

Chapter 5

Opposition media

Burmese opposition media are many and varied, with different goals and target audiences, different internal structures and missions. They have in common that they work for change in the political landscape in Burma and an end to continued militarization and violence. The environments in which these media are produced also help to shape them, so that the international Free Burma Coalition Internet campaign, the mainstream opposition media produced in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and those ethnic media based primarily on the Thai border, all reflect the impact of their environmental influences. This chapter provides an overview of Burmese opposition media, and although I do not provide an exhaustive account of such media, I do examine issues and problems they all face in their work and document some of their successes.

I have demonstrated in Chapter 3 the environment of suspicion in Burma, and in Chapter 4 I described how this atmosphere has influenced the opposition movement along the border. Within the Burmese opposition, there is a correlation between location in physical space and the freedom to say what one thinks. Those opposition activists furthest removed from the militarized environment of the borderlands have the greatest access to communications technologies and the feeling of safety necessary to use them to speak freely. The borderland areas, on the other hand, physically straddle the divide between authoritarian Burma and the freer communications environment in Thailand. In this chapter I will show how the producers of Burmese opposition media struggle to

negotiate the gulf between democratic and authoritarian approaches to communication, and create a “middle zone” between them that is freer than but still constrained by the communications environment inside Burma.

I begin with a view from the cyber-campaign for Burma, initiated and largely carried out from outside of Thailand, far from the fear restricting those living along the border. The Free Burma Coalition (FBC) offers an interesting case study of an activist movement and its Internet campaign that mastered both the art of alternative media production and the development of a democratized communication system. The FBC campaign created a powerful sense of camaraderie in the “creative making of a social order” (Hamilton, 2000, p. 361) involving hundreds of people corresponding over vast distances about a country few of them had ever visited. And while significant elements of the campaign’s rhetoric involved militarized responses to the regime and militarized efforts to enact change in Burma, the Internet also provided a forum in which alternatives to militarized thinking could be introduced and discussed.

Spiders on the (World Wide) Web

The Free Burma Coalition (FBC) is an umbrella organization coordinating groups around the world working on various local, national and international campaigns for change in Burma. During the mid-1990s, the organization claimed member groups in over 100 universities and high schools in the U.S. and overseas, as well as affiliations with a large number of environmentalists, labor organizers, and human rights campaigners from around the world. The FBC’s high-profile Internet campaign was

often cited as an example of what has been constructed rhetorically as a new international cyber-activism (Doherty, 1997; Matthews, 1996; O'Neill, 1997; Tyson, 1995; Ureschel, 1996). Some even claim it was the Internet itself that spawned the movement for human rights in Burma, and that in providing the communicative framework for this new kind of movement, the Internet has fundamentally changed international activism (Holloway, 1996).

To get people involved, however, required more than a means of communication. It required a good story, and the Burma campaign provided activists with a cause as dramatic as that found in any legendary tale: an evil military dictatorship in power since 1962 violently oppressing brave freedom fighters; a massive general strike in 1988 in which troops killed unknown thousands of unarmed demonstrators; complicity by western businesses willing to profit while looking the other way as the government they deal with abuses its own citizens; the photogenic, somewhat frail Nobel-Prize-winning leader of the opposition forces standing strong against constant surveillance, her movements restricted despite her ostensible release in 1995 from six years under house arrest.³⁶ She fought back by holding a series of standoffs with the Burmese generals, sitting in her car under a blazing sun after being prevented from visiting party members in an outlying district, her deteriorating health a source of concern for the international community.

In 1998, a group of eighteen activists from six countries slipped into Rangoon and distributed thousands of palm-sized pamphlets printed with phrases in support of

³⁶ Aung San Suu Kyi was recently re-released from house arrest to great media fanfare. As of this writing in July, 2002, she has been free to move around and conduct the business of her political party, the NLD.

democracy. Their arrest, detention, trial and deportation made international news headlines. Two other foreigners, Rachel Goldwyn and James Mawdsley, both British, were arrested in two separate incidents in Burma and later deported for their equally high-profile actions in support of the democratic resistance. They were all part of an international grassroots movement in support of democracy in Burma, a campaign in which individual activists often began their online postings with “Dear fellow spiders,” in reference to the campaign’s motto, “When spiders unite they can tie down a lion.” The FBC lauded its Internet campaign as the largest cyber-campaign devoted to human rights in a single country, in which students and others from around the world pressured many corporations to rethink their Burma connections. The FBC approach to communicating its message included networking with labor unions, environmentalists, and activists worldwide, including many from countries such as Nigeria, Indonesia and East Timor.

The FBC campaign made use of its international reach to create a “bottom up” strategy that drew on the power of Burma’s story to bring activists into battle against the Burmese regime. Social movement theorists have shown how collective behavior becomes possible when activists define themselves using categories, constructed and contested through language, which help to build motivation for collective action (Hopkins and Reicher, 1997). The issues involved in the Burma campaign were framed as problems between the good democracy activists and the evil Burmese regime, and these categorizations motivated activists, in turn creating a sense of identity for them.

The Free Burma Coalition's use of the Internet capitalized on the international nature of the Web, promoting this interconnectivity as a source of legitimacy rather than

fearing it, and cultivating an identity among democracy-loving activist “spiders” around the world. As I have detailed elsewhere (Brooten, 1998) with regard to the Internet campaign that celebrated the tenth anniversary of the 1988 uprisings, the rhetoric of activists constructed those working for democracy in Burma as reflecting, in contrast to the Burmese government, not just the values of the Burmese people, but also of “all pro-democracy people of the world” and even of “all people in the world today.”

Central to the Burmese opposition’s online presence has been the BurmaNet listserv, founded in 1993, which quickly became the primary source of daily information for most Burma watchers. The impact of the Internet and, specifically, BurmaNet, took the regime by surprise, and it soon recognized that effective control of communication required different strategies. Shortly after the founding of BurmaNet, the Burmese embassy in Washington and other known military representatives subscribed and began to post their own messages. Despite protests from some listserv subscribers, in 1994 BurmaNet’s editors decided to allow the military to post messages to BurmaNet, “in the interests of free speech and full debate” (Danitz & Strobel, 1999, p. 13), and to include excerpts of the military regime’s messages in the BurmaNet daily news summaries (former BurmaNet editor Christina Fink, personal communication, August 14, 1998). There was at this point a history of online communications between representatives of the Burmese regime and members of the opposition in exile, in which both sides had attacked, cajoled, and poked fun at the other, and at times even managed a sort of debate. The BurmaNet listserv had become arguably the most significant forum for discussion between the regime and the opposition, and despite limited access for many inside and

even outside Burma, was a significant step toward a more polycentric, non-hierarchical system of communications among the Burmese.

Despite its structural and practical contributions toward a more democratic form of communication, the Internet has also played host to militarized rhetoric from both the opposition and the military regime in their continual rhetorical battle over which represents the true aspirations of the Burmese people. The regime has shown a propensity to engineer wedges between various groups, especially the Burman majority and ethnic minority elements of the opposition, while proclaiming itself the fulfiller of the “people’s desire.” It has emphasized the distinction between those ethnic groups that have signed ceasefire deals and those that have not, and between Burmans and non-Burmans. In the tense days just prior to the tenth anniversary of the 8/8/88 uprisings, for example, the ceasefires signed between the military and several ethnic groups were raised in postings to the BurmaNet by the military regime’s representative, Okkar. Okkar argued that sixteen armed ethnic groups had come “to a peaceful solution,” and there was therefore “no need to buy the arms.” Then he added that “the arms may still be needed for ABSDF [All Burma Students Democratic Front] regiments,” thus setting in opposition the ABSDF and the ethnic minority groups. The government’s rhetoric is also aimed at creating divisions within groups. A recent article in the *New Light of Myanmar*, for example, portrayed the KNU leadership as violent in direct opposition to the desires of the majority of the Karen, or the “Kayin,” as the regime calls them. The article refers to the breakaway Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, which is discussed in detail in the next

chapter. What is interesting here is the contradiction between the stated desire for peace and the justification given for the DKBA violence.

The KNU members' desire for peace is the driving force behind the breakaway of the Buddhist Kayins . . . As they wished peace [sic], the Buddhist Kayins founded the DKBA, launching attacks on the KNU, which is just a group torturing the public. (Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, 2002).

Militarized metaphors involving communications use also abound in international news stories about communications and media use among the Burmese, as well as in Burmese descriptions of their own use of information technologies. Activists have been described as “online on the frontline” (“Activists Online”, 1998), engaged in “cyberwarfare” (Strobel et al., 2000) in which they use the Internet as a “weapon” (Crampton, 2000) used in “waging propaganda wars” in the battle for freedom (Peck, 1995). The military regime has warned against the “psychological warfare” being waged against it by “opposing forces” using the Internet (“Myanmar Junta”, 1999). Several of the opposition activists I interviewed in Thailand used the term “information warfare” and other military metaphors when describing their use of information technologies, and an activist in Rangoon has been quoted as saying that “The junta is implementing a well-planned psychological warfare campaign against the opposition and the media” (Zarny Win, September 26, 2001). In addition, accusations have been made against the military regime for targeting its opponents on the Web with a computer virus (Strobel et al., 2000), and against opposition activists who are said to have hacked into the government’s website and to have “hijacked” at least one e-mail listserv (Crampton, 2000). Many of these accounts were written by journalists who proclaim a utopian role for the Internet as

the frontline weapon in a war against repression and control that will usher in a new era of democratic change and a freer world.

Although this campaign has been conducted far from the activists along the border and elsewhere in Thailand, they were nevertheless involved, both as an audience for media stories about the campaign, and as a source of information on human rights abuses used as a “weapon” in the struggle against the military government. The borderland is home to a variety of opposition media, a bridge between the authoritarianism of the Burmese regime and the ability to communicate freely represented by Burma’s cyber-activism. The media have worked to negotiate between these two extremes in their attempt to develop a pluralistic public dialogue within the opposition.

Opposition media: a brief history

The Thai-Burma borderland has for decades provided activists with the freedom to develop and distribute alternatives to the government-controlled media in Burma. Numerous clandestine radio stations have operated from these border areas, the earliest of which was the Karen-controlled *Radio Kawthoolei*, which began broadcasting in 1949 and continued intermittently during the 1970s and 1980s (Smith, 1999a). Although these stations were no longer broadcasting in 1999-2000, the armed groups waging military offensives as well as those involved in nonviolent resistance inside Burma made use of wireless transmitters that provided local radio communications. Several reporters and stringers for the international broadcasting networks were based in Thailand, traveling or

sometimes living along the border. Journals and information sheets of various kinds in a range of languages had long been published on the border, usually with little funding and lots of propagandizing. In recent years, however, increasing attention had been paid to standards of “objectivity,” and the meaning and value of “propaganda” was shifting. This was partly in response, also, to the expectations of increasing numbers of aid agencies and non-profit groups funding opposition media projects.

In this section, I will provide an overview of the variety of opposition media found in the border areas, including the more mainstream opposition media and the ethnic media, each of which has had a different history. I then examine the impact of new information technologies (NITs) and conceptualizations of gender on opposition media. I discuss several functions of the Burmese opposition media as described by their senior staff members, such as cultural preservation, education, a call to action, the development of participatory communication, and their use of human rights discourse to both liberating and oppressive ends. I will begin, first, however, with an overview of the variety and creativity of the various opposition media used by the Burmese opposition.

Overview

The opposition media that have evolved outside Burma through the years have been distributed both back inside the country and to activists and interested people around the world. These media range from the more stable and continuous forms such as the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) radio station based in Oslo, Norway and broadcast into Burma, to what Downing (2001) has identified as “ephemeral media,” acts

of defiance that work by manipulating an aspect of ordinary activity and coding it with new meaning (Scott, 1990). In Burma, ephemeral media has included wearing yellow clothing to symbolize support for the opposition, or the sudden appearance of an unusually large number of monks, in a show of quiet defiance, making alms rounds at exactly the same time. These were often, but not always, preplanned moves intended to communicate without the risks involved in more flamboyant displays. A Greenpeace activist has dubbed these ephemeral media “‘mind-bombs’: influential, sometimes archetypal images that can cut through the hypnotic drone of the day-to-day babbling to reach people at a deeper emotional level” (as cited in Downing, 2001, p. 102).

To reach those inside, activists along the Thailand-Burma border have made creative use of opposition media, including printing stickers, posters and leaflets that are then smuggled into Burma. A 1997 newsletter of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which funds many of these projects, described little red stickers made on a dot-matrix printer that “don’t seem like much” (“Burmese Democrats,” 1997). These and other similar stickers have been printed in the border areas, then smuggled into the country and slapped on walls, posts, fences, and military vehicles. The stickers described in the NED newsletter were reportedly difficult to remove, and because the military hated them so much that they would not allow the soldiers to ride in trucks adorned with these stickers, their appearance sometimes forced the soldiers to walk (“Burmese Democrats,” 1997). Another example is the calendar I helped design when I was staying with an activist group in Mae Hon Song. They wanted a simple pocket calendar that would encourage people inside and celebrate the beginning of the new

millennium. I saw a copy of the finished calender a few months later. It folded down the center, and on the outside were printed innocuous pictures of the Shwedagon Pagoda and other tourist sites. Inside it contained pictures of Aung San Suu Kyi and demonstrators during the 1988 uprisings, words of defiance against the military, and a simple rhyme.

All marching to the same drum
There's nothing we can't overcome
As we begin the new millenium



Figure 10. Posters such as these adorn the walls in many opposition group offices.

Posters and calendars were popular, adorning the walls of NGO offices, homes and refugee camps along the border, where they were often the house's sole decoration. The Federation Trade Unions, Burma (FTUB), for example, printed a popular poster outlining the basic principles laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Burma was a signatory in 1948. FTUB is concerned primarily with migrant workers in Thailand, informing them of their rights as workers and teaching them about

how to work together for collective bargaining strength. Many of the factory workers in Mae Sot placed these posters in the rooms in the factory dormitory where they were staying, but here, too, the environment of suspicion limited what they felt safe doing. Workers believed that there were translators and interpreters among them who could inform the factory management of the meaning of the posters printed in Burmese (Saw Min Lwin, personal communication, May 31, 2000).

There have been several other important types of alternative or opposition media that are worth mentioning. These include opposition music, produced outside of the country, broadcast on international broadcasting stations and smuggled inside on cassettes or CD-ROMs. Cartoons have played an important role in the opposition movement, especially since they appeal to a wide range of people, including those who cannot read well. Comedians have also been important for the opposition movement, and several high-profile cases of their arrests have damaged the credibility of the government. Opposition groups also used satellite phones inside Burma to communicate with people on the border and elsewhere in Thailand in 1999-2000, but they were still fairly expensive, so their use was limited. Like most of the newer technologies, their use was reserved for military or political purposes, was generally kept secret, and was almost exclusively the responsibility of men.

Several groups had reached out to SPDC soldiers using opposition media, although this also had consequences for local villagers. The FTUB, for example, distributed their posters to SPDC soldiers through the network of KNU soldiers operating on the Burma side of the border. In one case, FTUB staff member Saw Min Lwin told

me, KNU soldiers hung one of the human rights posters on a tree near a village not far from a KNU army base and the nearby SPDC troops. The villagers reported the appearance of the poster to their area SPDC army camp. The soldiers took the poster, threatening to detain the village head for not reporting the presence of KNU troops in the village. They were satisfied to drop the matter only after they received a basket of sticky rice from the villagers, who once again were caught in the middle of maneuvering between two armed forces. Although these particular soldiers then took the poster to their commanding officers, Saw Min Lwin believed that many soldiers kept them in order to study them (personal communication, May 31, 2000).

The opposition print media have perhaps made the greatest impact on the communication environment in the borderlands. These media could usefully be divided into two broad categories during 1999-2000. The first was composed of a few well-funded, widely read and increasingly professional opposition media that were “unmarked” in terms of ethnic identification. These media included *The Irrawaddy* (in English and recently Burmese) and *New Era Journal* (in Burmese). They were perceived by many non-Burmans who read them as originating from Burman activists and their sources, and therefore as addressing issues of most concern to Burmans. These magazines were not explicitly described this way by their Burman staff members, however, who saw themselves as providing a service to all groups in the country. Both *The Irrawaddy* and the *New Era Journal* were produced and published away from the border, *The Irrawaddy* in Chiang Mai, and *New Era Journal* in Bangkok. They were both printed in large runs and distributed to offices all over Thailand, to the refugee

camps, and abroad to friends and supporters. These papers covered the activities of a wide variety of groups in Burmese society and addressed important issues in international news, especially if they concerned Burma in any way. These media were similar to the *samizdat* media of the former Soviet bloc in that the samizdat writers were primarily the intelligentsia, based in leading urban areas and with connections to Western journalists. It was these writers who produced the writings that had the greatest international impact and most disturbed the Soviet block elite (Downing, 2001, p. 358).

Since the mid-1990s there had also emerged a number of media identified with the ethnic nationalities, which I will call ethnic media. These were produced primarily from locations along the border, although not exclusively, since there were also some ethnic media printed in Thai cities and by groups in exile. Several of the Thailand-based ethnic media had become significant voices for ethnic nationalities, putting them “on the map” for outsiders interested in the situation in Burma, and for the other groups in the opposition. Many of them grew out of information groups established to document human rights abuses by the military regime. These groups had begun publishing newsletters for their own peoples in their own languages, as well as for the international community. But reports on human rights abuses figured prominently even in those media that did not specifically grow out of this human rights documentation effort.

Many of these print media were going online, as the Internet increasingly blurred the distinction between print and electronic media. In addition, with improvements in computer skills and the use of desktop publishing software on both the Thai side of the border and in urban areas in Burma, opposition groups had begun smuggling their

publications inside the country on CD-ROM or computer diskette, which were generally easier to hide than hard copies of a publication, and lessened the risks for those smuggling the information.

Although media created at the border have made their way into Burma, it is hard to know how much or what kind of impact they have had. What is clear is that the media and their messages, no matter how widespread, were not themselves enough to motivate mass action, as the analysis of the 9/9/99 campaign in the previous chapter has shown. Yet I reiterate Downing's (2001) point that the impact of these media is more of a slow burn, invaluable in "recovering memory that had been banished," so that their presence "lights a flame that, like some trick birthday cake candles, obstinately refuses to be doused" (p. 392).

The Impact of NITs on opposition media

The introduction of NITs has enabled the development of more complex networks of information between activists and civilians inside and outside Burma. Opposition groups in Thailand get information from their contacts inside Burma, then feed their statements, news, and opinion pieces to the media, such as the BurmaNet News listserv and the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) radio. Messages posted to BurmaNet News and other Burma-related listservers are now regularly read and often reported on by the wire services and other news services, including the major international Burmese-language broadcasters like the Voice of America (VOA), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Radio Free Asia (RFA), and DVB, which then broadcast much of the

information back into Burma. The DVB is based in Oslo, Norway, and would have difficulty surviving without the use of the Internet. The station bases much of its own reporting on the information it collects from wire services and major publications throughout Asia using the Internet. The Internet is also important because it enables field reporters to send reports as e-mail attachments, saving the editors back in Oslo the trouble of retyping them during the editing process (Khin Maung Win, personal communication, August 23, 2000). Thus, the Internet is a source of information for the print media published along the border and elsewhere in Thailand, and these media are then distributed in Thailand and overseas, and smuggled or excerpted for broadcast back into Burma. In this way, even those without access to NITs are affected by the increased number of sources NITs make available to more traditional media.

In addition to publications, Burmese opposition media in Thailand have developed websites and posted information regularly to the Burma-related listservers. In the years since I returned to graduate school in Fall of 1995 and went online myself, the number of postings by ethnic nationality organizations has increased significantly. Perhaps the most visible online group is the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), which in addition to participating in several Shan-related e-mail listservs, posts information regularly to Burma-related websites (including its own). SHAN's messages appear regularly as part of the BurmaNet News. Other ethnic nationality groups are also active online, several with their own websites or listservs. The Mon listserv, for example, had about 100 members who posted messages of interest to the Burmese opposition

groups and to the Mon online community, including many Mon living in the United States and Canada (Nai Kyin Shwe, personal communication, July 22, 2000).

Gender

A word or two must be said about gender at this point. Media work, while less gendered than the work of political groups in the opposition movement, is nevertheless primarily the realm of male activists, although this is changing. There are also ethnic differences in this regard, as it was educated, mostly Burman women who came to the border after 1988, many of them from urban areas in Burma where women have long been respected as writers. In the rural areas of the country, however, the lack of educational opportunities and the need for female labor in the home meant that girls received less education than boys. While life in exile and the opportunities for education provided by funding agencies has begun to change this, the effects of this prejudice can be seen in the lack of women writers, especially among the non-Burmans. In general, however, opposition media are starved for capable writers, and therefore provide more options for women than other roles in public life. Women's lack of access to NITs, however, has acted to further discourage their involvement in opposition media. Women's involvement would increase if opportunities were made available for a wider diversity of people and if Burmese opposition media avoids an overzealous emphasis on professionalization that acts to exclude women and others who have yet to gain the confidence to make their voices heard.

Self-determination and ethnic minority media

The new ethnic media respond to the need that non-Burmans feel to protect their identity against the assimilationist policies of the regime, and their dignity against the feeling many have of being overlooked by the Burman opposition groups. Soon after the Burman students and politicians had arrived at the border areas in 1988 and 1990, they and the ethnic leaders realized that their interests differed. The Burman groups, struggling primarily for democracy, were not especially concerned with the non-Burmans' desire to protect their group identity and right to self-determination. Some of the Burmans even perceived this desire for autonomy as a threat to the strength of the opposition, a distraction from the most pressing issues of political change. As a result, the non-Burman students involved in 1988 often felt their loyalties divided once they reached the border areas. Nai Kyin Shwe,³⁷ a Mon, was a twenty year old student in Rangoon in 1988 when he became involved in the demonstrations. When he returned home after the demonstrations in March, he found himself confronted by Mon family and friends who challenged his loyalty to his people.

Many Mon or Shan or other ethnic people were confused when the 1988 uprisings started. The Burman people are for democracy, but the Burman people don't say anything about a federal union or about the unity among the nationalities . . . They just ask for democracy, and ask for an interim government . . . When I arrived home to my native home, many people asked me, "You are for democracy, so you don't work for the Mon people? Are you sure [this is good] for the Mon people?" (personal communication, July 22, 2000)

³⁷ Nai Kyin Shwe is a pseudonym.

Once at the border, Nai Kyin Shwe, like other students from non-Burman communities, had to decide whether to affiliate primarily with the democratic struggle or with his ethnic group in its struggle for self-determination. Nai Kyin Shwe decided to work with the state-wide Mon organization created a few weeks after the demonstrations on August 8, 1988 and now called the Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF) (personal communication, July 22, 2000). But as Nai Kyin Shwe explained, the Burmese students criticized the formation of the MNDF as dangerous competition within the opposition movement that would create disunity and give the government the opportunity to increase its control. “They said, ‘You are Mon, you should join our democracy movement, you should not create our own separate group,’” Nai Kyin Shwe told me. “They said ‘Democracy must come first, and then we can talk about self-determination later,’ they said like that. So that’s why many ethnic people were confused. ‘Should we participate in this struggle or not?’” (personal communication, July 22, 2000).

Many of the Burman students and politicians who arrived at the border after 1988 and 1990 approached their organizing among non-Burmans with the concepts they had internalized back home, especially the danger of national disintegration that requires a specific type of unity, defined as the absence of dissent. It is not surprising, then, that a central motivating factor in the development of the new ethnic media appearing in Thailand in the last decade has been to provide these groups with a means to express themselves freely regarding issues facing their own group. The staff at the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM), for example, explained the importance of their publications in terms of the platform it provides for people to speak openly, despite the

staff's inability to protect people from the consequences. As Nai Kyin Shwe explained about the Mon people,

They never had an experience like this is to create their right of freedom of expression. They have no rights in Burma. They're always afraid to say what is in their hearts, their minds, so if we inform them [that] this is what you can say, we are trying to create their right to freedom of expression. . . . But. . . we cannot protect them. . . . Our message is a very small one. Now they can tell me their feelings, and . . . we can make the world pay attention and cause some change in Burma. (personal communication, July 22, 2000)

Cultural survival

By providing a forum for discussion of issues affecting their groups, these media perform what has been called the “cultural transmission” function of ethnic media, which helps to revive or reinforce ethnic identity and pass it along to the next generation (Viswanath & Arora, 2000). The Karen journal, *Kway K'Lu*, for example, has as a central goal to inform Karen people of the situation of other Karen. The journal is named after the *kway*, a horn made from the tusk of a wild animal such as a boar or buffalo. Making different sounds to represent different meanings, the player of the *kway* would inform the Karen in neighboring villages about community projects or celebrations. *Kway K'Lu*'s editor, Saw Thaw Thi, explained why the *kway* is a fitting symbol for the newspaper he publishes.

We want to let the people know each other by reading this newspaper. . . . People in Papun can know what happened to the Karen people in the southern part, like this, Mergui-Tavoy. And people here can know what happened to the Karen in Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai, and what the Karen people in America or Australia are doing. So this is

something like the *kway*, or Karen horn. (personal communication, July 24, 2000)

Concern for literacy and the preservation of their national languages was a motivation for many of the groups publishing ethnic media. The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) publishes some of the few regular Mon language publications, as well as reports of the suppression of Mon language training by the Burmese military government. In the October 30, 2000, edition of *The Mon Forum*, for example, HURFOM reported on the SPDC's attempts to close down the Mon National schools in Kawkaik Township, Karen State. The report pointed out that although Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt and the SLORC agreed in the 1995 ceasefire deal to allow the teaching of Mon language in both government and private schools, "actually, both SLORC and SPDC never kept their promise for the promotion of Mon literature role [*sic*] in Mon community and still operate their assimilation policy" ("SPDC's MI", 2000, October 30).

The editor of the Karen journal *Kway K'Lu*, Saw Thaw Thi, told me that his objective in publishing the journal was to "raise the level of Karen literature and culture in the Karen society" (personal communication, July 24, 2000). He explained that Karen literature used to be taught in Karen schools up to the tenth standard.³⁸ But nowadays, he told me, the Karen language cannot be taught in the schools in Burma, except by some Christian groups who can teach Karen in Sunday school. According to Saw Thaw Thi, many older Karen believe that the standards of Karen literature have been declining gradually, and are alarmed that many of the Karen young people "do not know exactly that we have a good culture" (personal communication, July 24, 2000). These examples

³⁸ The Karen schools run on the British system, in which tenth standard is the equivalent of the U.S. high school senior class.

of ethnic opposition media alert us to the fact that in a militarized setting where one's group is under attack, the cultural transmission function of ethnic media is matched by an equally important focus on cultural survival.

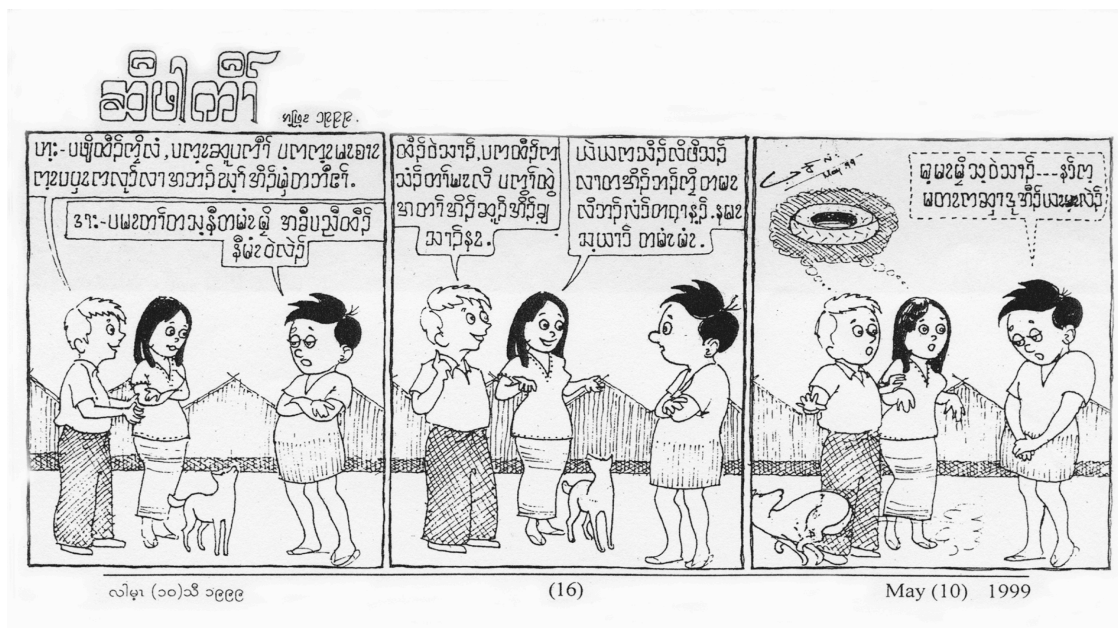
Education

Many of the ethnic media also work to educate their people about international politics and its relevance to the Burmese situation. To this end, HURFOM began publishing a second Mon-language journal, the *Northern Star*, with its first issue on the auspicious date of September 9, 1999. The *Northern Star* is an independent newspaper, the first of its kind for the Mon people, Nai Kyin Shwe told me. The newspaper includes information on the Burmese political situation, translated into Mon from other news sources such as the online *BurmaNet News*, the Mon listserv, *The Irrawaddy*, the two Thai English-language dailies the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*, and other sources. Like *The Northern Star*, much of the information published in *Kway K'Lu* comes from other news sources. Saw Thaw Thi explained that *Kway K'Lu* addresses questions such as "What is national democracy? Who are the power-holders who abuse the people?" (personal communication, July 24, 2000).

Call to action

Many of the staff of these media see their role as maintaining people's motivation to struggle in whatever ways they can on behalf of their people against the Burmese regime, while resisting a dependence on outside forces to change the situation. This

could be termed a “call to action” function of alternative or ethnic media, which seems to combine the functions described by Viswanath and Arora (2000) as boosterism and mobilization. On the one hand, these media help their readership feel good about themselves, and on the other hand attempt to mobilize them to support initiatives for the improvement of the *group* situation. The following cartoon (below) from *Kway K’Lu* is a good example.



1st man: Hey, we have graduated from school. Let's go back to our country and help our people who had to run away [to the jungle].

1st man: It has meaning!
We will learn from the
medical school and take
care of their health.

2nd man: If so [if you go], who will come and feed me?

2nd man: Oh, I can't do anything, so it would have no meaning.

Woman: Oh, I'm going to teach the young people who have no chance to go to school. You can do something!

Figure 11. Cartoon from *Kway K’Lu*, May 10, 1999

Saw Thaw Thi explained that Karen people living in their own villages bury their dead in a cemetery. At the refugee camp, though, they are not permitted to have a cemetery, so they must burn the corpse, which they do using old tires. “So it means, ‘oh you are fit for this tire, you are not fit for the country’,” he told me and laughed. He explained that the *Kway K’Lu* staff had heard reports from readers who felt discouraged to work, given the harsh situation, and that this was one of the cartoons that points out a weakness in Karen society.

This cartoon exemplifies an approach to social change that encourages action on behalf of the community, with a corresponding denigration of selfish motives. *Kway K’Lu* readers are encouraged to get involved in the opposition efforts, although Saw Thaw Thi insisted that the magazine does not tell them specifically what to do. “We just encourage them, we don’t show the way, because some will want to fight by means of arms, some will want to fight by means of politics, like that. Let it be, whatever they want to do,” Saw Thaw Thi explained. What is clear is the expectation that they will work in some way for the Karen people as a group.

Participatory communication

These ethnic media involve their communities in the process of their production to varying degrees, but different journals conceive of their audiences differently. The staff of HURFOM, like that of *Kway K’Lu*, saw its Mon language publication as targeted toward the grassroots, and tried to get content and ideas directly from the Mon people by providing a place in their publications for the villagers to express their views. They

encouraged readers to write in, and received between 15-20 letters a week in response, letters delivered by hand from travelers coming from inside Burma. They chose the best written letters, those that to Nai Kyin Shwe were “more effective” in describing the suffering of local people or in expressing an opinion or idea. Saw Thaw Thi also emphasized the role of the readers in the production of *Kway K’Lu*. “They also can respond to each other by sending their articles or their news to this newspaper, and we include them” (personal communication, July 24, 2000). Khuensai Jaiyen, of the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), explained that the *Independence* journal is difficult reading for the less-educated, and that their target audience is the group of educated Shan, which he said is considerable. He also told me that the SHAN receives many letters each month, “mostly about the news reports we produce. Some [people] are satisfied, some are not. We receive a lot of criticism, too, but that's good” (personal communication, June 28, 2000).

These media have employed various strategies to reach out to larger audiences, such as printing their magazines in several languages and adjusting their physical shape for easier distribution inside Burma. The Shan language *Independence* newsletter, for example, was printed monthly in three sections, using the Shan, Burmese and English languages in a single issue. And the Human Right Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) had begun printing four pages of Burmese-language information in the *Northern Star*, which they were sending to other Burmese opposition organizations in Thailand and inside rural Burma. Although *Northern Star* was dangerous to carry inside Burma, the staff had changed its design several times so that the newspaper was easy to fold and

conceal, and about 300 copies of each issue were smuggled into the country. To varying degrees, then, ethnic media were encouraging the development of a more participatory communication environment which included those inside as much as was possible under the circumstances.

Human rights

The global focus on human rights in the post-Cold War era has provided marginalized groups around the world a tool with which to generate sympathy and more successfully lobby internationally for their cause. Increased funding for human rights abuse documentation and for the development of Burmese opposition media has led to new office space and access to new information technologies for ethnic nationalities and other opposition media groups, as well as some additional training in journalistic techniques. Training sessions along the border have focused on methods of documenting human rights abuses for submission to international organizations and for posting on the many websites devoted to human rights violations in Burma. Yet there is concern that human rights discourse has also acted to perpetuate the very inequities against which these groups are fighting.

One result of the publication of these new media was the growing recognition of the value of information about human rights abuses as a basis for advocacy campaigns targeting the international community. Nai Kyin Shwe's decision in 1988 to work for the promotion of ethnic self-determination, for example, led him to work with several NGOs and human rights organizations, which in turn led him to want to document the human

rights abuses against the Mon and to disseminate this information to the outside world. He helped to found the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) in 1995 for these purposes, and the group began publishing their information in both Mon and in their monthly English language publication, *The Mon Forum*. *The Mon Forum* provided detailed coverage of human rights abuses in Mon areas, along with conflicts between Mon people and the SPDC authorities. The audience for *The Mon Forum* was primarily outsiders, and HURFOM sent out over 400 copies of each issue to people and organizations around the world, especially to government, UN, and labor and human rights organizations, but also to women's organizations, development organizations, and other Burmese opposition groups. HURFOM also maintained *The Mon Forum* website, which provided online access to back issues of *The Mon Forum*, information on the Mon people and Mon history, and pictures of victims of human rights violations. The website also featured scanned images of written orders from Burmese military battalions for forced labor and other demands made of Mon villagers, directly refuting the regime's claims that it has stopped the practice of forced labor.

Many of the new ethnic media grew out of efforts to document human rights abuses and were working to educate the people of Burma about their rights under international law. Saw Thaw Thi, for example, explained that *Kway K'Lu* discusses the meaning of human rights, women's rights, children's rights, ethnic or indigenous rights, genocide or ethnic cleansing, and democracy. In addition to *The Mon Forum* in English, HURFOM published *Our Time*, a journal in the Mon language that worked to educate refugees in resettlement areas near the Thai border and people inside the Mon State.

“Especially we put in the human rights education for empowerment,” Nai Kyin Shwe told me, “so we try to show our people what are the international principles for human rights protection.” For example, he said, “the ILO has decided that Burma still has not stopped using forced labor . . . so we translate it and inform our people about how the international community is trying to protect [their] rights.” This has clearly disturbed the military regime. A few years ago, Nai Kyin Shwe told me, the Burmese government officially placed *Our Time* on its list of unofficial, illegal publications, sending word to the New Mon State Party (NMSP) office and to Mon villages that anyone caught with the journal would be arrested and detained (personal communication, July 22, 2000).

These journals have thus helped to raise the profile of their communities, both within the opposition movement as well as with outsiders. In March 2000, for example, *The Mon Forum* printed information about forced labor around the Yadana gas pipeline, a controversial project to pipe natural gas to Thailand involving the California-based company Unocal and the French company Total as partners. Nai Kyin Shwe explained that after *The Mon Forum* printed this story, several organizations wrote letters to Total using the information and citing a “Mon human rights organization” in their arguments to urge the company to pull out of the project (personal communication, July 22, 2000). HURFOM also sends its information to the UN Special Rapporteur, and as Nai Kyin Shwe noted, the Special Rapporteur points out every year in his report, albeit not in great detail, that the situation in Monland is not good. He also pointed out that HURFOM is frequently contacted by the ILO or other labor organizations who appreciate their information about forced labor (personal communication, July 22, 2000).

The emphasis on human rights has other, less desirable consequences as well. Without denying that the victims of human rights abuses suffer and that their plight must be effectively addressed, it is important to consider the cumulative effect of these images, and to recognize that they perpetuate the perceived differences between Burmans and non-Burmans. There are significant exceptions, of course, but the images of human rights abuses present broad tropes that portray Burmans and non-Burmans differently. The Western emphasis on civil and political rights has led to their association (and many would say they are synonymous) with democratic governance. In the overall picture painted by both opposition and international media, it is primarily Burmans who are portrayed as victims of abuses of these rights. Specifically, Burmans are associated with restrictions on freedom of expression (most jailed writers and activists are Burman), restrictions on freedom of movement (the focus here is on Aung San Suu Kyi and not, for example, on the refugees in Thailand), restrictions on freedom of association (Burmans who might be organizing inside the country), and so on.

The non-Burmans, on the other hand, are seen primarily as victims of abuse against social, economic and cultural rights. In the big picture, it is the non-Burmans who are understood to suffer most of the forced labor, forcible relocation, and overt violence of various kinds, especially violence against women. Even the rights of non-Burman groups to teach, speak and write in their own languages is portrayed as a struggle for cultural rather than civil rights. While I am not questioning that the non-Burmans *do* suffer these kinds of abuses at greater rates than Burmans, what I would like to point out is the consequences of this picture. These unacknowledged divisions among categories

of human rights abuse victims tend to make the abuse of non-Burmans' civil rights invisible, emphasizing instead their image as victims of violence in need of protection. This image upholds the notion that the Burmans are the capable politicians, working to protect the victims of human rights abuses through their political work. These stereotypes and their unacknowledged division into a hierarchy of rights abuses perpetuates and naturalizes the status quo of ethnic inequities within the movement.

Media independence – a debate

This section explores the debates among opposition and ethnic media staff and their audiences regarding the role of the press in crisis. While there is a strong tendency toward proclaiming media independence from political groups, there are those who believe that media must also serve a role in motivating people to work for the cause. This meant promoting “unity” of the people, although the definition of unity seems to be shifting. Despite the opposition media's moves towards independence, there was also evidence that the motivation to proclaim political independence may have stemmed as much from the demands of funding agencies as it did from a genuine desire for freedom from political power-holders. A great deal of self-censorship still occurred within the opposition media. Nevertheless, opposition media staff often challenged opposition political groups directly. This contributed to a decrease in the practice of silencing others and in the militarization of communication and media use. It also offered a hopeful sign of change.

Unity and independence

“Unity” is a term that comes up repeatedly in discussions with opposition activists and in the writings of scholars and commentators, yet is very often used without being explicitly defined. The assumption in these cases seems to be that unity means agreement on political goals and actions, and the ability to act unhindered by fighting or factionalism. Several scholars have remarked upon the emphasis on unity in Burmese political culture, a unity defined as unanimity and manifested through consensus (Callahan, 1998; Silverstein, 1980; Steinberg, 2001). Callahan (1998) has argued that the political party that grew out of the resistance to British colonialism, the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), “never developed any mechanisms to accommodate and resolve conflicting views, visions, and objectives” (p. 53). Mechanisms that suppressed dissenting viewpoints became the norm at that time, impeding the development of government structures that could tolerate competition and political differences (Callahan, 1998). Thus, Callahan (1998) argued, Burma emerged as a state through a series of military actions aimed at restricting expressions of dissent and emphasizing unity, defined as uniformity or unanimity. Even the period between 1948 and 1962, commonly referred to as the “democratic era,” was characterized by challenges to the government and within it, often backed by arms and violence (Callahan, 1998).

The legacy of this history was apparent in the disagreements within the opposition over the role of media in a time of crisis.³⁹ Within the opposition movement, media had begun to serve as a public space in and about which people were challenging long-held

³⁹ This begs the question: How long does a conflict have to go on before it is no longer referred to as a “crisis,” implying a temporary state, but has been recognized as a way of life?

conceptions. Debates on media's role during a crisis revolved around whether or not to censor some kinds of information to achieve unity. That these debates emerged at all suggests changes in the way unity was being thought of. The debate regarding opposition media centered on whether or not "unity" required unanimous agreement, or whether it could be understood as flexible enough to accommodate the possibility of continuing debate. The definition of "unity" was thus closely related to practices of censorship and the media's independence from external control.

Several opposition media staff members stressed the importance of their organization's independence from opposition political groups. "We were the first people to use in Burmese the words 'independent media,'" explained Aung Zaw, editor of *The Irrawaddy* magazine. "People were disgusted with us, and snipped at us, 'What the hell? What is that? Independent media?' We didn't care, you know." That strategy seems to have worked, and *The Irrawaddy* has grown, becoming more professional in appearance and more widely read than in its early days as a simple information sheet. But he alluded to a kind of coercion forcing opposition media to proclaim their independence from local political organizations. "Now a lot of people are using this word, 'independent,' whether they like it or not. This may be eye-catching for donors" (personal communication, April 18, 2000).

Many of those working in Burmese opposition media in Thailand claim they are independent, but definitions of independence are vague and the desire for it can cause problems. As Aung Zaw explained, "People are sitting here, staying here, asking for democracy, which includes press freedoms, right? But they don't practice it here. You

say something critical of them and they really attack us A lot of people here . . . become dictatorial, one-sided, very narrow-minded.” Once a few years ago, when *The Irrawaddy* was about to publish an interview with an ABSDF leader, for example, several ABSDF members came to his office to see the magazine prior to its publication. “They didn’t say ‘censor,’” he explained. “They wanted to request that if it’s too sensitive they don’t want us to publish it. But they were also worried that I would put out just a blank page with only the headline” (personal communication, April 18, 2000).

Silencing dissent has been the practice of those opposition political leaders who think of democracy as an end state rather than an ongoing process. Enloe (2000a) has argued that the fight against silencing and being silenced is a means of demilitarizing the situation and promoting democratization. Many opposition writers insist upon using their press freedoms to promote a free media, despite challenges from both the Burmese government and opposition groups. They claim the freedom to criticize if it is warranted, and they challenge the view that press freedoms can be given, like a “reward” in the aftermath of a change in political leadership. As Aung Zaw said about some of the political opposition groups,

They always say, “As long as the movement goes on, don’t criticize. After the movement is over, after the revolution is over, write whatever you like. You will get press freedom, everything.” But I said, “No, it’s not like that. Democracy doesn’t come in a chest or in a box. It doesn’t come like, ‘Here is democracy’. . . ‘Today we overthrow the government, the government is gone. Tomorrow we will get press freedom, everything is fine, do it.’ It’s not like that. (personal communication, April 18, 2000)

Other media staff reported similar experiences. When the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) was founded, Nai Kyin Shwe explained, they intentionally did not invite anyone from the New Mon State Party (NMSP) to get involved, so that they could work free from the influence of any political organization. Nai Kyin Shwe told me that they would sometimes print a story criticizing, for example, the continuation of people's suffering in the aftermath of the New Mon State Party (NMSP) ceasefire. "Does this mean the New Mon State Party (NMSP) can't protect them?" So, like that I criticize. Whether they like it or not, I don't know . . . I write the truth, but I send it to them" (personal communication, July 22, 2000). When I asked him whether or not they had received feedback about this, he said that they had received feedback only once. "When we had some news about some NMSP leaders involved in corruption, we put this news [in the paper]. And they said it made disunity among them, and they sent a letter back to us, and we also put this letter [in the paper]."

"And they got angry?" I laughed, imagining their reaction.

Yeah, but no problem. We also told them that you must become a democratic government, not like a dictatorship, so if someone analyzes you, talks to you, you must accept it. If you don't agree, you say you don't agree It's no problem. We try to improve our Mon community to [have] a more democratic way of thinking, of participation (personal communication, July 22, 2000)

"One time we published a report about the people's plight," Khuensai Jaiyen explained.

He continued, describing the report.

One rural villager said, "Every four times I hit my hoe on the ground, the first time is to feed the Burmese army, the second time is for the Shan army, the third time is for the village and the monks, and the fourth time, only then is it

for my family.” And one of the SSA officials was angry. But they shouldn't be. We told them, “We are not criticizing you at all, but it's true. We didn't make it up. It was said by the people themselves. You should listen to it and become more humble in dealing with people” (personal communication, June 28, 2000)

I asked if their attitudes had changed over the years, and he answered that it takes time.

“They have become more and more understanding about the way the media works. They thought I would be a cheerleader for them all the time. So I asked them, ‘You don't want me to become *The New Light of Myanmar*, do you?’” (personal communication, June 28, 2000).

Self-censorship

Although they struggle for independence from opposition political groups, media workers often intentionally censor themselves. Aung Zaw provided his own assessment of the degree of self-censorship he sees among media workers.

It's very sad, you know. They want to keep the information quiet. Even among journalists, I hate the people who want to keep the information quiet, deciding which is right and which is wrong I think a lot of opposition-minded, pro-NLD minded reporters writing here use a lot of self-censorship. Which is bad, I think. I myself, also, I am one of them. But I am coming out of a shell, becoming more professional, more independent. (personal communication, April 18, 2000)

But not all media workers see the withholding of sensitive information about opposition groups in this way. The opposition radio station, the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), was established as the official voice of the opposition political leadership, but there was contention among political leaders regarding who would control the station,

its budget and its programming.⁴⁰ Despite the fact that the DVB had negotiated to achieve independence in its day-to-day operations, especially its reporting, the staff saw its mission primarily as providing information for the people of Burma about the work of the opposition organizations. DVB founding member Khin Maung Win explained that the station was meant to be a mediator between the people in Burma and the leadership of the National League for Democracy (NLD). He identified the opinions of these leaders as especially important for airplay on the DVB.

We consider it important to get reconciliation in Burma. The Shan people must know about the opinion of General Bo Mya, or the Karen people. And NLD must know what General Bo Mya is saying. The same, how Dr. Naing Aung thinks, how Moethee Zun thinks. They should be informed, the rest of the people in Burma. (personal communication, August 23, 2000)

As people at the grassroots level were “armed” with more information, Khin Maung Win told me, they were beginning to criticize their leaders. DVB staff, however, did not perceive the station as a forum for this criticism.

The concept of unity was central to decisions to practice self-censorship in reporting for opposition media. According to Khin Maung Win and confirmed by other DVB staff, the station “never criticizes any organization, not just NCGUB. They never criticize rights violations in ABSDF or KNU or any other organization It’s not written policy. It is understood. We don’t criticize” (personal communication, August

⁴⁰ After much discussion and some heated debate among opposition groups about the role of the government-in-exile, the NCGUB, in the operation of the station, the DVB staff was promised independence in its operations. The only requirement was that the station continue opening each broadcast with the statement, “this is the Democratic Voice of Burma of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma.” This compromise allowed the NCGUB to remind people in Burma every day of its continuing opposition to the military regime, while giving the DVB editorial control (Khin Maing Win, personal communication, August 23, 2000).

23, 2000). He went on to explain that there were many forums for the criticism of opposition politicians, but that DVB wouldn't play that role until a later day. For now, he explained, the role of the DVB was to inform people inside Burma about the rights violations by the SPDC, international support for change in Burma, and the activities and opinions of various political organizations. If DVB criticized these organizations, he told me, "we would never get unity. DVB doesn't want to be part of the fighting in the present movement" (personal communication, August 23, 2000). Unity, once again, was seen here as the lack of opposition or critique.

Complicating the opposition movement's communications environment, and specifically its journalism, are the political affiliations of many of those staff working for opposition media. For example, at the time of our interview, Khin Maung Win was a member of the ABSDF as well as a correspondent for DVB. This connection made his critical reporting a political issue. For example, if he wrote about rights abuses within the KNU, he told me, the KNU would criticize the rights violations by the ABSDF, and this would perpetuate a process of accusations and counter-accusations within the movement. He saw his job, therefore, as one of reducing fighting and forging consensus.

Several Burmese opposition media staff felt that freedom of speech and total independence of the media was not appropriate under the current circumstances. They argued that given the struggle they were engaged in, and the history of factionalism within the movement, this was not the time to do anything that would undermine unity. Saw Thaw Thi, the editor of *Kway K'Lu*, insisted that his newspaper was and would remain independent of any outside influence, including the Karen National Union

(KNU), but he was also determined that *Kway K'Lu* not be a forum for criticism of any Karen organization.

We think that it will not create understanding. . . . Our problem is to make the Karen people understand each other, regardless of what organization they belong to, what religious belief they have. Our problem is to make them understand each other and unite. (personal communication, July 24, 2000)

As a result, he told me, they did write about breakaway groups of Karen such as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), or problems with individual Karen leaders, such as several of the high profile defections from the KNU, but they handled these stories with care. “We have written about it very politely. We try to wipe out pain from the society” (personal communication, July 24, 2000). In the case of *Kway K'Lu* and several other opposition media, then, unity required independence from political organizations, but also an avoidance of criticism or disagreement between and within groups in the opposition movement.

Change

Nevertheless, recent developments suggested that opposition media were also changing ideas concerning both the meaning of unity and potential sources of legitimacy. Although there was no consensus on the most effective role of the media during the opposition struggle, those who most vehemently claimed independence from political groups also seemed the most willing to raise contentious issues and criticize the weaknesses of the opposition, and to work to protect their right to criticize in this way. Those that were most successful in this regard had done much to open space for public

debate over issues of political legitimacy. For the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), unity had paradoxically come to be associated with a separation from all of the competing Shan political organizations. According to SHAN's Director, Khuensai Jaiyen, things changed once he and his staff decided to distance themselves from the propaganda efforts supporting the infamous Shan drug "warlord" Khun Sa, as well as other Shan leaders. As he explained, "it's not propaganda anymore. We have become . . . maybe to use the right word, professional." This shift in the understanding of propaganda has also led to new ways of thinking about unity.

When we left Khun Sa, we were then without any organization . . . and when we thought about which organization to back up, we found that just backing up one organization would be a bad idea. Supporting, cheerleading just [one group] against other Shan groups, [this is] what we've done in the past. It wouldn't be a wise thing to do when we are thinking about unity. We want to be a neutral ground where every group can meet. (personal communication, June 28, 2000)

Khuensai Jaiyen added that once they'd begun thinking in this way, they found that people saw them as more credible, "even more than other political organizations, because we are independent" (personal communication, June 28, 2000). Nevertheless, he described the process of changing from a propaganda organ to a professional media source as difficult, involving "several reorientations" over several years, including workshops with local NGOs interested in journalism and the opposition press (personal communication, June 28, 2000). The source of legitimacy had thus begun to shift for the staff of some of the opposition media, from a dependence on political leaders to a focus on the organization's credibility with the people at "the grassroots." Unity had taken on a

very different meaning for some, defined as an apolitical stance that allowed every group a voice.

This view of unity and the media's role in it was an important step in the move away from militarized views of communication and appropriate media use. This kind of unity, which I heard referred to a few times during my time in Thailand as “unity in diversity,”⁴¹ would require the inclusion of dissenting non-Burman voices in Burman or “unmarked” media, as well as the ability of ethnic media to criticize their political groups and leaders. Because the non-Burman groups have been the victims of military aggression for so long, it is unlikely that they will be willing to risk being seen by the Burmans as vulnerable through their lack of unity. It will likely be the professional, “unmarked” opposition media that will allow space on a regular basis for voices of non-Burmans critical of the Burman majority. The non-Burmans will probably take a bit more time to feel secure enough to loosen the restrictions on dissent from within or critiques of their group.

⁴¹ The term has also been used by academics, such as Martin Smith (1994) and Chao Tzang Yawngwhe (1995).