

'There's no media for refugees'

Information and communication in camps on the Thai-Burma border

Abstract: This article uses the example of camps on the Thai-Burma border to highlight the exclusion of refugees from the common world and subsequent omission of their voices from news coverage. Moreover, the article argues that this exclusion weakens the supposed protection offered to refugees by impeding the media in its role as protector and promoter of human rights. While there has been considerable literature examining the reporting of humanitarian crises to a global audience, in contrast there has been little in the way of research—and practice—concerning strategies to effectively communicate with refugees affected by such crises. Fieldwork conducted in three of nine official Thai-Burma border camps involved interviews with 81 participants, including refugees, humanitarian practitioners and journalists. Participant accounts show that a range of factors inhibit the production of news media coverage relevant to refugees interned in the Thai-Burma border camps, thereby preventing refugees from accessing vital information and voicing in common public space their experiences of violence, corruption and discrimination. A handful of exiled media groups provide poorly funded exceptions.

Keywords: alternative media, Burma, communication with communities (CwC), community media, ethnic media, humanitarian, human rights, Karen, protection, refugee camps, refugees, Thailand

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Introduction

THE IMPORTANCE of the media in fostering democracy and providing information is 'beyond dispute' (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 2), but little research has been done about the role of news media in the specific context of refugee camps. Refugees are frequently quarantined in camps in remote and hard-to-reach locations where they can rarely be seen or heard. Highlighting this point, Agier (2011) notes the absence of refugee camps from maps of the

world, even in cases where they are home to hundreds of thousands of people and have existed for a decade or more. In addition to this physical dimension of exclusion, refugees also experience social, economic and political exclusion from the common world in that they are often denied social integration, political rights and participation in the global economy (Parekh, 2014). The consequences of this exclusion are that a stateless person loses ‘his or her place in a common public space from which action, speech and hence identity become meaningful’ (p. 653). This article argues that the potential role of news media as intermediaries between the camp and common public space is particularly crucial in such a context of exclusion. However, the absence of a viable business model for camp-based media groups means that such groups have little hope of addressing the information needs of camp residents unless the humanitarian sector supports their efforts.

Approximately 110,000 refugees—mostly ethnic Karen—live in nine camps scattered along the Thai-Burma border (The Border Consortium, 2015). Camp residents experience physical exclusion—and significant degrees of social and economic exclusion—owing to their confinement in camps that are located amid isolated mountain areas in Thailand, not far from the Burma border. In the face of discussions about voluntary repatriation, which have gained momentum in the wake of political developments in Burma in recent years, camp residents highlighted information and communication as priority concerns. Likewise, humanitarian organisations have recognised that ‘refugees have no easy access to formal channels through which relevant information can be requested, accessed, disseminated or made credible’ (Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand, n.d., p. 1). On the final page of *Governing Refugees*, McConnachie (2014) notes that a lack of information is ‘a core problem for the refugee population’ given the possibility of return to Burma (p. 164). The purpose of this article is to explore the role of news media in camps on the Thai-Burma border, and to provide insight into the challenges that must be overcome in order to improve access to relevant news content for encamped refugees. Fieldwork accounts highlight the criticality of journalism that can provide refugees with vital information about the world outside the camps, and project their voices in common public space, where a network of actions and relationships—the sphere of human affairs—shape the course of their lives.

Journalism: A human right regardless of frontiers

UNHCR policy and guidelines explicitly recognise the vital role of communication for refugees in camp settings (UNHCR, 1998, 2006, 2011). The rationale for this position is underpinned by notions of communication as both a fundamental human need and a human right enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the right to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. (UNHCR, 2006, p. 58)

Of particular relevance to this discussion is the advice provided in UNHCR's global reference guide for the protection of refugees in camps and settlements. The guide states that refugees should have access to 'accurate, reliable, regular and up-to-date information' about matters such as the assistance and programmes available in the camp, the situation in their communities of origin, their rights and obligations, and explanations for the decisions made by humanitarian organisations (UNHCR, 2006, p. 58). Such information should be available upon admission to the camps, and in the many days that follow. In particular, refugees need to know about their rights and responsibilities under international human rights law, national refugee law and national law in general. Refugees may inadvertently violate their obligations if they are not properly informed, and this can result in personal consequences as well as broader repercussions for the host country's treatment of refugees. Alternatively, effective communication with camp residents 'will directly improve the protection of refugees' because they will know how to access services, be aware of their rights and make realistic plans for the future (UNHCR, 2006, p. 61).

Substantiating these ideas, it has been noted that there is an inverse relationship between the protection of refugees' human rights and refugees' lack of access to information about their rights (Holzer, 2010; Saltsman, 2011). In their in-depth study of human rights in refugee camps, Verdirame and Harrell-Bond assert that 'the enjoyment of one's rights is best achieved through an awareness of those rights' (2005, p. 7). The low level of knowledge possessed by refugees about their rights under international law has been acknowledged in numerous camp settings, including in Rwanda (Ho & Pavlish, 2011), Kenya (Verdirame & Harrell-Bond, 2005), Uganda (Verdirame & Harrell-Bond, 2005), Tanzania (West & Wambugu, 2003), Ghana (Holzer, 2010) and Jordan (Saltsman, 2011). Demonstrating the link between understanding and exercising rights, Ho & Pavlish (2011) recounted the experiences of women in camp settings who refused to expose and condemn sexual and other forms of violence, which they had experienced because they did not have a strong understanding of their rights. Moreover, even if they knew their rights, the voices of women and girls were 'unheard' due to a lack of effective processes and mechanisms that made it 'difficult, if not impossible, to demand their rights or resist various forms of abuse and exploitation' (p. 96). Further, Verdirame and Harrell-Bond (2005) linked a lack of awareness of the law among refugees, government officials and humanitarian organisations to the arrest of refugees on false charges and inappropriate decisions to bar asylum seekers from status-determination interviews.

The sense of insecurity that is evoked by a crisis is the reason why refugees seek information, and will continue to do so until they feel they have sufficient information to 'cope' with their uncertain situation (Sommerfeldt, 2015, p. 8). Other studies suggest a link between a lack of information and feelings of anxiety (Glazebrooke, 2004), desperation (Saltsman, 2011), uncertainty (Holzer, 2012; Saltsman, 2011) and confusion (Holzer, 2012). West and Wambugu (2003) suggest that refugees need information and to communicate in order re-establish a sense of security:

Security is not just a physical entity in conflict and post-conflict areas, requiring military or police presence and the assurance of economic survival, it includes the rather psychological and emotional element of an individual's inherent need to have some control over what he or she understands of a situation and to whom he or she is able to communicate his or her understanding. (p. 1)

A logical follow-on that is yet to be explored in the literature is whether access to relevant and trusted sources of news media can play a part in ensuring that camps are a secure and protected space.

Communication and media in a camp environment

Although the literature points to the importance of information for refugees, there has been little research concerning the role that news media might play in addressing these needs in a camp environment. Existing studies concerning news media in situations of forced migration have focused on examining publicity strategies for communicating about refugee crises to global audiences, rather than communicating with refugees themselves. Numerous studies have explored the role of humanitarian organisations in facilitating and producing news content about humanitarian crises and issues. Scholars have analysed the aims of news content facilitated by humanitarian organisations and suggest these efforts are designed to frame and circulate information that will bring international attention to specific issues in specific locations (Clark, 2001; Dawes, 2007; Powers, 2014), as well as to meet organisational needs for visibility and fundraising (Bob, 2005; Cohen, 2001; Geras, 1998; Powers, 2014). The literature also suggests that humanitarian organisations have been forced to adapt and somewhat corrupt their publicity strategies towards sensationalism in order to reflect the biases and preferences of the news media rather than discuss complex issues such as the structural causes of humanitarian crises and concerns (Powers, 2014). This is hardly surprising given the mass media's tendency to neglect marginalised and less powerful groups (Atton & Hamilton, 2008). On the contrary, community media typically gives voice to the voiceless, and therefore may present a more plausible model for communicating with refugees in camp settings.

The few studies that explore access to news media in camp settings describe a lack of access to regular and reliable sources. In Rwanda, Congolese refugees ‘live totally outside mediated communication in the world’ (Kivikuru, 2013, p. 36). Their only access to news media is in the form of news bulletins on one or two available radio stations. About 20 percent of households have a radio, but those without are generally welcome to listen at a neighbour’s house. (Kivikuru, 2013, p. 45). In Burundian camps in Tanzania, Turner observes that it is common for young people to ‘hang around, glued to their small short-wave receivers, trying to pick up any relevant news’ (2004, p. 236). The available stations are broadcast in French, Swahili, or English, which are comprehensible to many but not all. In contrast, Saltsman notes that Iraqis displaced in urban areas have access to ‘a variety of media’ (2010, p. 58). This is perhaps because refugees in urban settings are often subject to fewer restrictions and live in areas where a more diverse range of media is available than in remote camp settings.

The limited range of media that is available to refugees in camps is generally characterised by a lack of direct relevance to the refugee experience. There are some instances, including camps in Palestine and Thailand, where community media platforms facilitate the provision of information about the situation inside the camps. However, it is typical even in camp environments where there are community media that such media do not report in a manner that is directly relevant and accessible to the refugees themselves. Instead:

The messages—often highly political—mainly focus abroad, trying to convince the rest of the world about the need for peace and democracy. These media rarely transmit stories about the day-to-day life in the camps and their audiences are outside the camps. Thus, although media content is produced on the camps, the focus is actually on the world outside. (Kivikuru, 2013, p. 37)

In light of the established connection between access to information and the realisation of human rights, this article considers the potential role and importance of news media in a camp environment. Moreover, the paper highlights the barriers and challenges that must be overcome in order to improve access to relevant news content for encamped refugees.

Methodology

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 81 participants during the course of ethnographic fieldwork in Thailand between April and July 2013. In the same period, I did about 120 hours of participant observation during visits to Mae La, Umpiem and Nu Po camps. I interviewed a total of 50 camp residents—a fairly balanced mix of males and females from young adults to the elderly. I interviewed 30 camp residents who identified as Karen, which is the ethnic majority

in the seven so-called ‘Karen camps’. I also spoke with 20 camp residents from various groups that have a minority presence in the camps, including Burman (10), Muslim (4), Kachin (1), Arakanese (1), Chin (1), Nepali (1), Shan (1) and Mon (1). The age group of camp resident participants and their ethnicity, as self-identified, are listed when quotes are presented. However, I do not state in which camp each quoted camp resident because such detail could jeopardise anonymity, particularly for camp residents from underrepresented ethnic groups. Camp residents have been allocated pseudonyms (e.g. Mr AR) where the letter ‘R’ is indicative of ‘resident’.

I also conducted 31 interviews with three categories of organisational participants. Each interview ranged in length between half-an-hour and one-and-a-half hours, depending on how much the participant chose to contribute.

Firstly, I interviewed 11 senior humanitarian practitioners from seven of the 21 humanitarian organisations that were providing services in the camps at the time. Ten of the humanitarian practitioner participants had roles in senior management—usually involving programme coordination—and the eleventh was an experienced staff member whose role focused primarily on community liaison with camp communities. Five of the practitioners had worked on the border for 10-25 years. Others had fewer years of experience but their positions involved spending significant amounts of time—or living for extended periods—in the camps. Secondly, I interviewed 12 community workers from community-based organisations and committees that support the camp residents or advocate for the refugee communities. The community worker participants were employed by community-based organisations providing services in the camps—in addition and complementary to those provided by humanitarian organisations. Typically, these workers were themselves refugees who had lived in the camps before coming to work for community-based organisations in Mae Sot. Their work—as well as the fact that family and friends remained living in the camps – meant that they returned to the camps frequently and remained part of the camp communities. Thirdly, I interviewed eight journalists from three Burmese media organisations that operate in Thailand. There are a handful of such organisations reporting regularly on issues occurring in or relevant to the camp communities. In contrast, journalists from international media organisations only visit the camps in the event of a ‘major’ story and therefore were not deemed to have sufficient relevant experience to warrant their inclusion in the sample. All eight journalists had visited the camps for reporting purposes on many occasions. Organisational participants have been given abbreviated pseudonyms (e.g. Mr AJ) where the second letter of the acronym indicates the category of organisational participant (H – humanitarian practitioner; C – community worker; J – journalist).

A bilingual research assistant interpreted the interviews with participants who were not fluent in English, including all camp resident participants and any

organisational participants who expressed a need or preference for the use of an interpreter. The recruitment of a bilingual research assistant fluent in Burmese and Karen dialects was undertaken with careful consideration of factors such as genuine interest in the research project, comprehension of the research focus, and a willingness to be involved for the duration of the fieldwork and beyond (Hennink, 2008; Liamputtong, 2008). Varying dialects can present a challenge for interpreters when conducting interviews with the Karen and other ethnic minority populations from Burma (Watkins, 2012). However, dialectical issues did not arise frequently during the interviews, perhaps due to the reported emergence of a ‘camp Karen’ dialect intelligible to speakers of both Pwo and Sgaw Karen (Watkins, 2012).

The aim of my analysis was to create second-order constructs; typical descriptions of phenomena that the participants themselves would understand (Schutz, 1962). I used NVivo as an archive for the transcripts and to assist in generating themes. I provided the findings to key informants in order to seek their feedback as to whether the emergent constructs were consistent with their understanding of the phenomena—a process Schutz calls the ‘postulate of adequacy’ (1962). An important part of the analytical process is reflexivity, which involves ‘the interpretation of interpretation and the launching of a critical self-exploration of one’s own interpretations’ (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 9). My analysis therefore involves an interweaving of accounts from the field that reflect key themes, or social constructs, and theoretical perspectives that inform those social constructs, which are all part of a reflexive process.

Results

This section will present the article’s findings by exploring key themes that emerged from the analysis of fieldwork accounts. Several sub-sections each describe a key aspect of the role of news media in the camps and the factors that inhibit news media access. First, in order to situate these findings, it is important to describe the accessibility of various forms of media and communication technologies.

Radio

Radio is by far the most accessible medium for camp residents. About a third of the camp residents I spoke to reported having access to radio at ‘home’, which is typically a simple house made of bamboo and thatched leaves. While most of those with access listen on battery-operated portable radios, a few camp residents described having mobile phones with FM radio capability. Camp residents who did not listen to radio reported either that they could not afford to buy a radio or that they were not particularly interested in listening. In a small number of cases, camp residents said they did not understand or were not familiar with the concept of radio.

Television

Only a few residents reported having a television at home. Owing at least in part to the extra costs associated with accessing television channels, camp residents who did have a television at home usually said they only watched DVDs. The camp teashops have televisions for communal viewing, but most camp residents reported that they did not go there because they do not have the money to buy something to eat or drink.

Newspapers

Camp residents had no regular access to newspapers or magazines. Copies of mainstream newspapers are intermittently available if someone—usually a camp resident who visits Mae Sot—brings one back to the camp.

Internet

While most camps on the Thai-Burma border do not have internet access, privately-operated internet services are available in Mae La, Umpiem and Nu Po. Internet shops operate in the camps but only a small portion of camp residents reported using them because of cost, illiteracy and a lack of technical skills.

Mobile phones

While mobile phone coverage is not available in most camps, Mae La and Umpiem do have access to privately-run mobile phone services.

Reporting: ‘There’s no media for refugees’

A lack of reporting designed to meet the distinct needs of camp residents limits the relevance and accessibility of news media. There is limited access to community media in the camps, so Burmese language media—when it is available—is designed for a general Burmese-speaking audience and infrequently reports about events or issues that are directly relevant to the camp populations. A handful of exiled media groups—such as *Mizzima*, *The Irrawaddy* and *Democratic Voice of Burma*—produce print, online and broadcast news targeted broadly at displaced populations from Burma, including internally displaced people inside Burma and migrants living outside the camps in rural and urban parts of Thailand. The fact that the vast majority of available content is printed or broadcast in Burmese and English means that it is incomprehensible to many camp residents who speak only Sgaw or Pwo Karen.

Preparations for repatriation and the outbreak of deadly fires have been among the camp events to garner attention from exiled media groups and mainstream news outlets in recent times. However, these reports were invariably framed and constructed for consumption by external audiences, not for those inside the camps. For example, news stories about the fire at Ban Mae Surin camp, which killed 37 refugees and left 200 families homeless, focused on relaying basic details of the tragedy and did not provide advice to camp residents concerning how to access

available assistance. Correspondingly, comments from camp residents suggest that the usefulness and relevance of access to news media is compromised by the lack of information that is specifically relevant to their lives and can inform decision-making. For instance, Mr TR (Burmese, 35-44) commented:

There's no media only for refugees. Sometimes some media announce refugee issues, but [only] little bit.

Voice: 'No one comes to speak with us'

There are limited and sporadic opportunities for camp residents to express their concerns and perspectives to the humanitarian organisations that administer the camps.

No one comes down to speak with us, to give us a chance or to give us a human right to speak what we need.

Some camp residents expressed a belief that journalists could bear witness, help give voice to camp residents and perhaps hold the humanitarian organisations and Thai government to account. Mr VR (Muslim, 55-64), a section leader, told me:

We want to tell other people what is really happening in the camp. We are not afraid of the camp authorities.

A number of camp residents described efforts to speak with journalists about issues within the camps but said the camp authorities obstructed their efforts. The topics these camp residents wished to speak about included unsolved murders of camp residents, and allegations against the camp authorities concerning corruption and collusion with human traffickers. Several murders of camp residents are known to have occurred outside the camp boundaries and the perpetrators were never apprehended (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Poe Kwa Lay, 2012; McConnachie, 2014:). Human Rights Watch has reported that the camp authorities physically abuse camp residents who are apprehended outside the camp, and do so 'with utter impunity' (2012, p. 43). Several journalists and camp residents said they believe the camp commanders are involved in a range of illegal businesses, which is one reason why they seek to limit the flow of information into and out of the camps.

Scarce resources for camp-based media

The only community news service wholly dedicated to providing content that focuses specifically on the needs and concerns of camp residents is the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG). The programmes vary from camp-to-camp, but generally consist of a range of news items, as well as music, stories and poems. The teams that produce the programming in each camp are comprised

mostly of fluctuant groups of part-time volunteers who are usually students and have little training or experience in journalism. At the time of my fieldwork, technical difficulties meant that the transmitters were not working in two of the seven camps in which KSNG has a presence. While the transmitters in Mae La, Umpiem, Tham Hin, Mae La Oon and Mae Ra Moe were functional, Nu Po and Ban Don Yang were plagued by equipment failure. The transmitters used by KSNG were acquired second-hand some years ago and were designed to broadcast to a one-kilometre radius, which only covers a small portion of each camp. The age of the transmitters, and the harsh weather they are exposed to, means that they are often in need of repairs that are difficult to facilitate in the camps. Compounding these problems is the fact that the transmitters have to be kept hidden from the Thai authorities because KSNG does not have the necessary permission to broadcast, as required by the Thai government. For that reason, the transmitters are located in places that reduce the possibility of detection—often high in the mountains surrounding the camps. Combined, these factors mean that KSNG broadcasts are only available to some of the camp populations some of the time. Only a few camp residents reported listening to or even having heard of KSNG's broadcasts. Among them, some said that they are not interested to listen, in part because the programming is produced by students and perceived to be amateur or irrelevant. Others said they tried to listen but could not hear the broadcast clearly or were not able to tune in at all.

A handful of other community media organisations—such as *Karen News* and *Kwe Ka Lu*—give voice to Karen refugees and produce content designed for displaced communities on both sides of the border. Free copies of their publications are distributed in the camps. However, their lack of resources means they produce infrequent editions and can only print a few thousand copies per edition, which are then split up and distributed among the nine camps but also migrant and internally displaced communities elsewhere in Thailand and in Burma. Mr AJ said the ethnic media groups—as distinct from other exiled media groups—are ‘the ones that are concerned about the camps’. However, their capacity to provide coverage that is directly relevant to camp residents is restricted by a lack of funding, which means ‘they don’t report very much’. Other journalists also highlighted the absence of a viable business model for ethnic media groups because camp residents are not a lucrative target market for advertisers.

Regulation and restrictions: ‘They’re not supposed to have press’

Tacit restrictions by the Thai government are instrumental in limiting the potential for relevant reporting and the accessibility of news media to camp residents. Humanitarian practitioners explained that camp residents are not explicitly prohibited from accessing news media, but it is understood that the Thai government is sensitive about these matters.

This is a closed camp. They're not supposed to have media broadcast; they're not supposed to have press in there. It's a closed refugee camp. We're on Thai soil; it's their sovereignty.

Journalists are also concerned about censorship and what they perceive to be attempts by humanitarian organisations to limit their independence. Handling these situations can be difficult for Karen journalists considering the language barrier between them and senior humanitarian staff or Thai officials who do not speak Karen or Burmese. A few journalists said that humanitarian organisations are active in providing information if it relates to a matter for which they seek publicity, but they are often evasive when the line of questioning is critical. For instance, Mr BJ said that some humanitarian organisations tended to be close-mouthed and circumspect when dealing with media requests because they were concerned about news coverage upsetting the Thai government.

Even if we try to get information that does not affect anything for them [...] they don't want to provide anything. So last time when I worked with, like, Handicap International, in the refugee camp, so they say that 'oh no, don't take the picture of the poster, no logo, no nothing'—something like that. [...] And then when I put it in the news, [they said] 'no, no, because we don't want to make big news to the Thai government'.

Likewise, the tendency of humanitarian organisations to 'impose organisationally partisan agendas upon media outlets; as opposed to respecting the overriding independence of the media' has been noted in 'many other contexts' (Abud et al., 2011, p. 52). Host governments and humanitarian organisations typically employ defensive tactics—such as restricting media access or filming in camps—owing to a 'fear of bad publicity' (Harrell-Bond & Voutira, 2007, p. 284). Moreover, the fact that many humanitarian organisations have no media officers dedicated to the task of liaising with news media is also 'a constraint that a lot of media groups come up against and get frustrated by' (Mr AH). This is indicative of a broader problem concerning 'the continual lack of communication between aid organisations and local media in developing countries' (Sommerfeldt, 2015, p. 17).

Discussion

The collected accounts point to the need for a media service that can provide useful information and act as a watchdog over the institutions that control the lives of camp residents. These calls resonate with political communication scholarship, which sees the role of the media as essential to democracy. According to Dahlgren:

The media are a prerequisite—though by no means a guarantee—for shaping the democratic character of a society; they are the bearers of democracy’s political communication beyond face-to-face settings. During the modern era, their role in making politics visible, in providing information, analysis, forums for debate and a shared democratic culture, is beyond dispute. (2009, p. 2)

While media can play an important role in any society, the predicament of encampment—which, as already established, is a predicament of political, economic and geographic exclusion (Parekh, 2014)—creates an environment in which the watchdog role of the media becomes even more necessary. Correspondingly, Harrell-Bond suggests that a lack of media presence in a camp environment enables the abuse of human rights to go unnoticed by the outside world. In an oft-cited paper—‘Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees be Humane?’—Harrell-Bond describes several instances of refugees being beaten or threatened with violence, and notes that ‘such acts of violence chiefly occur in refugee camps out of eyesight of the media or independent observers’ (2002, p. 64).

Although there is a lack of scholarly research concerning the role of news media in refugee camp settings, Internews—a global leader in humanitarian communications—attests to the importance of community media produced by and for refugees. Internews stresses that the humanitarian sector should support local media, where possible, to play a vital role in ensuring people affected by crises have access to accurate and timely information that can save lives and reduce suffering. In 2014, Internews released a report documenting the launch of a Humanitarian Information Service audio programme at Tong Ping Protection of Civilians site in Juba, South Sudan, where about 14,000 people were living after being internally displaced by recent fighting. Internews surveyed the community in order to identify information needs and access issues, and this information was used to inform decisions about what content to provide and how it was to be provided. The result was Boda Boda Talk Talk (BBTT), a twice-weekly programme of ‘news-you-can-use’ that was broadcast at several static listening stops and from speakers attached to a quad bike that rotates to dedicated ‘listening stops’ around the site (Internews, 2014, p.1). The programme delivered vital information concerning topics such as access to aid, legal rights and educational opportunities, and provided a platform for people to share their views and experiences about all aspects of life at the site. An evaluation of the programme based on survey data collected from the community concludes that the programme addressed information needs and barriers to access in ‘measurable and significant ways’ (p. 26). Also pertinent in the context of preparations for voluntary repatriation of refugees in Thailand is Internews’ vision of link-up programming, which could enable communication between camp communities and people in Burma. To develop link-up programming, a signal must be available both in the camps and the country of origin.

[Link-up programming] would be crucial in removing refugees from their enforced isolation (e.g. call-ins or pre-recorded programmes), so refugees from a particular location can potentially locate missing family members, talk to people back in their home location, pass family greetings and messages, share stories, and tell each other what life is like in their areas. (Abud et al., 2011, p. 52)

While this proposition was made for the refugee camps in Dadaab, Kenya, it has obvious relevance for the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. Increased communication between camp residents and people in their communities of origin could empower refugees to seek information and make informed decisions about whether, when and where they feel safe to return. As preparations for repatriation continue, camp residents need to know about relocation areas, livelihood opportunities, safeguards for human rights, clearance of landmines and other remnants, location of troops, and recognition of education and training received in camp. Communication about these and other matters is necessary if camp residents are to make informed decisions about ‘voluntary’ repatriation.

Also relevant are studies in the field of media development that explore the importance of community media for marginalised people in developing countries. Tacchi (2012) highlights several examples from an applied research project that brought information and communication technologies to communities in various parts of Asia. In Sri Lanka, participatory content strategies were used to give voice to Tamil youth—who experienced social exclusion due to ethnic and linguistic factors—and provide a forum for debate about important local issues. Another example Tacchi cites is that of a radio programme run by women farmers in rural India. The programme enabled the women to share information to promote food sovereignty, such as how to grow drought-resistant crops. The benefit of such initiatives ‘relates to proliferating information sources, and the ability of those traditionally positioned as receivers of development messages, to engage, ask questions, and create messages themselves’ (Tacchi, 2012, p. 654). Likewise, Mhagama (2015) found that in rural parts of Malawi, where mobile phones are increasingly popular, talkback radio is providing a medium for marginalised citizens to have a public voice. Phone-in programmes to radio stations are empowering listeners ‘to have a say, which has for a long time been denied to them’ (p. 278). Likewise, in a study exploring citizen engagement through broadcast media in developing world contexts, Srinivasan and Lopes (2016) found that media organisations have come to be seen as participatory organisations that elevate audience opinions to citizens, governments and international actors. By providing ‘opportunities for voice, debate and claim-making in the mediated public realm’ (p. 156), participatory media can enable audiences to ‘influence decisions that affect their lives’ (Srinivasan & Lopes, 2016, p. 157).

A participatory media project could provide a much-needed space for public discussion at a time when refugees in Thailand are facing the prospect of ‘voluntary’ repatriation and service reductions resulting from the redirection of donor funds to projects inside Burma. An initiative of this kind would require humanitarian funding for staff training and material support (Abud et al., 2011; Quintanilla et al., 2014). As described earlier, the local media initiatives staffed by refugees on the Thai-Burma border were limited in their impact due to factors including a lack of professional equipment, technical support and guidance on reporting about complex humanitarian issues. Humanitarian organisations could also play a part by helping to negotiate permission from the Thai government for local media to operate freely and openly in the camps. Despite the potential benefits of local media initiatives, it is perhaps unlikely that such projects will attract significant humanitarian funding, given that communication programmes are typically among the least-funded areas of humanitarian aid (Mandel & Sommerfeldt, 2012). Although the humanitarian sector has at the highest levels recognised the need to increase the voice of affected persons and improve accountability, ‘this transformation has not taken place, or not sufficiently’ (United Nations, 2015, p. 12)

Conclusion

This article has argued that relevant and trusted sources of news media can play a part in ensuring that camps are a secure and protected space. Accounts collected in camps on the Thai-Burma border support the assertion that local media initiatives can—if supported by the humanitarian sector—play an important role in addressing information needs in a camp environment (Abud et al., 2011; Quintanilla et al., 2014). Moreover, camp residents expressed a desire for journalists to act as independent observers of the institutions that control the camps, which are zones of exclusion from common public space. There remains a lack of research into models of community media that might effectively be deployed in a camp environment in order to resolve the unmet need for information, as identified in this article. However, Internews’ suggestion of supporting community media initiatives to realise ‘link-up’ programming could be a modest and important step towards creating communicative spaces that camp residents might both use and trust. Of course, communication is not a panacea for the fears that camp residents experience in response to the prospect of repatriation—but it is clear that information is a necessity if repatriation is to be truly ‘voluntary’. A range of financial, regulatory and technical challenges must be overcome if the potential benefits of news media are to be realised.

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