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The emergence of a local public sphere under violent conditions: The case of community radio in Thailand's South

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Community radio has strongly changed Thailand's centralised media landscape. This article analyses community radio's role in establishing a public sphere in the context of Southern Thailand's ongoing Malay Muslim insurgency. This article argues that although the new community radio stations potentially provide ethnic communities, particularly Malay Muslims, with a chance to broadcast in their own language, these stations are dominated by middle-class broadcasters and commercial interests. More politically-oriented community radio stations in Southern Thailand feel threatened by both the Thai military's attempts to intimidate them or influence their programming as well as by militant threats to broadcasters who show favour to the Thai armed forces, which results in the self-censorship of sensitive topics. In addition, the community radio sector is fragmented between Malay Muslim and Buddhist broadcasters.

The establishment of community radio in Thailand in the first decade of the twenty-first century was accompanied by high expectations of pluralism and democratisation from media activists and scholars. Definitions of community radio tend to stress that the term 'refers to any radio station that serves a specific geographic group or a community of interest'[1] which offers an alternative to profit-driven mainstream media by giving

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1 Additional characteristics of community radio are said to be a low budget and a high involvement of community volunteers. See http://cima.ned.org/media-development/community-radio#sthash.RDNREHES.dpuf (last accessed 29 Jan 2014).

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a voice to the voiceless.[2] In multiethnic societies with centralised and strongly profit-oriented media systems as in Thailand, where the national majority dominates content and production, community radio is assumed to open up a local public sphere for informing citizens and mobilising them for social change. Unfortunately, this normative view of community radio clashes with the empirical reality in Thailand, where community radio stations do not necessarily represent 'grassroots voices'.

In addition to being a watchdog for local and national government institutions, which are often considered corrupt, media activists in Thailand hoped that community radio in the country's Malay Muslim South, riddled since 2004 by one of the bloodiest separatist insurgencies in Southeast Asia,[3] could ease the roots of conflict by giving the Malays a platform for expressing their politics and culture, which had been mostly excluded from both the Thai Buddhist media centred in Bangkok as well as by the nation-state's 'Thai-fication/isation'-campaigns.[4] Activists and observers also hoped that the local media could improve communication between Buddhist and Malay Muslim communities, often characterised by mistrust moulded by almost ten years of violence.[5]

This article assesses the local public sphere in Southern Thailand, seeking to answer in particular the following questions: Does the introduction of community radio stations in this area enable a form of grassroots participation in the production of media content, challenging the dominance of a media system in which they otherwise have no voice? Who organises these community radio stations and how do they operate under the conditions of insurgency? How do the broadcasters reflect upon the insurgency itself? And, importantly, does the existence of community radio contribute to the establishment of an interethnic public sphere in which Buddhists and Muslims can communicate on local issues?

The data for this article were collected during fieldwork in Southern Thailand between June and September 2012. In-depth interviews were conducted with around 31 representatives of the local community radio sector,

2 Louie N. Tabing, 'Community radio, a means of people empowerment: Opportunity and challenges', in *Peoples' voices, peoples' empowerment: Community radio in Asia and beyond*, ed. Kalinga Seneviratne, pp. 25–31 (Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, 2012).

3 Between Jan. 2004 and Mar. 2013 more than 5,600 people were killed and almost 10,000 have been injured either by Malay separatists and Thai security forces, mainly in the three provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani; http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/node/4147 (last accessed 8 Aug. 2013).

4 Interviews with Samatcha Nilaphatama, Pattani, Aug.–Sept. 2012.

5 Areefa Apitzsch, 'Gerüchte und Gewalt: Versuch einer dichten Beschreibung der Wahrnehmung des Konflikts in Pattani' (diploma thesis, University of Passau, 2010), p. 52.

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journalists, Malay Muslim intellectuals, members of the Royal Thai Army, and the staff of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC). Additionally, the author and his research team participated in a number of local community radio activists' meetings at the Prince of Songkla University (Pattani Campus) and the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) in Yala from 10 to 17 August 2013.

Community radio in multiethnic contexts: A fragmented public sphere?

Here, I use the concept of the public sphere as an open space that is accessible to all those who want to say something and to those who want to listen to what other people say.[6] Therefore, community radio, with its alleged easy access, is an appropriate means to constitute such a public sphere at the local level. From a normative standpoint, Habermas conceptualises *Öffentlichkeit* as a sphere of political reasoning, where, based on rational discourse, citizens form their political will and the idea of a common good can emerge.[7] Modern public spheres produce discourse and images that dominate perceptions of social and political life. Empirical research has shown that even under the conditions of a free press this rational discourse in modern mass media, especially radio and television, appears to be the exception rather than the rule. Arguments tend to be reduced to announcements and political statements without rational reasoning that refer to opposing opinions.[8] Postcolonial as well as feminist critics of Habermasian research have also illustrated that public spheres are characterised by significant processes of exclusion and inclusion with regard to income, gender, and ethnicity.[9]

The differentiation of media, especially mass self-communication,[10] in which the users become both senders and receivers, enabled ethnic and subcultural milieus to increasingly communicate among and between each other. This tendency can be seen in the emergence of ethnic media[11] or broadcasting outlets that concentrate on people with a low

6 Friedhelm Neidhardt, 'Vier öffentliche Vorlesungen im Rahmen der Georg-Simmel-Gastprofessur der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin zum Thema Öffentlichkeit und Politik' (MS, Humboldt University, Berlin, 2000), p. 5.

7 See further Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2010).

8 Ibid., p. 18.

9 Patrick Eisenlohr, 'The anthropology of media and the question of ethnic and religious pluralism', *Social Anthropology* 9, 1 (2011): 41.

10 Manuel Castells, *Communication power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 4.

11 Ethnic media are defined here as 'broadcast, print, and digital communication channels that serve a particular cultural or racial group'. Melissa A. Johnson, 'Incorporating

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educational background. Mass media such as community radio can strongly support ethnic consciousness by facilitating the wider public use of minority languages.[12] This pluralisation could have its downside. It could limit the development of an inclusive national political public sphere or threaten the inclusive function of an existing public sphere, if cultural and other differences and conflicts between groups are not discussed in the public sphere and the interpreters of these cultures retreat into the trenches of particularistic communication and private life.[13] As illustrated below, even in Thailand's community radio sector— where the logic of communication should be based on neither profit nor propaganda, but on the shared concerns of local citizens — there are tensions between these concerns, market forces, and government.

Community radio in Thailand

Community radio is a relatively new phenomenon in Southeast Asia. Although the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a rapid spread of this new form of self-mass communication in Latin America and Africa, community radio spread much slower in Asia, partly because governments were not interested in the medium.[14] In Thailand, radio is the second most popular medium behind television: 48 per cent of the urban population and 33 per cent of the rural population listen to the radio daily.[15] Based on the 1955 Radio and Television Act, all radio stations in the country were under state control and therefore primarily represented Bangkok-centred viewpoints.[16] Broadcasting also developed under the auspices of the military, which ruled Thailand with few exceptions from the 1930s up until the late 1980s, and its civilian agencies, which provided concessions and broadcasting content.

self-categorization concepts into ethnic media research', *Communication Theory* 20, 1 (2010): 108.

12 Usharani Narayana, 'Community radio in India: A critique of broadcasting policy', paper presented at the 22nd AMIC Annual International Conference, Yogyakarta, 4–7 Jul. 2013, p. 4.

13 As the case of the media landscape in neighbouring Malaysia shows, ethnic media can strike a balance between expressing the particularities of an ethnic group and, at the same time, integrating ethnic communities at the local or national level. Faridah Ibrahim, Chang Peng Kee and Kuik Cheng Chwee, *Ethnic media and nation-building in Malaysia: Issues, perceptions and challenges* (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2012), p. 7.

14 Kalinga Seneviratne, 'Community radio in Asia: Slowly coming out of the shadows', in *Peoples' voices, peoples' empowerment*, p. 1.

15 Lisa Brooten and Supinya Klangnarong, 'People's media and reform efforts in Thailand', *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 5, 1–2 (2009): 108.

16 See further Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 'Radio in a transitional society: The case of modern Thailand' (Ph.D. diss., University of Leicester, 1989).

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As a result of this military control, private content providers and journalists developed various forms of self-censorship. News programmes, for example, were produced by the Public Relations Department and distributed by the state-controlled Radio Station of Thailand to stations that were required to broadcast them. It was only very recently that independent news broadcasters emerged. The 1997 Constitution broke the state's monopoly on radio, establishing the right for *sue phak prachachon* (peoples' media): sections 39, 40, and 41 of the Constitution not only guaranteed freedom of the press, it also gave the people the right to access airwaves and demanded the establishment of an independent public regulatory body.[17]

This significant change in Thailand's media sector was partly the result of a media reform movement that emerged after the so-called Black May events in 1992, during which the massive use of military force against pro-democracy demonstrators led to the death of at least 52 people. After the event, scholars and nongovernmental organisations heavily criticised the state's five television channels for following government censorship orders while reporting on the demonstrations. Throughout the first half of the 1990s, a movement of scholars and nongovernmental activists demanded the diversification of Thai media and an end to state control. These demands were reflected in the 1997 Constitution, which, however, did not codify frequency allocation, but stipulated that a law on this had to be drafted within three years.

The drafting the new law on frequency allocation took place in the face of strong lobbying from NGOs, businesses, and government officials. The former demanded a business-friendly law that would support the idea of a free media market, whereas the latter asked for a continuation of state control under the notion of 'national security'.[18] Civil society groups formed the Article 40 Follow-Up Group, which continually organised public events and sent representatives of different groups like the hill tribes, farmers, and children's advocates to observe the parliamentary media bill-drafting committee in order to maintain public pressure on lawmakers.

In 2000, the Frequencies Distribution, Radio and Television Broadcasting and Telecommunication Business Supervision Agency Act was promulgated. Article 26 of the law was widely held up as a success by media advocates, as it required that 20 per cent of the airwaves be distributed to community radio and television.[19] Although Thaksin

17 Pirongrong Ramasoota, *Community radio in Thailand: From media reform to enabling a regulatory framework* (Bangkok: Heinrich-Böll Foundation, 2013), pp. 82–5.

18 Brooten and Supinya, *People's media*, p. 105.

19 Ibid.

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Shinawatra — prime minister from 2001 and deposed by a military coup in 2006 — tried to create a climate of fear among critical journalists by filing libel suits against them as well as by using his economic power, the era of community radio in Thailand had begun. While the pro-Thaksin Red Shirt movement currently relies on community radio for mobilisation, Thaksin himself was not keen on supporting this new type of media because of its potential independence. Yet, as Lisa Brooten and Supinya Klangnarong highlight, it was impossible for Thaksin to publicly oppose the community radio movement while he was in power due to its growing popularity and support among civil society organisations.[20]

Thailand's first community radio station was established in Kanchanaburi province in 2001, but there has been a dramatic increase in the number of such stations since then as radio broadcasting technology became cheaper and easier to operate. Community radio has become a popular medium for various interest groups in the country. In 2009, when public regulators asked community radio operators to apply for licences, more than 6,000 applications were submitted. There are now an estimated 6,500 to 7,000 such stations, an average of 85 to 92 in each of Thailand's 76 provinces.[21]

The number varies from province to province, however: there are approximately 265 *registered* radio stations in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region alone, but only around 18 in Narathiwat province, 26 in Pattani, and 27 in Yala.[22] In addition, some community radio stations are licensed, while others operate illegally.[23] The closure of some radio stations by the authorities was politically based: stations in Northeastern and Northern Thailand as well as parts of Bangkok have been an important element for the mobilisation of the Red Shirts.[24] Since the 2006 coup, the controversial lèse-majesté law has been exploited by various military-backed governments to suppress Red Shirt-affiliated media.[25]

In Northeast and Northern Thailand, Thaksin's strongholds, community stations were shut down by the post-coup military government. The stations were later allowed to resume broadcasting, but only under strict conditions, such as broadcasting all government orders and announcements.

20 Ibid., p. 108.

21 Pirongrong, *Community radio in Thailand*, p. 93.

22 Interview, Phongsak Suppayakom (NBTC staff), Bangkok, 26 July 2012.

23 Interview, Perapong Manakit (Board Member of the NBTC), Bangkok, 4 Aug. 2013.

24 The Red Shirt movement emerged after the ousting of the former elected prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra by a military coup in September 2006. The opposing pro-monarchy, anti-Thaksin movement, the Yellow Shirts, has rather relied on mainstream media, especially television, for mobilising support. Interview, Pitch Phongsawat, Bangkok, 29 Sept. 2013.

25 *Reporters without Borders*, 'Thailand', http://en.rsf.org/thailand-12-03-2012,42054.html (last accessed 18 Oct. 2014).

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In 2009 and 2010, Abhisit Vejjajiva's elected government declared a state of emergency, again increasing the political pressure on the 'Red Shirt media' who were openly mobilising support for Thaksin. Although this censorship largely focused on web sites, according to the secretary-general of the Campaign for Media Reform (CPMR), a Thai media rights NGO, 26 community radio stations were shut down in 2009.[26] In Malay Muslim dominated Southern Thailand, however, the community radio sector has not fallen under added scrutiny since the Red Shirts are not a strong presence.

Malay Muslim media in Southern Thailand

Before the era of community radio stations, Southern Thailand and its 1.8 million Malay Muslims had for a long time no local broadcasting media, although Malays are distinguished from the ethnic Thai majority by their culture, language (Malay), and history.[27] Since the formerly independent Malay Sultanate of Patani was divided between British Malaya and Siam in 1909, Thailand has, sometimes forcefully, attempted to integrate the region into the Thai nation-state and to assimilate its population. After the present-day provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani formally became part of Siam and the rest of the Malay principality of Kelantan became part of the British Empire, the central government in Bangkok systematically replaced the local elite with its own administrators. This political change also demanded the break up of local and regional ethnic identities. Bureaucrats in Bangkok have long viewed the local Malay Muslim identity as a potential threat to national integration and therefore to be replaced by Buddhist Thai identity.[28] In reaction to this assimilationist policy, waves of separatist insurgencies emerged from the 1970s until the early 1990s, and again since 2004. In the South, the Thai central state, dominated by Buddhist officials, has been perceived as a corrupt foreign conqueror.[29]

The Thai state's nation-building project centred on the idea of cultural uniformity and included the school system as well as the media.[30]

26 Pirongrong, *Community radio in Thailand*, pp. 94–5, p. 110.

27 The ethnoreligious composition of Southern Thailand varies from area to area. In Pattani province, for example, the Malay population averages 80 per cent. Marc Askew, 'Landscapes of fear, horizons of trust: Villagers dealing with danger in Thailand's insurgent South', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, 1 (2009): 63.

28 See further Chaiyan Rajchagool, 'The social and state formation in Siam, 1855–1932' (Ph.D. diss., University of Manchester, 1984).

29 Michael K. Connors, 'War on error and the Southern fire: How terrorism experts get it wrong', *Critical Asian Studies* 38, 1 (2006): 151.

30 Sascha Helbardt, Dagmar Hellman-Rajanayagam and Rüdiger Korff, 'Religionization of politics in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar', *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 14, 1 (2013): 51.

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Newspapers, radio, and television were dominated by the Bangkok elite, reflecting the views of the dominant Buddhist majority in the country. Bangkok did not support the development of local media until recently. Although there are Malay printing and publishing houses, which also, for example, publish literature for the Malaysian market, there were hardly any Malay-language newspapers or political magazines. Although a number of political magazines have been published from time to time, they were usually launched by influential figures or had a very limited readership.[31]

While there are presently Malay-language Internet sites that report news on Southern Thailand, these often have a dubious background and are hardly accessible to the rural population. At the time of writing, there was still no local Malay daily. In January 2013, the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) launched the first Malay-language television channel 'to promote the understanding of people in the deep southern provinces of Thailand'.[32] The SBPAC channel can only be received via satellite, which limits its reach. Channel 5, Channel 11, and Thai PBS have also aired programmes in Malay, but they are not popular in the South.

This is problematic, for example, when it comes to national reporting on Southern Thailand. Malay Muslims often feel underrepresented in the Bangkok-based national media. Southern Thailand as well as other regions in the country only find themselves in the national news when something spectacular happens. The southernmost provinces usually appear in national headlines when there has been another dramatically violent incident. In the wake of such events, reporters from the national television channels typically rush to the scene of the bomb blast or assault on state security forces, take photographs, and interview some more or less well-informed officials present at the site before airing the footage. Locals are rarely given a chance to voice their views. Such biased reporting creates a misleading picture of the South as the most restless, dangerous, and chaotic region in the country, since local politics or everyday concerns rarely attract any attention.

Social mobility among the Malay Muslims themselves and the spread of Islamist ideas have not only led them to reflect on their identity in Southern Thailand, it has also led many Malays to question the legitimacy of a Thai state which considers all its peripheries rural and backward — in

31 Interview, Ahmad Somboon Bualuang, Pattani, 7 Aug. 2013.

32 *The Nation*, 'Malay language TV stations is a positive step', 7 Jan. 2013, http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/Malay-language-TV-station-is-a-positive-step-30197359.html (last accessed 19 Mar. 2014).

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contrast to the exemplary centre of Bangkok, which is closely associated with Buddhism. The new Malay middle class, employed in universities, private religious schools, Islamic banks, and even the national bureaucracy, have reinterpreted Islam in a way that guarantees the good life both in the here and now and in the hereafter.[33]

In other words, while this version of Islam stresses private piety and economic success, it also makes claims on the public sphere. Here, most Malays demand public recognition of their particular religion — not a secular state — in which Muslims, Buddhists, and other religious groups in Thailand can live together. These demands include, for example, an extension of sharia law, more state subsidies for Islamic education, a halal food industry, and more government jobs for Malays in the local administration.[34] Public piety, to put it differently, directly affects questions of the public sphere and thus of the media. A public sphere solely dominated by Buddhist officials and Bangkok-based media is no longer acceptable.

Local officials have been divided about community radio: some regard all cultural content that questions national culture as defined in Bangkok as a threat to the cultural unity of the nation, while others fear that community radio could be a security concern as the media could be misused by insurgents. More progressive government administrators have a more neutral attitude or even hope that community radio will bring an end to the dominance of rumours as well as the mistrust between Thai Buddhist officials and local Malays.

In 2003, Witthayu Chumchon Chut Mueang Pattani (Pattani City Point Community Radio), the first radio station in the three provinces, was established. This station was founded by Ja Ahli, Narong Maseng, and other media activists from the Klum Witthayu Chumchon Chut Mueang Pattani (Pattani City Point Community Radio Group), which was set up in the same year.[35] The group later expanded and changed its name to Khrueakhai Witthayu Chumchon Changwat Chaiden Phaktai (The Three Border Provinces Community Radio Network). The group sought the assistance of the Thai Sathaban Phatthana Ongkorn Chumchon (Community Organisation Development Institute), a public agency that paid for the technical equipment to establish their radio station. Later, with the support of the Bangkok-based King Prajadhipok Institute, the group developed training workshops and manuals, introducing locals to methods of setting up and running community radio stations.

33 See Alexander Horstmann, *Class, culture and space: The construction and shaping of communal space in South Thailand* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2002).
34 Personal interviews between Aug. 2008–Mar. 2009.
35 Interview, Ja Ahli, Pattani, 2 Aug. 2013.

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Subsequently, community radio stations were also set up in Khokpho district and Sai Buri district, Pattani province, and, in the years that followed, more stations were launched in Narathiwat and Yala provinces as well. These groups all faced a fundamental problem of funding. An estimated THB100,000–200,000 (US$3,160–6,320) is necessary for the basic broadcasting equipment, depending on the strength of the antenna (although the NBTC only permits the use of a 500-kilowatt unit with a maximum range of 20 kilometres). Monthly expenses — a minimum of THB6,000 (US$190) — adds to the difficulties associated with operating a radio station, without considering additional costs such as staff training.

Dominance of commercial interests and the middle class in broadcasting

Media literacy is considered crucial for democratic citizenship. Media studies stress that the media and public information are the foundations for a better life, social equality, and political participation.[36]

Access to financial and other resources as well as the necessary licensing, managerial, and journalistic knowledge is crucial for setting up and running a radio station — all of these pose certain barriers to entering the sector. Community radio in the South is dominated by institutions such as Islamic schools, mosques, and Buddhist temples as well as individuals such as businessmen or members of the middle class (e.g. teachers, lawyers, academics). A statistical survey of community radio broadcasters in five Southern provinces (Satun, Songkhla, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat) conducted by the Prince of Songkla University illustrates this middle-class dominance. A majority of the broadcasters are tertiary-educated — 57.3 per cent have a Bachelor's degree and 13.5 per cent even have a Master's degree — while 12.5 per cent have a secondary education, and around 7.3 per cent have completed only primary school.[37] Middle-class dominance of community radio is also reflected in broadcasters' occupations. A relatively large percentage of the sample, 23.4 per cent, are either teachers or university lecturers. Business persons and officials follow closely at 18.2 per cent and 17.9 per cent each. Unfortunately, the

36 See further Kurt Imhof, *Die Krise der Öffentlichkeit: Kommunikation und Median als Faktoren des sozialen Wandels* (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus Verlag, 2011).
37 *Khrongkan Sueksa Sathanaphab Botbat Damnoenkan Lae Kansoemsang Khwamkemkhaeng Khong Witthayu Puea Sang Santiphab Nai 5 Changwat Chaidaen Phaktai Tonlang: Changwat Satun, Songkhla, Pattani, Yala Lae Narathiwat (2012)* [Research project on the situation, role and empowerment of Peace Radio in the five Southern Border provinces: Satun, Songkhla, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat (2012)], Khanacharn Khana Witthayakan Suesan Mahawitthayalai Songhla Nakharin Witthayakhet Pattani.

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survey does not mention farmers or labourers as distinct categories.[38] These numbers do, however, imply that the latter categories are underrepresented in community radio.

In other words, local communities are hardly taking responsibility for establishing, managing, and producing content for these radio stations. The monopolisation of community radio by a few people is not unique to Southern Thailand; it seems to be the case in other parts of the country, where interest in running these stations is often more commercial than socio-political. An estimated two-thirds of Thailand's community stations are commercial in orientation, run by local businessmen to advertise their own or other local companies' products and services. Allegedly, many stations are used by music and media companies to reach a grass-roots audience. This can be partly attributed to the lack of regulation before 2005.[39]

Although Thai law forbids radio stations that are registered as community radio stations to air advertisements, many stations breach this law regularly. Some construction companies, traders, and other business people have established 'community radio stations' in order to promote their products or services. The NBTC is well aware of this phenomenon, but it does not have the capacity to monitor how the stations are being used. Furthermore, it is often hard to distinguish between commercially and politically-oriented community radio stations as some political activists also draw on advertising to finance their political programmes.[40]

Ahmad Somboon Bualuang, a prominent Malay intellectual and newspaper columnist for the national newspapers, argues that community radio largely fails to attract more grassroots attention due to its elitism. He points out that the decentralisation measures introduced in the 1990s, such as the elected Provincial Administrative Organisations and the Subdistrict Administrative Organisations, did not lead to the expected democratisation of local politics, but instead facilitated the domination of these institutions by corrupt local elites (e.g. construction company owners). With some exceptions, community radio broadcasters, local politicians, and local businessmen, who are often also community radio station owners, are, according to Ahmad, part of the same elite group in Southern Thailand, and have

38 Ibid.

39 Pirongrong, *Community radio in Thailand*, p. 93; and Palphol Rodloytuk, 'Thailand: Real vs. commercial community radio', in *Peoples' voices, peoples' empowerment*, p. 256.

40 Since 2012, media laws demand that local radio stations register as either (a) public, (b) commercial, or (c) community radio, at the national, regional, or local levels. Some local commercial stations register themselves as community radio, as the registration fee for the former is THB10,000 against THB500 for the latter. Interview, Somporn Amornchainoppakun (NBTC staff), Bangkok, 28 July 2012.

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a certain level of disregard for the rural and less-educated population. Accordingly, community radio fails to play its role as a critical watchdog:

> Community radio stations could potentially contribute to local democracy by reporting on what the elected heads of the Subdistrict Administrative Organisation or the Provincial Administrative Organisation do for the people, or what they don't do, but most stations just play music all the time. Other stations are owned by politicians or local intellectuals, who want to promote their position.[41]

A related problem is the patronising attitude of many middle-class broadcasters, who consider the rural population to be uneducated and in need of leadership from intellectuals. As one anonymous Malay community radio activist from Yala province expressed it:

> We [the educated people] are the leaders of society. That's how it is in Islamic societies. Listeners now complain that we don't speak village Malay, but only academic Malay. But after ten years of listening to us, they will improve their language standards. We have to be scientific and use logic.[42]

Language appears to be a crucial issue in the social distinction between broadcasters and the local community. Instead of seeing community radio as a means for the reproduction of Patani Malay, intellectuals tend to regard broadcasters who use the local dialect or an 'unprofessional mix' of standard (Malaysian) Malay and local Malay, as 'uneducated'. In this elitist view, community radio does not represent a means for local communities to gather and spread their knowledge. Instead, local knowledge is connoted as being unmodern and unscientific and thus has to be replaced by the rational knowledge that the middle class acquires in universities.

However, there are exceptions to this rule of commercial and middle-class domination: stations that represent community ownership and are based on collective participation. One station in which the local community was involved from its inception in 2003 is the Taawun community radio in Moo Nueng, a village in Bangpoo subdistrict, Ampoe Muang Pattani. When Lateh Mahamah, a local NGO activist, approached the villagers and the Imam of Moo Nueng with the idea of establishing a community radio station in the village, the Imam and others initially opposed the idea, fearing that the station would attract the attention of the security forces.

It took Lateh Mahamah almost a year to convince them of the new opportunities that radio would offer and of the fact that, as it was based

41 Interview, Ahmad Somboon Bualuang, Pattani, 17 Aug. 2013.
42 Interview, Yala, 9 Sept. 2012.

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on the 1997 Constitution, the Thai government supported the project. Eventually, the Imam, a women's group, a group of university students from the village, and the local elementary school joined in to build the station.[43] The mosque provided around THB150,000 for technical equipment, as the radio station would include regular programmes on Koran recitation, translation, and interpretation. A number of outside actors were also involved in establishing the station. For instance, Ja Ahli, a prominent media activist in Southern Thailand, initially assisted the villagers by providing training for the equipment and on the organisational structures of community radio. Staff from the Prince of Songkla University Radio support the station's technical maintenance.

As the radio is nonprofit, its staff is not compensated for their work; activists in Muuban 1 invest their own time and some of their own money in the station. Local actors such as the Imam or university students produce their own content, depending on who is available and what topic is on the agenda. The local women's group, for example, produces programmes on traditional Malay medicine or the role of women in Islam, whereas the village mosque committee is responsible for other religious content. A group of university students from the village goes on air for one hour every Saturday and Sunday, providing important information on matters of education such as on local schools, scholarship opportunities, English language camps, or other youth matters. Pupils from the local schools are also allowed to produce their own content. The district office has also joined the radio station and is allowed to make important public announcements. In other words, the existing organisations, both governmental and nongovernmental, are highly involved in the community radio station. The radio's committee also draws on the mosque and donations from the local population to finance its day to day expenses.

Fear and (self-)censorship

A central feature of Thailand's media has been the nexus between the mass media and (national) security; state censorship and self-censorship by journalists have been ever present. In 1955, the above-mentioned Radio and Television Act established the state as the sole owner and authoriser of the airwaves, thus enacting a form of 'structural censorship'.[44] This tight control was also legitimised by Thailand's anti-communist struggle.

43 Interview, Lateh Mahamah, Pattani, 8 Oct. 2012.

44 Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 'People's media and democratic movements in Asia', in *Media reform going backwards?*, ed. Sopit Wangvivatana (Bangkok: Thai Broadcast Journalists Association, 2005), p. 53.

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In Southern Thailand, the much-criticised Emergency Decree has allowed the military to expand its operations into the civilian realm, allowing the arbitrary use and abuse of power. Legally, the Emergency Decree also allows officials to close down any community radio station, in case they threaten the 'state's security or public order'.[45] There have been no — or at least no known — cases where security officials closed a station for criticising the state or otherwise used physical violence against community radio broadcasters in order to intimidate them.[46] Usually officials use softer tactics in dealing with 'too critical' journalists. In one reported case in 2006, soldiers visited a community radio station owner in Narathiwat and asked him to 'choose a softer tone' (*phut bao bao*) or refrain from 'escalating the situation' for the sake of a 'peaceful and harmonious society' (*sangkhom santisuk*).[47]

Malay community radio station broadcasters point out, for example, that local army units have visited them after they aired programmes that reported on the state's human rights violations.[48] In terms of 'national security', there seems to be some insecurity among radio activists about what can be broadcast:

> Every broadcaster can be held responsible for his or her programme. Yet we really don't know what the state allows us to air and what not. Therefore we must be very careful of what we say and actually, we should also know the law.[49]

Other Malay broadcasters also complained in interviews that the Thai government officials do not distinguish between insurgents and non-insurgent Malays and they therefore consider local journalists as a potential security threat, as one community broadcaster explains:

45 Additionally, the Broadcasting Business Act B.E. 2551 (2008) prohibits broadcasting material that might cause: '1. the overthrow of the democratic government, which has the King as the Head of State; 2. Impact the State's security and public order or good morals of the people; 3. An action that is obscene; 4. Have a serious impact on the deterioration of the people's mind or health.' This law gives the (NBTC) the power to suspend any broadcasts or close the whole station. This law has, to date (early 2013), yet to be applied in Southern Thailand. Two aspects come in here. First, the NBTC does not have the capacity to monitor all community radio stations. However broad the definition of 'state security and public order' may be, the NBTC itself has a tendency not to search for infringements too actively. Instead, regulators act upon complaints brought to them by third parties, checking each case individually. Interview, Perapong Manakit, Bangkok, 18 Aug. 2012.

46 Interviews with various community radio owners and officials at the headquarters of the Fourth Army Region, Pattani, Aug.–Oct. 2012.

47 Interview, Prachya Pimarnman, Narathiwat, 29 Sept. 2012.

48 Various interviews, Narathiwat, 9–26 Sept. 2012.

49 Interview, Mansoh Saleah, Yala, 8 Oct. 2012.

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> Community radio people do not dare to tell the truth about the conflict, because the next day the army will be at your doorstep. They don't understand that we are not separatists, we just want to talk about justice and defend our rights.[50]

These practices are perceived as forms of control — some would even argue censorship — employed by local Malay journalists who want to use community radio as a political platform. Aware of the danger of appearing too critical, they refrain from criticising the Thai state and avoid appearing 'too political'. In a climate of fear and mistrust of a state that has a strong record of human rights violations in dealing with Malay insurgents as well as civilians in Southern Thailand, such visits are, however, well remembered and communicated among Malay community radio broadcasters. Although some Buddhist community radio broadcasters might be aware of these practices, they do not appear to be affected by them.

For their part, officials argue that they just want to restore stability in the region. The Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), a unit responsible for national security, asks local units to 'keep an eye' on community radio stations located in their area of command. If a radio station is suspected of airing 'hate speech' or calls for separation from the Thai state, soldiers have to report to the ISOC command in Pattani. According to an ISOC officer responsible for such monitoring, however, there was only one such report in 2012, about the Prince of Songkla's University Radio.[51]

In March 2012, it was reported to ISOC staff that during a programme called 'Kampong (village) on air', Wanmahdee Wandaud, a well-known local Malay politician, played a Patani nationalist song, criticised the presence of the Thai military, and argued for a 'Special Administrative Zone' (*khet pokkhrong phiset*) in Southern Thailand. During the investigation, ISOC officials asked the PSU campus radio for a copy of the programme, which they then transcribed. Later, officials talked to the station director and asked him to avoid airing 'separatist songs'.

Nonetheless, there is room for critical public discourse about the state. More daring Malay broadcasters turn to other means in order to scrutinise the state's policies in the South. They either use the Malay language to express critical views, which is often successful as neither the security agencies nor the NBTC can vet all content, especially when it is in Malay. Another example is Media Selatan (Southern Media), one of Pattani's best known politically-oriented community stations.[52] This Malay

50 Interview, anonymous Malay community radio activist, Narathiwat, 1 Aug. 2012.
51 Interview, Lt. Colonel Uayporn Chumtong, Fourth Army Area, Pattani, 23 Jan. 2013.
52 In Thai, the station is called Withayau Ruam Duay Chuay Kan (United to Help Each Other Radio).

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community radio produces a programme during which the audience confronts state officials with critical questions. The programme is divided into two parts. In the first part, which is primarily conducted in Malay, the host asks members of the audience to phone in and pose questions they want to ask Thai officials, without giving their full names. During the second part, Thai officials are invited and asked the phone-in questions in Thai, and given a chance to reply to them on air.

The programme's design has two advantages. First, the questioner can remain anonymous and this provides more potential that critical questions will be asked. Second, she or he poses the question in whichever language they are most comfortable with. When the author of this paper was interviewing the owner of the station, for example, a Malay woman called in and asked why Thai Buddhist officials always consider Islamic schools a source of unrest, suspecting all students and teachers of being rebels. These and other questions are written down by the host and in the following part of the programme, which might be broadcast the next day, an official, who could be from the police force, army, district authorities, or any other relevant state agency, is invited to respond.

A second illustration of how community radio enables Malays to express their resistance to the Thais is Radio Nasser in Yala province. The station is run by the Amir Al-Mu' Minin Foundation in Yala, an Islamic nonprofit organisation that seeks to care for children orphaned by the political violence. The foundation uses its own radio station to air portrayals of orphans (or half-orphans). A crucial part of these portrayals are interviews with the children themselves, in which they are asked to talk about how they lost their parents during the insurgency and how this affects their lives. Officially, the foundation makes no distinction between ethnic Malay, Thai-Chinese, or Thai Buddhist children. Therefore, on some level, these children's stories appear ethnically neutral. Nevertheless, while these stories appear, at first glance, to be legitimate expressions of the suffering of all groups in the South, at a deeper level, it reveals a disguised form of resistance against the Thai state. In reality the station only airs stories about Malay (half-) orphans, whose fathers have been allegedly killed by Thai security forces. Stories of Buddhist or Malay children orphaned by insurgent violence are deliberately omitted. Interviews with the children are conducted and aired in Malay, aiming at an emotional effect on the audience, as one producer anonymously explained:

> We cut out those parts of the interview, where the children directly claim that Thai security forces killed their fathers. That would bring us as well as them trouble, but

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> from the rest of the interview every Malay knows who killed their fathers. When people listen to the story at the market in Yala, they begin to cry. It is a way of publicly showing what is really going on here, what the state does to us. Normally nobody dares to publicly express this suffering.[53]

In this sense, community radio enables more daring broadcasters to bring at least parts of what could be called a 'hidden transcript' among Malays into the public sphere — that the Thai state has a long history of subordinating and committing human rights violations against the Malay Muslim minority.[54] For many Malays, the forceful subordination of the formerly semi-independent Sultanate of Patani under Thai rule in 1909 is an act of quasi-colonial oppression, something which they are not allowed to publicly mention or read about in school books. In this sense, the stories of Malay children who are victimised by the Thai state is a manifestation of suppressed collective trauma.

Questioning the legitimacy of violence is not only directed at the state, however. Other Malay community radio stations are equally critical of the violence against civilians and government officials committed by separatist insurgents. Yet, directly questioning the legitimacy of the separatists' cause and the means they choose to achieve this cause, such as daily attacks against security forces and even government schools, can itself be dangerous and is therefore mostly avoided, as it could get community radio stations, especially Malay broadcasters, in trouble. Muslim radio broadcasters are very much aware that insurgents or their informants are listening to them: publicly opposing the insurgents could be a threat to their own safety. Malays and non-Malays in Southern Thailand alike are well aware of the fact that insurgents threaten and, if necessary kill, fellow Malays who pose a threat to them.[55] In 2006, for example, Rosmin Nijah, a female Malay radio host, was killed by insurgents after she regularly supported and cheered the Thai army on the radio. She had received warnings and was asked to stop talking in favour of the Thai army, but refused to give in to the demands.[56]

Contesting images of the state: Counterinsurgency radio

Armies around the world have long used radio for counterinsurgency purposes. In Southern Thailand, the Fourth Army Area, which has a special

53 Interview, Yala, 13 Sept. 2012.

54 James C. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press Academic, 1990).

55 Sascha Helbardt, 'Deciphering Southern Thailand's violence: Organization and insurgent practices of BRN-Coordinate' (Ph.D. diss., University of Passau, 2011), pp. 162–6.

56 Interview, Rungrod Anantoh, Pattani, 19 Sept. 2012.

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unit for local radio, has been trying to use radio for its counterinsurgency. Two types of counterinsurgency community radio stations are evident in the region: first, there are 23 local radio stations fully run by the Thai military in Southern Thailand, each with an approximate range of coverage of 20 to 30 kilometres; second, the army collaborates with around 40 privately-owned radio stations.[57] In the latter case, the military approaches a community radio station and offers to buy airtime from them. Although the price varies from station to station, it costs around THB3,000 per month for three hours of airtime per week. Some stations just sell three hours; others allow army personnel to go on air up to ten hours per week. In some instances, a programme host from the military will come to the station and go on air live, while in others, the military sends written news programmes or announcements to the station and asks the local host to read them.

For some stations, especially those that are more commercially-oriented, this cooperation offers a much-needed regular income. However, a number of Malay community radio stations have rejected these offers because they fear that the military will interfere with their 'broadcasting sovereignty' and misuse their station for psychological operations. This, for many Malay broadcasters, would undermine their audience's trust in the station's core function as an authentic voice of the people, which ought to be independent of the state. Others subscribe to the view that open collaboration with the Thai military will lead to retaliation from insurgents, although there is no evidence that this has ever happened. The army argues that this cooperation does not enter the realm of 'psychological warfare', but is only intended as a public relations measure to 'foster understanding between the people in the South and the state'.[58] Still, many stations reject the offer or stipulate conditions for the cooperation: (1) that the military presenter does not speak about issues of religion or the insurgency; and (2) that the military is not openly supported or propagated during the programme. Being aware of its limited ability to monitor all stations, other community radio stations simply do not present all the material the ISOC sends them, leaving out news or army announcements that they consider inappropriate, particularly news that directly concerns security or propagates the achievements of the army, which is routinely omitted from programmes.[59] As one community radio activist from Pattani, who wants to remain anonymous, reports: 'We can't simply

57 Interview, Lt. Colonel Uayporn Chumtong, Pattani, 23 Jan. 2013.
58 Interview, Lt. Colonel Uayporn Chumtong, Pattani, 23 Jan. 2013.
59 Interview, Mariam Chaisantana, Pattani, 22 Sept. 2013.

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tell the insurgents "Stop it!". What we can do is to report on the problems of society.'[60]

Another example of the danger that speaking out against the insurgency presents is the Thai security forces' failed attempt to win over an imam or popular Islamic scholar to discuss the question of militant jihad on radio or TV. The combined idea of Patani nationalism and jihad is central to the legitimacy of and mobilisation attempts by Malay separatists groups in Southern Thailand.[61] Therefore, Thai security forces have been trying to use this issue for their counterinsurgency campaign, largely to no avail. Many imams in Southern Thailand admit in private that the insurgent violence is illegitimate in the sense that it is not a jihad. For them, one of the main justifications of violent jihad, namely Muslims being prohibited from freely following their religion, is not the case in Southern Thailand. However, all imams who were asked by the Thai military to discuss this topic openly rejected the offer, fearing retaliation by the insurgents — whom the army could not protect them from.[62]

A basic problem is that the military is largely clueless about the actual impact of radio stations on the audience, as an ISOC officer admits:

> We don't even know if the Malays understand us. We should go out more to the people and talk to them personally to assess what impact we actually have. We are currently planning radio projects that would involve the people directly.[63]

Another officer from *Thaksinsamphan*, an army psychological warfare unit, assesses that out of the twenty-three military stations, only about ten stations are well connected to the local Malay audience and can achieve a certain impact. For him, that impact is merely the simple fact that the Malay population would have a different source of information about the Thai state that could counter rumours spread by insurgents:

> In red areas, people avoid contact with state officials and officials themselves are afraid to visit them as well. That is why villagers can be manipulated by separatists, who tell them that officials are cruel people, who kill and torture Malays. Here, we are trying to intervene and make a difference. We tell them that we also provide medical services for villagers or support their economic activities with development aid at the village level. If we do not relate what we say on the radio with these activities on the ground, the radio is meaningless.

60 Interview, Yala, 29 Aug. 2012.

61 Marc Askew and Sascha Helbardt, 'Becoming Patani warriors: Individuals and the insurgent collective in Southern Thailand', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, 11 (2012): 788.

62 Interview, anonymous Thai army colonel, Pattani, 17 Aug. 2013.

63 Interview, Yala, 13 Sept. 2012.

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Reporting on violence

A basic problem for the Southern news media is that since violence broke out in 2004 little information has been garnered about the perpetrators, as the description and the interpretation of data is impeded by a cloud of 'nameless' violence that renders an understanding of the actors, their organisations, and their interests difficult. Furthermore, although scholarly observers, state agencies, and the local population attempt to make sense of these violent acts, they all face the problem of uncertainty: Who are the perpetrators of violence on the 'Malay side'? What are their motives? Are they simply the victims of harassment or the failed policies of the Thai nation-state who are responding with a bloody campaign of revenge? In contrast to the insurgencies in Northern Ireland or in Basque country, no insurgent groups claim responsibility for attacks in Southern Thailand.

In everyday conversations between Buddhists and Malay Muslims, the topics of insurgency and its causes are typically avoided, especially among women who are not considered to be involved in politics because such talks are believed to lead to personal conflicts.[64] Thai Buddhist civilians, as well as Malay Muslim civilians who oppose the insurgency, have become major targets for Malay insurgent violence seeking to drive out the Buddhists from Southern Thailand.[65] Malays, on the other hand, have often found themselves victims of Thai state violence. In other words, the lack of knowledge about the insurgents stands in stark contrast to knowledge about the Thai state's human rights violations, exemplified by excessive state violence in Tak Bai and Kru Se[66] and a myriad stories about the state's abuse of power and discrimination experienced by Malay Muslims. These different perceptions between Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims are reinforced by their separate languages (most Thai Buddhists cannot speak Malay), school systems (Thai government vs the Islamic educational systems), books, web sites, and online chat rooms.

64 Apitzsch, *Gerüchte und Gewalt*, p. 28.

65 Helbardt, *Deciphering Southern Thailand's violence*, p. 143.

66 On 28 April 2004, 32 Malay militants besieged the historic Kru Se mosque in Pattani after a total of 100 militants had attacked government buildings and security installations in Pattani, Yala, and Songkhla. Despite government orders to resolve the stand-off between militants in the mosque and the Thai army peacefully, General Panlop Pinmanee ordered his soldiers to storm the mosque, which resulted in the deaths of all the militants. Six months later, on 25 October, at least 78 Malay demonstrators suffocated in state custody after they were arrested and piled into the back of military trucks. More than 1,000 people had demonstrated in front of Tak Bai police station, Narathiwat province. *Human Rights Watch*, 'No one is safe: Insurgent attacks on civilians in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces', 28 Aug. 2007, http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/08/27/no-one-safe (last accessed 18 Nov 2014), p. 36.

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News of violence is mostly transmitted by rumours communicated along ethnic lines. In contrast to news, rumours cannot be falsified; their origins or sources are typically not traceable.[67] The lack of information about the perpetrators, their motives, and the background to the violence, both by the state and the rebels, lead to rumours as a form of 'mass communication under conditions of a limited public sphere'.[68] Information is highly relevant for making sense of and coping with the unpredictable violence. The lack of reliable information is hence replaced by rumours, which are built on plausibility structures that identify responsibility for and causes of the violence based on existing value systems, cognitive structures, and past experiences.

As a consequence of the lack of a local public sphere, contradictory explanations of violence are not pitted against each other, which would provide opposing versions of the violence and thereby counter the rumours. This is coupled with the fact that very few local Malay Muslims express their opinions publicly on national TV, radio, or in the print media.[69]

How does community radio report on the insurgent violence that has become such a part of everyday life for both Malay Muslims as well as Buddhists in the area and has caused rifts in the social fabric by increasing mistrust between both communities? From content analysis, it seems that community radio stations usually restrict the coverage of violence to news items; comments or background analysis are rarely broadcast. Stations mention the violence in their daily news with more or less detail about the time, place, the kind of violence (murder, bomb, arson, assault, etc.) as well as the number of victims. Perpetrators are sometimes referred to as *chon* ('bandits'), but are more frequently called neutral terms like *phu ko khwam mai sangop*, which might be translated as 'instigators of unrest'.[70] Typically no reference is made to specific groups or the motives for the attacks. Instead the reports tend to mention the impact that the violence has had in terms of numbers of casualties.

In general, community radio stations avoid the topic of insurgent violence and its impact on Buddhist–Muslim ethnic relations. Comments and analysis are rare for several reasons. First, stations that want to cover violence in detail face the covert nature of Southern Thailand's insurgents,

67 Thomas Zitelmann, 'Gerücht und paradoxe Kommunikation: Systhemtheoretische Implikationen der Gerüchteforschung' (MS, Free University Berlin, 2000), pp. 2–3.

68 Ibid.

69 Interview, Ahmad Somboon Bualuang, Pattani, 17 Aug. 2012.

70 Sukri and Patchara stress that 'negative terms' like terrorist (*phu ko kan rai*) should not be used to label the rebels in Southern Thailand.

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which makes information about the perpetrators and what motivates them rarely accessible to journalists. Furthermore, community radio stations usually lack the financial resources, knowledge, and manpower for investigative journalism; instead broadcasters rely on the Internet and personal contacts as sources of information.[71] This weakness in reporting the news can partly be compensated by freely accessible news services for journalists providing information on the rebellion, such as the Isara News Agency run by the Thai Press Development Foundation or Deep South Watch, a Pattani-based information platform and civil society forum, which provides special reports and news items as well as statistical data about deaths and injuries.[72] Second, however, many community radio stations concentrate on entertainment and therefore avoid politics altogether since the broadcasters fear that the audience does not want to listen to such information. As one radio host from Narathiwat explained, 'If I talk too much on certain topics and like go into details, people will be easily bored and turn to another station. I must try to entertain them in this bad situation.'[73] A loss of audience would be accompanied by a loss of revenue from the advertisements on which most stations depend. Third, a number of the Thai Buddhist as well as the Malay Muslim broadcasters that I interviewed saw it as their duty to avoid increasing the distrust between Muslim and Buddhist communities in the three provinces. As such, they intentionally avoid reporting on the rebellion and counterinsurgent violence in detail. Patchara Yingdamnun from the Prince of Songkla's University Radio in Pattani is a case in point;[74] even in cases where it is evident that insurgents or state officials committed a murder, she refrains from naming the perpetrators directly, arguing that 'I don't want children in Pattani to grow up with the suspicion that all the people around them kill or commit violence.'[75]

Patchara and other community radio hosts considered it a problem that their fellow Buddhist community radio hosts too often express anxiety

71 An exception is 'Media Selatan'. In 2012, this station received financial support from USAid for six months. One of the conditions for this support was that the station had to report on critical issues like fighting corruption, democracy, and civil society during this period for five hours per day. The rest of the time, the station could broadcast whatever it wanted, which meant playing songs or other forms of entertainment. However, the implementation of this condition proved to be difficult. Although the station has six programme hosts, they have to go on air so often that they hardly have time to prepare the programmes. Interview, Narathiwat, 10 Oct. 2012.

72 http://www.isranews.org and http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/about (last accessed on 20 Jan 2014).

73 Interview, Narathiwat, 10 Oct. 2012.

74 Interview, Pattani, 3 Sept. 2012.

75 Interview, Pattani, 20 Dec. 2012.

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and animosity against Malays openly in the three provinces, risking provocation of communal conflicts. As Sukri Jintanon, a Malay Muslim community radio host from Pattani, comments: 'They talk about 'us' and 'them', 'us' meaning Buddhist and 'them' meaning Muslims. At times, they express their anger and say 'another one of us has been killed'. And if Malays are killed, they don't mention it on the radio. Although Sukri himself thinks that Buddhists in Southern Thailand are being indiscriminately attacked and driven from the area, he, like Patchara, tries not to mention it while he is on air: 'What I do to control my feelings on air is to write everything down before I speak on the radio. This way I can better control what I say. Others, however, don't do so and thus cause rifts in the communities.'[76]

This form of sensitive journalism, the restriction of violence to news items and the choice of the right tone, is not simply a matter of professional journalism, but is considered a crucial element for not widening the rifts between Buddhist and Muslim communities, and a necessary condition for a peaceful coexistence. The subject of conflict is still avoided by the majority of radio stations as Prachya Pimarnmana, a Malay community radio and school owner in Narathiwat, points out:

> We have a million conflicting issues to talk about, both within the communities and between them. From corruption, conflicts between the generations, violence between Buddhist and Muslim youth gangs in Narathiwat, to conflicts between traditional Malay Imams and Wahabist Imams. It is all beneath the surface, but nobody talks about it in depth. Radio hosts just say 'This is bad, that is bad!', but that is it. The broadcasters are afraid to get into trouble with the people involved, because they live all in the same city.[77]

In other words, journalists are not expected to follow their professional responsibilities and hence become troublemakers in the local community. Ahmad Somboon Bualuang argues similarly that community radio's capacity to provide a degree of critical self-reflection is avoided in the search for communal harmony or simply because 'community radio stations are not professional enough'. He is very critical of middle-class community radio activists: 'Some activists talk for about a half hour on the radio without any content. And even the activists at the Prince of Songkla University Radio in Pattani have more technical rather than political knowledge.'[78]

He provides an example of a discussion about *Mahanakornpattani*, a version of decentralised rule for Southern Thailand that is currently being discussed: 'So the programme host talks about *Mahanakornpattani*,

76 Interview, Pattani, 28 Sept. 2012.

77 Interview, Prachya Pimarnman, Narathiwat, 2 Aug. 2012.

78 Interview, Ahmad Somboon Bualuang, Pattani, 7 Aug. 2013.

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but it is only a fashionable term that expresses local identity and the desire for self-rule. He does not explain what it really means.' Ahmad Somboon Bualuang admits that decentralisation might be a positive step towards more self-determination and that simply talking about decentralisation or autonomy publicly is in itself an expression of local Malay identity. However, he remarks that the consequences and crucial details are not given deep consideration: 'Who pays for *Mahanakornpattani*? Who will get the power position in it? Intellectuals and media people have a duty to discuss this, but here they fail [to do so].'

Quest for peace and intercultural communication

To some degree, this community radio silence about the insurgency and particularly solutions to violence was broken in 2013. Since the Thai government entered into talks with BRN-Coordinate, the region's largest rebel group, topics like possible scenarios for a peace process have been taken up by community radio stations like the Prince of Songkla University Radio or 'Media Selatan' in Pattani. On 18 June 2013 the latter also aired a 38-minute long interview with the leader of BRN-Coordinate's negotiation team in Malaysia, Hassan Taib.[79]

As it appeared in national headlines, this interview boosted the popularity of the station and its owner, Wan-Ahmad Wan-Kecik. Such an interview with a leading member of a rebel group would not have been possible before 2013 for several reasons. First, BRN-Coordinate did not communicate directly with the outside world before entering the negotiations. Although the group was known in the region, its leaders remained a mystery outside the organisation, had not given any interviews, and did not have a web site that could be accessed for information. Second, the Thai government recognised the existence of Malay Muslim rebels as political actors for the first time by sitting at the negotiating table with BRN-Coordinate and other groups. Prior to entering into the negotiations, the Thai security forces would have considered any publicly aired interview with rebels an open instigation of rebellion. Adding to the increased discussion of the conflict, Wan-Ahmad Wan-Kecik launched a radio programme in Malay called *Dunia Hari Ini* (World Today) in March 2013, in which listeners can voice their views on the ongoing insurgency. In other words, the current negotiations have not only opened up space for civil society in the South significantly, as publicly talking about autonomy

79 *Bangkok Post*, 'Five demands remain focus of the peace talks', 19 June 2013, http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/355906/five-demands-remain-focus-of-peace-talks-says-brn-negotiator-hassan-taib (last accessed on 3 Mar. 2014).

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would have hardly been dared before late 2012, they also illustrate the potential role community radio can play as part of a local public sphere.

The difficulties of actively engaging in the peace process can be illustrated by the attempt to initiate a community radio peace movement in August 2012 by Deep South Watch. The radio station invited more than a dozen community radio activists who regard their media as crucial in a possible peace process, not least because it is the only local mass media that can serve as a platform for the local population to publicly express their views on peace in Southern Thailand. Other crucial functions of community radio in the peace process that were discussed were the active dissemination of knowledge, e.g. civil rights. However, when it came to concrete collective action, most activists showed a degree of reluctance. Rifts between activists became apparent, especially when it came to finding a common definition of peace and a common analysis of the violence. Some, especially Malay radio broadcasters, saw the root cause of the conflict in the region's historical subjugation to Thai rule and the long history of human rights violations, and the cultural suppression that followed. Others, however, felt that the root of violence lay in the Malay Muslim insurgency. They excused the Thai state for its actions by arguing that it has provided religious freedom and immense development funds, which amount to more than what is being extracted from the region. These perspectives not only underscore the divisions between community radio broadcasters, but represent those within Buddhist and Malay communities themselves.

Another example of the limitations to intercultural communication that community radio in Southern Thailand faces is the Prince of Songkhla University Radio in Pattani, one of the most professionally run local stations in the region. Its director prides himself on the fact that his station, in contrast to others in the region, represents a platform for variety (*khwamlaklai*) and in-depth reporting. The station offers regular programmes for Malays, Buddhists, women, young people, professionals, and other social groups in the South. Special news programmes are offered both in Malay and Thai. In addition, the radio also presents news from the world of science to the population of Pattani city. At the same time, however, the director, Phirakan Khai-nunna, stresses that cross-cultural communication is limited, when it comes to talking about the causes of the insurgency and its solution: 'Once we tried to organise a discussion between Buddhists and Muslims scholars about the killings of Malays by the Thai military at Kru Se mosque, but it was very difficult, because emotions easily run high and a rational discussion was hardly possible.' He also attempted to foster cross-cultural understanding by finding a Buddhist monk or

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scholar who would explain the basics of Islam to Buddhist listeners. This attempt failed when he was unable to locate anyone suitable for the job: 'Religious questions are so sensitive these days that no one dares to talk about it.' In other words, even an intellectually-oriented local radio station like this university radio risks reproducing cultural exclusion.

One exception is the Network of Civic Women for Peace in the Deep South, which has gathered Buddhist and Muslim women in Southern Thailand to produce a radio programme, 'Voices of Women in the Deep South'. The network aims to, on the one hand, 'demonstrate the potential for women in the role of radio hosts and the value added by the civil society workers who join the radio programme'. On the other hand, the network specialises in raising awareness about the victimisation of women in Southern Thailand's insurgency. Accordingly, the group produces reports on various aspects of the insurgency such as the plight of women whose husbands or sons have been killed. In 2012, the network's programmes went on air at 47 stations. Each report lasts about 17 minutes, with 15 minutes in local Malay language and a 2-minute Thai language summary.

The group's other radio reports focus on topics such as the effect of drugs in villages or the economic situation of fisherwomen. The network also organises training courses on radio broadcasting for women. All members of the group who produce radio content have to pass these courses and regularly exchange their experiences of producing radio content. The Network of Civic Women, one of the higher profile and better-funded civil society networks, is supported by, among others, Oxfam and the European Union. It can afford full-time staff. Since the Voices of Women in the Deep South have no station of their own, they depend on other community radio stations to broadcast their content.

Conclusion

Community radio stations in Southern Thailand are crucial for effecting change in the structure of mass communication in that region. Media activists in Thailand hoped that community radio would form a communicative infrastructure that would be closer to everyday lives at a time when traditional local institutions were losing much of their integrative capacity and the national cultural and political elites are not considered legitimate representatives either. However, the effects of the introduction of community radio in Southern Thailand are ambivalent. Undoubtedly community radio provides a medium for the establishment of a local public sphere — just as the local government institutions provide a formal means for local participation in a political system that is otherwise dominated by Bangkok.

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The case of Southern Thailand, however, also illustrates how local business interests and middle-class broadcasters dominate community radio stations. Very few rural or urban communities take responsibility for establishing, managing, and producing their own content for community radio stations. This clearly contradicts the self-image of community radio activists and activist scholars, who claim that community radio speaks for farmers, young people or women, and other excluded groups of society. In other words, whereas community radio leads to a differentiation of the national communication system, it also reproduces (local) power differentials.

Nevertheless, community radio plays a crucial role in enabling Southern Thailand's Malay Muslim minority to voice their concerns, assert their culture in the public sphere, and importantly, broadcast in the Malay language — which they could not do in the national Thai media system that is dominated by Buddhist broadcasters in Bangkok. In this sense, local media in Southern Thailand are also ethnic media. Although community radio broadcasters often remain silent on certain sensitive issues like insurgent violence or interethnic relations, some stations dare to publicly criticise the Thai state for its behaviour towards Malay Muslims. At times, this criticism takes a more discursive form, as in the case of radio interviews with Thai government officials produced by Media Selatan, while at other times, it is the mere expression of the fate of those who suffer from state violence, as in the case of Radio Nasser's interviews with Malay orphans.

However, if we assume that the function of ethnic media is to strike the balance between expressing the particularities of one ethnic group and, at the same time, integrating ethnic communities, community radio in Southern Thailand seems to fulfil the first function better than the second. In general, it remains weak in terms of establishing a 'cosmopolitan space' where Muslims and Buddhists can mingle and produce a commitment to commonly shared values, regardless of race, class, and gender. Community radio stations — with few exceptions — are no melting pot for local broadcasters from both ethnic backgrounds. Instead there are Malay-language community radio stations for Malay audiences and Buddhist radio stations focusing on their audience; the exceptions are 'commercial community radio' and 'counterinsurgency community radio', which target both groups. Hence, community radio tends to constitute a public sphere that is mainly fragmented along ethnic lines.

The recent peace talks between the Thai government and Malay separatists, which began in February 2013, started a new phase in violence-ridden Southern Thailand. The crux of the peace process is not only the talks between the government and rebels themselves, it also

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represents an opportunity for civil society in Southern Thailand to contribute to the discussion on peace and a common future for both Malays and Buddhists, who have suffered from almost a decade of violence. Plans for a possibly autonomous Southern Thailand as well as questions about transitional justice have to be publicly discussed; trust between state and people as well as Buddhist and Muslim communities has to be restored. It is here that community radio can play a crucial role in the near future.

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