

The Development of Community Media in South-East Asia

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The ASEAN Media Scene

In this context, the term ‘community media’ is defined as a communication facility that is in the community, for the community, about the community, and by the community. The characteristics of community media are that they are: owned and controlled by people in the community; usually small and low-cost; providing interactive two-way communication; non-profit and autonomous, therefore, non-commercial; having limited coverage or reach; utilising appropriate indigenous materials and resources; reflecting community needs and interests; and supporting community development with a large part of the programme or content.

From this, ‘community communication’ may be defined as the process of social interaction in small groups, using interpersonal, indigenous, or small media. It is highly participatory, involving the community in planning, producing, and evaluating messages. The element of wide participation of the people in management, production, and responsibility in genuine community media, thus, separates the grain from the chaff. The term ‘community’ is often associated with territoriality; however, it also refers to groups of people who share common interests and values.

While hundreds of local newspapers and low-power radio stations – together with dozens of village audio towers – exist in Asia, these are not, in most cases, controlled

or animated by the community. Political bureaucrats and elite sectors or families maintain exclusive control of and access to most of them, particularly the broadcast stations. Furthermore, these communication media serve as one-way channels of government information, advertisements, and religious propaganda for those who control the facilities. Hence, even when they serve small populations and limited geographical communities, it is doubtful if they could be labelled as community media.

Among the ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Brunei, and the recently associated Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar – the communication industry is largely in the hands of government. There are a few exceptions in Indonesia and Thailand, but the privately owned media do not have the same latitude that is associated with the mass media in the more liberal system in the Philippines. Freedom of media in the Philippines, on one hand, and state control of the media in other countries, on the other, are two-edged swords. In the Philippines case, the media do not easily lend themselves to the purpose of nation-building or to any development plan. Where the media are state-regulated, this is more easily accomplished, but in this case, the media are often unable to perform the innovative tasks expected of them in a society where innovation, flexibility and self-correcting mechanisms are so important.

In Malaysia, for instance, a law prohibits any public discussion or questioning of ‘sensitive issues’ such as the special position of the Malays, the national language, citizenship and the position of the Kings and the Sultans. The cumulative effect of the legislation has been to surround editors and publishers with a network of legal prohibitions, without giving them any practical guidance. Thus, most reporters, editors and owners take the attitude that it is better to be safe than sorry. The control of media is a natural scheme among despots, authoritarians and dictators in order to control the actions and the minds of their citizens. Autocratic rulers feign threats to the security of the state, as well as the infringement of national and regional values, as reasons to control critical or independent media. Hence, national media ownership and practice have largely been a monopoly of government and the ruling elite. Communication facilities in the South-East Asian nations are used for purposes of development by national, regional or local government to tell the people to accept the inevitable changes that go hand in hand with progress.

A further consideration is the location of these media and the access rural people have to the means of communication. All over the region, the mass media system is concentrated in the urban areas. It has not been able to reach and have an impact on the grassroots population. The flow of information emanates from the metropolitan areas and tends to be one-way since there are no effective dissemination mechanisms to gather news from the regions and much less from more specific localities. And since the media are national or regional in orientation, they do not genuinely address the needs of the majority of the population who are in the rural areas.

Moreover, the content of mass media - particularly the programming of electronic media - is heavily Western and entertainment-oriented. It does not exert a beneficial influence on mass audiences. Rather, it fosters escapism from the concrete problems of survival that they must confront in their immediate environment and reinforces values and aspirations for other standards, norms and models of development. By the constant bombardment of Western culture whose emphasis is on individualism and materialism, most of these media erode indigenous cultures.

It is in this context that community media have been increasingly explored because of their potential to fill the glaring gaps in the mass media system. It is hoped that they can augment and rectify the imbalances and inequities in the distribution, as well as the content and thrust, of the mainstream media. It is also seen that community media can provide those at the grassroots with mechanisms for their diverse voices to be heard and for their needs to be addressed. Hence, some community-based or local media are sporadically born, not exactly as a deliberate movement, but of necessity, felt by individual communities. To a great extent, however, the pattern of government control - with limited citizen participation and elitist ownership - at the national level is carried over to the local and community ones. Yet, some innovative forms of media are adopted at the local level if only to adapt to economic, cultural and practical considerations.

However, some community-based media - publications, newsletters, blackboard newspapers, wall newspapers, audio tower systems, folk media - have managed to survive. Many of these were private initiatives or, at best, operated by a limited group with specific concerns. These forms of media, although looked down upon by larger media, have proved to be of significance in the process of community development. They are the only ones available, particularly in remote communities, villages, and islands. These less-populated places

are regarded as commercially non-viable. Community-based media are also the ones dealing with local events, issues, and concerns.

Printed publications and folk media are more prevalent in the South-East Asian region and dominate the other types of media.. Publications range from the crude blackboard news bulletin, to mimeographed pages, to tabloid-sized newspapers. The form and manner of operation are largely determined by the economic, social, geographical, cultural and political factors obtaining in each situation. The inclination, competence, and purpose of the initiating institution or individuals are major determinants in the way community media are operated.¹

Moalboal Times: a Blackboard Newspaper

A classic example of a cheap, effective and innovative publication is the now defunct *Moalboal Times* of Cebu, in Central Philippines. While the name suggests a newspaper and in fact it functioned as one, *Moalboal Times* was not a newspaper but 25 blackboards set up at strategic points in the villages of the remote town of Moalboal. Every morning, high-school boys wrote the news of the town on the blackboards which were placed in front of the village schools for everybody to read. The *Moalboal Times* used marine *lawanit* boards that had been contributed by the villagers. They were resistant to rain and painted with blackboard paint so that the news was written on them with chalk. The blackboards were cleaned at night by small children, to be covered with news the following day. The news was gathered from market vendors, fishermen, farmers, and their wives. It was carried and relayed to the other villages where other blackboards were situated. A big central blackboard was installed in the town itself. The main fare was community happenings from births, deaths, municipal ordinances and the prices of commodities in the public market. It also carried news that could improve the lives of the people, farming methods, care of children, family health and the preparation of cheap and nutritious meals.

Though written with chalk on the board, the blackboard newspaper was very much like the front page of a newspaper complete with editorials, cartoons and columns. Anyone was free to write a commentary on the bulletin board. School children copied all the news into their notebooks and took it home to their parents. And for some of the parents who could not read, the children read the news to them in the dialect.

During elections, the blackboard announced that all the candidates for the post of mayor would deliver their campaign speeches in the church – all at the same time. There was only one rule: no candidate was allowed to say anything bad about any other candidate. Each one was permitted to present only the good things he planned to do for the town. The candidates talked to the whole town while everyone listened. When the campaign speeches were over, all the candidates joined hands in the sanctuary and sang the *Cursillo* (religious) song. After the elections, the mayor used the *Moalboal Times* to announce all the municipal ordinances. The *Moalboal Times* served the town for six years and ceased publication only when the Catholic priest who initiated and led the bulletin board publication was transferred to another town.

***Alon* (Waves): a Mimeographed Weapon by Fishermen**

Alon, literally translated as sea waves, was started in the late 1970's and continues to this date. It grew out of the struggle of the small scale fishermen, whose fishing grounds in Laguna Lake in Luzon were usurped by wealthy fish-pen operators. It came in the form of a mimeographed publication that was prepared by the fishermen. Guided by the Asian Social Institute (ASI), the small fisherfolk turned from routine boat paddling to writing in the weekly newsletter.

This community paper became the voice of the small fishermen. Initially started by the staff of ASI, the fishermen felt they should have a hand in *Alon*'s publication. They said that *Alon* should carry more authentic stories and the first-hand accounts of the experiences that fishermen and their families had to suffer. So they took over the publication. They wrote articles, prepared columns and drew editorial cartoons. They also contributed to the cost of the publication. To keep the quality of the publication consistently high, ASI organised seminars on writing and editing. In a few months, *Alon* had a print run of 500 copies. Copies were distributed beyond the affected villages and soon attracted the attention of government officials. One of them was the head of the Laguna Lake Development Authority, who, instead of acting on the legitimate grievances, denounced the fishermen's organisation as leftist.

To intensify the struggle, the fishermen decided to support their publication with a slide presentation *Dagat Ba'y Amin Pa?* (Is the Sea Still Ours?). This gen-

erated further support from other groups as it moved from group to group and village to village. The support that evolved enabled the fishermen to transform *Alon* into a militant instrument. While the general problem of lake control and access continues to be an issue, the fishermen have claimed back some of their rights to fish in the lake. In the process, they have developed an effective mode of self-expression. When the fishermen know their own conditions, problems and needs, they can find solutions to their problems and are able to collectively make realistic plans.²

Periodikit: Wall Newspaper

The *Periodikit* is typical of the publications that are used by government agencies in most of South-East Asia. Agriculture and rural development agencies use it in order for farmers and fishermen to have access to news, policies and development information. The news is centrally printed on large-sized paper and posted on bulletin boards where people can see and read them. However, since the people are not able to participate in the production, the material appears less interesting to them. While production costs are brought down considerably because of bulk production, observers believe that the benefits for both the government institutions and the general citizens are not that favourable.

Most communities prefer the initiatives carried out in certain villages by farmers, transportation and youth organisations who set up boards near village convenience stores, waiting sheds, village halls and wherever people converge. Here, they post their less-expensive but regularly mimeographed publications. The village bulletin board thus becomes a form of informal message exchange among the members of an organisation. When properly managed, the community board becomes a convenient outlet for talent and cultural expression.

Rural Mimeo Press

The rural mimeo press was started in Manila during President Ferdinand Marcos' martial law days when there was no freedom of speech. With initial funding from an international agency, it was started by veteran journalists and activist priests who wanted to give a voice to the people. Using the Catholic

church organisation, 86 mimeographing machines, paper, ink and some funds were provided to rural communities. Seminars were held for participants about how to improve their skills of writing, mimeographing and distribution. A central organ called the *Communicator* was also published in Manila and distributed to the communities. While the *Communicator* was in English, it set the editorial tone and standard for the local publications. It touched the crucial issues of the day and was the source of news and editorials on various issues and concerns. Each of the 86 rural mimeo papers was in the local dialect.

In one community in Southern Philippines, the rural mimeo press had a major casualty. The parish priest was fighting the government for stealing the land of the poor and the military for brutal oppression. He was also a witness in a rape case. He received three warnings: "If you do not shut up, we will kill you." He persisted and was killed. When asked what he would do about this, the Bishop said, "I will send another priest to the town. If that priest is killed, I will send another priest to the town. And if that priest is killed, I will send another priest to the town." Proof that the rural mimeo press was effective is that almost all of the 86 editors were arrested by the military, brought to headquarters and questioned. The rural mimeo press is certainly a strong medium for crisis communication. It could probably be used, with great effectiveness, by community organisations.

Kadaclan News Organ: Voice in the Wilderness

Kadaclan is an isolated town in the mountainous Northern Philippines. It is 36 kilometres from the nearest town where transportation is available. The hardships of the people, the difficulty of carrying sick folk to the nearest hospital, the lack of school buildings, footbridges and other facilities with which the people could have access to information and news created a sense of urgency for a village newspaper.

A school teacher who had been sent from Baguio City conceived of the idea. In 1973, he started with two pages written on a portable typewriter and the carbon copies were circulated among the villagers. He was assisted by friends and the enthusiastic community. None of them had had any formal training in writing or publication. They combined their talents and meagre resources in a way that was functional and practical. It clicked! Readers and amateur writers from near and far sent letters to the editor

asking for more copies. They had come to know the sincerity and positive significance of the *Kadaclan News Organ* which was distributed free of charge and existed through donations of printing necessities, carbon paper and other materials. Soon the idea of silkscreen printing came upon them and eventually a mimeographing machine was acquired. Interested tribal writers were given training in the rudiments of news writing. With no funding at all, the editors performed their tasks for free. They dedicated their talents to editing, publishing, and distributing the *Kadaclan News Organ* to village folk and there were times when they had to use their personal funds.

The organ reported on improved roads, bridges, hygiene, school buildings and other developments in the locality. It also covered topics like herbal medicine, education and current events. To date, the *Kadaclan News Organ* has spread to nearby villages and municipalities. In spite of the hardship of the place and the skimpy resources, the *Kadaclan News Organ* has provided less-fortunate mountain tribes with a very vocal newsletter of their own. It has recorded beautiful customs and social practices and it has awakened the different tribes to educational uplifting and spiritual growth.

Provincial Publications: are they Community Newspapers?

Owing to the difficult geographical situations in many countries in South-East Asia – mountainous and archipelagic – the emergence of local newspapers is a natural phenomenon. Diverse religious, ethnic, and language groupings are also factors. These publications cater to the smaller communities and take up news and issues of specific concerns. However, responsibility for the production of the paper is not shared by the controllers. Readers are conditioned to be mere readers and not contributors. Liberal interaction between readers and writers, as well as among readers, is not a common practice. The increased literacy rate and generally improved economic situation in the region have brought in the tabloid-sized newsletters that are commonly published, on a weekly or fortnightly basis, and circulated to a couple of hundred readers.

All across the region, de-massification of the printed media has become a natural urge. However, democratisation is not a virtue that has been added to the small publications. A wide participation base and democratic control do not appear to be the main trend, except for some publications that are owned by co-operatives and grass-

roots organisations. Another point is the implicit or explicit control imposed by the authorities on the content of local papers. Government restrictions, such as limited allocations of printing paper, do not constitute a congenial environment for the exercise of creativity and free expression.

Folk Media: a Natural Art Form of Communication

A number of folk media practices are popular in the South-East Asian region. These indigenous forms of self-expression are used in information, education and communication campaigns for extension or development purposes, as well as in cultural enhancement work.

In Malaysia and Indonesia, the *Wayang Kulit* (shadow puppet) is a common art form which has been fostered and is closely interwoven with the life of the people. The traditional shadow play is performed with flat puppets made of leather. The stories of *Wayang Kulit* are based on the ancient faith and the great epics. The equipment employed consists of a white cloth stretched out on a vertical wooden frame to form the screen. A lamp hangs over the *dalang*, the narrator or the performer, who moves the puppet so that the light throws the shadows onto the white screen. The narrator is supported by the *gamelan*, an orchestra of about 25 persons and singers who sit behind him. The *Wayang Kulit* is usually performed at night and can last for hours.

Poetic performances are another great crowd-puller. The *Pantung* in Malaysia are short verses, where the contestants display their brilliance of mind, their poetic talent and oratorical eloquence. They are similar to the Filipino debate in rhymes, *Balagtasan* in which two protagonists argue over an issue, with the *Lakandiwa*, a respected referee and judge, standing by to make the final resolution or to intervene if the debate gets out of hand. In some cases, the winner is proclaimed by the applause of the audience. This form has also been harnessed to convey the merits of contentious government programmes, such as family planning, to the people.

A wide array of folk media in the form of songs, story telling, chants, dances, dramas, speech and theatrical performances, as well as community spectacles that are often related to social and religious occasions, are practised in South-

East Asia. While there are limited participants in these folk media performances, they are highly popular events and inexpensive where everybody is challenged to participate.

Community Audio Tower System: a Precursor to Radio Broadcast

In Thailand, the use of the community audio tower system has been popular in farming villages since the 1970s. The Ministries of Agriculture, Health, and Internal Affairs produced pre-recorded programmes about their development activities and aired these over the community audio tower system (CATS). The CATS is made up of powerful speakers hoisted on top of 10 to 20 metre bamboo or steel poles. Regular programmes are broadcast at specific times of the day over the loudspeakers. The programme is heard in the whole village or in the neighbouring ones, up to a distance of four kilometres, though the coverage and quality of the reception depend on weather conditions and on the terrain of the locality. The CATS follows a top-down approach.

Realising its worth in the development of farming areas, the practice of using loudspeakers mounted on tall poles as programme outlets has been recommended by the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the United Nations Development Fund in several other countries in Asia. However, a more participatory and consultative arrangement was promoted. In some of the rural communities in the Philippines where the CATS were installed, the villages treated them like real radio stations. Regular daily programmes were conducted by community members who were trained in radio programme production. Daily programmes on agriculture, family life and community development were aired over the loudspeakers. Community members representing various sectors, e.g. youth, women, agriculture, religious, were motivated to voluntarily participate as community broadcasters and they were trained by professional radio broadcast practitioners.

Some villages where the CATS were located adopted the school on the air type of radio. Farmers and their wives enrolled in various courses, such as pest management, swine raising, nutrition and family planning. Lessons were aired daily. Questions were asked at the end of each session. When the two to four month course was completed, certificates and prizes were given to deserving

enrolees. At other sites, the school on the air was followed up with farmers' classes or field demonstrations conducted by extension workers.

The programmes were so effective and the hosts gained such popularity that participants became instant personalities in their community. A few who ran for public office capitalised on their newly-attained community standing. In an isolated valley in Southern Philippines, the audio tower system was upgraded with a low-power transmitter, transforming it into a real radio station. The CATS introduced the people to responsibility, interest and activities which were strengthened by interactions and the courage to make decisions.

Tambuli Radio: an Example of Community Media

As noted above, political, economic and cultural idiosyncrasies in the region do not favour the spawning of free and pluralistic media in Asia. Closed autocratic systems hardly allow the operation of independent private media that promote free expression. Most of the broadcast and print media in the ASEAN countries are operated for propaganda by government functionaries or for profit by businessmen. Government stations dominate the Asian broadcast scenario, except in the Philippines where highly commercial media are in vogue and government stations constitute the minority. Decision-making and programme production in government stations are kept away from the wider public by the bureaucrats. The mere concept of privately-owned radio is looked at by government with trepidation. Where commercial radio exists, the professionals and the owners keep media access to themselves. Businessmen often collaborate with the political powers.

In the late 1980s, there were close to 400 radio stations in the Philippines and 80 percent were private commercial ventures. Ten percent served as government mouthpieces, and a handful of school-based radio facilities were largely used as an academic training ground and partly as an extension arm. Religious stations ostensibly aimed to propagate denominational religious dogma while rendering token public service on the side and earning some money for the Church through commercial advertisements. Today, the broadcast industry has not changed much except that there are an additional 200 radio stations granted licenses by the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC).

As limited advertising revenues become the target of competition, programming is chiefly geared towards getting listeners and the corresponding advertisements. This gives rise to nonsensical, highly sensationalised, and inane programmes. Programme production budgets are often minimal. News, editorials and public service programmes are of low quality. Socially meaningful documentaries are rare. Educational, informational and development programmes hardly find slots in commercial radio stations. Music and frivolous personality shows are the fashion.

A recently imposed interesting, but distressing feature of the situation is that broadcast operators are required to seek a congressional franchise before their applications are entertained by the NTC, the government regulating agency. This additional obstacle further restricts would-be initiatives by small, less influential and resource-strapped groups in setting up their own radio stations. Thus small organisations, communities, co-operatives and municipalities are discouraged from establishing their own respective radio facilities. The process of applying for a franchise costs money and patience which, in the end, would make them beholden to the power-hungry politicians. It is against this backdrop that community radio stations were developed in the Philippines – thanks to a UNESCO-DANIDA project called Tambuli which started in 1991. It aimed to establish six community media and training centres (CMTC), two in a two-year pilot phase and four in the four-year expansion phase.

The Tambuli-assisted radio stations are among the few which meet the definition of community radio or community media, where wide participation and control is a critical yardstick. The Tambuli community radio involves a high level of effective popular participation, particularly in its operation.

The Tambuli Approach

Each one of the proposed community media and training centres (CMTC) of the project was designed to have a low-power radio station, a publication and an income generating unit. The relatively far-reaching radio station would be central to the CMTC. The newspaper, with its built-in advantage of catering to the better-off members of the community, would complement the radio station. The training centre, on the other hand, would provide income generating opportunities and co-ordination for the economic and social well-being of the community.

The project has thus far helped 12 communities establish their own radio stations. These low-power stations are located in remote areas and are controlled by the community, through a multi-sectoral group of leaders. The two other components pertaining to income generation and a publication have so far been dropped. Income generating projects are implemented by local government or non-governmental entities. Where Tambuli started such projects, they were confined to the radio participants, if only to motivate them in their respective roles.

The idea of the publication was received with little enthusiasm by community leaders. Compared to radio, publishing is a more expensive proposition. As a medium of glamour, dynamism, spontaneity and excitement, radio proved to be more attractive to the participants and community leaders. In the towns where both radio and a publication were tried or even where there already was an existing publication, the latter was put aside and finally forgotten. In Basco, Batanes, where a community paper was set up side by side with the radio station, the enthusiasm of the participants waned to the point where they abandoned the monthly mimeographed paper called *Vudyadong*. In Laurel, Batangas, a more sophisticated eight-page tabloid-sized publication closed after five successive monthly issues as soon as the radio station began operation. The participants were more inspired by radio. They found the newspaper work more costly and cumbersome. An existing *Partido Herald* in Camarines Sur suffered the same fate when the community station *DWTP-Tambuli Kan Partido* went on the air in 1995.

These pioneer radio stations provided good albeit hard lessons for the project. Opening a community newspaper should be viewed with caution, especially regarding its sustainability when a radio station operates side by side with it. On the other hand, the livelihood and economic component of the project was received with more enthusiasm by the community, but it was not pursued if only to avoid duplicating with the ones already accessible to the community.

The 12 Philippine Community Radio Stations

DWIR, Basco, Batanes. When the Tambuli project was initiated in late 1991, there was already a 10-watt transmitter operating in Basco, Batanes. It was one of two FM transmitters built by Martin Allard, a British electronics communication engi-

near. The first one was used by the University of the Philippines in Los Baños, either as field broadcast auxiliary equipment or as a spare transmitter. The second transmitter was offered to the UP College of Mass Communication (CMC) for installation in Batanes, the northernmost group of islands in the Philippines. In 1990, through seed money of \$25,000 granted by UNESCO, the CMC bought a 100-watt booster, acquired additional production equipment, provided three-months training to six participants and conducted a benchmark study in Basco. The Batanes Development Foundation Incorporated (BDFI) officially assumed operation of DWIR or Ivatan Radio.

Without adequately trained technicians to operate and maintain the equipment, the transmitter, including the 100-watt booster, was found to be no longer serviceable in 1991. The Tambuli project helped put it back into operation, gave additional equipment and provided some supplementary training to both the technician and the participants. The Board of Advisers for Ivatan Radio was also reorganised.

DWIR served only the capital municipality of Basco which had a population of approximately 8,000 people. It was the desire of the BDFI to increase its coverage to the other towns in the mainland of Batan, as well as to the other populated islands of Sabtang and Itbayat (approximately 49 kilometres away from Basco). This would need a much bigger transmitter. No adequate transmitter, however, was available from Tambuli. The project had only 100-watts as the highest transmitter power available. The plan to upgrade the transmitter power never materialised. Meantime, a 1-kilowatt AM government station was put up in Basco in 1993, which proved to give a better signal and a wider coverage for the mountainous terrain.

While the government station *Radyo ng Bayan* had a wider coverage, DWIR had a more participatory and balanced programme. At least for the listeners in the capital town of Basco, DWIR was a better choice. On the other hand, *Radyo ng Bayan* had one thing going for it. It had a larger staff, working full-time, paid by the government. DWIR participants were community volunteers. It did not take long for all the producer-announcers of DWIR to be lured to *Radyo ng Bayan*. Meantime, the management of the government radio station offered three hours of airtime for the DWIR-produced programmes to reach more people. As of today, the Batanes Development Foundation has a plan to move DWIR to the remote island of Itbayat, where it can take up the local concerns of a depressed community.

DWTL, Tambuli ng Laurel. Laurel, Batangas, is roughly 85 kilometres south of Manila. Located next to the active Taal volcano in the periphery of Taal Lake, Laurel is among the most economically depressed communities of Southern Luzon, having been the poor part of the old municipality of Talisay. Laurel was chosen as the first official pilot site for Tambuli because of its relative proximity to Manila, which would allow for better monitoring. The idea of a radio station and a publication for the municipality was received with enthusiasm by the town people and their leaders. It was believed that they would help speed up development, aside from serving as direct signs of progress for the town of 20,000 people. An elaborate multi-sectoral community media council (CMC) was constituted from among the recognised leaders of the town. Farmers, youth, women, senior citizens, education, religious denominations, businessmen, transportation groups and the local government were represented. The CMC would make the major decisions in the operation of the station and the publication. The election registrar, a woman, was elected as chairperson of the council, ensuring that the station would not be used for partisan political purposes.

Taking their cue from Batanes, the Bayuyungan Community Development Foundation (BACOD) was formed. BACOD, not the municipal government, would assume the administrative operation of the station and the newspaper. BACOD would apply for the license and franchise of the station and raise the operational funds. The CMC, an *ad hoc* body without judicial power, could not undertake the functions of the Foundation. The town mayor himself was elected as president of BACOD. The first component to be set up was the publication. After three weeks of training in newsletter publication conducted by experts from the University of the Philippines' Institute of Development Communication, the first issue of *Abot Tanaw* came out in September 1992. It was an eight-page tabloid-size newspaper meant to be published monthly.

Excitement suffused the town and the 15-member editorial staff of *Abot Tanaw*. The paper took up the major happenings in the community. It discussed issues on the uncompleted approach bridge to the town. It pointed out the need for a more orderly and cleaner market place. These and the other concerns brought up by the paper were acted on swiftly by the people concerned. The paper was selling like hot cakes for two pesos and fifty centavos or US \$0.10. Around the fourth issue of

Abot Tanaw, in January 1993, the 5-week training course for radio participants was conducted, also by experts from the Institute of Development Communication. Some of the radio participants were from the editorial staff of *Abot Tanaw*.

The equipment for the radio station was set up in an elementary school building. A 50-square meter school room was converted to a studio, partitioned into an announcer's booth, a technician's section and a receiving-working area. The equipment consisted of a 100-watt transmitter, an audio mixer, an open reel tape player-recorder, two cassette recorders, two microphones, an amplifier, and monitoring speakers. The antenna was hoisted about 70 feet above the ground of the already elevated school grounds.

The first broadcast of DWTL – *Tambuli ng Laurel* – was heard in February 1993. Its broadcast hours, decided by the CMC and the participants, were from 8:00 a.m. to 12 noon Monday to Sunday. The programme content included news, agriculture, homemaking, counselling and public affairs. Certain obscure personalities became instant celebrities. A fresh air of dynamism pervaded in the community. Apart from the regular staff of 15 people, ordinary members of the community were given the chance to participate in the station. It was in Laurel that the very popular *Baranggayan sa Himpapawid* programme was started. A variety programme, consisting of live music renditions, panel discussions, interviews, cultural talent shows, was prepared in the outlying villages. Villagers who had no training in radio were the participants. They freely discussed community issues, provided especially relevant information, and displayed their musical, poetic or speech talents. The programme moved from baranggay (village) to baranggay where each tried to outdo the other with better and more solid presentations. The weekly *Baranggayan* was the most popular programme of DWTL. This village-level production became a pattern for all the Tambuli-assisted stations. Seeing the popularity of the programme, *Baranggayan* was adopted by some of the commercial stations.

It was not anticipated that the start of the radio broadcast would mark the end of the publication, especially as both projects were perceived to help one another. The publication was to cater to the more educated members of the community, while the radio station was to reach the less literate. Editorial activities and management would be complementary or combined. The newsletter, if sent to the wealthier natives of Laurel living elsewhere, could be a means to solicit funds for

both the station and the publication. One major thing was assumed: the publication would be overshadowed by the radio station. Radio was the more glamorous outlet and it easily made personalities popular and respected. While radio was more of a spontaneous medium, preparation of the newspaper was more demanding. Radio was less expensive for the producers and reached more people. The newspaper commanded less feedback. In no time at all, the publication was abandoned as the editorial staff feigned difficulty in getting funding, as well as lack of material support from the community leaders.

Meantime, the leadership of both the community media council and the BACOD Foundation ran into separate difficulties. The chairperson of the CMC discovered she was suffering from cancer, sought treatment abroad but soon died. The otherwise charismatic and administratively efficient mayor was charged with murder by political opponents and was sent to jail. The new Catholic parish priest was named to head the CMC. But the vice president of the foundation, the school principal, was less endowed with leadership qualities and vision and balked at taking over BACOD leadership. Coming from another political party, the new town mayor had his own personal agenda. He discouraged the operation of the radio station and would not allow any project started by his predecessor to continue in his term. The Catholic priest was in turn using the station against the municipal leadership. When the station closed in 1995, the people were agitated. A survey by communication students of Ateneo University indicated that 98 percent of the people of Laurel wanted the station back. One percent of the population, the mayor, and his followers were the only ones who opposed it. The mayor had his reasons as there were some irregular activities in the town, such as the operation of cock-fights and illegal numbers games, which with other inadequacies of his administration might be exposed by the community media.

At the time of writing, some of the original participants are working out arrangements for the resumption of DWTL's operation, which would otherwise be regarded as the only one among the 12 Tambuli-assisted stations that has totally ceased operation.

DXOI, Ang Tingog ng Olutanga. Olutanga is a small island in Mindanao, eight hours by boat from Zamboanga City. There are three towns in the island, populated by 40,000 people. Olutanga was the scene of serious armed conflicts

in recent years, making the island poor and even more isolated. One third of its population are Muslims while the others are Christian migrants from the northern islands.

The Tambuli management initially had doubts about whether it could maintain a radio station which might be just an additional load for the towns people. In 1993, the radio project was discussed with the community leaders. At first they were incredulous, believing that the Tambuli staff were city people who were there to defraud them. A low-power station? A radio station in a remote poor island? Where was the catch? It was necessary to bring in the equipment and put it into operation before they accepted it. Then their eyes lit up when they realised that they could hear themselves on the air. The participants scampered home to check if the signal could be heard on their own radio sets. A council of leaders was organised to make up the community media council. Somebody thought of organising the Olutanga Media Development Foundation. In the end, the community media council and the Foundation were merged.

For the three-week training course in radio broadcasting, there were over 40 applicants from the island. Only 15 were selected after a thorough screening. To ensure a fair representation of the various important sectors and interests in the community, a teacher, a farmer, a Muslim leader, a member of the paramilitary group, a fisherman, several youth leaders, a municipal councilman, some technicians, the lady chairperson of the electoral committee and some religious leaders were selected. Three of those who were not chosen insisted on participating in the training course as observers. The course was conducted jointly by an instructor from the Institute of Development Communication who spoke the native Cebuano language and a veteran radio journalist and multimedia practitioner from Zamboanga City who provided practical tips on broadcasting.

The training course covered the following topics: (i) conducting a radio talk; (ii) writing scripts; (iii) gathering and writing news; (iv) voicing; (v) conducting interviews; (vi) preparing magazine programmes; (vii) preparing short programmes materials, such as radio spots, jingles, plugs; and (viii) preparing citizen participation programmes. Actual broadcasting was done during the training course. Some of the practice productions were put on the air. Live programmes were also conducted. Some participants had to walk 11 kilometres on muddy roads

to take their turn at the station at 5:00 in the morning. DXOI went into operation immediately after the training. The daily broadcast hours were 5:00 to 6:00 a.m.; 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.; and 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. Hosts and technicians took turns running the station during the hours of broadcasting.

With the permission of the Catholic priest, the station was provisionally set up in the Catholic convent. It stayed there until a permanent building was erected on a lot donated by the municipal government. The 5 x 5 metre bungalow type structure was a community effort. Funds were raised from contributions from ordinary people and the proceeds of a raffle. In spite of the distance from the city and its apparent economic decline, an interesting aspect of the life of Olutangans is the prevalent number of hand-held radio transceivers, most of which are illegal. However, they are used and displayed. An explanation is that these transceivers are smuggled through the southern backdoor of the country and they are status symbols for many people, including youngsters. The station management saw the potential of these gadgets for news-gathering and stimulating interaction in the community. A radio club was organised among those who had access to the sets. They were trained in news-gathering and reporting.

To date, Olutanga has been operating the same broadcast hours as it had when it started. Some new participants have joined as some of the old ones have gone. It is seen that the pattern may go on for a long, long time. Community members readily recognise the need for the facility that has so far changed the lives of many Olutangans.

Nine Others Followed DWTL-Laurel, DWIR-Batanes, and DXOI-Olutanga. Each of the stations that Tambuli set up was a learning experience for the project. The situations were always different in terms of the following: (i) ethnic idiosyncrasies; (ii) general disposition of the community; (iii) propensity and capability of the co-operators to contribute; (iv) media situation in the area; (v) economic condition of the citizens; and (vi) the approach that the project used. At several sites, the main co-operator was either an agricultural school or a university with a communication curriculum, while at others, it was either a local government unit, a grassroots development foundation or a church organisation. Apart from the official interest of the organisation, the personal outlook and interests of the key officials of the local partner agency have a bearing on the way the community radio works.

Nine other stations have now been established with assistance from the Tambuli project. They are: (i) DWTS-Sta. Teresita, Cagayan; (ii) DWRA-Cabagan, Isabela; (iii) DWTP-Goa, Camarines Sur; (iv) DYMT-Banga, Aklan; (v) DYTI-Ibajay, Aklan; (vi) DWAR-Aborlan, Palawan; (vii) DXLM-Maragusan, Compostela Valley; (viii) DXTT-Tubajon, Surigao del Norte; and (ix) DXRL-Loreto, Surigao del Norte.

At least six other stations will be set up under the project. These should include a station 'for women and by women,' a station 'for children and by children,' and a 'tribal' station. Certain other local initiatives with minor assistance from the project are also likely to be set up, especially after seeing that the equipment cost for a community station could be brought to a minimum. A major obstacle in the Philippine setting, as well as in the rest of the ASEAN region, is obtaining the license and franchise from the government bureaucracy. Indonesia and Thailand, where the airwaves have been opened up to private owners, appear to be the best prospects for setting up community radio stations in the near future.

A Forward Look for the Development of Community Media

In many respects, the development of community media in the South-East Asian region is an uphill struggle. Some of the major hindrances are as follows:

1. in most of the countries, media policies do not favour the setting up of private and free media;
2. where media are open, the rules and opportunities favour the big commercial media with respect to licensing, importation of equipment, generation of resources, and access to technology;
3. among practitioners, academicians, policy-makers, and local organisation, there is a low level of awareness of the benefits and ways of operating community media;
4. resources are scarce and funding is limited.

The prime movers of community media in the Philippines have recently drafted a legislative measure that would provide a better environment for the development of community media. Among its provisions is that the resource and time-consuming application for a congressional franchise would be waived for radio stations

that are below 500 watts and that are operated for education and development purposes. Community media operators would also enjoy tax relief and a relaxation of import duties. A third provision would allow community media to receive liberal subsidies from government resources.

Indeed, governments should help the growth of community media that address the very needs of the people living in isolated rural communities. Policy makers should favour the operation and existence of local, non commercial, participatory and developmental media over commercial, national, elite-controlled, centralised and politically motivated operations. Among the other policies that would help the development of community media operation and practice are:

1. tax exemption privileges such as for the importation of equipment and spare parts;
2. freedom from regulations that tend to stifle the fundamental right of free expression;
3. eligibility to receive government support and subsidy as well as tax-free grants from funding institutions;
4. a more liberal attitude to community media practitioners enabling them to develop their skills rather than to be subjected to unrealistic standards;
5. communication courses in colleges, based on research, that review the operation as well as the costs and benefits of community media.

There are concerns that community media may overly emphasise the parochial angle and not link individual communities to other communities or to the national community as a whole. However, it has been noted that when people view their total needs, they cannot help but look beyond the local or the limited community sphere of concerns.

An interesting aspect of community media practice is the choice of technology to be adopted. The Internet, teleconferencing, interactive cable television, digital audio-video systems and communications satellites are looked upon with interest. Some of these computer-related technologies can logically be integrated with the more indigenous and localised media systems. However, to most of the people living in the countryside, these modern and fascinating technologies may not be available for many years. This is not to diminish the potential dangers of their impact on the fragile rural culture and way of life.

A great many lessons have been learned from the experiences and the experiments with community media in the South-East Asian region. There is tremendous potential for community media to be harnessed efficiently to create mechanisms for socialisation, interaction, and mobilisation, to preserve the integrity of the cultural minorities whose way of life reflects the richness and plurality of Asian culture, and to be liberated from oppressive and iniquitous structures. With judicious planning and support, community media represent a viable and crucial alternative to provide the means for participation and group action to the grassroots population. Community media serve as valuable weapons and shields to ensure the preservation of local cultures and values, particularly in the face of the continuing onslaught of neo-colonial values which are being relentlessly propagated by the present-day commercial media.

Notes

1. People in Communication, Inc., *Communication for Community: A Resource Book for the First World Congress of the World Association for Christian Communication*, Manila, 1989.
2. Ramirez, Mina, *Communicating from the Ground Up*, Manila: Asian Social Institute, 1990.