An Investigation of Community Radio Broadcasting in Phutthamonthon District, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand

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Abstract—This study aims to explore and compare the current condition of community radio stations in Phutthamonthon district, Nakhon Pathom province, Thailand, as well as the challenges they are facing. Qualitative research tools including in-depth interviews; documentary analysis; focus group interviews; and observation, are used to examine the content, programming, and management structure of three community radio stations currently in operation within the district. Research findings indicate that the management and operational approaches adopted by the two non-profit stations included in the study, Salaya Pattana and Voice of Dhamma, are more structured and effective than that of the for-profit Tune Radio. Salaya Pattana – backed by the Faculty of Engineering, Mahidol University, and the charity-funded Voice of Dhamma, are comparatively free from political and commercial influence, and able to provide more relevant and consistent community-oriented content to meet the real demand of the audience. Tune Radio, on the other hand, has to rely solely on financial support from political factions and business groups, which heavily influence its content.

Keywords—Radio broadcasting, programming, management, community radio, Thailand.

I. INTRODUCTION

COMMUNITY radio stations in Thailand were formally allowed in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (1997). However, the lack of an official community broadcasting association and regulatory systems with legal authorities to oversee the operations has resulted in an unruly and widespread surge of community radios, currently estimated at over 500 stations nationwide [1]. Inevitably, questions arise on whether these petite-sized and homegrown stations still represent the real voice of the community or have become mere mouthpieces and advertising channels for local influential groups.

Radio broadcasting is a powerful tool for massive communication. It enables sharing of information and boosts community development by encouraging self-improvement, both directly and indirectly. Section 40 of the 1997 Constitution stated as follows:

"Transmission frequencies for radio or television broadcasting and radio telecommunication are national communication resources for public interest.

There shall be an independent regulatory body having the duty to distribute the frequencies under paragraph one and supervise radio or television broadcasting and telecommunication businesses as provided by law.

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In carrying out the act under paragraph two, regard shall be had to utmost public benefit at national and local levels in education, culture, State security, and other public interests including fair and free competition."

Public Relations Department of Thailand released the Guidelines for the Establishment and Operation of Community Radio (2004) following the enactment of the 1997 Constitution, determining that:

1) A community radio station shall be easily and equally accessible to all demographics, as well as open to community participation in every step.
2) It shall be a public entity – owned, established, managed, and operated by its listening community.
3) Volunteers are encouraged to assist its operations.
4) It shall be non-profit, non-sectarian, and non-partisan, either directly or indirectly.
5) It shall be a public two-way communication channel for community members.
6) It shall fulfill the role of a local medium that serves the demands and interests of the community and provides opportunities for the underprivileged.
7) It shall be an information hub that connects and enhances learning experiences to strengthen the community.

The subsequent Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (2007) further emphasizes the importance of the people's right to expression and the freedom of the press. The Section 45 and 47 of the law call for an establishment of an independent regulatory body with the duty to distribute the transmission frequencies for radio or television broadcasting, as well as telecommunication. The distribution must be to utmost public benefit at national and local levels in education, culture, State security, other public interests, and fair and free competition, including public participation in providing public mass media [2].

Thus, community radio was realized out of the people's need for information and communication channels that truly respond to public interests and issues. By definition, community radio is a local broadcasting medium that is about, for, by, and of a specific marginalized community [3]. It is a platform for community members to voice their opinions, beliefs, and demands, and listen to others', thus promotes respect for freedom of expression and diversity.

It is worthy of note that even though regular radio listeners perceive community radio as an alternative medium that offers contents of vast variety and particularly those of local interests, many are irritated for having their mainstream stations interrupted by these local transmissions. Some also finds certain community radio stations offensive [4].

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol:8, No:9, 2014

Nakhon Pathom is one of the central provinces of Thailand, neighboring to Bangkok. With a multitude of archeological remains dating back to the era of Dvaravati kingdom (6th through 11th centuries AD) found in its territory, the province is often referred as Thailand's oldest city. Nakhon Pathom, the country's 62nd largest province (out of 76) in total area (2,168.327 sq. km.), is subdivided into 7 districts. The districts are further subdivided into 106 communes and 930 villages. For a relatively small province, it has registered as many as 69 community radio stations. (The Public Relations Office of Nakhon Pathom, 2011).

There are six community radio stations registered in the district of Phutthamonthon. A few are privately run and the rest are backed by various government agencies. Preliminary inquiries found that the local broadcasters have to deal with a number of issues and challenges that constantly affect the operation. In order to shed light on the contemporary situation of community radios within Phutthamonthon district, find possible solutions to their current problems, and contribute to the development of this local medium, this researcher commenced the research project to study the entire operation. The stations' programming, content, and management structure are analyzed to determine whether they are in accordance with the intent of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (1997) that transpired the birth of community radio.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a combination of qualitative methods including documentary analysis, interviews, and observation. Data related to the subject are collected from academic papers, news articles, textbooks, and online databases, then analyzed and used as a basis forming an interview template for the individual in-depth and focus group interviews to inquire into the operation and management of community radio stations [5].

A. Objectives

1) To explore the challenges and issues affecting the operation of community radio stations in Phutthamonthon district, Nakhon Pathom province, Thailand
2) To study the stations' management structure and policies
3) To compare and assess the stations' programming and broadcasting content

B. Research Population

Only the community radio stations currently in operation within Phutthamonthon district, Nakhon Pathom province, Thailand, are included in this study. Interviews are conducted with those directly involved with the management and operation of the community radio stations (i.e. managers, program directors, and radio personalities) as well as those indirectly involved (e.g. community leaders and long-term residents in the broadcast area).

III. FINDINGS

A. Current Condition and Challenges

1. Station Overview

As of 2011, there are a total of six community radio stations in the district of Phutthamonthon registered with the Public Relations Office of Nakorn Pathom. However, the results show that only three are currently in operation: Salaya Pattana Community Radio FM 90.75 MHz ("Salaya Pattana"); Tune Radio: Broadcasting for Stability FM 96.75 MHz ("Tune Radio"); and Voice of Dhamma from Buddhists Radio Station FM 88.25 MHZ ("Voice of Dhamma").

Tune Radio, located at the Old Salaya Market, Salaya sub-district, is found and managed by Surin Sichandra, a veteran local disk jockey who used to rent daily broadcast time at another neighborhood commercial radio station. His own income depended on the amount of advertisement he took on the two-hour program. In 2007, he started his own for-profit community radio station, "Tune Radio". The name was officially changed to "Tune Radio: Broadcasting for Stability" when the Office of the Permanent Secretary of Defense included it in the "White Radio: In the Honor of the King" project, a network of 200 community radio stations nationwide.

Voice of Dhamma broadcasts from Wat Hatainaresh in Salaya sub-district and is managed by the Venerable Ajahn Somkiat Katapunyo.

Salaya Pattana operates from the Faculty of Engineering, Mahidol University, Salaya campus. It is under the care of Worawit Issarangura na Ayuthaya, the dean of the faculty.

The two institutional stations, Salaya Pattana and Voice of Dhamma, were established as a not-for-profit educational medium with a main purpose to strengthen and serve their respective listening community in all aspects. Tune Radio, on the other hand, clearly positioned itself from the beginning as a for-profit operation, while regularly providing local news and information.

2. Coverage

The Guidelines for the Establishment and Operation of Community Radio, issued by Public Relations Department of Thailand (PRD) in 2004, determined that the transmission power of community radio must be limited to 30 watts. Its antenna must not be higher than 30 meters from the ground, while broadcast strength is limited to an area with a radius of 15 kilometers. The regulations are required to prevent community radio signals from interfering with aeronautical radio, which may affect aviation safety. They are also intended to prevent interference with the broadcasts of the existing mainstream radio stations. Later in September 2012, the new regulatory body, Office of National Broadcasting Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), amended these technical specifications, increasing the maximum signal strength to 500 watts and maximum radius coverage at 20 kilometers.

Salaya Pattana and Voice of Dhamma are both using 30-watt transmitters with a transmission range of 10 kilometers in

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radius. Tune Radio, on the other hand, opts to broadcast at a higher power in order to overcome strong signal interference from fellow community radio broadcasters.

3. Audience Demographics

Phutthamonthon district locates in the east of Nakhon Pathom, adjacent to Thawi Wattana district of Bangkok. Being a part of the so-called "greater Bangkok", diverse groups of people residing within the area are commuting between the district and the inner part of the capital city daily and weekly. A number of the district's population is students of Mahidol University, Salaya Campus, and another big bulk is middle-aged adults or parents raising families.

4. Operational Equipment

All three stations are adequately outfitted with standard computer-controlled equipment. The Faculty of Engineering contributed the resources needed for the transmission and other studio hardware for Salaya Pattana, while Voice of Dhamma relied mainly on donation for such equipment. In the case of Tune Radio, the station manager himself funded the startup.

5. Financial Sustainability

As not-for-profit entities, Salaya Pattana and Voice of Dhamma are not seeking any financial gain from its operation. The Faculty of Engineering funds a large portion of Salaya Pattana's day-to-day operating expense, while donation from Buddhist community is the main source of funding for Voice of Dhamma. Tune radio generates enough income from advertisement to sustain its operation.

6. Challenges and Difficulties

Interestingly, the results show all stations share the same type of operational difficulties. The most pronounced and persistent problem is interference from other broadcasters. Due to its close proximity to Bangkok, Phutthamonthon's frequency bands are already congested with broadcast signals of mainstream radio and television broadcasting. More localized radio stations in neighborhood areas are also being set up unregulated, and each broadcasting at high power. Interference often causes listeners to tune away and turn to a clearer frequency, i.e. a higher powered mainstream station. Other challenges encountered are insufficient operational budget, equipment maintenance, and outdated computer system.

B. Management Policies and Structures

1. Management Structures

Salaya Pattana, Voice of Dhamma, and Tune Radio largely share the same minimal management structure, which allows quick and flexible decision. The stations keep only the smallest number of staff needed for the day-to-day running of the station; each is assigned specific duties according to their abilities. In the cases of Salaya Pattana and Voice of Dhamma, a community radio committee exists, but only in name. It has no involvement in strategic planning or the actual administration.

It is interesting to note that the managers of all three stations are the ones making executive decisions on important matters such as programming, equipment maintenance, and hosting assignment. Should a problem arise, the manager and the on-air personality jointly respond to it immediately or delegate the responsibility as appropriate. The distinct difference is, for Tune Radio, there is no subordinate staff carrying out the orders. The station manager himself usually performs all necessary tasks.

2. Station Policy

Salaya Pattana and Voice of Dhamma position themselves as a not-for-profit educational medium that aims to keep their respective listening community informed, connected, and involved. Indigenous contents are regularly highlighted to support preservation of local culture and wisdom. The position draws a sharp contrast to that of the commercial-oriented Tune Radio. Entertainment programs occupy most of its airtime where local news and information became secondary priority, albeit regularly presented.

C. Programming, Content, and Quality Control

1. Programming

None of the three stations strictly adhere to a fixed program schedule. Content, length of programs, and even the hosts, are entirely flexible. Most of Salaya Pattana's live radio hosts are volunteers – lecturers on various subjects from the Salaya campus of Mahidol University – who cannot commit to a fixed time slot for a long period of time, so the station tries their best to accommodate them. The same can be said about Voice of Dhamma where the temple's monks step in as hosts when possible. Other times, the station relies on pre-recorded Buddhist teaching CDs.

Due to rising operational expenses, especially the cost of electricity for the transmitter, Tune Radio and Voice of Dhamma have had to cut down their broadcast schedule. Only Salaya Pattana, which enjoys the support of the Faculty of Engineering, Mahidol University, still manages to stay on the air 24 hours a day.

2. Content Development

Since the sustainability of a community radio ultimately rests with the people of the community, finding out exactly what local listeners want and need is crucial. All three stations have conducted community surveys before the initial broadcast in order to map out their programming and set the criteria for content material selection accordingly.

The research findings indicate that excessive rambling on community radio will most likely drive the audience to tune away from the channel, opting instead for mainstream stations or other entertainment media. However, if the local station's broadcasting content is mainly community-oriented, listeners will stay interested considerably longer.

3. Human Resource Development

Community radio is expected to be grassroots public broadcasting service that provides platform for members of the community to serve their communal, developmental,

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Vol:8, No:9, 2014

economic, social and cultural objectives. It can only be run effectively if constant training and retraining of all personnel of the station is up to date. Not only do they need to have basic community relations, programming, and administration skills, the staff and volunteers must also realize the potential impact of community radio on the society. It is vital that they understand the importance of keeping the broadcast content clear, factual, and impartial.

The staff of Tune Radio and Voice of Dhamma was sent to attend community radio basic trainings and workshops. The station manager of Salaya Pattana, having grown up in a family of broadcasters, he opted to personally train the personnel and volunteers.

4. Evaluation

In order to obtain a view of the demographics and their preferences, all three stations have conducted informal audience evaluation surveys. However, certain essential aspects of community radio operations, such as hosting performance, accessibility, coverage, content relevance, management, and community participation have never been assessed in ways that could lead to significant improvement. An evaluation system needs to be put in place so as to ensure effective operation and performance toward the goals and objectives of community radio.

IV. DISCUSSION

Research findings indicate that the management and operational approaches adopted by the two non-profit and institutional stations, Salaya Pattana and Voice of Dhamma, are more structured and effective than that of the for-profit and private-owned Tune Radio. Thanks to their "in-house resources", Salaya Pattana – backed by the Faculty of Engineering, Mahidol University – and the charity-funded Voice of Dhamma – which mainly airs Buddhist teaching programs – are comparatively free from political and commercial influence, and able to provide more relevant and consistent community-oriented content to meet the real demand of their respective audience. Tune Radio, on the other hand, has to rely solely on financial support from political factions and business groups, which heavily influence its content, resulting in a broadcast that strays the furthest away from the intent of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (1997) that transpired the birth of community radio.

V. RECOMMENDATION

1) Community radio should be for, by, and about its own listening community; sharing community-related content with an aim to empower, strengthen, and unite the community it serves.
2) The Public Relations Department (PRD) should play a more active role in monitoring and assisting local broadcasters, especially in giving technical advice on preventing radio frequency interference.
3) PRD should ensure that local stations are always in keeping with the true spirit of community radio through its management, operation, and programming. The state's

policies and regulations concerning community radio should be unambiguous, and enforced equally. An appropriate proportion between information and entertainment programs in community radio should be spelled out clearly, to prevent overly commercial-oriented programming.

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