

Chapter 4

The politics of communication within the Burmese opposition

This chapter provides a description of life for the Burmese in Mae Sot and elsewhere in Thailand, and examines how this environment constrains conceptions of the possible uses of communications technologies and media. I examine the ways communications technologies are used in attempts to change the political situation inside Burma. Some of the methods used by opposition groups resemble the social engineering methods characteristic of media in authoritarian states. These top-down approaches have backfired, reducing the opposition's credibility. I also assess the impact foreign funding has had for groups in the movement, and delineate the outline of a hierarchy within the movement that has been reinforced by the introduction of new information technologies (NITs). I argue that the discourse of human rights acts subtly but powerfully to shape social conventions, resulting in an unstated hierarchy of human rights that mirrors and perpetuates both the inequitable gender and ethnic composition of the Thailand-based opposition political groups and the hierarchy of access and use of technologies among these groups.

Mae Sot, the border, and the communications environment

When I arrived in Thailand in late October, 1999, the atmosphere was still tense from the October 1st takeover of the Burmese embassy in Bangkok by five armed gunmen calling themselves the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors. They had stormed the

building, holding 38 people hostage for more than 24 hours before being flown by helicopter to the border, where they were released. Thailand's handling of the case angered the Burmese government, and shortly after the incident, the Burmese government closed the border, demanding that Thailand find the embassy raiders and put them on trial. In November, the Thai government began rounding up thousands of migrant workers in Mae Sot and trucking them to the border, where they were forced across. An unusually large number of police patrolled the streets of Mae Sot, and roadblocks were set up in many places, where the police detained those without proper identification. Newspaper reports indicated that immigration police had been sent from Bangkok, which activists told me was a way for the national-level Thai officials to get around the agreements between local police and factory owners. In Mae Sot, trucks drove through town like big crowded people cages on wheels, those pressed against the wire mesh gripping it with their fingers. Although many Mae Sot factory owners protested the deportations, the Thais continued to repatriate Burmese workers by the thousands throughout November, and sporadically after that throughout the time I lived in Mae Sot. Newspaper reports on the repatriation or planned repatriation of workers have continued to appear periodically since then.

This series of events set the stage for my reintroduction to the Thai border after seven years. The people of Huaykaloke refugee camp where I'd lived before had been moved to a new location, Umphien Mai, a two-hour car ride south of town. There was now a large population of migrant workers in and around Mae Sot, and there were also far more Westerners and other foreigners in town than there had been a decade earlier

when I'd first arrived. Most of them were working with the many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and aid agencies that had since proliferated along the border, involved in various ways with the Burmese opposition or the refugees. During the time I lived there in 1999 and 2000, the local NGOs began holding meetings to discuss and coordinate their work, but in general the NGO staff, like the political groups in town, tended to stick with their own crowd, meeting few people in other groups or with other interests. In fact, as I came to see, calling Mae Sot the home to an opposition "movement" was perhaps stretching the term a bit.

The Burmese opposition movement was at best loosely-connected, and members from one organization very often hadn't met the members of another. For example, friends of mine in Mae Sot who worked with the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG) and the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) did not know each other, and when I asked about this, it became clear that except for some of the leaders, very few of the members of one group knew those of the other. I found this to be true with many other groups in town. In part this was due to the need for tight security in Mae Sot, preventing people from moving about freely or attracting attention to themselves by, for example, calling a large meeting. When meetings or workshops were organized, security was arranged in advance with Thai military intelligence (MI), and every effort was made to keep things low profile. Though this fragmentation reflected the tendency of people to associate with those most like themselves, this tendency seemed less pronounced in Chiang Mai and Bangkok, where activists had a more professional attitude and had had a great deal more contact with each other through the interactions of local NGOs. In Mae

Sot, however, when people of different groups attended get-togethers (including western-style parties thrown by foreigners), these groups would rarely interact.

There were exceptions to this, however, and I think it remains valuable to use the term “opposition movement” in a broad sense to encompass the many groups that were involved in the struggle for political change in Burma. They all shared the ultimate goal of improving the situation for the peoples of their country. This movement, then, included the groups that were working on what were unquestionably “political” goals, such as lobbying internationally on behalf of Burma or working to coordinate with the opposition inside Burma to create change from within. But I also include in my definition those who were working to educate and assist marginalized groups so that they would have the desire and the tools to become involved in the opposition, whether through a project aimed at individual self-improvement, or at the improvement of the situation in their area. This definition encompasses an enormous mix of groups and individuals. I do not attempt to provide an exhaustive list or to describe all the groups in detail. This work intends instead to provide a few cogent examples that help to demarcate the broad patterns that I found within the movement. I will begin by presenting some characteristics of the media and communications environment in Thailand, especially along the border. This environment has had a significant impact on how people conceptualized the possible uses of media and communications technologies.

Alien technologies: conceptions and preconceptions

Computer technology, I came to realize, is a pervasive, almost invisible aspect of my own world, one that I took for granted until I realized how much it is *not* a part of the world most Burmese peoples grew up in. Early on in my field research, during a trip to Chiang Mai, I went to visit my friend and former fellow teacher, Thra William,²³ who had become a Vice-Chairperson of the National Health and Education Committee (NHEC). NHEC is a coalition of education and health departments of many ethnic organizations from rural Burma that had been set up after the fall of Manerplaw in 1995. Thra William looked much the same as he had years earlier, although perhaps with a bit more gray in his hair, a man in his late 50s with wide black-framed glasses and a friendly smile. During our visit, he asked me to help him edit a document in English, and led me to the second floor of the house, which, as usual, served as both an office and a living space. He led the way to the upstairs office, a small room with two computers. The NHEC office had access to e-mail, which they told me they used primarily for receiving information. They got the BurmaNet News every day, and “to be friendly,” they printed it out for the local Thai military intelligence officers. It was primarily the younger men who used the computers.

Thra William motioned toward a computer, handed me a handwritten report, and asked me to please correct it. I realized that he wanted me to type the report into the computer as I corrected it, so I sat down and asked him how to turn on the computer. He quickly left the room, and came back a moment later with one of the younger men, who showed me the power switch. Thra William told me that had never used the Internet, and

²³ Not his real name. “Thra” is a Karen title for male teachers, “Thramu” for female teachers.

that he was afraid to touch the computer because it is a very expensive machine. If he hit the wrong key, he explained, he might destroy the computer's memory or something else vital. We talked about how much technology had changed in the four years since I'd last been in Thailand and what the next five years might bring. He told me about when he was young in Burma, and went on a school trip where he saw a teletype machine that he thought was the most advanced technology. He compared that teletype with today's fax machines, which he described as amazing since they are instantaneous, and use just a regular sheet of paper.



Figure 8. Computer training session along the Thai-Burmese border.

On the same trip, I got a sense of what computers represented to the ethnic minority groups when I sat in on a few computer training sessions organized by the Karenni National Youth Organization (KNYO) and funded by the Open Society Institute's Burma Project. The workshop was held on the outskirts of a Karenni refugee

camp near the border town of Mae Sariang. During the opening ceremony, a representative of the KNYO explained that the purpose of the computer training was to ensure that the KNYO would be able to work side-by-side with other democracy organizations and opposition groups after a period of inactivity due to their “difficulties” as refugees. He emphasized that computers were being used all over the world nowadays, and that the Karenni must not be left behind.

While the computer may have been an alien technology along the border, it was clearly not unwelcome, and people were motivated to learn how to use it. The training course had twelve participants, three women and nine men from various Karenni organizations, including a labor group, a student group and an environmental group. After the first 45 minutes, which was devoted to a lecture introducing some basic concepts about the computer and word processing program, the participants started using the computers themselves. Some of them had clearly used computers prior to this training, but others had never before touched one. Although the house had no telephone line, the computer training included an introduction to the use of e-mail messenger software in addition to the word-processing that the participants told me they needed in their work for their organizations.

At one point, a Shan man sitting near me made awkward attempts to control a computer mouse for the first time, and I remembered the difficulty I’d had the first time I’d used one, too, only a few years before. When I returned for the second day of the course, he was far more at ease with the mouse, and was moving text around with a satisfied grin on his face. Another man, a member of a Karenni labor organization

wearing a baseball cap and chewing betel nut, concentrated intensely as he maneuvered the mouse with his heavily tattooed arms. He laughed out loud as the computer did his bidding, revealing his betel-stained teeth. This sight jolted me into the recognition that I had my own preconceptions about what people who use computers *look like*. It was this kind of surprise that had attracted me to life along the border when I first arrived there in 1989, and more than ten years later there were still surprises in store.

Shortly after this trip, as I settled into life in Mae Sot, I had to laugh when I imagined myself sitting back at home in Athens, writing my dissertation proposal. I had proposed to examine the ways in which Burmese dissidents living in the Thailand-Burma borderland were being changed by their ability to surf the web and to experience the vast amounts of information and differing points of view they would be finding there. I'd imagined people spending hours in front of the computer, and these people, many of them from rural villages, would be amazed and changed by what they were finding. I found, of course, a reality very different, in which online access charges were only one obstacle preventing people from spending time on the Internet. To save the expense of time online, most people used the Internet exclusively for e-mail, writing their e-mail messages offline and then going online quickly to upload them and download new messages.



Figure 9. Computer training session along the Thai-Burmese border

Computers were generally not treated as a natural presence in the offices they occupied. Their unfamiliarity and fragility combined with the serious purposes for which they were intended prevented their use for pleasure. When I arrived in Mae Sot at the end of 1999, some activists were using the two Internet cafes in Mae Sot, primarily to send e-mail. But even the most computer-savvy Burmese opposition activists in Thailand had come to know the technology only within the last decade and were not regularly spending long periods of time on the Internet even for work, let alone pleasure or personal interest. There was no established pastime of “surfing” the web, and for many the use of word processing was still new. “Many Burmese find it very uncomfortable,” a well-educated Burmese reporter explained about the use of computers. “Because, at first, you have to write in English. Second, now they have the Burmese fonts. Even with

Burmese fonts, I don't know how to type in Burmese. The typewriter is not widely used in Burma. . . . I'm a new beginner, learning how to type" (personal communication, April 18, 2000).

Because of the infrastructural development within Thailand and the greater ease of communications and security in the urban areas, Bangkok was the scene for the opposition movement's earliest uses of NITs, followed by Chiang Mai and then the border towns. The larger and better-funded groups had offices in Bangkok and Chiang Mai instead of or in addition to their offices on the border. Several border towns first gained access to a local dialup number for online service during my time in Thailand in 2000. Before that, online access had been available there, but only at the prohibitive cost of a long distance call. So, although the situation was changing as more and more opportunities for training and using computers became available, computers were still alien to the experiences of most people involved in the opposition movement. Nevertheless, the gradual increase in the number of people with access to NITs meant that people's early suspicions of these technologies was slowly changing.

Suspicion/distrust

Despite the usefulness of computers and e-mail, many people in the opposition movement were suspicious of them at first. Some suspected that the CIA and other groups were monitoring e-mail, that all the information that passed through e-mail could be intercepted and read, and that once someone was connected to the Internet, the Burmese or Thai intelligence apparatus could copy all the information from their

computers (Win Min, personal communication, March 6, 2000). This made the encryption program, PGP, very popular among opposition activists for sending sensitive material by e-mail, although there was speculation that the PGP code could be cracked. The worries about NITs and the vulnerability of the information they carry were only a few of the many manifestations of suspicion perpetuated both inside Burma and among Burmese activists working elsewhere.

Activists in Mae Sot remained wary of the security of communications technologies because numerous spies were believed to be active along the border (Surath, 2001). A staff member of one opposition group, for example, told me that his group had noticed that people with Burmese names were working at the local Thai Internet service provider where they had their e-mail account. They saw these names on the record of the mail delivery route of their messages, and since they didn't know these people, they were uncertain if their e-mail was secure. Telephone conversations were not private. Several opposition activists described their surprise when local Karens, who were reportedly working with the Thais to intercept Burmese military radio transmissions, contacted them. These Karen radio operators gave them a warning by repeating to them what their group members had recently said on the phone, sometimes playing back recordings of these conversations.

Such a climate of suspicion was a significant part of the Burmese students' upbringing. When he was a young student, Win Min believed government media portrayals of federalism as fundamentally divisive, and the demands of the ethnic peoples and others holding opposing opinions as a threat to the country's unity. Once he reached

university in the mid-1980s, however, he was exposed to new ideas from former student activists who had become teachers, or who sat in the teashops surrounding the university and spent their days talking with students about alternatives to the government line. Another student, Mi Sue Pwint, who grew up in a “black area” in the Karenni state,²⁴ admitted that even she was worried about meeting the insurgent groups at the border. “We saw from the picture books and the movies about the rebels, so we worried about meeting them. We thought they were always ready to kill people,” she told me, laughing, “that they were always acting violently” (personal communication, July 3, 2000). Her own fears, she told me, were small compared to those of students from the urban areas. But once the students reached the border and met people from the ethnic rebel groups, many of them for the first time, they realized why the ethnic minorities were fighting. As Win Min put it, “they weren’t fighting to break up the country, but because they were really suffering. What they were saying was that if [they] don’t get equality, [they] will break up the country. We could now see that their position was a fair one. We could see that federalism is okay, and that we can solve the country’s problems” (personal communication, March 6, 2000).

This realization of the late 1980s was important for the opposition movement, since it subverted many of the government’s long-held explanations for the country’s problems. Tensions remained, however, owing to a long history of conflict between the various groups and decades of anti-rebel propaganda by the Burmese military. Mutual distrust had made it difficult for many of those advocating change in Burma to move

²⁴ Burma is divided by the government into regions labeled black, brown and white, referring to the degree of control the central regime has over an area. Black areas are considered most insecure because they are controlled by ethnic minority rebel groups.

beyond a militarized mode of thinking that sees control of information as a means of maintaining power. As Win Min explained,

We were born under the military intelligence, you know. We are secretive not only because we don't want to share information, but also we are afraid the information will be dangerous for us. Right? Like the military intelligence in Burma always keeps things secret. The way they show the people they are powerful is to keep the information secret (personal communication, March 6, 2000)

Several activists acknowledged that opposition groups tended to repeat similar patterns of secretive and manipulative actions, making it difficult for groups to cooperate. Some told me that this was beginning to change, but they also believed there was a long way to go before open communication and transparency would be the norm. Those agencies funding various communications and media projects in Thailand significantly influenced this process.

The number of opposition organizations and related projects, activities, and training sessions had increased enormously since the 1988 uprisings brought international attention to Burma, yet increased funding in many ways exacerbated existing divisions within the opposition. In the following sections I provide a bit of history regarding the United States' foreign policy interests in Burma, and how they coalesced with the Burman opposition's calls for democracy and human rights in Burma. The funding that had flowed to the opposition since had exacerbated divisions within the loosely coordinated Burmese opposition movement in Thailand. The resulting patterns of access and use help to explain how the dominant cultural conceptions of technologies were

negotiated through gender and ethnic difference, and how these conceptions affected the way the opposition groups and their funding sources prioritized their use.

Politics, human rights and the Burmese opposition

In November, 1988, Republican congressman-elect Dana Rohrabacher quietly escaped the itinerary of his trip to Asia long enough to make the grueling trip to meet Burmese students who had fled to the Thai border after the uprisings (Grubbs, 1988). To Rohrabacher, Burma represented the latest battleground in the United States' campaign to promote democracy in Asia. Although unwilling to discuss the possibility of providing arms for the students, he left them with encouraging words. "I admire your courage, and I admire your goals for your country. . . President Reagan is very proud of the fact that America stands behind and helps people who are struggling for freedom" (Grubbs, 1988). Rohrabacher had spent more than seven years writing speeches for Reagan and was a key player in the crafting of the Reagan Doctrine and its mission to promote freedom and democracy around the world (Grubbs, 1988). In her 1988 study of the Voice of America, Lauren Alexandre noted that during the 1980s, the Reagan Doctrine of low intensity warfare and support for anti-communist forces around the world represented "the selling of America in a 'new' age, unencumbered by post-Vietnam restrictions on U.S. military adventurism abroad and freed from the confines of detente's rhetoric of negotiated coexistence" (Alexandre, 1988, p. 101). The Reagan administration's strong anti-communist stance was often linked to issues of free trade, and relied heavily on the

foreign diplomacy apparatus of the United States Information Agency (USIA), whose role greatly expanded during the Reagan years (Alexandre, 1988).

A key component of the Reagan Doctrine was low intensity warfare (LIW).²⁵ LIW is a type of “nonmilitary aggression” in the political, economic, psychological and diplomatic arenas that employs strategies such as civil disobedience, harassment, psychological terror, and clandestine destabilization in order to “render the enemy ineffective, demoralized, and isolated” (Frederick, 1989, p. 20). A major component of this effort was the establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in 1983, which has been controversial from the start. A 1990 report by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs was harshly critical of the NED, describing it as a means through which the U.S. could “carry out interventionist operations formerly managed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)” (Council on Hemispheric, p. 4). The NED was accused of interfering with the indigenous democratic process in several of the countries where it provided funding, by “creating or supporting organizations which conform to a narrow, interventionist U.S. political agenda,” including “pro-business lobbying efforts” that were publicized as promoting democracy, but rarely addressed the needs of the poor (p. 4). The NED was accused of being selective in its choice of grantees rather than providing assistance to a wide variety of political organizations. Finally, the report argued that the NED supported clandestine activities that had the potential to risk both U.S. diplomatic relations and the well-being of its grantees (p. 5).

²⁵ The USA has employed LIW strategies extensively in Central America. In Nicaragua the U.S. foreign policy apparatus employed these strategies to “demonize” the Sandinista revolution in the eyes of the U.S. public as well as the Nicaraguans (Frederick, 1989).

In 1984, the year following the establishment of the NED, the Reagan administration took measures to intensify the use of communications media in low intensity warfare, which included enlarging U.S. international radio and television broadcasting and providing strategic technical assistance in communications technologies to the Third World (Frederick, 1989). Clarence Dias (1993) has argued that the U.S. export of low intensity conflict into Asia increased military expenditures in the region, led governments to turn their weaponry on their own citizens, and spawned increasingly restrictive laws enacted in the name of threats to national security. This has occurred simultaneously with the increase in the use internationally of, ironically enough, the discourse of human rights.

Human rights became a key component in the new U.S. foreign policy emphasis on communication, but a debate soon emerged regarding differing conceptions of communications and rights. In 1978, UNESCO published its *Mass Media Declaration*, seen by many as the threshold event in the evolution of the New International Information and Communication Order (NIICO) being called for by nations around the world, particularly in the developing world. Many leaders from developing countries called for the “right to communicate” as a part of the NIICO. Although this concept has Western origins and a history of acceptance by the U.S. until the late 1970s (Roach, 1993), in the early 1980s the U.S. began objecting to the term “people’s rights,” a term closely associated with arguments for the right to communicate, which emphasized the obstacles to access facing people as members of specific, marginalized groups. The U.S.

government argument was that a concept of “people’s rights” marginalized individual rights and strengthened the government or State’s right to intervene in people’s lives.

What this argument misses is that the concept of rights developed differently in the developing world than in the West, where “rights” emerged to protect individuals against the power of the state or major institutions such as the Church (Muzaffar, 1993). Many colonized peoples, however, used the concept of “people’s rights” to legitimize the decolonization movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the developing world (Roach, 1993). In rejecting the concept of people’s rights, the U.S. demonstrated a conception of rights that was narrowly defined, nipping alternative conceptions of democracy in the bud by emphasizing political and civil rights over the economic, social and cultural rights of both individuals and groups.

Although U.S. pressure on Burma reflected in part the growing influence of the U.S. human rights movement during the 1980s (Neier, 1996/1997), the goals of the Burmese democratic opposition and the nonviolent strategy called for by Aung San Suu Kyi also merged quite nicely with U.S. post Cold War foreign policy interests. This was especially true in the mid-1990s, when President Clinton decided to de-link China’s most favored nation (MFN) status from its human rights performance and U.S. Burma policy could be held up as proof that the U.S. wasn’t going “soft” on human rights issues. The U.S. position on Burma was relatively unclouded by significant amounts of trade, and officials could therefore take a harder line with Burma than they could with China. This led critics to note the double standard the U.S. uses when its economic interests are at stake (Neier, 1996/1997).

The discourse of democracy and its resonance with U.S. interests had not gone unnoticed among ethnic minority groups, and was a source of frustration for many who had watched their own struggle for self-determination take a back seat to the promotion of a democracy that they weren't yet convinced would further their interests. With increasing international attention and funding focused on the development of democracies and civil society around the world, the non-Burman groups had found little space within international discourse to voice their concerns regarding ethnic self-determination. One Karenni leader, Doh Say, echoed the comments of many other non-Burmans when he described the Burman advantage, which he called their "democracy boat":

The way I always say it, we don't have the democracy boat . . . We can't travel from country to country around the world to speak about Karenni suffering, but democracy groups, they are given this opportunity by the international community, so they can travel from country to country to speak about democracy. That is why people know about the democracy movement. . . . When you go out and visit a diplomat, and you start talking about the Karenni or other [non-Burman] groups, he will say, "No, we don't know [about that]. We know only about Aung San Suu Kyi and democracy." (Doh Say, personal communication, July 4, 2000)

Although there have been efforts in recent years to fund ethnic minority groups and women's organizations, the overall pattern of funding has privileged as "political" (and therefore important) certain kinds of groups and activities over others. This has perpetuated a hierarchy of skills within the movement that keeps conceptions of political participation narrowly defined and limits access to decision-making power. Narrow conceptions of rights have also widened divisions within the movement. Political and

civil rights, which have been described as the “first tier” or “first generation” rights, are perceived by Burmese activists as the basis of a democratic order, while the major issues facing ethnic groups, such as poverty, displacement and ethnically-motivated oppression, have been associated with “second-tier” or “second generation” economic, social and cultural rights. Funding for first tier rights work was labeled by opposition activists as political, while other concerns, in particular those that most affected the ethnic minorities, were labeled as efforts at cultural preservation or development. Funding for the opposition was contentious, contributing to the factionalism that has been a regularly-cited characteristic of the opposition movement. While a detailed examination of the history, patterns and consequences of foreign funding for the Burmese opposition movement is beyond the scope of this work, this is an important area for further inquiry.

In the following sections, I will sketch a hierarchy of access and use of communications technologies described by many of those I spoke with and supported by my own observations. The hierarchy, as I see it, has three broad categories: Burman students and politicians, non-Burman leaders and ethnic media, and women.²⁶ Although I recognize the risks of categorizing in this way, I cordon off women into a separate category here especially regretfully. But I accept the risk of minimizing their differences in order to reinforce the point that although they may have experienced it in different ways, all women’s marginalized placement **as women** affected their access to and

²⁶ This hierarchy is painted in broad strokes with the recognition that there are exceptions. One of my interview sources, in reading this chapter, for example, included his own observation that the first group to gain access to the Internet on the border was the KNU. This access, however, was gained through the initiative of an individual Karen man with ties to overseas Karen, and was limited to his individual correspondence and contacts with embassies and others abroad. It did not represent an overall KNU interest in the use of the Internet, which developed much later, or foreign funding for the KNU’s Internet use. This interviewee also noted the importance of the generation gap between the Burman students initially most interested in the technology and the ethnic minority leadership.

comfort with information technologies. What follows, then, is simply a framework, potentially useful in understanding how militaristic thinking manifests itself in communications and technology use, and what forces exist that could be used to counteract these effects.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on each of the categories in the hierarchy I have outlined. I will begin in the next section by detailing the experiences of Burman students and politicians. The primarily Burman-led turn toward nonviolence within the opposition made information and communications even more important for opposition activists. Using the 9/9/99 campaign as a case study, I demonstrate the creativity of activists' uses of communications technologies, but also the limitations of these technologies in motivating people to action. Differing sets of constraints operating on activists inside and outside Burma caused them to operate differently as groups. The lack of an efficient means of communication between those inside and outside led to tensions between them, especially when Thailand-based activists tried to engineer an uprising from outside that some insiders felt was insensitive to their concerns and even their safety.

Burman students and politicians

The mostly Burman students and politicians who fled Burma after the 1988 uprisings and the crackdown in the 1990 post-election period have benefited most from foreign funding for what are seen as "political," rather than "development" activities. This has provided them with several advantages over other groups on the border and

elsewhere in Thailand, such as access to training in various skills, exposure to foreigners and different ways of thinking, and foreign travel. These opportunities, in turn, have increased their knowledge of world politics, their lobbying skills, and their ability to generate funding through grant writing.

In 1993, Win Min, then a senior member of the All Burma Students Democratic Front, or ABSDF (MTZ),²⁷ spent a lot of his time cutting articles about Burma from the Thai English-language newspapers, the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*. He and other ABSDF members in the Bangkok office would cut out and compile the Burma-related articles, then make forty to fifty copies that they would mail overseas to advocacy groups and others interested in Burma. Although this was expensive and time consuming, it was an important means by which interested people could keep up with developments. As ABSDF (MTZ)'s Joint General Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Win Min was responsible for maintaining contact with NGOs, funders, diplomats, and overseas Burmese. While the cut-and-paste method helped disseminate the most detailed information published at that time on Burma, the news they sent often arrived two weeks after it had occurred. When Win Min heard about the use of computers to send information, he “went crazy for e-mail” and tried to find someone to help him gain access (Win Min, personal communication, March 6, 2000). At the end of 1994, a friend lent the ABSDF the use of an e-mail account, and they used their 386 computer and a borrowed modem to connect. Win Min and the other ABSDF (MTZ) members began typing all the newspaper articles into the computer, and while this was tedious, they could send articles every day rather

²⁷ The ABSDF split into two factions in 1991. Win Min joined the faction of student leader Moethee Zun, known as ABSDF (MTZ).

than once a week.

Another student activist who had early access to a computer was Aung Zaw, now the editor of *The Irrawaddy* magazine and a correspondent for Radio Free Asia. He first used a computer at his job with the non-governmental aid agency, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), which he began shortly after arriving at the Thai border in 1988. Like Win Min and others at the ABSDF, during the early 1990s Aung Zaw was compiling Burma-related articles from the Thai newspapers and using his friends' offices to fax them to individuals and organizations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Aung Zaw told me that the BBC read out the information from the Thai newspapers they received from him every night on their broadcast (personal communication, April 18, 2000). During his work with JRS, Aung Zaw formed the Burma Information Group (BIG)²⁸ with three other Burmese students. The members of BIG were able to use a small computer at the JRS office, but often only at night, when it wasn't needed by other JRS staff. In 1992 a friend gave them their own small computer, and they began producing human rights reports, including stories about the revolution in Karen state and about Thai police killing or harassing Burmese students in Bangkok. In doing this work, Aung Zaw met a lot of people interested in Burma, including reporters and staff members at Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights. He came to recognize the importance of human rights to the Burmese struggle.

While Aung Zaw's primary purpose was to sharpen his skills as a writer, he also found opportunities to learn other skills, including how to write funding proposals. He

²⁸ BIG changed its name in 1999 to the Irrawaddy Publishing Group.

told me that when he wrote his first funding proposal, he thought the amount he was requesting was too large, but a friend who was helping him disagreed. “No, no, this is how it works,” he remembered her telling him (personal communication, April 18, 2000). BIG got its first small grant in 1993, then in 1994 the OSI Burma Project funded them. Later they began receiving funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). BIG’s activities accelerated once the funding was providing them with financial security, but it wasn’t until 1998 that Aung Zaw began using e-mail regularly. When we spoke, he had become reliant on it for his work as a correspondent for Radio Free Asia (RFA) and with *The Irrawaddy*, which started as a four-page weekly publication sent to 500 people and had grown into a glossy monthly sent out to over 2000 subscribers (personal communication, April 18, 2000). This would have been impossible without the early opportunities Aung Zaw had to learn the skills and meet the people who could help him find the funding he needed to publish his magazine.

Of the student activists on the border during my time in Thailand, it was primarily men who had benefited from opportunities to attend various training sessions, to travel to workshops and conferences around the world to lobby on behalf of Burma, and to meet and discuss issues of international importance with leaders and activists from around the world. Several have had the opportunity for scholarships abroad, often specifically to learn the tools of governance. Although Win Min struggled to find sponsorship, for example, he finally left Thailand in the summer of 2000, to pursue a master’s degree at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government.

As a result of these opportunities, male Burman activists have often felt encouraged by evidence of the impact of their work. Student activist Win Naing, for example, told me that the reports written by his group, the Foreign Affairs Council of the All Burma Federation of Students Unions (ABFSU), regarding the educational situation inside Burma had been discussed in UNESCO meetings (personal communication, August 15, 2000). Other activists have testified in front of the UN General Assembly, or lobbied foreign government leaders on behalf of the opposition movement and its struggle for democracy in Burma. While these activities and opportunities have not been open solely to men, men have been the primary beneficiaries.

The benefits and problems of training sessions were discussed in an editorial in *The Irrawaddy* in July, 2001. The article noted several problems with training carried out along the border. It observed that outside organizers often did not adequately consider the security precautions necessary in organizing large-scale workshops, resulting in the arrest of some of the Burmese participants. It also noted that participants were often chosen based on their connections with powerful opposition leaders rather than on their genuine interest in participating, and called for more careful screening processes to ensure that the best candidate is chosen. Yet the article also rejected complaints by some that ethnic Burmans had received greater training opportunities than members of ethnic minorities, saying that “while this may be true inside Burma, it certainly does not reflect the situation outside of the country, where ethnicity is less a determinant of social status (“Editorial,” 2001). This may be a reasonable conclusion to reach from offices in Chiang

Mai, but does not reflect the situation I found with the opposition movement in Mae Sot, for example.

In addition to the opportunities available to Burman men to learn new skills, access to political and military information also provided the male activists and political leaders (both Burman and non-Burman) with a level of personal security not enjoyed by women, migrant workers or refugees. Win Min's work with the ABSDF, for example, placed him in direct contact with activists inside Burma, and the information he gained in this way allowed him to develop a special relationship with the local Thai authorities. In October 1999, just after the raid on the Burmese embassy in Bangkok, the Thai police in Mae Sot detained Moethee Zun, the former leader of the ABSDF, under suspicion that he had been involved. Win Min was at a workshop in Paris, where he received the news by e-mail from another ABSDF officer. Win Min e-mailed a Thai friend of his, the former secretary to a Thai parliamentarian, asking for his assistance. This Thai friend in turn contacted his own boss to intervene, and shortly afterward Moethee Zun was released. These relationships with the Thai authorities afforded the Burman activists a level of protection far higher than that enjoyed by the undocumented Burmese in Thailand. Group leaders could then extend this protection to varying degrees within their own group, which in turn increased their power and perpetuated the gendered and hierarchical nature of the patron-client pattern of personal relationships.

The turn toward nonviolence

The power of the Internet and information became more important to the opposition movement after the alliance headquarters at Manerplaw fell to the Burmese troops in 1995. I will now describe how, despite a turn toward nonviolent opposition strategies within the opposition movement, the interception of information and its manipulation for political purposes facilitated militarized thinking about information. Information had become increasingly commodified for use by individuals, groups and institutions with varying agendas. Opposition activists were finding that their legitimacy and often their funding relied not just on their ability to send information into Burma, but also on their ability to find and make public information about what was happening there. As I will explain, activists in Thailand had been working to help spark another uprising in Burma, which led to tensions between activists outside the country and those inside, who would have had to bear the brunt of any violent retaliations by the Burmese military.

In late 1999 and 2000, although sharp differences of opinion existed, the democratic forces within the opposition movement had increasingly been advocating nonviolent means of solving Burma's problems. This was no doubt a response to Aung San Suu Kyi's calls for reconciliation, but it was also true that most funding agencies would not fund armed groups. "Political defiance," or the technique of applying military strategies to the use of nonviolent acts of civil disobedience, became a buzzword in the movement. A former U.S. Defense Attache' to Rangoon, Robert Helvey, has held political defiance training in the border areas for many years, and has used the book *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, by Gene Sharp. The book's influence was widespread,

which Aung San Suu Kyi noted in her weekly column in the Japanese newspaper, the *Mainichi Shimbun*.²⁹ In her column, she described how Gene Sharp and his political defiance trainings had disturbed the military regime (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1997, p. 163). When Helvey's trainings and Sharps' book were denounced on Burmese state-run media, there was a sudden and sharp increase in demand for the book. Thousands of copies were secretly distributed (Helvey, 1996).

Despite ongoing debates about whether or not armed struggle should continue as part of the overall opposition strategy, the move to non-violent resistance among several opposition groups led them to value information more than ever. Opposition political groups, in addition to the military forces, now listened regularly to the SPDC's radio communications, increasing the intensity of what many activists referred to as the "information war." According to one activist, every unit of the opposition armed groups that remained in Burma had at least one communication expert who could monitor the movement of the SPDC troops (personal communication, August 23, 2000), and it was clear that both armed and unarmed opposition activists were working together to get and share information. Interception had become a primary source of information about Burmese government activities, and many groups used this information for their opposition media campaigns (personal communication, August 23, 2000). Interception was especially easy since poor and corrupt Burmese officials could be bribed to provide a copy of the regime's radio communications encryption code, which changed every two or three months.

²⁹ These columns were later reprinted in the collection *Letters from Burma* (1997).

This increase in the importance of interception in turn called attention to the risks of planted misinformation, making information from inside Burma less trustworthy. One of the founding members of the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) radio, Khin Maung Win, told me that opposition groups had become very careful about using information obtained through interception. They knew that the regime was aware of their monitoring, but also that the regime had no alternative means of communicating with its officers across the country. When we spoke, Khin Maung Win had recently received information about a SPDC plan to initiate a fake story about the arrest of an elected NLD member of parliament (MP).

They are sending this information . . . because they want the opposition groups and DVB and RFA to broadcast it. If they broadcast it, what the government will do is bring the NLD MP to Rangoon and show him in the press conference, [saying] “You see, DVB and RFA broadcast wrong information. They said this NLD MP was beaten and put into prison, but now he is free, nothing happened to him, so don’t believe the outside broadcasters,” and so on. This kind of thing they want to do. They systematically planned this. We also know that two or three weeks ago there was a meeting in Rangoon to set up this plan to produce wrong information. (personal communication, August 23, 2000).³⁰

In order to check the accuracy of information received through interception, activists often called people in Burma for confirmation, but this could be a dangerous call to receive. There have been several publicized arrests of activists and writers accused of providing information, or in the government’s view, misinformation, to the outside media. The Burma Media Association reported in a recent post to the Internet that two

³⁰ Shortly after Khin Maung Win described this to me, a story describing this misinformation campaign appeared in *The Irrawaddy*, attributed to the DVB (“Intelligence”, 2000, September).

prominent writers had been arrested after frank interviews they had given to international broadcasters. They cited “local residents” as sources (Burma Media Association, 2002). Thus, people in the local area were asked to confirm the arrest of these two writers, who themselves had been asked by the media to provide information.

The 9/9/99 campaign

The “four nines” campaign was a particularly well-publicized attempt by activists to create another uprising in Burma on September 9, 1999, to commemorate the 1988 uprisings. This campaign was one in a series of planned events that fell flat, false alarms that seriously undermined the credibility of the opposition movement and weakened the morale of activists in Thailand. These events also included the tenth anniversary of the 8/8/88 uprisings on August 8, 1998; the August 21st deadline a few weeks later by which the National League for Democracy (NLD) demanded that the regime convene the people’s assembly; and an alleged plan by the monks in Burma to march on the capital Rangoon in May, 2000, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the NLD’s election victory. Although activists made clever use of opposition media and communications technologies, they are also said to have tried to engineer the 9/9/99 campaign from outside the country, rather than facilitate the plans of the opposition inside Burma. Some activists believed this was in large part why the expected unrest inside Burma never materialized, causing this string of hyped media events to fall flat.

I followed the media reports of the 9/9/99 campaign carefully, and discussed it with several activists. The campaign involved many groups, both inside and outside

Burma, and a variety of creative uses of communications technologies and media. Especially innovative was the use of the telephone by activists outside to gather information about events in Burma and to convince the military and others inside of the need for change. In this campaign, activists in Thailand called people inside Burma, including military officers, sometimes pretending to be military intelligence (MI) officers and demanding information. “All people are scared of MI and so they give us information so we can know what’s happening in the military,” explained one activist involved in the campaign (personal communication, March 6, 2000). Activists in Thailand could then warn students inside Burma about possible actions against the students in Burma. The Thailand-based activists also used the telephone to confirm rumors, such as reports of the arrest of an activist in Burma, which once confirmed could then be reported to human rights organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch.

Activists in Thailand also used the phone to try to convince military officers and government staff inside Burma of the need for change. The callers would introduce themselves honestly, and explain that they were not enemies of the military, but that they were trying to improve the situation in Burma. They asked those listening to think about the changes taking place in Indonesia and the Philippines, and also to think about how military leaders could become elected government leaders if they had the support of the people. As one phone campaigner described it, “We explain democracy and that it is the only way to solve our problems, so we try to show them that we will work together . . . Sometimes they don’t have the time to talk, so they record it or they put it on the speaker

in the office so everyone can hear. Sometimes they say ‘Okay, try to accomplish your movement, and once there’s a movement, okay, we’ll join’” (personal communication, March 6, 2000).

The activists also tried to exacerbate existing tensions between branches of the military, such as the army and the military intelligence (MI). Pretending that they were frontline soldiers, they would call the military headquarters and request reinforcements while complaining that the MI had a better quota yet did less work, a feeling that activists knew many of their superiors at headquarters shared. Or they would call a general in Rangoon at 3 AM saying that they were from MI and asking for information which the general, though angry, felt compelled to provide. Then the next day they would call the same general in Rangoon, saying that they were calling from the front line, and would complain angrily about the late-night call they had received from MI the previous night. The general would then corroborate, and he and the phone campaigners would have a good time together complaining about MI (personal communication, March 6, 2000).

The phone campaigners tried to find out what problems existed between the officers and the rank-and-file soldiers in the military, and especially about the soldiers’ hardships, such as watching their officers confiscate their belongings or not having sufficient food. The activists then created radio dramas based on these problems that they aired on the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) radio station. As one activist explained, they would collect “some real information so they can make it into a story so it makes sense for the soldier” (personal communication, March 6, 2000).

According to activist Win Min, this telephone campaign affected the military's ability to communicate. He said that three or four days prior to 9/9/99, the military found out about the campaign, and instructed their officers not to give out any information or even pick up the phone. The telephone activists continued, making use of the fear that is employed by the regime to keep its soldiers in line. As Win Min explained, "If we scolded them angrily they got scared and talked to us. The Burma army works like that" (personal communication, March 6, 2000).

It was clear early on that the regime was concerned about a possible uprising on 9/9/99. They held a press conference on August 13, 1999, warning the opposition that they had intelligence of their campaign plans for September 9th (Radio Myanmar, 1999). At the press conference, a staff officer of the Directorate of Defence Service Intelligence presented "facts exposing the conspiracy by the anti-government organizations inside and outside to create disturbances" on September 9th, 1999 (Radio Myanmar, 1999). His presentation included detailed information regarding planning meetings in Thailand for the 9/9/99 campaign, including names of those involved and the ways these activists had exchanged information with those inside. In the days leading up to September 9th, opposition activists in Thailand made claims that an uprising was imminent and that there were debates raging within the Burmese army regarding whether or not to take action. The activists urged people inside to take part in a general strike and other acts of resistance to the regime, including tearing up government-run newspapers in a boycott of military-controlled media ("Myanmar Warns", 1999). The regime threatened to clamp down on any unrest, erected roadblocks manned by riot police around Rangoon, put up

barricades outside of the NLD compound and the home of Aung San Suu Kyi, tightened security around schools and monasteries, and arrested dozens of dissidents (“Myanmar junta”, 1999).

The campaign fizzled. There were reports of students protesting here and there, and then fleeing or being quickly arrested, and of monks and students handing out pamphlets. The opposition activists had indeed been able to get the news out, as there were reports of opposition pamphlets, leaflets, and posters appearing in many places around the country. The international broadcasters also covered the events in their reporting, both the preparations leading up to the day and then the day itself. This made it even more difficult for many Burmese activists in Thailand to understand the lack of action by people inside. But the results of the campaign help to explain this. As many as 500 activists, monks and NLD members were arrested and detained in the six weeks prior to 9/9/99 (Fink, 2001).

The outcome of the 9/9/99 campaign prompted introspection among many activists. Several Thailand-based activists stressed the positive aspects of the effort, primarily that it kept hope alive for many inside the country, who knew people were working on their behalf. They reasoned that if they hadn’t done anything, the people inside would have become discouraged. A few people expressed the need to learn from the experience. Others said that they were still trying to figure out what went wrong and what to do differently next time. There were those, however, who believed that the 9/9/99 campaign was ill conceived. One of these was Win Naing, an activist who was involved in the student demonstrations in Burma in 1996 and 1998. MI had tried to arrest

him in 1998, and after living in hiding for eight months, he came out of Burma in April, 1999. His arrival in Thailand just over a year before we spoke gave Win Naing a different perspective on the situation inside Burma than many of the other Thailand-based activists. He did not like the 9/9/99 campaign.

The 9/9/99 campaign targeted the people inside. The people inside think that if they want to do a campaign inside, the message must come from inside Burma. . . . If you do it in the media, and you broadcast saying “hey, do this, on this day and at this time,” the people, they know themselves the real situation, and the students know the real situation. When they will do something, they can decide and do it. We can’t command them, we can’t create it from the outside. . . . So we can’t say the 9/9/99 campaign was profitable. We didn’t get anything. Before 9/9/99, nearly 100 students were arrested by MIS just because of this campaign. The people inside were really angry. (personal communication, August 15, 2000)

Win Naing and others believed that the external opposition would be most helpful by finding the means to support those aspects of the campaign that had been initiated by Burmese inside the country. Nevertheless, he recognized why those outside had worked so hard on the campaign.

It’s like hope . . . Even for me, once in 1996, we hoped that we would be successful this time to destroy the SPDC. So I couldn’t stop doing it, because my hope was really big, and what I thought was based on my hope, not systematically on reality. So I go, go, go, go, and finally, I can’t control my hope. And finally, I see it didn’t happen. (personal communication, August 15, 2000)

The opposition groups based along the border were working with their UG members inside Burma to build a base of support for a mass uprising among the people and to eventually spark another mass action, but some questioned the methods used to

communicate with those inside. Bo Kyi was a student activist inside Burma just prior to the 9/9/99 campaign, and he told me about the problems he faced when activists from outside tried to contact him for his help in organizing to mark the day. He had been released from a lengthy prison term only shortly before that, vowing to himself that he would not return. Because 9/9/99 was fast approaching, the MI officers visited Bo Kyi two or three times a week to ask him what might happen and for his opinion of the NLD. “They also warned me that if someone from outside contacts me, I must contact them or they will know that I support 9/9/99,” he told me. He tried to cut connections with people from outside, “but I couldn’t cut them all, because many people knew me. . . but I couldn’t do activism” (personal communication, August 18, 2000). Bo Kyi concurred with Win Naing’s view that the activists outside of Burma must take their lead from the activists inside, rather than trying to lead the movement from their offices on the border. “We should ask them, ‘What is your strategy?’ and we should discuss it again and again and sometimes we should suggest something to them. If they agree, we will do it, but if they don’t agree, we should not” (personal communication, August 18, 2000).

In addition to those activists I met in Thailand who were critical of the 9/9/99 campaign, there were also those in Burma who were critical of attempts by activists outside to exacerbate the unrest in Burma. In Rangoon I met a former close ally of Aung San Suu Kyi, Ma Thanegi, who had become a controversial figure in the Burmese opposition. She told me that there remained no functioning underground movement and no real current UG leadership inside Burma. She said that the leaders from 1988 were gone, that when things got really difficult they had disappeared. She also had harsh

things to say about those Burmese living outside the country who complained that no one inside was willing to do anything. If they came back inside and risked their own lives, she told me, then there would be people willing to follow their leadership. But unless they were willing to do this, they should not complain and should make more of an attempt to understand the risks involved in what they were asking people inside to do (personal communication, December 26, 1999).

Opposition groups in Thailand and in Burma operated under different constraints, and the lack of efficient means of communication between these groups exacerbated their differences. Win Naing noted that along with differences in freedom of movement and communication, there was a greater need for those inside to work closely together, given limited resources. In his experience, the loyalty of the activists inside was to the opposition movement as a whole rather than to a specific group (personal communication, August 15, 2000). He also noted that the activist leaders outside had a responsibility to support their followers and secure their safety. When we spoke, his group, the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) had recently split into two factions, in large part over charges of misuse of funding by members of the other faction. Win Naing had no funding for his faction. “I am the leader of ten members. I need to take care of their survival. . . I need to raise the funding to support these people” (personal communication, August 15, 2000). The formal structure and increasing professionalization of opposition groups in Thailand made their daily operation quite different from the opposition inside Burma, which had to remain flexible, relying on less

formally structured social networks for support, such as family, friends and neighbors. Activists inside organized covertly to ensure their own survival.

The desire for information from inside Burma and the need for opposition groups to prove to funding agencies that they had accomplished something inside the country with the money they had been granted created a dangerous situation for activists inside. Opposition groups outside used various means to document their work, including collecting information from inside and making it public. The harassment or arrest of an activist inside Burma was also a way to reassure funding agencies that groups were indeed active and work was being accomplished. The arrest of an activist inside Burma in this way was perversely beneficial to the group based in Thailand. In addition, since the practice of announcing opposition plans on international broadcasts had become problematic, dissidents inside Burma had become more selective in their communications to outsiders, even to opposition activists. Those inside had learned, for example, to be vague about the times and dates of planned actions. “If we give them the message,” Win Naing told me, “they can’t keep it [a secret] and they will tell the media. If they announce the plan. . . then our plan will be destroyed” (personal communication, August 15, 2000).

Opposition groups working in Thailand had come to depend on external funding, thus increasing the commitment of activists to the survival of their group, and exacerbating political factionalism and competition between groups. This funding combined with the difficulties of communication between groups inside and outside Burma led to attempts by activists outside to engineer a movement for change inside.

This externally-driven approach to the use of communications to engineer social change is similar to the tactics of totalitarian regimes (Friedrich, 1954),³¹ and can thus be seen as a setback in the process of moving from a totalitarian approach to information and communications to one that is more democratic. The fact that the attempt backfired could be seen as a positive sign that resistance to totalitarian approaches within Burma is alive and well. It could also be argued that the amount of attention devoted to this campaign and to externally-focused lobbying campaigns distracted opposition activists from dealing with some of the most difficult issues facing the Thailand-based opposition movement's efforts to democratize internally. Although foreign and indigenous NGOs had begun addressing inequities in opportunities for education and participation in the public realm, I found a strong strain of denial among many Burman male activists that these inequities even existed.

Non-Burman leaders and ethnic media

The non-Burman opposition groups functioned under different sets of environmental and historical constraints than the Burman groups. The majority of non-Burmans were from rural areas where they were less likely than those from urban areas to have been exposed to electronic technologies or other modern luxuries more commonplace in urban settings. Many of the ethnic peoples' lives had been focused on the survival of their families, their villages, and their way of life. Until recently, few had

³¹ It also bears a striking resemblance to the "social engineering" approach employed by communication and development practitioners.

considered it worthwhile to spend time presenting their situation to outsiders beyond a small group of foreign supporters.

What many older leaders described as a discomfort with new technologies seemed to some younger people to have more to do with their elders' lack of attention to the importance of involvement with the outside world. Mon student Nai Kyin Shwe,³² for example, came to see that international information campaigns focused on human rights strengthened the movement, and in the mid-1990s urged the older leaders of the New Mon State Party (NMSP) to begin an information campaign like the one the ABSDF was aggressively engaged in. "But at that time the leaders weren't interested. They were interested in the war in the jungle, they were isolated from the world, and very few people knew the Mon people," he explained (personal communication, July 22, 2000).

The most direct criticism of the ethnic nationality leaders often came from young people. Younger activists described, for example, how older non-Burman leaders had at times tried to discourage women's groups or student groups from organizing activities with people outside their ethnic circle. As one Karen student activist said about some of the Karen leaders, "I feel like they are a very big truck and they want to go, and they don't want the little car to go past them. They cannot go quickly, but they also don't want the little car to go past them" (personal communication, April 18, 2000). Other Karen students told me that the nepotism that for years had ensured that the leaders' children got the best opportunities was slowly giving way to a more equitable distribution. This was partly due to the fact that several funding agencies were making specific efforts to include a wide range of Burmese peoples in their programs. Several

³² Nai Kyin Shwe is a pseudonym.

people told me that the best hope for reconciliation in Burma remained in the hands of the younger generation, including some younger leaders already entering the ranks with new ideas and more flexible attitudes.

It was the younger people who were most eagerly taking to the newest information technologies. Many of them used the Internet on occasion for research and to take advantage of online training opportunities. They learned their computer skills through the ad hoc training sessions provided by opposition groups and NGOs, or they taught themselves using online training manuals and trial and error methods. Several activists I spoke with were taking advantage of online educational programs. They were especially popular among students whose flight from Burma in 1988 cut short their academic studies, as well as many young people who had left the refugee camps to try to find opportunities to build a better life by working for NGOs or in Thai cities as domestic servants or child care providers.

Many young people believed that they had an important role to play in the movement. As Karen student Naw Mu Si told me,

The leaders and the people in the camps, there is a gap between them. The leaders are doing the political work, but there is also the civilian population in the camp who don't know anything. . . . When it is time to really cooperate, there is a gap between them and then we will not be able to cooperate together. So, we want our students to be a bridge between the people and the leaders. (personal communication, April 18, 2000)

Several younger activists, especially non-Burmans, had been documenting human rights abuses against their people, and saw NITs as an inexpensive way to publicize this work.

They understood that information had become an even more valuable campaign tool, since its dissemination was cheaper and faster than ever before.

The emphasis on documenting human rights abuses since 1988 corresponded with a growth in the number of ethnically-focused opposition newsletters and journals. Several of these publications had become significant voices in the overall media environment among the opposition groups in Thailand, and will be described in more detail in the next chapter. In the face of what the ethnic minority groups perceived as a loss of influence within the opposition movement, these media worked to encourage their people to continue the struggle against the Burmese regime. They tried hard to keep people committed to working against the regime rather than defecting to it, as so many ethnic groups had already done.

Ceasefires, national reconciliation, and invisibility

The last decade has seen a decline in the power and influence of the non-Burman elements of the political opposition, which has significance for the diversity of views included in opposition decision-making processes. Several ethnic nationality leaders attribute their loss of influence at least in part to the opposition's move toward nonviolence and the success of the Burmese government's formal ceasefire agreements with fourteen larger ethnic groups, as well as several other smaller "ceasefire forces" (Smith, 1999). These ceasefires have been used by the regime to lend credence internationally to their claim to desire a peaceful transition to democratic rule. They have also seriously weakened the opposition alliance of armed ethnic groups, the National

Democratic Front (NDF). NDF General Secretary, Khaing Soe Naing Aung, pinpointed the cause of the ceasefires as the popularity of nonviolent action in countries around the world, which he says “fanned into Burma in 1989” with the political defiance trainings that were being sponsored on the border (personal communication, July 8, 2000).

While Khaing Soe Naing Aung didn’t claim that the political defiance trainings led directly to the ceasefires, he did argue that the Burmese regime cleverly manipulated this post Cold War trend toward nonviolence, which coincided with the war-weariness of many Burmese peoples, the messages of reconciliation from Aung San Suu Kyi, and the foreign policy objectives of the U.S. and other world powers. In addition, many of the ceasefire groups and their leaders had benefited handsomely from the surge in business activity in Burma since the early 1990s (Smith, 1999). As Khaing Soe Naing Aung explained, “The government allowed those groups to do business. When their business prospers, these people will not have the mind to revolt. In other words, to kill the spirit of insurrection, the government enticed them with business” (personal communication, July 8, 2000). The military regime successfully combined the language of peace with the lure of good business.

The capture by Burmese troops of the opposition alliance headquarters at Manerplaw in 1995 caused a loss of face for the armed ethnic groups and disrupted communications between the opposition groups. Leisurely conferences stretched over a week or two were now impracticable. As Pa-O leader Hkun Okker put it, “in Manerplaw, security and funding was no problem. If there was food, okay, you can talk ten, twelve, thirteen days, no problem. Now we can’t do it, so preparation is very important”

(personal communication, July 5, 2000). Now that they must pay for security, transport, food, and accommodations, including a place to meet, these leaders have come to rely on communications technologies such as e-mail to help them in their preparations for much shorter conferences of two or three days at most.

During the time I was in Thailand there were two significant efforts underway aimed at improving both communications between ethnic groups and access to NITs for those ethnic groups that were politically active but not yet online. One of these was the National Reconciliation Program (NRP), initiated by Dr. Sein Win of the NCGUB, and Harn Yawngwhe, a Shan intellectual living overseas, and financed with help from the Norwegian government and other organizations (Khon Manko Ban, personal communication, August 8, 2000). The objectives of the NRP were for “all nationalities” to discuss and define their own political goals, engage in dialogue with the country’s other nationalities regarding the political future of Burma, prepare to establish their desired political goals, and create the conditions necessary to safeguard them (National Reconciliation Program, n.d.). The program aimed at preparing the ethnic nationalities for the possibility of tripartite dialogue between the ethnic groups, the NLD and the SPDC. In order to get all parties to agree to common goals for that time in the future when they would need to articulate them, the NRP programs consisted primarily of meetings between non-Burman leaders, most often between the political factions within one ethnic group, so that they could identify and communicate common goals. There was also some support for cultural exchanges between groups. When I met with Khon Manko Ban, a founding member of the NRP, he and other NRP members had been meeting

regularly with the various Rakhine political factions, trying to help them achieve “unity” in agreeing upon a set of stated political goals for their people (personal communication, August 8, 2000).

The second project, called *Ethnics Online* and funded by the OSI Burma Project, was intended to improve the communications capacity of the non-Burman political leadership and grassroots organizations by providing funding for new technologies and training in their use. The program was intended primarily to help ethnic leaders who needed to communicate during their frequent travels, but also ethnic organizations that weren’t yet online. Since the Karenni leader Rimond Htoo, for example, was the Chairperson for the National Reconciliation Project (NRP) along with his work for the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), he needed to be able to communicate well with the other leaders, so he was provided with a laptop in 1999. The project provided laptops to several of the other key NRP leaders, as well as funds to support the e-mail accounts and phone bills of several groups (Kyaw Kyaw, personal communication, November 23, 1999). In this way, *Ethnics Online* was vital to the communication of those involved in the NRP. The project also supported a few training sessions for non-Burman groups, such as the computer training for Karenni organizations described at the beginning of this chapter.

Those leaders who had received this funding cited it as a rare example of foreign financial support for the ethnic minority political leaders. When I spoke with National Democratic Front (NDF) General Secretary, Khaing Soe Naing Aung, for example, he told me that the NDF had not been able to get funding from the National Endowment for

Democracy (NED) or other organizations because NDF is an alliance of armed groups. The NED also would not fund the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), an alliance of armed and unarmed groups representing both Burmans and non-Burmans, for the same reason. NDF had received a bit of funding for non-military activities (US \$500 per month), channeled through the government-in-exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), during the years 1997 and 1998, but had stopped receiving this funding in 1999. He argued that the NDF conducted non-military activities with a political wing that he admitted had been established specifically to try to get funding. These activities mostly included various means of gathering information on human rights abuses. “Our office building is not a military building,” he told me. “In fact, [NDF] is a political wing. So we ought to be given funds” (personal communication, July 8, 2000).

While a detailed analysis of the history of funding for the Burmese opposition is beyond the scope of this work, it is clear that funding throughout most of the 1990s resulted in patterns of access to and use of NITs that fell along ethnic and gendered lines. This was apparent from the emphasis on information and communications activities that were themselves highly gendered, being considered primarily within the public realm of politics. Men ran the political groups, held office, wrote most of the news, and were dominant in the information campaign to raise awareness and lobby national and international policymakers. Men also organized the state-building activities such as the major effort to draft a constitution for a future federal system in Burma.

Although there were non-Burman men involved in these political activities, non-Burman organizations were especially well supported in their efforts to document human rights abuses by the Burmese regime. This was undoubtedly an important aspect of opposition activity, as community involvement in documenting abuses is understood as crucial to the process of empowerment (Dias, 1993), or what Freire (1970) called “conscientization.” Nevertheless, the consistent and repetitive nature of human rights abuse reporting has also worked to maintain stereotypes of non-Burmans as victims. In the public realm they remained invisible except as symbols of Burmese military oppression. While there were exceptions, the very fact that they were exceptional proves the rule – that the popular conception within the opposition was of the non-Burmans as lacking political skills. This, then, made it seem “natural” that they lacked access to communications technologies and did not participate in the public realm.

The feeling of being overlooked was a consistent theme in my conversations with non-Burmans, and reinforced in their own minds the notion that they were “behind the Burmans.” This phrase was repeated most vehemently among refugees, but was also heard at the highest levels of non-Burman leadership. “The ethnics are too late in communication,” said Hkun Okker, the President of the Pa-O People’s Liberation Organization (PPLO), explaining why he didn’t use e-mail until 1999. At that time the PPLO received support to buy a desktop computer, he explained, but since then members have had no training in how to use it. They must also now pay for an e-mail account and much higher phone bills. He pointed out that the smaller groups had the most trouble

maintaining online access and paying their bills, especially if there was no follow up from the funding agency.

Non-Burman leaders I spoke with often compared their funding with that provided to groups they perceived as primarily Burman, such as the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) or the Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS). They argued that these groups, while they may be doing good work, nevertheless were working in exile, far from home and therefore unable to claim (and without the responsibilities of) a constituency. The funding patterns benefited the same groups repeatedly, they maintained, because those groups that were funded then gained the skills necessary to complete increasingly sophisticated grant proposals.

The donors don't understand well, so they donate their money to those who are clever, more advanced because of the assistance from the international community. So they enjoy that and they can make better proposals. . . . Then they get money and they become more clever. Those who are not clever and who do not have a chance to get assistance, they never get assistance, so the gap within our movement is very wide. (Hkun Okker, personal communication, July 5, 2000)

In the politics of the Burmese opposition, the Burmans were generally considered more educated and therefore skilled in reading and writing, and thus “naturally” the most active and best funded. Ethnic groups remained for the most part focused on issues of survival and self-determination (which, they pointed out, was not an issue for the Burmans), issues that got labeled as “development” or “cultural preservation.” This reinforces the observation by Clarence Dias (1993) that “civil and political rights have tended to become the focus of international human rights advocacy while economic,

social and cultural rights have tended to become the focus of international development assistance” (p. 705). Conceptions of development or cultural preservation issues as separate from the mainstream “political” issues removed all but a few of the non-Burmans and the issues they were working on from the public realm of political action, except insofar as they are useful symbolically in lobbying efforts. The symbiotic relationship of those issues seen as “politics” with those understood as “development” was in this way masked (Dias, 1993). This relationship between politics and development, as well as the way it becomes masked, was reflected in several people’s comments about their rights. Several people told me that they did not yet feel ready to assume their democratic rights because they were not yet at a high enough level of understanding and knowledge. They saw their lack of development as a barrier to their assumption of political rights rather than as a violation of their economic rights. Granting them political and civil rights would thus do little on a practical level to improve their daily lives.

As Eghosa Osaghae (1996) has argued by using Nicaragua as an example, “without redressing inequalities, the entrenchment of individual human rights would be meaningless to members of disadvantaged groups” (p.177). He maintains that discrimination cannot be prevented where gross inequalities exist among competing groups. Thus, the human rights approach to conflict resolution “should involve the right of backward groups to approximate the levels of the advanced groups, which requires affirmative action. The right to non-discrimination cannot be meaningful unless this is done” (Osaghae, 1996, p. 184). Osaghae (1996) argued that if the root cause of the

differences in qualifications between individuals is a group disadvantage (such as discrimination based on ethnicity), then the granting of special privileges is not discriminatory. He goes so far as to argue that without granting special privileges to level the playing field for disadvantaged groups, the attempt to treat them equally with those more advantaged would systematically preclude them from attaining their rights. In other words, special privileges for individuals belonging to disadvantaged groups will be a necessary means of creating genuinely equal opportunity for all.

Those opposition groups that have been disadvantaged by the status quo recognized this. As Hkun Okker of the Pa-O People's Liberation Organization explained,

If your knowledge is level, you are level. If your knowledge is still too low, you cannot ask for equality. If I want equality with you, my knowledge must be just nearly your knowledge. . . The ethnics have less knowledge than the Burmans. Why? We have no opportunities. (personal communication, July 5, 2000).

These same concerns were echoed by women in the opposition. Mi Sue Pwint, a founder of the BWU, for example, was initially worried about starting a women's organization because women in the opposition movement had been given very few chances for study outside of their border camps. This limited their abilities to communicate with outsiders and gain funding. Although there have been many training sessions conducted in Chiang Mai and Bangkok, or overseas in the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and other places, she argued that very few women had been chosen for inclusion by the leadership of political organizations (personal communication, July 3, 2000). She told me about her frequent arguments with the ABSDF male political leadership on this issue, but said the men's position was that it was not safe for women to

travel in Thailand. “We can see easily,” she explained, “that in every organization, women are working under or behind the men They never choose the women to go to trainings, seminars, workshops, like that, and it’s very difficult to contact each other outside the camp. So slowly, slowly, women’s abilities and men’s abilities are different” (July 3, 2000).

Women of the opposition

Although women time and again told me that they were not yet “ready” for involvement in the political process in Burma, which many of them attributed to a lack of opportunities to develop their skills, these women were not inactive by any means. It was rather the way “active” was defined that blinded the movement to the way that women’s work was political in that it supported the military and governing activities of the men. This work included income generation to support the family and the care of the elderly and the sick, not to mention raising new soldiers and politicians. Women’s focus on the domestic sphere and issues of daily survival demonstrate how the global phenomenon of the public/private divide that naturalizes a gendered division of labor has been perpetuated within the opposition movement.

Journal entry, Mae Sariang, Thailand, November 28, 1999

*This evening over dinner I got into an interesting conversation with XXX over the issue of women's rights. Although I found it hard to keep my mouth shut and not get heated, I also found myself listening to repetitive and superficial arguments about how we must all get along. It came up in a conversation among the guys in Burmese, I think, and then Kyaw Kyaw told the others that I would be going to the women's meeting. Kyaw Kyaw asked me whether or not women had their rights in the U.S. When I said no, there were grunts of dissatisfaction around the table. XXX then said that woman was made from the rib of man, and so woman was made **after** man. Another man added that it cannot be denied, as it is the word of God. I asked "Whose God? Most of the people of Burma?" and Kyaw Kyaw said no and laughed. XXX then said that most of the people in the world believed this. Then he went on at great length about how the women were now raising questions and arguing with the men and how it is causing problems. Both men and women each have their own work, he argued, but the women were weakening the movement. They were no longer focused on the work they do best.*

I told him that I was sorry I couldn't do much for him about this — that it was an issue to be solved between Burmese men and women. He suggested that maybe I could help the women realize the problems they were creating. I told him that the Burmese women I'd met were very smart and didn't need my advice, but he countered that maybe I could "open their minds" about this issue.

Shortly after that I ended the conversation, since I realized I was listening for about the fourth time to the argument that if we all talk and work together we will understand

each other. I wondered whether he considered his monologue “talking together” -- did he really think we were having a conversation? He went on again about how women and men must do their own work, which is fine in my opinion, if the work you do is fulfilling and the unfulfilling work is shared. But I realized that he wasn’t interested in my opinion, which to me, and probably to most Burmese women fighting this attitude, lies at the heart of the matter.

Social conceptions of gender and gender roles meant that information technologies were seen as most effectively used in the service of war and its related surveillance and security functions, in state-building, and in externally-focused lobbying efforts. This merged with the gendered nature of Burmese opposition politics to ensure that comparatively few women had access to the newest communications technologies in late 1999 and 2000. Those who did have access often felt uncomfortable with the technologies, or that their access was contingent on their support of political organizations as (unpaid or unrecognized) secretaries or typists, or as leaders of women’s organizations. Even though a computer expert had visited the Burmese Women’s Union (BWU) offices, for example, and provided them with some training on e-mail, not many of the BWU women actually used e-mail or the Internet. The biggest issue for the women was the language barrier, and the concern that someone would find mistakes in their written English. They would most often get an English-speaking friend to correct or even write their correspondence for them. This was slowly changing as the BWU worked to build the capacity and skills of their members, but even when I left in August

2000, there were few BWU members who could send a confident e-mail message in English. And although there had been women's organizations for many years, and several had recently gained access to NITs, their activities were understood to be primarily relief and development efforts in their local communities, since women have had to bear the largest responsibility for the maintenance of the family while their fathers, brothers and husbands waged war or political battles. For this reason, even those women with access to NITs were not generally perceived as participating in political work, but rather in work to maintain the family and community.³³

Many women I spoke with expressed feelings of inferiority when speaking of their role within the opposition movement, not only to the men who dominate politics, but also to other women. During the forum that established the Women's League for Burma (WLB), for example, many members of the newly-formed women's organizations, such as the Pa-O Women's Union (PWU), felt inferior in education and abilities to the more outspoken women there (Nang Aine, personal communication, July 5, 2000). This underscores the fact that the politics of women's organizations were as complex and contested as the mainstream male-dominated groups. Feelings about ethnicity and class run deep, and women were as vocal and impassioned as men in expressing their discontent with the racism as well as the sexism they had experienced.

³³ Nevertheless, women's groups in the Burmese opposition are as varied as their histories would suggest. Groups such as the Karen Women's Organization, first formed in 1949, and have had much experience dealing with outsiders and organizing different kinds of projects. Others have only recently formed, such as the PaO Women's Union, organized in March, 2000. Terms such as "women's groups" or "women's movement" make invisible the differences between women and the divisions that passionately concern them.

Although women's groups had received sporadic assistance throughout the years, attention to Burma and its exiles increased after 1988, and with gender becoming an increasingly important focus of development agencies, Burmese opposition women have received more funding. Until the recent formation of the umbrella organization, the Women's League for Burma (WLB), the most visible group of Burmese women in Thailand was the Burmese Women's Union (BWU). The BWU was founded by female students who left Burma after the 1988 uprisings, many of whom were also members of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF). Mirroring the situation with the ABSDF and the ethnic-based political organizations, the BWU received funding for publicity and information work earlier than other women's groups. This, in turn, increased their chances to get more funding. The BWU set up the first women's organization office along the Thai-Burma border when they rented space in Mae Hong Song in late 1997 (Mi Sue Pwint, personal communication, July 3, 2000). What distinguished the BWU from the ethnic-based women's groups, especially at first, was their emphasis on outreach to the international community and their use of communications technologies and media to do so. During my time in Thailand, the BWU was the only women's organization producing a regular newsletter. The BWU was also instrumental in organizing the formation of the Women's League of Burma (WLB).

Two major surges of organizing energy in the development of the Burmese women's movement corresponded with significant international events and the desire to communicate with the international community. The first was the NGO Forum that was held alongside the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference, and was followed by the first

“shadow report” to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in January, 2000. Women’s participation in these two events provides evidence of a move among Burmese women activists from a focus on political and civil rights, perceived by many minority people to concern primarily Burmans, to a heightened awareness of race and its related problems.

The Burmese Women’s Union (BWU) was formed in 1995, and after a few months was informed about the Beijing Women’s Conference by members of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), the opposition government-in-exile.³⁴ The BWU and NCGUB arranged for two Burmese women living overseas to attend the Beijing NGO Forum as representatives of the BWU. Especially because Aung San Suu Kyi gave the opening address to the NGO Forum via videotape smuggled out of Burma, a Burmese presence was important to help raise awareness of the oppression in Burma. Two days of campaigning by the women and their supporters were described by the ABSDF’s *Dawn* newsletter. According to the article covering BWU involvement in the Forum, this campaign focused on the release of all political prisoners in Burma and on providing moral support to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Although there was discussion of ethnic issues when two films about violence against women were screened, this was not the focus of the campaigning at the Forum by the BWU (“Burmese Women’s”, 1995).

³⁴ Different women remember the men’s involvement in these events differently, with some suggesting that the men encouraged the formation of the BWU in order that there be a Burmese presence in Beijing. Others insist that the BWU was formed before anyone learned about the upcoming Beijing NGO Forum. What is clear is that the NCGUB supported the women in order to ensure a Burmese presence at the Forum.

Then, in January, 2000, a multi-ethnic committee of women presented their “shadow report” to the UN to counter Burma’s own report to the CEDAW. This committee of women had compiled information and written this document for presentation at the United Nations in order to counter the arguments made by the Burmese government regarding the advancement of women in Burma. It was the first time women from different ethnic groups had come together to write a document of this magnitude. It is significant that these women decided to focus on the plight of ethnic women in the rural areas of the country, as it indicates their willingness to directly address the racism facing the most vulnerable of their countrywomen.

During the time I spent with members of various opposition groups, I found that in general, women’s style of organizing and interacting among themselves differed in significant ways from many of the male-dominated groups. Monthly meetings I attended of the Mae Sot Women’s Exchange, initiated while I was living in Mae Sot, exemplified the ways in which women’s organizing around specific issues, such as domestic violence and child nutrition, cut across ethnic lines. The organizers of the Mae Sot Women’s Exchange were a diverse set of women leaders from different opposition organizations who valued the fact that women from a variety of ethnic groups attended the meetings. There was a concerted effort to include everyone in the discussions. Women sat on the floor together, and everyone had a turn to speak if they wished. This raised problems with language, since many of the women were not native speakers of Burmese. When someone’s language problems became apparent, the other women were careful to find a translator within the group rather than discourage her from speaking. Concerned that

women have been silenced through years of socialization, they understood the value of these meetings to lie primarily in the opportunity they gave women from diverse backgrounds to speak up in a safe public place.

These women, then, were developing their own grassroots, participatory channels of communication that transcended ethnicity and typified the process of “conscientization” (Freire, 1970). Many female activists spoke openly about problems they had faced in their meetings and organizing efforts, including those related to ethnicity, both within their organization and between groups. I did not often find such self-critical introspection about problems within their own organizations when I spoke with male activists.

Although it is too early to know how women might use NITs as they gain access to them, the differences in their style of organizing are likely to also be mirrored by uses of NITs that differ from those of male activists. Many women’s groups intentionally distanced themselves from the masculine realm of politics because they saw it as contentious and divisive.³⁵ When women described how they would make use of access to the Internet and e-mail, for example, they often said that they would seek contact with women from other ethnic groups and from other women’s groups around the world. Their interest in NITs very often revolved around the development of relationships with people at the local, regional and international levels. This is in contrast to what many male activists answered when asked the same question, which was that they would like

³⁵ There are other reasons for this distancing, however, such as the fact that calling what they do “political” can make it more difficult for women to get foreign funding. This is especially true in the refugee camps, where the Thais have prohibited “political” activities, and because many women don’t perceive the work they are doing as political.

more time online to either send or seek out information. As women gain access to NITs, and as long as they are free to develop their own agendas regarding their use, the desire to build relationships both locally and around the world promises to open up new ways of thinking about communications technologies and media use. I also have no doubt that many Burmese women feel it necessary that more women's voices be included in the public dialogue.

Communication and change

The environment of surveillance and suspicion in Mae Sot and elsewhere along the border helped to shape conceptions of the proper and most efficient uses for communications technologies and media among the opposition movement. It had also resulted, at least in Mae Sot, in a fragmentation among opposition groups that inhibited pluralistic dialogue. This was not yet significantly affected by the introduction of computers and the Internet. These were still unfamiliar presences in opposition offices along the border, many of which had neither the technical nor the human capacities to communicate electronically. Nevertheless, while the technologies may have seemed alien initially, they were also welcomed and were quickly becoming important tools in activists' work to make their concerns known to more people around the world. There existed, however, significant differences in access to and use of NITs between the border areas and the urban areas of Thailand.

The events of 1988 and 1990 and the resultant movement for democracy in Burma coincided with the needs of U.S. foreign policy interests. By making use of the

discourses of democracy and human rights, the movement for democratic change in Burma became a powerful moral and political symbol as well as promising a potentially useful ally for the U.S. in the Southeast Asian region in the long run. The Reagan administration's concept of low intensity warfare and its exportation to Southeast Asia led to some militarized approaches to communication, much like in totalitarian regimes. When applied in the Burmese context, such approaches proved ineffective and demoralizing to opposition activists.

In addition, the history of U.S. involvement in the movement for a New International Information and Communication Order (NIICO) helps to place in a global context the emphasis on human rights within the Burmese struggle. Funded in large part by Western aid agencies, including the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), many groups in the Burmese opposition emphasized political and civil rights over economic, social and cultural rights. These latter were categorized as rights **abuses** when useful for condemning the regime, but as “development” when it came to appropriating funding. Movement inequities were exacerbated by unacknowledged assumptions that political and civil rights abuses occurred primarily to Burmans, while abuses of economic, social and cultural rights affected ethnic minorities. While I recognize that these statements are true in numerical terms, what is not generally acknowledged is the privileging of the “first tier” individual political and civil rights within the opposition movement. This occurs, for example, when the arrest of a writer inside Burma becomes bigger news than the suppression of an ethnic people's right to learn their own language.

Both events have inhibited communication, but one is seen as a political right to freedom of expression, while the other is labeled a cultural right.

A greater examination of debates over the meaning and scope of “human rights” provides some insight into how this concept can paradoxically contribute to the marginalization of specific groups in society. Critical scholars have made important contributions to our understanding of the problematic framework of human rights that emphasizes democracy as the main goal, marginalizing women and minority groups in the process. Human rights approaches that interpret the civil and political rights of individuals as belonging to public life, while (at the regional or national level) relegating village and family life to the private sphere, produce a dichotomy between the public and private spheres that prevents women and many minority groups from participating fully in the public sphere. Women and rural minority groups are inhibited in their ability to use the authoritative forms of speech and dialogue that democratic participation demands. Yet by placing a premium on speech, persuasion, and rhetorical skill, the practice of democracy, then, ensures that the citizen who makes the most persuasive argument has the most to gain and that those without these skills remain unable to fully participate (Romany, 1994).

With a public/private divide that relegated women to the private sphere (and in the Burmese case, relegated minority peoples to villages or to “the jungle” as guerilla fighters), there has developed a hierarchy resulting in a gendered and ethnically inequitable conceptualization of human rights. Recognition of the so-called “second generation” of social, economic and cultural rights has clarified the inconsistencies

inherent in a global system that rhetorically upholds principles of justice and dignity while at the same time denying basic rights of self-determination to colonized or minority peoples (Romany, 1994). The current structure of international relations mirrors the construction of the liberal state, in that it presupposes the will of people to institute the legal order, yet does not recognize or admit to the naturalized normative order that guides such constructions (Romany, 1994). This normative order includes the glorification of feminine values and of ethnic nationality cultures without a corresponding examination of the ways this normative order is constructed through patriarchal power structures and the structural position of women and minorities within them. In other words, it is the structural positioning of women and minorities within society that elicits many of the (politically) significant behavioral differences between them and the majority (mostly male) elite which are constructed as “natural” by those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. The patriarchal narrative that perpetuates these cultural definitions results in a form of domination that strips women and ethnic minority groups of the opportunities to develop the very skills they need to resist this domination. Claiming the existence of “natural” differences between men and women, or between “simple” rural people and the urban cosmopolitan, aids the state and its elites (both men and women) in enlisting culture, especially cultural “tradition,” as a means of creating and perpetuating the hegemonic subordination of women and minority groups. This system of subordination also acts as the organizing principle in the distribution of resources within various groups in society, further compounding the subordination of minority groups. As Romany (1994) argues, “[t]he legitimation of human rights

discourse must therefore rest on the renunciation of hegemonic communicative competence held by a few” (p. 110).

Feminist communication studies have in recent years moved beyond a focus on the gendered nature of media content to contribute to more nuanced understandings of the impact of communications and media through exploring the gendered nature of technological development and use. Lana Rakow (1988) maintains that most discussions of technology mask questions of gender and therefore preclude a gendered analysis. She argues that a gendered approach to understanding technological developments challenges hidden assumptions about “the values expressed by technologies and the purposes to which they are put, about the creation and organization of culture, and about the structure of power relationships” (Rakow, 1988: 57). Following Baudrillard, Rakow (1988) argues that ideology does not exist **before** it is channeled through the media, but rather that it exists **in** the media itself. Ideology is lodged in the ways that technologies and media are understood in society, and in the ways they are used to exercise power, especially through the creation and maintenance of cultural metaphors and meanings. Feminists have demonstrated how technology expresses “mainly male values and meanings”, and that technologies are ways to “think the world” (Rakow, 1988, p. 67).

If we hope to understand and change communication as the process by which we take up our places in a particular kind of world, we should look to how the gendered meanings and metaphors of technology not only describe but inscribe us. (Rakow, 1988: 67)

The hierarchy of access to communications technologies within the Burmese opposition movement offered in this chapter is intended to paint in broad strokes the

patterns I found within the opposition movement. There were exceptions that did not fit this framework, and I hope to find an ever increasing number of these. Nevertheless, leaving these broad divisions unspoken does the opposition movement a disservice, since it is in the recognition of inequities and the tolerance to discuss and address them that the foundation of a future democratic society lays. This was the powerful yet unacknowledged contribution being made by those in the Burmese opposition movement willing to confront and address contentious issues of race and class.