnic communities which had never intended to make contact with each other (Ewart et al., 2007). Ethnic language programs in community radio have the ability to provide the locals with the sense of belonging to the community and to remind them of their national homelands.

You get to listen to the radio and you feel at home listening to your own language. This community is very isolated from other Tongan communities in Australia. Without the radio program we would feel very cut off. There is no Tongan food or music here (in Adelaide) and so the radio program gives us a sense of home (5EBI Tongan language focus group).

Public Relations and Community Tourism

Public relations (PR) is an important tool for tourism marketing. Jackson (2001, p. 1-2) introduces the concept of PR to show that it provides an overriding social benefit when people have a voice and produce long term harmony because harmonious relationships are fortified with trust. He also points out that the role of communication in PR is not just in transmitting information but also intuition and emotion.

PR has also been used in tourism industries in order to stimulate economic growth. In Asian Countries, for instance, China is a country that uses foreign tourism as a PR element in accelerating the country's economic development. It has developed rapidly since 1978 because of China's policy of "opening doors to the outside world" (Tisdell & Wen, 1991). As a result, in 2003, the Chinese tourism industry kept developing continuously and healthily. It reached around 3,000 billion Chinese Yuan Renminbi, an increase of 14% over 2012, and provided over 500,000 direct job opportunities (TravelChinaGuide, 2013). Another example is the cooperation among China, Japan and South Korea. These three countries made an agreement to accelerate the strengthening of identity and cultural exchange and the promotion of the cultural prosperity of Eastern Asian countries. "The three countries select a 'Cultural Envoy of East Asia' to not only promote cultural exchanges among citizens of the three countries, but also introduce the splendid culture of East Asia to the global audience" (Xuequan, 2013, p. 1). They also organized some festival and cultural events such as art performances, exhibitions and academic conferences starting from 2014, and these activities were promoted by using the media.

Social media plays a vital role in the promotion of tourism. Tourism can no longer be examined in relation to geographic places or spaces. As Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier (2002, p. 416) state, "we cannot afford to ignore the

revolutionary changes information technology brings us, which inherently affect the ways we think of linking up to each other and our notion about place and space”. In Australia, there is the “Tourism Australia's Social Media Program” launched by Tourism Australia, an Australian Government agency responsible for attracting international tourists to Australia. One of its marketing strategies is to build competitive digital capacity by delivering digital and online devices and applications that meet target customer needs. Its marketing activities have included a focus on encouraging conversations about Australian tourism through main social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Google Plus, Instagram and Pinterest (Tourism Australia, 2014).

New Media Overview in ASEAN

ASEAN has witnessed a high adoption rate for online activities by individuals along with outstanding growth in digital media. ASEAN countries show a stronger interest in new online service activities than the global audience in 2011 (Sleigh et al., 2012). The social networking service and website is highlighted as a steady increase in internet use by individuals. For examples, in Indonesia, the number of social media users grew by 14 per cent in 2010, and dramatically increased by 65 per cent in 2011. In a recent year, around 40 per cent of internet users in Myanmar have Facebook accounts (Sekhar, 2012).

In cyberspace, effective community networks are formed. In Thailand, during the flood crisis, people were looking for a voice of ‘authenticity’ instead of ‘authority’ (Rodloytuk, 2011). Community people rallied around each other on social media sites especially Facebook. Rodloytuk (2011) points out that people forged new connections with ‘total strangers’ and as a result, built a community of trust where information has shared on the constantly-changing flood situation minute-by-minute. The example of a popular Facebook page is *Tell me quickly if there are floods (nam ma hai reep borg)*.

By 2015, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) has the goal of regional economic integration. Consequently, there should be a lot of development in communication inside each ASEAN country with enhancement projects of connectivity within each country. The online media cooperation in a smaller sector seems to be effective. Four Southeast Asian English-language newspapers – The Star from Malaysia, the Jakarta Post from Indonesia, The Nation from Thailand and the Philippine Daily Inquirer – launched their joint ePaper subscription with the support of the CIMB Group, a leading ASEAN Universal Bank. It aims to offer opportunities to the readers to read the news from the local perspective of each country. As a Chief Executive Officer Wong Chun Wai said, "it is an opportunity for readers to widen their knowledge and know their neighbours on a more meaningful level" (Meikeng & Tan, 2014, p. 1). Epapers are able to reach approximately 450 million out of the 600 million residents of ASEAN (The Jakarta Post, 2014, p. 1).

Within the diversity of ASEAN countries, it is hard to be a single communication society. I argue that online activity is a good start. With online media cooperation in a smaller sector, it is easier to gain the success. In cyberspace, individuals have the ability to create communities and to connect themselves with other people because it is flexible and accessible. This kind of online engagement has become a great benefit for ASEAN citizens.

Hyperlocal Media

Hyperlocal media focuses on the stories and articles which larger mainstream media organizations avoid. It serves the interests of communitywide and regional audiences. Hyperlocal media has much in common with community media in that both focus on even smaller geographic areas than national media, but it tends to be online. 'Hyperlocal' can be defined as:

... 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 (Howley, 2009, 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 an updated local information and engaging local people in the affairs relevant to their area. Kurpius, Metzgar and Rowley (2011, p. 774) state 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 attend a public meeting. It has also lowered obstacles so that people can easily launch community news sites on their own.

There are also examples of hyperlocal sites emerging in many countries. One example is News Community Media's 'whereilive.com.au' website in Australia. Sinclair (2010, p. 1) concludes that: "(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 whom are Chinese.

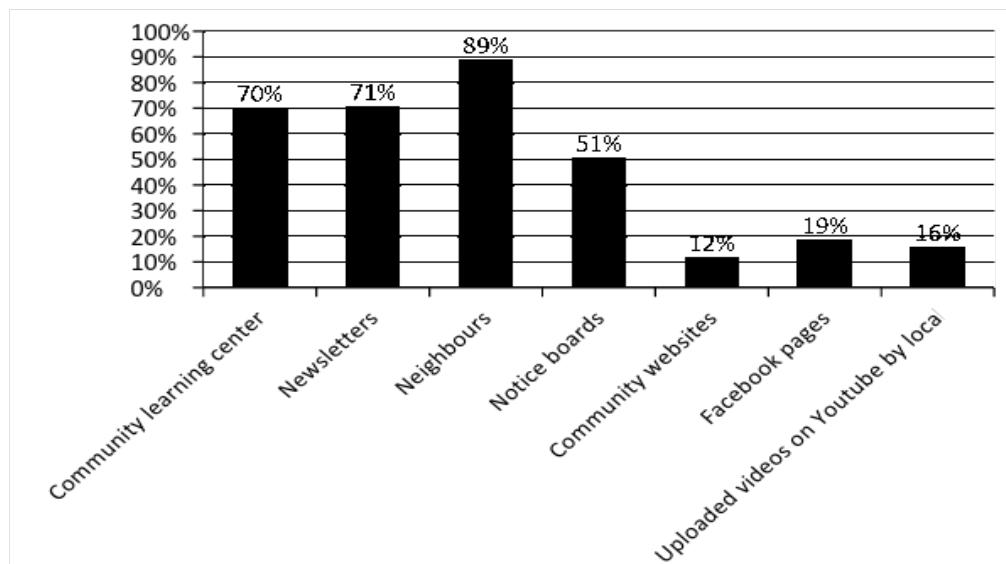
Hyperlocal journalism is also popular in Southeast Asian countries. For example, in Singapore, Straits Times Online Mobile Print (STOMP) is an Asian citizen-journalism website which won the World Newspaper Association's IFRA award for Best in Online Media in 2008 for its use of

citizen journalism content to meet the changing needs of readers. This site is hyperlocally successful in a style and approach that is different from conventional news websites.

Results and Discussion

Of the hundred participants in the community, sixty-six are female and thirty-four are male. Fifty-nine per cent of participants are over the age of fifty. Participants aged 36-50 years accounted for twenty-four per cent while twelve per cent are 26-35 years, and only five per cent are 18-25 years. I divide the information distribution activities among the Riverside community members into 3 categories – community-based media, commercial media and the media supported by the government.

Graph 1. Community-based media use



Of a hundred participants, face-to-face communication is the highest at eighty-nine per cent. People are the most powerful media in the community.

The community learning center, a community meeting point, is also the popular place where the community members gather for news, information and discussion. Newsletters are the second most accessible media. The reason why the traditional newsletters work effectively is that they are free and 'touchable'. Newsletters are produced by the community leader teams and are sent out to every household. One participant suggests that he prefers getting information from newsletters and notices rather than from the neighbours. He states:

When I am not home, the neighbour walked pass my house, so I miss some information that I should know... or I could say there is still some people who are ignored by neighbours. I think it does not work if we so much depend on our neighbours in order to get news. We need something more effective...or something up-to-dated which we can access anytime and anywhere in our house.

Online media activities such as community websites, Facebook pages and online uploaded videos can reach a small numbers of community members. The reason is the most of the community members are over the age of 50. One participant says, "the internet is just OK, but not effective because lots of people here are older. You know that they cannot deal well with this kind of innovation". However, adults aged 18-35 have more frequent use of the internet in their everyday life for different purposes such as work-related matters, entertainment and social connections. About seventeen per cent of the community internet users state that they have participated online concerning community matters including participating in the community social media sites, responding to the chat room and also creating blogs about community issues. Some participants point out that, although they cannot attend the community meeting, they can still be involved online.

Although online activities concerning community matters are small in number compared to other traditional media, they accelerate the sending of messages from the community to the nation, especially in the promotion of community tourism as exemplified in a Facebook post.

We have just around a hundred households in the community, but we have got nearly a thousand people following us on Facebook. There are not just us. It means people outside want to know about us...want to know what is going on in the community. When we have got something like street events, we post it on Facebook. You see... lots of people come to our community. Then, when those people come here, they take a picture and post it in on Facebook, so their friends know what is going on in our community. Now, you can guess what's next. Yes, lots of people come here. This is so much like a snowball game (P. Chatmalai, President of Riverside Community Development Association, personal communication, August 28, 2014).

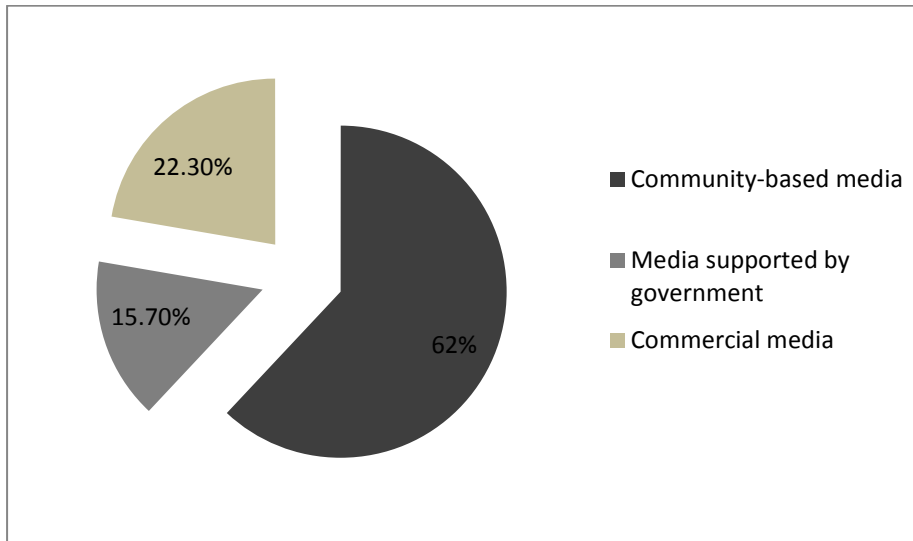
Then, I will provide the study results concerning media outlets from outside the community. The most popular commercial media which influenced the community members is the local commercial TV. Cable TV has the ability to reach 69 households in the community, while local commercial magazines and mainstream television reaches a similar proportion of around 25 per cent of the households. One of the participants says that these media outlets help to promote mainly the community tourism by stating:

I am so glad that there are some people outside interested in producing media content about this community. Local magazine like AboutChan is so informative, and the pictures in there are so beautiful. I think a lot of tourists come to our community because of

they write about us, you know? I am afraid that one day they will stop doing it.

The media channels supported by the government also play an essential role in the community. Wire broadcasting services, sometimes called conventional public address systems can reach approximately 62 per cent of the participants. The system works within two square kilometres, so it is quite effective for a small area like the Riverside community. This system needs speakers to convey messages to the community members. However, there are still the concerns about the wire broadcasting services. There are insufficient numbers of the speakers and sometimes the speaker volume is not loud enough. Voice broadcasting through speakers, broadcasting car and radio programs is so important for a commercial community like the Riverside community because it is flexible for merchants to receive the information while working. "I am always busy during the day. My mouth, my hands and my eyes are for the customers. I prefer something that I can listen to it while working at the same time," according to one participant. However, there is also a suggestion to the government how to improve the media activities. A variety of news content is needed: "the governments should help promoting the community in the other ways, not only the street market, we need to promote more about our community value and history," one participant said.

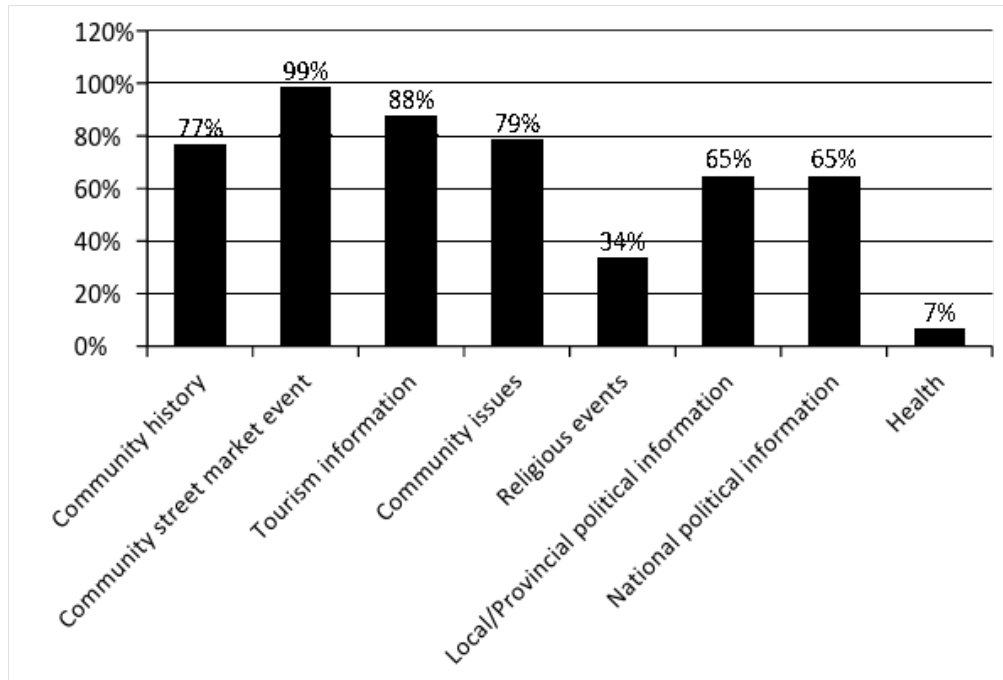
Graph 2. Comparison of three media use categories



When comparing the three media use categories, I found that the community members depend on community media and themselves. Around sixty-two per cent of the participants rely on the media produced by the community. Second in importance is commercial media produced within the province. The government media is just the supporter which helps strengthen the communication in the community. As one participant commented: “community media should work together with the help from the government and other commercial media, so the community members will not miss anything important”.

Another beneficial aspect of the community-produced media is that everything in the community can be news (Sinclair 2010). One of the participants gave an example: “there was a wife run after her husband around the community. It was so funny that she tried to hit her husband with the wok. People shared the incident on the Facebook, and discussed on the community web board. This means news for me”.

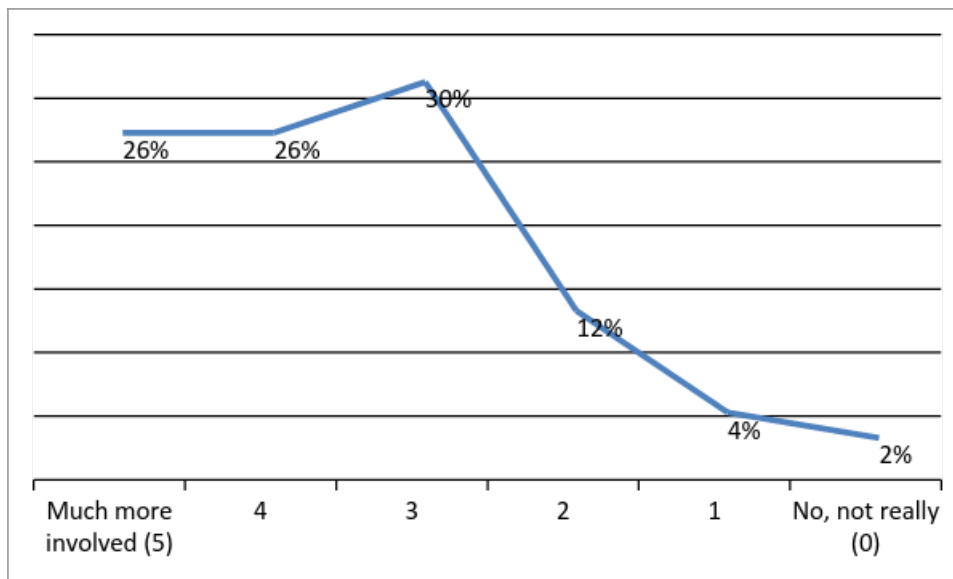
Graph 3. Media content



The media content concerning commerce and tourism has the most influence on this community. Ninety-nine per cent of people state that they receive the information about the community commercial events like a street market, and eighty-eight per cent is about community tourism. Content concerning community issues is the second influence of seventy-nine per cent. The community history is seventy-seven per cent. Beyond that, the community members are also interested in the political news at both the local and national level accounted for sixty-five per cent. Lastly, seven per cent of them searched for the information about health in community media.

Furthermore, the participants were asked to rate how much the community-based media made them feel more involved in the community.

Graph 4. Influence of community-based media



However, a few participants do not agree that the community media are effective in uniting them. These participants claim that they are disconnected because they have no ability in producing, managing or changing anything in the media yet, sometimes, they do not agree with the media content. The highest proportion that is thirty per cent of the participants say they feel involved in the community because of the media, but the media need to be more updated. Twenty-six per cent of the participants feel very involved and another twenty-six per cent feel much more involved showing that the community media plays a vital role in the community involvement. These participants point out that the media made them feel more important. As one participant says, “I feel like I have been cared for someone”.

Those community media I discussed above help Riverside community members develop in their own context and style. They are very effective in allowing community members to become empowered, to preserve their cultural background, and to promote themselves to the external environment. According to Meadows et al. (2007), the community media facilitates this unique community public sphere which can be defined as a cultural

empowerment. The online media activities among the community members also suggest that, while the internet obviously breaks down geographical boundaries, hyperlocal is the tool to deepen the meaning of a place and to deliver a range of new and better local services (Howley, 2009; Kurpius et al., 2011). It means people have more ability to attend community participation in their households.

The role of community-based media in Riverside community functions as community connection, cultural preservation and as a tourism promotion. Community media has the perfect role in creating community connectedness and engaging people's participation (Forde et al. 2009). As the study shows, about fifty-two per cent of participants claim that the media makes them feel involved in the community, which can lead to a higher level of individual participation which enhances the democratic environment in the community (Meadows et al., 2007).

As Forde et al. (2009) state, community media are more able to convey the nation's social identity and cultural diversity which I found to be practical in this community. The highest percentage of media content about community history shows how community members preserve their value and facilitate their identity and culture to others and the nation by using their own media outlets.

Moreover, the Riverside community promotes their history as their cultural product, their attractions and events by using their community media, especially online channels. There is a significant number of social media activities. Using Facebook to promote tourism has been found effective in engaging people to a high level without the barrier of space and place (Wang et al., 2002).

Conclusion

This is another study of reconceptualising Habermas's concept of the public sphere. I conclude that community-based media has an effective ability to characterise the unique Riverside community members in the community environment. Their identity, history and tourism as their cultural products have been distributed as the flow of information within the community and also into the macro environment. The message they create within both traditional and hyperlocal media in their own 'community public sphere' can strengthen the people's perception of themselves as community and also to promote their community as the national cultural tourism to the wider Thai public sphere.

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