

## **Mobile Phones as Participatory Radio: Developing Hmong Mass Communication in the Diaspora**

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In this article, I explore the development of Hmong teleconference radio: a thriving form of mass communication for Hmong in the diaspora that uses conference call software to provide listeners with a wide array of radio-like programming accessed through their mobile phones. It is based on a qualitative analysis of Hmong media that assesses the history of Hmong media development in the United States, the content and formatting of teleconference radio programs, and the perspectives of those who participate in creating and consuming media. In exploring the development of a new form of participatory radio, this article expands our understanding of diasporic media practices to include communities that must overcome the challenge of using limited resources in their efforts reach geographically dispersed audiences.

*Keywords: mobile media, diaspora, participatory radio, Hmong*

For minority communities in the diaspora, the ability to maintain strong channels of communication plays an essential role in maintaining cultural practices and identities, as well as creating a network of support for individuals who sometimes feel isolated or vulnerable. Ethnic and diasporic media<sup>2</sup> in the form of newspapers, television, and radio have long played this important role of connecting migratory communities and providing a stable forum for the sharing of information and resources. In the digital age, ethnic media practices also have come to encompass a wide variety of online platforms that more easily extend the geographical reach of these community connections. Yet we cannot take such media cultures and practices for granted, as not all diasporic communities share the same access to either traditional forms of ethnic media or digital technologies.

This research explores Hmong communities in the United States and the specific ways that they have overcome economic, cultural, and technological barriers to develop their own widely accessible form

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<sup>2</sup> Although there can be important differences between *ethnic media* and *diasporic media* for some populations, in this article, I use the terms interchangeably because the Hmong are both an ethnic group and a diasporic population.

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of mass communication—a format that I call *Hmong teleconference radio*. These radio programs use conference call software to provide listeners with a wide array of aural programming through a simple phone call. They have become a central form of mass communication for Hmong in the diaspora, particularly for those who originally dispersed from Laos after the Vietnam War. They offer a way for callers to learn about current events; to participate in debates on topics ranging from essential to banal; to give and receive advice about their problems; to share music, poetry, folktales, and other forms of cultural expression; and overall to connect with others who identify as Hmong. Given its grassroots, bottom-up structure, I position this form of audio media within the framework of *participatory radio* while also pointing to ways in which it departs from previous understandings of how participatory radio is used.

This specific use of mobile phone technology is particularly notable at a moment when voice calls are declining and mobile phones are primarily used to connect to the Internet and engage with multimedia features (Wortham, 2010). With the introduction of smartphone technologies, users can now engage in countless activities using their cell phone: They can send text messages, surf the Internet, take photographs and videos, play games, listen to music, make purchases, deploy geolocation, and use a variety of apps. Although many studies examine the way that these expanded capabilities impact the lives of users, these multimedia functions are not being used to produce this particular form of Hmong mass communication. As Levinson (2006) states, “what the cellphone initially allowed us to do was just one thing: have conversations with people, any place we might be, any place they might be” (p. 12). This ability to simply have conversations is the affordance that Hmong teleconference radio programs have used to proliferate and flourish. Conversations around new media and the changing shape of ethnic media often presume that innovation results from recently invented technologies, relying on a logic that reifies linear narratives of technological progress and privileges the Internet as the site for this progress. A media affordance perspective allows us to consider the relationship between technological capabilities and the social practices and goals of users (Schrock, 2015). Hmong uses of mobile phones to create a new form of diasporic radio serve as a reminder that not all forms of technological innovation rely on the development of new affordances or on access to the Internet. Here, I examine the confluence of factors outside of the phone itself—including cultural, technological, and socioeconomic factors—that result in the creation of a new form of mobile communication that allows Hmong communities to reach audiences that extend far beyond their local communities. In doing so, we can expand our understanding of the spatiality of diasporic media to include this interactive and transnational form of participatory radio.

This study of Hmong teleconference radio programs is based on a qualitative analysis of the Hmong media landscape as a whole, considering the history of Hmong media development in the United States, the content and formatting of teleconference radio programs, and the perspectives of those who participate in creating and consuming Hmong media. Interviews were conducted with more than 50 Hmong Americans, including 25 media professionals (including those who work in Hmong broadcast and print media, as well as those who own or host teleconference radio programs) and 32 media consumers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Media consumers interviewed for this study varied in age, generation, and language (21 were conducted in English and 11 were conducted in Hmong). Interview subjects were recruited through a combination of the personal and university-related networks of the researcher, research assistants, and visits made to Hmong social gatherings. Once initial subjects were recruited, snowball sampling was used

I also worked with a team of Hmong American undergraduates to analyze transcripts of more than 100 hours of teleconference radio programming. Through this examination, we can see how members of the Hmong diaspora are actively creating new cultures of mediated communication through their own version of participatory radio. I first situate the development and use of Hmong teleconference radio programs within the larger context of Hmong America, articulating the challenges that have stymied traditional forms of Hmong mass media and the specific affordances that precipitated the rise of this unique form of radio. This narrative of development is then contrasted with theorizations of diasporic media and participatory media as they have applied to other communities. Although there are many examples of thriving participatory radio around the world, I argue that Hmong teleconference radio programs expand our understanding of what political work participatory radio can do. Rather than remaining tied to a single geoethnic location, Hmong teleconference radio programs demonstrate the potential for ethnic communities in overcoming the challenges of resource limitations to reach a geographically unbounded and diasporic audience.

### **Diasporas and Digital Media**

As an ethnic community with no nation-state or home country of their own, the Hmong are a nomadic people whose history reflects persistent themes of persecution and resettlement. They are believed to have originated in southern China, but a group of Hmong began migrating to Laos in the late 19th century to escape oppressive Chinese regimes, where they settled in the hills. During the Vietnam War, more than 60,000 Hmong in Laos were enlisted by the CIA to fight in the "Secret War" against Communist forces. Beyond the devastating casualties suffered directly as a result of this engagement, their alliance with the United States and the Royal Lao Army further led to retaliation by the Communist Pathet Lao. Many families began to flee across the Lao-Thai border and ended up in refugee camps in Thailand. From there, they began dispersing across the globe to countries that would grant them political asylum, including France, French Guyana, Australia, Canada, and the United States.<sup>4</sup> There are now more than 260,000 Hmong in the United States, largely located in central California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin (Pfeifer & Yang, 2013). Scholarship on Hmong media use and production has largely centered on the role of Hmong DVDs and videos that are marketed and sold within their own communities. Hmong documentaries and narrative videos have been found to express longing for the homeland (Schein, 2004), to maintain narratives about their own history and politics (Baird, 2014), and to inspire pride for and identification with Hmong culture (Koltyk, 1993). There have been some exploratory investigations of Hmong YouTube videos (Falk, 2013; Lee, 2006; Yang, 2008), but there has been little research on a wide swath of Hmong media outside of videos, such as radio, newspapers, television stations, mobile media, or other forms of digital media.

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to find additional participants. Conversations with participants were based on a semistructured interview guide that led to a discussion of the kinds of media consumed, how media were accessed, what kinds of topics listeners were generally drawn to, and generally how participants used media in their everyday lives.

<sup>4</sup> Although there are large populations of Hmong living throughout Asia (particularly in China and Vietnam), this study is particularly focused on the population of diasporic Hmong whose history is narrated here. They are characterized by having strong connections to the idea of Laos as their homeland.

This is an important absence to rectify, given that media play a central role in the lives of all minorities who seek to maintain a sense of community or collective identity within a dominant culture (Dhoest, Cola, Brusa, & Lemish, 2012; Downing, 1990; Zhou & Cai, 2002). The creation and maintenance of communication networks become even more important to diasporic populations whose identities are connected to being geographically dispersed while maintaining ties to the idea of a homeland (Georgiou, 2007; Karim, 2003a). In an era of increased migration flows and the availability of transnational media technologies such as satellite dishes and online media, ethnic and diasporic media continue to proliferate and thrive. Deuze (2006) argues that in addition to these factors, we need to consider the emergence of participatory and community media projects all over the world in relation to ethnic media. That is, beyond the use of new media to facilitate improved corporate or mainstream forms of media, it is important to consider the ways that media production undertaken by everyday citizens has the potential to expand the role of ethnic media in our increasingly multicultural society. Deuze highlights the rise of participatory media, community media, and other forms of media that offer a way for everyday citizens to “become the media” as central to the continuation of ethnic media. Georgiou (2007) similarly finds that diasporic media often challenge a clear-cut distinction between producers and consumers of media with “two-way or multiple-way media that advances the participation of audiences in content production” (p. 22) and demands analysis by media studies scholars. This emphasis on participatory and citizen media provides the starting point for considering the rise of Hmong media in the form of a grassroots medium that counters the authority of professional journalists and other singular voices. Because there is no homeland or nation-state for the Hmong, this becomes an even more important distinction to recognize, as Hmong media in any country would be considered “ethnic media,” and we must then ask what role audiences play in its creation.

Yet within the literature on contemporary shifts in ethnic media practices, we can see that there is need for further clarification of the spatial dimensions of participatory media. Discussions of diasporic communities are premised on a spatial relationship to one another, as diasporas compose communities that are physically dispersed across the globe. To that end, scholarship on diasporic media practices has centered on two primary sites for investigation: the distribution practices of global media industries throughout the diaspora, and the use of the Internet to maintain global forms of communication and connection. For instance, *The Media of Diaspora* (Karim, 2003b) is divided into two sections: the first is on the industrial realm of “film, radio, television, video,” and the second is on “computer-mediated communication.” Indeed, with increasing access to computers and the Internet, members of what Laguerre (2010) calls *digital diasporas* are often able to engage in a variety of political, economic, social, religious, and communicational activities that extend far beyond their local communities. Within the digital diaspora, minority communities are clearly participating in the bottom-up forms of media production and distribution that Deuze and Georgiou emphasize as essential.

Although these studies of diasporic media can help us understand the rise of global media cultures within specific ethnic communities, they are less helpful when considering communities that are resource poor, including those that do not have well-established professional media industries or do not have reliable access to the Internet. These limitations have certainly plagued Hmong American communities, as well as contributed to the rise of Hmong teleconference radio, as I will explore. Among other ethnic communities, participatory forms of radio have been a common way to overcome resource

limitations and find a way to contribute to media production on their own terms. Examples of participatory radio projects include the use of low-power radio stations, partnerships with nonprofits in running community radio stations, and government-supported initiatives that create citizen radio stations for minorities. Participatory radio projects include those in South Africa, Malawi (Manyozo, 2007), Mexico (Rodriguez, 2005), and Thailand. Investigations into participatory radio stations around the world reveal the way that radio can be mobilized by small and resource-poor ethnic minority populations to challenge the dominance of state-run broadcasting and strengthen democratic participation by facilitating mobilization around local issues. For instance, the community-run Radio Zibonele in South Africa was found to broadcast a wide range of cultural storytelling based on health issues in partnership with a community health center, and was able to assist in the wider distribution of health-related campaigns (Olorunnisola, 2002). Similarly, radio programs run by hill tribes in rural Thailand contributed to stemming the threat of Communism and encouraged ethnic minorities to register as citizens with the Thai government (Supadhiloke, 2011). These uses for participatory radio correspond with the way that scholars of ethnic media have emphasized the development of geo-ethnic storytelling as a way of centering geographically bounded happenings within local communities to promote civic actions (Lin & Song, 2006).

This points to what distinguishes the scholarship on diasporic media and participatory media projects: Diasporic media is positioned as a global or transnational form of media, whereas the participatory radio projects that emerge from those with limited technological resources are primarily seen as being invested in their specific local contexts. This is not to say that diasporic communities are never interested in local issues or cannot remain local, but merely that research on participatory radio has not been able to account for the global positioning of diasporic audiences. In comparing the way that diasporic media and participatory media projects have been theorized, we are left with the question of what possibilities remain for resource-poor diasporic communities. Is there a way for such communities to extend their media's reach beyond the local, and can they do so in a way that still promotes the political and social mission of participatory media? This examination of Hmong teleconference radio programs seeks to answer these questions by examining a small ethnic community that has been able to create a participatory form of media that interpellates and reifies a global audience across the diaspora. In articulating the context for Hmong teleconference radio, this research calls attention to the significance of spatiality in the development of participatory media for diasporic communities.

### **Financial, Cultural, and Technological Struggles for Hmong Media**

We can begin an investigation of the Hmong media landscape by acknowledging that there are limited forms of professional media dedicated to addressing Hmong audiences in the United States. In 2016, there were two Hmong broadcast television stations and three radio stations located on the AM/FM band (see Table 1). There were no daily newspapers for Hmong audiences and no newspapers of any kind that were written in Hmong. The only Hmong newspapers in production were two English-language Hmong newspapers in the Twin Cities: the biweekly *Hmong Today* and the weekly *Hmong Times*. These two newspapers started in the mid-2000s and offered their audience contemporary perspectives on Hmong current events in their local Twin Cities setting, as well as across the Hmong diaspora. Yet other publications have not been so successful; in the mid-1990s, there were two monthly newspapers in central California (Vang, 2008), and there have been numerous attempts to produce Hmong magazines

and online news sites (Leepreecha, 2008), but nearly all have shuttered over the years. By examining some of the reasons that professional Hmong media outlets have struggled, we can understand more clearly the context for developing new modes of Hmong mass communication.

**Table 1. Hmong Broadcast Media.**

Station name	Medium	Location
Hmong TV Network	Television station	Fresno and Twin Cities
Hmong USA TV	Television station	Fresno and Twin Cities
KBIF 900AM	Radio station	Fresno
KPNP 1600AM	Radio station	St. Paul
KFXN 690AM	Radio station	St. Paul

In terms of broadcast media, some of the most significant barriers are financial. The costs to purchase and operate a television station or radio station are often prohibitively high for Hmong media owners. One broadcast professional said, "In the major markets are where there will be enough Hmong, usually there's not any open slots for radio or TV, and if there are, the price is too high. It just takes too much." Although Hmong immigrants began arriving in the United States more than 40 years ago, it has taken time for Hmong communities to build a culture of supporting media industries and helping them flourish. Moreover, even as Hmong American business communities and pools of media talent have developed, the advertising-based model that predominates in U.S. media industries continues to stymie Hmong media. Broadcast stations can survive only if they can convince corporations to recognize the value and buying power of their target demographic—in this case, Hmong American audiences—and buy advertisements. This is a struggle that all Asian American media industries face, as Asian Americans are perceived as too small a minority population for corporations to target with their advertising dollars. Although Asian American advertising agencies have emphasized the argument that Asian Americans collectively wield billions of dollars to spend (Shankar, 2015), this tactic is less useful for the Hmong because the demographics of the disaggregated Hmong community reflect significantly lower numbers than other Asian American populations in terms of both population and wealth (Asian American Center for Advancing Justice, 2011; Vang, 2013). Although some media organizations are still striving to acquire national advertising accounts, nearly all of the advertisements currently supporting Hmong media are for Hmong restaurants and markets—small, local, family-owned businesses whose advertising dollars are unquestionably limited.

If these are the struggles to develop primary funding sources for Hmong media, we can then understand why there are no national Hmong media outlets that seek to address Hmong across the United States. Larger national advertisers are less interested in targeting such a small audience, and local businesses are not interested in targeting a geographically dispersed audience that extends beyond their own region. Even efforts to sustain local forms of media can be difficult in locations such as Wisconsin, as the Hmong population is spread across the state's wide expanse rather than centrally located, like the Hmong in the Twin Cities. Some minority populations have been able to find ways to overcome these financial barriers: to name a few examples, Chinese Americans have relied on the financial contributions of wealthy businessmen (Zhang & Xiaoming, 1999), indigenous communities have used government

support (Rodriguez, 2005; Smith & Brigham, 1992), and Spanish-language radio has benefited from corporate support (Paredes, 2003). But these solutions are unavailable to the Hmong, which leaves their opportunities for traditional media ownership and operation extremely limited.

Newspapers and other print publications for Hmong audiences struggle with the same financial issues, as they too are primarily supported by advertisers. Yet print publications also face an additional set of cultural barriers with regard to the value of orality and the low rates of literacy among many older Hmong in the United States. The Hmong writing system known as Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) was developed relatively recently (in the 1950s). The strength of their long history of orality, coupled with histories of resettlement that frequently disrupted educational training, have contributed to low levels of literacy for many Hmong immigrants in both English and Hmong. Because ethnic media primarily target the first-generation immigrant population, the low levels of literacy in Hmong RPA contribute to a lack of readership and support for Hmong-language newspapers in the United States. The absence of Hmong-language newspapers is of course notable (and unfortunate) for an immigrant community in which 92% of the population speaks a language other than English at home (Xiong, 2012), but if we consider some of the histories of Hmong immigration to the United States and the complicated relationship that the Hmong have had with literacy (Duffy, 2007), the scarcity of Hmong-language print media begins to make sense.

As with many diasporic populations, in the absence of locally produced and locally distributed forms of media, Hmong Americans can turn to the Internet. When asked how they find out what is going on in the Hmong community, participants frequently mentioned that they sought out Hmong videos on YouTube. These included searches for user-generated videos of activities such as hunting and farming, as well as Hmong news videos such as those made by Suab Hmong Broadcasting in Milwaukee or HBCTV in the Twin Cities. They also mentioned that they can read about Hmong news on Facebook, where many Hmong participate in Facebook Groups that share Hmong stories from around the world in a mixture of Hmong and English. Such stories evidence the reality that Hmong Americans are engaging in the development of new media literacies, or the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a new media environment (Livingstone, 2004). Hmong people of all ages are learning how to access online materials via sites such as YouTube and Facebook to rectify the scarcity of other forms of Hmong media.

Yet we must also keep in mind that new media literacies are often dependent on traditional forms of literacy (Gebremichaela & Jackson, 2006), and are certainly dependent on access to an Internet connection and a computer. Although Hmong in the United States are a diverse, multifaceted community that should not be reduced to a single rendering, it is important to note some of the significant demographic trends that characterize much of the Hmong American population. For instance, the Hmong are among the poorest ethnic groups in the United States, with a median annual income of \$12,407 per person as compared with \$28,184 in the U.S. population overall (Pfeifer, 2014). The Hmong also have some of the lowest rates of educational attainment of all racial and ethnic groups, as well as low levels of English proficiency and literacy, particularly for first-generation immigrants (Xiong, 2012). Due to the relatively small size of the Hmong population in the United States, it is extremely difficult to estimate the

penetration of communication technologies in Hmong communities.<sup>5</sup> Yet, if we are to extrapolate from the characteristics of the Hmong population for which we do have measurable data, it is likely the case that many Hmong Americans do not have reliable access to information technologies such as broadband Internet or home computers.<sup>6</sup> Although all of the participants I interviewed had mobile phones, they were primarily used to make phone calls. Even if the phone possesses “smart” technology to perform operations such as taking photographs, sending and receiving text messages, or going online, most elders simply use the phone to make calls. This lack of access, combined with the difficulties that many older Hmong people may have with developing new media literacies, mean that online forms of mass media have not emerged as a reliable way to communicate information within the Hmong diaspora.

As a result of these factors, there are thousands of Hmong living throughout the United States who cannot turn on their television and access a Hmong channel, tune in to a Hmong radio station, pick up a Hmong newspaper at their local market, or connect to Hmong websites on their computer. Indeed, this was often the scenario described by Hmong living in Wisconsin, a population of nearly 50,000 clustered in cities such as Milwaukee, Wausau, Madison, Sheboygan, and Green Bay. Yet, as an ethnic population with no nation-state to call their own, Hmong communities have always displayed marked resiliency in adapting to new environments and developing new forms of communication to maintain their cultural heritage and traditions. For example, following an exodus of Hmong communities from Laos to refugee camps in Thailand in the 1970s, Hmong women shifted their tradition of embroidery into sewing narrative storycloths called *paj ntaub* that serve to visually document their histories (Craig, 2010). With the dispersal of Hmong throughout the United States and the world, new generations of Hmong are now actively developing practices of communication that adapt to their contemporary surroundings. Karim (2003a) finds that immigrants in the diaspora “have frequently been at the leading edge of technology adoption due to the particular challenges they face in reaching their audience” (p. 12). Indeed, Hmong teleconference radio programs represent an innovative form of communication that makes sense for this particular audience in many ways.<sup>7</sup> In examining the specific circumstances that have impacted Hmong media, we can better understand how this form of technology came to be taken up, but we must also examine how it is used and what it means to its participants.

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<sup>5</sup> This kind of data often belongs to Internet providers and cell phone companies, which are not interested in sharing this information or have no interest in the Hmong population, and there have not been any academic studies of Hmong digital media use.

<sup>6</sup> Studies of the digital divide often connect issues of access to factors such as income, age, and level of education (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2014; Perrin & Duggan, 2015). Although I am not interested in reifying notions of the digital divide as monolithic or deterministic, this understanding of digital divides accords with many accounts from Hmong families.

<sup>7</sup> Although there is very little evidence that the use of conference call software to create radio is a widespread practice outside of Hmong communities, a public radio station in New York (Bah, 2012) produced a story about conference call radio in West Guinea immigrant communities. Thus, it is certainly possible that other communities are making use of this nascent media practice but have not yet been identified by scholars or journalists.



### Hmong Teleconference Radio as Participatory Radio

Hmong teleconference radio programs are created by using conference call software to create a 24/7 stream of audio programming that listeners can call in to for free using their cell phones. The use of conference call software (most commonly used for hosting business meetings) allows upwards of 2,000 or 3,000 participants to listen at the same time. The shows did not seem to fill to this capacity; most shows surveyed for this study had between 500 and 1,000 current listeners, as announced by an automated voice at the start of the call. There are dozens of different Hmong teleconference numbers<sup>8</sup> that are accessible at any moment, each using their own unique call-in number and run by different individuals across the country. Although it is unclear how the first shows came into existence, there are two factors that allowed for their rise: the availability of free conference call platforms,<sup>9</sup> and the affordability of mobile phone plans with unlimited wireless minutes. If the callers were being charged by the minute to participate or the shows were expensive to host, this would not be a sustainable form of mass communication for the same reasons that traditional broadcast and print media have struggled. But with the decline in using mobile phones to make voice calls, wireless plans with unlimited minutes are now affordable and commonplace (Bensinger, 2012). As a result, many participants describe their engagement with the programs in terms of long-term, daily usage: They call in to the teleconference radio programs from the minute they wake up in the morning and remain connected throughout the day, often falling asleep to the sound of the radio programs at night. Others call in more sporadically, tuning in on occasion when they want to fill time while doing chores or relaxing after work. Callers either listen with the phone to their ear or put the phone on speakerphone so that the call is audible from a greater distance, which means that friends and family who are nearby can listen as well.

In many ways, Hmong teleconference radio programs represent a remediation of radio that is recognizable and familiar. In fact, many of the shows are indistinguishable to listeners from traditional forms of radio, as listeners indicated that sometimes they did not know (or care) if they were listening to a cell phone simulcast of the local AM channel or a Hmong teleconference radio program. Each conference call has a single owner who manages the team of DJs who divide up the hours of the day by topic. Common topics include traditional singing, folktales, health and medicine, and more broad discussions of relationships, cultural practices, and religion. All of the conversations take place in Hmong language, using a blend of the White Hmong and Green Hmong dialects that are most common in the United States. Listeners said it provides them with information, comfort, companionship, and a connection

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<sup>8</sup> Each different conference call number could be called a *channel* or a *station* if modeled after radio or television. But throughout the article, I more frequently use the term *programs* or *shows* because this is the language used by participants.

<sup>9</sup> Although the use of conference call software seems to evidence that Hmong teleconference radio programs rely on a computer and an Internet connection, the vast majority of callers use nothing but a cell phone to participate in the shows. Moreover, many of the "owners" of the shows (who ostensibly used a computer and Internet connection to initiate the shows and sign up for a conference call number) profess to have forgotten what website they used or how it was set up, and do not seem to see their use of computing technologies as central to the functioning of Hmong teleconference radio programs.

to a larger community. Those who participate as owners and DJs are volunteers and everyday citizens rather than paid professionals or journalists.

Hmong teleconference radio programs also challenge the standard conventions of radio through their deeply participatory nature. Traditional broadcast radio shows rely on the authoritative voice of a DJ who controls the flow of information or music. Even during designated call-in shows, which are common on traditional broadcasts, there are gatekeeping processes in place that screen callers and limit access to public participation (Dori-Hacohen, 2012), and it is the interaction between the host and the caller that is the primary goal of the show. In contrast, one of the defining characteristics of Hmong teleconference radio is their polyvocality and the ease with which listeners can become speakers. When participants call in to one of the teleconference calls, they are first greeted with a message informing them of what number they must dial if they want to speak. The first few minutes of the hour are often designated to assigning numbers to those who want to speak so that the host can then call on each participant when it is his or her turn to talk. Although the host of the program and the owner have the ability to mute or kick out callers who do not follow the rules or conventions of the conference call space, the general feeling is that all participants are invited to speak if they want to. If there are hundreds or thousands of listeners and only one person speaks at a time, it is certainly the case that the majority of participants are only listening. Yet this ethos of participation, in which anyone who feels impassioned about a topic is invited to share his or her opinion, is one of the central markers of participatory culture. Participatory culture is defined by Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, and Weigel (2006) as

a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another. (p. 3)

Beyond simply describing a relationship that participants have to one another, participatory cultures are important to note as such because of the benefits that they can provide. These include opportunities for learning and skill development, but also an increase in the potential for empowerment. In talking to those who own, host, call in to, or listen to Hmong teleconference radio programs, it seems clear that this form of media is marked by participatory culture.

We can see the way that participatory cultures are engaged through looking at specific formats, such as the singing shows that one participant spoke about as his favorite. He loved calling in to programs on which callers simply took turns singing Hmong songs, one after the other, until they grew tired of singing. He enjoyed these shows because they gave him the chance to interact with Hmong artists, to improve his singing based on feedback he received from fellow callers, and to make friends with those who helped him. This model of musical performance and co-creation challenges the top-down format of traditional radio, in which privately owned corporations exercise direct control over what songs are broadcast over the airwaves and listeners can only participate by passively listening. Within Hmong teleconference radio programs, participants have the opportunity to not only choose what songs are shared, but if they should so desire, they can perform the song themselves before thousands of listeners.

Shows that focus on musical performance offer a clear example of participatory culture in the sense that Jenkins et al. (2006) elucidate, with a strong focus on sharing artistic expression and engendering a culture of mentorship and support for one's contributions. Other Hmong teleconference radio programs dedicated to topics such as Hmong medicine or financial matters similarly invite callers to join the conversation. The mantle of expertise is shared among the varied participants, each of whom is invited to take a turn voicing his or her own perspective.

Beyond sharing and sustaining cultural art forms, the interactive and flexible format of the shows opens a space for discussing what it means to be Hmong and how Hmong culture is changing. As with all ethnic media, such discussions can be seen to perform the ideological function of shaping Hmong identities and ways of life (Molina Guzman, 2006). We can see this particularly in the titles of the shows, such as *Hmong in the 21st Century*, *Men and Women Nowadays*, and *If There Is No Tomorrow*, which broadly address the way that Hmong people see themselves and their lives in relation to the past and the future. Other shows provide discussion forums for common struggles in the lives of Hmong all over the world, including the difficulties of growing up in poverty or being a young mother or young father, how to reduce stress, or how to deal with jealousy in relationships. These topics help us understand the kinds of issues that are most interesting, provocative, or useful to Hmong listeners. By creating and participating in these conversations, Hmong people are creating an unregulated and nonhierarchical forum for communicating cultural norms, as well as for potentially shifting or challenging those norms.

### **The Geographic Reach of Hmong Participation**

Although the participatory aspects of Hmong teleconference radio programs described here seem to clearly position them within the category of participatory or community radio, we must return to the idea of spatiality to consider what sets them apart from other radio programs within these categories. Traditional forms of broadcast radio compose a distinctly local medium, particularly for small communities that rely on radio because of a lack of access to media technologies with a broader reach. Yet the Hmong programs analyzed here largely eschew any reference to local contexts and cannot be seen to promote mobilization around local issues. Rather, Hmong teleconference radio programs participate in interpellating and reifying a global Hmong diaspora. This is the "community" that the programs are designed to represent and bring together. We can see this framing in the description of one of the shows, as stated on its website:

[Friendship Radio] is a bridge, an echoing sound, a shining light, a powerful method for Hmong to send messages to one another. It doesn't matter where you are in the world, everyone will hear once the voices are made through this radio. (Vaj, 2015, para. 1)

This global framing does not necessarily mean that the shows are consumed evenly across the Hmong diaspora or are that they are accessible to Hmong all over the world. It is more accurate to describe the shows as being primarily centered in the United States, particularly given that all of the phone numbers used to access Hmong teleconference radio programs originate in the United States. Yet owners who can view statistics on the callers report that participants hail from a diverse array of countries, including many locations with large Hmong populations such as Thailand, Laos, France, and Australia. Some participants

also reported that their family members abroad call in to the shows, and those who had travelled to Laos confirmed that Hmong communities there are very familiar with the shows. More important, the shows are positioned as being for the "Hmong community," a distinction that transcends local, regional, and national boundaries.

We also can better understand the spatial dimensions of the show's geographically unbounded nature by looking at how conversations unfold on this platform. First, we can note the widespread use of anonymity for participants, with most speakers withholding their name or using a pseudonym, practices that can be seen to subvert attempts to identify individual participants within a specific location, community, or clan. Anonymity can be understood partly as a function of the aural nature of the programs, as the voice is often difficult to identify. Casillas (2011) notes that radio is a particularly useful medium for Latino immigrants with questionable legal status, given "the intimacy entailed in radio listening coupled with the inherent anonymity made possible through sound" (p. 811). Although Hmong participants in teleconference radio programs may not seek to avoid legal persecution, the veiling afforded by this solely aural medium is nonetheless purposefully deployed to construct a safer environment for its participants. Of course, the voice is certainly not entirely anonymous, and there are many cases in which the user is easily identified by friends and family who are listening. But there are attempts to make the shows more anonymous by the hosts, who often openly state their preference for using pseudonyms for speakers and refraining from using identifying information in stories told about others. These rules are often stated on the websites for the shows, alongside other rules about community norms such as respecting one another or avoiding profanity.

The practice of anonymity is particularly important within tightly knit Hmong communities, in which all those who share a single last name<sup>10</sup> are considered to be part of one's extended family. Given that participants frequently talk about matters that are deeply personal or could potentially bring shame to themselves and their families, the presumption of anonymity can help shield participants from negative social consequences. Discussions on the shows often delve into issues of physical, mental, and emotional health; marital issues such as infidelity, polygamy, child brides, divorce, or domestic violence; or the everyday struggles and problems that individuals are facing. Many interview subjects described a sense that gossip about these kinds of issues spreads rapidly within the face-to-face communication networks of Hmong extended families, and that any salacious tidbit of information would quickly become known by everyone in their family and local community. In this context, it makes sense that Hmong individuals might seek a communicative space that is distinctly Hmong, but that is not reliant on family networks. It is the feeling of speaking to a diasporic audience—which stands in opposition to conversing with community members from one's own family, city, or geographic region—that draws many participants to the calls.

Beyond creating a sense of security and safety, teleconference radio programs also use their ability to transcend regional boundaries to create a platform for discussing issues of global significance.

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<sup>10</sup> There are 18 family names, or clans, in the Hmong culture. Members of the clans are often distantly related in reality, but are considered to be family in the sense that it is taboo to marry someone of the same name.

This can include more personal issues, such as seeking to find others who spent time in certain refugee camps or who are similarly nostalgic about growing up in a village in Laos. But there are also many conversations about the more serious problems facing Hmong families in the United States some 40 years after the first refugees began to arrive. For instance, one of the most commonly debated topics discussed on the shows is abusive international marriages or the practice of Hmong American men traveling to Laos, China, or Thailand to find a spouse (Dabby-Chinoy, 2012). Many of these marriages become a problem when the bride is underage, does not consent to the partnership, or is subsequently abandoned. Hmong families in the United States are negatively impacted when husbands pressure their first wives for a divorce to engage in international marriages, and then the wife and children struggle with poverty, lack of child support, and the negative social stigma attached to divorce in Hmong communities. This extremely complex issue reflects the transnational positioning of Hmong in the diaspora, as it is premised on the idea that Hmong Americans are now adjusting to their increasing power and wealth relative to Hmong in Asia, or are attempting to maintain traditional customs amid shifting contemporary gender roles. Hmong teleconference radio programs thus provide an ideal platform for allowing Hmong voices from across the world to address this issue, including sharing stories about friends and family members who are experiencing this problem, providing advice and support to those who have been affected, and engaging in debates about the meaning of this practice for Hmong culture.

### **Conclusion**

Through this investigation, we can see that Hmong teleconference radio programs offer a unique form of diasporic communication that is adapted to the community's own purposes. Hmong Americans are a population that has struggled to thrive within traditional media industries, and these radio programs represent a technological innovation that opens new avenues for participation. Using nothing but a cell phone, callers are able to speak up, perform, voice concerns, debate, and connect to others all over the world. This form of communication is not reliant on having an Internet connection or a Web browser and, moreover, bypasses commercial interests and the monetization of participation in favor of responding directly to the needs of its audience. These characteristics certainly make Hmong teleconference programs a novel form of mass communication in the digital era, but it is also important to recognize how this form of media expands our understanding of diasporic media. In particular, it reminds us that we must continue to ask whether participatory forms of diasporic media are available to all populations or only those who are advantaged enough to have access to certain forms of technology or Internet capabilities. Hmong Americans provide a compelling example of the way that technological limitations can be bypassed, and this example reminds us that the kind of participation and community involvement that diasporic populations seek may extend beyond the reach of spatially limited media.

This study also points to a more expansive cultural and ideological goal for participatory media than the civic impact that is so often seen in studies of community radio. Although scholarship on different forms of participatory radio throughout the world celebrates their potential for improving democracy, here we can see that intervening into community politics or increasing civic engagement is not the goal or the primary outcome of participation. Rather, those who run the shows describe a general desire to connect to Hmong communities all over the world and discuss their common experiences, cultures, challenges, and successes. The way that this is expressed is through participants using the shows to connect about their

everyday lives, discussing topics such as cultural norms and customs, cooking and music, romantic and familial relationships, and other concerns. Together, these conversations affirm the maintenance of diasporic Hmong identity and culture that are not bound to a single region or nation, and is not necessarily concerned with local politics or governmental apparatuses. We must then consider what political goals a global diasporic audience may take on via participatory media, and how members can support each other from afar using the communication afforded by emerging forms of technology. As populations of refugees continue to disperse across the globe from locations such as Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, and the Sudan, we must take a closer look at the forms of communication that are available to them and what possibilities exist for using them to redefine and empower their global community. Participatory forms of media are clearly flourishing within many different communities around the world, but further research is necessary in considering the spatial dimensions of diaspora and the way that new media technologies address the unique needs of specific diasporic communities.

Diasporic communities are particularly fluid in accommodating new cultural surroundings, shifts in communication technologies, and the ebb and flow of global policies and other macro forces. As a result, it is important to acknowledge that the specific form of Hmong diasporic media discussed in this study represents but a single moment in its development. This particular engagement with teleconference radio will undoubtedly continue to shift course as new needs and new technologies arise, or it may lose momentum altogether as new generations of Hmong find their own uses for emerging media. Nevertheless, this exploration of the way that Hmong teleconference radio programs were created and used provides the foundation for future scholarly investigations into the way that diasporic communities are proactively shaping their own experiences through the use of global communication technologies.

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