

**Communication practices of the Karen in Sheffield:  
Seeking to navigate their three zones of displacement**

GREEN, Geff <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2482-5256>> and LOCKLEY, Eleanor <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8257-9543>>

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**Asian Journal of Communication**

## **Communication Practices of the Karen in Sheffield: Seeking to navigate their three zones of displacement**

This study investigates communication practices of a newly arrived Karen refugee community in the UK who, as well as establishing themselves in a strange country, seek to keep in touch, campaign politically and maintain identity collectively through communication and contact with their global diaspora. We look at the technologies, motivations and inhibiting factors applying to the communication by adult members of this community and construct the idea of three zones of displacement which help to model the particular contexts, challenges and methods of their communication. We find that overall, they are using a wide range of internet-based technologies, with the aim to 'keep-in-touch' (personal contacts) and to 'spread the word' (political communication). This also includes archaic, traditional and hybrid methods to achieve extended communication with contacts in other 'zones'. We also identify the importance of the notion of 'village' as metaphor and entity in their conceptualisation of diasporic and local community cohesion. We identify the key inhibitors to their communication as cost, education, literacy and age. Finally, we speculate on the uncertain outcomes of their approach to digital media in achieving their political aims.

**Keywords: diaspora, displacement-zones, communication, refugees, digital divide, identity, counter-power, economic migrants, autochthony, inverse-reach**

### **Introduction**

Diasporic communication has strong and weak links. In the case of the Karen, (who originate from the border regions of Burma and Thailand) these links pass from the developed world through developing countries with their infrastructural and institutional barriers to the undeveloped world of jungle-based villages with only the most tenuous links to a centralised communication infrastructure. These can be characterised as three distinct zones each with its own specific characteristics and communicative affordances, which are discussed in this article and which provide the boundaries across, and within

which, attempts to communicate and to keep in touch are made. The characteristics of these zones reflect the particular historical and geographical circumstances of this group which has taken them from largely village-based communities to Thai refugee camps and then for some, to various locations in the West. Within this framework we also look in more detail at the purposes and range of methods for intra and extra-community communication which characterise the trans-global Karen diaspora. We will demonstrate through discussion and modelling how, as refugees, the characteristics of their communal communication activities differentiate them in certain ways from economic migrants.

This is a study of a newly established immigrant community in the City of Sheffield in the UK. The community consists of Ethnic Karen who have gained asylum in the UK primarily through United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) relocation schemes after significant amounts of time in the refugee camps in Thailand near the Burmese Border and before that crossing over the border from Burma into the camps.

Our study demonstrates the importance and relevance of modern communication amongst one dislocated community. It also highlights the relatively limited communication opportunities which exist for maintaining links and relationships in some non-Western, or more authoritarian societies, thus necessitating hybrid communication solutions which combine the newest social media in the West such as Skype and YouTube, but rely also on methods which are thousands of years old such as hand-delivered letters and memorised messages with all the unreliable aspects of these channels. It also highlights another inhibitor which is the deliberate decision, in some circumstances, not to communicate.

Our contact with the Karen community has revealed how local as well as the inter-local communication, often enabled by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), are not just used for maintaining communication with correspondents in other regions, but are important parts of maintaining ethnic identity in a foreign land.

Through a community journalism training project we ran for the Karen refugee community in Sheffield, we secured a unique opportunity to work with them. Up until now, very little research has been conducted about the communication by the Karen in diaspora from a UK standpoint and so this study is a first step in filling that gap. It is first useful to provide some background and guide to some relevant literature.

## Literature

There is a growing body of literature dealing with migrant communities in diaspora which are a product of the many facets of modern-era globalisation and the various issues such as identity and integration which arise from these (Hyndman & Walton-Roberts 1999; Nesdale 1998; Marranci, 2011). Some seek to theorise and categorise these issues and phenomena (Clifford 1994; Shuvall 2000). Of particular interest to this study is what Clifford calls “utopic diasporism” (Clifford 1994, p.312) and this refers to the remembering and creation of an idealised homeland. This aspect seems particularly important amongst Sheffield’s Karen community and relates to the idea of the 'village'.

Perhaps the term 'Karen' needs some examination at this point, as it is a broadly-applied ethnic identification which in fact includes quite a large spread of linguistic, cultural, religious and ethnic groups. Clearly there is also some contestation with regards to the ownership and allegiance of the name 'Karen', for instance when considering or discussing the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army (DKBA) who are Buddhist Karen fighting with the Burmese military against Karen National Union (KNU) (Cheeseman, 2002). However, it has recently become even more complicated than this with factions of the DKBA joining forces with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2011). Thawngmung (2008) points out that the majority of Karen actually live in urban or semi-urban situations outside the Karen state. They have a much looser political engagement than the Karen refugees towards the aims of the KNU and the action of their military wing the KNLA.

The parallel growth of physical communications such as relatively affordable intercontinental flights and the new digital communication media has increasingly affected the behaviour of migrant communities and the interests of those who are studying them (Castro & González 2008; Cho 2009; González & Rodriguez 2009). Some of the ideas relating to Social Media in particular are still emerging as we discover what people think the new media are for and make decisions on how, and for what purposes they use them with both positive and negative effects (Wilding, 2009). Debates on the nature of global digital divides also have an impact on our study; particularly in relation to theorising ‘displacement’ (Chen & Wellman 2004; and Pick & Azari 2008). Such accounts tend to have a technocratic focus and tend to assume a stable civil environment, although Pick and Azari (2008) do make some useful observations which equate to our study about the indirect communication benefits for

remote communities through intermediaries. These accounts provide useful overviews of the issue of global digital divides, but don't necessarily include the inhibitors characteristically dividing the victims of conflict and internal oppression.

Theorising communication by this community in diaspora requires understanding issues around their ethnic, religious and political identity, plus the colonial and postcolonial history of modern Burma and its specific impact on the Karen and other marginalised and contested groups (Aldrich, 1999; Heikkilä-Horn, 2009; Thawngmung, 2008). It also requires examining models of power and resistance in a networking society (Castells 1996; Castells, 2007). Castells' (2007) concept of the development of horizontal networks of interactive communication and the idea of mass self communication and counter-power is useful to this work. This is because the enabling aspect of digital communication technologies providing potential for counter-power reflects the efforts of the Karen community to utilise this media and to gain media literacy in order to be more effective in this realm.

Although our key sources in research are the Karen community themselves, the following sources have also been valuable in shedding light on our observations. Work by Dudley (2010a) with Karenni refugees provides useful points of reference through her accounts of a longer term study of a community with similar characteristics and under similar circumstances in Thai refugee camps. She provides some theoretical framing which is helpful in interpreting our own data and direct experience with Sheffield's Karen community.

Unpublished work by Cho (2009) presents an ethnicised methodological model, insights, and qualitative data on a similar set of refugee communities in Auckland, New Zealand. Cho's (2009) work provides intergenerational examples and profiles which helps to provide comparison and validation of our own findings: the study presents many similar findings to our own in relation to the communities' composition, preoccupations, motivations, issues and digital practices. Clearly, community cohesion is an important factor in identity and the Karen's' trans-global Diaspora presents challenges to the communication which is necessary to maintain links and thus sustain a sense of identity and belonging. Cho's study (2009) indicates the importance of language and thus online media in a familiar language is important, whether this is in the form of downloaded music files or news. Cho also mentions the motivating factor of political communication in maintaining hope through monitoring websites and social media providing Burmese pro-democracy discourse and more specifically Karen National Union (KNU) activities. Cho's

observations have helped to verify similar findings relating to the Sheffield Karen community's communication activities.

Kuroiwa and Verkuyten (2008) also provide some valuable insights into the complex processes and issues around the construction of Karen identity such as the playing down of ethnic and religious diversity in the articulation of pan-Karen political campaigning, rather than taking a broader anthropological view representing communities from Sgaw, Pwo, Paku and white Karen and which incorporates people with Buddhist and Animist components. This highlights the utility of a common enemy in terms of the Burmese regime along with these other constructed markers of common identity which apparently are used to promote and encourage a sense of common Karen identity.

Horstmann's (2010) work has extended the views of Kuroiywa and Verkuyten (2008) about Karen identity into the contentious area of Christian domination of the politics of Karen nationalism. Horstmann (2010) highlights not only the religious diversity within what are collectively known as Karen, but provides an explanation of the religious structures and practices which underpin political and to some extent military campaigning by the 'Karen'. This relates directly to our own observations of the ambition by certain members of the community to use media as a kind of weapon in their struggle. The predominance of Christian Karen (particularly Baptists) in Sheffield is illustrative of the intensity of evangelical missionary work which has happened in the 'Hill Tribe' and border regions of Burma over a considerable period of time (Horstmann 2010b).

There is limited literature specifically focusing on Karen / Burmese diasporas using ICTs and this makes Cho's (2009) work particularly valuable at this time. However, other current research helps to highlight key issues. The work of Castro and Gonzalez (2008) provides a scenario of migration which differs from the one which we are looking at in significant ways, but serves to highlight both similarities and differences which exist when looking at different communities in diaspora. The community they are scrutinising are voluntary economic migrants rather than refugees. Thus, compared to the subjects of their Mexican / US study, the Karen refugees have double or even triple displacement which often profoundly disrupts communication with family and friends. Also, the family units and global divisions within families differ between the two scenarios. Their study thus provides contrast to aspects of our own. Nevertheless, some motivational factors identified by Castro and Gonzalez which drive

communication such as homesickness, and maintaining a sense of community and identity, as well as connecting to a home region or village, are similar.

## **Methodology**

The opportunity to work with the Karen community in Sheffield came through a government funded project which provided basic ICT and journalistic training to adult refugees. Through working closely with the community we built a working relationship with them based on trust and regular engagement. We were able to gather information through our training sessions, but also through attending Karen community church services, fundraising events and other social or formal meeting events between May 2009 and February 2011.

When taking an ethnographic approach to a 'community' in an urban context who are not co-located, there are certain challenges to establishing a consistent engagement with them in terms of access. A key challenge was language. The project made use of interpreters / translators to build longer term relationships over a significant period of time, and key community representatives who had proficient English language skills were also helpful as they were able to translate / contextualise their own experiences in ways meaningful beyond their own cultural context. Relying heavily upon translators is a limitation of this work in terms of evaluating the overall discourse of the community and so in addition to our use of interpreters, we have also drawn upon community gatekeepers and respondents to provide us with information.

Data was also gathered through using interviews from work within our training sessions. Our 'students' interviewed each other using their new-found digital recording skills. Some of the interviews were conducted in English whilst others were conducted in Burmese or Karen dialects (usually Sgaw) and then translated either by the 'students' themselves or the translators.

Although we were primarily looking at communication networks and practices distinctive to this community with a focus on the affordances of digital technology, it was also necessary to get a broader sense of the issues which were important to them. Therefore, unstructured and semi-structured interviews were also conducted with community members who spoke English outside of the training session parameters. These respondents were useful transmitters of knowledge due to higher levels of formal education and language ability than some other members of the community. These 'gatekeepers' were aware of the issues in the community and had grasped that their role



provided important intercultural communication function through their good command of English. However, it is important to highlight that we do not underestimate the value of the input of other community members who collectively and individually provided us with valuable perspectives regarding their own values, aims and challenges - through translation.

From an ethnographic point of view, it was only possible to achieve a limited amount of penetration into the Karen community due to its dispersed nature. There were only a few occasions when it was possible to observe collective behaviour - either in individual family situations or at events such as the church services or sometimes fundraising events and annual celebrations such as Karen New Year. This difficulty in itself is illustrative of the necessity for communication channels and has led to making use of the following approaches to understanding the community:

- interviews
- observation
- collective discussions
- media produced and provided by members of the community which illustrate interests, attitudes, preoccupations and practices.

As well as not being able to observe and engage with the whole community on a day-to-day basis, we were aware of the issues raised by our own overt intervention. While complicating the analysis of findings, it did represent an honest and ethical interaction with the communities by offering them help and enabling them in areas which they were interested in developing without any pretence of a 'scientific detachment'. This fitted with Cho's (2009) *tapotaethakot* methodology. Cho convincingly proposed this indigenised methodology which is sympathetic with the cultural practices of communication and exchange of information in Karen culture in particular. This rings true with our own experience of working with this community and although we didn't have the same type of relationship with them as Cho did with her contacts in terms of shared language and culture at the outset, the notion of exchange, trust and disclosure characterised our approach in working with them.

Our intent to maintain an equitable and supportive relationship with the community meant that we abandoned one of our initial hopes to conduct a survey of their communication practices as the community were not happy to do this. This was primarily due to resistance to anything which could be interpreted as surveillance after

their experiences of oppression and state control in Burma and to some extent in Thailand. For some of them, lack of confidence in the use of English was also an issue.

Another area of intervention involved encouraging some of the women to attend our training sessions. We were successful in this and it allowed a better insight into their preoccupations, roles, histories and practices by gender. Having male and female participants also provided a much richer range of perspectives and group dynamics in our sessions.

One element of our methodology allowed for our students to produce pieces of work which provided some insight into what they valued, but also what they thought we would value with regard to reporting on their own lives in Sheffield. They did this through interviewing each other and also through creating short audio packages and a five minute film. This work gave us insights into their issues in the UK around self-confidence, language skills, education, keeping in touch, finding employment, relating to the local population and telling of stories. The stories became quite a significant part of their output, reporting on issues ranging from personal 'potted' biographies, past political events, oppression by the Burmese military, keeping in touch, and everyday life in the refugee camps.

### **Key Findings**

The data gathered from the project and research provides helpful insights into how and why the Karen community in Sheffield make use of ICT. We have found that there is quite a wide range of media usage by this community ranging from mobile and landline phones to technologies enabled by broadband internet such as Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP), Skype video, Facebook, email and Karen news and media based websites. We found that the range of media used is dictated by experience, education, confidence, role and age. It also helps us to understand the enablers and barriers to use.

In this section, we will outline the types of communication undertaken, the motivations for communication and the inhibitors. We also clarify the particular complexity of the communication paradigm which confronts the Karen through modelling the three displacement zones which illustrate the unique set of different conditions across which and within which the Karen have to negotiate their diasporic relationships, share information and thus to 'keep in touch'.

The key motivations for keeping in touch are:

- passing on and catching up on family / village news
- liaison for political campaigning
- making financial arrangements
- religious networking & arranging charitable relief work
- maintaining a sense of Karen identity

Whilst the key barriers to use are:

- financial in terms of costs of travel, services and technology
- issues with inter-zonal communication infrastructure
- political oppression and internal displacement
- education and technical literacy
- trust

### ***Motivations***

Over time a key driver has developed amongst the Karen which is to attempt keep in touch with family and friends and maintaining the Karen sense of 'village'. On the one hand the Karen have become accustomed to movement in dislocation having been forced to move by the military actions of groups like the Burmese army (*Tatmadaw*) often more than once before eventually crossing the border into Thailand (Thawngmung, 2008). However, a movement to the UK is a much greater change in certain respects than the movement into the refugee camps where they would be surrounded by their compatriots. In Sheffield, the community is dispersed based on availability of accommodation. We found that the need for keeping in-touch therefore becomes of paramount importance, both locally and internationally. The types of media being used to do this are various – for example synchronous and asynchronous social media, email, VOIP and telephone - and keeping in-touch is also extended to physical visits via road, rail and bus between the UK Karen communities in the cities of Sheffield, London, Bury and Bolton. Economics is a key driver behind choice of transport. This is also the case with other forms of communication, where even in a digital age of apparently ubiquitous communication technologies, barriers of expense still have an impact (Pick & Azari, 2008). The Karen tend to refer to the phone

technologies they use as VOIP. The availability of computers within the community in Sheffield seems mixed, although their primary use for children's education seems to be widely understood.

### *Characteristics of Communication*

Like many other communities in the world today they experience physical dislocation, but as first or second generation, they still maintain a sense of autochthony and village relationships which are not necessarily embodied in the physical opportunities they have to communicate.

Barriers include cost in some cases, but also simply a lack of availability of communication channels, particularly in Thailand and Burma. Where these do exist, they are sometimes severely limited, either by the lack of infrastructure in Burma's Karen territories, Burmese control of media in the more developed areas and the limitations on communication imposed by the Thai authorities, with perhaps only one Thai-run communication centre in a refugee camp.

Ironically, as the community gets further from their homeland or the long term refugee camps and reach the Western world, communication amongst them becomes easier and so there is a number of 'super-communicators' who are on the one hand twice displaced, but on the other are much better placed to keep in touch with:

- other Karen in the 'West' who are of Karen Diaspora
- some within the refugee camps
- occasionally those on home 'Karen soil'.

One example we encountered of a Karen super-communicator is a political activist, using an array of technologies which would not have been available only a few short years ago. He / She uses Skype to video conference mainly social / family contacts in the West ie. Canada, USA, New Zealand, Australia and the Northern European Karen communities. However the boundaries between membership of social and activist networks are somewhat blurred and overlapping – there seems to be a social as well as a political function in the networking which has as much importance for social cohesion around a Karen identity as it is about the causes themselves. Skype is also used more formally for audio-conferencing to conduct discussions amongst members of the European Karen Christian network. The respondent also uses the technologies of

landline, mobile and email, but not social networking sites such as Facebook which seem more popular with the younger community members and appear to be used for more social purposes and identity-making of a different sort, although these youth activities are outside the scope of our particular study.

The diasporic location and circumstances of the Karen can be described more specifically in the following terms. Between them exists a technologically diverse social, political and communication network made between individuals in different regions incorporating:

- refugees in camps on the Thai / Burma border
- overseas refugees in other countries (e.g. USA, Australia, Japan, New Zealand)
- refugees and migrant workers living outside the camps in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore
- internally Displaced Karen living in Burma in urban centres (those internally displaced people (IDPs) outside urban centres would be almost impossible to contact)
- Karen still occupying their traditional urban or rural homes in Burma.

The Karen community based in Sheffield consist entirely of ‘voluntary’ migrants to the UK through the UNHCR resettlement scheme. However their displacement from their homeland cannot be seen as uniformly voluntary. Because the community we have been working with are focused on keeping in-touch with contacts in the refugee camps and in Burma, we have less clear insight into the communication with voluntary migrants working in Thailand and Malaysia for instance. These voluntary migrants are not necessarily escaping warfare, but do not necessarily have legal status in the countries they live in. This also tends to mean that they are less politicised (or less able to engage politically) than their counterparts with refugee or resettlement status (Thawngmung, 2008). Their situation is much more similar to those in Mexico which we discuss later and although we refer to them as part of the Karen Diaspora, they are not the main focus of this study as we have had little opportunity to study people with this particular profile in the UK. However, it appears that there is limited overlap between these different communities partly due to the different circumstances underlying their migration, i.e., economic migration versus forced migration. This is an

area which deserves some further study as although this general distinction can be made, there is bound to be a certain fluidity between these categories and also (as we mention in our study) a certain amount of communication between ‘refugees’ and ‘economic migrants’ occupying the different zones which we illustrate in our model.

For students undergoing our Media training, working closely with computers presented some interesting and regular opportunities for the participants to show us websites which they used and issues which concerned them. Their own monitoring of websites and general networking meant that they were often aware of issues before they were being widely reported in the news media in the UK. One example of this was the imminent expulsion of Karen refugees from Thailand back to Burma. Another was when, they told us about an ongoing heat wave and drought in some parts of Burma which was not yet being widely reported in the UK. One site which was popular was *www.kwekalu.net* another Burmese language site was *irriwaddy.org*. For those who were illiterate, it would have been necessary to have the contents of these sites to be read or reported to them.

### ***Spreading the word***

A sense of ‘mission’ appears to be strong with the Baptist Karen. Communication skills have been a characteristic of the Christian Karen since the early days of their proselytisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and revolving around literacy, education and further missionary activity. Thus the idea of spreading the word appears to come easily to them.

It is clear that this community still carries a great deal of trauma of various kinds. They wanted to take these stories beyond their own community and communicate these to the wider world and wished to use the digital technologies they were working with to do so. Dudley mentions civilians travelling with soldiers to record destruction and interview villagers (Dudley 2010a). Several of our students (younger males) expressed their desire to return as ‘soldiers of information’ to report on oppression by the *Tatmadaw* and enhance the military / campaigning aims of the KNU through forms of journalism and reporting. This is a form of the counter-power enabled by internet-based new media proposed by Castells (2007). It was interesting that they understood clearly the value of their ‘digital weapons’ and the necessary skills to use them in a meaningful activity for themselves and their community. ICT was providing a purpose, an affiliation and a cause to which they could engage themselves without necessarily

being conventional soldiers, nor solely the 'Christian soldiers' which also might be implied in their scriptures.

Like the dispersed nature of the global Karen Diaspora, the Sheffield group is also dispersed within the city. However, they are able to come together physically for certain community events and activities. On a more regular basis, their church services provide a sense of community cohesion and a regular social gathering. They also provide communication opportunities for exchanging news from 'back-home' and this can sometimes include visits from people who have recently been in the refugee camps such as *Maela* or perhaps in the Karen territories on the other side of the Burmese borders. These visitors might be missionaries of Burmese (probably Karen) or occasionally Western origin. There are also regular events which have a fundraising or celebratory function (or both) such as 'Teacher's day', a 'Wrist-tying' ceremony and 'Karen New Year'. Individual celebrations such as birthdays take on special significance providing a pretext for gatherings sometimes using people's homes or perhaps church halls. These normally take place on a Friday night or a Saturday. This also provides an opportunity to exchange news often derived through ICTs and has a function of providing extended fictive kinship relationships in the absence of certain family members. It also contributes to a local and extended sense of community or 'village'.

Political campaigning and networking is clearly an important communication function which goes beyond the political issues themselves. The international networking along with the format for events like Karen New Year provide cultural and religious expression combined with publicising the KNU's aims and highlighting human rights abuses in Burma in general. Because Karen identity is tied up with all of these aspects, the preparation, performance, participation (and eventually dissemination) of this event is an important opportunity to express, assert and to some extent mould Karen identity in a new country. There is also the knowledge that these events are occurring and being shared right across the world further evidenced by the many videos of these events placed on *YouTube* from places as far apart as Australia, USA and Singapore.

### ***Barriers and enablers confronting their community***

Social networking is used by those in their teens, twenties and thirties (with some older, more educated members also making use of these technologies) and it was

suggested to us that *Multiply* was a favoured networking site amongst adults, as the way it functioned, using private groups and personal email addresses, made it easier to bypass Burmese online surveillance and interference. This was our first indication that surveillance and the long arm of Burmese state oppression was still an issue for these resettled migrants in the UK and that although new media was potentially empowering, it might also be the case that it created an 'inverse reach' by the Burmese state towards the ostensibly 'liberated' refugees. This is the colonisation of the same technologies by the opposition, in this case supporters or employees of the Burmese regime, through hacking, disinformation and direct threats. This effectively modifies a channel for counter-power (Castells, 2007) into opportunities for this inverse reach, by their adversaries, across national boundaries. This means that counter-power using social media, rather than representing straightforward political empowerment, ironically opens up a new channel for the delivery of the state oppression and fear which it seeks to oppose.

Thus we found that fear is also as a barrier to communication, in particular that the Burmese government are watching, despite this community being 'protected' as refugees in the UK. A particular type of interference which might occur was highlighted to us by one of our Burman students who described how, when using an internet cafe in Rangoon, the cursor on their computer started moving around without their her control. He/She said that this was a way in which the Burmese government would let users know that they were being watched and creating an atmosphere of fear without necessarily intervening with an arrest for instance.

Human carriers of messages are also important, i.e., personal spoken messages and letters. These are for the illiterate or as a method for those who want to avoid authorities as well as those who don't have access to technology. The inhibitor here is the lack of reliability of such messages and the time they take to deliver. Our respondents' accounts of these activities are supported by the work of Dudley (2010a) who describes in some detail the practices and function of cross-border communication and movement between refugee camps in Thailand and villages in Burma.

Direct communication can also break down for very long periods with people in Burma not being contacted, sometimes for their own safety, and participant cited their own situation, where some close relatives haven't been contacted for nearly 40 years. This in turn can become the source of a breakdown in trust as they pointed out that it is not easy to tell, when only getting anecdotal information or rumours (the most tenuous



form of one-way communication), whether these relatives have ‘flipped’ and are in some way working in the service of the Burmese regime. It turns out that most of the subject's brothers and sisters are located in Western countries (although different ones). The fact that they are in different countries highlights the fractured nature of the ongoing displacement process and its impact on families. It also highlights the need for communication and networking which is aided and accelerated by new information and communication technologies when taking place in a zone with similar technological and political affordances.

Ironically, these long periods of non-communication may take place in cases of relatively close geographical proximity, whereas relatively seamless communication takes place between other contacts who are separated by very large global distances, but who are able to see and talk to each other with relative ease and at low or no cost. This indicates the kind of digital divide which exists especially between conflict and non-conflict zones combined with the economic and infrastructural differences which seem to arise in such instances. It also demonstrates the need for a descriptive model which highlights the very different communication characteristics existing within the zones occupied by the Karen.

We found that economic factors challenge every aspect of refugees’ lives and communication is no different. Because of the inconsistency of their collective communication ‘grid’, it costs a lot to call someone who only has access to a landline, even making use of VOIP technologies. Often it is necessary to cover costs for friends or family at the other end in a Thai refugee camp for instance.

Communication networks are made complex and inefficient by the range of media used which range from blogs, YouTube videos, email, VOIP technologies used by the Karen in Western countries, to letters (sometimes delivered by hand) and spoken messages carried by pastors, fighters, relief workers etc. in Thailand and Burma. Sometimes very long periods of fracture in direct communication arise. One woman mentioned that the efficiency of the transport of information is mixed and can be broken at any number of points along the way. So for instance it is not unusual to find out that a close relative has died several years after the event (Cho, 2009). Although at other times, depending on the closeness of the Internet or telephony, the information can get to the UK, for instance, within a few days, as was the case with the death of the mother of one of the Sheffield community who was contacted via the internet from a Burmese internet café. However, this may have involved quite a long and hazardous journey for

the relative to get to the internet café which in some more militarised regions would be completely impossible.

Much of the communication is haphazard and opportunistic, taking chances when they arise, i.e., discovering that a missionary or NGO member is visiting a particular region and then getting an oral or written message to them (or even a photograph) to deliver to a particular person or group. An oral message in particular will be necessarily short and lacking in detail and therefore needs to be the “I’m alright, how are you?” kind of message. But there are risks in carrying physical media in Burma if the messenger is captured or interrogated. The key types of news are predictably universal, i.e., births deaths, illnesses and marriages, but also on another level these communications have the purpose of maintaining a sense of extended familial and ethnic linkage - an extended community through keeping in touch and maintaining a sense of ‘village’.

In discussing the global digital divide, Pick and Azari (2008) mention language as one inhibitor in disadvantaged communities and this was clearly a problem for some in Sheffield’s community. We found that learning potentially advantageous ICT’s was more difficult for them and basic bureaucratic tasks such as setting up an internet connection could be difficult without reasonable English. To some extent this ties in with literacy which is also an issue for some of the older community members.

Another aspect of working with the computers showed the range of skills which was large. It was clear that some of the older participants and the women as a whole only had basic computer skills and some had none at all. This demonstrated the limited ways in which these individuals could network and highlighted the importance of more conventional telephone technologies to keep in touch, although sometimes they would be helped by younger family members to use VOIP technologies. This observation about the younger and technically literate supporting the less able community members (especially older people) is supported by the work of Cho in New Zealand (Cho, 2009) who describes a similar situation.

### ***Modelling the Displacement Zones***

Through working with the Karen, (focusing on their communication practices, characteristics, motivators and inhibitors), we have modelled their global communication on the basis of occupying three distinct zones of displacement. We have defined displacement zones as referring to notional regions containing displaced people

with different characteristics and opportunities for interaction, both within and across their boundaries. Each zone is identifiable by its specific collective characteristics rather than specific location. Therefore, each of these three zones is geographically dispersed and yet collectively similar.

We have used the term *displacement*, as in each of these zones there are significant groups of people displaced from their place of origin or 'villages' where there is little or no scope for personal choice in leaving. In the case of the Karen and possibly other refugee populations who inhabit camps and who have also migrated further-afield, the notion of three zones appears to be applicable. Each zone has its own characteristics in terms of communication affordances and practices and these have a bearing upon communication within each zone and into the other zones.

Zone 1 equates with the Burmese state and, according to our informants, is a series of villages, towns and cities containing ethnic Karen living in their place of origin or as internally displaced people or IDPs. All of these are subject to the limitations to communication imposed by the Burmese state such as the banning of Skype in March 2011 and the prohibitive cost of phone and internet connections. In the case of the villagers and IDPs, only the most tenuous and archaic methods of communication are possible with a few exceptions such as where a phone line or an internet cafe is available.

Zone 2 is constituted of the refugee camps in Thailand containing refugees of Karen and other origins. They increasingly have characteristics of penal confinement, by limiting both physical and interpersonal communication in a similar way to punitive prison environments, although similarly to prisons, individuals sometimes find ways to evade the communication limitations. The situation in the refugee camps has an impact on the dissemination and transmission of messages and information despite these camps also being centres of political and religious activity for the Karen and also a fulcrum for communication with people still in Burma via messages carried across the border, by soldiers, refugees, NGOs and missionaries.

Zone 3 is comprised of Western and Asian countries. In the West, they are primarily refugees in New Zealand, USA, Australia, UK and various other countries in Europe. In the Asian countries where they are found, they are migrant workers; some with legal and others with illegal status. Because the Karen in this zone are not specifically confined or oppressed in the same way as those in Zones in 1 and 2, they have greater access to 21<sup>st</sup> century telephony, the internet and social media. However, as

we explained above - challenges such as cost, gender roles, education and language have a bearing on the extent to which people are able to make the most of the technological affordances within this zone.

(Figure 1)

We suggest that the identification of these zones is an important distinction in that the communication practices of other diasporas may only be seen to take place within one zone and be seen as globalised without significant differentiation in technical, administrative or political inhibitors across borders. Perhaps the case of the Mexican Diaspora which is mostly economic in nature can be cited here (Castro & Gonzalez, 2008) which can be seen to exist in a single zone despite crossing a national border. The zones don't necessarily equate with national borders as the term 'diaspora' assumes trans-national migration. We propose that it is the relatively common conditions of communication within each of those zones which place communicators within them.

Inevitably, visually modelling the characteristics of something as complex as communication between regions of conflict and authoritarianism, may lead to certain simplifications and possibly omissions. For instance, the communication from zone 2 to zones 1 and 3 could in fact be monitored and we have some anecdotal evidence that this is the case, but it is less clear who is doing the monitoring and whether this is driven by Thai or Burmese government activities. Similarly it is likely to be the case that archaic communication methods are used to some extent between zones 2 and 3. However, we have observed that these are not significant in quantity or significance compared to other forms of communication, other than between the 'economic' migrant communities outside the camps in Thailand and the inmates of the camps themselves.

It is clear that the challenges to communication go far beyond ideas of a technological internet-based 'digital divide' (Chen & Wellman 2004) either in a localised sense or a global sense. Many of the communication disjunctures are not strictly to do with infrastructure (although this is a factor). The political dimension is key to characterising the three zones and this has both an influence on the available technologies, but also the limitations of communication behaviour within the displacement zones. Our study has also illustrated the divide spanning the extremes of communication practice ranging across the zones from primary reliance on traditional

pre-literate, pre-technological practices right through to use of the latest social media in Zone 3. This gives us a more specific and nuanced ethnographic take on the challenging communication environment for refugees in general and specifically the Karen in Diaspora.

## **Conclusion**

Our study has allowed us unique access to a newly established Karen Community in the UK. We have identified some key aspects of the communication practices and motivations underlying their communicative activities and the acute challenges which confront them in both a communicative and overall sense. It is clear that both the need to 'keep-in-touch' to maintain relationships and influence their global diaspora is important to their sense of collective identity, political aims and wellbeing.

We have found that communication is conducted through often changing channels in hybridised forms which cross within and across different zones. This results in fractured communication which often means that direct interactive contact is not possible. We have modelled the disjunctures and varied communication ecologies as three zones of displacement. Although ostensibly unique to this community these zones seem likely to have similarities with other global diasporic communities whose movements are based on refugee rather than economic factors. This highlights the importance of differentiating our understanding of the communication practices of diasporic communities and finding both the commonalities and differences therein and not seeking to over-generalise diasporas as a whole.

In the case of the Karen, we have found that these zones represent quite different barriers in terms of government control, communication practices and infrastructures and thus require complex communication strategies in order for the Karen to maintain relationships and contacts across these boundaries. These include methods ranging from; the use of the most archaic forms of communication, requiring physical travel and memorised oral messages, to the use of social networking and video conferencing.

Their communication also serves to network and disseminate their own political causes. Attempts to gain individual and collective empowerment in the face of layers of disempowerment imposed by each zone of displacement also plays a part in the need to communicate with family and Karen organisations between these zones. This helps to maintain a sense of political, ethnic, religious and familial identity which comprises the Karen 'village'.

We have also identified some clear inhibitors to communication in this community. Some of these are to do with technological deficiencies within zones and across their boundaries. However, there is also deliberate non-communication in some cases, interference and intimidation by the Burmese government plus regulation and control of communication in the Thai refugee camps. Educational, gender and generational factors have been shown to play a big part in the roles undertaken with illiteracy and limited technical competence of some of the older community members, limiting some to basic (and more expensive) telephone technologies, whereas others are helped to engage with the broader sphere of ICTs by younger community members.

The final aspect of their communication is the desire to publicise their political causes beyond their own community and language groups or what we have termed 'spreading the word'. This requires a different kind of outward-facing mentality and approach which they are still developing engaging in activities of counter-power mentioned by Castells (2007). Although this is still quite well-developed in relation to the cause of the Burmese democracy movement in general, it is less developed in terms of the dissemination and networking of the political aims of the Karen as a sub-group of Burma's displaced and disenfranchised. This has also highlighted the existence of 'inverse reach' by the Burmese state from 'zone 1' into 'zone 3' which counterbalances to some extent the empowerment and counter-power which Western communication networks and technologies allow.

The Karen have shown a great ability to tenaciously adapt and maintain communication in changing and challenging circumstances both technologically and circumstantially over the last twenty years or so, but the limitations on the quality of inter-zonal communication will inevitably have detrimental effects. An important aspect of the separate zones or communication eco-systems as they currently exist is that they are likely to result in a drift and separation of relationships, aims and political stance between the zones. The process of inter-zonal influence is also inhibited. So, the freedom to network and communicate outside the other two zones may not result in keeping in step with their compatriots and ethnic cousins in Burma and the refugee camps.

Although the emphasis of this article is on understanding the characteristics and challenges of a specific community by modelling their communication, it is worth considering the practical significance and relevance of this research in terms of what refugee and host communities can learn from this study. Primarily, the enabling of

communication skills and education in the technologies available along with the implications and dangers of these technologies would be of great benefit. Our own media training project has highlighted the gap in knowledge amongst different segments of the community and the range of communication needs. These are not simply to do with community and family cohesion on a local and international basis, but include political, religious and organisation communication, public relations and journalistic activities. In terms of local and national policy, communication tends to be under-valued at the expense of more apparently basic needs amongst immigrant and refugee communities such as housing and basic welfare. Despite the inventiveness in the communities driven by the needs to keep in touch and apart from fairly isolated schemes such as our own media training for refugees, this type of activity is left to the community themselves. This results in the hybridised and largely ad-hoc approach to maintaining identity and linkages across the globe, but also limits the opportunities for the community to make meaningful connections within their host communities.

Eventually though, despite the Burmese government's strongest efforts to control communication and to create an illusion of democracy, improvements in the ability to network across these three zones using modern digital technology is likely to have profound political outcomes even if that has not quite been able to happen up until now. Although it could be said that pressure from overseas governments and international media exposure might have had an effect, recent political events in Burma such as the much criticised election could be moving the political process away from the achievement of the Karen's 'struggle' for a form of self-determination. The more integrated urban Karen majority in Burma may well be more central to future political developments of significance to the Karen than the KNU and associated military factions. Nevertheless, the growing numbers of refugee Diaspora living and operating in Western and Asian democracies with the social networking and communication technologies which the third zone has to offer are already having a certain impact in Burma and in the global awareness of what is happening in the country.

Whilst this study has provided an overview of the patterns of communication undertaken by the Karen diasporic community in Sheffield, we hope that researchers such as Cho (2009), with direct cross-linguistic skills would be able to study in more detail the specific content of websites and social media in order to gain a more detailed view of the developing online imprint which provides an important record and interface for worldwide Karen communities. We would suggest that such research might also be

able to put this in the context of specific varied identity-markers such as language, belief, political allegiance and ethnicity which problematise the collective term 'Karen'.

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