From bulletins to bullets to blogs and beyond: The Karen's ongoing communication war

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on the communication approaches taken towards political campaigning by the Karen communities displaced from Burma and who live in diaspora. It maps the ways in which these approaches have developed over a long period of time and highlights particular challenges encountered in this process along with ways of thinking with regard to using media and communication strategies as part of, or instead of, methods of warfare. I focus on the KNU (the Karen National Union), seek to critically examine the Karen approach in the context of current communication / media theory which has attempted to make sense of minority community campaigning which is not clearly contained within particular national boundaries, particular media nor single media control or regulation regimes.

Knowledge of the processes is based on a long-term engagement with the Karen and has involved ethnographic work which began with a journalistic media project run with Karen adults in 2009-2010 and has continued to 2014 with discussions and interviews with key KNU activists. This period has also coincided with the putative democratisation of Burma and this has provided an often confusing transition from a state of war to a state of ceasefire between the KNU and the Burmese military or *tatmadaw*. Dick (2012) still classifies the Burmese state as an 'authoritarian regime'.

This research is based on my direct engagement with the Karen community in the North of England since 2009 firstly through a community journalism training project for adults in the community which happened for many of them shortly after their arrival in the UK. I focus on one particular attack upon this community by hackers during the media project with them and the rest of this study seeks to put those attacks into a broader historical and theoretical context, drawing upon other literature mapping history of the Karen - Burmese conflict, the roots of construction of modern Karen identity and recent theoretical perspectives on power relations in the digital age and cyber warfare with a particular emphasis on the recent work of Castells (2007, 2009), but with reliance on other more specifically focused studies such as those by Danitz and Strobel (1999, 2001) and Karatzogianni (2004, 2009). The accounts provided by Cho (2011a, 2011b) and Participant A (interviews, 2014), who preferred not to be identified, have provided important details regarding the development of Karen (and more specifically KNU) approaches to media and communication over time and their own roles as participants.

Karen Community, Identity and Conflict

I do not assume terms like 'identity', 'community' or 'Karen' to imply simplistic or heterogeneous meanings and acknowledge that understandings of these terms do not always elicit shared understandings of what they denote or connote. However, for the

purposes of this chapter I adhere to the notion of a community existing as much as a group sharing markers of identity and practices which collectively differentiated them from others who surround them in their immediate physical vicinity (Delanty, 2010) but also those who surround them more broadly in a global context, making them part of what Appadurai (2001) describes as an 'ethnoscape'. These markers will be things like dress, language, religion, ethnicity and political affiliation. I also acknowledge the self-identification and construction of identity, often citing these same markers (Speech by Karen community Leader, New Year Celebrations, 2013). In addition to this there is the putative national identity which takes the form of the notion of a Karen nation as a kind of extended community. This exists in a theoretical form as an 'imagined' community (Anderson, 1983), but can also be considered to be something more than imagined, as it is experienced as something real for the subscribers to this notion of state (known by the Karen as *Kawthoolei*) despite its continuing lack of formal status. In the case of Burma "*There was no 'Burma' before the British started to 'imagine' it as a particular entity east of the British Raj and gave it a 'geo-body' by mapping it.*" (Heikkilä-Horn, 2009)

In the case of the Karen, academics such as Harriden (2002), Cheeseman (2002), Heikkilä-Horn (2009) have pointed out the contradictions which have arisen over time, as the historically diverse Karen have tried to define themselves primarily in opposition to the Burmese state. They also point out the post-colonial legacy of creating a collective state on the one hand while seeking to formalise ethnicity on the other.

Two basic dimensions to the international communication by the KNU can be posited which, to use a basic corporate communication notion (Forman & Argenti, 2005) of internal and external communication. On the one hand there is 'internal' networking with the maintenance of effective channels of communication along with a notion of managing the agenda within a particular organisation and wider ethnically linguistically and religiously bounded networks (Horstmann, 2014). Then there is the notion of publicity, journalism, lobbying and public relations which are also methods used by the Karen to reach the outside world. This is primarily audiences beyond the Burmese public sphere and the 'internal' Karen networks mentioned above. However, it is quite clear that internal and external notion only provides a structural starting point when confronted with the potential porosity of 'internal' communication, overlapping of intended and actual audiences and interpenetration of media technologies not to mention the existence of various forms of surveillance by the Burmese government. This includes online and offline scrutiny of communication activities, often leading to questioning of political loyalties, positions and allegiances. Nevertheless, the concept of 'us and them', 'right and wrong' is an enduring idea with the Karen which helps to maintain their sense of identity even when presented with the long term reality of spies and spying in various forms. In addition to this there is an element of formality and informality in the communication which takes place some of which mixes political discourse and social interaction through platforms such as *Kwekalu* and then there is the more formal communication which is more directly conducted between networks of

nominated and appointed individuals who have specific named roles in local cells of the organisation (interview with Participant A, 2014).

The other key aspect of their communication is its relationship to warfare in both broad and specific senses. Warfare has been a characteristic of their long struggle with the Burmese state. This is highlighted in the title of this chapter and a previously published case-study study (Green & Lockley, 2014), focusing on a particular series of cyber-attacks upon the Karen which I will revisit later. Warfare interspersed with discourse is a familiar pattern with separatist and other world conflicts such as with the Palestinian/Israeli context (Olesker, 2014), and I will explore the implications of this in the Karen – Burma context as part of my discussion about the way in which a war-footing frames and polarises communication and allegiances. I will also show how this has a bearing on the current 'ceasefire' situation at the time of writing between the Karen organisations and the Burmese state.

A history of conflict, communication and campaigning for the Karen

In this section I map out a history of relevant communication approaches, taken by the Karen, the Burmese regime and the broader anti-Burmese opposition. An important aspect with regard to this long running postcolonial struggle is its silence and invisibility in the world media at large over long periods of time, and even in Burma itself. It was often seen (or not seen) as an invisible struggle in the Jungle. In particular, I focus on the seminal communication activities which grew up in the refugee camps along the Thai- Burmese border. The accounts written by Cho along with my own UK research informants have been helpful in mapping these out. The work by Danitz and Strobel (1999, 2001) has also been helpful in both recording the development of Burmese regime and opposition group policies and media use up until that time, but also in its observations regarding the relevance of a whole range of approaches taken to campaigning by the broader Burmese opposition.

There is a long history of ethnic conflict in Burma, which has been examined by a number of academics (Aldrich 1999, Heikkilä-Horn 2009, Lieberman, 1978). A key period in moulding the subsequent events was the period following the liberation of the Burmese region from Japanese occupation and the arrival of an independent Burmese state. The historical ethnic and linguistic diversity of Burma meant that it was almost inevitable that diverse and incompatible nationalistic ambitions emerged at this time. This led to a whole string of conflicts that largely developed as a number of geographically peripheral fights for self-determination by ethnic groups from the central Burman-dominated state. This tended to be stoked by a continuity of Burmese military regimes, which then resulted over the next few decades.

The KNU was formed by the Karen in 1947 and the postcolonial civil war broke out soon afterwards. A significant communication event was a broadcast announcing a new Karen (*Kawthoolei*) government in 1949 (Harriden, 2002) by one of the early leaders of the cause Saw Ba U Gyi (Keenan, 2008). This marked a symbolic start to the adoption of

twentieth Century communication media by the Karen. Right from the early postcolonial times, the importance of communication has been apparent to the Karen nationalists. Saw Ba U Gyi was killed by Burmese army forces in August 1950 allegedly on his way to broadcast on Free Karen Radio from Thailand (interview with Participant A, 2014). Aldrich (1999) also mentions the radio links that existed for coded communication with British Intelligence Services after 1945.

The ongoing fighting in the Karen territories of Burma inevitably led to internally and externally displaced people on an increasing scale and from the early 1980s (COHRE, 2007) this led to a whole string of nine refugee camps which developed along the borderlands between Thailand and Burma over subsequent years resulting in a current refugee population numbering around 140,000 (UNHCR, 2014). Initially as temporary community structures started to form, a communication infrastructure started to develop which was initially based on paper-based newsletters that were circulated internally and between camps, also reaching some Karen in surrounding areas in Burma and Thailand.

In the 1990s before the Internet became available, new radio networks were set up based in Thailand such as the *Democratic Voice of Burma* (DVB) providing shortwave broadcasting aiming to reach deep into Burma. This later developed into satellite broadcasting entity based in Norway and also a web based presence, which in turn has its social media 'tentacles' such as its Facebook site. Also, there were more localised FM communications from Thailand which was more specifically Karen, reaching the border camps and some border Karen areas broadcasting in Sgaw Karen dialect which was chosen after surveys as a kind of Karen Lingua franca (interview with Participant A, 2014). Student journalists were trained and recruited. These still operate successfully today, but have also been supplemented by much more sophisticated and increasingly more ubiquitous ICTs which allow the diasporas beyond the Burmese state to communicate more freely, cheaply and more interactively than was previously the case. The beginning of these was outlined by Danitz & Strobel (2001:134):

> *In the early 1990s, a few Burmese exiles opposed to the regime in Rangoon began communicating on the Internet via electronic mail. Among the first was Coban Tun, an exile living in California who redistributed newspaper reports from Bangkok, Thailand, and other information about Burma on the Usenet system, using an electronic mailing list called seasia-l The first regular and consistent source of information on Burma available on the Internet was BurmaNet. It took shape in Thailand in late 1993, the brainchild of student Douglas Steele.*

An important online resource developed specifically by Karen for Karen was *Kwekalu*, but it had its origins in print media:

> *One of the first Karen indigenous media groups in exile was Kwekalu, which was setup in 1994 by Kwe Htoo Win, the leader of a southern KNU district. The word' Kwekalu' means the sound of a buffalo horn, which is a S'gaw Karen*

instrument and nationalist symbol. The media group was set up as a monthly Karen language newsletter, for distribution in border areas in Thailand, inside Burma and overseas, and the focus of it has since shifted to Web based media. When set up, Kwekalu was part of the southern district of KNU with the aim to 'become a weapon to educate grassroots people and make them aware of the power each person has'. (Kwekalu n.d.). (Cho, 2011a: 467-468)

Please note the use of the word 'weapon' in the previous quote. This metaphor of communication media seen as weaponry and communicators as warriors is quite commonly understood amongst the Karen. Danitz and Strobel have also used this type of metaphor to highlight the purposes to which communication technologies can be used referring to *'"arrows" in an activist's "quiver"'* (2001)

Other print media in the refugee camps were *Karen News* and *Student's Friend (Jopoe Tho),* which were described by Cho as follows:

> *The papers were quite informal – there were a range of genres from poems, stories and biographies to life lessons and short pieces from the frontline. The publications worked with and through the KNU. Apart from Student's Friend, most writers were current or former KNU members and many readers and writers see the media as part of the Karen struggle for self-determination, not as something 'independent.' Back then, texts in Kwekalu and Karen News did not follow a uniform structure and often included first-person narratives.*
> (Cho, 2011a: 469)

On the Burmese side, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) which was set up after the student uprising in 1988 was controlled by the military Junta who continued to rule the country for the next 20 years. They have been active in seeking to counteract different communication channels and ploys used by the opposition both within and outside the country. This included setting up a website in the 1990s, www.myanmar.com using an American company to develop and host it. The regime has been identified as actively using proxy individuals to post statements on usenet sites and *BurmaNet* (Danitz & Strobel, 2001). The regime also passed the Computer Science Development Law, which had serious punishment for unregistered ownership of modems or faxes (ibid). These activities, by the Burmese regime can be seen as a digital manifestation of the 'four cuts' policy seeking to break the capability for digital communication. The four cuts policy introduced by the *tatmadaw* in the 1960s aimed to cut information, food, recruiting and funds (Harriden, 2002). The broader Burmese opposition movement used both old and new Media in the 1990s with a newspaper, radio and online products such as the *Democratic Voice of Burma* and *New Era Journal.* Publications were often carried into Burma by hand along with computer disks, thus seeking to counter the *four cuts* policy. There was also *Radio Free Asia* using local languages and broadcasting into Burma: "*[t]hese campaigns have educated a Burmese citizenship-in-exile in consensus building and in grassroots cyberstrategy*" *(Danitz & Strobel, 2001: 157-158).*

The increasing use of Internet-based two-way communication has also increased the potential for inverse reach (Green & Lockley, 2012); the digital hacking of phones, social media and blogging platforms to launch informational counter-attacks. The liberalisation of communications in Burma itself is now allowing for more information to flow in and out of the country and the three tiered communication environment previously identified (Green & Lockley, 2012) is starting to become less pronounced, in particular due to the increased availability of mobile phone licences in Burma and in accounts for individuals in the camps themselves (interview with Participant A, 2014).

Who are we talking to and what should we say?

In my interview with Participant A, (17/01/2014) it was clear that there is a sense of frustration with the way that the dispute is often discussed in the 'mainstream' Media. This is often to do with Framing (Touri in Karatzogianni, 2009) and the power structures producing the media, but it is also sometimes to do with 'lazy' journalism based sometimes of simplistic humanitarian agendas which are not based on historic or cultural insight. However, a third dimension to this arose when as part of our SHU Media project (2009-2010) we discussed a UK Channel Four *Unreported World* documentary *Inside Burma's Secret State* (2010), filmed in Karen Territories, Burma with a mixed Burman and Karen group and it was clear that the notion of truth based on concepts of right and wrong, good and evil were also a factor in judging journalistic work and so it is important to make the point that an endogenous propagandist motivation is evident in judging reports by others, but also in moulding their own discourse. In this sense the story and the way it is told becomes a weapon of war. In particular, information gathered over the border about human rights abuses (Horstmann, 2014) has provided a journalistic approach to providing a propagandistic tool. The empowerment provided by new online communication technologies allows this to be disseminated via a more personal viewpoint. However, what is less clear is who is listening and how does this influence the political agenda? The difficulty in detachment of traditionally propagandist journalistic approaches arising from political affiliation and motivation is illustrated by the difficulty KNU had in agreeing to detach itself from its 'Karen Information Centre' in order for the KICC to join up with the umbrella collective, the Burma News Organisation (Cho, 2011a: 468):

> *Many in the exiled Burmese opposition movement see media as part of a strategy. English medium media, such as Irrawaddy, is strategic through its ability to reach an international audience to gain support for the fight against the Burmese junta. Burmese and minority language media is strategic as it can be a tool for political mobilization and it can reach those inside Burma.*

Cho points out that the KNU Karen approach to media is historical and arises from the missionaries introducing a written form of Karen languages, but perhaps more

important than this is a certain missionary zeal and binaristic notions of right and wrong which may not correlate with Western ideas of journalistic balance. Also, a broader approach was established early in terms of establishing media channels with some form of persuasive agenda.

> *Burma's first indigenous mass produced newspaper was Morning Star (Satugaw), a monthly S'gaw language publication started by missionaries in 1842.It was a problematic start to mass media in the country. Rather than spreading news, dialogue and debate, the paper's aim was to propagate Christianity to Karen publics. (Cho, 2011a: 467)*

The melting of borders and diasporic communication through new technologies does present some interesting questions when control of media and media technologies is not corralled within particular nation states and their regulatory and surveillance frameworks (Castells, 2009), but it can also be overplayed in terms of the potential it provides (Green & Lockley 2012) with barriers still remaining between different 'zones of displacement'.

Violet Cho (2011a) describes the approach taken to communication by the KNU in the refugee camps and provides a helpful account of paper publications *Kwekalu*, *Karen News* and *Student's Friend*. This last title illustrates the importance of education both as a tool for betterment, but more specifically as a political education. Cho notes the informality of these publications including poems, biographies and 'life lessons', with a subjective use of first person narratives. These were before overseas backed initiatives to 'train' journalists were introduced. Cho (2011a) and Participant A (2014) also mention *Karen Student Network* group radio as an important initiative moving political and cultural communication beyond the camp-based newsletter. Cho mentions:

> *One of the organisation's aims is to be a platform for young people like myself to raise awareness of the political struggle. My involvement was part of a personal learning process about Karen political, social and cultural struggle. The radio station we set up targeted the younger generation in the camp who had grown up without much access to the outside world, since the camps are closed military zones. The radio station itself was run underground. Because of our base in the camp, broadcasters only had limited access to information. We would listen to exiled Burmese radio broadcasts such as the BBC and translate news into S'gaw Karen. We also had discussions on air about issues that we saw were important at our local level, such as drug use, HIV/AIDS and teen pregnancy. We broadcast Karen rituals that happened in the camp that involved storytelling, music, song, poetry and comedy. (Cho, 2011a: 468)*

It is important to stress the 'internal' nature of this communication and the function which this had in terms of being community based and Karen-focused. The later extension of *kwekalu* online for instance represents an extension beyond physical boundaries or zones of displacement (Green & Lockley, 2012), but not an extension to reaching global 'external' audiences.

The attack

To outline the actual attack I will quote from the case study report published in Green & Lockley (2014) regarding the specific comments made and also my brief analysis of how it was intended to function as communication. I will then frame this in relation to my previous discussion of prior literature.

My direct experience of a multiple hacking event occurred in 2010 when I was working with adults from the community on a citizen journalism project producing videos, blogs and audio packages whose subjects were chosen by the community. Many of these were autobiographical and told of how they had previously come to be living in the refugee camps and often featured quite explicit accounts of abuses by the *tatmadaw*. Early in 2010, our *WordPress* identities and passwords were compromised and I was alerted by a community leader that abusive posts had been placed using names including those of the author of this chapter. This coincided with a series of direct attacks using text messages against local community leaders and edited, hacked telephone conversations which were posted via social media.

One important aspect of this apparently concerted attack and attempting to identify the absolute source and motive is that it highlights the range of possible interrelated scenarios in a situation like this one. The most obvious would be a direct attack from Burmese intelligence employees, the second possibility is agents of the regime who are more indirectly employed but who know the relevant Karen dialect. A third possibility is that the attack came from mercenary hackers from a similar ethnic group who perhaps had political or affiliative differences from the KNU. The last possibilities are someone much closer from the same political affiliation who was either disaffected and thus tempted to work for the Burmese regime or finally someone from the same ethnic group acting alone with personal grudges against the people concerned.

However, there are particular characteristics of this attack that indicate a strategic agglomeration of attacks using a targeted approach based on quite specific information. These attacks are designed to create significant damage. Since this time I have also noted other social media based attacks on members of the community some of which had similar characteristics to the kind of messages posted on WordPress. In particular, there were attempts at 'character-assassination' along with attempts to undermine community cohesion through attacks making allegations about moral and cultural transgressions within the community. There were sexual threats and also a range of accusations around transgressing moral codes and sexual taboos. The intended mechanics and impact of these attacks in terms of accessing and referencing and reigniting existing fears and phobias arising from actual lived experiences are discussed further in Green & Lockley (2014).

Conversations with Karen and Burman refugees confirmed that they all believed that Burmese spies were commonplace and were often embedded in communities themselves in the UK, USA and elsewhere beyond Burma's borders and often these had

moved from the refugee camps where they had been similarly placed by the Burmese regime. There is probably some paranoia which benefits the Burmese regime, just because of the fear and distrust a belief in such possibilities can create. However, existing knowledge about how the Burmese military and post-military state has operated over the years indicates extensive surveillance and control of information (Chowdhury, 2008), which no doubt has extended beyond its borders along with refugees and the technologies used. This extract from the new Burmese constitution underpins this:

- *The military maintains a dominant role in politics, including control of all security-related ministries and committees, as well as 25 percent of the members of the national and regional parliaments*
- *The military itself remains fully autonomous, subject to neither executive nor legislative or judicial civilian authority.*
- *All democratic rights are subject to "laws enacted for national security" and "the prevalence of law and order."*

(Pedersen, 2011,:54)

We got some traces of IP addresses which located the attacks to have come from Thailand. What we also later discovered was that a discussion over VOIP between a member of Sheffield's Karen Community and a contact in Thailand was hacked and a certain amount of 'gossip' about the Sheffield community was recorded, significantly re-edited and circulated on online networks used by the Karen diaspora. This re-editing also represents another form of 'cutting' in reference to the *four cuts* policy mentioned previously. In addition, similarly exaggerated and doctored versions of this information appeared on our blog site along with some personal messages to community leaders with threatening and derogatory messages about them and their families. All three of these separate attacks happened around the same time and not long after the community had arrived in the UK. These events not surprisingly sent a shockwave through a community already struggling to establish itself spread across a new city in a new country.

Having clarified the particular Karen context, the next section will discuss these in more detail in relation to critical work undertaken by Castells and others.

Karen Media, Communication, Campaigning and Conflict

Because of the long-lasting conflict between Karen organisations and the post-colonial Burmese nation state there has been a long evolution of methods of communication, media and strategies regarding communication. There are also a great number of barriers to communication; what has been traditionally described as 'noise' in communication theories. This noise often arises as a result of the many media channels that compete for our attention. It is also the case that an increase in the noise potentially renders isolated and uncoordinated approaches to communication ineffective and

invisible. In addition to this, there are the technological barriers which are commercial, state censorial, economic, technical and physical (e.g. state limitations on communication and movement such as in refugee camps, Green & Lockley, 2012)

Karatzogianni (2009) does important work in highlighting the many 'smaller' causes and focuses on a traditional media discourse, whereas the situation with Karen is largely unrepresented or is placed subsumed into the reportage of a generalised Burmese opposition as represented by Aung San Su Kyi. Although the Karen I have worked with express respect and confidence in her as a symbol, her primarily urban movement does not necessarily forward understanding of the more regional and ethnically driven disputes which began as expressions of post-colonial nationalism and are now developing into a commodity-political dispute which is characteristic of current pan-Asiatic Capitalism. Her notion that these small groups benefit more than larger powerful entities on ICTs is probably true and reflects the potentiality posited by Castells (2007) of the power of resistance through mass-self-communication. Castells proposes that:

> *...power relations, that is the relations that constitute the foundation of all societies, as well as the processes challenging institutionalized power relations are increasingly shaped and decided in the communication field.*
> (Castells, 2007: 239)

Castell's writing provides a seductive sweeping vision of national and global media landscapes, which provides some important reference points and frameworks and terms of reference for discussing the primarily 'horizontal' communication channels being used by the Karen. This chapter however does not look very closely at the mass media discourse of Burmese State Media and the way it frames or 'indexes' the political debate in a few different zones. Nevertheless, I recognise that this is a part of the landscape which the Karen are working partially within and against. A key partner to mass-self-communication is the notion of counter–power that Castells describes as follows:

> *By counter-power I understand the capacity by social actors to challenge and eventually change the power relations institutionalized in society. In all known societies, counter-power exists under different forms and with variable intensity, as one of the few natural laws of society, verified throughout history, asserts that wherever is domination, there is resistance to domination, be it political, cultural, economic, psychological, or otherwise.*
> (Castells, 2007:248)

A key element in Castell's analysis of how power is contested in the media is the notion that 'If credibility, trust, and character become critical issues in deciding the political outcome, the destruction of credibility and character assassination become the most potent political weapons' (Castells, 2007: 243)

This idea refers primarily to political power struggles being played out in the mass media, but as can be seen in the 'attack' outlined above, this is also a key element in the discourses emerging through the reach and 'inverse reach' (Green & Lockley, 2012) provided by 'horizontal' media (Castells, 2007). Character assassination is a particular aspect of our cyber-attack. The approach of using media to try and undermine leading figures using scathing attacks has been used as part of the 'four cuts' policy mentioned previously. Interestingly, Harriden (2002) has suggested that such attacks in newspapers in the 1980s on popular leaders such a Bo Mya had limited effectiveness and even increased his popularity, power and influence. Nevertheless, this approach has clearly gained new currency in the digital age. Castells expands on this in a way that also reflects my case study in terms of the collection fabrication and manipulation of information. Interestingly he also extends the metaphor of weaponry I have highlighted earlier:

> *Because all parties resort to it, all parties need to stockpile ammunition in this battle. As a consequence a market of intermediaries proliferates, finding damaging information about the opponent, manipulating information, or simply fabricating information for that purpose.*
> (Castells, 2007: 243)

The metaphor of weaponry is also apposite as the visceral boundaries of the virtual and real in this and probably other conflict situations make communication more than just an adjunct to warfare, but an act of warfare itself with tangible results as discussed earlier. This appears to be understood by participants on both sides from what I have observed from working with the Karen community. What is also interesting about this is how it can play out at a relatively localised level (in our case), but also how this is at the same time directed over a very long physical distance, taking the metaphorical form of a very long distance surgical missile strike. The fact that distant targets are seen as important (and threatening) to a regime, along with more localised resistance is also notable and the way that *inverse reach* can enable this kind of targeting is an interesting characteristic of digital warfare.

The Media landscape which Castells occupies attempts to be global but in terms of its reference points, it shows more interest in national media ecologies with a degree of freedom in the mass media and where forms of free speech are practiced. The case of the Karen occupying a number of 'zones of displacement' (Green and Lockley, 2012), means that their discourse (and its counter-discourse) operates within and through more than one type of medium. Nevertheless, Castells acknowledges that social and political activists '[...] think local, rooted in their society, and act global, confronting the power where the power holders are, in the global networks of power and in the communication sphere' (Castells, 2007: 249).

Another aspect highlighted by this idea of 'zones of displacement' is that it is important not to suddenly assume a seamless availability of communication channels to all parties. Although in some technologically equitable utopian future this may be the case, there

are particular barriers, some of which are political, but other which are very physical due to forms of incarceration, displacement or separation experienced by the Karen. There is also the kind of isolation that can result from limited education or economic means. It is also not confined to the virtual realm, which is acknowledged by Castells: 'Thus, the space of the new social movements of the digital age is not a virtual space, it is a composite of the space of flows and of the space of places' (Castells, 2007: 250).

The suggestions of autonomy as an aspect of mass-self-communication by Castells is less clearly demonstrated in the case of the Karen where the technology tends to be harnessed towards communally decided aims: 'Furthermore, the development of the technology of self communication is also the product of our culture, a culture that emphasizes individual autonomy, and the self-construction of the project of the social actor' (Castells, 2007: 249). Thus, the broad sweep of Castell's descriptive and explanatory frameworks diverges in some respects from the specifics of an example such as the Karen. This is partly to do with the focus on Western media and commercial ownership and its developing relationship to social media platforms. When examining the example of a more monolithic political and commercial culture in the case of Burma (Pederson, 2011) and the way this is reflected in the media of power and counter-power between the Burmese regime and the Karen played out on a global stage, some aspects stick such as the construction of autonomous networks (Castells, 2007). Nevertheless, Castells states in his conclusion that:

> *The twin processes of globalization and the rise of communal identities have challenged the boundaries of the nation state as the relevant unit to define a public space. Not that the nation-state disappears (quite the opposite), but its legitimacy has dwindled as governance is global and governments remain national. And the principle of citizenship conflicts with the principle of self identification...What scholarly research can observe is the attempt by the holders of power to reassert their domination into the communication realm, once they acknowledged the decreasing capacity of institutions to channel the projects and demands from people around the world.*
> (2007:258)

This is a correct assessment of the situation in Burma whereby apparent political reform generates a certain type of political message in the global media at the same time that lower-level cyber war continues, largely below the radar of mass media discourse, as is the case in the attack my colleagues and I experienced alongside the Karen community. The notion of influencing public opinion (Castells, 2007) is also quite important. There appears to be an assumption that successful communication can and will arise through convergent media when in actuality this is much harder to achieve through 'horizontal channels of communication'.

My own research certainly echoes Karatzogianni's suggestion that 'resistances need to become more conscious of their hosting environment if they are to be attempting conflict transformations in today's global politics in the era of fast virtual communications' (Karatzogianni, 2009: 145). However, in the case of the Karen this

refers to global hosting environment and technologies that are not specific to one nation state or its political, legal or regulatory structures. This also extends resistance communication and its 'inverse reach' to an international context.

One aspect of my research has made it clear however, that although there is an undoubted diasporic cohesion of families, friends, organisations and activities which are enabled through ICTs, the archaic and traditional activities based on physical movement and face-to-face movement (Green & Lockley, 2012), are still important and so even in a UK context lobbying of politicians is seen as a key activity (interview with Participant A, 2014) alongside the extended reach the new technologies allow for traditional rhetorical practices such as the KNU speeches which can be found on YouTube as part of Karen New Year events (Karen New Year celebration, Sheffield, 2014). These mix messages of goodwill and hope for the New Year with entreaties about maintaining cultural and linguistic identity along with urging of caution regarding ceasefires and the possible consequences of such agreements.

Karatzogianni (2004: 46) has suggested that there are two categories of cyberpolitical action: the first 'between two ethnic or religious groups' and the second between 'a social movement and its antagonistic institution'. With the Karen, their activities largely fit into the first of these and the focus is primarily on an ethnic identity with a focus on autochthonous claims. However, religion also sometimes becomes part of the mix. In fact, the notion of an ethnic group itself can be problematic and this is certainly the case with a constructed identity like Karen-ness (Harriden, 2002). Harriden suggests a focus on ethnic identity rather than ethnicity when looking at Karen nationalism and the KNU. She suggests that they should be understood as 'social units' in structural opposition to other units (Harriden, 2002: 86-87).

This is important when trying to identify the forces at work in an instance of cyberconflict / cyberwarfare like the one which we encountered: 'There is a joke amongst democracy activists in exile, that if you have three Burmese in a room, they will represent four organisations' (Cho 2011b: 202). The historic in-fighting which has characterised the formation and ongoing development of the KNU alongside other "Karen" groups means that representing conflict and its flashpoints in terms of a binaristic power-struggle between say a Burmese regime and a particular ethnic group only works at a broader and general level. This resultantly characterises the opposing sides as monolithic and heterogeneous in their aims, motivation and actual actions on the ground and is problematic. The outcomes of the attacks, may potentially benefit the Burmese regime in undermining the reputation and morale of a Karen community and its KNU membership, but directly attributing these to the regime is more difficult, and Karen 'in-fighting' cannot be entirely ruled-out. Nevertheless, the position of overseas 'cells' of Karen nationalists can be seen as a threat to the aims of the regime and this is partly to do with their location in democratic countries with potential access to ministries and diplomatic structures through lobbying and the 'free' media. This approach goes back to 1946 when a Karen delegation travelled to London to petition

the British government for Karen nationhood (Harriden, 2002). This illustrates the importance of what could be described as archaic communication methods. Namely, direct face-to-face discussions and the ongoing valuing of this form of communication. There is a strong cultural dimension to this: 'charismatic leadership was the most intense form of personal authority in a society where personal status relationships formed the basis of the social structure' (Harriden, 2002: 115). Danitz and Strobel (2001, 131) also highlighted the limitations and specificities of the affordances of online communication for activists in diaspora. It is interesting that their observations and predictions regarding the importance of lobbying and direct forms of communication alongside it made fifteen years ago, have proved largely correct when looking at current practices (interview with Participant A, 2014) and also in the light of new formats and forums which have been enabled by modern social media platforms and digital two-way communications media such as Skype.

> *While the role of the Internet is important, it is not a replacement for other forms of interaction and communication. But it is a powerful supplement. Traditional face-to-face lobbying is still more effective than computers. In addition, using the Internet has inherent limitations for grassroots activists. Its use is limited to those who have access to the technology, and its openness allows information to be manipulated by those holding opposing points of view* (Danitz and Strobel, 2001: 131)

In addition, their comment about manipulating digital information which is out there, prefigures the concept I have introduced of 'inverse reach', which allows the technically adept in opposition to a set of views to subvert the message and channels being used by activists to attack or counter-attack them.

Danitz and Strobel (2001) focused on the overall movement opposing the Burmese regime and not specifically on the Karen, but it is clear that the tactics and strategies being used are similar, and are often collaborative, especially more 'traditional' methods of campaigning (interview with Participant A, 2014). This is still the case where the international diasporas in exile from Burma cooperate more than is the case with exiles closer to Burma such as the refugee camps in Thailand. Where the practices of Karen diverge from Strobel and Danitz' observations (2001) is that there is not a predominant use of English in communications. There appears to be a predominance of Sgaw Karen as the dialect of resistance, although other dialects are sometimes used (interview with Participant A, 2014). Despite the clearer sense of common cause which appears to occur with physical distance from Burma, ethnic differences still create fragility in those campaigning relationships and this was highlighted in the cyber-attack we experienced, where the initial blame was directed on ethnic lines towards locally-based ethnic 'Burmans', although it later became clear that it was probably the same ethnic group which was conducting at least some of the attacks and that these were coming from Thailand.

There is an interesting dichotomy in the Burmese regime's approach to ethnicity, apparently seeking to unify a sanitised and safe version of ethnic identity aligned to a

Burmese nationality and common Burmese values (Cheeseman, 2002), which represents a project of national identity construction on the one hand. At the same time, it aims to 'divide and rule' by employing any ethnic religious or political rifts which exist within social or ethnic groups including setting Burmese activists against the Karen. In contrast to this, Danitz and Strobel (2001) pointed out that the function of online communication in the form of the Internet tended 'more than any other technology, it permits its users to create and sustain far-flung networks based on common interests or concerns of the members, where none existed before' (Danitz and Strobel 2001: 134). This also illustrates the utility of pragmatically based alliances, which are attached to broader causes of Burmese democratisation. This is despite a historically-based ethnic suspicion held by the KNU towards people from the Burman ethnicity, the evidence of which we saw when we were cyber-attacked. My research participants have also openly acknowledged tensions that have existed historically between different factions of the KNU and also against other Karen groups such as the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Organization Army (DKBA)

Another factor which appears to be current is that despite more diversity and sophistication in the digital communication 'weapons' available to activists, it seems clear that whereas in the 1990s, when the activists outside Burma were very successful and effectively ahead of their quite insular opposition in many ways forcing Pepsico to leave Burma and getting the ear of the then president of the United States (Danitz and Strobel, 2001), the public relations battle in the global and horizontal media appears to be tipping away from the activists. The apparent moves toward democratisation in Burma and the associated public relations the Burmese government are conducting (interview with Participant A, 2014), has taken the initiative present in the earlier days of the Internet and has reduced the online effectiveness of overseas campaigners. The overall "noise" created by blanket prevalence of multiple channels of digital communication also appears to be a problematic factor in achieving effective communication. In addition, the cease-fires which have been declared in Burma create a cold-war situation where opportunities have arisen for Burmese interests to erode previously existing unities against the Burmese regime amongst groups like the KNU.

Conclusion:

In relation to the ideas of Castells, although the sweep of his ideas map the nature and modes of political communication in a general sense which claims globality, there is limited value in using these to explain and understand a situation and events which occur outside the traditional media paradigms of the West or alternatively cross from the West to the East crudely speaking. Castells does allude to this, but Asian geo-politics appears to occur as largely 'othered' in his discourse and case studies he uses regarding power relationships and media use. Ideas of mass self-communication almost seem out-of date when looked at in relation to the observations of Danitz and Strobel (despite the

fact that these were made several years previously). In particular, the trends I have observed seem to show that the development of "social media" as an effective medium of mass-self-communication in my case study is limited to relationship building and community cohesion amongst the largely "converted". The growth of knowledge by those in power about the role of social media in a broader approach to public relations and the skirmishes on the periphery of its discourse, has meant that although this is something which is apparently predicted by Castells, it may be further advanced than is proposed. Therefore in media terms, a swing back towards the previous status quo of power relations in a media environment is well underway. It is therefore for the disempowered populations at large to try to keep up rather than the proposed cyber-enabled leadership from the masses, which more utopian visions of the current media landscape appear to predict.

> *However, the Internet does not guarantee the success of international grassroots campaigns aimed at social or political change. It is a powerful tool when used to organize far-flung activists; to rapidly share news or replicate successful strategies from one location to another; or to focus activists on a single, well-defined goal. Traditional approaches, such as face-to-face lobbying and "retail politics," remain vital to success in many political campaigns. In addition, reliance on the Internet brings risks of electronic sabotage, monitoring, or disruption by opponents.*
> (Danitz and Strobel, 2001: 169)

I have used the notion of the organisation to talk about the KNU and its Karen constituency and this is interesting in the sense that the organisation is diasporic and global in nature relying increasingly on modern communication technologies. In addition to this, its existence has become less reliant in recent years on physical places to locate itself. Nevertheless, a key finding of this research indicates that the dynamics of geographical proximity appear to play a stronger role in peacetime than in a time of war and conflict in terms of the kind of influence overseas diasporas can have over decisions, deals and processes being made when local channels of communication are being opened up in Burma and the border territories. As my key UK Karen community research informant said to me in relation to the peacetime dynamics 'cold blood is more dangerous than hot blood' (interview with Participant A, 2014)

What I have concluded from my review of campaigning activities by Burmese Karen both in a historical context and more recently in my 'own backyard' is that:

Tried and tested methods of communication should not be discarded by grassroots or minority activists in the face of apparent utopian claims made for new digital affordances and technologies. There is actually an indication that in some respects for political campaigning in this context, the potential for these technologies to influence is receding. There are specific functions of digital communication to achieve useful and beneficial aims in diaspora, but these are not necessarily 'military' or militant and in fact are more likely to provide cohesion amongst groups with pre-existing cultural, social

and familial links. This is not mass-self communication in the sense suggested by Castells.

Apparent control and empowerment provided by new technologies may be illusive. When using media for warfare or perhaps for more innocuous PR purposes, activists may actually create 'ammunition' for opponents. Targeted attacks on specific communities or 'audiences' have a high impact by attacking identified weaknesses and in some cases reifying discourse in a devastating way by connecting to lived experience in the victims.

It is possible that a new enemy of much more complexity than the monolithic *tatmadaw* is now emerging and this is modern style Asian commodity capitalism. This clearly presents problems for activists in exile as post-ceasefire co-opting of political and military leaders leaves the exiles with a much less clear role and this is possibly where face-to-face communication potentially wins out over the apparent closeness and cohesion enabled by ICTs. There is a question now about how the organisations will reconfigure and re-align along with their communication practices and discourses to fight for the control or perhaps framing of a discourse of ownership owing less to militaristic nationalism and more to postcolonial Asiatic capitalism. This also could bring their activism closer to the kind of movements which Castells focuses on and possibly some of the methods being used by those movements including international interventions. Issues of land-use, land-ownership and natural resources as commodities are rising quickly up the Karen agenda apparently in divisive ways. The previous paradigms were based on ideas of national self-determinism or perhaps political and ethnic autonomy. Communication practices amongst the Karen have been considered and designed within this rubric of *Kawthoolei*, but the fragility of which underpinned these previously adhesive notions are making themselves felt and the binary of state versus secessionist is now becoming much less clear. This seems likely to change the nature of the ways in which information is formulated, framed and fought-over by the Karen in coming years.

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