

# Articulating the Shan Migrant Community in Thai Society Through Community Radio

## A Case Study of the Map Radio Fm 99 in the City of Chiang Mai, Thailand

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Community media as an alternative public sphere for minorities has emerged separately from mainstream media and formal public spheres. In particular, its ethos of understanding community participation as a key component of operating a station highlights its potential to empower community members as active social agents. This study examines the social consequences of an ethnic migrant community radio station, Map Radio FM 99, to explore its role for the Shan migrant community in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Fieldwork was conducted for seven weeks between December 2015 and January 2016 to collect data using semi-structured interviews, participant observation and relevant documents. Employing a qualitative approach, this study found that participation in community radio helps participants be socially active in Thai society by maximising their participation in the social sphere using media. This study concludes that participation in Map Radio enables the Shan migrant community to better adapt to Thai society by providing and obtaining information necessary for their lives in Thailand and by contributing to the formation of a collective identity as ethnic migrant workers, thereby creating community cohesion. Nonetheless, lack of political efficacy as a result of the challenging political environment in Thailand might partly prevent Map Radio from functioning completely as an alternative public sphere.

**Keywords:** community radio, alternative public sphere, ethnic migrant, social participation, Thailand, community cohesion

**M**edia in the public sphere plays an important role in ensuring citizens' participation in modern society. The public sphere indicates a communicative space where citizens raise their opinions, interests and discourses with freedom of expression, free from external powers (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974). In particular, the importance of the public sphere arises from its contributing role of achieving social integration through facilitation of public discussion. However, a general disregard in mainstream media for minorities often limits their opportunities to participate in the public sphere and leads to their exclusion from society (Atton, 2001). In response to this crisis, community media emerge as an alternative public sphere to mainstream and commercial media. Emphasising community participation at the grassroots level, community media highlights its potential to empower community members and promote democratic communication across many spheres of society.

The growth of community media is closely linked with increasing migration patterns worldwide (Georgiou, 2005). Such presence of community media appears in Thailand, a multicultural society where approximately 70 ethnic groups co-exist (Jory, 2000; Hayami, 2006). Geographic proximity and the cultural similarities of northern Thailand and Myanmar as well as the recent economic growth in Thailand have attracted Shan migrants for decades (Jirattikorn, 2016; IOM, 2013). However, their disadvantaged legal and economic status leads to their occupation of the most marginalised sections of Thai society and their exclusion from the public sphere (Murakami, 2012). Furthermore, Thai media has often described Burmese migrant workers as illegal or a threat to national security (Sunpuwan and Niyomsilpa, 2012). Nonetheless, their participation in community radio indicates the creation of an alternative public sphere for the migrant community in a new society. This study understands community radio as a social practice as well as an empowering tool for development intervention. Through a case study of Map Radio FM 99 in Chiang Mai, Thailand,

the study explores how community radio functions as an alternative public sphere and facilitates social participation for the Shan migrant community.

## **Theorising community radio as an alternative public sphere**

### *Understanding community radio as an alternative public sphere*

Community radio is often considered the most effective and democratic method of community communication (Vatikiotis, 2005). Compared to mainstream media, community radio has several advantages, including its “more widespread geographic coverage, access to rural and illiterate populations, and its ability to broadcast in minority languages” as well as its low operation cost (Bosch, 2014, p. 430). Above all, easy accessibility leads to a favourable environment for minorities to create an alternative public sphere.

The alternative public spheres indicate a communicative space where minorities create their own discourses (Fraser, 1990; Bosch, 2014; Meadows, 2015). In particular, Fraser's recognition of an alternative public sphere is valuable in understanding community radio. She indicates that alternative public spheres are created as a result of social inequality and the exclusion of minorities from the main public sphere (Fraser, 1990). Fraser (2007) pinpoints the importance of “efficacy” in forming an alternative public sphere. Rooted in political theory, the notion suggests the public sphere should be equipped with both “normative legitimacy” and “political efficacy” to have critical mass (Fraser, 2007). While normative legitimacy concerns the inclusiveness of the public in a sphere, political efficacy concerns delivering the will of the public as a form of civil society, which can be further realised in a certain society (Fraser, 2007, p. 8). In this regard, Fraser claims that the (alternative) public sphere can have an influence on social change when it involves the formation of public opinion and decision-making (1990, pp. 89–92). Furthermore, the recognition of an alternative public sphere implies

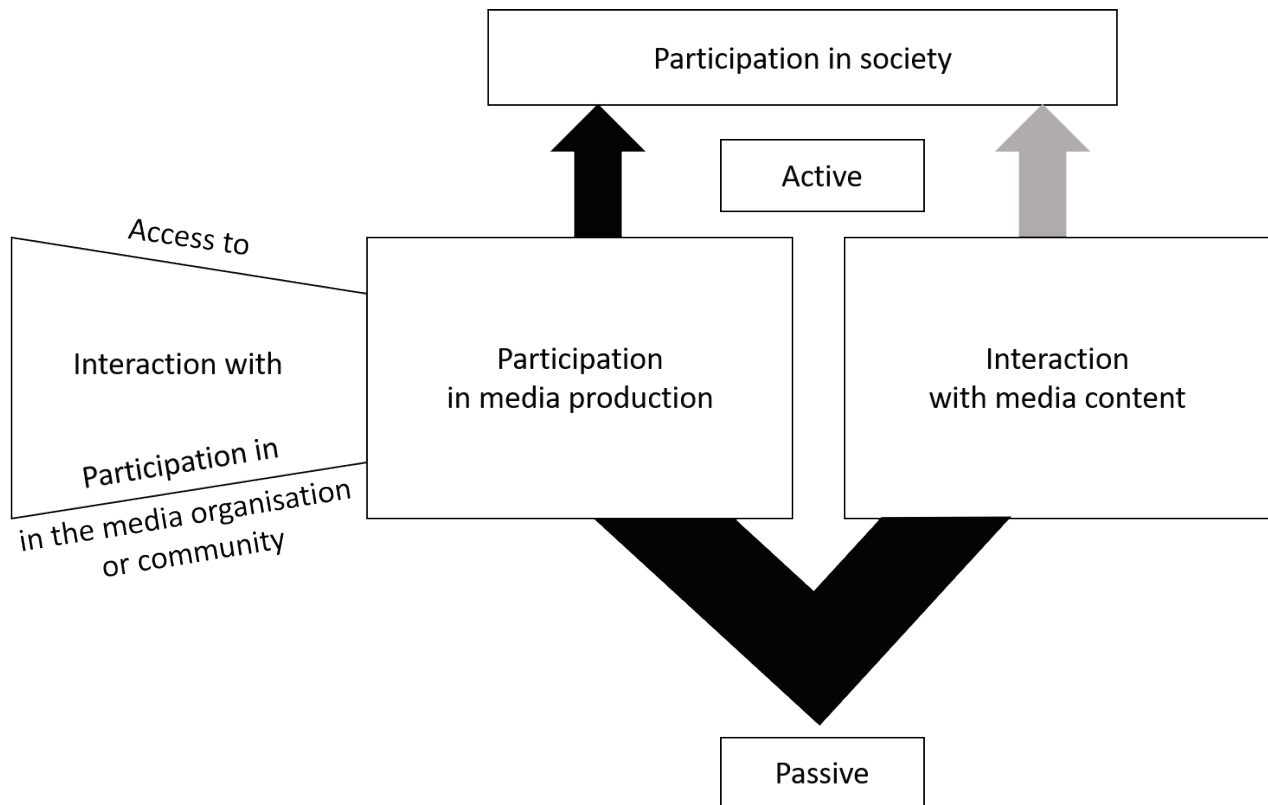
the presence of multiple public spheres in society. According to Fraser, multiple public spheres are preferred and better ensure participatory parity for all, especially in a multicultural society (1990, pp. 65–70). Although this claim is based on the assumption that “multiple public spheres are situated in a single ‘structured setting’ that advantages some and disadvantages others” (Fraser 1990, p. 68), it is clear that a single unitary public sphere cannot guarantee participation for all.

#### *Participation with different action rationales*

In community radio, different forms of participation are made through the different action rationales of participants. For Leal (2009), different action rationales refer to “the differing orientations that motivate the actions of the actors who perform in the space of the radio station, namely the host/presenters and directors who are connected to

the station by means of voluntary and contractual regimes” (p.159).

As shown in Figure 1, Carpentier (2011, p. 67) argues that audience participation in media can take two forms: participation *through* media and participation *in* media. According to Carpentier (2011), participation through media takes the form of expressing individual voices and experiences to interact with other people. In addition, participation in media production consists of content-related participation and structural participation (Carpentier, 2011). While the former refers to direct engagement in the production of media content, the latter refers to involvement in decision-making processes. Both forms of participation encourage participants to be active in the public spheres related to their daily lives (Carpentier, 2011). Arguably, both participation in media production and interaction with media content ultimately lead to participation in society.



**Figure 1.** Participation dimensions in the media sphere (Carpentier 2011, p. 70)

### *The socio-cultural functions of community radio*

Entering public discourse through participation in community radio promotes a greater level of individual and collective agency (Berrigan, 1981). Agency is a central concept to understand empowerment and describe the process of change; an agent is someone who acts and brings about social change (Kabeer, 2012; Sen, 2001). Describing community radio as empowerment radio, Jallof (2012) explains that empowerment grows when people realise their knowledge and the power obtained by sharing this knowledge with others. Similarly, Khawaja (2005) argues that information plays a key role in empowerment. Information can be divided into two aspects: provision of information and access to information (Khawaja, 2005). While the provision of information intends to benefit listeners by meeting their needs, access to information does so by allowing them to make informed decisions (Khawaja, 2005). In this sense, participation in community radio can be understood as a means of providing and gaining information (Bosch, 2014). Community radio also enables community members to share a language that reflects their common social and ethnic formation. For Howley (2010), this facilitates the creation of a sense of shared identity and collective solidarity. Especially for minority groups, this can be an act of demonstrating indigenous forms of expression and defending cultural identities (Rodríguez, 2008).

### *The social consequences of community radio*

The practices of community radio result in social consequences for the given society as well as the community. By recognising community media as a form of social capital, Fleras (2009, 2015) argues that community media creates bonding (within a community) and bridges roles (between communities) for migrant communities in a new society. According to Fleras (2009, pp. 726–727), community media can operate inwardly by announcing relevant information about a homeland and outwardly by reporting information of “relevance and immediacy” necessary for life in a new society.

Community media can operate reactively and proactively (Fleras, 2009). As alternative media, community media responds to the needs, identities and furthermore, the realities of communities which are not discussed in mainstream media by offering a community’s perspectives. Moreover, community media can proactively celebrate community culture and identities to create social cohesion within the community. However, thinking from an outward perspective, such strengthened cohesion may insulate a community from a new society (Fleras, 2009). Nonetheless, Fleras (Fleras, 2009, p. 726) emphasises that the outward role of community media should not be underestimated because it allows community members to challenge inequitable social structures to create a more inclusive society as well as to proactively facilitate intercultural dialogues. A multidimensional understanding of community media that considers outward and inward perspectives, as well as proactive and reactive actions, is depicted in Table 1.

### *Analytical framework*

To analyse the social consequences of community radio practices and in keeping with the multidimensionality of community media (Fleras, 2009, 2015), I adopt “articulation” as an analytical framework based on the theoretical grounds discussed. According to Howley (2010), “the feeling of affinity, belonging, ‘we-ness’ that we share for our local neighbourhoods, ethnic communities, or nationality is articulated within and through communication” (p. 4). As an analytical lens, articulation posits three dimensions concerning the practices of community radio: process, relationship and agency.

Process indicates the way in which two different elements are articulated together. Specifically, process explores how community members create connections within community radio to create their own public sphere, understood as an “alternative public sphere” in the current study (Fraser, 1990). Furthermore, community radio has a strong focus on “doing communication” (Atton, 2001; Howley, 2010).

	Reactive	Proactive
Inward focus (bonding/insular)	<b>Constructing buffers</b> Reaction to invisibility in main-stream media by offering the perspectives of minorities	<b>Creating bonds</b> Foster community pride/cohesion by celebrating community achievements and provide news from homeland
Outward focus (bridging/integrative)	<b>Removing barriers</b> Address injustice by advocating for positive change and leveling uneven discourse	<b>Building bridges</b> Civic participation while fostering intercultural dialogue for social integration

**Table 1.** Multidimensionality of community media as social capital (Source: Fleras 2009, 2015).

This is largely linked with community participation. With this in mind, the current study explores the content produced by participants as well as community participation by different action rationales.

Relationship refers to the articulated linkages within community radio across any social levels including the nation-state, a media system, a neighbourhood, civic groups and even individuals (Howley, 2010). In the current study, I pay attention to the relationship between community radio and contemporary Thai society with the purpose of exploring the outward functions of community radio.

Agency refers to “the pivotal role human actions play in articulating and rearticulating social formation” (Howley, 2010, p. 15). In other words, a form of articulation emerges when community members are empowered through their participation in community radio (Mhlanga, 2015). In the context of community radio, agency can bring about social changes by mobilising individual and collective abilities.

**Methodology**

In Chiang Mai, there are more than 150,000 Shan migrants, almost one-sixth of the city’s population (Jirattikorn, 2012; Eberle & Holiday, 2011). According to Jirattikorn (2012), Chiang Mai became a main destination for Shan migrants because of “its provincial border with the Shan State in Myanmar, the language similarity between the northern Thai dialect and Shan language, and Chiang Mai’s status as a metropolitan

centre in the North where there is a great deal of demand for cheap labour” (p. 215–216) (See Figure 2).

The methods for collecting data were semi-structured interviews, participant observation and document analysis. I interviewed 23 people, and the field



**Figure 2.** The location of the Shan State and Chiang Mai city (© 2018 GADM. Reproduced under terms of their licence. No redistribution nor commercial use without prior permission from GADM.)

work continued for seven weeks. During the fieldwork, I conducted participant observation to observe the interactions between listeners and broadcasters that were taking place at the radio station, including during the broadcasting. I also attended an international conference “Culture and Communication for Sustainable Development Goals” on 18 December 2015 where two staff broadcasters from Map Radio presented their communication strategies for migrant workers. Furthermore, I reviewed some relevant documents, including the timetable, a historical background of the establishment of Map Radio and policy guidelines for volunteer broadcasters. In addition, I recorded a total of two minutes from different listener panels, which contained 15 listeners’ opinions on the radio programmes.

## **Analysing Map Radio 99 FM**

### *Articulating the process of Map Radio 99FM*

The presence of community media in Thailand has increased because of continuous political instability, mainly caused by military intervention and a reaction from civil society called the “Campaign for Popular Media Reform” (CPMR) in the late 1990s (Klangnarong, 2009; Siriyuvasak, 2009). According to Brooten and Klangnarong (2009), in addition to the CPMR, ethnic minorities and labour organisations also worked together to defend their communication rights and freedom of expression (p 105). Along with increased funding from international donors directed towards Thailand at the time, this social movement resulted in a nationwide surge of community radio.

The Migrant Assistant Programme (Map) Radio FM 99.75 is the first community radio station in the Shan language in Chiang Mai. With the financial support of the Map foundation, Map Radio has been broadcasting for the migrant community in Chiang Mai since 2004. Radio programmes are broadcast in three languages: (northern) Thai, Shan and Burmese. Today, Map Radio aims to be a “space where migrant workers voices and opinions can be

heard by encouraging public participation and civic engagement” (Map Foundation, 2009). This highlights the desire of Map Radio to be the alternative public sphere for migrant workers.

### *Participation with different action rationales*

Broadcasting at Map Radio is performed by both volunteer and staff broadcasters who have an average of almost six years of experience in broadcasting. All parties engage in broadcasting and their skills used for broadcasting have been largely self-managed after a small amount of training.

Most volunteer broadcasters mentioned that their largest motivation was concern about migrant workers and an awareness that new Shan migrant workers need specific information to properly navigate life in Thailand. One staff broadcaster mentioned during the interview that “broadcasting is my interest and I feel happy when I can help migrant workers,” a sentiment shared by other volunteer broadcaster interviewees. With this in mind, it is perhaps clear that volunteer broadcasters’ participation in Map Radio is largely motivated by shared experiences with and empathy for Shan migrant workers.

Map Radio allocates almost half of each broadcasting slot for phone calls from listeners. All listeners interviewed responded that they listen to Map Radio because the radio programmes provide them with useful information, including the period for visa extension, Thai migration policy changes, and updated news on the Shan State in Myanmar. Furthermore, one listener mentioned, “Map Radio speaks in Shan and talks about the Shan issues which are not dealt with on Thai radio.” This highlights the alternative nature of Map Radio in comparison with mainstream media which do not use minority languages.

Interestingly, most volunteer and staff broadcasters were previous listeners of Map Radio. One staff broadcaster said, “I was a listener before and listened to songs and migrant issues from the Map Radio. I also talked with broadcasters through the phone-in programme.” Considering such sentiments, it is possible that participants’ experiences

as listeners through access to and interaction with media content encouraged them to become broadcasters, as emphasised by Carpentier (2011). Namely, their participation *through* radio programmes and supported participation *in* Map Radio served as motivators. Furthermore, staff broadcasters attend regular meetings as well as participate in a monthly listener panel to discuss overall issues related to the management of Map Radio and content of its radio programmes. These participants' action rationales, which include different motivations and activities, are summarised in Table 2 below.

### Content

At Map Radio, most programmes are broadcast in the Shan language, which accounts for 53 out of 77 hours of broadcasting per week. Programmes in Thai (20 hours) and programmes in Burmese (4 hours) are also broadcast. The programmes can be categorised into nine themes: religion, culture, health, migrant workers, youth, women, media, news and others.

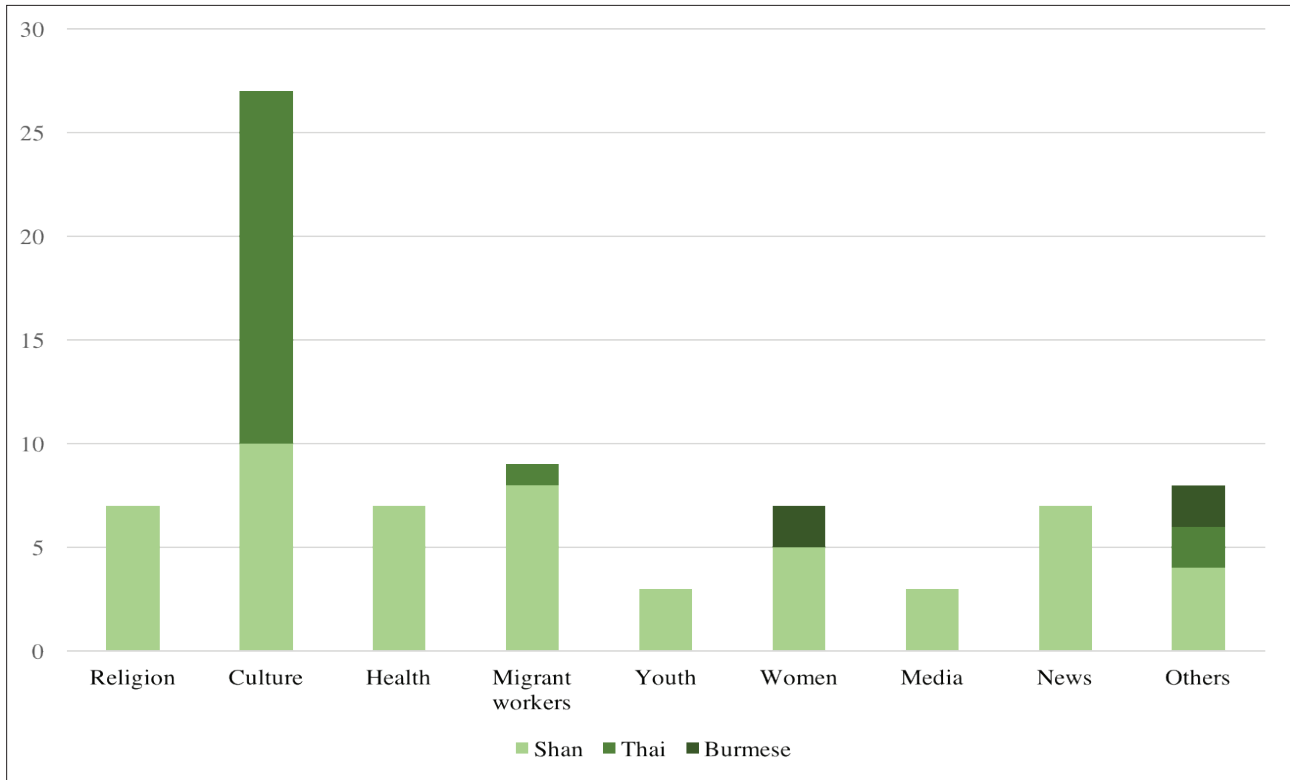
As Figure 3 shows, programmes on culture take up the largest share of broadcasting hours (27) followed by migrant workers (9), other (8), health (7), religion (7), news (7), women (6), youth (3) and media (3). Interestingly, cultural programmes broadcast in Thai have more broadcasting hours than those in Shan.

During my observation of the *Shan Tea Table Programme*, the Shan singer Nang Hseng Lu from the Shan State was invited to the programme to celebrate the Shan New Year. Such flexibility was often observed during Shan festivals and other Shan community activities. Arguably, the content produced by Map Radio is to a large extent culturally motivated with a strong focus on the Shan community. Nonetheless, some of the content produced in Thai and Burmese also enables community members to experience a sense of multicultural belongingness in Thai society. This demonstrates the “normative legitimacy” of Map Radio as an alternative public sphere characterised by an inclusive nature regarding varying ethnicities, as explained by Fraser (1990). However, it is notable that at Map Radio, political opinions cannot be expressed during broadcasting because of the strict censorship from the Thai military. Instead, only political news with exact sources can be broadcast. One staff broadcaster notes, “...we should follow Thai rules and policies since we are in Thailand. If not, we will be closed down. We just mention Thai policies related to migrant workers, not really opinions, just facts, exactly what happened.”

In considering this sentiment, political discourses arising from Map Radio is arguably not accompanied by the formation of a public opinion. This indicates a diminished functionality of Map Radio as an alternative public sphere particularly for political efficacy

Participants with different action rationales	Motivation	Activities
Listeners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information on Thai migration policies, visa extension</li> <li>- News on the Shan State</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Phone-calls</li> <li>- Listener panel</li> </ul>
Volunteer broadcasters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interest in broadcasting and volunteering</li> <li>- Concern and awareness about Shan migrant workers and their situation in Thailand</li> <li>- Former listeners</li> <li>- Recommendations from the Shan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Broadcasting</li> <li>- Monthly broadcasters meeting</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** Participants' action rationales at Map Radio



**Figure 3.** Broadcast hours per week according to theme and language

which, according to Fraser (1990), delivers the will of the community as a form of civil society. It also suggests a diminished potential for Map Radio to be an influential and strong public sphere in Thai society.

#### *Articulating relationships in Map Radio FM 99*

There are five programmes broadcast in Thai on Map Radio. One Shan staff broadcaster mentioned “We try to build our relationship between Thai and Shan and it is actually going well.” Thai broadcaster from *Thai Community Programme* has assisted in designing the broadcasting timetable with Shan community members since Map Radio first started. Her programme is currently broadcast 10 hours a week and is the biggest slot among cultural programmes shown in Figure 3. When it comes to the participation of Thai broadcaster at Map Radio, one staff broadcaster responded, “Our Thai DJ can talk well, and she can link migrant issues with the Thai community for listeners. Even though she speaks

Thai, her information can be about the Shan, which is very good.” Thai listeners as well as Shan migrants listen to *Thai Community Programme*. Because of language similarities, Shan migrants are willing to listen to Thai programmes.

One government official from the Thai immigration office broadcasts information regarding recent policy changes during *Immigration Programme* for one hour per week. This programme is particularly helpful regarding participants’ living conditions because relevant legal information is delivered. One listener mentioned the programme, “this programme is so important for us, so Map Radio should increase broadcasting time.” Thai citizens’ involvement with the radio station shows the intention of Map Radio to promote intercultural dialogue with Thai society. In addition, the presence of Thai broadcasters and Thai programmes at the radio station suggests that the meaning of community at Map Radio can be understood more than as simply the Shan migrant community.



### *Articulating the agency of Map Radio 99FM*

At Map Radio, all participants of this study except for one responded that they have experienced personal changes after becoming involved in broadcasting. Some broadcasters have become more confident, for instance, when speaking in public, when meeting people outside and when writing transcripts for broadcasting. Two broadcasters are employed or received offers for employment from broadcasting organizations. As such, participation in Map Radio may bring about socio-economic opportunities which enable participants to actively participate in Thai society. Moreover, interactions with listeners can make broadcasters feel empowered through sharing information with listeners. For instance, one staff broadcaster responded, "I found that information I talked during the broadcasting was so useful and important for migrant workers. I think I love that. I like the interactions with listeners. I feel like I can help them."

Frequent interactions with listeners may provide opportunities for empowering broadcasters. Additionally, as discussed, most listeners listen to Map Radio to gain information about the Shan State in Myanmar as well as about their life in Thailand.

Since establishing Map Radio, participants have wanted to expand their working area and the influence of the radio station beyond the Shan community in Chiang Mai. Several broadcasters noted a willingness to have an AM frequency and establish a community radio station in the Shan State. Furthermore, broadcasters mentioned that they wanted to train Shan youth to make them become broadcasters of Map Radio. Regarding participants' collective changes, one volunteer broadcaster responded,

I think Thailand is more advanced. In the Shan State, we just started accepting the typical norms. Last time, in my programme, I talked about gender equality and discrimination. I knew that people have rights [...] human, child, women's rights [...] I've learned this from the community, which made us change.

As this sentiment demonstrates, such changes are made because participants become aware of their

fundamental rights through providing and acquiring information during their engagement in the community radio station. Arguably, this awareness of rights and a common social status as ethnic migrant workers strengthened participants' collective identities and can potentially facilitate collective movements in the future.

### **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to explore a range of social consequences that result from the practices of a community radio station in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in order to understand the role of this radio station as an alternative public sphere for the Shan migrant community in Thai society. I have argued that Map Radio has emerged as an alternative public sphere because of an early marginalisation and exclusion of the Shan migrant community from Thai society. The content produced by Map Radio is to a large extent culturally motivated with a strong focus on the Shan community among others and mostly spoken in the Shan language, which strengthens a shared identity of the Shan migrant and maximises their participation in society through this media channel. Based on shared experiences and empathy among Shan migrant workers, it becomes clear that the radio station plays an important role in providing necessary information for new Shan migrants. However, when looking at the Shan community itself from a perspective that is *not* the comprehensive structural viewpoint of the media landscape in Thailand, it is arguable that Map Radio could be considered an alternative public sphere as framed in this study. It is certain however that Map Radio has been working as a formal public sphere for the Shan migrant community. Indeed, Map Radio has a central role for the Shan migrant community in building up their buffers and it plays a significant role in their socio-cultural survival in the country.

I have also claimed that this radio community is attempting to strengthen relationships with Thai and Burmese communities in addition to strengthening relations between Shan community members. The radio station achieves this by using different languages, a variety of multicultural programmes

and engages with different community members. In this regard, it is clear that Map Radio operates both inwardly and outwardly to varying degrees according to Fleras's (2009) argument that community media creates bonding (within a community) and bridges roles (between communities) for migrant communities in a new society. Furthermore, I have argued that as a tool for emancipation, Map Radio empowers participants on individual and collective levels. Individually, participants have become more active, confident and knowledgeable, in some cases increasing their socio-economic participation in Thai society. On a collective level, participants have been expected to exert collective agency by establishing radio stations in the Shan State to achieve communication rights. This clearly shows community radio has social capital as Fleras (2009) describes.

While Map Radio seems to actively engage in creating community solidarity and cohesion, thereby constructing buffers for new Shan migrants, it is unclear whether it proactively operates outwards beyond the community in Thailand. This may be partially explained through the insufficient political efficacy of Map Radio attributable to migrants' challenging socio-economic status along with the political environment in the country, which can be characterised as threatening. Although this restrictive political situation is

also applied for other community radio stations in the country, regardless of which community they serve, I would argue that a political environment in the country which guarantees freedom of expression and communication rights may favourably increase the presence of the Map Radio as an influential and strong public sphere in Thai society. This may bring about positive effects on intercultural dialogues between this ethnic migrant community and Thai society by supporting their social participation and strengthening the linkage between the communities.

Since the country has not recognised multiculturalism as a critical national agenda and an independent community broadcasting landscape has not been promised, discussing the social consequences of community radio might be premature. Nonetheless, the case of Map Radio provides an example of how a radio station has managed to serve an ethnic migrant community by operating their own radio station which is premised on community participation.

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