

*The Role of Community-Based Media in Strengthening and Promoting Community Identity: A Case Study in the Thai Public Sphere*

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**Abstract**

This paper analyses the role of community-based media in the Riverside community, an old and scenic location in Chanthaburi, Eastern Thailand. After being razed by conflagration and flood, the community has been regenerated by promoting itself as a cultural tourism destination. This community has started to produce its own media, and to use a wide range of media to promote itself to the nation. Exploring the role of locally produced community media will reinforce the idea that community media has provided much more effective communication channels for the local people.

This study aims to reconceptualise Habermas's (1989) concept of the single public sphere which represents the dominant mass media. While the mainstream media acts decisively in dealing with issues relating to subordinating groups in every part of the world, community-based media is already deeply implicated in representing the multiple public spheres, which is more preferable in a community environment. By using participatory action research as a methodology, this research is strengthened through a rich understanding of the community-based media on its concentration on planning, doing, observing and reflecting.

Keywords: community-based media, Thai, the public sphere

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## **Introduction**

In media and communication studies, allowing people access to media and other information and communication technology (ICT), and then encouraging them to create their own local content, those people are able to become 'active citizens' (Rodriguez, 2004). People, then, are empowered by the media. This paper is a study of the role of community-based media operated in a rural community and how these media are used to strengthen and promote community identity in Thailand.

By community-based media, I refer to all participatory media tools that provide individuals or groups whose voices are excluded from mainstream media, with access to the tools of media distribution and production. The paper provides an appropriate context to analyse community-based media's role in constructing alternative and discursive spaces for the subordinating people.

## **Case study: The Riverside community**

The case study is one of several research designs frequently used in media and mass communication research. It is chosen because it is the best method of in-depth examinations of groups of people. As Bill (2010) asserts, a case study is a unit of human activities in the real world. It also allows researcher to explore in depth a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals (Creswell, 2003).

The Riverside community is a 120-year-old town. It is located on the first street of Chanthaburi province which was historically called 'Chantebon' by western people. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand's (TAT) 2015 Discover Thainess campaign, Chanthaburi is among the 12 provinces that are renowned for their unique history, culture and lifestyle. Chanthaburi is a province of Thailand with an area of around 6,338 square kilometres. The province is located in the east of Thailand, and on the border with Cambodia. Its neighbouring provinces are Trat in the east, Rayong and Chonburi in the West, Chachoengsao, and Sa Kaeo in the north. The main river of the province is the Chanthaboon River where the Riverside community is located.

As a part of Chanthaburi, the Riverside community was a centre of agriculture, transportation, and both national and international, commercial activities. Being located parallel to the Chanthaburi River, the main river of the province, water transportation is the main reason for the region's characteristic cultural diversity emanating from western countries, Vietnam and China. This cultural diversity is particular evident in the architecture of the area. With a Chinese wooden townhouse, and Thai-Chinese, European and Sino-Portuguese buildings adapted to the Thai style, this community has an ability to attract many tourists from various parts of the world. In the past, the Riverside community took advantage of its prime location next to the main river. The community gradually grew from a small market into a real commercial hub where the Chinese and Vietnamese were traders and merchants, and people could buy practically everything including gems and jewellery. As a result, the government offices and many markets were established within the area.

However, when the district was badly affected by a natural disaster like the flooding in 1999, many community residents began to move out of the area. Most of the important features such as government offices and the market were also relocated in other places. Many shops were closed, houses were abandoned and this once-bustling

neighbourhood, now inhabited mostly by elderly people, took on a desolate appearance.

In 2009, the Ministry of Commerce had projects focusing on rural and community development in every province of Thailand. It was to improve two important aspects of the communities: restoring retail shops, and developing culturally-based commerce and tourism. Thus, the community cooperated with the Office of Commercial Affairs and Chanthaburi started to promote both culture and historic buildings, and to preserve and restore local architecture. A group of community members set up as an association under the name of 'The Chanthaboon Riverside Community Development Committee', with the vision 'Culture leads trade', which mainly focuses on cultural preservation and community development instead of commercial activities. This was a starting point of cultural tourism along the Chanthaboon River by using this community as a central spot.

### **Method**

There are approximately 100 households in the Riverside community. The population number of the community is around 250. My survey of a 100 participants from 100 households in this found that 59 per cent of the participants are aged over 50 years old. People who are at the age of 36-50 years old accounted for 24 per cent of the interviewees. Twelve per cent are 26-35 years old, and only 5 per cent are youth aged 18-25 years old. These age representations appear consistent with the general breakdown of age groups within the town and illustrate the figures on the demographics of the Riverside community.

### **The public sphere and its revisiting**

This paper utilizes the notion of *the public sphere* based on the work of Habermas's (1989) and others (Fraser, 1990; Dahlgren, 1991; Calhoun, 1992). The concept of the public sphere was originally elaborated in the book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in 1962. According to Habermas (1989, p. 49):

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. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. 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.

Habermas demonstrates media as being within the sphere of private individuals who come together as a public to engage in a debate over the state's rules. However, his idea have been criticized and controversially debated. I feel that Nancy Fraser and others' critiques and suggestions of the concept of multiple spheres, which will be discussed in the following section, seem to be more realistic to today's complex media environment.

Fraser's work, *Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy*, was firstly published in 1992 after the publication of the *Structural transformation* in English. She states that the concept of the public sphere is not adequate for the current forms of democracy which exist in late capitalist societies (Fraser, 1990). 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. 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. Consequently, the idea of a multiplicity of publics is much more preferable to the concept of a single public sphere (Fraser, 1990) with each sphere likely to overlap to some extent.

Examples of other critiques are followings. Calhoun (1992) points out an absence of subordinate groups, including women and lower classes in bourgeois public sphere institutions. Dahlgren (1991) describes Habermas's idealization of the bourgeois public sphere as an "absence of reference to the complexities and contradictions of meaning productions". Squires (2002) mentions that 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.

### **Community identity**

The principle concept of community identity seems to imply two related suggestions. Firstly, the community members should have something in common. Secondly, the something in common should distinguish them in a way from the members of other groups (Wenger, 2004). McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 9) also state that, "the sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together".

Community identity is the focus in order to explore how the Riverside community creates its identity or 'sense of self'. The 'sense of self' recognizes that this community is valuable because it is unique, and there is no one else exactly the same as it in this world. The community identity identifiers such as the historical background, culture and arts, community resources and pride can define the Riverside community area.

The Riverside community has a unique history. It is a long, historical community which can be dated back over a hundred years. The Riverside community extended for a kilometre along the bank of the Chanthaburi River. Decaying but charming French-built shops and houses and historic Thai-Chinese temples are tucked over narrow old alleys alongside the snake-shaped Chanthaburi River. The area attracts many tourists from around the world who enjoy the historically beautiful architecture and the timeless features. Furthermore, many households in the Riverside community engage in commercial activities involving the sale of food. There are numerous cafés, restaurants and an art gallery among the old wooden townhouses and shrines. Many food shops offer traditional Thai food cooked with local herbs such as Siam Cardamom (Krawan in Thai language) which are grown in the Khao Phu Soi Dao area of the Chanthaburi province.

The most important influence on the Riverside community culture seems to be religions including Buddhism. Thailand is a stronghold of Buddhism where majority of population is Buddhist. Many Thai beliefs and traditions have long stemmed directly from Buddhist principles. Respect is essential within the consciousness of every Thai. As a result, respect for elders and for those in higher social positions is important which influences hierarchies related to social status. Children are expected to respect their parents and teachers. The young must show deference to the elderly.

The Riverside community is also unique in its arts and architecture. The alluring power of the colonial architecture together with the clustered wooden buildings with lace-like wooden decorations, has turned this area into a popular location for the film and advertising industry since it can be converted into the set of an old town. Sino-European buildings line in the one kilometre, narrow road. Chinese and French architectural styles have an influence on many buildings in the community areas. There are two different types of charming architecture in this community. The first type is the colonial building with sculpted clay ornaments owned by the royal servants. Another type is the wooden home with intricate lace-like wooden decorations of the wealthy merchants (Panaram, 2010).

Beautiful and historic buildings are the pride of the Riverside community. The old quarter's sleepy streets and alleyways meandering along the Chanthabuti River are highly attractive. Baanluangrajamaitri Historic Inn is one of the proudest projects of the community. With the intention to rehabilitate the lives of the community residents, together with support from the architecture of the Arsomsilp Institution, a non-profit organization, the Architectural Preservation and Regeneration Project decided to renovate the Riverside Community to become a historical tourism destination. The creation of the “preservation with care” has occurred. The hundred and fifty year-old house owned by the Luang Rajamaitri family was chosen for renovation to become a historical inn or a museum inn. The rental contract was written to create value rather than money. The house owner, a Luang Rajamaitri heir, offered permission to the partners to manage the house with a thirty year rental contract and only one Baht monthly rental fee. This hotel project was opened to the community members and the Chanthaburi local people become part of the stakeholder group by purchasing a share for a thousand Baht. There are already more than three hundred shareholders including the locals and other interested people. The profit is returned to all shareholders and to support a cultural activity in the community. This campaign not only focuses on raising sufficient funds to operate the business sustainably but also to allow people and the country to realise that this historical heritage can be cared for while moving despite a rapidly changing world (Baanluangrajamaitri, 2013).

### **Community-based media in the Riverside community**

Community media is defined by Howley (2009) as media which encompasses a range of community-based activities and can take many forms. It takes on different meanings, depending on whether the “felt need” of the community is practical. Community media can be defined as “an adaptation of media for use by the community, for whatever purposes the community decides” (Berrigan, 1981, p. 8). These definitions are able to represent community communication and media activities in the Riverside community. Information in this community is distributed by media which appears in many forms with various different the “felt needs” of community residents.

In the Riverside community, community-based media produced by community members include community leaders or people as media, community circulars, coffee shop activities, religious performances, newsletters, maps and information boards, screen printed T-shirts, photo and art gallery, community learning house and community events. Community-based media produced locally also include online activities such as community website, Facebook pages, videos on YouTube, and group chat in LINE application. Commercial media such as CTV, a local cable television and AboutChan magazine are also essential in the Riverside community although their media content is not only focused on the community, but also on many areas around Chanthaburi and neighbouring provinces. In addition, the community has been supported by the government. Broadcasting cars and community loudspeakers are free services supported by the local municipality.

These media characterize the essential characteristics of community-based media include 1) localism (Johnson & Menichelli, 2007; Wellmanee, 2008) which is all about community, 2) storytelling (Johnson & Menichelli, 2007) where the community tells historical stories from the past, 3) empowerment (Hamilton & Weiss, 2005) in which community uses media to promote itself to the nation, and 4) diverse participation (Johnson & Menichelli, 2007; Meadows et al, 2007) where each community member is allowed to participate in the communication activities. These four characteristics have the potential to reduce isolation among community residents and also empower those people by allowing them to voice their opinions.

In this research, the objectives of media discursive activities are categorized from both the community aspect and the tourism aspect. The community aspect, in this sense, includes communication among community residents in their everyday lives especially community matters, community issues, and community well-being. On the other hand, the tourism aspect concerns communication for the sake of tourism in this community which aims to benefit tourists.

### **The role of community-based media in strengthening and preserving community identity**

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.

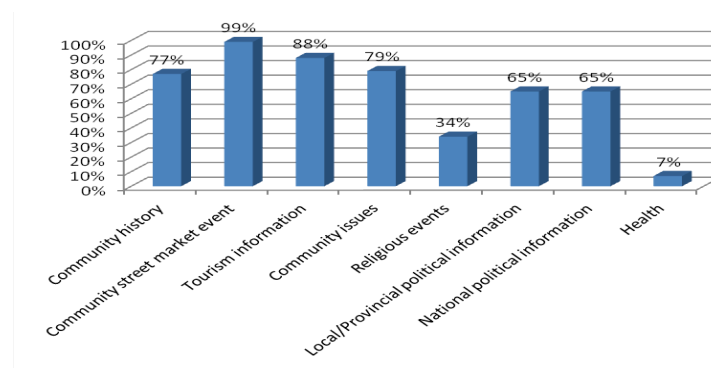


Figure 1: Media content

In the Riverside community, the high percentage of media content about community history, accounted for 77 cent, shows how community members preserve their value and facilitate their identity and culture to others and the nation by using their own produced media. As Forde et al (2009) point out, community media is 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. For example, in the past, Vietnamese handicrafts such as mats were popular in this community. Those handicrafts are promoted again via community media to show that at one time, the community was one of the multicultural centers in Thailand.

Another significant media activity which local people conduct to preserve their identity and history is exchanging old pictures of the community via the LINE application. LINE is an application for communication on electronic devices such as smartphones, tablets, and personal computers. LINE users can exchange text messages, photos, voice recording, videos. They can also have a free call and conduct video conferences through this application.

A group chat named 'the Riverside community people' is formed with the aim of daily chats, news and information sharing, and social discussions. Community members have exchanged various old pictures of the community by sharing them on the chat room, and assembling them as a photo collection. Pokabal (personal communication, December 23, 2014) says:

Firstly, it was a kind of showing-off. I wanted to show that my photos are much older and more precious. Then, when I and my friends see a lot of old photos in the group chat. We feel like it is not just a chat room but an online old photos exhibition of our community.

### **The role of community-based media in promoting community's identity (tourism)**

Cultural tourism can become a platform for community residential discussions around place and identity (Carson, 2013). This means while it is the way the visitors to feel included, at the same time, local residents could begin to see their community in regenerating and new way. The Riverside community is a new cultural tourism destination in Thailand, and also the new cultural destination at international level as the community's historic inn was named one of four winners of Awards of Merit in the annual UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation

Many community-based media productions are used to promote community as a cultural tourism destination to the nation. Media outlets produced as a result of tourism promotion include community newsletters, maps and information boards, postcards, screen-printed T-shirts, videos on YouTube and a commercial magazine. The messages of these communication tools aim to benefit community tourism. Information such as community history, art and culture, walking directions, food restaurants and attractions can generally be found in the tourism media.

Messages are sent of beautiful attractions, local food, and valuable community history. Within the community, participants give examples of walking maps and

direction boards which help tourists to travel along a kilometre of the community area. Because the media helps to attract more people to their community, the people gain further income which benefits community economics.

In the Riverside community, such evidence suggests that social media plays a vital role in the promotion of tourism which can no longer be examined purely in relation to geographic places or spaces. The Facebook activity in this community, an example, shows particular characteristics of social media including: *participation, openness, conversation, community, connectness* (Mayfield, 2007, p. 5). *Participation* can be seen from the number of followers of the Facebook page, their feedback and opinions. *Openness* can be seen from the number of the followers which is not limited to the community members. Conversation is a two-way interaction between the Facebook creator, Bamrunghai, and the followers. *Community* shares common interests like the historic inn which has great community pride. Lastly, Facebook creates *connectness* by making use of links to other sites such as Thai Local Government Administration website. Because of these benefits, this social networking toolkit transmits messages from this community to the nation, especially in the promotion of community tourism. It shows that social media has the potential ability to reach a wide audience.

Bamrunghai (personal communication January 2, 2015) illustrates the benefit of Facebook in order to reach a wide audience. She says, “the first time we created the Facebook page (community historic inn page), we were not quite sure who our target groups really were. We were quite blind at that moment.” Then she just started by sharing the Facebook page with her friends and people she knew like some of the villagers. Later on, the Facebook followers were not just the people she knew but “There were a lot more strangers who were interested in this project,” she points out.

### **Community media as community transformation: changing of community communication purpose**

Arguably, the media has a vital role in putting emerging destination on the global tourist map, thus helping to boost the local economy, and it has proved to be of significance in the process of each community development (Tabing 2000). Community-based media is an effective tool for the Riverside community to develop itself from an old community to a new cultural tourism destination.

This research finds that the number of media which serves local people’s needs and the number of media which have a tourism aspect are quite the same. It can be assumed that the community-based media producers emphasize the importance of people matters as much as tourism in the community. Then, the question emerged from this point about whether the tourism aspect already challenges and reduces the importance of local people residents in the Riverside community or not. The findings from the information that the Riverside community members receive from community-based media helps to address this issue.

People’s perception of community media content (Figure 1) shows that the media content concerning commerce and tourism has the most influence on this community. Ninety-nine per cent of people state that they receive information about community commercial events like a street market, and 88 percent involves community tourism. While media content concerning community issues is ranked third at 79 per cent, and community history is about 77 per cent. Although there is still a significant proportion



of media content concerning people and their roots, the table shows that the tourism aspect has already deeply challenged localism in the Riverside community. The primary purpose of local communication has changed since 2009.

Communication in the Riverside community has substantially changed since 2009 when the community first recognized itself as a tourism place. Chadmalai (personal communication, December 24, 2014) states that in the past, communication in the community was mostly about neighbourhoods, health, flood crises, political situations, elections and traffic. "Everything has recently changed" (Chadmalai, personal communication, December 24, 2014). It can be assumed that community-based media with the community aspect has begun before media concerning tourism. Communication activities such as community leaders as media, community circulars and people's discussions at the coffee place have been in the community communication process for a long time. As a result, there is nobody who could recognize when these media exactly started (Chadmalai, personal communication, December 24, 2014; Pokabal, personal communication, December 23, 2014)

When taking a closer look at media activity, it is apparent that there are changes to the primary purpose of community communication following the embrace of a new cultural tourism in Thailand. For example in Facebook page creations, initially, there was an official Facebook page for the Riverside community which was a forum for community members to discuss community problems such as neighbourhood noise, teenage alcohol consumption and community improvement. It was entirely focused community matters. However, in 2014, when the new tourism project emerged, this Facebook page was closed and transformed into a new page, Ba-an Ruang Ratchamaitri Historic Inn. Communication on Facebook seems to be about the new attractive accommodation which centres on a community pride. The messages about community matters have been replaced by details of the historic inn and customers' reviews.

At this stage, I draw the conclusion that the primary purpose of community-based media in the Riverside community, which was once to serve the needs of community members, had already changed since the community was promoted as a new cultural tourism destination. Community-based media then played an important role in the community transformation from an old community to a new one in terms of tourism.

### **Conclusion**

This research reinforces the idea that multiple spheres seems to be more realistic in regard to today's complex media environment (Fraser, 1992; Calhoun, 1992; Dahlgren, 1991; Squires, 2002), and community-based media clearly is already deeply implicated in representing the multiple public spheres. The research results also support the hypothesis that community media is a cultural production which community residents produces, owns and uses to benefit their community. For the Riverside community members, community-based media has two outstanding beneficial aspects which are community identity preservation and tourism promotion.

This old community has become reinvigorated through their media activities after the decline produced by fire and flood. The community-based media is produced and used by community members which can strengthen the bond between them and construct community identity as a whole.

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