

# Citizen Journalism: Empowering Stateless Thais as Citizens

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## Abstract

This case study illustrates how the first public service broadcasting in Thailand, named Thai PBS, has incorporated the practice of citizen journalism as a forum for public participation to empower a group of Thai diaspora to regain their citizenship. Following Rosen's definition of citizen journalism as "the people formerly known as the audience" employing the press tools to inform one another, the study is based on document analysis, personal observation, and interview with key informants and program monitoring. The diaspora in this case refers to descendants of the Thai ancestors who used to live in territories occupied by British-ruled Burma (now Myanmar) and French-ruled Cambodia as a consequence of the territorial demarcation over a century ago. Thousands of Thai descendants later moved back to Thailand and were treated as stateless people without any legal rights in their motherland. After a decade of an uphill legal struggle against ethnic and legal discrimination, a group of citizen journalists joined hands with the Network of Stateless Thais and mainstream media to mount a national information campaign. Finally, they staged a long march for a distance of 320 kilometers from the Thai-Burmese border checkpoint to the Parliament in Bangkok to demand the passage of the new Thai Nationality Act. Consequently, the law was approved by the Senate on January 30, 2012 to grant the Thai diaspora citizenship.

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## Introduction

“Citizen journalism” or “participatory journalism” has now been commonly used to convey the idea that “people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others” (Glaser, 2006). For example, one might write about eyewitness news on his blog or in online forums. Or one might snap a digital photo of a newsworthy event happening in a city and post it online. Or he might videotape a similar event and post it on a site such as YouTube or Facebook. Or one might fact-check a newspaper article from the mainstream media and comment on his website.

In the digital era, new media technologies, particularly the Internet, social networking and media-sharing websites and the increasing prevalence of mobile phones have made citizen journalism more accessible to people all over the world, who can often report news stories much faster than mainstream media. Notable examples are citizen journalists’ news reports of such major world events as the Arab Spring and Occupy movement. Citizen journalists also helped in the worldwide reaction and relief efforts to the tsunami and flooding in Southeast Asia in late 2004, and to damage wrought by hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the U.S. in 2005.

However, the concept of citizen journalism remains controversial and confusing. As Outing (2005, 2011) noted, “Citizen Journalism isn’t one simple concept that can be applied universally by all news organizations. It’s much more complex, with many potential variations.”

Some variations of citizen journalism have long existed in Thailand. A first form of citizen journalism can be traced back to the year 1991 when the first traffic radio was established in Bangkok named “Jor Sor 100,” based on the phone-in news reports from citizen reporters (Bangkok Post, December 8, 2009). A year later, in the wake of the “Bloody May” crack-down on anti-government protests in 1992, public debates about public broadcasting in Thailand began to take shape. However, owing to financial and political crises, it was not until early 2008 that the first public broadcasting service came into being in Thailand, called the Thai Public Broadcasting Service, or in brief, Thai PBS. The Thai PBS has incorporated the act of citizen journalism as a tool to empower citizens from the beginning. During its 5 years of existence, the Thai PBS’s citizen journalism program has made a tremendous success in empowering a group of over 20,000 stateless people to regain their Thai citizenship.

This study is designed to achieve two main objectives:

1. To describe the emergence and development of citizen journalism in more developed countries and Thailand, and
2. To illustrate how the practice of citizen journalism has been successfully implemented as part of the public service broadcasting in Thailand to empower stateless people as Thai citizens.

### **Literature Review**

The concept “citizen journalism” or “participatory journalism” is commonly used to refer to the notion that “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006) play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. For example, the widely shown video of police responding to the Virginia Tech shooting was taken by a student on his mobile phone and submitted to CNN through its website portal (Leith, 2007). Some news organizations are experimenting with having professional journalists collaborate with readers and others outside the newsroom to gather and analyze information that is integrated into news reports.

In fact, the practice of citizen journalism is not entirely new. Abraham Zapruder, who filmed the assassination of President John F. Kennedy with a home-movie camera, is sometimes presented as an ancestor of all citizen journalists. Also, letters to the editor have been precursors to the reader comments sections of news websites. Nowadays, what have changed are information technology and the increased involvement of the “audience” earlier in the process of gathering and producing news. As Rappaport and Leith (2007) noted, cell phone cameras and ubiquitous high-speed Internet access make it possible for people physically near a newsworthy event to record images and quickly transmit them anywhere. Interwoven with these technological advances are changes in the public’s attitude toward the news. Now that the Internet allows greater participation in the process of creating the news, it appears that at least some citizens want to partake in nonprofessional journalism.

Nowadays, Ohmy News in South Korea has become popular and commercially successful with the motto, “Every Citizen is a Reporter.” Founded by Oh Yeon-ho on February 22, 2000, it has a staff of about 40 professional reporters and editors who write about 20% of its content with the rest coming from other freelance journalists who are mostly ordinary citizens. This site is a hybrid of professionally reported and citizen reported stories with citizen journalists being paid small sums for the more popular work.

The concept ‘citizen journalism’ itself is hard to define, depending on its purpose and formation. According to Rappaport and Leith (2007), “citizen journalism encompasses a broad range of vehicles and techniques for publishing and broadcasting content created, in part or in whole, by nonprofessionals.” This definition is particularly helpful in this study.

It is also difficult to catalog all of the ways in which traditional news organizations currently are engaged in citizen journalism. Rappaport and Leith (2007) have listed seven such categories: reader comments, forums, reader blogs, hyper local reader-generated news, user-generated photographs and videos, reverse publishing and “crowdsourcing”.

Some other scholars have used different terms. Gant (2007) and Papandrea (2007) have included such terms as participatory journalism, grassroots journalism, open source journalism, networked journalism, citizen media, and pro-am journalism.

Outing (2005, 2011) proposed the “11 Layers of Citizen Journalism” as a framework to help publishers and editors understand citizen journalism and how it might be incorporated into the website and media legacy. These layers include participatory reporting, citizen blog house, newsroom citizen transparency blogs, and the hybrid-pro + citizen journalism, integrating citizen and pro journalism and wiki journalism (where the citizens are editors).

## *Participatory Journalism*

Rosen (2008) provided a most useful definition of citizen journalism that reflects the people's participation in the media. He said:

“When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism” (Rosen, 2008).

The definition has drawn much attention. One reader noted that “citizen journalism is a subset of citizen media. Digital media makes it easier for regular folks to communicate for themselves, many to many rather than few to the masses” (McAfee, 2008).

Several scholars often refer to the emergence of user-generated news content as “participatory journalism” (e.g., Deuze et. al., 2007, Domingo et. al. 2008). The rise of participatory journalism, and the assortment of challenges and opportunities it presents for broadcasting media in particular, has received increasing attention in the literature. In many instances, the inquiry has focused on the extent to which large, mainstream news media have adopted practices of participatory journalism (e.g., Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Paulussen et. al., 2007; Thurman, 2008).

A number of mainstream media around the world have successfully incorporated the practice of citizen journalism. Of particular concern is public broadcasting. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's French-language television network has organized a weekly public affairs program called, “5 sur 5”, which has been organizing and promoting citizen-based journalism since 2001. On the program, viewers submit questions on a wide variety of topics, and they, accompanied by staff journalists, get to interview experts to obtain answers to their questions (Rappaport and Leith, 2001).

In Myanmar, the public broadcaster named the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) present an interesting case study to illustrate the role of citizen journalism in the struggle for democracy. Successful in garnering international financial and technological support, DVB has used Internet and Satellite technologies strategically for gathering and broadcasting information for thousands of people living in political and economic exile from Myanmar (Pidduck, 2010; Chowdhury, 2008).

In the print media, numerous mainstream newspapers have embraced the practice of citizen/participatory journalism. Interestingly, Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa (2010) present a case study to understand how community newspaper editors in Texas, U.S.A., negotiate the professional complexities posed by citizen journalism – a phenomenon that would appear to undermine their gatekeeping control over content. Through interviews with 29 newspaper editors in Texas, they found that some editors either favor or disfavor the use of citizen journalism primarily on philosophical grounds, while others favor or disfavor its use mainly on practical grounds.

#### *Citizen Journalism in Thailand*

Following Rosen's (2008) definition, a form of citizen or participatory journalism has come into existence in Thailand for a long time. New technologies, particularly mobile phones, the Internet, websites, weblogs and social media provide the useful tools for Thai audiences to participate in the process of newsgathering and production.

Historically, the first form of citizen journalism originated in Thailand's radio journalism. It took place when the first traffic radio station was established in the capital city of Bangkok on September 2, 1991 called "Jor Sor 100," which stands for "Jor Sor 100: Radio for Traffic News and Public Information," (JS100.com, 2011). With the slogan "wholeheartedly for society," Jor Sor 100 was designed not to be merely a traffic radio to serve the congested capital city and its vicinity, but also a public broadcasting to serve the Thai society for the well-being of people from all walks of life. Thus, its mission was extended to cover a wide range of activities from solving traffic congestion, road accidents, emergencies, natural disasters and public grievances to creating social awareness, national consciousness, democracy and civil society. Although not originally planned, the mobile phones have been mainly used in the traffic news reports for ordinary people to report on newsworthy events as well as to develop a social network of people to help one another on various issues. As a result, Jor Sor 100 has been considered as the first form of citizen journalism in Thailand by the most popular English-language daily newspaper, the Bangkok Post on December 9, 2009.

Blogging has become a common form of citizen journalism in Thailand. In 2006, a pioneer and popular blog, named OK Nation was started by Suthichai Yoon, and turned out to be leading citizen journalism in the country. This is an extraordinary case where a professional journalist has engaged in nonprofessional journalism through his own blog. Blogger Suthichai Yoon admitted that, as a result of technological advances, the role and function of professional journalists are subject to a radical change. When modern technologies and digital devices became affordable and easily accessible to any citizens to use and post their messages, audio clips or video footages on line so that many other people can read and share opinions, the time has come for professional reporters and editors to reconsider adjusting their functions (OK Nation, 2006). In short, the gatekeeping role of professional journalists is found to undergo change.

Another pioneer blogger who goes by the pen name of “Jotman” happened to be in Bangkok on the night of Thailand’s coup d’etat, on September 19, 2006. On the scene before most Western news organizations, Jotman provided some of the earliest photographs of the coup (Jotman Travel, 2007).

In fact, Jotman started blogging in 2006 the night a coup took place in Thailand. He said:

*“Thailand has been a pioneering region for citizen journalism. This is due mainly to the constant political instability on one hand, and the presence of a large expatriate community on the other. Other contributing factors include a high quality English language press that has – until quite recently – been relatively free and relatively open access to the Internet – although this also seems to be changing for the worse ---“ (Jot asean, 2009).*

In early 2006, the Thai-style citizen journalism also became evident in the mass protests over Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s sale of Shin Corporation to Singapore’s government investment arm, Temasek Holdings, under dubious terms. People have taken to the streets calling for his resignation, with some notable citizen journalism efforts applying the pressure (Lih, 2006). The Nation, an English language newspaper, had citizen reporters send pictures and text reports by cell phones using text/multimedia messages at the rallies. The photo blog The Media Slut also helped to highlight some of the questionable stories by ITV, then a Shin Corporation asset, which reported only around 6,000 to 7,000 protesters while Reuters reported 30,000 (Lih, 2006).

Citizen journalism has clearly emerged in the coverage of natural disaster and emergencies. A notable example is the great tsunami which had devastated southern Thailand and many other countries in Asia in 2004. When the 9.1 magnitude underwater earthquake caused a huge tsunami in Banda Aceh Indonesia and hit Phuket Island on December 26, 2004, news footage from many people who experienced the disaster was widely broadcast throughout Thailand and the region. Many citizen journalists sent audio and video clips and text reports by cell phones and the Internet to the mainstream media throughout the region.

As a consequence of new technology, particularly mobile phones, the Internet, social media and digital devices, the citizen journalist movement in Thailand has found new life as ordinary people can now capture news and distribute it nationally and globally. A good example could be seen in the recent great floods in central Thailand during July-October, 2011. A large number of “Jit-asa” (Thai word for public mind or volunteerism) people, particularly youths, had been quickly interconnected through Facebook and other social media and later organized themselves as Networks of Online Volunteerism to help flood victims. Members of the Networks work as citizen reporters to share and exchange information as well as report news online which prove helpful to relief operations. Over 100,000 volunteerism citizen reporters have taken part in the flood relief programs (Jit-asa, 2011).

The web-based newspapers are also growing in Thailand. Prachatai has stood out as the website alternative to all the Thai and English mainstream news outlets. Currently, Prachatai publishes about 10-15 news reports and articles in Thai daily through [www.prachatai.com](http://www.prachatai.com) (alternatively [www.prachatai3.info](http://www.prachatai3.info)) as well as Twitter and Facebook, which is followed by about 17,000 people and has over 20,000 fans (as of 10 January 2012). In 2011, it had 178,000 visitors per month on average and more than 25,000 hits a day. Prachatai had 14 full-time staff members and about 10 freelancers across the country. Although most news and articles have been produced by its own staff and reporters, ordinary citizens and students were also encouraged to submit news reports. It also provides an opportunity for citizens to translate and rewrite Thai news stories into English versions for the English edition (Prachatai, 2012). The newspaper has often been closed down by authorities because, as an alternative news medium, it has engaged in reporting on sensitive issues which were ignored by the mainstream media.



A recent trend in citizen journalism has been the emergence of “hyperlocal journalism,” as online news sites invite contributions from local citizens of the communities, who often report on topics that mainstream newspapers tend to ignore. In Thailand, the newspaper business appeared to be relatively healthy but newspapers are also planning for a web-based option. Hyperlocal news has become a hot technology topic nowadays. Hyperlocal crime reporting ties crimes to individual neighborhoods, streets, and even apartments in Bangkok (Bangkok Post, December 8, 2009).

Nowadays, television has widely incorporated the practice of citizen or participatory journalism in its news telecast. All television channels have encouraged their audiences to submit their comments and feedbacks by mobile phones, Facebook, Twitter and other social media. During natural disaster and political crisis, a large volume of video news clips and text reports poured in to the news studio.

### **The Stateless in Thailand**

According to Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Res. 526 A (XVII), April 26, 1954, a stateless person is “a person who is not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law.” A person that is not a national of any country is not guaranteed the rights of any country that it promises to its own nationals.

The figures and estimates of the stateless in Thailand vary wildly. Some estimates of the stateless in Thailand are skewed because they are counted together with undocumented persons and migrant workers. The Thai reported the number of stateless at 542,500 in 2010 (UNHCR, Thailand, 2012). Alternatively, a 2011 U.N. agency publication put the number of stateless in Thailand at a whopping 3.5 million (IRIN, 2011).

Hill-Tribe: The hill-tribe people receive the most attention among the stateless in Thailand. They represent the majority of the country’s stateless (UNHCR Thailand, 2012). According to the International Observatory on Statelessness (IOS)(2014), Thailand’s northern hill tribe people, who include members of the Akha, Lanu, Lisu, Yao, Shan, Hmong, and Karen ethnic communities, number around two million. NGOs report that 337,000 to almost half of them lack Thai citizenship, and are unable to vote, buy land, seek legal employment, work in certain occupations or travel freely. Since an influx of refugees and migrants into Thailand in the 1980s, the Thais have denied hill tribe people citizenship.

In 2001, the Thai Cabinet granted temporary residency rights for one year to those who had previously taken part in a government survey and others lacking identification. To secure citizenship, they had to show that they, and at least one of their parents, had been born in Thailand. These requirements are difficult for those born in remote mountain areas and who lack documentation or other evidence of birthplace and parentage. Following the expiration of the most recent filing deadline, many hill tribe people are considered illegal migrants or stateless. An inter-ministerial taskforce was created to propose solutions for acquisition of Thai nationality and systematic birth registration (IOS 2014).

Sea Gypsies: Where the hill-tribes are the darlings of the humanitarian community, the sea gypsies are almost invisible. Sea gypsy is the English name given to the Chao Lay, or “sea people”. This group gained limited recognition after the 2004 tsunami as the sea natives who escaped the wrath of the tsunami and were saved by their innate wisdom of the sea, while so many others perished. The sea gypsies are perhaps the smallest category of stateless in Thailand, numbering only around 10,000 comprised of the Moken, the Moklen, and the Urak Lawoi. They are historically nomadic people, living largely off boats as they travel from island to island in the Andaman Sea to the west of Thailand, staying put only during the monsoon season. Like other non-ethnic Thais, they too experience disdain or worse from the larger Thai population.

Several million Burmese live in Thailand, having fled persecution and economic deprivation in their country of origin. About 150,000 refugees have been allowed to live in temporary refugee camps, leaving more than two million others to live outside the camps illegally. Small numbers of illegal persons are also inside the camps. Children born to Burmese in Thailand are ineligible for citizenship either in Burma or in Thailand. (IOS, 2014).

The number of stateless children in Thailand is unknown, but some estimate the number might be close to 100,000 in border towns such as Mae Sot and Ranong. Estimates also suggest 3,000 to 15,000 children are born every year to some 500,000 migrant workers, who are mainly from Laos, Vietnam, and Burma (IOS, 2014).

Apart from the hill-tribe, the sea-gypsy and refugee groups as mentioned above, there is a group of displaced Thais who are the subject of this study. The displaced Thai are persons of Thai descents who used to live in Myanmar and Cambodia in the areas near the Thai border. These areas used to be part of Thailand, but the change in borderline some hundred years ago has brought them under the rule of neighboring countries. Thai people who lived in those areas and their descendants have, therefore, lost their Thai nationality. Recently, some of these Thai people have moved to live in Thailand and staged a campaign requesting that Thai nationality be returned to them for over 10 years. These displaced Thais have a total number of around 20,000 persons and their stories will be described in more details later.

### **Methodology**

The case study is based on a combination of document analysis, participant observation, personal interview, program monitoring and content analysis.

At the initial stage, an extensive review of the literature has been undertaken on the subjects of citizen journalism, public service broadcasting and stateless people in Thailand, which are relatively rare and little known.

The researcher has made a number of personal observations in the fields to observe how a group of citizen journalists engaged in newsgathering, production and distribution. He also took part in other related activities of the stateless people including the long march campaign for the enactment of the new Thai Nationality Act in 2011-2012.

In addition, the researcher conducted a series of in-depth interviews with policy makers, program director and producers and citizen reporters to see how the policy of public participation has been implemented and the act of participatory journalism carried out to empower the stateless Thais. Accordingly, three members of the Thai PBS's Board of Governors have been selected for interviewing as policy makers. They are: Associate Professor Malee Boonsiripund, Ms.Chintana Bhundu-Falck and Mr.Somchai Suwannabun. In the program production category, the researcher has interviewed Mr.Somkiat Juntursima, Director of Public Media Network Department, Thai PBS, who is directly responsible for production of the citizen journalism program. The researcher has made many interviews with him and his colleagues at the Thai PBS head office during March and April 2012. For the citizen journalists, the researcher has made phone interviews with all three 'stateless' journalists themselves during March and April 2012. They are A-e-cha Kaewnparat,

Lek Prakobpran and Charwit Sri-wan. These are among valued key informants in this study. There are too many other interviewees to be named here.

Finally, during the years 2011-2012, the researcher has randomly monitored the broadcasts of Citizen News Reports on Thai PBS during weekdays at 8:30pm and content analyzed a series of 3-minute news reports on the struggle of stateless Thais for their legal rights. In this process, the researcher has managed to monitor on Thai PBS 20 three-minute evening news reports about the stateless people's campaign for their citizenship. This accounted for 60.00% of the total 33 three-minute news reports produced by the stateless reporters (N=33 news stories). Some of the news reports had been already on air but could be monitored later on YouTube website. Altogether, 28 news reports had been monitored, accounting for 85% of the total news segment.

### **Results of Study: Emergence of Thai Public Broadcasting Service (Thai PBS)**

As Thailand's first national public broadcaster, the Thai Public Broadcasting Service or, in brief, Thai PBS, was originally conceived as an alternative TV channel to promote people's rights to freedoms of expression and information, thus encouraging public participation in both its programming and other activities. Debates on public TV stations began in the aftermath of the "Bloody May" crackdown on anti-government protests in 1992, in which all existing TV channels were under government control and there was a need for an independent channel to broadcast news and information free from state intervention. The public debate led to establishment of iTV as a privately owned channel which started broadcasting in 1995 under a 30-year state concession. According to the agreement, iTV had to include news and information no less than 70% of its total airtime.

However, owing to financial and political crises, iTV had undergone a significant change in subsequent years in its structure and programming; the name was also changed from iTV to TITV and TV Thai Television respectively. Eventually, on January 15, 2008, Thai PBS was officially established under the Thai Public Broadcasting service Act. 2008. Financed with taxes on tobacco and alcohol amounting to 2 billion Baht (US \$65 million) annually, Thai PBS is committed to creating an informed citizenry with its diverse educational and entertainment programs and fair, balanced and impartial news coverage.

### *Public Participation*

As a public service broadcasting system, Thai PBS has clearly adopted a policy of promoting public participation. The policy statement said “Thai PBS strongly believes in the role of citizens in public broadcasting” (Thai PBS, 2012). Accordingly, it has encouraged public participation in both its programming and other activities, aimed at bringing citizenship from the margins to the center.

Thai PBS’s dedication to citizens is also reflected in its organization structure. To comply with its constitution, Thai PBS has set up an Audience Council which represents people from all walks of life. This 50-member council serves a two-year term on a voluntary basis to collect feedbacks and suggestions from audiences which are used for improvement of TV programming. The citizen council is another step for Thai PBS to provide quality outputs in response to public interest and public needs.

The Audience Council holds a general assembly at least once a year and has periodical dialogues with the Thai PBS Board of Governors and the Executive Boards on matters of public interest.

### *Citizen Journalism: Empowerment of Marginalized People*

Based on the “public participation” principle, Thai PBS has embedded the practice of citizen journalism in its newsgathering and news reporting from the beginning. Designed as an alternative medium to “empower local communities,” Thai PBS has provided a three-minute daily time slot at the end of evening news cast for the so-called “Citizen News Report” since May, 2008 (Thai PBS, 2012). In so doing, the public broadcaster provides ordinary citizen with public space they cannot find in other mainstream media to air their grievances on issues that were previously ignored. Through “Citizen News Reports,” these non-professional journalists hold local authorities accountable and make local voices mainstream. Many of their news reports have been picked up by mainstream media and turned out to be a national agenda.

According to Somkiat Juntursima, Director of Public Media Network Department, Thai PBS provides technical inputs to help train citizens on basic skills of broadcasting journalism. In collaboration with local and international organizations, it organizes training courses and workshops for selected volunteers in various regions of Thailand. In general, a basic training course requires a simple digital camera and a lab-top computer equipped with editing software for citizens to learn about shooting, writing and editing news stories on various topics. Citizen journalists write their own scripts, shoot their own pictures and present the stories themselves in whatever styles and dialects suitable to them and the environment. These citizen journalists then produce their own news stories that cover a wide range of issues in their communities. They submit their video news clips online or by mail for telecast (Juntursima, interview, 14 March 2012).

Somkiat said Thai PBS has provided training to about 500 citizen journalists every year and, so far, around 2,000 citizens from all regions of the country have completed the training courses. They have been selected for training on a voluntary basis. Since 2008, these citizen journalists have produced about 250 news reports on various issues a year and, until now, around 11,000 news stories have been completed and put on air at the end of weekdays evening news cast (Juntursima, interview, 18 March 2012).

Thai citizen journalists have gained valuable insight from national and international media professionals. For example, Suzanne McBride, Associate Chair of the Journalism Department at Columbia College in Chicago, USA, said the Thai PBS's citizen news reporting gives non-professional journalists a chance to inform the public about issues that are underrepresented and also provides a platform for voices and opinions that are excluded from mainstream media. To many Thai experts, citizen journalism at Thai PBS has proved a helpful forum to empower the marginalized people at local communities.

## How Citizen Journalism Empowered Stateless Thais to Regain Citizenship

This case illustrates how the Thai PBS citizen journalism plays a role as an alternative forum to empower a group of Thai diaspora to regain their citizenship. The case begins with a brief description of the Thai diaspora, followed by their struggle for citizenship and the roles of citizen journalists in a campaign leading to their victory in 2012.

The Thai diaspora in this case refers to the thousands of people who used to live in territory occupied by the British and which later became the territory of Myanmar, namely Tavoy, Mergui and Tenasserim regions.

During the reign of His Majesty King Chulalongkorn Rama V, Siam relinquished the western towns of Tavoy, Mergui and Tenasserim to Britain, which was then exerting a colonial rule over the neighboring Burma. The areas then automatically became a part of Burma after it was granted independence by Britain in 1948 (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009).

The historical event resulted in the displacement of Siamese occupants of the three ceded cities. After coming under the administrative rule of Burma, the group was discriminated against and treated as minorities by authorities. In the early 1950s, the Burmese government started to suppress various minority groups. Skirmishes raged in many parts of the country and the people who still considered themselves Thais were caught up in the battle. Consequently, a large number of Thais had crossed over to Thailand several decades ago. Many had migrated back to reside in areas which later became Prachuab Khiri Khan, Chumphon and Ranong provinces. However, their return was not recognized by local authorities and they were given the status of “stateless” or “displaced” persons (Ekachai, 2012).

At present, descendants of these stateless ancestors number over 20,000 persons. They are living with neither identity nor rights to social services, including healthcare and education. Without citizenship, they also do not have any property ownership rights and registration labor protection. They have no birth certificates, nor death reports.

Since early 1990s, these stateless Thais have tried to regain citizenship of the country once they belonged to but met with a failure. There has existed in the country the Thai Nationality Act BE 2535 (1992) but the law requires that stateless people obtain Burmese nationality before they can apply for Thai citizenship. The stateless group was strongly opposed to the legal condition, believing that being one hundred percent Thai by bloodline, they are fully entitled to file for citizenship directly.

In the year 2002, the stateless Thais launched another round of campaign to gain fundamental rights and citizenship with the help of some social advocates and senators (Bangkok Post, July 2, 2012). They formed a Network of Stateless Thais (NST) to spearhead the campaign in 2002. They started to document their community histories and family lines in order to develop and identity for themselves. They also campaigned for regulations to address their plight. Finally, the campaign boiled down to the amendment to the Thai Nationality Act BE 2535 (1992) which had been put on shelf for a couple of years.

The draft bill was proposed by a group of Democrat MPs led by Kraisak Choonhavan, after years of study by activists, the National Human Rights Committee, academics and local villagers (Bangkok Post, 2011, January 26).

The bill, which has the support of stateless Thais, replaces one in which stateless people who qualified had to apply for Burmese nationality first and then transform their Burmese nationality into Thai. The 2011 nationality bill coincides with the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Thailand is not a signatory to the conventions but the bill would be a step in the right direction (IRiN, 2011).



### *Citizen Journalism for Stateless People*

Shortly after Thai PBS came into existence in 2008, the practice of citizen journalism has been embedded by the Network of Stateless Thais in its campaign for naturalization. A group of three young people volunteered to receive training on basics of broadcasting journalism organized by Thai PBS in Pangnga province in 2008. Among the three, Charnwit Sai-wan, 30, from Chiang Rai province, are the only Thai “citizen” who serves as an advisor to the group. The other two – A-e-cha Kaewnoparat, 22, and Lek Prakobpran, 20, have been ‘stateless’ persons; both were from Ranong and Prachuab Khiri Khan, respectively. Literally speaking, the two may not be called a citizen journalist yet; they represent an exceptional case in which stateless persons fight for their legal rights and identity to become non-professional ‘citizen’ journalists (Kaewnoparat, interview, 31 March 2012).

The trio attended a three-day training course in Pangnga in which they have learned about basic techniques of video shooting, interviewing, script writing, news writing and editing, news presentation and ethics etc. They have been provided with a video camera, a desktop computer and software programs to do practical works. They found this kind of on the job training program helpful to them as amateur journalists (Kaewnoparat, interview, 3 April 2012).

Based on the first training, the trio had subsequently received a further training course on feature production in Phuket and another one on short film production in Ranong, all organized by Thai PBS staffs. A-e-cha said all these training courses did not involve much expense which was from their own.

During the years 2008-2011, the three young amateur journalists have produced 33 news stories, two features and one short film. The three-minute news reports covered a wide range of topics and issues affecting the stateless people’s ways of life in their communities, particularly ethnic and legal discrimination, cultural and social discrimination, identity and citizenship rights, unequal access to basic social services, including education, healthcare and job opportunities, etc. Generally, the reports portrayed the bitterness and grievances of the stateless people’s lives without citizenship and legal rights in their motherland.

A series of three-minute news had been live telecast over Thai PBS as part of the “Citizen News Reports” scheduled at 8.30pm every Monday to Friday. They are primarily aimed at reaching the target groups of stateless people in various communities in Ranong, Prachuab Khiri Khan, Chumphon, Pangnga, Tak, Trad and Chonburi provinces. Before the news cast, a citizen report coordinator would inform all 35 communities to watch the live telecast. Viewers can also have access to news telecasts at the website: [www.tvthainetwork.com](http://www.tvthainetwork.com) and YouTube: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

Normally, news video clips will be replayed at a meeting of the Network of Stateless Thais for further discussion and comment. There are about 3,975 members of the Network in Ranong, Prachuab Khiri Khan and Pangnga who play an active role as “opinion leaders” to disseminating information. Villagers have also been provided with copies of news video clips for viewing at home. These viewing patterns have helped to diffuse news and information about the stateless Thais widely and effectively to various communities.

The “narrow-casting” approach has been an effective way to “empower” groups of stateless people in various communities to realize their citizen rights, cultural identity and human dignity which have been hitherto denied to them. They have also developed a sense of group consciousness and self-determination to fight for their right cause and justice.

Most villagers appeared to carry the social stigma of being branded as “stateless” or “displaced” persons without human rights and dignity in their motherland. They have well recalled how miserable and traumatic they have gone through various kinds of legal and cultural discrimination throughout their lives. Followings are some excerpts of their testimonials.

Mr.Boonserm Prakobpran, 62, is one of tens of thousands of displaced persons now living in Prachuap Khiri Khan, Chumphon, Ranong, Pangnga and Tak without any official documentation. They are descendants of Thais who moved to what is now Myanmar before the redrawing of the map 143 years ago. Without Thai nationality, they are treated the same as any illegal migrant.

“I have known since I was a kid that I am Thai because we know that we are Thais,” Mr.Boonserm said. “Myanmar officials also call us Thai, and that’s very right. What is very wrong is Thais calling us Myanmarese.” He added, “The villagers elsewhere often yelled at me at tambon meetings. – Why have I joined them when I am not Thai.” (Bangkok Post, February 5, 2012) A core leader of citizen journalists, A-e-cha Kaewnoparat, 20, from Ranong, said, “We speak the same southern dialect, we perform ta-lung (Thai shadow plays) and no-rah (Southern traditional dance) too. Why are we not treated like other Thais?” (Bangkok Post, February 5, 2012).

Hasiyah Chansamut, 48, from Ranong, said she was born on Koh Song, or Kawthaung, now in Pokpian district of Myanmar, which was a major center of Thais for centuries.

“We have applied for citizenship several times in the past decade but the officials refused, saying we are not entitled to it,” she said, “Why not? We are Thai. Why can’t we reclaim our nationality?” (Bangkok Post, January 26, 2011).

Also in the eastern coast, some displaced Thais live in Chanthaburi and Trat. Banton Sommai, who fled to Trat from Koh Kong in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge’s reign of terror, said: “We are Thai by bloodline. We speak Thai. We observe Thai customs. How come we are not recognized as Thai?” (Bangkok Post, February 2, 2012).

While directing their messages at the specific group of stateless people, a team of stateless journalists also launched a pro-active campaign to advance their causes among other segments of audiences, particularly civic leaders, academics, mass media, politicians, government and business leaders and general publics. Through news stories, interpretative reports and news features, they sought to sensitize social leaders and policy makers about their grievances, the root causes and their solutions. The news items have been widely picked up by mainstream media, thus, creating a better understanding and moral support by the publics.

From the Agenda Setting perspective, the case of stateless Thais represents a unique agenda-building process in which the public sets an agenda for the media which in turn determine a national agenda for the government to follow (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Faced with a complex problem of citizen rights, groups of stateless people in local communities came together to “frame” their own issue which requires cooperation of the media and government to solve. This bottom-up agenda-sitting process is triggered off by the local communities setting the public agenda, followed by the media agenda and finally the national policy agenda set by the

government and policy makers. Thus far, citizen journalists have made a considerable success in building a media agenda, based on the public agenda, paving a way for further national policy agenda to follow.

### **A Long March for Victory**

On 13 January 2011, over 500 supporters of the Network of Stateless Thais began their march on foot for a distance of approximately 320 kilometers from the Singkorn Thai-Burmese border checkpoint in Prachuab Khiri Khan to the Parliament building in the capital city of Bangkok to stage a demonstration. The march, comprising Buddhist and Muslim villagers from Ranong and Prachuab Khiri Khan, was aimed at asking the government and the legislators to speed up.

A member of the Network of Stateless Thai, Bangdam said, “We had worked on persuading the government to give us citizenship already for so long but nothing had changed. What could we do? Most of us do not have any money or other means. The only thing we had was ourselves and our voices.” (Evelien, 2011).

So, the long march was a last resort to make their voices heard. Citizen journalists have helped make these local voices mainstream finalizing the Thai Nationality Act that has been pending for almost two years (Bangkok Post, January 26, 2011).

Citizen reporter A-e-cha Kaewnoparat said the Network of Stateless Thais have decided to stage a long march in order to call public attention to the chronicle problems affecting their lives as well as to put pressure on the parliament for a decisive action.

The villagers have taken turns each day to walk, hand out pamphlets and talk to more than 20,000 passers-by about their difficulties and sufferings. Despite heat, dust and restless nights. As Bangdam, a member of the Network of Stateless Thais, who also joined the march, said, “With the march, we achieve a lot because our story was broadcast on TV. We got a lot of attention. People along the road cheered and supported us. We were on the news; a lot of journalists came to see us, or walking with us. Even MPs gave us their support.” (Evelien, 2011).

The stateless people walked for 14 days. Upon their arrival in Bangkok, their representatives, accompanied by prominent human rights activist, Tuenjai Deetes, met Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to seek government support for the draft bill to be submitted to parliament. The representatives handed their petition to House Speaker Chai Chidchob, Minister of the Prime Minister’s Office and the Secretary-

General of the National Security Council, demanding an amendment to the current Thai Nationality Act.

The group of stateless Thais had staged a peaceful demonstration in front of the parliament for a few days. On 29 January 2011, after having been informed of the new nationality bill being included in the cabinet agenda, they decided to disband peacefully with high hopes. Subsequently, the bill received a green light from the Cabinet on 1 February 2011. Later, on 2 March 2011, the House of Representatives approved the bill in principle with a 257-0 vote, two abstentions and three in the chamber not voting (The Nation, May 5, 2011).

After the passage of the draft bill, the House of Representatives has been dissolved and the new general election, held on July 3, 2011, resulted in a change of government under the Puathai Party. As the Thai Nationality Act is still stuck in the Senate, the Network of Stateless Thais keeps wondering what will happen next. They continued to campaign for wider public attention and support.

According to citizen reporter A-e-cha Kaewnoparat, the campaign strategy has been revised to suit the prevailing situations. The main thrust is now more on building up public understanding and moral support of policy makers at a national level. For example, the stateless group tried to clarify the controversial issue, through interpreting reports and news features, that the law granting citizenship to illegal people will not attract more illegal immigrants, subsequently, undermining national security. They argue that the beneficiaries of the draft law must be Thai by family bloodline. They must belong to the diaspora groups who have been affected by the territorial change a century ago. There was no proof of any links between stateless Muslims and any violence in the deep south that might endanger national security (Bangkok Post, January 26, 2011).

During this time, a group of citizen journalists had sought to project a favorable image for stateless Thais on various activities in order to win public support. For example, during the great flood in 2011, two thirds of Thailand's provinces had been hard hit by floods; central region was a key venue for many evacuated flood victims. A group of stateless people from Ranong had made many visits to the affected communities in Pathum Thani to reach out to the stranded villages in isolated areas and help disperse aids to the victims. They were portrayed as volunteers without Thai citizens to provide service to other displaced Thais in their motherlands (tvthainetwork, 2011). In another instance, the Network of stateless Thais paid a visit to the Chinese community in Yaowarad during a Chinese New Year Festival to pay respect to their "ancestors." They sought to establish a link by

bloodline between Chinese people and their descendants stateless (tvthainetwork, 2012).

Finally, on Monday, January 30, 2012, the initially reluctant Senate passed the new Thai Nationality Act to grant the Thai diaspora citizenship. The law was later published in the Royal Gazette on March 21, 2012.

After 10 years of fighting for their rights, what else could bring more delight to stateless Thais than to learn that the nationality act had been finally passed by both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Their legal victory for Thai citizenship is indeed a historic one.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The stateless Thais problem originated in the territorial demarcation in 1868. Faced with Western threats of colonization, King Chulalongkorn had to cede vessel states in the west to British-ruled Burma and those in the east to French-ruled Cambodia. Following the territorial changes, some Thais moved back to their motherland while many others stayed on. Later, as a consequence of the violence in Myanmar and Cambodia, these Thais were forced to move back to the motherland and were shocked to find themselves officially branded as “stateless” people. In the west, the largest groups of stateless Thais are found in Ranong, Prachuab Khiri Khan, Pangnga and Chumphon. In the east, they are in Trat and Chanthaburi. The total number of these stateless people was estimated at about 20,000 persons.

Since early 1990s, groups of stateless Thais had tried to regain their citizenship but were in vain. Again in 2002, they launched another campaign to reclaim their fundamental rights, with backing of some social advocates. This time, they formed a Network of Stateless Thais, with some 3,975 members, to spearhead the campaign. Their goal was to seek an amendment to the existing Thai Nationality Act BE 2535 (1992). After Thai PBS came into being in 2008, the act of citizen journalism was embedded in the campaign. A group of three young people volunteered to receive training on basics of broadcasting journalism, organized by Thai PBS. Two of these young volunteers, aged 22 and 20 from Ranong and Prachuab Khiri Khan were still stateless persons. The three non-professional journalists had produced 33 news stories, 2 news features and one short film on a variety of issues affecting their lives as stateless people in their motherland. The three-minute news reports which were telecast on Thai PBS at 8.30 pm were primarily aimed at various groups of stateless people in 35 communities to arouse their social consciousness and self-determination to regain their citizen rights. At the same time, the news

reports and features were also beamed to larger segments of audiences, particularly, mass media, academics, social leaders and policy makers to gain their understanding and moral support. The news reports were well picked up by the mainstream media which helped further attract public attention and understanding. From the agenda-setting perspective, the act of citizen journalism has successfully framed the issues of stateless Thais as well as built a national agenda for media and government to pursue.

Finally, the Network of Stateless Thais has decided to organize a long march as a last resort to put pressure on the government to finalize amendment of the Thai Nationality Act. On 13 January 2011, over 500 Buddhist and Muslim villagers from Ranong and Prachuab Khiri Khan staged a march on foot for a distance of about 320 kilometers from the Singkorn Thai-Burmese border checkpoint to the parliament in Bangkok. The villagers took turns each day to walk, hand out pamphlets and talk to more than 20,000 passers – by about their problems and sufferings. The march had attracted a lot of attention and was widely reported in the mainstream media-television, radio, newspaper etc. Many people came to cheer and joined the march, including social advocates, journalists, politicians, and academics. Most importantly, the work of citizen journalists had raised the issue of stateless Thais high on the national agenda for policy makers to take action.

The long march set a momentum for stateless Thais to gain a victory. Consequently, on February 1, 2011 the government approved the new Thai Nationality Act. Later, on March 2, 2011, the House of Representatives passed the bill in principle with a 257-0 vote, two abstentions and three not voting. Finally, on January 30, 2012, the initially reluctant Senate passed the Thai Nationality Act to grant the stateless Thais citizenship. The law was later published in the Royal Gazette on March 21, 2012.

Lessons can be learned from this case study. Most important, the case suggests citizen journalism as an alternative model of public participation in public broadcasting systems. In developing countries like Thailand where traditional media have long been dominated by a linear top-down process and people were deprived of their basic human rights of expressions and equal access to information, participatory journalism has become a useful alternative channel. As demonstrated in the case of Jor Sor 100, by allowing ordinary people to use telephone to report newsworthy events in its live broadcast, the traffic radio turned out to be a first form of citizen journalism in Thailand that has contributed significantly to the social and political development. Similarly, a series of three minutes news reports on Thai PBS

by citizen journalists have become a valuable public platform for groups of stateless Thais to voice their grievances and ultimately regain their citizen rights and dignity.

In the digital era, new media technologies, particularly the high-speed Internet, media-sharing websites, Blogging, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the increasing prevalence of cellular phones have made citizen journalism more accessible to people all over the world who can now report newsworthy events much faster than mainstream media. The convergence of technologies has further enhanced the work of citizen journalism widely available to various segments of audiences around the world. There is no wonder that the act of citizen journalism will have more impact in modern society.

However, citizen journalism has many weaknesses. The unregulated nature of citizen journalism has been criticized for being subjective, amateurism, non-professional and haphazard in quality and coverage. It is also lacking in ethics and professionalism. Some critics advocate abolishing the term 'citizen journalist' and replacing it with 'citizen newsgatherer' or other labels. The Thai citizen journalists also suffered from these shortcomings, particularly the lack of objectivity, quality, ethics and low content. Hopefully, with the enforcement of self-regulation and code of ethics, many problems can be addressed in the future.

The growing use of citizen journalism to gather news and create content inevitably raises legal issues. Of particular concerns are the liability issue for defamatory and other potentially actionable statements posted by audiences, invasion of privacy and the protection of confidential sources covered by the so-called shield laws.

Despite its weakness, citizen journalism can provide a helpful conceptual and operational model for harnessing the potentialities of information and communication technologies in broadcasting development based on the principle of public participation. As demonstrated in the case, citizen journalism has proved a valuable public forum for ordinary people to express their opinions, air grievance and actively engage in civic works. It is a bottom-up communication process, initiated by the people to empower the marginalized groups to participate in the national development. It promotes basic human rights to expressions, freedom of information and equal access to information, which are essential in democratic and civil society. As shown in the case study, citizen journalism is more than a news source and an alternative medium; it has worked well with mainstream journalism to tackle social problems and empower the marginalized groups of stateless Thais to regain their legal rights. It remains a challenge for the hybrid of citizen journalism and



mainstream journalism to be forged out to further develop a democratic society in the information, communication technology (ICT) era. A variation of hybrid journalisms may be taken into consideration such as mobile journalism (Mo-Jo), entrepreneurial journalism (En-Jo) and peace journalism.

This case study is exploratory and descriptive in nature. In light of findings from this study, further empirical research may be undertaken to investigate the potentialities of variation of citizen journalism as the participatory communication process in Thailand's socio-economic change in the new digital era, with particular reference to marginalized groups of stateless people in rural areas. More advanced research methodology such as social networking analysis and field experiment can be tried out to trace the complexity of new media effects in Thai society.

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