

It's time marginalized media join hands to build bridges and reduce political conflict

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Media of the margins join hands to build bridges through their effects that lead to increased understanding and reduced conflicts in society. A former TV anchor of Thairath says the media can serve as a bridge that connects people with different opinions. The Editors of local media outlets, as well as the alternative media, Prachatai, in Bangkok, speak out about their roles and hopes for a better Thailand.

BANGKOK – The Isaan Record joined hands with The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), THECITIZEN.PLUS of Thai PBS, and the Embassies of the Netherlands, Finland, and New Zealand to launch the “Journalism that Builds Bridges” project at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre in early November. The event was entitled, “Putting the Periphery at the Center of the Conversation: A Re-examination of the Thai Media Landscape.”

It was organized to give voice to alternative news outlets and to media outlets operating in the margins of Thai society. The event also brought together citizen reporters undergoing training with *The Isaan Record* in Khon Kaen and *Louder* in Ubon Ratchathani, *Lanner* in Chiang Mai, *Wartani* in Yala, and *Prachatai* in Bangkok. The project targets groups less represented in journalism. Two-thirds of participants are female, and 30% self identify as LGBTIQ.

One main goal of the project is to develop an approach to journalism that challenges stereotyping and exclusionary attitudes and practices, in an effort to move Thai society toward greater social

justice, democracy, and human rights. Another goal is to build connections between media in the margins in order to counter the Bangkok-centric mainstream media in Thailand.

In the afternoon session, “Why media needs to build a bridge to connect people: Voices that need to be heard,” a leading voice in the Thai media scene joined the editors of the participating media outlets in discussing the importance of journalism in society and why regional voices need a place at the table.

Below, The Isaan Record provides the key passages of each speaker.



Jomquan Laopetch (former host of “Talk with Jomquan” on Thairath TV)

“The recent youth-led pro-democracy protests in Thailand have changed society. The movement has become one of the latest events to show why the media needs to step up its role and serve as a bridge. The media must be more than just a pipe or channel. It should continue improving and adapting itself to a constantly changing world. When there is a large-scale conflict in the country, as a media organization, the media must accept the fact that people hold opposing views.”

“How do we connect them? By using the word “connect,” it does not mean that we say who is right or wrong, or that someone can get away with their crimes. Apart from the media’s traditional roles – which need to be improved – the media needs to step up its coverage. Facing new challenges in the past few years, members of the media realize that they can take a greater roles in shaping the world to become a better place.”



“We need to thank digital disruption. If we do not, Bangkok will still think that Thailand is one of the greatest countries in the world. Since the most recent coup d’état, the media has turned away from weighty subjects because reporting them takes a lot of time. In order to survive in the industry, many media outlets have chosen to exaggerate details of news.”

“It’s not that these news stories contain no value; it’s just that they are often presented in a hasty, careless, and dramatic way. It also serves as a distraction to the public: shifting their interest from society and politics to crime news – which does not challenge Thailand’s justice system.”

“Thanks to new media outlets, the mainstream media – whose primary audience is the middle class – realizes that more groups of people need to be heard. Therefore, the existence of alternative media in local areas is vital. Alternative media doesn’t have to adapt much because time, trends, and technology will bring the mainstream media’s attention to us.”



Ruslan Musor (Editor-in-chief, Wartani)

“Wartani was born because of the fact that people in the Deep South have been suppressed. They do not have a space to express themselves or demand their civil rights. Many people in the Deep South are afraid to express themselves because their identity has been suppressed for years – not just in the last 18 years as many people may think. In the past, the Malay people also did not have a space to discuss issues or express their identity.”

“So it’s hard to find justice for the Deep South. There should be a space for them to express their opinions. What we can do to change things is: opening a space for people to stand up for themselves and talk about how they’re being suppressed.”

“Previously, the mainstream media has tried to stigmatize people in the Deep South. For example, it says that rights campaigners who were killed were criminals. Even though the people responsible for the Tak Bai incident apologized and expressed their regrets, the term “southern insurgents” is still bandied about. People in the Deep South still feel deeply stigmatized by depictions of them as criminals.”

“The mainstream media often misrepresents the Deep South because it does not report from the ground in the actual local area. They only cover what the government authorities say. They present one side only. This is why Wartani decided to present another side of the story: tell stories from local peoples’ perspectives. How is it that a person called a criminal by the government is praised as a hero among the local people?”

“We try to tell stories from the point of view of Patani people and local communities. Wartani helps to connect them. We present stories in Malay language, which is one of the most widely used languages in Asia. We try to tell stories about how people in the Deep South are suppressed by connecting with other media outlets based in other regions in Thailand. Wartani acts as a link

between these different voices.”

“We don’t know if we’ve reached our goal yet, but at least, today, more people will know about Wartani and what’s really happening in the area [the Deep South]. People in other regions of Thailand – and foreigners – will also know more about the context of Patani people. This is the bridge that connects us.”



“Ever since Wartani was founded, we’ve faced harassment. The state uses its power to threaten not only local media, but also the people, activists, academics, and others from several other sectors. But we carry the hopes of the local people. We serve as a bridge of hope for the people who once never dared say who they were.”

“I often say to my colleagues: even if we are no longer alive, the ideology we started when we founded Wartani must carry on. There are 2.8 million people in the Deep South who hope that their stories will be told.”

“I still believe that if one day I die, what I’ve done will continue to impact others. People in each region can connect through common struggles. Although the stories are different, the issues are the same: The people are suppressed. If we can connect together, our voices will be more powerful.”



Tewarit Maneechai (*Editor-in-chief of Prachatai*)

“I think a key to building bridges is to connect people with storytelling that exposes structural problems. It’s not about bringing up a dramatic case study that calls for tears. That’s not enough to solve the issues. Building bridges is not enough; it needs to be drilled deep underground – something that will show the rest of the iceberg. We must be a bridge connecting people and showing them that they share a common fate. We are not just a single interest group. As soon as we cross the borders, we will realize that we are all the same, with common goals and interests.”

“We need to think about the power that can bring structural change to society and lead to a better quality of people’s lives. Therefore, we need to build a bridge of information, issues, and news sources. We must be a bridge that connects people with policymakers, allowing them to discuss and solve the problems together.”

“Prachatai has met obstacles in the past four to five years. One of them is an identity crisis. Many employees of Prachatai went on to grow professionally in other, more prominent news outlets. But in 2020, when Arnon Nampa made three demands and Thammasat University students announced a 10-point manifesto on reforming the monarchy, we reported those demands straightforwardly. We received donations from many people afterward, proving that our existence is essential.”

“If we no longer exist tomorrow, society will still move on. We must constantly remind ourselves that we are not at the center of the universe. We also need to pay attention to others and find ways to connect with them and their issues.”



Watcharapol Nakkasem (*Editor-in-chief of Lanner*)

“Previously, the media landscape in northern Thailand mainly consisted of news outlets. Some media agencies operated consistently for a certain period of time. The media, however, has been in decline in the past few years. I think Lanner serves as a bridge at the right time. In the past few years, since 2014, the bridge collapsed. It is a period of time that people lost their freedom of expression. Some orders and regulations restrict our rights. We felt that we were silenced.”

“Then, the movements led by the youth in 2020 brought up issues never publicly discussed. People in local areas in each region could express their opinions more freely. That’s when I felt that Lanner could serve as another space that talks about social issues in different dimensions, which may help change society for the better. The media allows people to talk to each other more openly and supports civil society to advocate for people’s needs in a more efficient way. Moreover, it shows the audience that many issues need to be addressed other than those reported in the mainstream media.”

“I believe that building bridges now can help connect people. If we look closely, we would see that the country has been centralized with each region’s roles being diminished. The central government wants to neutralize local governments. Therefore, the media needs to come together, especially local-level media, to connect and empower the people. Show the people who they are and that they have their own power. One of the challenges is: ‘How do we find that power and utilize it?’ This may be an opportunity to learn and find the answer.”



Prof. Teerapol Anmai (*Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University; Advisor to Louder*)

“Thailand is not limited to its capital city, Bangkok. People living in Bangkok get to decide what kind of stories or information should be presented. How Louder started is similar to how The Isaan Record was founded: it aims to show that Thailand is not only limited to Bangkok or Khon Kaen. There are many other areas where the voices of local people need to be heard.”

“Despite cultural differences, we still feel shocked and saddened by the crowd crush in South Korea during Halloween festivities because we are familiar with how South Korea is portrayed through the media. However, when a Thai person living in a rural area speaks with a different dialect, we feel that they are outsiders. Therefore, working as a media in a local area means creating a space where unheard voices are now welcomed and heard.”

“Working as a media organization, there should be nothing we feel afraid of. The truth needs to be told. We do not clash with powerful people directly, but we inform on what kind of power that abuses, silences, and suppresses the people. This is our method. What’s scary is that no one would care about what we do. If that happens, it would mean that what we do is unimportant or irrelevant to the people. If the government attacks us, it means we’re doing something right.”



“Our work enables us to learn about our similarities and differences, and that helps us understand each other better, especially marginalized people. We are left behind by the government, which ought to be accommodating us. The government alienates us due to the lack of a people-centric governance model. We need to learn about each other more so that we do not stigmatize others as ‘southern criminals,’ ‘lazy Laotians,’ ‘sloppy northern people,’ or ‘heartless city people.’”

“We would soon realize that the discourse we hear is the result of propaganda made by the state, which marginalizes other groups of people. That’s why we’re working to make diversity and inclusion matter so we can live in harmony. People learn more about each other through the stories we present. We become someone who is not judgemental because of social discourses that aim to divide society. As citizens, we may be more skeptical but also more understanding. This should create a better world than one in which citizens are controlled and divided by the state.



Dr. Samatcha Nilpat (*Faculty of Communication Sciences, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus*)

“An essential mechanism of a bridge should be a safe space that allows people to have civilized conversations. It’s a bridge that connects through voices, and those voices come from us. As marginalized media, we speak up to the metropolis, which is regarded as an important political space where young people express their opinions. Where we come from is a marginalized area. We are a small media company, and we are a part of the media ecosystem. Do not exclude us.”



Assoc. Prof. Dr. Patra Burarak (*New Media Communication, School of Business and Communication Arts, University of Phayao*)

“Alternative media must serve as a record of people being treated positively. It shows a different perspective of citizens engaging in political activities, since the mainstream media mostly portrays activists and protesters negatively.”

“When I work, I always feel scared. But I have to be brave and stand firm. If I choose to work with alternative media, it will take a lot of strength.”

“The concept of the alternative media does not come from God, but from our sweat, labor, and tears.”