GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS, LOCAL CONCEPTIONS: 
HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE POLITICS OF COMMUNICATION 
AMONG THE BURMESE OPPOSITION-IN-EXILE

A Dissertation Presented to
The Faculty of the College of Communication of
Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Lisa B. Brooten
March 2003
This dissertation has been approved
for the School of Telecommunications
and the College of Communication by

Professor of Telecommunications

Dean, College of Communication
Acknowledgments

A project such as this is never the creation of a single person, and this work is no exception. Most of the people who made this study possible must remain unnamed, both for reasons of security and for the fact that naming them all would take pages. I am grateful for the support of Ohio University and for the Student Enhancement Award that made possible my fieldwork in Thailand and Burma. I am also grateful for the warm welcome to Thailand I received from my hosts at Bangkok University, and for their assistance during my fieldwork. I thank especially Dr. Mathana Santiwat, Dr. Rosechongporn Komolsevin, and Ajarn Srisuda Chongsithiphol for making me feel at home. I am also grateful to the Open Society Institute for the grant supporting research assistance that made possible the interviews with refugees from Umphien Mai.

I was fortunate throughout this process to have the generous support of the five exceptional faculty members who made up both my program and dissertation committees. Dr. Drew McDaniel deserves a medal for unfailing support, even at times when we disagreed, as well as for his willingness to read through some very rough drafts despite their verbosity. To him I am ever grateful. Dr. Mary Beth Krouse led me to the deep waters of feminist social theory, to which I return regularly and from which I find myself refreshed time and again. I have been lucky to have Dr. Gene Ammarell as both an advisor and friend during my years at Ohio University. To Dr. David Descutner and Dr. David Mould I owe many thanks for their unfailing support. Special thanks are due Dr. Elizabeth Collins for support and encouragement throughout my years at Ohio
University. I also wish to thank Dr. Steve Rubenstein for his considered responses to the many drafts of my work he read.

This work would never have developed the way it has without the companionship, intellectual stimulation, passion and commitment of Stephen Fessler. I am lucky to have found in him an editor extraordinaire and a partner both supportive and challenging on so many levels.

I owe much to all the people who helped me with this research in both Thailand and Burma. To the research assistants without whom the Umphien Mai interviews would never have been done - many thanks to Nant Bwa Bwa Phan, Naw Heh Blut Moo, Naw Ler Lah Khu Htoo, Naw Moo Moo Htoo, Saw Sam and Naw Hser Moo. I am grateful for the help of Naw Roslyn, Ko Mun Awng, Ko Yeni, Ko Pe Thet Nee, Sweet, and all of the women of the Karen Women’s Organization in Mae Sot and the Burmese Women’s Union in Mae Sariang and Mae Sot. Thanks as well to Brenda Belak, Jeanne Hallacy, Christina Fink, Mary O’Kane, and Patrick Pierce for their hospitality and assistance during my time in Thailand. There are many more people - in Thailand, the USA and in Burma - who took time to speak with me and welcome me into their homes and offices. I am grateful to all of them. I only hope that this work is in some small way a contribution to the realization of a home free of violence and fear for them and all the peoples of Burma.
Preface

It was the Burmese who taught me the importance of democracy. Before my involvement with the country I had very little interest in the operations of my own government, and even less in U.S. foreign policy. My passion as an undergraduate was with community radio, and I volunteered in many capacities at WXPN-FM in Philadelphia at the time that station was making the painful transition from a community-run station with an almost completely volunteer staff to a more professional-sounding station which found its market niche in world music and singer-songwriters. It saddened me to see the station lose its community staff - even then I was passionate about who had access to the airwaves and how this was limited, in this case by the constraints of the market.

My decision to travel to Thailand was large part whim. I wanted to travel and see more of the world, so in 1989 I left Philadelphia with my good friend Steve (to whom I am now married), our backpacks, and plane tickets to Bangkok. Stumbling upon a chance to volunteer as teachers in a camp of refugees from Burma living in Thailand, we never dreamed that we'd stay the two and a-half years we ended up staying, or that I would continue on to graduate school to study more closely the situation facing the people we met in the camp. Thirteen years later I am still fascinated by Burma and its people. Thus, although the field research upon which this dissertation is formally based was conducted in Thailand and Burma from October, 1999, through August, 2000, my involvement with Burma has lasted since my first introduction to the situation in late 1989 in the Huaykaloke refugee camp, home to Karen refugees from Burma.
As I learned more about these people and the situation they faced, I became angry about the situation the refugees had to endure - a situation not of their own making. After the first several months of teaching, Steve and I agreed to stay a full year. After that year, we moved to a smaller village along the border further north, called Pwe Baw Loo, where we helped develop the curriculum and taught in the opening year of the Karen Teacher Training College (KTTC), a project sponsored by the Karen National Union (KNU). During these years with the Karen, I came to appreciate a lot of things I had always taken for granted, such as the absence of war in my life, the availability of good food, and the chance to take a daily bath and drink unlimited quantities of clean water. I experienced things I had never experienced before in quite the same way, such as the power of community in times of trouble.

During those first years in Thailand I also met Burmese students who had arrived at the border just the year before, after the uprisings inside the country in 1988. I learned about these demonstrations and their aftermath, and about the students' flight to the border areas and their plans for the future. I found myself buoyed by the optimism they communicated in their enthusiasm for change in Burma, which back then seemed not just a possibility but an imminent reality as the Burman students allied themselves with the ethnic minorities for the first time in Burmese history. It was the hunger the Burmese students expressed for democracy, and the interest they showed in international news that made me realize how much I had taken my own democratic rights for granted, and how powerful they could actually be if engaged. It was this realization that caused me to rethink my involvement with the Burmese opposition. I was an English teacher, but I
believed I had skills that could be better utilized. I decided that graduate school would be a means for me to identify what those skills were and how to best make use of them. After several more years in Asia in which I worked to save money to return to school, I returned to the United States to begin a graduate program in the Fall of 1995. I completed my master’s degree in International Development Studies in November, 1997, by which time I had begun my doctoral program in telecommunications.

By the time I arrived back at the border in 1999 to conduct fieldwork for this dissertation, I had learned a great deal about the field of international development and its consequences around the world. Much of what I had learned was critical of the unanticipated consequences of "modernization" efforts by developed countries with aid programs in the developing world. I had learned about the disastrous consequences of structural adjustment programs and other efforts by major international monetary organizations working to bring developing countries into the global marketplace. It was with great interest, then, that I watched media coverage of the "Battle in Seattle," the massive street protests that took place during the meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle, Washington in late 1999. Coverage in the Thai press of the issues being raised by protestors was far more critical than any coverage I had seen of the WTO in the U.S. mainstream media. As the events of that meeting and the street protests unfolded, it occurred to me that they might have some relation to the work I was doing in Thailand, although at that point I could not yet see the connection. That there is a connection has become clear to me, and I will revisit these events in the final chapter of this work.
I dedicate this dissertation with great respect to all of those peoples of Burma working so hard to change the situation in their country. Yet I also offer it somewhat hesitantly, as it does not always portray the opposition movement in the best of lights. I hope that the perspective offered here will be useful for those in the movement willing to be self-reflective. It is also meant for those of us from other countries willing to take a critical look at how we may be doing more harm than good in our efforts to support the opposition struggle. I offer this dissertation primarily, however, to recognize and exercise those most valuable aspects of democracy - the space it provides for debate leading to change, and the potential it offers us all for recognizing our human differences not as threats, but as our greatest asset.
# Table of Contents

 Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................ iv

 Preface ....................................................................................................................... vi

 Table of Contents ........................................................................................................ x

 List of Tables ................................................................................................................ xiv

 List of Figures ............................................................................................................... xv

 Chapter 1. Burma: Violence in the Golden Land ......................................................... 1
 Statement of the Problematic ...................................................................................... 4
 Globalization and borderlands ..................................................................................... 5
 Power, the state and "ethnic conflict" in Burma ......................................................... 7
 The state and nationalism ............................................................................................ 9
 Structural violence and "ethnic conflict" ..................................................................... 12
 Militarization .............................................................................................................. 18
 Militarization in Burma ............................................................................................... 21
 Gender and ethnicity ................................................................................................... 24
 Militarized communication and media ....................................................................... 31
 Media and democracy ............................................................................................... 33
 Preview of the dissertation ......................................................................................... 39

 Chapter 2. Methods: Exploring the Interconnected Global and Local ...................... 43
 Site: Women's Issues panel, Free Burma Coalition Conference, Washington, D.C., October 1997 ........................................................................................................ 44
 The interpretive turn and the situated nature of knowledge ....................................... 48
 Methodological frameworks ....................................................................................... 50
 Site: Ohio University, Athens, Ohio ............................................................................ 51
 Ethnography: exploring communication technology and media use ..................... 54
 Guidelines for a multi-sited approach ......................................................................... 61
 Site: Thailand and Burma, 1999-2000 ....................................................................... 63
 Burma ......................................................................................................................... 64
 Mae Sot ....................................................................................................................... 66
 The ethnographer as circumstantial activist ............................................................... 71
 Culture and the "difference" of places ......................................................................... 73
 Site: Umphien Mai refugee camp .............................................................................. 75
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 3. Communication and media in Burma</th>
<th>91</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Brief History</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications, media and control, 1962-present</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student organizing and the underground (&quot;UG&quot;) leading to 1988</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990 elections</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceasefires and the ethnic minority opposition</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The loss of Manerplaw</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996 and 1998 demonstrations</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications in Burma today</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Censorship and fear</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easing restrictions, maintaining control</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father knows best</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covering a dead elephant</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cracks in the edifice</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsiders within</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shades of Gray</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Communication Dance: A final duet</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4. The politics of communication in the Burmese opposition</th>
<th>157</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mae Sot, the border, and the communications environment</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alien technologies: conceptions and preconceptions</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspicion/distrust</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics, human rights and the Burmese opposition</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burman students and politicians</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The turn toward nonviolence</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 9/9/99 campaign</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Burman leaders and ethnic media</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceasefires, national reconciliation, and invisibility</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women of the opposition</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and change</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 5. Opposition media</th>
<th>220</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spiders on the (World Wide) Web</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition media: a brief history</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The impact of NITs on opposition media</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Self-determination and ethnic minority media........................................ 237
Cultural survival.................................................................................. 239
Education............................................................................................. 241
Call to action...................................................................................... 241
Participatory communication.............................................................. 243
Human rights....................................................................................... 245
Media independence: a debate............................................................. 249
Unity and independence..................................................................... 250
Self-censorship.................................................................................... 254
Change................................................................................................. 257

Chapter 6. Militarization and rights in Umphien Mai refugee camp........ 260
Huaykaloke refugee camp, Thailand, 1989............................................ 263
The militarization of the Karen and Karen refugees................................ 266
The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)................................... 268
Attacks and resettlement..................................................................... 269
The gendered nature of communications and media use in Umphien Mai 274
Conversations...................................................................................... 275
Media use............................................................................................ 279
Women on the gendered conceptions of women.................................. 281
A state of backwardness...................................................................... 287
Constructing and interpreting stories, re-constructing lives.................. 289
Constructing stories: disrupted lives..................................................... 292
Interpreting stories: nonviolence, unity, and the role of outsiders......... 299
Nonviolence......................................................................................... 299
Unity..................................................................................................... 302
The role of outsiders........................................................................... 305
Re-constructing lives: using a discourse of "rights"............................... 309
Interpreting stories: Burmese Embassy and Ratchaburi Hospital incidents 313
Seizure of the Burmese Embassy......................................................... 315
Takeover of the Ratchaburi Hospital.................................................... 317

Chapter 7. Violence, invisibility and the international order.................... 325
Impact of NIT use and consequences of funding patterns..................... 333
Professionalization and foreign funding................................................. 336
Human rights discourse and democracy................................................. 339
Militarism, information and propaganda.............................................. 343
The commodification of information.................................................... 346
Dependency and neocolonialism............................................................ 348
Group vs. individual rights and the digital divide................................. 353
Human rights and political mobilization ......................................................... 355
Gender, militarization and peace ................................................................. 360
Concluding thoughts .................................................................................. 361

References .................................................................................................. 366

Appendix A: Umphien Mai introductory statement ...................................... 390
Appendix B: Umphien Mai interview protocol ............................................. 391
Appendix C: Introductory statement for open-ended interviews .................. 396
Abstract .................................................................................................... 397
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Timeline of Historical Events</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. List of Acronyms</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ethnic groups of Burma</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Burma and towns on the Thai-Burmese border</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mae Sot</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mae Sot</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. An opposition group office in Mae Sot</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Umphien Mai refugee camp</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Map Showing the Location of the 17 National Armed Groups That Have Returned to the Legal Fold</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Computer training session along the Thai-Burmese border</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Computer training session along the Thai-Burmese border</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Posters such as these adorn the walls in many opposition group offices</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Cartoon from <em>Kway K’Lu</em>, May 10, 1999</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Huaykaloke refugee camp, Thailand, 1989</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Children and soldiers in a boat on the Moei River</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. A house burns during the January 1997 attack on Huaykaloke refugee camp</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. A refugee and his son stand on the remains of their home</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Refugees hold a protest after an attack on their camp</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Writing on one of the few camp buildings still standing</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. <em>Cartoon from Kway K’Lu</em>, February 29, 2000</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Ethnic Groups of Burma.
Figure 2. Burma and towns on the Thai-Burmese border
Table 1. Timeline of Historical Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1824-1885</td>
<td>The British annex the territory that is now Burma in three campaigns: 1824, 1852 and 1885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Burman nationalists turn against the Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Independence hero General Aung San assassinated by a political rival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Burma gains independence from Britain; Karen rebellion begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Prime Minister U Nu asks General Ne Win to take over with a military-led Caretaker Government; military forms a new government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>General elections held; U Nu wins a majority and forms a new government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>The Burma Army led by General Ne Win overthrows U Nu's government and takes power in a coup; the 1947 constitution is suspended, and Parliament dissolved; the &quot;Burmese Way to Socialism&quot; becomes the ideological basis of the new regime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>All political parties except the government's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) are banned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>Periodic student protests against the regime result in university closures; continuing rebellion by ethnic minority groups; alliance of ethnic groups form the National Democratic Front (NDF) on the Thai border (1976)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>Offensives intensify against the Karen along the Thai-Burma border</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>First Karen refugee camps established in Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Government demonetizes 25, 35 and 75 kyat banknotes without compensation, leaving 75% of the country's money worthless; students riot in Rangoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Student unrest erupts in Rangoon, escalating into massive street demonstrations against the regime; thousands are killed when the army opens fire on unarmed demonstrators; students flee to border areas and form the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF); Burman and ethnic opposition groups form the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1989 Aung San Suu Kyi placed under house arrest and scores of NLD members arrested

1990 Elections are held; the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) wins in a landslide but the regime announces that a lengthy process will be required before the NLD can take power; National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) formed in exile

1991 NLD activists and elected Members of Parliament (MPs) form the National League for Democracy (Liberated Area) (NLD-LA) at the ethnic alliance headquarters at Manerplaw; ABSDF splits into two factions; Aung San Suu Kyi awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; students celebrate her award with demonstrations in Rangoon; universities closed "indefinately"

1992 Manerplaw Agreement between the NDF, DAB, NCGUB and NLD-LA on a common platform for a "federal union of Burma"; Burmese regime intensifies its offensive to capture Manerplaw

1993 National Convention convened to draft a new constitution

1994 Burma joins the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an observer; breakaway group of Karen form the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)

1995 Manerplaw falls to the Burmese troops; Aung San Suu Kyi released from house arrest; NLD withdraws from the National Convention citing lack of freedom of expression

1996 Student protests break out in Rangoon, but are quickly dispersed

1997 Burma becomes a full member of ASEAN; ethnic nationality groups hold a much-publicized Ethnic Nationalities Seminar, pledging to join hands with pro-democracy forces and Aung San Suu Kyi; the regime responds with intensified offensives against the Thailand border-based ethnic nationality groups; DKBA begins cross-border attacks on refugee camps

1998 Student protests break out but are quickly suppressed; tenth anniversary of the 1988 uprisings passes quietly

1999 The 9/9/99 date for the much-publicized "four nines" campaign passes quietly without anticipated massive uprisings
Table 2. List of Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAPP</td>
<td>Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABFSU</td>
<td>All Burma Federation of Students Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSDF</td>
<td>All Burma Students Democratic Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSPP</td>
<td>Burma Socialist Programme Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BWU</td>
<td>Burmese Women's Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPB</td>
<td>Communist Party of Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAB</td>
<td>Democratic Alliance of Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DKBA</td>
<td>Democratic Karen Buddhist Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPNS</td>
<td>Democratic Party for a New Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTUB</td>
<td>Federation Trade Unions, Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HURFOM</td>
<td>Human Rights Foundation of Monland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNPP</td>
<td>Karenni National Progressive Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNU</td>
<td>Karen National Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KSNG</td>
<td>Karen Student Network Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KWO</td>
<td>Karen Women's Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCGUB</td>
<td>National Coalition Government Union of Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDF</td>
<td>National Democratic Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLD</td>
<td>National League for Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLD-LA</td>
<td>National League for Democracy, Liberated Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPLO</td>
<td>Pao People's Liberation Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHAN</td>
<td>Shan Herald Agency for News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLORC</td>
<td>State Law and Order Restoration Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPDC</td>
<td>State Peace and Development Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWAN</td>
<td>Shan Women's Action Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WLB</td>
<td>Women's League for Burma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Burma: Violence in the Golden Land

Burma\(^1\) is a land of contradictions. Often dubbed "The Golden Land," the country is scarred with landscapes of scorched earth. Although most of the people of Burma practice the nonviolent tenets of Buddhism, the country is riddled with violence. During popular uprisings in 1988, the Burmese army reacted by firing on unarmed demonstrators, killing thousands.\(^2\) The military regime has since gained worldwide infamy for brutal human rights abuses. Violent conflict has shaped the country's history, most recently in the decades-long war between ethnic minorities and the central government. Burma, once known as the "rice bowl of Asia," was one of the region's richest nations.\(^3\) It is now one of the world's poorest. The International Monetary Fund has estimated that 30-40 percent of the Burmese people now live below the poverty line (as cited in Steinberg, 2001, p. 203). And despite the fact that the people signaled their desire for democratic change during elections in 1990 by sending the opposition party to a landslide victory, they are still governed by a military regime that has ignored these results and systematically destroyed civil society in the country (Steinberg, 2001).

\(^1\) The name "Burma" has taken on political connotations since the military government changed the country's name in 1989 to the Union of Myanmar. While the government claimed the new name is ethnically neutral and would provide a greater sense of national unity, the opposition movement opposed the name change, since it was made without consulting the people through a referendum. "Burma" has been the term preferred by the opposition. While the UN has accepted the name change, the U.S. has not, and the terms have become an indicator of one's political position in the struggle for control over the country. Since this dissertation focuses on the opposition movement, the term "Burma" will be used here. 

\(^2\) The number of people killed in 1988 is unknown, but according to reports published in the London Times and The Guardian, between 2,000 and 3,000 people were killed by riot police from the 8th to the 13th of August, 1988 (cited in Kraeger, 1991, p. 332). Estimates of the total killed during three months of unrest range as high as 10,000 people, including thousands of monks (Smith, 1999). 

\(^3\) Prior to World War II, Burma was an exporter of both food and fuel.
This study focuses on the Burmese opposition movement, which is struggling to counteract one of the most troubling contradictions of contemporary Burma - that while the country's peoples long for peace, they confront instead an environment of factionalism and violence. Ethnic minority groups have been fighting the central government since the country's independence from the British in 1948. At the time of massive 1988 democracy uprisings in Burma, nearly twenty insurgent forces were active over about one-third of the country, controlling vast rural areas (Smith, 1995). These ethnic insurgencies and the government's counterinsurgency operations have led to massive numbers of casualties\(^4\) and to the pattern of violence that perpetuates the longstanding distrust among the country's different peoples, especially between the Burmans and the non-Burman groups.\(^5\) Factionalism is also widespread within the Burmese opposition groups. By the 1980s, all of the major ethnic groups had some element of their population in revolt (Steinberg, 2001), and anti-government student groups and political parties have shown a tendency to expel members expressing minority viewpoints or "to fragment around leaders of uncompromising positions" (Callahan, 1998, p. 64).

The Thailand-Burma border areas have been headquarters to the opposition movement for decades, with alliances between ethnic minority nationalist groups forming and changing through the years. The resistance gained new impetus in 1988 when the border-based ethno-nationalist movements were joined by thousands of Burman student

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\(^4\) Since independence, "an average of ten thousand deaths a year due to insurrection may well be an accurate figure," according to Burma scholar Martin Smith (1995, p. 225).

\(^5\) The term "Burman" is used to refer to the ethnic majority of the country, while "Burmese" is used as an adjective to refer to the language and the various peoples of the country. Thus, an ethnic Shan, for example, is both Shan and one of the Burmese peoples.
activists who fled the country in the crackdown after the uprisings. A number of Burman opposition politicians arrived at the border after the 1990 elections as well, when a crackdown on the members of the winning party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), made it clear that the military regime planned to ignore the election results.

Between the time I first arrived at the border in 1989 and when I left in early 1992, the initial energy and optimism of the Burman students had begun to wane. Many of them had believed at first that they could topple the regime within a few years. During brief return visits I made to the border in 1992 and 1995, it became clear to me that people's frustrations were mounting. That there were long-held prejudices between the Burmans and non-Burman groups had become clear to me during my first stay along the border, but they seemed to have become increasingly manifest in explicit statements of suspicion between people of different groups. I had become aware of and disillusioned by these prejudices during my time teaching in the refugee camp and Pwe Baw Lu village, and they only seemed to be getting worse.

Adding to these tensions was the fact that the dramatic events of 1988 put long-forgotten Burma on the map for much of the world, and the struggle of the "democracy students" and their charismatic leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, became a cause celebre in the post Cold War ascendancy of the discourses of democracy and civil society. During the ongoing struggle to frame the post Cold War ideological debate, Burma and its opposition movement offer an interesting site for the study of the impact of global discourses on an emergent democratic movement attempting to unify a war-weary, multicultural opposition.
The arrival of the Internet also launched Burma onto the international political stage with a high-profile human rights campaign led in the United States by the Free Burma Coalition. This campaign was often cited as an example of a new cyber-democracy, initiated and carried out largely from outside the Thailand-Burma border area. On the border, however, the introduction of new technologies came a bit later. The fact that little has been written of their impact provided the impetus for this study.

Statement of the Problematic

I began this project with a desire to explore whether or not the introduction of new information technologies (NITs) was promoting a more inclusive public dialogue within the Burmese opposition movement that would help to ease tensions between different groups. The study set out, therefore, to explore the following questions:

What communications technologies are being used, and by whom, among the Burmese opposition groups based in Thailand?

How are NITs, specifically computers and the Internet, helping to reduce, maintain, or intensify ethnic conflict?

How are global media and the discourses they promote being used by the opposition and with what effects?

What implications do these issues have for political mobilization?

As the research progressed, I found I needed to learn about the differences in attitudes toward and access to NITs within the movement. This in turn led to a focus on
discourse and its uses, specifically on how conceptualizations of gender and ethnicity framed the ways people thought and spoke about their uses of media and communication technologies. In addition, although global attention to human rights and democracy has provided an important discursive tool for Burmese opposition activists, I examine how the discourses of human rights and democracy have been used with both liberating and oppressive consequences. This study is a multi-sited ethnography, conceived within the epistemological framework of standpoint theory, providing an empirically grounded exploration of the opposition movement in both its local and global contexts. It is to the global context that we now turn.

**Globalization and borderlands**

Globalization has led to an increasingly interconnected world, but also to the proliferation of localized conflicts. The rise of transnational corporations, the expansion of market economies, the growing strength of global military powers, the ability of new technologies to eliminate spatial barriers, and the development of an international legal system are all said to be undermining the sovereignty of the state (Featherstone, Lash & Robertson, 1995; Hall, 1991; Waters, 1996). The uncertainties caused by these global processes of deterritorialization have in turn led to the rise of fundamentalisms around the world (Appadurai, 1990), which Stuart Hall (1991) has argued are narrower, more defensive definitions of national identity, driven by an unusually aggressive form of racism. The end of the Cold War, which seemed to promise a respite from global conflict, has instead ushered in a complex variety of localized wars (Reed & Tehranian,
New patterns of regional conflict and escalations in armed conflicts within states now seem to be taking the place of more familiar forms of warfare between states (Jacobson et al., 2000).

This increase in localized warfare in conjunction with changes in the organization of the world economy have in turn affected global political geography, leading to an increased interest in border areas around the world. The increasing globalization of travel and communication technologies, large-scale migrations across borders, and the internationalization of trade markets have all contributed to a decline in what used to be the protective function of international borders (Herzog, 1990). The distinction between the "border" as a boundary between two contiguous states, and a "borderland" or "frontier" as a zone of contact and interaction between these states has become more pronounced. While boundaries are the legacies of history, in particular of colonialism, the borderland "is a lived and negotiated political phenomenon, flowing across the boundary in different forms" (Lang, 2002, p. 127).

To understand conflict in international border areas of the developing world, we must recognize the failure of states to provide for the equitable participation, representation and distribution of resources for all members of their populations (Rumley, 1991). In mainland Southeast Asia, the politics of nation-building have often marginalized and undermined the interests of border area populations, leading to the existence of armed separatist movements (McVey, 1984). The analysis of border situations can thus provide insights into intra-state conflicts, especially in the case of
weak states such as Burma, which cannot control their border areas (Grundy-Warr, 1993).

Yet to date the study of borderlands has not seriously addressed the role of communication and media in the deterritorialization of nation, politics, culture or human agency. The Thailand-Burma borderland, for example, straddles the boundary between two states with very different approaches to communications and media. Authoritarian Burma tightly restricts the flow of information, while Thailand is considered one of the freest communication and media environments in the region. This borderland, then, home to the Burmese opposition movement, is the site of struggle between the opposition movement’s efforts to democratize Burmese politics and the current regime's determination to maintain its grip on power. Before discussing the current situation, however, it is valuable to understand how the development of the modern state affected historical conceptualizations of identity and power in Burma, leading to an outbreak of conflict widely understood as "ethnic" in origin.

**Power, the state and "ethnic conflict" in Burma**

For more than 800 years, the people living in what is now Burma were ruled by absolute monarchs, from the establishment of the first monarchy in Pagan by King Anawrahta (AD 1044-1077) until the 19th century, when the British annexed the territory in a series of military campaigns. A sparse population and the resultant shortage of manpower meant that the pre-colonial political structure emphasized control over people as a resource rather than land. Interpersonal relationships were built on a series of
patron-client ties both with individuals and within institutions (Aung-Thwin, 1994). Power was organized hierarchically, from a "high centre" held by the king, whose legitimacy derived from divinity, moving outward to indistinct borders determined by the degree of protection offered by the monarchy (Anderson, 1991). There were as yet no political boundaries defining states in the form that we find them today. Allegiance was personal rather than to any ideology or institution, so that in the monarchy, loyalty was centered on the king of the moment rather than on the institution of kingship (Steinberg, 2001). Personalized loyalty meant that patron-client relationships were "highly developed" and in turn led to factionalism, since to be loyal precluded the possibility of opposition, and opposition meant ouster (Steinberg, 2001, p. 38).

During this time, different ethnic groups intermingled frequently, and at any given point in time there were large groups of the population undergoing acculturation (Renard, 1988; Smith, 1999). In the Burmese kingdom, rarely did political structures consist of a ruling center and a set of minority groups along imagined borders; the pattern was far more variegated (Renard, 1988). Identity was determined primarily by whether or not one was Buddhist, and secondarily, whether or not one was in alliance with the ruling dynasty. Culture was thus subordinate to religion and one's tributary status with the monarchy (Gravers, 1993). Losing factions in conflicts over the throne fled to states populated by people of other ethnic backgrounds. People moved around a great deal, as the shortage of manpower led to wars fought to obtain prisoners, and people moved away from areas controlled by unpopular rulers.
The colonial period changed the way the peoples of Burma conceptualized the state, its territory and its power structure. By destroying the monarchy, the British changed the very order of things. The introduction of the census and the map during the colonial period in Southeast Asia created new ways of understanding space and power (Anderson, 1991, Thongchai, 1994). Power became defined increasingly in terms of control over territory as well as people, and the census created new "identity categories" which became increasingly more racial and less religious in nature (Anderson, 1991, p. 164). The introduction of the map meant that the conception of sovereignty as emanating from a sacred capital outward to an unidentifiable boundary began to shift as people began to perceive sovereignty as more equally distributed within a bounded territorial space (Thongchai, 1994). The concept of the nation-state and national boundaries was thus introduced into Burma.

The state and nationalism

The modern conception of the state is of a public entity separate from those under its jurisdiction, a political apparatus involving land or territory. It is this complex political apparatus that distinguishes the state from the "nation," conceived of as an "imagined community" looming "out of an immemorial past" and continuing "into a limitless future" (Anderson, 1991, p. 11). Because the nation(s) and the state are often not contiguous, the state's existence depends on the generation of a national myth in which a dominant culture is produced and reinforced through the symbols created in written history, the mass media, the arts and popular culture (Satha-Anand, 1988). This
formation of a sense of collective "self simultaneously builds and is built upon identifying those "others" who do not fit the collective. This can result in tensions between different communities, since it "curtails the potentialities of those inside to reach out and relate to those outside as equal human beings (Satha-Anand, 1988, p. 39). As this occurs, relationships between this state-sponsored culture and other cultural forms become inequitable. It is this process out of which nationalisms are borne.

Nationalism is generally viewed as a negative phenomenon, but it is not a unitary or fixed idea. Although nationalisms have proven "chameleon-like" and capable of adaptation and reformulation, sociologist Anthony Smith (1994) has nevertheless identified some recurrent themes in the goals of nationalist movements (p. 198). These include the development of a national identity, the need for unity, (which is directly related to) intolerance for internal division, and the desire to appear as a big, happy family. Nationalism is therefore productive of the group identity and cohesion that are at times a people's only defense against oppression. Paradoxically, then, nationalism is at the root of conflicts attributed to ethnicity (and a main cause of the present plight of the world's refugees), while at the same time providing a means of self-assertion for oppressed or vulnerable groups.

During the colonial period in Burma, increasing attention was paid to racial and ethnic differences, so that religion grew to be less important than ethnicity as a source of collective identity. The British divided Burma into geographic areas distinguishing mountainous "Frontier Areas" and their tribal peoples from the peoples of the valley, more closely controlled by the colonizers as "Ministerial Burma" (Smith, 1999). Only
during the colonial period did it become normal to speak of various groups in ethnic terms "as if they were unified national groups with ancient historical antecedents" (Taylor, 1982, p. 8). Those in the highlands did not practice the religion of the lowlanders, leading the lowlanders to see the hill peoples as wild and ignorant (Renard, 1988). Religious and cultural differences divided people socially, but these divisions were not generally seen as political (Taylor, 1982).

The British encouraged this cultural segregation "as the criterion of internal political administration" which became a fundamental strategy of divide-and-rule and a means of legitimating British control of Burma (Gravers, 1993, p. 29). As a result, Taylor (1982) has argued that while ideas of separate ethnic identity may have already been present, there had previously been no reason or mechanism for their demarcation. With the introduction of the state structure in Burma, "regional and local hill leaders were now encouraged to begin to articulate their interests in ethnic and nationalist terms understood by the modern world" (Taylor, 1982, p.9). Nationalist discourse thus became the means through which the newly-defined ethnic minorities made their concerns known, and they were encouraged to push for separate rights, opportunities and powers phrased as "national" demands (Taylor, 1982, p. 10).

Although the British abolished the monarchy when they colonized Burma, the nationalisms that developed during the British period, as well as the military regimes over the last several decades, have all drawn on Burma's monarchical past. This pattern persists in the current opposition as well as the military. Gravers (1993) has argued that through attachment to the traditional hierarchical model and its patterns of power
relations, the Burmans have attempted to keep their past in the present and repair the break in their imagined community caused by the British colonizers. In fact, he has argued that the dominant culture's attempt to maintain the traditional hierarchical order in response to threats against it has made this hierarchical order "the quintessence of both Burman (ethnic) cultural identity and a part of modern Burman nationalism" (Gravers, 1993, p. 23)

**Structural violence and "ethnic conflict"**

Philippe Bourgois (2001) makes a useful distinction between four types of violence: political, structural, symbolic and everyday violence. Political violence refers to direct violence administered in the name of a political ideology, movement or state. Structural violence refers to the organization of society in such a way that it imposes conditions of physical and emotional distress on people. The inclusion of the word "violence" here is not merely a means of sensationalizing the issue. It distinguishes structural violence from the term "structural inequities" in that it underscores the extent to which such forms of social organization lead not just to distress, but also to death on a massive, although much less visible, scale. Structural violence can include such problems as high morbidity and mortality rates, poverty and other kinds of abusive conditions. Bourgois (2001) identified symbolic violence as that process that operates through the misrecognition by the dominated group of the power structures that make the social order seem natural and self-evident. Everyday violence as Bourgois (2001) defined it refers to "the routine practices and expressions of interpersonal aggression that
serve to normalize violence at the micro-level such as domestic, delinquent and sexual conflict, and even substance abuse" (pp.8-9). These four types of violence are inter-related.

If the state's dominant culture emerges alongside or as a result of structural violence such as poverty or other types of social injustice, those among the minority cultures will resist, often through overt violence (Satha-Anand, 1988). A state's minority groups are especially vulnerable in the formulation of the national myth, and can become defensive and more cohesive as a result. Simmel (1955) argued that this kind of group cohesion may actually require some form of external threat. It may even be "a piece of political wisdom" to ensure that the group has enemies "in order for the unity of the members to remain effective and for the group to remain conscious of this unity as its vital interest" (Simmel, 1955, p. 98). Marx (1843) also argued that the state requires differences and the divisions they engender in order to legitimize its existence and control. Differences are for this reason emphasized as threatening by the state, which is in turn legitimized through its ability to control these threats.

The nationalism that developed in Burma's heartland caused unrest along the periphery. During Prime Minister U Nu's time, personal power was linked to large-scale organizations that provided a bridge between the traditional patron-client relations and a new form of political organization that created opportunities for social mobility and the development of a more egalitarian society (Steinberg, 1997). U Nu also made

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6 U Nu became Prime Minister of Burma after the assassination of independence hero, Aung San, in 1947, and remained so for most of the years between independence in 1948 and General Ne Win's takeover in a military coup in 1962. There was a brief "Caretaker Government" from 1958-1960 headed by Ne Win, who was "invited" by U Nu to run the country for an interim period to avoid a brewing civil war (Steinberg, 2001).
Buddhism the state religion and introduced it into the school curriculum. But the development of mass organizations and a state religion, along with assimilation policies that involved sending Buddhist missionaries into minority areas, threatened minority groups. It was the Karen leader Dr. San C. Po who first initiated the call for ethnic "self-determination" with his writings in the 1920s, and this idea has since become the main demand of all the country's nationalist movements (Smith, 1995).

These developments have all contributed to a process Whitten (1976) has called "ethnogenesis," whereby ethnic identities become more distinct in reaction to a policy of homogenization by the state. If the state perceives a threat to its existence from coalitions or communities organized along ethnic or religious lines, it often responds by suppressing them with a state-sponsored ethnocide. This in turn may trigger a further development of "ethnogenesis," whereby people whose cultures are acknowledged by an application of ethnocidal policies often intensify and adapt ways of doing things which underscore their own implicit, transformable symbolic relationships. The symbolic template . . . provides a set of ethnic markers . . . in the face of inevitable state expansion" (Whitten, 1976, p. 28).

Bateson (1935) showed how this solidification of group identity can result in a cyclical process of "complementary schismogenesis" involving state oppression followed by intensification of group identity, followed by further state suppression (p. 194).

In Burma, the government and opposition have responded differently to conflict perceived as ethnic in origin, with the military conceiving of itself as at the top in a traditional hierarchical order. Some scholars argue that since independence, the military has been the only institution capable of establishing authority throughout the entire
country (Callahan, 1998), a claim the regime uses as its own argument for legitimacy. During the monarchical period, the order of Buddhist monks, or Sangha, was the only body in the country financially independent of the crown, so it was able to counterbalance somewhat the wealth and power of the state (Aung Thwin, 1994, p. 35). The Sangha, however, has been cowed into submission through various restrictions and arrests of monks. During this process, the regime's leaders made several references to the Buddhist code of conduct for kings,\(^7\) and to a royal purification of the Sangha in the 13\(^{th}\) century. Thus, while the military has "come to dominate all aspects of national and political life" in Burma (Smith, 1995, p. 227), it has justified its actions by representing itself as the divine presence at the peak in a monarchical hierarchy of power relations. This framing of the regime as a benign patriarch becomes clear in a perusal of the daily commentaries meted out by state-run media, as detailed in Chapter Three.

The post-1988 democratic opposition movement has been challenging this concept of power as centralized by building alternative structures of authority in exile that they hope will play a key role in the national life of a future Burma. Josef Silverstein (1997) has called this a "new politics" of Burma that began with the formation of the first alliance between Burmans and non-Burmans in the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), and has continued with such initiatives as the negotiations that have led to the drafting of a new constitution by opposition groups in exile. According to Silverstein (1997), this new politics is based on equality and promotes full participation, democratic procedure, and sensitivity to special interests.

\(^{7}\) This code included ten royal precepts, four kingly virtues and seven kingly rules the monarch was expected to follow in order to maintain the traditions and customs of the land (Maung Maung Gyì, 1983).
While this optimistic view does provide hope for the future, there still exists great distrust of "others" and a degree of factionalism within the opposition movement that requires acknowledgement and attention. Bertil Lintner (1994) put it succinctly when he noted the "inescapable fact" that

there is no term in any language that covers both the Burmans and the minority peoples, as no such entity ever existed before the arrival of the British in the nineteenth century. Burma, as we know it with its present boundaries, is a colonial creation rife with internal contradictions and divisions, (p. 41)

Despite the exacerbation of ethnic divisions during the colonial period in Burma, there has been some controversy regarding the degree to which specific ethnic groups have "developed" as a result of the history and circumstances of the colonial and postcolonial political milieu. Robert Taylor (1982), for example, has argued that "ethnic conflict" in Burma has been conceived in such a way as to pose a false and irresolvable problem in the practice and study of Burmese politics. This, he argued, has occurred because Western political thought has conceptualized ethnicity with implicit assumptions of "primordial antagonisms between different groups . . . rather than as a relational attribute" reflecting sub-cultural characteristics (p.7). The politics of Burma, he argued, "have been shaped to some degree by the idea of ethnic conflict as conceived in Western ascriptive terms" (Taylor, 1982, p. 10). In an article reviewing studies of culture in Southeast Asia, Mary Steedly (1999) warned that researchers risk regarding the violence of the region as primordial, "making it appear as inherent in and distinctive to Southeast Asia as a world region" (p. 445). To get around this problem, Steedly (1999) suggested that researchers "localize" violence by exploring the details of each incident in context to
see "how it is produced in certain circumstances; how it is deployed, represented, limited, imagined, ignored, or instigated; how it is identified, disciplined, interrogated, and, of course, punished" (p. 446).

Although the causes of conflicts labeled "ethnic" in origin may be too complex to pinpoint with certainty, the fact that conflict occurs between groups is recognized much more often than the fact that there is also a great deal of conflict within groups. Although conflict between groups may provide individual groups a cohesion they would otherwise lack, it also brings into sharp relief personal conflicts and other aspects of intra-group relations. Unanimity among members is the ideal each group strives for, which "subjects them to such a uniform impulse that they either must completely get along with, or completely repel, one another" (Simmel, 1955, pp. 1-2). Mary Callahan (1998) has suggested that the intolerance for dissent that characterizes Burmese political culture stems from the country's history of "colonial, parliamentary, socialist, and post-1988 military rule, [when] conflicts over views, visions, and policies have always been winner-take-all battles" (p. 64). The only answer to conflict, then, has been to eliminate it, and to do this required enforcing unity (Callahan, 1998). She has argued further that

common to both the SLORC [State Law and Order Restoration Council] and the [opposition National League for Democracy] is an overarching emphasis on unity and solidarity that is simply inimical to the development of institutional mechanisms that can accommodate the needs and demands of the broad range of social forces that exist throughout the country. (Callahan, 1998, p. 65)
Thus, as Gravers (1993) argued, both the Burmese military and the opposition demonstrate characteristics of the traditional hierarchical model and its patterns of power relations. This has left its mark on nationalist movements.

The dominant problem in Burma’s nationalism is that all have had to subject themselves to the hierarchisations of the social order whereby classification takes place according to race, culture/civilization, religion and ethnicity/nationality (Gravers, 1993, p. 76).

What is missing from Graver's (1993) analysis and from most works that analyze the Burmese situation is the recognition that gender is also a means of placing people within a social hierarchy, and that a gendered hierarchy is required in order to make possible other hierarchies. This is particularly crucial since a gendered hierarchy is a necessary foundation upon which militarized systems are built. Because militarization is a central focus of this dissertation, I turn now to a discussion of this process.

**Militarization**

We live in an increasingly militarized world. Considering only military casualties, the eighteenth century had a casualty rate of 50 per 1 million population per year, compared with 60 per million during the nineteenth century and 460 per million in the twentieth century (Tehranian, 1999, p. 156). In the twentieth century more than any other, the sophistication and efficiency of information and military technologies enabled governments to subdue their enemies, resulting in the deaths of millions in the process. In addition, new forms of warfare targeted civilians more than ever before with grenades, mortars, landmines and small arms (Jacobson et al., 2000). If we add to the victims of
direct warfare those trapped in forms of "structural violence" that cause death to millions annually from famine, malnutrition, epidemics or homelessness, the twentieth century must be seen, in Majid Tehranian's (1999) words, as "a century of death by design" (p. 156).

While the end of the Cold War offered hope for reducing the degree of global militarism, subsequent outbreaks of violence have dampened that optimism. The process of militarization has been attributed to the current global structures of government, as Chinkin (1993) states succinctly:

Peace, in the sense of not just an absence of conflict but as a substantial modification in the inherent tendencies of the international system to conflict, is not fostered by the prevailing patriarchal ideology of most nation States, the prevailing emphasis on statism within the international legal order, nor the militarism that sustains them (p. 409).

Militarism and militarization are defined in various ways, but all recognize some common characteristics of the phenomenon. Militarism is generally understood as a state or condition, whereas militarization is a process. The World Council of Churches has defined militarization as "the process whereby military values, ideology, and patterns of behavior achieve a dominating influence on the political, social, economic and external affairs of the State; and as a consequence, the structural, ideological, and behavioral patterns of both the society and the government are 'militarized!'" (Churches Commission, 1982, p.5). Militarism has been defined as a belief system providing legitimacy to "the assumption that military values and policies are conducive to creating an orderly and secure society" (Chinkin, 1993, p. 408). And Reed and Tehranian (1999) identified two primary forms of militarism discussed by scholars: the institutionalized
relations between and within states in which "military behavior comes to be preferred" on the one hand, and on the other, individual behavioral preferences for violent responses rather than nonviolent means of influence (p. 27). The study of militarism has focused primarily in three general areas: the armed forces and their inculcation of military values; the effects of militarization on gender relations; and the role of militarization in shaping national cultures (Simons, 1999).

One thing these studies and various definitions of militarism have in common is the recognition that militaries are institutions dominated by men and supported by conceptions of an aggressive masculinity. Yet militarism is not limited to acts of male competition or the promotion of specific concepts of masculinity. The recognition that women, sometimes as members of the military, are often complicit in violent acts (Jacobs, 2000), or that some acts are violent in non-physical ways calls for a broader concept of militarism, such as its definition as a "habit of violence" that cannot be resolved without "the deinstitutionalization of coercion" (Yawnghwe, 1995).

Militarism as I use the term in this study can most usefully be regarded as a culture that legitimizes violence as a way of resolving conflicts and ordering relations, so that a militaristic culture can exist whether or not war is actually being waged (Kelly, 2000). Militarization, then, is the process through which this culture develops and comes to seem natural. Using this definition, a militaristic culture can exist within groups of women, or among people pursuing nonviolent yet coercive means of problem-solving. Militarism is self-perpetuating, creating division by dichotomizing "self and "other" in a process that functions by dehumanizing the enemy (Simons, 1999, p. 89). As Tehranian
(1999) has noted, "the organization of warfare . . . has been totalized by involving every social institution in society" (p. 170). Supported at local, national, and international levels through a complex series of hierarchies, militarism provokes uprisings among the disadvantaged that challenge governing structures and in turn act as justification for enforcement of military "security."

It is impossible to understand how international politics is played out today without examining gender and militarism, since "the global forces of militarism, the accumulation of capital, and the exploitation of natural resources depend on a gendered order" (Lorentzen & Turpin, 1996, p. 7). Chinkin (1993) argues that it is not just that the patriarchy of the nation State fosters militarism, but that the two - patriarchy and militarism - "are interdependent and mutually supportive" (Chinkin, 1993, p. 408). She argues that the same forces that work to maintain marginalization and oppression of women at home also work internationally in actions by stronger states against weaker states. "The methods used are also identical - rape, battering, aggression, economic exploitation, rendering invisible and humiliation" (Chinkin, 1993, p. 408). Militarism, in other words, takes many forms, not all of which are overtly violent.

**Militarization in Burma**

Burma’s modern history is a tale of increasing militarization. Mary Callahan's (1996) doctoral dissertation, *The Origins of Military Rule in Burma*, traces the emergence of coercion as a primary method of social control to the state-building project of the British. Burma was simply appended to India within the British empire, and in a project
"initiated by and organized around coercion," a colonial state, complete with trained civil servants and soldiers, was transplanted into Burma (p. 41). The armed forces were composed primarily of non-Burmans, mostly professional soldiers or mercenaries from India, but also some recruits from Burma's ethnic minorities. This led to tensions between these groups and the majority Burmans. By the mid-1930s, most major nationalist or religious organizations in Burma had (surprisingly) been permitted by the British to establish their own small army, or "tat." Such tats soon became a prominent feature of public life, reinforcing "the primacy of violence in non-state and anti-state organizations" (Callahan, 1996, p. 515). In addition, state violence took explicit form in Burma's first national army, established during the Japanese occupation. Then in the 1950s, the leaders of the "tatmadaw," or armed forces, began a program of institution-building in order to create a modern, bureaucratized army structure out of what was really "an array of networks," in a process that extended army influence over more of the state's territory than any other national institution (Callahan, 1996, p. 19). After the military took power in a coup in 1962, it subsequently "eliminated any legal centers of pluralism" and replaced them with "centralized military control that brooked no local power" (Steinberg, 2001, p. 49).

In the aftermath of the 1988 uprisings and the September 18, 1988 "coup" that brought the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to power, the Burmese tatmadaw expanded rapidly. At the time of the 1988 demonstrations, the army numbered approximately 186,000 (Callahan, 1998). By mid-1995, the regime was reporting a

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8 This "coup" essentially provided for the rearrangement of the military power structure.
9 As is common when discussing Burma, exact statistics are not available.
force of 300,000 men, with a goal of 500,000 by the year 2000. Callahan (1998) has estimated that 35 to 40 percent of the central government's expenditures have gone into expanding the country's military power every year since 1988, including a concomitant influx of new arms and equipment (p. 89). The Burmese army, navy and air force have all grown dramatically, and recruitment is continuing (Callahan, 1998). Nevertheless, she also points out that the rapid expansion has caused problems such as shortages of manpower in some areas, inadequate training, poor leadership, "outmoded doctrine" and poor morale (p. 92).

Martin Smith wrote in 1999 about an institutional self-view that had developed within the upper hierarchies of the tatmadaw during the previous decade. He argued that a "state-of-siege mentality" had become deeply ingrained throughout the army's history, with many of the army's senior officers rising through the ranks, fighting internal wars and seeing very little of the world outside (p. 423). Military officials believed that the tatmadaw was the only organization capable of keeping the country together (Smith 1999). Steinberg (2001) maintains that the Burmese regime has come to focus on the military itself as an ideology. Detailed daily communications regarding the plans of the military for the people, the military's motivations and its good will were all "directed toward adulation of the military in its leadership role" (p. 45).

For the outsider to Burma, the most obvious effects of Burma's militarism can be found in the country's border areas, with its refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs), migrant workers and political dissidents and their stories of abuse. Here the impact of militarism is felt most violently at the level of everyday experience. Because it is those
with the least formal power in society who are most adversely affected by militarized forms of violence, whether physical, mental or structural, many peace activists argue that these most marginalized people must form the core constituency around which peace is built (Reardon, 1996). For researchers, those in the most vulnerable positions in a society can best clarify and give voice to the significant problems and contradictions posed by the current situation. Thus, it is from their lives and experiences that we must begin in order to identify the most significant obstacles to demilitarization and the achievement of a more equitable social order. As in most countries, women and ethnic minority groups are the most vulnerable, and it is therefore worthwhile to review how these groups are both victimized by and help to reinforce the process of militarization.

**Gender and ethnicity**

The invisibility of women in military affairs and policy-making makes clear the "taken-for-granted international assumptions about the maleness of war" (Lorentzen and Turpin, 1996, p. 6) and the "maleness" of global governing bodies. Yet it is women who suffer the most from the violence of military actions. An oft-cited statistic from a 1983 study undertaken for the International Symposium on Children and War is that in World War II, civilians represented 50 percent of the casualties, but that civilian casualties in subsequent wars has exceeded 80 percent and in some conflicts has been as high as 90 percent, the majority of whom are women and children (Lorentzen & Turpin, 1996; Vickers, 1993). More than 80 percent of the world’s refugees are women and girls who often experience violence during their flight and in exile (Lorentzen & Turpin, 1996).
The widely perceived role of women as guardians of a people's cultural identity helps to explain women's vulnerability during conflicts perceived as ethnic in origin (Jacobson et al., 2000).

Overt physical violence is the primary focus in reporting on and theorizing wars, but this often masks the structural violence within militarized systems. The victims of this structural violence are also primarily women, but also ethnic minorities in a system where "the means for the satisfaction of basic needs, for the expression of these and for the attainment of certain rights is controlled by the group in power" (Reardon, 1996, p. 214). Scholars and activists have argued that the concept of security must itself be demilitarized, and that women's voices and a gender perspective must be integral to foreign and security policy decisions (Kirk et al., 2000).

Despite the need to highlight the impact of war on women, there is now enough of a scholarly history to convincingly make the point that in any field, "gender is not usefully equated simply with women" (Indra, 1999, p. 4). Nevertheless, the common approach to gender is exemplified by conferences which offer the obligatory "special" sessions on gender and the conference's main theme, such as "gender and mental health," "gender and the environment," and so on, creating a kind of "gender ghetto" (Indra, 1999). This approach presents the main theme of the conferences as though the issues raised are essentially genderless or gender neutral, or as if gender were one of a host of attributes that might affect how the main topic plays out (Indra, 1999). In the field of development, this has been called the "add women and stir" approach (Harding, 1987). It is problematic because "it allows these other topics to continue to be presented as
Doreen Indra (1999) challenges this central framing assumption and argues instead that gender should not be equated solely with women or their activities, beliefs, goals, or needs.

In escaping the association of gender with women, scholars have realized the importance of seeing gender as a socially constructed notion of the differences between men and women, and have recognized the role of social theory in shaping and organizing what and how we see. Militarized masculinity, for example, involves characteristics such as "physical strength, emotional detachment, the capacity for violence and killing, and the appearance of invulnerability" (Kirk et al, 2000). To maintain such a conception of masculinity requires specific ideas about what is feminine - vulnerability, emotional involvement, physical delicacy - both to contrast with the masculine and as a means of justifying the "protector" aspects of stereotypically masculine characteristics. This involves defining what it means to be a man as well as a woman, and thus effects everyone (Indra, 1999).

This way of seeing gender as a fundamental organizing principle of everyday life highlights the point that gender matters greatly even in empirical situations where there are only men or only women, and where nothing is ever spoken of women or men, maleness or femaleness. (Indra, 1999, p. 6)

A relational approach to gender acknowledges that conceptions of gender vary from place to place and over time, and that while the overall situation of violence against
women may benefit men as a group even if they do not directly participate, in certain situations specific men do not benefit. Men may be harmed, for example, by violence against female family members. Such an approach also recognizes that some women, as a result of their class or racial position, may themselves wield power that results in violence against others (Jacobson et al., 2000). Restricting analysis to women or women's issues obscures how gender conceptions involve stereotypes of men and affect them as well in any given context.

This approach, then, requires that social researchers take a gender relational approach to all research topics. By doing so, previously taken-for-granted facts, categories, and structures suddenly appear as unnatural, gendered, social, cultural and historical constructions, possibly problematic and open to challenge. While this approach to gender has become axiomatic in some areas of research, the tendency among many theorists to study "women" rather than "gender" has not disappeared. Structural gender inequalities and their accompanying statuses and roles in this way come to be seen as "natural," non-problematic differences between women and men. Their effect, however, is to reify the distinctions between the public sphere of politics and community leadership, and the private sphere of the home and family (Indra, 1999).

It is crucial to understand that the phenomenon at play here affects not only women, but also adversely affects men, especially men of minority groups who find themselves limited within national and international patriarchal and militarized structures. Militarism is directly linked to racism and ethnic conflict through ways of thinking that define people as inherently unequal. This makes the idea of violence against others
palatable, whether those others are seen as less important, "evil" or in opposition to authority (Reardon, 1996: 226). Political scientist Cynthia Enloe (2000a) argues that gender affects relationships between men, so that "introducing masculinity into a discussion of international politics, and thereby making men visible as men, should prompt us to explore differences in the politics of masculinity between countries - and between ethnic groups in the same country [italics added]" (p. 13).

In Burma, concurrent with a rising tide of what have been regarded as "ethnic conflicts" since the 1990s has been an increasing recognition that these conflicts, also called "ethno-nationalisms," are intrinsically gendered. Women's bodies have historically been seen as spoils of war for the victorious, yet it is only recently that rape has been recognized as a weapon and a "cost" of conflict (Jacobson et al., 2000). Women have suffered not only from the rapes themselves, but also from being shunned and excluded because "they embodied the failure of militarized men to 'protect' their homeland" (Kelly, 2000, p. 53). Yet given the fact that males can also be oppressed by the military, gender analysis must resist "the notion of a 'one size fits all' model of masculine aggression and female victimhood" (Jacobson et al., 2000, p. 12). It is important to recognize that women can have a stake in patriarchal or racialized arrangements in which they have benefited from the positions of power available to them (Kandiyoti, 1998; Mukta, 2000).

The use of gender by both men and women to manipulate minority or marginalized populations is not new. Ann Stoler's (1991) writing on carnal knowledge and imperial power shows that during the colonial period the relationship between sexual
desire for and sexual control of the "other" was "a fundamental class and racial marker implicated in a wider set of relations of power" (p. 55). Quoting Edward Said, who described Orientalism as "a male power fantasy in which the Orient is penetrated, silenced and possessed" (as cited in Stoler, 1991, p. 54). Stoler (1991) argued that by demasculinizing colonized men and hypermasculinizing European men, the colonists asserted white male supremacy. As Enloe (2000a) has shown, colonial rulers emphasized the Victorian code of feminine respectability and the corresponding standards of manliness necessary to protect these respectable ladies. Native men were held in contempt when compared with these ideals. In India, for example, colonial officials created the stereotype of the "effeminate" Bengali male, accused of lacking those manly qualities that obligate men to protect and revere women. This inability was then used as a justification for the colonial project (Enloe, 2000a). Gender thus became a crucial tool in defining power relations and constructing racial categories of difference. By characterizing Asian men as feminine while simultaneously devaluing the feminine or relegating it to limited realms of action, colonizers asserted their racial, class and gender superiority. Specific stereotyped conceptions of women were necessary to maintain this superiority, and colonial women largely accepted these stereotypes.

One rare example of an approach to gender in studies of Burma that does not focus exclusively on women is Betsy Apple's (1998) *School for Rape*. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with defectors from the Burmese army and male and female villagers from rural Burma, this report examines sexual violence by the Burmese military. Apple (1998) described in detail a Burmese military system characterized by aggression
and destruction, abusive of both the women who are raped and the male perpetrators.

Apple's (1998) preface describing the Burmese army is worth quoting at length, as it sums up the story which unfolds throughout the book from interviews she collected.

Take over 300,000 men, many of them under the age of 17 and largely uneducated. Force some of them to enlist at gunpoint and promise all of them a salary they never receive entirely. Give them guns and bombs. Train them to shoot, to crawl through the jungle at night, to ambush. Convince them that their enemies are ethnic minorities, students, women, anyone who disagrees with the government, and that these millions of people are traitors or infidels. Starve them. Withhold their mail and don't allow them to send any letters. Forbid them from visiting their families. Force them to beat each other for punishment. Abandon some of them if they are too sick to walk. Abuse them verbally and physically every day. Allow them plenty of alcohol and drugs. (Apple, 1998, p. 9)

Apple's account examines the psychological effects of this relationship between the military leaders and the rank-and-file soldiers, and the culture of fear and silence it has engendered. Apple (1998) has shown how the Burmese military has grown in direct proportion to its own power base over the last several decades. In arguing that notions of masculinity and femininity are adapted by a militarized society to suit the needs of the dominant military culture, Apple (1998) described how these categories are constructed through difference:

In such a context, soldiers... are, of necessity, defined as strong and bold, and women are seen as weak and in need of protection. In the Tatmadaw [Burmese army], these ideas about masculinity and femininity are taken a step further. The Tatmadaw is pervaded by a brutal ethos that requires soldiers to accept violence and domination as quintessential characteristics of masculinity. Popular myths about the Burmese army portray this institution as noble, protective, and fierce, (p. 33)
Ethnic differences are arguably as important as gender differences in the Burmese military strategy. Apple (1998) argued that for Burmese soldiers, rape provides an outlet for anger and a gratification of the desire for revenge against the ethnic insurgents. By raping ethnic women, the Burmese army communicates with ethnic soldiers through the bodies of ethnic women. As one Burmese army defector said,

I think the soldiers bully the ethnic groups. I think they behave badly to all the people from the ethnic groups. . . . The women I know who were raped were Mon nationality. The soldiers were Burman. I do not think soldiers ever raped Burman women. It might happen, but I never heard of it. (as cited in Apple, 1998, p. 43)

Soldiers perpetuate the process of militarization through a cycle of violence and its resultant insecurity. All oppressive structures trade on such insecurity in order to justify armaments and technological development in the service of war and its requisite security needs. This is achieved partly through preventing the circulation of alternative ideas, and it is in this regard that the use of communications technologies and the development of a pluralistic public dialogue becomes so crucial for change.

**Militarized communication and media**

Divisive media messages and militarized technologies have developed much faster than technologies of peace-building. While 100,000 landmines around the world are removed each year, another 2 to 5 million are deployed (Tehranian, 1999). Global cultural forms have also played a role in militarization, such as the transnational movement of super-masculinized sports programming (Messner et al., 2000) and martial
arts films, creating "new cultures of masculinity and violence" that in turn spur the arms trade (Appadurai, 1990, p. 305). News programming is also implicated. As Tehranian (1999) argues,

As the mass media dichotomize, dramatize, and demonize "them" against "us," reified images of the "Islamic terrorists," "satanic Americans," "cunning Japanese," "evil Chinese," and "uncivilized Africans" become frozen in minds of mass audiences as justifications for the next cycle of violence, (p. 158)

The control of communication is key to maintaining the fiction of a benign patriarch in authoritarian states such as Burma. Steinberg (2001) maintains that in Burma during the 1980s, the military systematically destroyed civil society by disbanding or subduing all organizations not under its own control, including the association of monks, or Sangha, and the education system. The military also controlled the channels of social mobility. The tatmadaw, or armed forces, developed "a pervasive atmosphere of political fear and a rigid command system, which did not allow for bad news to filter up to the top of the hierarchy" (Steinberg, 2001, p. 23). The extent of government control over communication and media in Burma is the focus of Chapter 3, which demonstrates that it is only outside Burma that opposition activists are free to use communications technologies and to gain access to information unavailable inside. Only in a free communications environment such as this can media develop as a vital participant in the process of democratization.
Media and democracy

In assessing the impact of communications technologies on the Burmese opposition movement, we must examine what has been learned about the process of change from militarized forms of centrally controlled communications and media characteristic of authoritarian states to more decentralized communication and media structures. This process is widely conceptualized as replacing a "top-down" with a "bottom up" approach to communications and media. A "top down" or "engineering" approach (Freidrich, 1954) attempts to control the behavior of people in order to control events (Scruton, 1990). The role of communication technologies and media in such a system is not to represent society's diversity and a diversity of opinions, but rather to act as a force in unifying society through the evocation of common language, symbols, values and interests (Hutin, 1993). Diversity is often seen as a threat to the existing social order in an authoritarian system, so the media become instruments to transmit the orders and symbols of the state, rhetoric becomes stiff and controlled, and a superficial surface picture of social unity develops (Hutin, 1993). Conflicts in society are "resolved" or suppressed, resulting in a media system that rarely addresses contentious issues (Pryliuk, 1993). To control masses of people requires instilling a pervasive sense of terror by utilizing mystery and secrecy to depict the leaders as possessing an "all-embracing omnipotence" (Arendt, 1958, p. 352).10 Messages such as these are then repeated endlessly, convincing people of the absolute power of the leaders and the consistency of the system (Arendt, 1958; Kecskemeti, 1950).

10 How this is accomplished in Burma will be discussed in Chapter 3.
A "bottom-up" approach to communications and media, on the other hand, invites diverse ideas and information from various sources, including and especially those from the grassroots level, to circulate in society (Hutin, 1993; UNESCO, 1993). The transition to a more democratic system replaces the hierarchical, monolithic media system with a polycentric, non-hierarchical form where messages often contradict one another (Pryliuk, 1993). The changing nature of media in this process is characterized by a redistribution of power within the media system, and the increasing importance of equal power relations as new media groups emerge and change the media environment, which in turn changes society (Pryliuk, 1993).

Countering the monolithic power of centralized and tightly controlled systems of communication and helping to redistribute power within the media system are those media outside the mainstream, variously called "radical media," "citizens' media," "opposition media," and the catch-all term, "alternative media." Alternative media is the most common, and though vague, it is generally understood to refer to media that encourages participation by a broad cross-section of people of differing socio-economic levels, minority or subcultural groups and various organizations within a society. Lewis (1993) maintained that alternative media have evolved from several sources, including from new social movements such as the women's movement, ethnic minority movements, and environmental groups, from struggles on behalf of rural populations against urban centers of power, from the push for human rights, trade union and other rights, and from the new political demands of indigenous peoples.
Alternative media are part of a much more horizontal process: not only democratization and demystification of the processes of making media (thus raising the very important issue of the production and control of knowledge), but also being at the very heart of struggles for democracy and social change. Their stakes are very clearly with the people, unlike those of the mainstream, which can often be said to be with the State, although they may occasionally (and usually opportunistically) address themselves to the people. (Butalia, 1993, p. 53)

An important category within the rubric of alternative media is what has been called "ethnic media," "ethnic minority media," and in some cases "indigenous media." Such media play a leading role in preserving minority cultures and languages, increasing the self-esteem and combating negative images of the group, networking with other minority groups for lobbying strength, and providing an outlet for creative production (Browne, 1996). These media are often the first channels through which indigenous or ethnic minority peoples have been able to enter the public sphere to present themselves in their own voices (Browne, 1996). These media often play both an assimilationist role, in which they help to assimilate the ethnic minority group into the majority, as well as a pluralist role, in that they promote the cohesion and cultural maintenance of the minority group (Riggins, 1992). Interestingly enough, although ethnic minority media require the recognition of a group identity, there is also evidence that these media also have a high regard for the dignity of the individual, and place more emphasis on displaying the voices and faces of marginalized people than majority culture media often do (Browne, 1996).

Finally, the existence of injustice, inequality and other forms of discriminatory treatment

11 The differences between "ethnic minority" and "indigenous" are contested, with the term "indigenous" generally reserved for those peoples who inhabited a particular region "centuries or even millennia before anyone else did," who were at one time sovereign in their lands, and who have suffered the consequences of stereotypes longer than other minorities in the society (Browne, 1996, p. 5).
of minority groups stimulates their interest in having a media outlet through which they can present themselves to the rest of the society.

   Ethnic media's focus on a specific group has both positive and potentially negative consequences. As Riggins (1992) pointed out, ethnic minority media are not always objective in their reporting, since they are concerned primarily with their responsibility to a community or movement. Pellegrini (1996) has noted that while there are benefits from the bonds created by media focused on the needs and interests of minority or special interest groups, such media also risk a process of "inbreeding," when they become the only means of communication open to a specific interest group (p. 97). She argued that such exclusively intra-group communication ignores the inter-group contact necessary for change, adaptation and membership in the larger community, and thus stunts the evolution of a democratic society.

   The benefits of other alternative media are also debated. Hamilton (2000) has observed that most alternative media practitioners work within the theoretical framework of a mass culture perspective, viewing their role "more or less explicitly as one of educating and mobilizing the 'masses' in the service of the cause or movement" (p. 359). Paradoxically, then, as alternative media grow they must struggle against the tendency to become less "alternative." Others find this observation to be based on several problematic assumptions, including the notion that effective social movements are necessarily mass movements, that these mass movements require mass media to create, maintain and support them, and that the larger the scale of production and distribution, the greater the impact (Downing, 2001; Hamilton, 2000). Downing (2001) urged
attention to the concept of the "slow burn" impact of what he preferred to call "radical media"\(^\text{12}\) in contrast to the focus on the instantaneous that characterizes much audience research. He argued that the energy put into and derived from radical media projects continues on in other projects over decades, in ways that cannot be measured yet should not be underestimated. The role of radical media, he maintained, especially if the struggle seems prolonged, "is to keep alive the vision of what might be, for a time in history when it may actually be feasible" (Downing, 2001, p. 9). Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) coined the term "citizen's media," maintaining that these media make use of resistance strategies that strengthen the symbolic dimension of everyday life, creating spaces for dialogue and participation, encouraging creativity, and demystifying the mass media.

An unquestionably important function of alternative media is the development of a pluralistic public dialogue. Pryliuk (1993) has identified five closely interrelated factors necessary to the development of a pluralistic mass media. These are the development of multiple sources of information, and of multiple political positions, multiple communication technologies, multiple forms of media ownership (such as private and public), and multiple mass media addresses (i.e. where the media are

\(^{12}\) John Downing (2001) rejects the term "alternative media" as "almost oxymoronic" since all media are alternatives to others (p. ix). He prefers the term \textit{radical media} which he defines as "media, generally on a small scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives" of the power structure (p. v). It would be difficult, however, to conceive of the Burmese opposition media using this definition, which is concerned primarily with theorizing media offering an alternative to capitalist media structures rather than to authoritarian or totalitarian states. Burmese opposition media is clearly in opposition to the Burmese regime, but the regime's control could hardly be described as hegemonic (see James Scott (1990) for a relevant and interesting critique of theories of hegemony). Radical media do have in common with Burmese opposition media, however, that they break somebody's (the regime's) rules, to "express opposition vertically from subordinate quarters directly at the power structure and against its behavior" and "to build support, solidarity, and networking laterally against policies or even against the very survival of the power structure" (p. xi).
"located" both demographically and professionally). These factors are so closely interrelated that they cannot operate independently. The importance of such pluralism is clear even in totalitarian systems, where it is either allowed on a limited basis, or mimicked (Pryliuk, 1993).

Alternative media promote pluralistic dialogue by encouraging popular participation and blurring the distinction between audience and producer. This is in contrast to the function of media as a source of information, and moves towards a view of journalists as facilitators of social communication and community organization, generating democratic practice (Tomaselli & Louw, 1989). This also promotes controversy as taboos on what can be covered are lifted. During the democratic transition in Brazil, for example, Busato (1993) noted "a rapid emergence of information topics that couldn't be touched on before," appearing first in the alternative press, and spreading later to the more conservative one (p. 186). In a multi-ethnic society like Burma, then, alternative media has a vital role to play in democratization. Ethnic minority media can contribute not only by alerting a group to the most pressing problems it faces and potential means of solving them, but also by teaching different groups more about each other. Although different alternative media achieve different results, they can contribute to the demilitarization of communication and media to the extent that they help to break down hierarchies, put an end to forced silences, and rid themselves of dichotomized images, the concepts of "us" versus "them" arising from militarized media.
Preview of the dissertation

Chapter One, "Burma: Violence in the Golden Land," described the contradictions of this predominantly Buddhist yet violent land, as well as my intent in undertaking this study. I then listed the specific questions that motivated the research. This was followed by a discussion of globalization and its impact on the Thailand-Burma borderland, the primary site for this research. A historical section followed, detailing the development of the modern state formation in Burma, changing conceptions of power, and the development of nationalisms and conflict increasingly defined as "ethnic" in origin. Next I demonstrated the interdependence of militarization, gender and ethnicity. Finally, the characteristics of militarized communications and media were contrasted with what is known about the process of democratization of communications and media.

In Chapter Two, "Methodology: Globalization and Movements," I lay out the epistemological foundation and specific methods that guided this research. I discuss the value of multi-sited ethnographies and the usefulness of discourse analysis in examining global communications and their impact at the local level. By exploring the role of the ethnographer in such a project, I detail my personal involvement in the multiple sites involved in this study and some of the dilemmas I encountered in doing this research.

Chapter 3, "Communication and Media in Burma," offers a brief history of communications and media use inside the country. I examine communications leading up to the 1988 uprisings and student demonstrations in 1996 and 1998, as well as communications among ethnic nationality groups, including the impact of the ceasefires brokered with many groups by the military regime. Controls on communications and
media in Burma contribute to a climate of fear and uncertainty, yet I also describe how people resist these controls. Finally, I reflect on the role of foreigners in political communication in Burma by examining some high-profile communicative acts carried out in the last few years by visitors to Burma.

In Chapter 4, "The Politics of Communication in the Burmese Opposition," I describe life for the Burmese in Mae Sot and elsewhere in Thailand, and examine how this environment constrains conceptualizations of the possible uses of communications technologies and media. I examine the ways communications technologies are used in attempts to change the political situation inside Burma and assess the impact foreign funding has had on groups in the movement. I delineate a hierarchy within the movement that has been reinforced by the introduction of new information technologies (NITs). I argue that the discourse of human rights acts subtly but powerfully to shape social conventions, resulting in an unstated hierarchy of human rights that mirrors and perpetuates both the inequitable gender and ethnic composition of the Thailand-based opposition political groups and the hierarchy of access and use of technologies among these groups.

Chapter 5, "Opposition Media," explores the circumstances giving rise to a significant number of new ethnic opposition media, and their goals as described by founding members. Media staff members take various positions in the debate regarding freedom of expression and the degree of media independence permissible during times of community crisis, and these are examined. I explore to what degree these media have opened a space for dialogue between groups, and whether or not the militaristic
characteristics of the Burmese political climate are beginning to break down. Media staff and audience members raised several concerns, and these are discussed along with the opposition media focus on human rights and its impact on different groups in the opposition.

In Chapter 6, "Militarization and Rights in Umphien Mai Refugee Camp," I provide a brief history of the Karen and the Karen refugees, highlighting the militarization perpetuated by recent violent events in the lives of the people now living in Umphien Mai. Stereotyped gender roles and militarization reinforced each other to form a dominant "frame" through which people understood their own media and technology use, and the refugee camp as a privatized, apolitical space. I examine refugees' descriptions of two media events they identified as important - the October, 1999, attack on the Burmese embassy in Bangkok and the seizure of a hospital in the Ratchaburi province of Thailand in January, 2000. The different ways Umphien Mai refugees used human rights as a concept in discussing these events provides insight into whether or not individual and group rights are incompatible concepts and demonstrates the need for a flexible and contextually-based understanding of rights. This chapter also demonstrates how attention to physical violence tends to mask the underlying structural violence from which it arose.

Chapter 7, "Violence, Invisibility and the International Order," revisits the issues raised in this dissertation and places them within a larger global context. First I discuss some of the concerns raised by activists regarding the introduction of NITs and funding patterns among opposition groups. I then return to the discussion of gender, describing
how this research has made me aware of the taken-for-granted "nature" of gender stereotypes, including within myself. I conclude with thoughts on the global patterns of militarization and peace, and how the "local" in this study both reinvents and mirrors the "global."
Chapter 2

Methods:
Exploring the Interconnected Global and Local

This research was driven by my excitement over the possibilities for political mobilization offered by new information technologies (NITs), especially the Internet, and my desire to return to the border to see how the border-based opposition groups were using them. Were these new technologies contributing to the dialogue between groups widely considered the key to peace and national reconciliation in Burma? Were they increasing contact between these groups and the outside world? These technologies were also relatively new to me as I prepared my proposal for this research, and I wanted to know whether Burmese activists shared my excitement. How was "surfing the Web" affecting people's understanding of themselves? Were they feeling part of a larger community, part of a national Burmese society, maybe, or of the transnational opposition movement against the Burmese government? What implications would any of this have for political mobilization and the development of a more equitable, democratic Burma? And how would one go about trying to understand the impact of NITs on something as ill-defined and dynamic as the Burmese opposition movement?

The following sections lay out the epistemological foundation and specific methods that guided this research and analysis. The concepts of situated knowledges and partial perspectives provide a particularly good fit with recent proposals for a "multi-sited" ethnography that can adequately theorize the connections between the multiple sites linking communication and media use in our increasingly interconnected world. I
explain how discourse analysis is useful in examining international communication and its impact at the local level. In exploring the role of the ethnographer in this type of project, I detail my personal involvement with Burma and the Burmese in the multiple sites involved in this study. Finally, I discuss the processes of transcription, translation and analysis and reflect on some of the dilemmas I encountered in doing this research. Ultimately, I contend that by examining a situation from the perspectives of those marginalized in that particular context we can gain the greatest insight into the issues that lie beneath the commonly understood story or political rhetoric of the situation. In other words, what seems most natural in any situation usually masks some form of dominance which only becomes clear when examined from the perspectives of those most marginalized in that context. What I aim to demonstrate in this dissertation is that this is true at multiple levels: globally, regionally, nationally, and within the community and the home. It is true at the most personal level, where the recognition of our individual blind spots is the first and most crucial step in understanding how systems of oppression operate.

**Site: Women's Issues panel, Free Burma Coalition Conference, Washington, D.C., October 1997**

I walked into the buzz of conversation in Burmese, English, and Karen. The room was arranged with a circular table in the middle, and the audience seated in a circle of chairs facing the central table. They were primarily women, of various ages, Burmese and American. A few men were present, most conspicuously a prominent male leader of the self-proclaimed government-in-exile, the National Coalition Government of the
Union of Burma (NCGUB) and a prominent male leader of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), who sat a few seats to my left.

Around the table sat the panelists about to present: Naw Ellen\(^{13}\), a Karen woman living in the United States who had been making trips to the Thai-Burma border for years, and who I first met during my own stay there; Khin Ohmar, a Burman student leader during the 1988 uprisings who had been forced to flee the country and who had been actively campaigning in the U.S. on behalf of Burma for years; Naw May Oo, a young Karen woman who I know from my own time in Huaykaloke refugee camp, where she was studying in the high school, and who had since moved with her family to the U.S.A. where she was a college student and very active in the Burmese democracy movement and the Karen struggle for justice; and a woman I had never met before. I gathered from the conference bulletin that she was called May Pyone Aung. She stood up.

"Why are so few Burmese women involved in politics?" she demanded. The room, which had gradually been quieting down for the panel, was suddenly silent. Women have participated in the democracy movement since the beginning, she continued, so why don't they also have equal status within the movement? During the time of U Nu's government, before Ne Win's coup in 1962, the role of women in politics and parliament was stronger. But since the military took over, she argued, women's participation has steadily decreased.

\(^{13}\) Naw' is an honorific title for a woman in the Karen language.
"In the National League for Democracy, less than 3 percent of the leaders are women, so it is men-dominated politics. In the U.S.A. I can say this, but in Burma, it is in their consciousness that politics is men's business. This is the fault of both men and women. Who is telling women that politics is men's work?" she asked. "Grandmothers and mothers as well as male relatives. I challenge this."

May Pyone pointed to Ohmar. Ohmar has had a lot of political experience, she said, maybe more than most men. After her involvement as a student leader during the 1988 demonstrations, Ohmar spent time living on the Thai-Burma border, working with the students there. Since obtaining a visa to live in the U.S.A., she had struggled daily for the movement, organizing and traveling around the country on speaking tours. She had testified in front of the U.N. and other important international bodies. "So why when we have a big conference is she always put on the Women's Issues panel? It makes us sad."

Not only Ohmar. May Pyone continued. Her voice was strong, not at all shy. She continued. Many of the female students work equally as hard as the male students, but were not represented in the Central Committee of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), the main dissident student organization. Many Burmese women of older generations had also been working very hard in the effort to change the situation in their country. And despite the fact that the wife of the military regime's top general, General Khin Nyunt, began a woman's group which takes the position that Burmese women don't need equal rights, May Pyone countered that this was not true. "SLORC can do this, but we are the democratic movement and we cannot accept this."
As I listened to the women speaking on this panel, I realized with a sudden shock that I had not considered the Burmese women as relevant or interesting as the Burmese men I was meeting in the course of my research. I had not even considered it important to ask for their input as I formulated ideas for possible projects on the border, although I had thought it important enough to consult the leadership of the self-declared government-in-exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), which was (and remains) predominantly male.

Perhaps the force of this revelation was greater than it might otherwise have been because I knew most of these women, and had known them for some time, yet had never before talked to any of them about these issues. I realized that I was far less knowledgeable about the Burmese situation than I had come to think. I had not recognized, or at least had not given much thought to the fact that the top leaders of the Burmese democracy movement were (and remain) almost exclusively male. It took the women on this panel to show me the marginalization of their voices I had not seen.

It is in these moments of surprise that the value of self-reflexivity becomes apparent. As I began looking further into the issues raised by these panel members and by the literature on Burmese women, I came to believe that there is more to be gained collectively by examining these issues than may be seen at first glance. And while this experience helped me to realize that I need to attend more carefully to the words and experiences of women, this was not so easy to do. The fact that I had difficulty doing so despite my desire to unearth naturalized conceptions of gender roles demonstrates how deep-seated is the tendency to see things the way they now stand as natural. To avoid
this trap, it is necessary to actively seek out the perspectives of others, and to accept the impossibility of such a thing as "objective" knowledge.

The interpretive turn and the situated nature of knowledge

That any knowledge arises from a location of some sort - a set of experiences, understood through cultural norms, determined by a particular way of seeing the world - is a truism among interpretive researchers and increasingly more accepted within mainstream academic circles. This view recognizes the limited nature of our own perceptual systems and that we all possess what Donna Haraway (1988) has called "situated knowledges." Knowledge cannot be separated from political and personal concerns, since all knowledge occurs within individuals, each of whom sees from a unique, inescapable and incomplete standpoint. There can thus be no "objective" approach to knowledge. Research must include an exploration of how our visual systems work, how all eyes "are active perceptual systems, building on translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life" (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). Only by confronting head-on the partial and situated nature of all knowledge can we become answerable for what we learn how to see and for what we write.

The process of interpretive inquiry makes strange what had once been familiar and unremarkable. The perspectives of those in subordinate positions in a social order offer the most assistance in this regard, since they often question what is taken for granted by other groups. In a society structured by a gender hierarchy, for example, beginning an inquiry from the standpoint of women's lives makes questionable practices
that appear natural from the perspective of men, especially those of the dominant cultural
group (Harding, 1991). Those subordinated along racial lines, on the other hand, will
have a distinct set of experiences and a lived reality not shared by those in other groups.
An individual's material conditions and social class stimulate a distinctive consciousness,
or standpoint, rooted in real life experience (Collins, 1991). Those within the dominant
culture but not of it, who Patricia Hill Collins (1991) calls "outsiders within," can see
most clearly the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies, and
the negative consequences of their claims to knowledge. Attending to the historical
particularity of different people's lives can be a resource for those who believe we have
much to gain from a process of "intellectual participatory democracy" (Harding, 1991, p.
151).

Attention to any particular standpoint in this way, however, makes research not
only more challenging, but also vulnerable to charges of relativism. Recognizing
multiple perspectives requires an acceptance that belief is shaped by historical context,
but this is not the same as saying that all competing knowledge claims are equally valid.
Accepting such an "equality" of all views is a way of denying responsibility for the need
to critically examine knowledge claims (Haraway, 1988). Understanding partial
perspectives provides not an omniscient view from nowhere, but rather "the joining of
partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision . .
. of living within limits and contradictions - of views from somewhere" (Haraway, 1988,
p. 590). It is discovering what connects these partial perspectives, and the insights we
can gain from looking at different contexts simultaneously, that offer the most fruitful rewards of this approach to research.

Attention to standpoints is also undeniably political, privileging the perspectives of marginalized groups with the recognition that they offer us a means of widening our field of vision, making it more complex by incorporating the perspectives of those whose voices we hear least often. Relevant here is Patricia Hill Collins' (1991) vision, in which "dialogues among and coalitions with a range of groups, each with its own distinctive set of experiences . . . form the larger, more general terrain of intellectual and political discourse" (p. 36). Or as Alice Walker puts it,

I believe that the truth about any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer's story. And the whole story is what I'm after, (as cited in Collins, 1991, p. 37)

**Methodological frameworks**

The foundation provided by the concepts of situated knowledges and partial perspectives guided the choice of methods used in this research. My research objectives were 1) to map out patterns of access and use of new information technologies (NITs) among the Burmese opposition groups in Thailand, and 2) to interrogate the cultural meanings of these technologies in order 3) to analyze how these meanings articulate with global institutions and discourses to influence the work of various groups within the opposition movement, and to further the goals of democratization and inter-ethnic dialogue for peace. This study draws on a variety of methods in order to better
understand the complexity of the Thailand-based component of the Burmese opposition movement.

The borderland that hosts many of the opposition groups straddles two countries using very different approaches to communications. Various private organizations and international institutions are also key players in this border region, and the discourses they employ help to shape the goals and activities of the opposition struggle. In order to understand how technologies were incorporated into life on the border, and what their presence meant for different people and groups, I needed to go there, to observe and talk to people about their experiences using new technologies. This desire to understand the impact of technologies in people's everyday lives has made ethnography an attractive method for media researchers trying to understand the cultural meanings of technology and media. It was for these reasons that during the years I was studying at Ohio University I formulated a plan to return to the border, but my experiences in the classroom and the computer lab, far from Thailand and the border, greatly influenced how I came to understand what was happening back there.

**Site: Ohio University, Athens, Ohio**

When I returned to the United States and to the academy in 1995, after nearly seven years in Asia, the Internet and e-mail were exciting new means of communication that played a key role in keeping me connected with my friends in Thailand and elsewhere working to change the situation in Burma. I founded the Ohio University chapter of the Free Burma Coalition (FBC), an umbrella group made up of Burma
advocacy organizations, based mostly on university, college and high school campuses in the U.S. and other countries. The FBC is devoted to raising awareness of the situation in Burma and of the implication of American and other Western companies in the subjugation of the Burmese people through their investment deals with the Burmese military regime. I have always had ambiguous feelings about the coercive nature of U.S. foreign policy measures through which sanctions are imposed inconsistently upon countries deemed undeserving of an economic relationship with the United States. But in this case, I thought it best to follow Burma’s elected leadership, the National League for Democracy (NLD), in its call for foreign companies to withdraw operations from Burma until the situation there had changed. My activism continued during my graduate years, and the Ohio University chapter of the FBC shifted membership and focus. Throughout these changes, the Internet remained central to our organizing efforts.

The Internet provided a fascinating window on the unfolding events concerning Burma. The Burmese struggle became a popular cause on university, college and high school campuses, especially but not solely in the United States and Europe. In April of 1996, USA Today made reference to the decision of PepsiCo to pull out of Burma in the most high-profile of the corporate withdrawals up to that point.

Few students took to the streets to shout about the victory. No campuses were shut; no armories torched. The e-mails were burning up the Internet, though, as a modern-day student rebellion celebrated its accomplishments not with bullhorns and fist-pumping, but with the furious clatter of fingers on the keyboard. (Urschel, 1996).
Various e-mail listservs, including BurmaNet and the activist freeburma listserv, had become key tools for providing updated information to anyone interested in the situation in Burma, and I read them regularly. Like many other activists, I subscribed to the BurmaNet listserv discussion group for awhile, which at that point was unmoderated. I soon became overwhelmed by the flood of daily messages. Wading through them proved too time-consuming for what I got out of the effort. Most messages were personal diatribes and interminable, circular debates. When they started getting nasty and personal, I stopped my subscription. I later heard many other activists describe similar experiences.

I can in hindsight recognize my own blindness to the gendered conceptions of technology use. My use of the Internet to gain access to most of the information I received on the situation in Burma also shaped my understanding of what was actually happening among the activists in Thailand, and of who was providing the information I found on the Net. Away from the border at my university, reading magazines and logging onto the Internet, I became accustomed to certain kinds of information about Burma, and grew to accept certain issues as more legitimate and worthy of study than others. Also, because I found websites and statements in online listservs from various ethnic minority, women's and other opposition groups involved in the movement, I naively assumed that all of these groups had access to the Internet. I imagined the opposition activists I knew sitting in small offices along the Thai-Burma border, busily writing messages to post onto BurmaNet News and building the many Burma-related websites that were springing up.
It was imagining this situation while reading literature on globalization and identity that set me wondering what it must be like for people who have lived all their lives in Burma, especially if they lived in the rural areas, to come suddenly into contact with the Internet and the world it reflects. I imagined the kinds of wonder they would feel at things they saw and read as they "surfed" the Web, eager to read more. I imagined sitting with them, watching as they moved from one website to another and talking to them about the experience. I imagined the revelations this would provide into issues of identity, globalization, and their perceived place in the new global "community." I imagined visiting various opposition groups and learning about the different ways they were all using the same technologies. And as I studied, I became more convinced of the value of ethnography in exploring the issues I wished to better understand.

Ethnography: exploring communication technology and media use

Ethnographies of media and communication technology use are relatively new, and have largely been carried out in "developed" countries with a focus on a particular text, genre, medium, or technology. In recent years, however, researchers have begun calling for greater attention to the situated conditions of technology use. Research in telecommunications, for example, has paid little attention to the meaning of communications technologies and the messages they bring to the lives of rural and marginalized peoples, particularly in the "Third World" (Berland, 1992; Samarajiva, 1994; Ubonrat, 1989 & 1991; Wang, 1994a; Wang, 1997). The primary concerns regarding new communications technologies in Southeast Asia involve development, the
preservation of cultural values, and the sovereignty of the nation-state. For this reason, much of the research on globalization and the growth of mass media in the region has been problem-based and development- and policy-oriented. Some have argued, however, that popular understandings of the impact of telecommunications in the "Third World" that are based on dependency theory, theories of media imperialism, or ideological domination theories are simplistic and do not consider the meanings and uses constructed by media audiences for themselves (Appadurai, 1990; Ubonrat, 1991; Wang, 1997). Other scholars have argued for a more varied approach to studying telecommunications (Dissanayake, 1988; Hukill, 1994; Tehranian, 1991; Ubonrat, 1989).

Forays into media and ethnography have been motivated by the recognition that in order to construct meaningful theories, we must consider the receiver and the decoding process in addition to the communicator and the encoding process (Dissanayake, 1988; Gibson, 2000). Cultural studies have shown us that the meaning or significance of a text emerges in the act of decoding, "where socially situated readers bring their own particular cultural and discursive resources to bear on the act of interpreting media" (Gibson, 2000, p. 255). Attention to the ways media texts are incorporated into everyday life can reveal both macrostructures of power (such as patriarchy or capitalism), as well as microprocesses of coping and of resistance. In criticizing an overemphasis on text and genre-based studies, however, scholars have argued that we need to avoid, as Gibson (2000) put it, "celebratory accounts of the power of audiences to subvert cultural texts to meet their own ideological needs" (p. 256). The concern is that these celebrations of audience autonomy may lead us to ignore important concerns regarding the social and
historical environment out of which audiences generate such meanings. By understanding what factors are at work in the processes of making cultural meaning, we can better understand how ideological discourses reproducing relations of dominance are experienced in everyday life. This approach would also help us to better understand "the cultural and ideological challenges facing progressive, social-democratic, and political movements" (Gibson, 2000, p. 271).

Recognizing that people's day-to-day experiences are vital to the cultural meaning of technologies and media, new approaches to exploring these experiences have emerged. One approach that has proven useful in this regard is Stuart Hall's (1986) concept of articulation, which theorizes the relationship between culture and society as a series of temporary, contextualized relationships between elements of a social order ("articulations"). These elements could include social practices, discourses, ideological positions, groups or other social forces, including social movements. The concept of articulation is one in which unities or identities can be formed and reformed in ways that are "specific, particular and non-necessary" (Slack, 1989). Specific articulations vary in their strength and their relative power in different contexts, and make possible different opportunities and practices (Slack, 1989). Slack (1989) provides an example worthy of attention by media scholars: the articulation between the development of new technologies and the idea of progress, which she argues is "neither determined nor necessary" (p. 331). This example demonstrates how articulation offers a way of theorizing technologies that is not tied exclusively to place-based cultural ideas. The articulation of local experiences with global discourses works to create cultural
conceptualizations of technologies that then help to constitute the meaning of **places** through the decisions made regarding technologies and their specific, daily uses within these places.

Writing in 1988, Janice Radway noted that researchers in media and cultural studies have had trouble grappling with ways of theorizing "the dispersed, anonymous, unpredictable nature of the use of mass-produced, mass-mediated cultural forms" (p. 361). She called for a recognition that multiple, publicly constituted discourses are both produced within and permeate a social formation, leading to discourses that overlap and contest each other in addressing social subjects. She argued that what we need is not a focus on the text, but rather on "the endlessly shifting, ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life and the way in which the media are integrated and implicated within it" (Radway, 1988, p. 336). With a switch in focus from the text and its interpretation to the examination of media's integration in people's daily lives, the challenge then becomes one of understanding how people are interpreting the dominant discourses, and to what extent they can "produce for themselves, through articulation, subject positions that do or do not accord with the needs of the dominant culture" (Radway, 1988, p. 372).

There have been other suggestions for developing a more sophisticated ethnographic approach to the circulation of information and meaning that moves beyond the single-site approach (Clifford, 1997; Rodman, 1992). To focus on movement, for example, would require a conception of "culture" as "sites" of travel encounters as much as a place-based phenomenon, and would include as a focus those migrant laborers, refugees, and others previously relegated to the margins because of their mobility.
(Clifford, 1997). Such an approach would call into question the very meaning of "the term 'culture' - seen as a rooted body that grows, lives, [and] dies" (Clifford, 1997, p. 25). Clifford (1997) has urged us to focus not only on "intensive fieldsites" but also on travel, and on "local/global historical encounters, co-productions, dominations, and resistances ... to focus on hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted, native ones" (p. 24). Yet this focus must not emphasize movement without recognizing the different ways of moving (as refugees or tourists, for example) and their meanings and consequences in specific contexts. A multi-sited method must examine how people are socially, culturally, and politically located.

An ethnographic approach that explored the uses and cultural conceptions of communications technologies and media as its object would help us to identify how global ideological, economic and political structures are reproduced by different technologies in various ways and across multiple media. Patterns of communications access and use, the movements of people, money, and other things between and through sites, including the movement of discourses and their uses - these and other as-yet-unrecognized linkages between sites are the interests of a growing number of scholars (Burawoy, 2001; Marcus, 1995, 1998; Molyneux, 2001; Weber, 2001). Burawoy (2001) defines a multi-sited ethnography as building "a montage that lends greater insight into the whole, into the connections, disconnections and reconnections" (p. 156). Weber (2001) calls for a "multi-integrative" approach to ethnography that focuses on the

The recognition of the interdependence of places is not limited to discussions of ethnography. Geographer Doreen Massey (1994), for example, has suggested that we move beyond the global/local dichotomy to think of places as being themselves constituted through their networks of links with other sites, near and far.
interaction between people and sites, exploring "the chains of mutual knowledge and interdependence that constitute them" (pp. 485-486). A similar approach is proposed in calls for a "global ethnography" (Burawoy, 2001; Molyneux, 2001), described as a reaction to globalization that "speaks, first and foremost, to those left behind on the ground" by studying the daily lives of marginalized people (Burawoy, 2001, p. 148).

The Burmese opposition movement is not a homogenous group or coalition of groups with uncontested ideas about its overall goals and the strategies best employed to reach them. It is rather a multi-sited, loosely-configured and shifting collection of member groups and individuals all over the world focused on a wide range of issues and concerns. In Burma's case, then, an attempt to understand the opposition movement calls into question the notion of place as conceived by conventional anthropological approaches. The best-known ethnographies generally take as their object of study a distinct group conceived of as bounded within a single research site. But as the movements of people have become more frequent and more often transnational, identity has become less tied to a locality than ever before. As Appadurai (1991) has pointed out, "the ethno in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality" as groups migrate, become refugees, exiles, immigrants, tourists and other world travelers (p. 191). If the world is not made up of discreet cultures bounded geographically, the idea of fieldwork as moving in and out of "the field" no longer holds (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). A multi-sited approach can grapple with the shifting, transnational locations of cultural production common in today's world system (Marcus, 1995). It is most appropriate when the
subject's physical location is uncertain, subject to change, or occupies more than one place - in other words, is a system involving associations and connections among sites.

A multi-sited approach presents a range of possible ethnographic research methods. In addition to participant observation and interviewing, research methods now also include attention to the media, the use of government and organization documents, tracking discussions on the Internet, and traveling.

Instead of a royal road to holistic knowledge of "another society," ethnography is beginning to become recognizable as a flexible and opportunistic strategy for diversifying and making more complex our understanding of various places, people, and predicaments through an attentiveness to the different forms of knowledge available from different social and political locations. (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 17)

The multi-sited approach has much to offer analyses of social and political movements, since so many movements are now either defined as or involved in larger, transnational struggles. Social movements are the result of specific, historical processes of articulation in which some identities, perspectives, and practices become viewed as more correct or natural than others (Gibson, 2000). The multi-sited approach explores connections, associations and relationships within the world system in order to "bracket" or make strange these naturalized discourses. This provides insight into the "modern interlocking institutions of media, markets, states, industries, universities - the worlds of elites, experts and middle classes" (Marcus, 1995, p. 97). The goal is not an ethnographic portrayal of the world system as a totality, but rather the recognition "that any ethnography of a cultural formation in the world system is also an ethnography of the
system" and cannot be understood only in terms of a single-site approach (Marcus, 1995, p. 99).

Edelman (2001) has proposed that ethnographies of social movements are "most persuasive" when they move beyond a focus on a single organization or single issue to a broader analysis of the political and social fields within which people take action. In the past, ethnographies have tended to overlook or avoid discussion of the larger political contexts within which mobilizations occur, or "the pre-existing militant traditions and the organizing processes that constitute movements' proximate and remote roots" (Edelman, 2001, p. 309). There has also been a lack of attention to the heterogeneity within social movements, and a tendency to downplay movement tensions and divisions (Burdick, 1995; Bourgois, 2001). These details must not be overlooked if research is to avoid "ahistorical pseudo-explanations for phenomena with profound historical roots" (Edelman, 2001, p. 309). By missing this kind of complexity within a movement, "we rob ourselves and the movement of precisely the kind of nuanced understanding necessary to deepen mobilizing, outreach, and coalition-building efforts" (Burdick, 1995, p. 368).

Guidelines for a multi-sited approach

Some specific guidance as to how to conduct multi-sited research has emerged since the mid-1990s. By that time, multi-sited research had become influential in anthropology, but there existed few guides to conducting such research (Marcus, 1995). Marcus (1995) suggested several ways of conducting multi-sited research centered
around a search for linkages between sites, arguing that association among sites defines a multi-sited ethnography. The most relevant "modes of construction" his framework offers this particular study are his suggestions to "follow the people", "follow the metaphor", "follow the story or allegory" and "follow the conflict" (pp. 106-110).

Following the people as a research strategy fits well with migration and forced migration studies, and has led to the development of new objects of study, such as a diasporic world independent of people's specific movements from one place to another. To follow the story or allegory means examining narratives told within a specific site for the views they provide on people's "own situated sense of social landscapes" (p. 109). Following the metaphor involves tracing the realm of discourse and modes of thought through the circulation of signs, symbols and metaphors. This process is effective in showing linkages between sites of cultural production that may otherwise have remained hidden. Following the conflict involves analyzing contested issues in contemporary society invoked in such spheres of everyday life as legal institutions and the mass media.

Marcus' (1995) approach explores the system as much as it explores local subjects, thus situating the subject, the researcher, and the "field" quite differently than the single-site approach to ethnography.

It was my hope that by comparing the different sites of the Burmese opposition movement, I could begin to understand those things that seemed natural within the movement instead as the product of specific conditions. This promised to provide hope for imagining and enacting change. It was with the aim of conducting such a multi-sited study that I returned to the border in 1999.
Site: Thailand and Burma, 1999-2000

In preparation for conducting this research, I studied in an intensive Burmese language course for the three consecutive summers prior to my fieldwork. I believed that learning Burmese would be useful in situations where inter-ethnic dialogue in Burmese was likely to occur, especially during the participant observation I planned as one of several research methods. I also planned to travel to Burma to get a sense of the communication environment inside the country, and any training in the Burmese language was sure to be useful then.

My language abilities provided me with advantages when I returned to the border, but caused some unexpected resistance as well. Although my Burmese was far from fluent, with the Burmans my efforts broke the ice as people at first reacted with surprise at my abilities, then with humor as the limitations of those abilities became clearer. My use of Burmese took on entirely different meanings, however, in my relationships with Karen people. When my Karen friends realized that I had forgotten a good bit of my Karen but had studied and was now at least proficient in Burmese, several of my Karen friends commented that I had "become Burmese." Although these comments were usually said jokingly, they mirror deep-seated resentments on the part of minorities who believe that the Burman dissidents have received comparatively more attention from foreigners. Nevertheless, my commitment to studying Burmese seemed to be interpreted by most people as an indication that I remained committed to the struggle for change in Burma, even if my focus had moved beyond the specificity of the Karen situation.
For the first six weeks of the research, I traveled to Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Mae Sariang and Mae Sot to "map out" who was using which technologies where, and to decide which was the most appropriate site for my research. My plan was to gain an overview of the Burmese opposition movement in Thailand. During this time I met many opposition group members and non-governmental organization staff. In Mae Sariang, I stayed in the compound of one group of activists and sat in on a portion of a three week computer training session offered to Karenni refugees who were working with various labor, social and youth groups. In Mae Sot I met with many friends I had not seen for several years. In December I returned to Bangkok and flew to Burma's capital city, Rangoon.

**Burma**

In planning my fieldwork, I recognized that my analysis of communications use among the Burmese opposition groups would be lacking without any firsthand experience of the communications environment in Burma itself. The activists inside the country were a vital part of the overall communication network integrating them with the activists-in-exile in Thailand and overseas. Fearing that my presence with Burmese opposition groups on the Thai border might come to the attention of the Burmese military intelligence there, and might then give me trouble getting into Burma and cause problems for those I met inside, I realized that I needed to make this trip before settling into my research site. Unable to enter Burma officially as a researcher, I obtained a month-long tourist visa. Before going, I gathered the names of a few contacts who could help me
arrange other meetings in my quest to understand how and under what constraints the
Burmese inside Burma communicate with each other and outsiders.

I left Bangkok in mid-December, 1999, and spent the next month traveling and
meeting with people in Rangoon, Mandalay, several towns in Shan State, and Pagan and
a few nearby towns. I arranged meetings with writers, students, NLD activists, and
others opposed to the government. I met the family of one of my former students from
the Huaykaloke refugee camp. During the course of my travels I also met people in
teashops, the owners of family-run guesthouses, taxi drivers, street vendors, and tour
guides. Because I was unable to safely use a tape recorder in Burma, I took notes during
all of my meetings, and then as soon as possible after the interview wrote them out,
adding what I could from my memory about the circumstances and other details. I was
careful to take precautions with this journal by keeping people’s names in code and other
references vague, an issue I will return to in the next chapter. My visa expired in mid-
January, when I returned to Bangkok and then headed directly to Mae Sot, where I’d
decided to base my fieldwork.
Site: Mae Sot

Figures 3 (above) and 4 (below). Mae Sot
One of the two main streets of Mae Sot, with its collection of motorcycle taxis (above) and one of two Internet cafes (below).

Mae Sot is a provincial town in northwestern Thailand. I was familiar with the town and its surroundings, since it was the access point to the Huaykaloke camp where
I'd lived previously. A stop on the Asian Highway, Mae Sot is a hub for local travelers and merchants, and a home to Thai citizens and immigrants from Burma and elsewhere. Mae Sot is also a thriving jade and gem center, and the tourist trade is somewhat successful there as well, mostly with backpackers wanting to know more about Burma and the refugees. When I returned to Mae Sot in 1999, Huaykaloke camp was gone due to circumstances I explain in Chapter 6. There had been significant new construction in the town, but overall it felt much the same as it had ten years earlier. It was fairly easy to adjust to life in Mae Sot, since I was familiar with the atmosphere of the place and how to get things done there.

Mae Sot had also become a much more important site for the opposition movement than it had been years earlier, and had been dubbed by some as the "second Manerplaw," referring to the opposition alliance headquarters that fell to the Burmese troops in 1995. Since the fall of Manerplaw, many of the ethnic minority and other opposition groups had resettled their offices in or near Mae Sot. Mae Sot sprawled outward for several miles beyond a center consisting of two main streets that hosted a collection of businesses including a post office, several banks, a large daytime market at one end of town and a night market at the other. Mae Sot residents who lived in houses generally lived in either traditional Thai houses built from teak, or in the newer houses made of cement that were going up around the town. There were other small homes, however, in poorer neighborhoods such as the one a former student of mine lived in with her husband and their two small children. Her home was a small wooden shack amidst others like it, consisting of a small main room and two smaller side rooms. She owned a
refrigerator and a radio but very little other furniture except for the small television that formed the focal point of the main room. Burmese opposition activists and their families generally lived communally in houses that doubled as offices for their organizations during the day.

My prior experience on the border was invaluable in providing me an "in" with many in Mae Sot. Several of my former students had moved on to take jobs in the leadership of their organizations or with NGOs, and there was very often a personal connection between the people I interviewed and people I knew during my earlier time on the border. And while there were now several foreigners working with the opposition groups who had committed their lives to these efforts and who could speak one or more of the local languages very well, my feeble language abilities nevertheless distinguished me from the increasing number of foreigners who passed through Mae Sot on brief visits, often volunteering for a short time or just wanting to learn more about the situation of the Burmese refugees and dissidents.

Although my original plan was to live in a neighborhood of Burmese or Karen people, what I'd imagined was significantly different from the options I found available to me in Mae Sot. There were several compounds in or near Mae Sot in which Karen families or Burman families lived in close proximity. Security in Mae Sot, however, was especially precarious while I was there, and most opposition groups were hesitant to invite the notice of the local police by having a foreigner living with them on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. It also became clear fairly early on that there remains a great
deal of factionalism in Burmese opposition politics, and that living near or with a specific group might make it difficult for me to meet and interview people from rival groups.

After a few weeks of looking for a place to live and feeling increasingly frustrated, I finally rented a house in a neighborhood near the center of Mae Sot. I also bought a bicycle, which became my trusted means of getting around town on a daily basis. My house was about equidistant from the opposite ends of town, each one about a ten-minute bike ride from my house. Every day on my way home, I rode my bike through the meandering alleyways and past one of the town's many garment factories employing illegal Burmese migrant workers, the rhythmic clicking sound of the weaving machines reaching me as I rode past the building's high concrete walls.

Figure 5. An opposition group office in Mae Sot.
I began visiting the offices of opposition groups in Mae Sot, offering to edit English documents or assist in whatever ways I could. This was a frustrating process. People were welcoming and generous with their time, but how could I establish myself as a presence in the town, as someone to call and include in meetings and events? How could I gain the trust of those I was meeting for the first time, and establish my credibility as someone with a serious and long-term commitment to Burma, a resident of Mae Sot rather than a Western tourist or volunteer staying for a limited time? People understood me first as working with one of the non-governmental aid agencies that had proliferated along the border during the ten years since I had first arrived in 1989 in a trend described by one longtime Western resident of the area as "the professionalization of the border."

Being associated with the group of humanitarian aid workers was a source of anxiety for me. It was difficult for me at that time to clearly explain to people my "function," since the benefit of my work to the community was not as clear and understandable as that of a teacher or an aid worker. I found that even after beginning each interview with a description of the purpose of my research and how it could be useful, at the end of interviews people occasionally asked me what NGO I was working with. I did my best to explain the possible import of my work, mostly by describing it as research that might help policy makers or lead to more informed decisions by NGOs regarding the promotion of information technology use. This seemed to satisfy some people, while others seemed happy just to know that I was a foreigner with a long-term commitment to the Burmese peoples and their struggles.
During my time in Thailand, I visited many offices and homes in Mae Sot, but also traveled to Umphang, Sanklaburi, and Mae Sariang along the border, as well as to Chiang Mai and Bangkok in order to meet people, participate in events and follow linkages between sites in the production of opposition media among Burmese activists. I paid special attention to the details of everyday experience wherever I went, whether it was to visit a group, join people for meals, drink a cup of tea, travel somewhere, attend a meeting or ceremony, conduct an interview, or just to hang out. I tried to be useful in whatever ways I could while learning whatever I could about people's uses and understandings of communications technologies and media. I did a lot of English-language editing for different groups, and in Mae Sot I held several English language classes and information "training" sessions on the basics of the Internet. This work clearly demonstrated my own alliance with the opposition movement, a political stance that must be acknowledged.

The ethnographer as circumstantial activist

Although the use of ethnography in the study of social movements is well-established, it is seldom theorized and therefore incurs risks (Edelman, 2001). The use of ethnographic methods provides researchers with access to the lived experiences of activists and non-activists and to features unique to a specific movement. But there is also the danger that ethnographers will succumb to the pitfall of "overidentification" with the movements they study, representing social movements as more cohesive than they actually are, or accepting activists' claims at face value (Edelman, 2001). There is also
the risk that ethnographers will become blind to certain dynamics within the social movements we study. This can be a serious problem since social movements are notoriously ephemeral and factionalized, and rarely attract more than a minority of the constituency they claim to represent (Edelman, 2001). Some have proposed that researchers should pay more attention to people who could be attracted by certain social movements but for some reason are not (Burdick, 1995). Others note that this would entail focusing not on the movement itself, but on the broader social field within which it operates (Edelman, 2001).

Marcus (1995) advises that multi-sited ethnography requires a keen awareness of the researcher's place within the landscape, a place that must be renegotiated at each new site. Consequently, a different sense of doing research is required as the ethnographer embraces "a constantly mobile, recalibrating practice of positioning in terms of the ethnographer's shifting affinities for, affiliations with, as well as alienations from, those with whom he or she interacts at different sites" (Marcus, 1995, p. 113). This method demands that a researcher become somewhat of an "ethnographer-activist, renegotiating identities in different sites as one learns about a slice of the world system," at times seemingly working with and at times working against changing sets of subjects (Marcus, 1995, p. 113).

The multi-sited ethnography fits comfortably with the recognition of the partiality of perspectives and situated nature of knowledge, and is ultimately an openly political undertaking.
We see the political task not as "sharing" knowledge with those who lack it, but as forging links between different knowledges that are possible from different locations and tracing lines of possible alliance and common purpose between them. In this sense, we view a research area less as a "field" for the collection of data than as a site for strategic intervention. (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 39)

**Culture and the "difference" of places**

Scholars have begun to posit that we need to escape our taken-for-granted assumptions about the localized and geographically bounded "nature" of culture in order to begin dealing with cultural differences. They critique notions of place that take a fragmented world, understood as a series of distinct, geographically-bound places, as "natural" sites for studying distinct cultures and societies (Clifford, 1997; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, 1997). Such assumptions prevent us from questioning the means through which spaces are constructed as places (as states, for example) to begin with, since we tend to take their already-constructed nature as our starting point when conducting cultural analysis (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). Abandoning the worldview of separate and discrete peoples and cultures, and focusing instead on a set of relations that is **productive of these differences**, "we turn from a project of juxtaposing preexisting differences to one of exploring the construction of differences in historical process" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 16). From this perspective, the enforced "difference" of places can then be seen as the workings of a global system in which difference acts to keep some groups marginalized.

Although people actively make meaning from their experiences, they do so within the constraints posed by their position within society. These meanings shift depending on
context. To understand how this works, it is necessary to first describe the society's larger structures of economic, political and cultural power, how they are organized in this historical moment, and then reproduced within and transformed by the practices of everyday life, including media consumption (Gibson, 2000). Social settings impose their own meanings on the events that occur within them. Different settings involve different norms of behavior, elicit different kinds of emotions, and lead to different interpretations of the events that take place within them (Weber, 2001).

My intent in studying the Burmese opposition movement was to understand how an imagined Burmese society in a particular historical moment was being reproduced within and transformed by geopolitical realities, and how this was reflected in everyday life in exile. This included attention to media consumption, but it was also vital to examine the patterns of access and use of communication technologies within this globally-connected political movement attempting to develop more equitable democratic structures for Burma. These patterns promised to provide clues as to who defined and controlled social discourse in what contexts, and what was at stake for different groups. Employing the insights provided by standpoint theory also meant taking seriously the perspectives of those most marginalized within the movement.
The focus on this site and this portion of the research was made possible by a grant from the Burma Project of the Open Society Institute. The purpose of the grant was to fund opportunities for young people from ethnic minority groups, especially women, to gain educational experiences in whatever ways possible, including developing translation skills and learning how to conduct research. The grant was used to fund the salaries of six Karen research assistants (RAs) who worked on this project, as well as most of the other translation work done during my fieldwork. The ability to hire research assistants on a sustained basis made it possible to carry out an extensive series of open-ended, in-depth interviews in the refugee camps with the purpose of learning about how the refugees themselves described their communications technologies and media use, and how this articulated with their perceptions of their own role in the overall context of the Burmese opposition and, in particular, in relation to other ethnic groups in Burma. Since
much of the refugees' understanding of the world outside the camp came from the media, this portion of the research focuses on the use of the media by the refugees, and the ways they understood and interpreted what they saw, heard or read in the media.

I chose Umphien Mai as a site for this part of the research for several reasons. Although I was not physically present during these interviews, I knew many of the people who lived in the camp. Umphien Mai was a consolidation of two former refugee camps, one being Huaykaloke, where I used to live. My time living and teaching in Huaykaloke smoothed the way in obtaining permission to conduct interviews in Umphien Mai. The camp's proximity to Mae Sot was also a key factor in the decision to work there, because security was especially uncertain for Burmese peoples in Thailand at this time. Thai police regularly arrested Burmese and extorted "fines" from them, usually with the charge of illegal entry into the country. Often this required that they spend some time in a local jail, and always there was the fear of repatriation.

Although the security situation did not affect my ability to visit the camp for short periods, Umphien Mai was not as accessible to foreigners as Huaykaloke had been, and certainly not for the length of time necessary to conduct these interviews. Having RAs conduct these interviews was in some ways an advantage, however, since for most of the refugees it was the first time they had ever been interviewed, and even a Karen interviewer made many of them nervous. My presence would have made them even more so. When I did visit the camp, I was encouraged by my friends to keep a low profile and not walk around the camp much.
Security became even more precarious for the Burmese in Thailand after the
October, 1999, siege of the Burmese Embassy in Bangkok by Burmese students, and the
January, 2000, raid on a hospital in Ratchaburi by a group of Karen from Burma calling
itself God's Army, incidents that are examined more closely in Chapter 6. Starting in
November, 1999, Thai police periodically rounded up truckloads of migrant workers and
other Burmese people in Mae Sot and drove them to the border.\textsuperscript{15} Five of the six RAs
working with me had either Thai identification cards or Burmese passports so that the trip
from Mae Sot to Umphien Mai was not so risky for them.\textsuperscript{16} The other RA was able to
move around without notice and luckily never had any problems getting back and forth to
Umphien Mai. Travel to camps farther away could have been dangerous, especially if the
RAs had been asked to answer questions in Thai by police or border patrol officers or had
been found with fake documents.

Five of the six RAs who conducted the Umphien Mai interviews were Karen
students studying under scholarships from aid agencies at a university in Bangkok, and
the other was a former student of mine who arrived in Mae Sot as this project began and
was available to help part of the time. They all spoke English and Sgaw Karen, as well as
some Burmese and Pwo Karen, and could thus both conduct and translate the interviews.
The group of six who finally conducted interviews in Umphien Mai and translated them
were Nant Bwa Bwa Phan (Bwa Bwa), the two sisters Naw Heh Blut Moo (Moo Moo)

\textsuperscript{15} Reportedly those workers who could pay a Thai driver (sometimes the same driver who had driven them
there to begin with) could often head back into Thailand only minutes after their arrival at the border.
There were reports that sometimes, however, they were forced back into Burma until they could arrange
another chance to get back across the border.
\textsuperscript{16} Fake ID such as a Thai ID card or a forged Burmese passport is a very useful, much-desired and
expensive commodity among the Burmese in Thailand.
and Naw Ler Lah Khu Htoo (Khu Khu), Naw Moo Moo Htoo, and Saw Sam, and my friend from Huaykaloke camp, Naw Hser Moo.\textsuperscript{17}

Before the interviews, I led several training sessions in which the RAs and I discussed the purposes of this study and characteristics of interpretive research. These sessions included exercises designed to clarify the differences between quantitative and interpretive research and how those differences would come into play in the interviews they would be conducting. I introduced techniques for asking non-leading questions, recognizing one's own assumptions during the interview process, and maintaining a relaxed atmosphere. The research assistants were also coached to listen for key terms, note unusual incidents, and ask appropriate follow-up questions without leading the interviewee. There was also a practice run-through of an interview in which the RAs took turns asking and answering questions while everyone listened and discussed how the questions might be rephrased to make them as clear as possible. This led to several adjustments to the interview guide of topics and how questions could be worded. The RAs and I then translated the interview guide into both Karen and Burmese. The group discussed at length and readjusted several of the questions a number of times in order to make them both linguistically and culturally relevant to the people in Umphien Mai.

We approached the interviews as structured conversations within which refugees could identify and discuss issues they themselves considered important. Although the

\textsuperscript{17} In Sgaw Karen, "Naw" is the female honorific, and "Saw" the male honorific. Bwa Bwa is Pwo Karen, which uses the female honorific "Nant." As it turned out, there were many connections between these six people and other Karen I knew from my time on the border. Moo Moo Htoo is the daughter of a man who attended one of my classes in Huaykaloke. Moo Moo and Khu Khu's sister was also in one of my classes. To confuse things even more, in addition to being a former student of mine, Hser Moo also happens to be Moo Moo Htoo's aunt.
RAs raised specific topics for discussion, they raised these issues with broad, non-leading questions, and examples and details were elicited from the refugees' own experiences. For example, the interviews included discussion of media content, yet through open-ended questioning it was the refugees themselves who determined what media content would be discussed. Questions were phrased such as these: "Is there any program you particularly remember recently? Any that was unusual?" This allowed the person being interviewed to discuss whatever programs they found most memorable or interesting. Follow-up questions would then try to get at why this program was important or interesting to them.

The interviews were conducted in April and May, 2000, mostly in two sessions, April 3-5 and May 1-5, 2000. The rest were done during a few shorter trips by one of the research assistants with different time constraints. An admittedly overwhelming 132 interviews were completed. Umphien Mai is home to people from the two main subgroups of Karen, the Pwo and Sqaw Karen, some Karen Muslims, and some from smaller subgroups. These groups often live clustered together in different areas of the camp, which houses Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and animists. Each RA was assigned a section of the camp, and approached potential interviewees in their homes. In order to interview as many different people as possible from around the camp, I instructed the RAs to begin with an arbitrarily-chosen house in their assigned section of the camp, and from there approach every 20th house. This practice was intended not to get a "representative sample" of Umphien Mai residents, but instead to get the
perspectives of a wide variety of people living in far-flung sections of the camp, which the RAs were able to do.

Before each interview, the refugees were informed of the purpose of the research and their right to refuse to participate or to stop the interview at any time. This introductory preamble can be found in Appendix A, and the interview protocol in Appendix B. The refugees’ names were not collected, and they were assured that their answers would remain anonymous. If the individual agreed to the interview, this consent was noted and the interviewer proceeded. The initial fourteen questions asked about the refugee’s sex, age, ethnic background, residence pattern, marital status, education, occupation, children, and religion. We also asked about the refugee’s family, such as ages, residence, and parents’ occupations. Because they were relatively straightforward and easy to answer, these questions helped to set a relaxed atmosphere for the interview. The RAs also encouraged the interviewees to discuss anything they wanted to during the interviews. In this way, we learned about things important to the refugees that would not have emerged in a survey, such as the deaths of family members, reasons for these deaths, experiences of war, and the refugees’ feelings about having to move from place to place during the course of their lives.

Following the initial factual questions were several open-ended questions designed to elicit descriptions from the refugees about how they use and understand the media and media messages. They were asked how they got information about what happened in the refugee camp, in Bangkok, in Rangoon and rural Burma, and in the border areas. The RAs then asked the refugees to focus on four categories of media: print
media, radio, TV/videos/movies, and telephone/email/internet. Within each of these categories, the RAs asked questions about access to the media, the type and frequency of use, their source, and the refugee's favorite type of publication or program found on each medium. The RAs also asked about unusual programs the refugees had seen or heard. If the refugees did not have access to a specific medium, they were asked about this lack of access.

The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to six hours, with the average interview lasting approximately two hours. The RAs interviewed people in their homes and interviews were generally informal, at times interrupted by visiting friends or the need to care for a child. Several interviews were taped and transcribed, although during the majority of the interviews, the RAs were instructed to write verbatim what the refugees said. The RAs practiced writing like this during their training sessions, and during the training and the actual interviews often asked the interviewee to wait for a moment so they could write down what had been said. Based on the RAs' comments, this may have helped to put some of the refugees at ease, since it made the atmosphere less intimidating.

After a first round of initial translations was completed, the interview guide was again adjusted on the advice of the research assistants, and another training session was held to discuss the challenges of translation and ways to adjust our methods for more precision and clarity. In order to deal with issues of reliability of translations from different translators, the RAs and I held several meetings during the process of translation in which we discussed the concepts that were recurring and how we would translate them, developing a list of common concepts and the translation we'd agreed as a group
was most appropriate in which contexts. I read every translation and reviewed the sections that were unclear with the RA who had translated them. Often these discussions happened as we all worked together, and the input of the group as a whole was considered. I know that the RAs also helped each other a great deal during the translation process, increasing the accuracy and reliability of the translations.

The RAs also kept a separate log book, and were instructed to complete each entry immediately after finishing an interview. These entries include their impressions of the atmosphere during the interview and any unusual or noteworthy circumstances or events during the interview. The RAs were instructed to write physical descriptions of people and the surroundings rather than value statements such as "he is poor" or "it is a poor house." These log books provide a useful picture of the interview scene and the degree of comfort established between the interviewers and interviewees, as well as occasional additional information about the refugee or his or her family.

Once the enormous task of translation was completed, the analysis phase of the research could proceed.

**Critical discourse analysis**

To understand hegemonic processes at work in large-scale discursive structures such as democratization, commodification and the glorification of technology, the use of critical discourse analysis has proven especially useful (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Within media and cultural studies there have been recent calls for the use of a critical discourse analysis to "establish the central cultural premises provided by respondents in
response to media texts" (Gibson, 2000, p. 267) and the ways in which these are structured by implicit assumptions about how the world works (Hamelink, 1985). The field of critical discourse analysis (CDA) emerged in the late 1980s in response to postmodernism's questioning of metanarratives, and has become a constituent part of the "linguistic turn" in the humanities and social sciences. This linguistic turn has led to a reconceptualization of language as the central means through which we construct our cultures and understand our lives, at least as important in shaping the social world as economic or political processes (Barker & Galasinski, 2001). CDA attempts to uncover "ways in which social structure impinges on discourse patterns, relations and models (in the form of power relations, ideological effects, and so forth), and in treating these relations as problematic" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 449). This approach can show how various readings of texts "often cohere around a discrete set of cultural premises, arguments, and assumptions" (Gibson, 2000, p. 267).

Cees Hamelink (1985) has outlined the potential contributions of discourse analysis to international communication, arguing that this approach provides insight into the relationship between the way messages are structured and the reinforcement of dominant legitimations. Hamelink (1985) suggested that global media produce and distribute messages that cultivate an image of the current international order as legitimate despite its underlying inequities. Discourse analysis helps to uncover how it is that people come to accept hegemonic discourses upholding "an international order which in fact excludes them from participation" (p. 150). In other words, discourse analysis can "probe into the ways in which the differential distribution of resources is supported, made
to look self-evident and acceptable” (Hamelink, 1985, p. 153). Such an examination of how and with what consequences representations uphold the context of social power is a central project of ethnography. Examining language-in-use helps to explicate the process of social construction (Baker & Galasinski, 2001).

Other translations and the process of analysis

In addition to the interviews in Umphien Mai, I recorded interviews with more than 80 members of various opposition groups, mostly in English, Burmese and Karen, but also in other languages such as Palaung and Shan. The introductory preamble to these interviews can be found in Appendix C. I spoke with activists and leaders of both Burman and non-Burman opposition groups, especially those group members responsible for information and media outreach. I also interviewed foreign and local NGO workers, students, and refugees, and participated in many meetings, conferences, and training sessions. Most of the interviews were audio-taped, and then transcribed in rough form. They ranged in length from 30 minutes to over eight hours, stretched over several sessions. Those in Burmese or Karen were transcribed in Karen or Burmese in Thailand, most often by Roseline, a Muslim Karen woman who spoke Burmese, Karen and English, and who helped me with simultaneous translations during many of my interviews. Helping me during interviews was keeping Roseline busier than she wanted to be, so after she transcribed the interviews, I gave them to various translators I was able to hire on a part-time basis. The interviews done in Palaung and Shan were translated on the spot and these translations were transcribed along with the tapes. In this way, I created a
triangulation of verification for my translations, in which the real-time translation on the interview tape could be compared with the written translation of the interviewee’s words, and the translation could again be checked against the written transcript and the tape by me back home when there were specific instances of confusion. In addition to the written transcriptions, I gave the translators a copy of the interview cassette which they could use as a guide if they found themselves uncertain about the meaning in the transcript.

I transcribed those interviews conducted in English during the year after I returned to Athens from Thailand. I collected an enormous number of personal narratives, and the resulting number of pages of text was overwhelming. But the process of listening and transcribing tapes, although tedious and slow, provided me with a chance to relive each interview and begin hearing themes and patterns emerge. This was also a process of self-reflexivity as I heard my own confusions, interruptions, aggressiveness, insecurities and satisfactions embodied in my reactions during the interviews. If conducting research is entering into relationship, as I believe it is, then attending to my own moments of violence, however small, are key to the process, and there is nothing like transcribing an interview word-for-word that brings home the memory of those moments when I interrupted someone, or stopped listening to them. Often while listening to the tapes, I realized that I had cut someone off when they were about to say something interesting, or rerouted the conversation without realizing what possibilities I was nipping in the bud.

Themes and patterns did eventually emerge from the interviews. They emerged in great abundance, given the number of interviews I conducted. The question then
became what to do with all these themes, and how to find patterns among them. I kept lists of themes floating around my desk as I transcribed tapes, adding to them, rearranging them, and playing with possibilities for juxtaposition. I continually looked for linkages between various sites in which data had been collected, as well as between the local sites and discourses and the larger national, regional or global processes and institutions. And I remained committed to interrogating the uninterrogated and providing perspectives from those inhabiting marginalized positions.

It cannot be denied, in the end, that ethnography is a process of editing, of selective inclusion and exclusion, of juxtaposition, and finally, of interpretation. This work is a story of my making, and needs to be read as such. All writing is a process of interpretation, but ethnography privileges bricolage, the process of juxtaposing things in new ways to stimulate fresh ideas about those things that have become taken-for-granted. I can now understand how, in the same way a visual artist produces a collage of juxtaposed images, the ethnographer presents stories, snippets of conversation, passages from texts, photographs, and her own voice. Through this process the work develops as a story in which the ethnographer’s character emerges in the telling, developing along the way her relationship with the characters of the story and with you, the reader.

**Ambiguity and Identity**

Finding one's way among the various Burmese opposition groups requires navigating an ocean of organizational acronyms and developing a tolerance for ambiguity in many forms. One of the most powerful is the omnipresence of uncertainty and
suspicion all the more sinister because it is directed towards a typically unseen, ambiguous enemy. It has become almost a cliche to note that Burmese spies are everywhere in Burma and Thailand, but cliches are cliches for a reason. Even if there are far fewer Burmese spies about than people suspect, the fear of their possible presence "among us" - since you can never be sure - acts to restrain people, and a furtive, cautious atmosphere prevails inside Burma and along the border.

The stakes depend on one's situation and the circumstances. For most westerners, the stakes are not much higher than a possible temporary detention and deportation from Burma. As long as they are willing to keep a low profile, westerners also have few fears about engaging in anti-Rangoon activities in Thailand. The feeling of uncertainty and suspicion that permeates the borderland has also become a pleasurable source of drama and intrigue for foreign travelers, journalists and even some aid workers who have little at stake. But for the Burmese peoples, the stakes are far higher. In Burma, any activities perceived as anti-government can result in harsh punishments. Punishable activities include interacting with foreigners in any way deemed suspicious by the authorities. I was warned of this before going to Burma by Burmese friends and other advisors, yet at times it was difficult to know how seriously to take the direst of these warnings, especially since the advice was sometimes contradictory. For example, one academic who had spent a good deal of time with writers in Burma provided me with some contacts, writing in her letter to me that I must be careful not to speak Burmese in Rangoon, as it would attract suspicion. I would then be followed by military intelligence (MI), which would endanger those people I met. Another of my teachers who also spent
a lot of time in Burma encouraged me to use my Burmese, but to be careful how to move around. There are ways to move around to throw off a tail, I learned, such as taking a cab from your hotel to a middle destination, such as another hotel, where you can then get out and take a second taxi to your destination. Telephone calls are screened, so nothing sensitive can be said on the phone. Living on a daily basis with this reality is one thing, but trying to act natural when you aren't sure what is or isn't suspicious is a real challenge, especially if you are wondering if this is all a bit over the top, after all.

This is how I was feeling one day as I went to meet a writer in Mandalay. We talked about what I was doing in Burma, and I told her who I had met with.

"Surely you are keeping your notes with you?" she asked. No, they were back at the hotel room. "So they are in code, then?" she asked. I had started my journal and interview notes using a kind of code, with a separate cheat sheet to help decipher it once I was safe at home. But feeling foolish about it, I had eventually stopped. This writer then told me about another foreigner who had come to meet with her, whose luggage had been searched in her hotel room while she was away. I returned quickly to my hotel room that afternoon after our meeting, worrying that I'd open the door to a ransacked room. All was well when I arrived, and my suitcase was untouched. But I went through my notebook that evening, crossing out names and updating my cheat sheet.

It is inevitable that this climate of suspicion leaves its mark on a work such as this. Identities, like so many things in Burma, are ambiguous. The people I met with were generous with their time, and many spent hours meeting and speaking with me. Many of them, however, must remain anonymous or be referred to using pseudonyms.
For the Burmese activists living in Thailand, pseudonyms are par for the course, and most use more than one name, depending on the situation. Following in the tradition of the famous Burmese independence activists, the Thirty Comrades, many students have taken "noms de guerre," such as the student leader Moethee Zun. The name "Moethee" means "hailstorm" and "Zun" means June, in reference to his first public speech during his early days as an activist in June of 1988 (Fink, 2001, p. 52). Those living on the border often feel threatened by Burmese military intelligence or by the complex and often changing relationship between the Burmese and Thai authorities. It is the fate of their families inside Burma, however, that is most worrisome for many. This is the primary reason for using a pseudonym, since identification with a family inside can be dangerous for the members of that family.

Even the NGO workers and many of the other foreigners working in various ways with the Burmese have their reasons for wanting to remain anonymous. Foremost among these is the desire to be able to travel in and out of Burma - an especially valuable ability for a foreigner who is also well-versed in the Burmese situation. If one can remain off the military government's blacklist of "external destructive elements," one can be of service by traveling in and out of the country carrying out carefully-planned activities. Videotapes of Aung San Suu Kyi speaking to different international organizations and gatherings have on many occasions been smuggled out of the country with the help of friendly and unsuspicious-looking travelers. For other foreigners working in NGOs in Thailand, the need for anonymity has more to do with the illegal or unofficial nature of the work they do with the Burmese in Thailand. Thai officials often look the other way,
but they will continue to do so only if those bending the rules do so quietly, without
drawing attention to themselves.

Thus, the secrecy in which much Burmese opposition work is being carried out
characterizes this text, populated as it is with anonymous quotes and pseudonyms. As
will be shown, this ambiguity cloaks this study in different ways, with significant
implications for communications and democratic change.
Chapter 3

Communication and media in Burma

What characterizes communications in a nation that has come to be described as enveloped in "a cloak of secrecy" (Smith, 1991a)? And what impact does this secrecy, and the environment of suspicion and fear from which it arises, have on the process of democratic change among Burmese in exile?

This chapter will provide a brief history of communications and media use in Burma, including the organizing methods that led to the uprisings of 1988, and the student demonstrations in 1996 and 1998. I will examine communications among the ethnic nationality groups, including the impact of the ceasefires brokered with many groups by the military regime. Highlighting some of the controls on communications and technology use inside Burma, I will demonstrate the ways in which these controls have contributed to the climate of fear and uncertainty that characterizes communications in the country today. I will explore the various ways people resist these controls. I will also examine the role of foreigners in political communication in Burma, exploring in particular some high-profile communicative acts carried out in the past few years by foreigners in Burma. My own experiences and conversations with people in Burma also help to flesh out an account of the communications environment that spawned the various elements of the Burmese opposition movement, and which still influences their work in exile.
A Brief History

Burma is a country of great ethnic diversity, in which over one hundred different languages and dialects have been identified (Smith, 1991b). The country is wedged between Thailand and Laos to the East, India and Bangladesh to the West, and Tibet and China to the North. The central plains of the Irrawaddy Delta are ringed by mountains that are home to a variety of ethnic peoples. Ethnic statistics in Burma are generally unavailable, and contentious when they are, since there has been no attempt to take a count of the population since the British census in 1931 (Smith, 1991a). The 1974 Constitution identifies seven divisions and seven ethnic states - Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah (Karenni), Mon, Rakhine (Arakan) and Shan. There are several other large minority groups in the country as well, such as the Lahu, the Nagas, the Pa-O and the Wa, and there are many Chinese, Tamils, Bengalis and others of Indian origin living in the country.

Burma was annexed by Britain in three stages between 1824 and 1886, and was governed at first as a province of India. The British divided its administration in Burma into two divisions - Ministerial Burma and the Frontier Areas, in which the ethnic nationalities were given autonomy to govern themselves. The British also used a divide-and-conquer strategy by employing ethnic minority men to help control the Burmans, who were agitating for independence in central Burma. During World War II, the Burmans fought with the Japanese against the Allies while the hill peoples such as the Karens and Kachins stayed loyal to the British. The British exacerbated existing tensions between the various groups by using ethnic minority soldiers to police the Burmans, who
were pushing for independence. After independence in 1948, Burma experienced only a few years of civilian rule before General Ne Win took over in a coup that brought the military into power in 1962. While there has been reshuffling of personnel over the years, the military has remained in power. In December 1987, Burma was accorded Least Developed Country (LDC) status at the UN, which recognized that after years of economic decline, Burma was one of the world's ten poorest nations. This was so embarrassing that the government in power at the time, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), waited for four months to announce this news to its own people (Smith, 1991a). And so, while Ne Win instituted his plan for the "Burmese Way to Socialism," the country languished in isolation. As conditions throughout the country worsened for the central regime, territories were designated as white, brown or black areas, corresponding with the degree of control the government had over that area. White areas were entirely under the government's control, brown areas were partially government-controlled, and black areas were under the control of ethnic nationalist groups. Visitors to Burma were generally restricted to all but the white areas.

Scholarly work in Burma has also been severely restricted by the country's isolationist policies, and there are few works that examine the development of media and communications technology use since Burma's independence. The few descriptions that do exist make clear that historically, Burma was a highly literate country with "proud educational traditions" (Smith, 1991a, p. 17). Western-style newspapers were introduced into the country during the colonial period, and a host of locally-produced magazines and
newspapers appeared soon afterwards (Smith, 1991a). This diversity of outlets continued after independence in 1948, and the Burmese press during the 1950s was recognized as among the freest in Asia, with more than 30 daily newspapers in several languages and representing a wide variety of political viewpoints (Hollstein, 1961; Smith, 1991a). While many of these papers were sympathetic to particular political parties, they remained relatively free of government control, and there was no serious attempt at censorship or harassment of journalists or writers (Allott, 1993; Smith, 1991a; Smith, 1999c).

Communications, media and control, 1962-present

Secrecy has characterized military rule in Burma from the start of Ne Win's rule in 1962. Immediately upon taking power in a military coup, Ne Win targeted the press by imprisoning newspaper editors and establishing the state-run newspapers, Working People's Daily and Forward Weekly (Smith, 1991a). Two years later, in 1964, Ne Win nationalized all newspapers, but agreed to allow them "full freedom of expression within the accepted limits of the Burmese Way to Socialism" (Allott, 1994, p. 89). Within a few years the country's previously vibrant private press was decimated, and by 1988 only six papers remained from the thirty that were being published at the start of Ne Win's rule. The remaining papers were mouthpieces for the army or Ne Win's political party, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Following the socialist philosophy for the role of the media in serving the overall goals of the society (Browne 1989), the Burmese media was used by the government to explain official policies, to provide the information
they thought the populace needed, and to exhort people to work harder for the national cause (Allott, 1994; Smith, 1991a).

Writing in a 1971 doctoral dissertation that compared communications and national development in Burma, Malaysia and Thailand, Paul Pritchard Blackburn summarized the Burmese media:

The Burmese mass media system in 1970 evidenced an elite orientation and high degree of ideological content. State control of the media was virtually complete, non-Burman elements of the population were denied access to mass communications channels, exogenous messages were carefully monitored wherever feasible, and most indices of activity showed little increase over those of a decade earlier. Unlike Malaysia and Thailand, Burma gave print media priority over electronic media; radio broadcasting was conducted from a single Rangoon facility, while Burma alone of the three countries had no television. Most messages, typically placed within highly ideological and exhoratory [sic] contexts, appeared aimed at elite official, party, and academic audiences. Media output for the masses, consisting mainly of periodicals and feature films, faced heavy governmental pressure to include more content related to advancement of the "Burmese Way to Socialism." (pp. 1-2)

Since news reporting was forbidden, fiction magazines became popular, and a number of literary periodicals sprang up after the establishment of military rule. Anna Allott (1994) has noted that three types of publications became popular under the military: magazines having to do with business and the free market, religious works, and lightweight fiction and love stories. Several successful magazines were state-owned, but many others were not, and they continued to publish through the years, often having to change their titles when they ran into trouble with the censorship body, the Press Scrutiny
Board (PSB) (Smith, 1991a). In addition to the popularity of literary periodicals, the film industry in Burma was historically characterized as composed of "apolitical, non-controversial historical or folk dramas" and was thus regarded by the military government as a mass medium rather than a vehicle for propagandizing the elite (Blackburn, 1971, p. 315).

Burma's military governments have been particularly harsh on the ethnic nationalities for their efforts to preserve and maintain their own languages, and members of these minorities have labeled the Burmese military's approach a process of "Burmanization." As Martin Smith (1991a) has pointed out, inside Burma, minority group literature has been restricted to "folksy or domestic magazines" such as the Karen magazines Go Forward and Our Home. In addition, there have long been restrictions on the teaching of minority languages in the nationalized school system, an issue that non-Burmans often raise in discussions with outsiders. Smith (1991a) notes that under the rule of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) since 1988, there have been even fewer books published in ethnic minority languages than during the BSPP era, and that many non-Burman intellectuals have been arrested or went underground, after being charged with allegedly trying to promote the usage of ethnic minority languages. The SLORC's xenophobic campaign of Burmanization has also affected the Indian and Chinese communities in Burma. Articles appearing in the Working People's Daily in 1989 decried marriages between "Burmese girls" and Indians or Chinese, saying that they had led to "impure Burmese nationals. Foreigners marrying Burmese girls and trying to swallow up the whole race will continue to be a problem in the era of democracy in the
future" (as cited in Smith, 1991a).

The literacy rate in Burma has historically been very good, and under the BSPP government, the country twice won UNESCO prizes for its literacy campaigns (Smith, 1991a). In 1987, however, the previously reported adult literacy rate of over 78 per cent was reduced to 18.7 per cent, apparently so Burma could comply with the strict conditions required to be considered for LDC status at the UN. Nevertheless, with the exception of some in the rural areas, the Burmese peoples are known to place a high value on education, and many Burmese are concerned about the deterioration of the country's intellectual and cultural life.

For several months during the period of the 1988 uprisings, Burma experienced a brief hiatus from the strict censorship that had characterized its communications since the beginning of military rule. A huge number of newspapers, press sheets and other publications began circulating throughout the country, many containing biting satire on the political situation under Ne Win and BSPP rule. Even the state-run newspapers reported news more accurately than ever before (Smith, 1991a). With the coup of September 18th that brought the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to power, however, the clampdown on the press was renewed and writers were harassed and arrested. Many fled to rebel-held territory or to other countries.

The foreign media have also long been a target of the Burmese military. Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt, head of Burma's Military Intelligence Service (MIS), enumerated many of the regime's accusations against foreign media in two books, *The Conspiracy of*

\[18\] To explain the drop in this figure, BSPP officials argued that earlier figures included monastic education, which could not be regarded as functional literacy for development purposes (Smith, 1991a).
Treasonous Minions Within the Myanmar Naing-Ngan and Traitorous Cohorts, and A Skyful of Lies [sic], which attacked reporting by foreign media during the events of 1988. Writing in 1991, Smith (1991a) noted that since 1988, over one hundred cartoons had appeared in the Working People's Daily attacking the BBC alone. And while most of the books' accusations against foreign media were inaccurate, Smith (1991a) argued that "this campaign conjured up the image of a network of foreigners secretly working together to seize control of Burma" (p. 72).

Smith (1991a) has described what he calls an "insurgent press" which was established just after Burma's independence in 1948. He noted the publication of a variety of journals, produced in rural areas of the country on Gestetner machines, as well as better quality publications produced in Thailand, that had varying and irregular circulation rates dependent on the funding provided by the various "insurgent fronts" (Smith, 1991a, p. 69). While many new magazines and journals had been produced since 1988, few had made their way into Rangoon with any regularity (Smith, 1991a). There were also intermittent efforts at running ethnic minority radio stations, as well as a radio program from the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) that shut down after the CPB broke apart in 1989. Opposition works from the border areas did find their way to Rangoon, although it was impossible (and would have been dangerous for those involved) to document this with any certainty. Nevertheless, many of the opposition groups have periodically smuggled information into the country in order to counteract government media descriptions of the rebels and to teach people about the gradually deteriorating situation in the ethnic minority areas. One student activist explained to me that prior to
the 1988 uprisings, he met a communist sympathizer who had access to copies of the underground communist newspaper, *Dawn*, which he was sometimes able to borrow for a day. He described to me how he would have to read it and then return it at the exact same time and place the following day. His friend told him that others were also secretly borrowing the newspaper, including some police officers (personal communication, April 18, 2000).

The restrictions on freedom of expression in Burma are clearly not limited to writers. Writing in 1991, Frances D'Souza, director of the media freedom watchdog organization, Article 19, noted that since the military coup in 1988, 15,000 public servants had been sacked or disciplined in Burma for "crimes of thought and expression" (Smith, 1991, p. iv). In such a climate of control, government media have also become suspect, and several scholars have written about the degree to which the mass media lacks credibility with the Burmese people (Allott, 1994; Lintner, 1989; Smith, 1991a; Smith, 1992). For this reason, the Burmese have relied a great deal on the international broadcasters whose news is carried over the airways, thus invisible and far less dangerous than print media. Bertil Lintner (1989) and others have described the high degree of dependence in Burma on international broadcasting services such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) (see also Fink, 2001).

What is clear from past accounts about communications technologies and their use in Burma is that since the start of military rule, media have been rhetorically constructed as a threat, on the one hand, and as the bearers of benign governmental
guidance, on the other. With such limited conceptions, the use of communications technologies has therefore grown slowly, and access to each new technology has been restricted to a select, trusted few. Mi Sue Pwint, a female student from Karenni State, remembers that when she was growing up there were very few telephones. "Telephones were not for the people. They were for the government offices, and officers used telephones, but the normal people had no phones and it was not easy to use the phone" (personal communication, July 3, 2000). This changed in 1986 or 1987, she remembered, when the state instituted a new telephone project, but even then phone conversations were easily recorded by Burmese military intelligence, and people did not feel safe using them (Mi Sue Pwint, July 3, 2000). Burma was the last country in Southeast Asia to set up a television service, which first aired in 1980 (McDaniel, 2002), and two decades later national broadcasting in Burma is limited to three government-run stations broadcasting a few hours a day. And when mobile telephones were initially introduced into Burma, they were considered military equipment (Crampton, 2000, August 31). It is this militarized understanding of technologies and of the importance and power of information that forms the context within which the Burmese underground resistance movements have developed and operated.

**Student organizing and the underground ("UG") leading to 1988**

The student movement in Burma has a long history of agitation for change in the country, and is particularly respected for its role in independence struggles against the British, back when the country's independence hero, Aung San, was a student leader.
More recently, in the months preceding the uprisings in 1988, the students spearheaded the underground activity in Burma that led to massive general strike and demonstrations in August. Aung Zaw, now the editor of *The Irrawaddy* magazine and a correspondent for RFA, was a second-year botany student at Rangoon University in 1988, and was involved in the underground student movement at the time. The underground, or "UG," was at that time a loose network of small groups of students and others organizing acts of resistance or protest against the military government. The key to survival, for both individuals and groups, was an unspoken agreement not to ask too much about each other. The less you knew about who was involved, the fewer people you could endanger because there was less information you could divulge under conditions of intimidation or torture. As Ko Oo, another UG activist at the time, explained to me, "It was UG work, so even though ... if I wanted to know, I thought I shouldn't ask. These were the rules, don't ask, and also you should not ask how many people, who they are, and so on" (personal communication, April 20, 2000).

Organizational units were small groups of five or six people, one or two of whom would have contacts outside the group. Aung Zaw's group started with three and built gradually to include seven students. "I think at the time there were other student groups already, doing similar activities like us," he explained, "but we had no way of communicating with them because even if we had a sense … we thought they may be also interested in politics because they're not too happy with the government, but we don't dare to talk with them. We might go out with them, or drink, or do all these silly things, but we wouldn't talk about this" (personal communication, April 18, 2000). Ko
Oo worked with the UG before the 1988 uprisings began, and was surprised when the student groups were able to work openly during the short period of freedom before the coup on September 18th. During that period of above-ground activity he realized that close friends of his had also been involved in organizing for quite some time.

Student activists were creative and resourceful in getting their information and calls to action out to the general public. Aung Zaw and his group used special inkpaper and a roller and mirror to roll out individual copies of their statements. One of his writer friends had given him the roller, which he could transport easily in his shoulder bag without detection. "So that’s what we would do, and we would press about 100, 200 copies . . . and distribute them among the people. It wasn’t very easy. We had to go take buses or public cars and throw them from the bus, or put them in the toilet stalls, the school's toilet stalls." Another activist, Ponnya, described *the poster teik-pwe*, or posters battles, he and his friends used to wage at the Rangoon General Hospital. They would get up very early, at around 3 AM, stick a rolled-up pile of posters in their back pants pocket, grab a bottle of glue, and head to the hospital by bus. Once there, they would look around to make sure no MI were loitering around, and then they would post their posters along the walls of the emergency ward. This clandestine form of protest was clearly a source of pleasure for Ponnya, both at the time and in the retelling of it, and it framed his thoughts about those days. "It is impossible to forget this poster teik-pwe after the '88 uprising," he told me (personal communication, May 7, 2000).

In Burma, teashops play a vital role as meeting places for discussion and organizing. The Mo Chit teashop in Rangoon was famous as a meeting place for student
leaders as far back as the 1930s and 1940s. "People would say that if you hadn’t been to Mo Chit, you hadn't been to university," Aung Zaw remembered. The students would occasionally organize a large meeting in the teashop, disguising it by having students sit in small groups at tables around the room, rotating one by one to another table every few minutes. Such choreography would enable everyone to plan how they would all go in separate groups by separate routes to the large meeting place, an old abandoned factory lent to them by a friend. And while this kind of atmosphere bred a great deal of suspicion, it also depended on trust. "Because the host is one of us, he guaranteed everything," Aung Zaw explains. "So this is the only trust we have … we don't have anything written, and we don't have a mafia-style of meeting, not like the Godfather, with the black sedans driving, like that. It was simple. So if someone said, 'okay, trust me, trust this group, at that place, I guarantee it for you,' that was it. It's a verbal agreement, a verbal promise only that we had" (personal communication, April 18, 2000). Aung Zaw's group eventually joined with a few others and by early 1988 included about 30 people, providing a much more efficient means of distributing information.

The events that sparked the unrest in 1988 began that March with a brawl in a teashop between students, one of whom was the son of a local chairman of the local People's Council, the local powerbase of the military regime. When the People's Council refused to hear the students' grievances, students organized a protest that was met by the riot police. An engineering student, Maung Phone Maw, was killed, and another two to three dozen students suffered gunshot wounds. The treatment of those
wounded angered the students further; they were shackled to their beds, armed guards were posted at the doors to their rooms, and higher authorities refused permission for doctors to operate on them, resulting in several deaths (Lintner, 1989, pp. 10-12). When the students’ demands for full media accounting of the incident were dismissed, tensions escalated even further. In mid-March, a bloody crackdown resulted in the deaths of approximately 200 students when troops isolated unarmed demonstrators on a bridge and opened fire. This incident is now known as the "Red Bridge" incident, referring to the blood that spilled that day.

Mi Sue Pwint was a 20-year-old student at Rangoon University when she took part in the 1988 demonstrations. At the end of March 1988, as the mood among students in Rangoon remained contentious, many universities and colleges were closed, and the students returned to their hometowns. Many student activists explained to me why this was a mistake for the regime. Mi Sue Pwint and other students from Rangoon University were eager to tell the students from Mandalay and Taunggyi, who were organizing in Loikaw, in Karenni State, about what had happened to students in Rangoon in March. The students gathered in Loikaw were highly motivated at that time and really wanted to act, Mi Sue Pwint recalled, but were unsure about what to do and how to begin. They received letters with information about possible actions from the students in Rangoon, but had little contact with students elsewhere farther afield in Karenni State. But the students in the area pressured each other to become and remain active.

Events continued to spiral into increasing levels of violence, and by mid-June, demonstrations had spread to campuses all over the country, and the students were soon
joined by monks and factory workers. After a particularly violent series of events in June, 1988, Aung Zaw's group had to split up and go into hiding. Many of his fellow students were arrested, and Aung Zaw was forced to flee the city. He hid in a beautiful old monastery, home to two old monks and a big old radio, on which he listened to the BBC and the VOA every evening. He stayed there as protests in the cities grew in strength. On August 8th, tens of thousands of demonstrators launched a nationwide general strike, demanding democracy, human rights, the resignation of the government, and an end to the socialist economic system. The military responded brutally. Troops using automatic rifles fired on unarmed crowds, and armored cars fired machine guns indiscriminately into neighborhoods in Rangoon, killing people in their homes (Lintner, 1989, p. 246, 1991, p. 18). According to reports published in the London Times and Guardian, between 2,000 and 3,000 people were killed by riot police from the 8th to the 13th of August (Kraeger, 1991, p. 332).

Aung Zaw remembered listening with the villagers all gathered around the radio as the students involved in the August, 1988, carnage were interviewed. "Everyone listened to the BBC, the students, the interviews . . . very moving. So one time I was sitting with about 30 villagers, sitting, smoking cheroots and listening . . . A female student was crying on the radio, giving an interview . . . that was very moving . . . and the villagers all went quiet, they were all really very, very upset" (personal communication, April 18, 2000). It was a shattering experience for the students, and an estimated six to ten thousand students chose to flee to the border areas of Thailand and India. As conventional wisdom has it, a militarized action results most often in an equally
militarized reaction, and after the outrage many students felt at the treatment they had received from their government, it is no surprise that many of them felt that taking up arms against the regime was the only realistic option left to them.

Aung Zaw returned to Rangoon from the monastery where he had been in hiding to find that most of his friends were gone - either missing or had left for the border areas, where they planned to get guns to fight the military regime. At first he stayed in a local police station, staffed by police who had joined the demonstrations on the side of the people and who were providing sanctuary for those in hiding. Some of the policemen gave Aung Zaw and his friends lessons in self-defense and how to use guns. But they were safe there for only a few days, and eventually Aung Zaw decided to leave for the border to join the others. "Everyone was talking about the armed struggle," he explains, "and all of us thought that that was the only option then."

This is perhaps not surprising. Stories told by several of the female students make it clear that the demonstrations in 1988 were gendered in significant ways. Some female students recalled being restrained in various ways during the demonstrations, including being prevented from joining the protests by parents or older brothers. This was perceived as a battle for the male student activists to fight, at least until the demonstrations grew large enough to include people from all walks of life. In the beginning, it was the male students who got things started, or were belittled when they didn't. Mi Sue Pwint remembered an incident in which someone sent the (male) student leaders at Taunggyi College a package containing a symbolic gift: a woman's taman, or sarong, and tanaka, a kind of makeup derived from the branch of a tree. "Many colleges
and universities made small demonstrations, but Taunggyi College was very silent at that time . . . They think that, how do you say? That they're not brave, [that they are] like a woman." Mi Sue Pwint laughed, but then added that this was not good for women, this kind of comparison. "Later I don't like this, but at the time I didn't really think about it" (personal communication, July 3, 2000). This symbolic "gift," used as a means of shaming the Taunggyi College students into action, associated women with inaction and fear. The associations remained unquestioned at the time, as were the gendered conceptions of the masculine "nature" of the Burmese democracy struggle.

### 1990 elections

In 1990, elections were held. Most Burma watchers contend that the regime underestimated the feelings of frustration in the country, and thought they had maintained enough control over the media to ensure their own victory at the polls. During the campaigning, the regime restricted the ability of opposition parties to publicly work to garner support. The increasingly popular opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was placed under house arrest and was unable to campaign for the ten months prior to the election. She was also prohibited from running as a candidate. Nevertheless, her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won 82% of the parliamentary seats in a clear show of support. Significantly, the NLD won support in areas dominated by members of the military and their families (Fink, 2001). The NLD also won approximately half of the seats in the ethnic minority states, and most of the nationality parties expressed unequivocal support for the party's goals. After the vote, minority
leaders expressed their satisfaction with the results, despite their fears that many ethnic minority peoples had been unable to vote (Smith, 1991b). I was teaching on the border in 1991 when the election took place, and I remember distinctly the great feeling of hope among the Karen and other opposition activists that something would soon change in Burma.

That hope proved unwarranted. After the election, the SLORC began a systematic crackdown on elected members of parliament (MPs) and members of the NLD. As the situation became more dangerous for elected opposition party members, and as it became clear that the military did not intend to relinquish power, eight elected MPs fled to the mountains in Karen-held territory along the Thai-Burma border. They were led by Dr. Sein Win, a cousin of Aung San Suu Kyi and an elected MP. They arrived at Manerplaw, the Karen and ethnic alliance headquarters, in December 1990, and declared the formation of a national coalition government. These MPs claimed a mandate from over 250 fellow MPs with whom they had earlier tried to set up a government. Dr. Sein Win and the others formed the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), which then declared a cease-fire with the armed opposition alliance, the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB). The 1990 elections provided the opposition with its most powerful claim to legitimacy, a claim the Burmese regime has attempted to counter with its own method of legitimacy, the ceasefires.
Ceasefires and the ethnic minority opposition

It is estimated that at the start of the rule of the State Law and Order Council (SLORC), that perhaps sixty percent of Burma’s land area was not secured by the government at any one time, and that within this sixty percent of the land lived only ten percent of the population (Steinberg, 2001, p. 186). But shortly after taking power in a coup in 1988, the SLORC began arranging ceasefires with as many of the ethnic nationality groups as they could. The "rebels" would agree to stop fighting, while the government agreed to allow these groups to pursue their traditional agriculture and promised more assistance with development in education, health care, transportation and infrastructure (Steinberg, 2001). The government established the Ministry for Progress of Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs specifically to improve conditions in the country's border regions, and has also emphasized the expansion of the national network of roads in recent years. These roads provide villagers with access to regional and national networks, but they are also a means of easy access for the government into previously uncontrolled border regions (Steinberg, 2001). These two things together offer the government a cloak of legitimacy - the ceasefires and their relationship to infrastructural development.
Figure 7. Map Showing the Location of the 17 National Armed Groups That Have Returned to the Legal Fold.

Rimond Htoo, Secretary of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) was a representative of the Karenni people at the talks during which the KNPP decided to agree to a ceasefire with the SLORC in 1995, and the two groups held a ceasefire celebration.
Although Rimond Htoo did not attend the celebration ceremony, he recalls what he heard about what happened at the gathering. Rather than calling it a ceremony of agreement between the two groups, the SLORC constructed the ceremony as one of Karenni surrender. The Karenni had brought their own statement to read at the ceremony, but when it came time to make their presentation, they were permitted to read only the statement prepared for them by the government (personal communication, July 4, 2000). Other groups, he insisted, have had the same experience.

There is bitterness among ethnic nationality leaders that the SLORC/SPDC has been so successful at negotiating with opposition groups individually, rather than having to deal with them as an alliance. Several ethnic leaders expressed regret at the weakness of the National Democratic Front (NDF), Burma's main ethnic alliance. Many see this as a result of both the ceasefires and the willingness of many of the ethnic minority leaders to throw their support behind the democratic movement to the detriment of their own struggles for self-determination. The NDF was first formed in 1976, and later constituted the group of ethnic nationalities included in the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), which incorporated the Burman democratic opposition groups when it was founded in 1988. After the founding of the DAB, the ethnic minority groups have found themselves competing for attention within the opposition movement, struggling for the right to self-determination. On the other hand, calls for democratic change are associated primarily with the goals of the Burmans, especially when viewed from the perspective of the ethnic nationality groups.

19 The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) changed its name in November 1997 to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).
The weakness of the NDF has only been compounded by the fact that the armed ethnic groups find themselves without their traditional sources of funding, the tax gates they once controlled along the border. They have also been unable to gain foreign funding or access to foreign funders who mostly shun associations with armed opposition groups. But for Hkun Okker, president of the Pa-O People’s Liberation Organization (PPLO), the crux of the matter came when the military regime realized the importance of the ethnic minorities before the Burman opposition did. Hkun Okker expressed his belief that the democratic opposition groups have not adequately dealt with the issues of concern to the ethnic nationalities. "Their top priority is to [have the government] hand over power. They never give priority to the ethnic issue. The democratic forces always said, 'Let's forget it for now. Try the democratic system change, and after that we will think about the ethnic issue.' So that is the response of the Burman leaders both outside and inside" (personal communication, July 5, 2000). But it was the military regime that got the upper hand with the ethnic nationalities, he explained, by making ceasefire agreements with different groups individually. "The military regime cleverly recognized that the ethnic power has a major role to play in Burmese politics, so immediately they picked up the armed ethnic groups and they spread out their power .... the SLORC was very clever. They recognized that he who rules the ethnics, rules Burma" (personal communication, July 5, 2000).

In Thailand, unlike the NLD and other Burman-associated groups working politically toward democratic change in Burma, the NDF and several other ethnic groups are underfunded or receive no outside support at all. At the same time, many of the
ethnic groups that once were members of the alliance have pulled out of the NDF as they have come to ceasefire agreements with the SLORC/SPDC. The government, in turn, has highlighted the series of ceasefires with ethnic groups in its PR campaign, attempting to show the international community that progress has been made in creating peace with elements of what was formerly their opposition. In doing so, the Burmese regime has effectively used the divide-and-conquer method, which resulted in the capture of their opposition alliance headquarters at Manerplaw.

The loss of Manerplaw

The loss of the ethnic alliance headquarters at Manerplaw, while mostly symbolic, nevertheless represented the loss of control over the land and the central communications headquarters of the opposition movement. Manerplaw, just across the border from Ban Tha Song Yang in Thailand, was by the early 1990s the headquarters for almost the entire lineup of non-communist opposition groups in Burma. More than two dozen rebel organizations maintained a headquarters or liaison office in the settlement (Ball, 1998). I visited and stayed at Manerplaw on several occasions during the years I taught in Huaykaloke refugee camp and later in the village of Pwe Baw Lu, just a few miles upriver from Manerplaw. Manerplaw was a short strip of flat land between the Salween River to the East and a mountain range to the West, beyond which was territory controlled by the regime. Just along the river were the buildings housing the military and political leadership of the Karen National Union (KNU) and other opposition groups, and nearby was the headquarters of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF). At
night, crowds of soldiers on leave from the front lines would gather around the television set to watch CNN news and videos of foreign movies, such as Rambo. A guesthouse near the river was equipped with separate cubbyholes with raised beds, and a cook, reportedly a former chef at the Strand Hotel in Rangoon, imported for the comfort of visiting journalists and other foreigners. I met many people there over the years from all around the world: journalists, aid workers, teachers and evangelists, as well as other backpackers-cum-teachers like myself. All of them had some interest in the situation and the peoples of Burma. Manerplaw was a place for networking, both among the various opposition interests, but also between them and outsiders. Burma was slowly becoming better known to the world.

The fall of Manerplaw in January, 1995, was due in large part to the formation of the Democratic Burmese Buddhist Army (DKBA), a breakaway group of Buddhist Karen, through behind-the-scenes manipulation by the Burmese military, but also in part to a breakdown in communications security among the Karen. The formation of the DKBA provided the Burmese regime with inside information about the layout of the area surrounding the Karen headquarters at Manerplaw, which fell to the Burmese shortly afterwards. Then in February, the Burmese military captured Wangkha, the army base across the border from the Huaykaloke refugee camp and one of the Karen's most symbolically important military sites. While the "human intelligence (HUMINT)" that the Burmese army obtained from the DKBA helped in the capture of Manerplaw, it also became clear that the Burmese military had been intercepting KNU radio messages for some time, and reprinting them, sometimes word-for-word, in the state-run newspapers in
Burma in the days after they had been intercepted (Ball, 1998). Desmond Ball (1998) has called it a matter of "stupendous folly" that the Karen were not more careful about their "communications security (COMSEC)" operations after the Burmese published these conversations in their newspaper, making it clear that they were in the active process of interception (p. 187). He described the Karen leaders as "old men who had become tired, depressed and careless" (p. 187).

**1996 and 1998 demonstrations**

The year following the fall of Manerplaw saw more unrest inside Burma. Just as the student demonstrations in 1988 were sparked in part because the incidents leading to the death of the student Phone Maw were misreported on state-run television (Ko Bo Kyi, personal communication, August 18, 2000), the misreporting of government TV was also a factor in the student demonstrations of 1996. In October, 1996, after a brawl in which the police beat two students, one of them seriously, the students demanded that the police tell the true story of what had happened on state-run television. That evening, when the news broadcast what the students saw to be outright lies, the students protested in the streets. They were met by security forces who tried to intimidate them into leaving. At 2 AM the security forces finally used water cannons to storm the area and chase the students away (Win Naing, personal communication, August 15, 2000; Fink, 2001).

Misinformation played a large role in organizing and responding to these student demonstrations, as it does in much of the communication that occurs between the military regime and the various opposition groups. Many student leaders at that time considered
the practice of propaganda a normal and necessary part of their struggle against the
government. As Win Naing explained, "SPDC, they do some propaganda, and also we
do some propaganda . . . like a movement." So during the 1996 disturbances, members
of the leadership of the main student union, the All Burma Federation of Students'
Unions (ABFSU), used propaganda to create student action. The ABFSU leaders wrote
an unattributed statement saying that the students were not good people, that they were
fighting with police and were dangerous. Then they distributed these statements among
the students, who assumed they had been printed by the government (personal
communication, August 15, 2000).

The use of planted information to deceive both "the enemy" and one's own
constituency was an important means of conceptualizing information as a tool of war. In
such an environment, the truth of all information is subject to question, and the
motivation behind all communications must be analyzed. Any communication received
by the opposition groups had to be considered potential misinformation deliberately
planted by the Burmese military to cause divisions within the opposition. This
environment tainted public discourse in Burma, where people tried to read between the
lines, interpreting the stories as best they could under the restrictive circumstances.

Compounding the ambiguity, violence and fear associated with information inside
Burma was the fact that the very centers for intellectual discourse, the universities, had
been closed for most of the time since 1988. Between 1962 and 1999, universities had
been shut down 13 times, for periods of one month to three years (Fink, 2001, p. 182).
The universities in Rangoon and Mandalay had re-opened in late 1991 and early 1992,
but were closed again from December 1996 until mid-1998, when they were opened again for a brief period before protests broke out once again and they were once again closed. One of the students involved in organizing the brief protests in 1998 was Thet Win Aung, who was arrested and sentenced to fifty-three years in jail, with the sentence later increased to fifty-nine years (Fink, 2001). Thus, while the students inside remained committed and active on behalf of change in Burma, they also faced severe consequences for their actions.

The tension between the people and the regime was palpable when I visited Burma. In fact, there were two overwhelming feelings I heard expressed by the Burmese I met. One was an intense anger at the government for the restrictions under which they had to struggle to survive and the increasing difficulty they faced in making ends meet. The second feeling, which counterbalanced the first to keep people quiet, was fear.

**Communications in Burma Today**

Getting off the plane in Rangoon, on December 21, 1999, I waited in line at the foreign exchange booth. It was mandatory for all tourists traveling independently (rather than with a packaged tour group) to exchange U.S. $300 at the start of their trip to Myanmar. I had been coached by activists in Thailand in the ways to get around handing over this money directly to the military government. I knew I would have to exchange money at the market eventually in order to avoid the ludicrous official exchange rate, but at least I'd be helping someone with their commission on the exchange, adding at least

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20 Along with the name change imposed on the country in 1989 were changes in the names of many cities and towns. The capital, known before as Rangoon, was renamed Yangon.
one layer of benefits between my expenditures and the military coffers.

"Just slip the people at the counter a fiver," a friend had suggested, "it works." I had never bribed anyone in my life, and the thought was exciting, in a James Bond kind of way. As I neared the counter, though, I had my doubts. I wouldn't be dealing with just one clerk, I could now see. There were three women behind the counter where I was waiting in line, and several armed men were standing nearby guarding the exit into the rest of the airport terminal. When my turn came, I sauntered up to the counter. "You must exchange three hundred dollars," the woman said to me in English, with a smile. I showed her the travelers checks I was holding, for $150. "Can I change this?" I asked. "Well, ma'am, you need to . . ." her eyes caught sight of the green five dollar bill sticking out from under a corner of one of the travelers checks. "Yes, that's right, ma'am." Like a charm, the atmosphere had changed, and there were smiles all around. Then she officiously stamped and handed me an envelope, leaned towards me and said, "You don't tell about this to anyone, okay?" We smiled, and I left, walking past the armed men clutching my envelope, printed in receipt of $300.

The remainder of this chapter explores the communications environment in Burma today, in which money often speaks volumes, and official rules are vague and shifting, adding to an already overcharged atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. I will describe the controls placed on communications technologies and media, and the government's reaction to the introduction of new information technologies (NITs). Their attempts to control the flow of information include the use of metaphor and language to induce fear of both communications technologies as well as the media's potentially
dangerous content, the withholding of information to perpetuate uncertainty, and the high costs of access that restricts use of NITs among all but the wealthiest Burmese. People living in this environment of censorship and control have developed their own forms of resistance, and this chapter details some of these. I also examine the role of foreigners in a few high-profile, publicity-generating events inside Burma. All of these factors contributed to the communications environment in Burma, from which the Burmese opposition arose, and which it will hopefully be instrumental in changing.

Censorship and Fear

The Printers and Publishers Registration Law of 1962 is Burma's primary legal instrument of censorship. It was introduced in 1962 soon after the coup that initiated the military rule of the past forty years, and has been amended several times, most recently in 1989, with increasing scope and more severe punishments (Sen, 2001). All books, periodicals, songs and films distributed in Burma are required to be approved by the country's censorship body, the Press Scrutiny Board, prior to their publication and distribution, and there is no judicial review of this board's decisions. There are no privately owned newspapers, and the four state-owned newspapers do not raise political cases or legal issues, providing instead a dry rundown of the daily activities of the generals (Sen, 2001).

My own trip to Burma in December, 1999, was unsettling. The feeling that I was being followed and needed to be extremely careful about the people I met with and the logistics of contacting them was countered by another feeling - that I was overreacting.
At these times it seemed that the warnings I'd gotten from teachers and Burmese friends outside the country to avoid speaking Burmese and drawing attention to myself were a bit over the top. This ambiguity and the resultant ping-pong movement I experienced between these two extremes was an embodiment of the polarity created by on the one hand seeing the Burmese situation in the black and white terms of good vs. evil that characterize much of the Burmese opposition's rhetoric, to on the other hand, recognizing the substantial areas of gray in the everyday lived reality inside Burma.

A famous writer in Rangoon who was a hub for the Rangoon community of writers explained to me that it was well-known among writers that the government kept a blacklist with three categories: white, gray and black. Those writers on the white list were believed to be no threat, and could get approval within two or three months from the Press Scrutiny Board to publish. Those on the gray list were of more concern to the government, and the Press Scrutiny Board examined their writings more carefully. But it was the writers on the black list that had the most difficulty, often having to wait as much as a year to hear back from the Press Scrutiny Board, and then having to rewrite their work very often (personal communication, December 27, 1999). Another writer told me that when the government arrested writers, they usually found some other charge to arrest and convict them of, rather than explicitly arresting them for their writings (personal communication, December 29, 1999).

A popular novelist told me that because she was on the blacklist, it took her two to three years to get a novel published, and that she was always asked to make revisions, sometimes even having to rewrite the personality of one of her main characters. The
censorship board disliked characters that resembled any of the famous opposition leaders, for example. Burmese novels also had to avoid referring to premarital sex, she told me, which the government claimed was "not fit for Myanmar culture," despite what she saw as a prevalence of premarital sex among Burmese young people (personal communication, December 28, 1999).

From Inwa Publishing House, Burmese people could subscribe to the *Singapore Straits Times, Business Times* (both of which were published in English in Singapore), Chinese newspapers, as well as *Time, Newsweek, Asiaweek* and the *International Herald Tribune*. All of these magazines and newspapers, however, were expensive and censored before being distributed. In addition, people got access on a limited basis to uncensored copies of the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* (published in English in Thailand), the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and other magazines through the airline flight and sanitation staff who serviced planes flying into Rangoon. These people had developed relationships with the staff of specific bookstores, which kept these illegal magazines behind their counters (personal communication from the editor of a major magazine, December 27, 1999).

The Burmese daily newspapers were a reflection in print of the government's attempts to engineer changes in society, featuring dry listings of the visits of various ministers to various public works or development projects, where they gave the proper advice on the successful implementation of the project and then left with their entourage, the list of which took up more than half of many of the articles. People jokingly referred to the infamous Insein prison as Burma's journalism school, reflecting both the fact that
so many journalists have been imprisoned there and that Burma has no school of journalism. One woman I met in Rangoon described how she reads the *New Light of Myanmar* from the back to the front. She said she skips the front and back covers of the newspaper because the photographs of top SPDC brass make her angry, so she goes directly to the marriages and obituaries in the back of the paper. She also said that the *New Light of Myanmar* is useful in that you can use its lists of which ministers went where to do what as a means of understanding shifts in the power hierarchy within the SPDC (personal communication, December 28, 1999). She also noted that the government's reaction to accusations against it, often by printing the accusing report so they could respond to it, told readers a good deal about what was bothering the regime at any particular time.

In Rangoon, I met with several writers, and all of them explained how they operated under conditions of censorship. The editor of one popular Burmese weekly magazine, who did not feel free to speak at the guesthouse where I was staying, invited me to his home to discuss the restrictions he faces in getting his magazine published. He explained that his magazine was established in the late 1980s, and quickly adopted the necessary forms of self-censorship and production of "sugar-coated news" that was required for approval by the Press Scrutiny Board. Such self-censorship was especially necessary, he told me, when writing about a problem in the country, and while his staff could sometimes write about what was happening and how to change it, they could only do so if the authorities weren't blamed directly or by name. They also had to avoid
certain information, such as the price of rice, exchange rates, the "market price" of kyat, and so on (personal communication, December 27, 1999).

This magazine editor also explained how the procedures for gaining approval for publication and for publication itself had changed over the years. Prior to 1996, the government allowed the publishing houses, primarily privately owned and run, to blacken out areas that had been censored, but this was no longer possible. When we spoke, the process required publishers to print about 100 initial copies of a magazine edition, which were then submitted to the Press Scrutiny Board. The magazine editor had to await the results, then edit and make corrections, and once it was finally approved, print the magazine in final form in larger quantities. In this way, the censorship was at least not physically obvious in the blackened-out parts of magazines (personal communication, December 27, 1999). People learned to read between the lines in such a climate of censorship. As one magazine editor I met in Rangoon described it, the writing needs to be very careful in order to impart as much information as possible in as subtle a way as possible, so as not to incur the financial losses of having to reprint an entire edition of a publication should there be a decision to censor even a portion of it. This concern acted as a powerful incentive to self-censorship.

The editor also explained the procedure that he had to go through in order to have his magazine approved for publication (personal communication, December 27, 1999). About 38 copies of the magazines had to be submitted on Wednesday, and were then distributed to various ministers, military intelligence and the National Library. The

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21 At the time of my trip to Burma, the official exchange rate was six Burmese kyat to one U.S. dollar, whereas the black market rate hovered around 350 kyat to one dollar. The price has fluctuated wildly since then, and continues to be a source of embarrassment for the Burmese government.
magazine scrutiny board meeting was on Saturday, and in the evening after the board meeting, the magazine was informed of what they could and could not print. They then had to make the necessary changes and re-submit the magazine by Monday. On Tuesday they got the okay and could print. Even so, if there were late objections by one or other of the ministries that had to approve the magazine, they could be stopped in the middle of printing and would have to change what was required of them to change. The various officials who received the initial uncensored copies of the magazine for review then often sold them in the market for extra money (personal communication, December 27, 1999). In the end, the Deputy Home Minister had to sign his approval for every issue of every journal or magazine. Another magazine writer I met in Rangoon told me that the Press Scrutiny Board had recently announced a page restriction for weekly journals, acknowledging that they were unable to read so much material every week (personal communication, December 29, 1999).

Censorship in Burma also carried over into the reporting of law, which has serious implications for legal practice. Law reports are the basis upon which lawyers determine past precedent, and thus upon which they build their cases [in a system marked by transparency]. The cases included in law reports are generally landmark cases that are considered important for a point of law, and many law reports are published by law publishing companies. In Burma, the government publishes the Burma Law Report annually, but the cases to be included are hand-picked by the government. Many landmark cases are missing from the record. While including cases involving theft, embezzlement, rape, murder and receiving stolen property, the Burma Law Report has
not included a single political case since 1988 (Maung, 2001).

The writers I met in Burma all seemed to be struggling with the issue of how much they were willing to work with a regime they disliked through compromises in the integrity of their writing in order to get things printed that they felt were necessary for the Burmese people. For example, one of the writers I spoke with was concerned that there was no journal in Burma about literature, or philosophy, or that dealt with serious health issues such as sex education and AIDS. She said that to publish a couple of good-quality journals would require working with the government in order to get licensed, something she didn't want to do but that she felt had to be done (personal communication, December 28, 1999).

State-run broadcasting in Burma was controlled by the government, but the authorities could not control the airwaves entirely. The military regime had long been antagonistic to the international broadcasting services in Burmese provided by the Voice of America (VOA), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and at times attempted to jam them (Ball, 1998). The government's antagonism towards foreign broadcasting in Burma was exemplified in the book *Skyful of Lies* [sic], in which Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt attacked the reporting by foreign media, especially the BBC and VOA, during the events of 1988. The government regularly criticized the broadcasts of the VOA Burmese service for creating what a Burmese army commander called "restiveness within Burma's defence services" ("Burmese commander", 2000), and accused foreign broadcasters of sensationalism for spreading rumors about counterfeit banknotes produced by the Burmese government (Myanmar Information Committee, 2001).
Burmese state-run television, featuring images of monotonic announcers interspersed with pictures of monks and officious-looking men in green, played like background noise in the Burmese homes I visited. Those who spoke about Myanmar TV at all told me how boring and repetitive it was. I met one woman in Rangoon whose husband worked for Myanmar TV, which she explained used to be private but had been taken over by "military people in civilian clothes." She told me a joke that was circulating at the time:

A man walks into a TV shop with a TV he recently bought, and complains to the shop owner that the TV does not work properly. "This is supposed to be a colored television," he says, "but it only has two colors: green and yellow."

It was understood by the Burmese that yellow represented monks and green represented the military and that this was a mockery of the daily TV rundown of which military leaders gave what gifts to which monks for what reasons (personal communication, December 24, 1999).

In its struggle to maintain control over the flow of information, it is predictable that the government would be wary of new information technologies. One of the regime's first reactions to the availability of computer-mediated communications was the introduction of the Computer Science Development Law of 1996, which imposes an automatic jail term of 7 to 15 years on anyone who imports, possesses or uses a computer modem or fax machine without government permission. The law gave the Ministry of Communications, Posts and Telegraphs the power to determine what types of computer equipment were to be restricted. The punishment also applied to anyone who set up a link with a computer network without prior permission, or who undermined state
security, law and order, national unity and culture, or transmitted state secrets by using a computer network and information technology ("Burma junta," 1996).

In July 1996, just a few months before this new law was introduced, the death of Leo Nichols in a Burmese prison created a storm of criticism for the Burmese regime. Nichols was imprisoned for possession of an unregistered facsimile machine, which he had used to send out a weekly column written by Aung San Suu Kyi for the Japanese daily Mainichi Shimbun and its English-language counterpart, the Mainichi Daily News (Zaw Win Maung, 1996). Nichols was a Burmese citizen, an Anglo-Burman, who served as an honorary consul for Denmark, Finland, Norway and Switzerland. All of these countries unsuccessfully appealed for an independent autopsy to be carried out on Nichols' body after the Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister alleged that he was tortured while in prison ("Dead envoy", 1996; "Memorial for consul", 1996). According to Burmese officials, Nichols died of an apparent stroke after being held in solitary confinement, but they refused requests for an independent inquiry into the cause of his death. Foreign Minister Ohn Gyaw was quoted as saying that Nichols' death was caused by the "richness of food" he ate in jail, which was "not compatible with his health" (Cooper, 1996). This incident indicates the extent to which the generals in Rangoon were willing to risk international condemnation in order to police the use of communications equipment and suppress the efforts of the opposition NLD.

22 The year-long series of weekly columns was entitled "Letter from Burma," and was picked up by several other newspapers around the world and posted on the Internet.
Easing restrictions, maintaining control

Despite signs that the government is easing restrictions on the use of new information technologies, their use is controlled through keeping prices high and threats for misuse severe. The government's Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) began providing an e-mail service in 1997 ("Public," 1999). Its use, however, was limited by cost and access was out of the reach of most Burmese. In October 1998, Secretary-I Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt announced that the government was formulating an Information Technology Master Plan that included allowing access to the Internet for private businesses ("Burma Internet").

Private businesses, foreign NGOs, expatriates and diplomatic personnel did at times have intermittent access to e-mail, but about ten days before I arrived in Burma in December 1999, the two private e-mail servers that had been operating in Rangoon were shut down with no warning. There were many rumors about why this had happened. I was told that a company called Eagle, owned by an American and managed by his Burmese wife, was the first to offer e-mail service in Burma. In addition to the substantial setup costs, there was a monthly service charge of US $80, making it affordable for diplomats, some NGOs and businesses, but unaffordable for most Burmese. Then a former employee of Eagle reportedly opened a rival firm called Netmail, which was poised to provide e-mail service at a much more affordable price. One rumor was that through competitive positioning, one of the companies had tried to oust their rival by accusing them of providing Internet access, downloading "subversive" websites, and sending them through e-mail. Another rumor was that a colonel in the
SPDC sent out information on one of the e-mail servers about things the government didn't want getting out. As happened several times after I left Burma, articles printed in the press outside the country corroborated some of the rumors. An Australian paper reported on December 30, 1999, that the Burmese military government had charged six people, including a senior military officer, with violating the Official Secrets Act for downloading anti-government material ("Internet download," 1999). Nevertheless, the variety and number of rumors made it difficult to know what had really happened, an ambiguity that characterized the everyday experiences of those living in Burma.

What remains clear despite the various stories is that the government stepped in and shut down both private servers. Shortly after this, the regime posted an announcement on its homepage stating that MPT is "the only entity allowed for public postal and telecommunications services in Myanmar" ("Public," 1999). The announcement also said that preparations for ISP access to the Internet and e-mail were "at the final stage," and that services would soon be available to the general public ("Public," 1999). Then in January, 2000, the regime issued a list of regulations for users of its Internet service, which among other restrictions, prohibits any writings "detrimental to the interests of the Union of Myanmar" or related to politics, holds the account holder responsible for all activity on the account, prohibits hacking or other forms of misuse, and requires account holders to obtain permission before creating a web page ("Regulations," 2000). The government remains the country's sole e-mail and Internet provider.
Some government officials and those associated with them are reportedly keen users of the Net, including former dictator Ne Win’s daughter Sandar Win, who until her house arrest in early March, 2002, was reportedly a regular e-mail user (Bardacke, 1996). She was placed under house arrest when her husband and three sons were arrested for allegedly plotting a military coup against the current SPDC leadership. Information and communication technologies have figured prominently in the regime's own "coverage" of the events during press conferences held to explain the official version. The government's website, Myanmar.com, provided transcripts of these press conferences, along with photographs of SPDC leaders officiating at the event and of the various communications equipment confiscated during the government's raids of the homes and offices of the alleged coup-plotters. Placing both Ne Win and Sandar Win under house arrest, the government cut her phone lines and confiscated her mobile phone, limiting her communication in much the same way they had done with Aung San Suu Kyi.

Communications technologies are powerful symbols, especially in Burma, where the country's lack of wealth and its otherwise underdeveloped infrastructure contrast starkly with the high tech nature of these technologies. The struggle over the use and control of these technologies reflects the power dynamics at play in the society as a whole, and a window on these dynamics is available in the symbolism at play in public events such as these government press conferences.

The government's concern with the potential impact of new information technologies was apparent in the fact that although they were slowly increasing the number of citizens permitted access to e-mail accounts, all messages had to pass through
a central server controlled by the military, where they could get held up for hours while
the censors read them (Neumann, 2002; Zarni Win, 2001). A few Internet cafes had
opened in Rangoon, but Internet access was unavailable. Instead, members could use e-
mail or surf the newly-created "Intranet" of government-approved sites. The annual
membership fee of one club, US $500, along with a monthly service charge of $65 for 30
hours of use, indicates how these Internet cafes were reserved for the country's elite
(Chon, 2001). Tourists and business travelers could legally e-mail from the more upscale
hotels, but these services were also expensive (Zarny Win, 2001).

Nevertheless, computer courses were advertised all over Rangoon and other cities
and were reportedly standard in many schools, and the government had set up a task force
to examine e-commerce (Chon, 2001). The government New Light of Myanmar
newspaper and the government website, Myanmar.com, included frequent news of new
IT developments, such as computer labs in schools or new opportunities for e-commerce,
often accompanied by photographs of Burmese citizens using computers. Yet
communication between those inside and outside Burma was limited; several businesses
in Burma had websites, but they did not have e-mail accounts, so they could not be
contacted online regarding their services (Zarny Win, 2001).

Despite the government's promotion of development in new information
technologies, the use of surveillance, threats, and high costs kept most Burmese from
being able to access and make use of the newest information technologies. The gendered
and paternalistic rhetoric surrounding the use of these technologies painted a picture of a
dangerous world in which the country, rhetorically constructed as a woman, and the
people, constructed as children, had to be protected by the father figure, the SPDC itself. The symbolic construction of information and communication as dangerous in the wrong hands while a means of protection if appropriately controlled by the government as father figure reinforced militarized understandings of the technologies and their association with potentially harmful consequences.

**Father knows best**

The government's strict control over the media and the cloak and dagger rhetoric that accompanied it was limited to some degree by its need to develop the country's information technology infrastructure in order to attract foreign investment and develop new forms of commerce. The regime responded to this need and to the accusations of its critics by launching a PR campaign aimed at improving its image. The campaign was directed in large part by the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS), a think tank headed by Lt. General Khin Nyunt, chief of Burma's military intelligence and the junta's third-ranking member. A key tool in this campaign was the regime's own website, *Myanmar.com*, launched in 1996, the same year the government instituted the Computer Science and Development Law. The website had become increasingly more sophisticated over the years, and included information on travel and business in Burma in addition to its ongoing postings of responses to accusations by the regime's critics. The homepage offered a choice of language options: English, German, French and Japanese, making it clear that the site was intended primarily for the eyes of outsiders and those educated Burmese in exile fluent in one of these languages. From the start, *Myanmar.com* had
been used to answer the various charges of the government's critics, and despite the fact that the site had become increasingly technologically sophisticated and professional in appearance, its xenophobic rhetoric was compounded by the fact that it remained a self-contained little bubble within cyberspace. Although the site included links to government offices, embassies, businesses and media within Burma, websites run by the other ASEAN governments were the only external links provided on Myanmar.com.

The government's ambivalence toward new information technology was exemplified by the rhetoric found on its website. Information technology was rhetorically constructed both as a threat and as a means by which the government could protect the country from dangerous outsiders who were seen as manipulating new information technology to undermine Myanmar's unity. The government was rhetorically constructed as the nation's protector, and from the beginning the site has featured proclamations about the noble efforts of the government to develop the country's infrastructure. The government's paternalistic attitude towards the people of Burma was reiterated in its responses to its critics. Following the links to the "Political Situation of Myanmar," led to a list of responses to the regime's critics, charge by charge. This section included articles with titles such as "Accusing Myanmar of Not Being Serious in the Fight Against Narcotic Drug" [sic] and "Allegations on Exercising Forced Labor in Myanmar." The section "Human Rights Issues and Democracy," made the argument, common to several Southeast Asian governments, that in "a third world country like Myanmar" the top priorities must be security, food and shelter, followed by education, health and the economy, all of which the website proclaimed the government was
diligently working to provide for the people. This was why party politicking was restricted, as it would "affect the national unity and drain her strength away elsewhere."

Here as elsewhere on the site, Myanmar was referred to as "she," and this section argued that a focus on political rights "is like expecting or forcing a child to run first before learning how to walk properly." Thus, using the figure of a family, the regime had rhetorically constructed the country as the mother, the people as the children, and itself as the father.

The attitude of the government towards the opposition was best exemplified by its on-going attempts to broker ceasefire deals with the ethnic minority groups which had for decades remained allied against it, and by its simultaneous efforts to discredit the Burman opposition to its rule. This was exemplified by the content found on early versions of the website when one followed a link to the Myanmar Information Committee page.

Following this link led to a webpage featuring in large lettering the words "Unity is No. 1" on the left side of the screen, mirrored on the right side of the screen by the words "Protect Your Country With Information Technology." Between these two statements and running down the middle of the page was a list of "declarations" reportedly made by ethnic minority groups that had signed ceasefire deals with the military regime. These included accusations that the opposition NLD was encouraging "dangerous foreign interference" and warnings that "interferences of those possessed by external politics and those attempting to disunite the national races" were harmful to the "progress made in national consolidation." The various "national races" were pictured thanking the government for its magnanimity and goodwill in working to develop the country, and
warning against provocation by the NLD, which "will not produce any positive results."
Thus, the website from the start rhetorically pitted the ethnic minority groups against the
Burman opposition, and constructed information technology as both a threat and a means
through which the government could protect the country by countering the threat and
providing "true" information.

Although the regime maintained that the website was an important tool in making
the "truth" known to outsiders and countering the "misinformation" of its critics, its
impact appeared uncertain. In an address to gathered staff of Myanmar Radio and TV in
and programming to counter false news distributed by some western nations' news
agencies, adding that genuine news about the country had started to attract attention on
the government website, which had helped to improve the reporting of foreign news
agencies ("Khin Nyunt", 2001). It was clear that journalists did visit the site, although
whether or not they found the information credible is another matter. Thomas Crampton
of the International Herald Tribune, for example, reported in August, 2000, about the
regime's response to Aung San Suu Kyi's attempt to meet NLD members outside of
Rangoon, when they prevented her car from leaving the city and provoked a standoff in
which Suu Kyi and her followers remained camped by the roadside in protest. Noting
that when she had done this two years previously, the government had faxed out terse
statements to a limited number of journalists, he described how this time he was
receiving almost daily e-mails about the standoff as well as invitations to visit the website
for more information. He described the government's language, portraying the standoff
as Suu Kyi’s "jolly jaunt into the countryside", and printed several of the captions used by the government and posted on their website under pictures of the incident (Crampton, 2000). He made no explicit value judgment about the government's rhetoric, but allowed the quotes to speak for themselves. In many cases, directly quoting the xenophobic government rhetoric is all it takes to throw into question the contention that the government is effectively counteracting its reputation as draconian. Here, for example, is a recent excerpt from the *New Light of Myanmar*:

> The internal and external destructive elements with every intention of misleading the international community, are making fabrications and false news politically and trying to make complaints to the persons who do not know about Myanmar well, organizing and using them. . . . Upholding the national interests and loyalty, the Tatmadaw has never committed any unjust and unfair acts. This is the noble tradition of the people's Tatmadaw. All the entire national people are urged to crush and stamp out the false news and fabrications disseminated by internal and external destructive elements in their attempt to tarnish the dignity of Tatmadaw. ("Stamp out", 2002)

In addition to the affect the website may or may not have had on journalists outside of Burma, several Burmese opposition activists in Thailand explained to me why they valued the site. It reportedly provided them with the chance to learn about what the regime was thinking and planning, and to catch up on the latest changes in government policy. Nevertheless, on the website, just like in the state-run media, there was a lot left unsaid.
Covering a dead elephant

They want to cover a dead elephant with a goat skin.

(Burmese proverb)

There are many things that don't get reported at all in the Burmese media, including changes in prices of basic commodities, exchange rates, including the "market price" of the Burmese currency, the kyat, or, basically, any bad news. This had become such a pattern that it was a topic for discussion on the news; international media or wire service reports about events in Burma often included the detail that Burmese media was not reporting the incident. Many of the Burmese I met talked about this, and all the writers discussed the need to avoid certain topics in their writing. These topics included increases in commodity prices, natural disasters such as the June, 2001, incident in which a dam broke, killing as many as 1000 people, the increasing drug problem in the country, and even the national soccer team's loss at the regional Tiger Cup tournament in late 2000 (Neumann, 2002). Even the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center in New York went unreported in the Burmese media until the day after the attacks, when they were reported only briefly. The story was told in a bit more detail a few days later by The Myanmar Times, a weekly magazine believed to have close ties with high-ranking military officials (Kyaw Zwa Moe, 2001). State-run media maintained its news blackout on the events until September 21st, when it published the message of sympathy sent by Senior General Than Shwe to President George Bush. Control over information regarding these events was likely due to concerns about possible agitation by Muslims in Burma (Moncreif, 2001). When I asked people in Burma why the government didn't like
to report bad news in the media, one woman laughed, reciting a Burmese proverb: "They want to cover a dead elephant with a goat skin." With a dearth of information about problems in the country and an overall climate of silence and fear, rumors were plentiful in Burma.

**Cracks in the edifice**

It was often the government itself that generated interest in otherwise unknown oppositional works. Robert Helvey is a former U.S. Defense Attache in Rangoon who has acted as a consultant to ethnic minority leaders on the Thai-Burma border. During training sessions on nonviolent civil disobedience he conducted with ethnic and Burman dissident leaders, he used the book *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, by peace activist Gene Sharp. When Helvey's training sessions and Sharp's book were denounced in Rangoon by state-controlled media, there was a sudden and sharp increase in demand for the book, and thousands of copies were secretly distributed (Helvey, 1996). The book's influence has since been noteworthy. Aung San Suu Kyi (1996) wrote in her weekly column in the Japanese newspaper, the *Mainichi Shimbun* (Mainichi Daily News), about a fashionable term being whispered around Burma at that time. It sounded like "jeans shirt," but was in fact a reference to Gene Sharp and his ideas of nonviolent resistance. Suu Kyi (1996) noted that 19 political prisoners had been tried and sentenced to seven years imprisonment on a charge of high treason for possession of Gene Sharp's book.

While I was in Burma, several people told me stories of others who had become angry with the media. One man described how people sometimes become so angry at the
Myanmar Radio and TV (MRTV) that they shout at their radios or TV sets. The state-run
*New Light of Myanmar* and other newspapers also raised the hackles of many Burmese.

One angry woman I spoke with told me about then current newspaper reports that implied
that Burmese universities had not been closed. According to this woman, the report listed
the number of students attending classes and the number of teachers teaching. A few
other people mentioned this same article to me, including one woman who told me that
many Burmese had recently become angry when the government's Minister for
Economic Planning, Brigadier General David Abel, told visiting Japanese dignitaries that
70% of Burmese classes were open (personal communication, December 28, 1999).

According to a writer I met in Rangoon, one way people communicated with the
government was to intentionally talk about complaints they had when they knew that
military intelligence (MI) officers were around. Their belief was apparently that their
complaints might in this way be reported upwards to the authorities through their spies.
The writer explained that in order to remain "safe" from the army's wrath, those doing
the complaining had to be general and could not name specific parties. Although this
could be risky, many people felt that this tactic was effective in communicating at least to
a degree with the regime, and that such anti-government talk had become more common
and even trendy in teashops (personal communication, December 28, 1999).

It was primarily inside Burma that the use of what Downing (2001) has identified
as "ephemeral media" was most effective. Ephemeral media are media with a "one-shot
concentrated pungency," described by a Greenpeace activist as "mind-bombs":
influential, sometimes archetypal images that can cut through the hypnotic drone of the
day-to-day babbling to reach people at a deeper emotional level” (as cited in Downing, 2001, p. 102). This type of opposition media was the most appropriate given conditions inside Burma, and activists in the country have made creative use of such media. Examples of ephemeral media use in Burma included the strategic use of clothing, such as wearing yellow, the color which had come to represent the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD). One NLD activist I met in Shan State celebrated the auspicious day of September 9, 1999, chosen by activists as the day to commemorate the 1988 uprisings, by wearing yellow and arranging only yellow books for display at his bookstand. An activist in Mandalay also told me that many people wore yellow that day, and that he had heard several people were arrested, although he hadn't witnessed this himself. But he had seen many people use candles instead of electricity that night in a silent symbolic gesture of support for the opposition. Other forms of ephemeral media included such initiatives as organizing people to go to pagodas around the city at a given time and ring the bells simultaneously a pre-arranged number of times. Activists did this on the tenth anniversary of the 8/8/88 uprisings, for example, when they rang the bells in pagodas around Rangoon eight times at exactly eight minutes after 8 PM (Win Naing, personal communication, August 15, 2000). Activists in Burma found creative ways to drop their "mind bombs" so that they were effective but also minimized the dangers of openly communicating opposition messages inside Burma. They wrote notes on paper money, which they used to pay for carfare, ensuring that the money circulated immediately. They scrawled messages on bathroom walls, or distributed printed statements by placing a pile of them on top of a public taxi, so that when the taxi moved
the papers went flying and people could snatch them up if they were curious.

The events surrounding the tenth anniversary of August 8, 1988, also known as "Four Eights," provided plenty of opportunities for such opposition "mind bombs," although there was also a tightening of surveillance. On August 8, 1998, stickers printed with "Don't forget 8-8-88" and "The army must serve the people" were found on the walls of a well-known monastery in central Burma. A few weeks later, an ABSDF media release, posted to the BurmaNet News Listserv on August 20, 1998 and then carried by the BBC Summary of World Broadcasts on August 21st, announced that the military authorities in Mandalay were offering cash rewards for people who could provide information about political activists who had been placing anti-military stickers all around the city, and who had written anti-military statements on walls of monasteries, schools and other public places (ABSDF, 1998). In a twist of the government's own rhetoric, statements written on walls of Rangoon University buildings accused Burmese authorities of being "ax-handles of the Chinese" (ABSDF, 1998). This refers to the term used often in Burmese state-run media to describe Aung San Suu Kyi. An "ax-handle" is a traitor, a wooden handle used to cut down the very trees from which it came, symbolizing a traitor to one's own kind.

But the act of communication was not always connected to such public expressions of defiance. Sometimes communication was less about communicating to a mass of people and more about the maintenance of a personal sense of dignity and hope. In Rangoon I met an elderly communist activist and teacher who had spent many years imprisoned in solitary confinement because of his writings. He described his time in jail,
and how through time spent in a cold cell without proper food and medicine he had become partially paralyzed. As he spoke, he shuffled over to a bookshelf, where he picked up and handed me a flat metallic object. It was a picture frame, made from what looked like a hammered silver metal of some kind, intricately patterned with designs in relief in the metal.

"I made it from my empty toothpaste tubes," he told me. "I hid it from the guards." He described other things made by other prisoners he knew, such as poems printed on plastic bags, and small paintings or drawings, smuggled out by those rare visitors permitted into the prison. I heard similar stories in Mandalay, where I visited a family of a well-known artist who had been imprisoned for his artistic mockery of the authorities and their attitude toward Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. His family had been able to afford to buy and smuggle some materials into the prison for him by bribing the guards. They furtively yet proudly showed me the things he had made in prison. There was a T-shirt with defiant slogans painted in colored paint, and several intricately-done embroideries of calendars for the year 2000, symbolically referred to as a year that would mark a turning point in Burma's history. One calendar had an embroidered fist and a statement that he would perform his act "my own way," in defiance of the censorship for which he had been imprisoned.

Former political prisoners in Burma talked about how important it was to be able to read and write whenever possible in order to both communicate and to keep themselves mentally occupied and alert in confinement. Prisoners wrote poems or other compositions using bricks or medicine tablets as markers on the concrete floor, or by
committing the poems to memory by chanting them over and over (Bo Kyi, personal communication, August 18, 2000). Bo Kyi is a former student leader and political prisoner who founded the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), or AAPP, based in Mae Sot. He described to me how in Mandalay prison he was able to get some books to read and was able to study English every day with a teacher he met inside. They would write the words in the dirt with sticks, and Bo Kyi would recite what he had learned to commit it to memory. Prisoners also made use of the plastic bags in which their families would bring them food; using a small nail, they could write on the plastic bag and circulate their writings within the prison. Some of the prison wardens were sympathetic to the student prisoners, and others needed money and could be bribed to smuggle things in or out of the prisons for them. As Bo Kyi described it, "some people handmade things from plastic bags, made beads from plastic bags, some people made sculptures. We bought soap and they would make a sculpture of a woman" (personal communication, August 18, 2000).

In March, 1996, twenty-two prisoners in Insein prison were tried and received an additional seven years with hard labor for their part in publishing weekly news bulletins in the prison and writing and smuggling letters out of the prison, including one to former UN Special Rapporteur, Professor Yozo Yokota (ABSDF, 1997). The transcript of their trial, smuggled out of Burma and published by the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) in 1997, provides important insights into the degree to which political prisoners in Burma have remained active despite the odds against them, as well as how these activities threaten the military authorities. The report provides details of the various ways
that prisoners communicated, both among themselves and with outsiders, including
writing on prison shirts and smuggling them out, smuggling in radios piece by piece and
reassembling them inside, and publishing and circulating magazines and news bulletins in
the prison. The report is also telling for the importance the regime obviously places on
information and the means of its distribution, which they clearly see as a threat. The list
of evidence brought to bear against each of the accused included, in addition to the three
radios and the batteries found in their cells, copies of foreign magazines such as *Time* and
*Newsweek*, some Burmese magazines sold legally, such as *Dana* and *Thuta Swae Sone*,
sheets of paper and plastic bags with articles or stories written on them, ball point pens
and refills, colored pencils and felt-tip pens, a picture of Aung San and several of Aung
San Suu Kyi, English language study books, a book of Buddhist Sutras, and various other
documents (ABSDF, 1997).

**Outsiders Within**

A big attraction to the Burmese cause for students around the world is the fact that
so many of those lobbying for change in Burma identify themselves as students. Students
from outside Burma have been centrally involved in the creation of several high-profile
media events by visiting Burma specifically to create their own "mind bombs" in the
ostensible hopes of encouraging international news coverage of the situation in Burma.
In honor of the tenth anniversary of the 8/8/88 uprisings, for example, eighteen activists
from the U.S., Australia, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, dubbed the
"Rangoon 18," flew into Rangoon as tourists. On the morning of August 9th they divided
themselves into groups and began passing out thousands of palm-sized pamphlets printed with the slogans "8888" and "Don't Forget - Don't Give Up." They were arrested and held in Rangoon before being tried, sentenced, and then deported. In mid-September 1999, a 28 year-old Briton named Rachel Goldwyn chained herself to a lamppost at a marketplace in Rangoon and began singing democracy songs. She was promptly arrested and charged with seven years of hard labor for "undermining peace, security and stability" with her actions, which drew a crowd of several hundred people (Lyall, 1999). Another Briton, James Mawdsley, was sentenced to 17 years in prison earlier in September, 1999. He had been arrested and deported twice before from Burma on charges of anti-government activity, which this third time consisted of entering the country illegally, shouting revolutionary slogans and carrying pro-democracy leaflets (Lyall, 1999).

All of these actions by outsiders traveling in Burma have been controversial, since they have had both physical and emotional consequences. Activists inside Burma were affected by the actions of the "Rangoon 18," because they led to a tightening of security which made action more difficult and dangerous. One activist who was inside Burma at the time of the action by the "Rangoon 18" thought that they should not have done what they did, because it played right into the hands of the regime and its propaganda to the Burmese people.

The SPDC showed [these foreigners] to the Burmese people in the Burmese newspaper and media. Every day they say that the westerners and America intervene in our country, that "this is neocolonialism." They say this many times, many times, and people are not clear all the time about this, (personal communication, August 15, 2000)
This activist and others expressed discomfort with the idea that foreigners should enter Burma and take this type of action. "In my opinion," another activist told me, "they should support from the outside."

Shades of Grey

One of the Rangoon 18 was Malaysian journalist Ong Ju Lynn (1998), who wrote about her experience for Nation magazine. In the aftermath of the media event, Ong (1998) pointed out that it was the six Americans who became the biggest heroes of the event, while the other 12 were recognized less often in the reporting on the incident. But her feelings about the event focused on how, against her own will, she had come to see her captors as people.

I came home with a knot in my chest that wouldn't go away. We came home jubilant and triumphant. Heroes. But I did not feel jubilant and triumphant. I was ashamed, not for what I did (leafleting, small matter). But because I really didn't want to see my captors as people, so I can come home and condemn the junta with authoritative vigour. So I can mock their ignorance and stupidity. My captors who are part of the junta, who work a 9-to-5 job, and go home to their families and TV sets. A small piece in a monstrous structure (Ong, 1998).

Ong (1998) ended her article by vowing to continue speaking out on behalf of the Burmese people, but also by recognizing that what used to appear to her as a clear target of evil, a bull's-eye of red in the center of a white circle, now appeared as "mixed to a solid pink."

Why does the picture get painted in these ways? For those who put countless
hours into the struggle against the regime, there may be a compulsion to see things in black and white in order to justify the sacrifices required. But this act of dichotomizing the situation in black and white terms of good vs. evil or the opposition vs. the junta, like any dichotomy, contributes to the divisiveness of the situation, perpetuating the process of militarization by provoking an equally vehement response. In addition, associating the opposition as good in contrast to the evil of the regime makes invisible the oppressive characteristics within the opposition itself, as well as the positive attributes of members of the military regime.

Attention to the shades of gray that complicate any reality that has repeatedly been painted in black and white is a key means of interrogating that which is most taken-for-granted. I would like to follow Lynn's example by examining the dominant metaphors used to frame our understandings of communications technology and its use. In Burma's case, and I believe more universally as well, two competing metaphors seem to dominate our thinking about technology. One the one hand are the Utopian views of the Internet and other technologies as the means to counter repression and control in order to usher in a new era of democratic change and a freer world. But more often the metaphors used to discuss and write about communications technologies and media in Burma associates them with war, including the "information warfare" in the public relations campaigns of the regime and its opposition. These metaphors connecting communication and media with war will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.
The attention to war is of course necessary and understandable in any situation such as Burma’s, where real war is being waged, and where people die regularly as a consequence. But at what point do the metaphors of war, repeated often enough, come to shape our expectations and our everyday lives as much as they are shaped by them? At what point do we begin to see our complex set of complex relationships with others only in terms of black and white?

The Communication Dance - A Final Duet

January 19, 2000

My final day in Burma, and my final meeting with X, a well-known writer. I had read one of his stories and was eager to discuss with him the meaning of the story and the intention behind some of its symbols and events. Other writers had been eager to tell me about how they had to write indirectly, to make a point subtly while ostensibly using another as the main idea of their article or story. One writer had told me that X seemed to be very clever at using symbolism that was clear to the public but which nevertheless got past the censorship board. I felt it was lucky that I was intimately familiar with one of X’s stories; in my final summer program in Burmese language just a few months earlier, I had studied the story carefully and tried to analyze its meaning.

Our meeting had been facilitated by Saya Gyi Y, a venerable writer who has been imprisoned more than once and who is a sort of hub among Burmese artists and writers. W, another popular writer I had met with, had also suggested that I meet with X, especially since I knew one of his stories well. I approached the meeting eagerly.
The taxi driver had difficulty finding the place, but as we grew nearer, people's reactions to our questions grew more sure (and less like the hesitant but still positive responses which I had learned indicate a genuine uncertainty). As we were stopping to ask someone the way for about the sixth time, a man walked up to the taxi and bent down, sticking his youngish-looking face into the window on the driver's side.

"Miss Lisa?" he asked. He was smiling, his face was kind and I felt immediately at ease. He ushered me around the back of what seemed to be a sort of ramshackle furniture-building workshop, across a muddy plot and up a dark set of stairs to an upstairs apartment. Like many other Burmese I have met, he lives simply, with his family in a few dark rooms, a kitchen of charcoal burners, and a simple squat toilet off in a tiny room in one corner.

He motioned for me to sit at a small table near what seemed to be the only sunlight in the rooms. The table was lined with a clean, pressed white tablecloth, and on it sat the inevitable yay nway (a clear Burmese tea), a china plate with two unopened packets of pocket tissues, a covered lacquerware bowl and a few books. He motioned for me to sit down, and as I did so, a young woman appeared with a plate of fried coconut snacks. He introduced her as his daughter, and she smiled shyly. As we sat there and began talking, she produced another plate - this one of a kind of coconut pudding. Then she returned with a cup of sweet Burmese tea for me. X uncovered the lacquerware bowl to reveal laphet thok, a Burmese wet tea salad. There was barely room on the table to fit all of the snacks he had laid out for me.

He nervously fingered the unopened packets of tissues and smiled at me. We had
already established that our conversation would need to be in a mix of Burmese and English, as both my Burmese and his English were far from fluent. I began with the introduction I used for the people I had established that I could trust, whom I’d met through others I could trust. I told him that I was a student studying Burma, and that my interest in Burma had begun ten years earlier, when I’d lived with Karen refugees from Burma in Thailand. I explained that I was currently living in Thailand along the Burmese border and studying the uses of new information technologies among groups working for democracy in Burma. I explained that although my project was based on the border, it was necessary for me to also understand the situation of communication inside the country as well. He said very little during this introduction. As I had said these things to several others before him, my Burmese slid easily from me and filled me with a bit more confidence. I explained that I was interested in how symbolism is used by writers who cannot be direct, and I asked him about his short story.

I had assumed when I read his story that he had written it specifically to address the problems in Burmese literature that several other writers had talked with me about explicitly. They had argued that the state of censorship in the country was so great that there have been few genuinely good works of fiction which have been able to pass the censorship board. As a result, they are concerned with the quality of Burmese fiction and the direction in which it is being forced to develop.

As X explained his intentions in writing this story, I took notes eagerly, but grew increasingly disappointed. He said nothing about the quality of fiction, and mentioned nothing about censorship at all. I thought perhaps if I reworded the question that my
inquiry would be better understood.

"Are you worried about the situation of fiction in Burma today?" I asked him.

"What do you mean?" His response surprised me.

"Well, for example, other writers have told me that there is a lot of censorship and that for this reason they are worried, because they believe that to publish good fiction is not possible in Burma." He paused and shifted in his chair. It was several beats before he answered.

"If there were no censorship at all," he began slowly, "it would be very bad." He looked at me and continued. "For example, what if I write about you and it is not true. What can you do?" I told him that in the U.S. I could sue for libel. But I also wondered whether I’d not understood him correctly, or he hadn’t understood me. He went on to explain that he believed that some censorship was necessary, especially as regards religious issues. I asked him whether or not he had ever been censored. He smiled nervously.

"A little bit," he answered. But, he said, different writers are censored to different degrees, and it depends on what they are writing. "For me, I have no problem, because I am not a politician. Some other writers are politicians so they have some problems." He repeated that he thought some censorship is necessary, especially with regard to religious issues and also with the various ethnic nationalities. He said that if there were no censorship, various religious groups and ethnic groups would begin writing bad things about each other and this would lead to quarrels and instability. He was beginning to sound a bit like an article from the New Light of Myanmar. I began to wonder whether or
not I had made a mistake coming to see him.

"For example," he argued, "bad things should not be written about the ethnic groups, since they are not very strong." I asked him why the government published books such as "Wither the KNU?" a government account of the rebel group. X answered that the government sees them as different from the nationalities, as insurgents. I said nothing for what seemed like quite a while as I decided what to say next.

I tried to remember back to what I had already told him. Had I told him that I lived on the border? I had. I'd even told him I'd lived with Karen refugees. Had I told him I was interested in the opposition groups? Yes. I'd try another way to figure him out.

"Do you think there is a lot of censorship now?" I asked him. He paused a long time before answering, looking away from me out the window.

"Some," he said slowly. "But some censorship is necessary. On the other hand, too much is not good. I would like to see more flexibility."

"A kind of middle path," I offered, hoping to indicate that this was my own preference as well. His face brightened.

"Yes, yes. The middle way is best."

I decided to find out more about his relationship with Saya Gyi Y and W, the other writer who'd suggested we meet.

"How do you know Saya Gyi?" I asked. But it turned out they'd never met. He had never met W directly, either, but they had spoken over the phone. I was beginning to get worried. I had made mistakes traveling around Burma. I had said what felt like too
much on the phone a few times, and had been too trusting of people on a couple of
occasions, but it seemed so far that I'd managed to stay out of trouble. Had I now, on my
very last day and during my last meeting, just blown it? After all, many, many people
had warned me that the MI plants people "in every sector."

I became angry at myself for having given away so much information about
myself right up front, and for not more explicitly asking Saya Gyi and W more about X
and how well he could be trusted. I decided to flip the tables a bit.

"Is there anything you want to ask me?" I asked. He hesitated for a moment, and
then said that he was worried about how I'd interpret his story. He assured me that he did
not intend to imply that there are no good bookstores in Burma, and that he was worried
that I would "look down on" his country. I assured him that I had come to see him
specifically to understand his meaning clearly, and that he didn't need to worry, that now
I understood clearly what he meant and that I did not look down on Burma and Burmese
writers. There was another pause.

"And what will you do with those?" he asked, gesturing towards my notes. I
thought quickly about how to avoid telling him that I'd hoped to hear more about
censorship. Fearing that I may have already caused suspicion with this man who could,
for all I knew, be a military spy, I decided it would be best not to bring up my research
again. I answered that since I'd studied his short story in my Burmese class, it was
mainly for my own interest and to be able to tell my Burmese teacher when I returned
home. She would also want to know about our conversation, I explained.

"Is that okay?" I asked.
"Yes," he answered. "But... are you really a student?" The question scared me.

"Yes, I am really a student. I am not a journalist. Don't worry." As I often do when I get nervous, I began to rattle on, about how I was trying my best to understand all sides, and how the "middle way" seemed the best way to me, too. By now we were both clearly nervous, and I decided it would be best if I left as soon as was politely possible. As far as I remembered, he knew only my first name. I couldn't remember whether or not on the phone the day before Saya Gyi Y had told him I was leaving for Bangkok that evening. Would MI be able to track me down by a first name only, if they knew I was leaving that day? There were only a few flights, and not many tourists. I was glad that I'd arranged another way to get my journal and my notes out of the country. I resolved to go carefully through my bag one last time before heading to the airport, just to make sure there was nothing that could link me with any of the people I'd met with during my trip.

When I said that I needed to go, X picked up the two books that had been lying on the table.

"A present for you - my short stories," he said, and he opened the front cover of the first book. He wrote out "To Lisa," and then said, "and your last name is B-R-O-0-D-I-N?"

"E-N," I answered, without correcting him about the D, which should be a T. Saya Gyi had given him my full name. He wrote inside the cover of each book a little note to me, "Lisa Brooden." I began preparing mentally to be thoroughly searched on my way out of the country in just a few hours - and perhaps being unable to return.

Rushing back to the guesthouse where I was staying, I hurriedly went through my
bags, removing anything that seemed potentially threatening to any of the people I had met with. My journal was no longer with me; I had left it with a friend to get out of the country in another way. I had also gone to the trouble to make a xerox copy, which I left with another friend as a backup. All that remained was a single sheet of paper that listed the codes I’d used in my journal instead of people’s names. I managed to fold that up into a very small packet and hide it in my clothing. As I finished throwing things into my bag, two new friends I had met at a recent painting exhibit showed up to drive me to the airport.

I sat in the front seat, next to XXXX, the driver. As we made our way to the airport, I grew increasingly worried about being searched. XXXX was telling me about a famous Burmese writer and painter who now lived abroad and produced commentaries for one of the big international radio services. As he praised this man, he quieted down, explaining how this writer's words were powerful and true, as it is impossible to be in Burma these days. His candor gave me courage.

"Do you know X?" I asked.

"Oh, another very good writer. I have never met him, but I like his stories very much." He looked over at me. "Why are you asking about him?"

"I met him today," I admitted, "and was worried by our meeting."

"Why?" he asked.

"Well, he seemed to be very nervous, and he said some unusual things. For example, he said that there is very little censorship in Burma today," I answered. "I am afraid that maybe he will say something about me, and I will be searched at the airport."
XXXX laughed.

"You don't have to worry about him. I have not met him, but I know his stories well. I can guarantee you that you don't need to worry about him." He smiled as I looked at him questioningly.

"He just finished several years in jail and he doesn't want to go back," he said. "He was scared of you! How did you come to meet with him?"

As I explained how I'd met him, it became clear to me that we had both been scared by each other, spooked by the thought that each was working for or connected with the military regime in some capacity.

At the airport, I passed through customs with no trouble. No one gave my bags a passing glance. As I sat in the waiting area for the plane to board, I contemplated how free I suddenly felt. I wondered about all those times I suspected I might be followed, or return to my room to find my bag had been searched. I thought about X and the comical dance we had danced earlier that day, each scared of the unknown other, each unable to communicate what we were both feeling. This is the irony of living in fear. You just never know, and the ambiguity is never-ending. To drop one's guard is to put oneself in danger. To maintain that guard means keeping all but one's closest companions at arm's length. You may well be bursting inside with anger or fear but you cannot speak about it. You just never know.
Chapter 4

The politics of communication within the Burmese opposition

This chapter provides a description of life for the Burmese in Mae Sot and elsewhere in Thailand, and examines how this environment constrains conceptions of the possible uses of communications technologies and media. I examine the ways communications technologies are used in attempts to change the political situation inside Burma. Some of the methods used by opposition groups resemble the social engineering methods characteristic of media in authoritarian states. These top-down approaches have backfired, reducing the opposition's credibility. I also assess the impact foreign funding has had for groups in the movement, and delineate the outline of a hierarchy within the movement that has been reinforced by the introduction of new information technologies (NITs). I argue that the discourse of human rights acts subtly but powerfully to shape social conventions, resulting in an unstated hierarchy of human rights that mirrors and perpetuates both the inequitable gender and ethnic composition of the Thailand-based opposition political groups and the hierarchy of access and use of technologies among these groups.

Mae Sot, the border, and the communications environment

When I arrived in Thailand in late October, 1999, the atmosphere was still tense from the October 1st takeover of the Burmese embassy in Bangkok by five armed gunmen calling themselves the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors. They had stormed the
building, holding 38 people hostage for more than 24 hours before being flown by helicopter to the border, where they were released. Thailand's handling of the case angered the Burmese government, and shortly after the incident, the Burmese government closed the border, demanding that Thailand find the embassy raiders and put them on trial. In November, the Thai government began rounding up thousands of migrant workers in Mae Sot and trucking them to the border, where they were forced across. An unusually large number of police patrolled the streets of Mae Sot, and roadblocks were set up in many places, where the police detained those without proper identification. Newspaper reports indicated that immigration police had been sent from Bangkok, which activists told me was a way for the national-level Thai officials to get around the agreements between local police and factory owners. In Mae Sot, trucks drove through town like big crowded people cages on wheels, those pressed against the wire mesh gripping it with their fingers. Although many Mae Sot factory owners protested the deportations, the Thais continued to repatriate Burmese workers by the thousands throughout November, and sporadically after that throughout the time I lived in Mae Sot. Newspaper reports on the repatriation or planned repatriation of workers have continued to appear periodically since then.

This series of events set the stage for my reintroduction to the Thai border after seven years. The people of Huaykaloke refugee camp where I'd lived before had been moved to a new location, Umphien Mai, a two-hour car ride south of town. There was now a large population of migrant workers in and around Mae Sot, and there were also far more Westerners and other foreigners in town than there had been a decade earlier.
when I'd first arrived. Most of them were working with the many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and aid agencies that had since proliferated along the border, involved in various ways with the Burmese opposition or the refugees. During the time I lived there in 1999 and 2000, the local NGOs began holding meetings to discuss and coordinate their work, but in general the NGO staff, like the political groups in town, tended to stick with their own crowd, meeting few people in other groups or with other interests. In fact, as I came to see, calling Mae Sot the home to an opposition "movement" was perhaps stretching the term a bit.

The Burmese opposition movement was at best loosely-connected, and members from one organization very often hadn't met the members of another. For example, friends of mine in Mae Sot who worked with the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG) and the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) did not know each other, and when I asked about this, it became clear that except for some of the leaders, very few of the members of one group knew those of the other. I found this to be true with many other groups in town. In part this was due to the need for tight security in Mae Sot, preventing people from moving about freely or attracting attention to themselves by, for example, calling a large meeting. When meetings or workshops were organized, security was arranged in advance with Thai military intelligence (MI), and every effort was made to keep things low profile. Though this fragmentation reflected the tendency of people to associate with those most like themselves, this tendency seemed less pronounced in Chiang Mai and Bangkok, where activists had a more professional attitude and had had a great deal more contact with each other through the interactions of local NGOs. In Mae
Sot, however, when people of different groups attended get-togethers (including western-style parties thrown by foreigners), these groups would rarely interact.

There were exceptions to this, however, and I think it remains valuable to use the term "opposition movement" in a broad sense to encompass the many groups that were involved in the struggle for political change in Burma. They all shared the ultimate goal of improving the situation for the peoples of their country. This movement, then, included the groups that were working on what were unquestionably "political" goals, such as lobbying internationally on behalf of Burma or working to coordinate with the opposition inside Burma to create change from within. But I also include in my definition those who were working to educate and assist marginalized groups so that they would have the desire and the tools to become involved in the opposition, whether through a project aimed at individual self-improvement, or at the improvement of the situation in their area. This definition encompasses an enormous mix of groups and individuals. I do not attempt to provide an exhaustive list or to describe all the groups in detail. This work intends instead to provide a few cogent examples that help to demarcate the broad patterns that I found within the movement. I will begin by presenting some characteristics of the media and communications environment in Thailand, especially along the border. This environment has had a significant impact on how people conceptualized the possible uses of media and communications technologies.
**Alien technologies: conceptions and preconceptions**

Computer technology, I came to realize, is a pervasive, almost invisible aspect of my own world, one that I took for granted until I realized how much it is *not* a part of the world most Burmese peoples grew up in. Early on in my field research, during a trip to Chiang Mai, I went to visit my friend and former fellow teacher, Thra William,\(^{23}\) who had become a Vice-Chairperson of the National Health and Education Committee (NHEC). NHEC is a coalition of education and health departments of many ethnic organizations from rural Burma that had been set up after the fall of Manerplaw in 1995. Thra William looked much the same as he had years earlier, although perhaps with a bit more gray in his hair, a man in his late 50s with wide black-framed glasses and a friendly smile. During our visit, he asked me to help him edit a document in English, and led me to the second floor of the house, which, as usual, served as both an office and a living space. He led the way to the upstairs office, a small room with two computers. The NHEC office had access to e-mail, which they told me they used primarily for receiving information. They got the BurmaNet News every day, and "to be friendly," they printed it out for the local Thai military intelligence officers. It was primarily the younger men who used the computers.

Thra William motioned toward a computer, handed me a handwritten report, and asked me to please correct it. I realized that he wanted me to type the report into the computer as I corrected it, so I sat down and asked him how to turn on the computer. He quickly left the room, and came back a moment later with one of the younger men, who showed me the power switch. Thra William told me that had never used the Internet, and

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\(^{23}\) Not his real name. "Thra" is a Karen title for male teachers, "Thramu" for female teachers.
that he was afraid to touch the computer because it is a very expensive machine. If he hit
the wrong key, he explained, he might destroy the computer's memory or something else
total. We talked about how much technology had changed in the four years since I’d last
been in Thailand and what the next five years might bring. He told me about when he
was young in Burma, and went on a school trip where he saw a teletype machine that he
thought was the most advanced technology. He compared that teletype with today’s fax
machines, which he described as amazing since they are instantaneous, and use just a
regular sheet of paper.

Figure 8. Computer training session along the
Thai-Burmese border.

On the same trip, I got a sense of what computers represented to the ethnic
minority groups when I sat in on a few computer training sessions organized by the
Karen National Youth Organization (KNYO) and funded by the Open Society
Institute's Burma Project. The workshop was held on the outskirts of a Karen refugee
camp near the border town of Mae Sariang. During the opening ceremony, a representative of the KNYO explained that the purpose of the computer training was to ensure that the KNYO would be able to work side-by-side with other democracy organizations and opposition groups after a period of inactivity due to their "difficulties" as refugees. He emphasized that computers were being used all over the world nowadays, and that the Karenni must not be left behind.

While the computer may have been an alien technology along the border, it was clearly not unwelcome, and people were motivated to learn how to use it. The training course had twelve participants, three women and nine men from various Karenni organizations, including a labor group, a student group and an environmental group. After the first 45 minutes, which was devoted to a lecture introducing some basic concepts about the computer and word processing program, the participants started using the computers themselves. Some of them had clearly used computers prior to this training, but others had never before touched one. Although the house had no telephone line, the computer training included an introduction to the use of e-mail messenger software in addition to the word-processing that the participants told me they needed in their work for their organizations.

At one point, a Shan man sitting near me made awkward attempts to control a computer mouse for the first time, and I remembered the difficulty I’d had the first time I’d used one, too, only a few years before. When I returned for the second day of the course, he was far more at ease with the mouse, and was moving text around with a satisfied grin on his face. Another man, a member of a Karenni labor organization
wearing a baseball cap and chewing betel nut, concentrated intensely as he maneuvered the mouse with his heavily tattooed arms. He laughed out loud as the computer did his bidding, revealing his betel-stained teeth. This sight jolted me into the recognition that I had my own preconceptions about what people who use computers look like. It was this kind of surprise that had attracted me to life along the border when I first arrived there in 1989, and more than ten years later there were still surprises in store.

Shortly after this trip, as I settled into life in Mae Sot, I had to laugh when I imagined myself sitting back at home in Athens, writing my dissertation proposal. I had proposed to examine the ways in which Burmese dissidents living in the Thailand-Burma borderland were being changed by their ability to surf the web and to experience the vast amounts of information and differing points of view they would be finding there. I’d imagined people spending hours in front of the computer, and these people, many of them from rural villages, would be amazed and changed by what they were finding. I found, of course, a reality very different, in which online access charges were only one obstacle preventing people from spending time on the Internet. To save the expense of time online, most people used the Internet exclusively for e-mail, writing their e-mail messages offline and then going online quickly to upload them and download new messages.
Computers were generally not treated as a natural presence in the offices they occupied. Their unfamiliarity and fragility combined with the serious purposes for which they were intended prevented their use for pleasure. When I arrived in Mae Sot at the end of 1999, some activists were using the two Internet cafes in Mae Sot, primarily to send e-mail. But even the most computer-savvy Burmese opposition activists in Thailand had come to know the technology only within the last decade and were not regularly spending long periods of time on the Internet even for work, let alone pleasure or personal interest. There was no established pastime of "surfing" the web, and for many the use of word processing was still new. "Many Burmese find it very uncomfortable," a well-educated Burmese reporter explained about the use of computers. "Because, at first, you have to write in English. Second, now they have the Burmese fonts. Even with
Because of the infrastructural development within Thailand and the greater ease of communications and security in the urban areas, Bangkok was the scene for the opposition movement's earliest uses of NITs, followed by Chiang Mai and then the border towns. The larger and better-funded groups had offices in Bangkok and Chiang Mai instead of or in addition to their offices on the border. Several border towns first gained access to a local dialup number for online service during my time in Thailand in 2000. Before that, online access had been available there, but only at the prohibitive cost of a long distance call. So, although the situation was changing as more and more opportunities for training and using computers became available, computers were still alien to the experiences of most people involved in the opposition movement. Nevertheless, the gradual increase in the number of people with access to NITs meant that people's early suspicions of these technologies was slowly changing.

**Suspicion/distrust**

Despite the usefulness of computers and e-mail, many people in the opposition movement were suspicious of them at first. Some suspected that the CIA and other groups were monitoring e-mail, that all the information that passed through e-mail could be intercepted and read, and that once someone was connected to the Internet, the Burmese or Thai intelligence apparatus could copy all the information from their
computers (Win Min, personal communication, March 6, 2000). This made the encryption program, PGP, very popular among opposition activists for sending sensitive material by e-mail, although there was speculation that the PGP code could be cracked. The worries about NITs and the vulnerability of the information they carry were only a few of the many manifestations of suspicion perpetuated both inside Burma and among Burmese activists working elsewhere.

Activists in Mae Sot remained wary of the security of communications technologies because numerous spies were believed to be active along the border (Surath, 2001). A staff member of one opposition group, for example, told me that his group had noticed that people with Burmese names were working at the local Thai Internet service provider where they had their e-mail account. They saw these names on the record of the mail delivery route of their messages, and since they didn't know these people, they were uncertain if their e-mail was secure. Telephone conversations were not private. Several opposition activists described their surprise when local Karens, who were reportedly working with the Thais to intercept Burmese military radio transmissions, contacted them. These Karen radio operators gave them a warning by repeating to them what their group members had recently said on the phone, sometimes playing back recordings of these conversations.

Such a climate of suspicion was a significant part of the Burmese students' upbringing. When he was a young student, Win Min believed government media portrayals of federalism as fundamentally divisive, and the demands of the ethnic peoples and others holding opposing opinions as a threat to the country's unity. Once he reached
university in the mid-1980s, however, he was exposed to new ideas from former student activists who had become teachers, or who sat in the teashops surrounding the university and spent their days talking with students about alternatives to the government line.

Another student, Mi Sue Pwint, who grew up in a "black area" in the Karenni state, admitted that even she was worried about meeting the insurgent groups at the border. "We saw from the picture books and the movies about the rebels, so we worried about meeting them. We thought they were always ready to kill people," she told me, laughing, "that they were always acting violently" (personal communication, July 3, 2000). Her own fears, she told me, were small compared to those of students from the urban areas. But once the students reached the border and met people from the ethnic rebel groups, many of them for the first time, they realized why the ethnic minorities were fighting. As Win Min put it, "they weren't fighting to break up the country, but because they were really suffering. What they were saying was that if [they] don't get equality, [they] will break up the country. We could now see that their position was a fair one. We could see that federalism is okay, and that we can solve the country's problems" (personal communication, March 6, 2000).

This realization of the late 1980s was important for the opposition movement, since it subverted many of the government's long-held explanations for the country's problems. Tensions remained, however, owing to a long history of conflict between the various groups and decades of anti-rebel propaganda by the Burmese military. Mutual distrust had made it difficult for many of those advocating change in Burma to move

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24 Burma is divided by the government into regions labeled black, brown and white, referring to the degree of control the central regime has over an area. Black areas are considered most insecure because they are controlled by ethnic minority rebel groups.
beyond a militarized mode of thinking that sees control of information as a means of maintaining power. As Win Min explained,

We were born under the military intelligence, you know. We are secretive not only because we don't want to share information, but also we are afraid the information will be dangerous for us. Right? . . . Like the military intelligence in Burma always keeps things secret. The way they show the people they are powerful is to keep the information secret (personal communication, March 6, 2000)

Several activists acknowledged that opposition groups tended to repeat similar patterns of secretive and manipulative actions, making it difficult for groups to cooperate. Some told me that this was beginning to change, but they also believed there was a long way to go before open communication and transparency would be the norm. Those agencies funding various communications and media projects in Thailand significantly influenced this process.

The number of opposition organizations and related projects, activities, and training sessions had increased enormously since the 1988 uprisings brought international attention to Burma, yet increased funding in many ways exacerbated existing divisions within the opposition. In the following sections I provide a bit of history regarding the United States’ foreign policy interests in Burma, and how they coalesced with the Burman opposition's calls for democracy and human rights in Burma. The funding that had flowed to the opposition since had exacerbated divisions within the loosely coordinated Burmese opposition movement in Thailand. The resulting patterns of access and use help to explain how the dominant cultural conceptions of technologies were
negotiated through gender and ethnic difference, and how these conceptions affected the way the opposition groups and their funding sources prioritized their use.

**Politics, human rights and the Burmese opposition**

In November, 1988, Republican congressman-elect Dana Rohrabacher quietly escaped the itinerary of his trip to Asia long enough to make the grueling trip to meet Burmese students who had fled to the Thai border after the uprisings (Grubbs, 1988). To Rohrabacher, Burma represented the latest battleground in the United States' campaign to promote democracy in Asia. Although unwilling to discuss the possibility of providing arms for the students, he left them with encouraging words. "I admire your courage, and I admire your goals for your country. . . President Reagan is very proud of the fact that America stands behind and helps people who are struggling for freedom" (Grubbs, 1988). Rohrabacher had spent more than seven years writing speeches for Reagan and was a key player in the crafting of the Reagan Doctrine and its mission to promote freedom and democracy around the world (Grubbs, 1988). In her 1988 study of the Voice of America, Lauren Alexandre noted that during the 1980s, the Reagan Doctrine of low intensity warfare and support for anti-communist forces around the world represented "the selling of America in a 'new' age, unencumbered by post-Vietnam restrictions on U.S. military adventurism abroad and freed from the confines of detente's rhetoric of negotiated coexistence" (Alexandre, 1988, p. 101). The Reagan administration's strong anti-communist stance was often linked to issues of free trade, and relied heavily on the
foreign diplomacy apparatus of the United States Information Agency (USIA), whose role greatly expanded during the Reagan years (Alexandre, 1988).

A key component of the Reagan Doctrine was low intensity warfare (LIW). LIW is a type of "nonmilitary aggression" in the political, economic, psychological and diplomatic arenas that employs strategies such as civil disobedience, harassment, psychological terror, and clandestine destabilization in order to "render the enemy ineffective, demoralized, and isolated" (Frederick, 1989, p. 20). A major component of this effort was the establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in 1983, which has been controversial from the start. A 1990 report by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs was harshly critical of the NED, describing it as a means through which the U.S. could "carry out interventionist operations formerly managed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)" (Council on Hemispheric, p. 4). The NED was accused of interfering with the indigenous democratic process in several of the countries where it provided funding, by "creating or supporting organizations which conform to a narrow, interventionist U.S. political agenda," including "pro-business lobbying efforts" that were publicized as promoting democracy, but rarely addressed the needs of the poor (p. 4). The NED was accused of being selective in its choice of grantees rather than providing assistance to a wide variety of political organizations. Finally, the report argued that the NED supported clandestine activities that had the potential to risk both U.S. diplomatic relations and the well-being of its grantees (p. 5).

25 The USA has employed LIW strategies extensively in Central America. In Nicaragua the U.S. foreign policy apparatus employed these strategies to "demonize" the Sandinista revolution in the eyes of the U.S. public as well as the Nicaraguans (Frederick, 1989).
In 1984, the year following the establishment of the NED, the Reagan administration took measures to intensify the use of communications media in low intensity warfare, which included enlarging U.S. international radio and television broadcasting and providing strategic technical assistance in communications technologies to the Third World (Frederick, 1989). Clarence Dias (1993) has argued that the U.S. export of low intensity conflict into Asia increased military expenditures in the region, led governments to turn their weaponry on their own citizens, and spawned increasingly restrictive laws enacted in the name of threats to national security. This has occurred simultaneously with the increase in the use internationally of, ironically enough, the discourse of human rights.

Human rights became a key component in the new U.S. foreign policy emphasis on communication, but a debate soon emerged regarding differing conceptions of communications and rights. In 1978, UNESCO published its *Mass Media Declaration*, seen by many as the threshold event in the evolution of the New International Information and Communication Order (NIICO) being called for by nations around the world, particularly in the developing world. Many leaders from developing countries called for the "right to communicate" as a part of the NIICO. Although this concept has Western origins and a history of acceptance by the U.S. until the late 1970s (Roach, 1993), in the early 1980s the U.S. began objecting to the term "people's rights," a term closely associated with arguments for the right to communicate, which emphasized the obstacles to access facing people as members of specific, marginalized groups. The U.S.
government argument was that a concept of "people's rights" marginalized individual rights and strengthened the government or State's right to intervene in people's lives.

What this argument misses is that the concept of rights developed differently in the developing world than in the West, where "rights" emerged to protect individuals against the power of the state or major institutions such as the Church (Muzaffar, 1993). Many colonized peoples, however, used the concept of "people's rights" to legitimize the decolonization movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the developing world (Roach, 1993). In rejecting the concept of people's rights, the U.S. demonstrated a conception of rights that was narrowly defined, nipping alternative conceptions of democracy in the bud by emphasizing political and civil rights over the economic, social and cultural rights of both individuals and groups.

Although U.S. pressure on Burma reflected in part the growing influence of the U.S. human rights movement during the 1980s (Neier, 1996/1997), the goals of the Burmese democratic opposition and the nonviolent strategy called for by Aung San Suu Kyi also merged quite nicely with U.S. post Cold War foreign policy interests. This was especially true in the mid-1990s, when President Clinton decided to de-link China's most favored nation (MFN) status from its human rights performance and U.S. Burma policy could be held up as proof that the U.S. wasn't going "soft" on human rights issues. The U.S. position on Burma was relatively unclouded by significant amounts of trade, and officials could therefore take a harder line with Burma than they could with China. This led critics to note the double standard the U.S. uses when its economic interests are at stake (Neier, 1996/1997).
The discourse of democracy and its resonance with U.S. interests had not gone unnoticed among ethnic minority groups, and was a source of frustration for many who had watched their own struggle for self-determination take a back seat to the promotion of a democracy that they weren't yet convinced would further their interests. With increasing international attention and funding focused on the development of democracies and civil society around the world, the non-Burman groups had found little space within international discourse to voice their concerns regarding ethnic self-determination. One Karenni leader, Doh Say, echoed the comments of many other non-Burmans when he described the Burman advantage, which he called their "democracy boat":

The way I always say it, we don't have the democracy boat. . . . We can't travel from country to country around the world to speak about Karenni suffering, but democracy groups, they are given this opportunity by the international community, so they can travel from country to country to speak about democracy. That is why people know about the democracy movement. . . . When you go out and visit a diplomat, and you start talking about the Karenni or other [non-Burman] groups, he will say, "No, we don't know [about that]. We know only about Aung San Suu Kyi and democracy." (Doh Say, personal communication, July 4, 2000)

Although there have been efforts in recent years to fund ethnic minority groups and women's organizations, the overall pattern of funding has privileged as "political" (and therefore important) certain kinds of groups and activities over others. This has perpetuated a hierarchy of skills within the movement that keeps conceptions of political participation narrowly defined and limits access to decision-making power. Narrow conceptions of rights have also widened divisions within the movement. Political and
civil rights, which have been described as the "first tier" or "first generation" rights, are perceived by Burmese activists as the basis of a democratic order, while the major issues facing ethnic groups, such as poverty, displacement and ethnically-motivated oppression, have been associated with "second-tier" or "second generation" economic, social and cultural rights. Funding for first tier rights work was labeled by opposition activists as political, while other concerns, in particular those that most affected the ethnic minorities, were labeled as efforts at cultural preservation or development. Funding for the opposition was contentious, contributing to the factionalism that has been a regularly-cited characteristic of the opposition movement. While a detailed examination of the history, patterns and consequences of foreign funding for the Burmese opposition movement is beyond the scope of this work, this is an important area for further inquiry.

In the following sections, I will sketch a hierarchy of access and use of communications technologies described by many of those I spoke with and supported by my own observations. The hierarchy, as I see it, has three broad categories: Burman students and politicians, non-Burman leaders and ethnic media, and women. Although I recognize the risks of categorizing in this way, I cordon off women into a separate category here especially regretfully. But I accept the risk of minimizing their differences in order to reinforce the point that although they may have experienced it in different ways, all women's marginalized placement as women affected their access to and

26 This hierarchy is painted in broad strokes with the recognition that there are exceptions. One of my interview sources, in reading this chapter, for example, included his own observation that the first group to gain access to the Internet on the border was the KNU. This access, however, was gained through the initiative of an individual Karen man with ties to overseas Karen, and was limited to his individual correspondence and contacts with embassies and others abroad. It did not represent an overall KNU interest in the use of the Internet, which developed much later, or foreign funding for the KNU's Internet use. This interviewee also noted the importance of the generation gap between the Burman students initially most interested in the technology and the ethnic minority leadership.
comfort with information technologies. What follows, then, is simply a framework, potentially useful in understanding how militaristic thinking manifests itself in communications and technology use, and what forces exist that could be used to counteract these effects.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on each of the categories in the hierarchy I have outlined. I will begin in the next section by detailing the experiences of Burman students and politicians. The primarily Burman-led turn toward nonviolence within the opposition made information and communications even more important for opposition activists. Using the 9/9/99 campaign as a case study, I demonstrate the creativity of activists' uses of communications technologies, but also the limitations of these technologies in motivating people to action. Differing sets of constraints operating on activists inside and outside Burma caused them to operate differently as groups. The lack of an efficient means of communication between those inside and outside led to tensions between them, especially when Thailand-based activists tried to engineer an uprising from outside that some insiders felt was insensitive to their concerns and even their safety.

**Burman students and politicians**

The mostly Burman students and politicians who fled Burma after the 1988 uprisings and the crackdown in the 1990 post-election period have benefited most from foreign funding for what are seen as "political," rather than "development" activities. This has provided them with several advantages over other groups on the border and
elsewhere in Thailand, such as access to training in various skills, exposure to foreigners and different ways of thinking, and foreign travel. These opportunities, in turn, have increased their knowledge of world politics, their lobbying skills, and their ability to generate funding through grant writing.

In 1993, Win Min, then a senior member of the All Burma Students Democratic Front, or ABSDF (MTZ), spent a lot of his time cutting articles about Burma from the Thai English-language newspapers, the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*. He and other ABSDF members in the Bangkok office would cut out and compile the Burma-related articles, then make forty to fifty copies that they would mail overseas to advocacy groups and others interested in Burma. Although this was expensive and time consuming, it was an important means by which interested people could keep up with developments. As ABSDF (MTZ)'s Joint General Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Win Min was responsible for maintaining contact with NGOs, funders, diplomats, and overseas Burmese. While the cut-and-paste method helped disseminate the most detailed information published at that time on Burma, the news they sent often arrived two weeks after it had occurred. When Win Min heard about the use of computers to send information, he "went crazy for e-mail" and tried to find someone to help him gain access (Win Min, personal communication, March 6, 2000). At the end of 1994, a friend lent the ABSDF the use of an e-mail account, and they used their 386 computer and a borrowed modem to connect. Win Min and the other ABSDF (MTZ) members began typing all the newspaper articles into the computer, and while this was tedious, they could send articles every day rather

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27 The ABSDF split into two factions in 1991. Win Min joined the faction of student leader Moethee Zun, known as ABSDF (MTZ).
than once a week.

Another student activist who had early access to a computer was Aung Zaw, now the editor of _The Irrawaddy_ magazine and a correspondent for Radio Free Asia. He first used a computer at his job with the non-governmental aid agency, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), which he began shortly after arriving at the Thai border in 1988. Like Win Min and others at the ABSDF, during the early 1990s Aung Zaw was compiling Burma-related articles from the Thai newspapers and using his friends' offices to fax them to individuals and organizations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Aung Zaw told me that the BBC read out the information from the Thai newspapers they received from him every night on their broadcast (personal communication, April 18, 2000). During his work with JRS, Aung Zaw formed the Burma Information Group (BIG)\(^28\) with three other Burmese students. The members of BIG were able to use a small computer at the JRS office, but often only at night, when it wasn't needed by other JRS staff. In 1992 a friend gave them their own small computer, and they began producing human rights reports, including stories about the revolution in Karen state and about Thai police killing or harassing Burmese students in Bangkok. In doing this work, Aung Zaw met a lot of people interested in Burma, including reporters and staff members at Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights. He came to recognize the importance of human rights to the Burmese struggle.

While Aung Zaw's primary purpose was to sharpen his skills as a writer, he also found opportunities to learn other skills, including how to write funding proposals. He

\(^{28}\) BIG changed its name in 1999 to the Irrawaddy Publishing Group.
told me that when he wrote his first funding proposal, he thought the amount he was requesting was too large, but a friend who was helping him disagreed. "No, no, this is how it works," he remembered her telling him (personal communication, April 18, 2000). BIG got its first small grant in 1993, then in 1994 the OSI Burma Project funded them. Later they began receiving funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). BIG’s activities accelerated once the funding was providing them with financial security, but it wasn’t until 1998 that Aung Zaw began using e-mail regularly. When we spoke, he had become reliant on it for his work as a correspondent for Radio Free Asia (RFA) and with The Irrawaddy, which started as a four-page weekly publication sent to 500 people and had grown into a glossy monthly sent out to over 2000 subscribers (personal communication, April 18, 2000). This would have been impossible without the early opportunities Aung Zaw had to learn the skills and meet the people who could help him find the funding he needed to publish his magazine.

Of the student activists on the border during my time in Thailand, it was primarily men who had benefited from opportunities to attend various training sessions, to travel to workshops and conferences around the world to lobby on behalf of Burma, and to meet and discuss issues of international importance with leaders and activists from around the world. Several have had the opportunity for scholarships abroad, often specifically to learn the tools of governance. Although Win Min struggled to find sponsorship, for example, he finally left Thailand in the summer of 2000, to pursue a master's degree at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.
As a result of these opportunities, male Burman activists have often felt encouraged by evidence of the impact of their work. Student activist Win Naing, for example, told me that the reports written by his group, the Foreign Affairs Council of the All Burma Federation of Students Unions (ABFSU), regarding the educational situation inside Burma had been discussed in UNESCO meetings (personal communication, August 15, 2000). Other activists have testified in front of the UN General Assembly, or lobbied foreign government leaders on behalf of the opposition movement and its struggle for democracy in Burma. While these activities and opportunities have not been open solely to men, men have been the primary beneficiaries.

The benefits and problems of training sessions were discussed in an editorial in *The Irrawaddy* in July, 2001. The article noted several problems with training carried out along the border. It observed that outside organizers often did not adequately consider the security precautions necessary in organizing large-scale workshops, resulting in the arrest of some of the Burmese participants. It also noted that participants were often chosen based on their connections with powerful opposition leaders rather than on their genuine interest in participating, and called for more careful screening processes to ensure that the best candidate is chosen. Yet the article also rejected complaints by some that ethnic Burmans had received greater training opportunities than members of ethnic minorities, saying that "while this may be true inside Burma, it certainly does not reflect the situation outside of the country, where ethnicity is less a determinant of social status ("Editorial," 2001). This may be a reasonable conclusion to reach from offices in Chiang
Mai, but does not reflect the situation I found with the opposition movement in Mae Sot, for example.

In addition to the opportunities available to Burman men to learn new skills, access to political and military information also provided the male activists and political leaders (both Burman and non-Burman) with a level of personal security not enjoyed by women, migrant workers or refugees. Win Min’s work with the ABSDF, for example, placed him in direct contact with activists inside Burma, and the information he gained in this way allowed him to develop a special relationship with the local Thai authorities. In October 1999, just after the raid on the Burmese embassy in Bangkok, the Thai police in Mae Sot detained Moethee Zun, the former leader of the ABSDF, under suspicion that he had been involved. Win Min was at a workshop in Paris, where he received the news by e-mail from another ABSDF officer. Win Min e-mailed a Thai friend of his, the former secretary to a Thai parliamentarian, asking for his assistance. This Thai friend in turn contacted his own boss to intervene, and shortly afterward Moethee Zun was released. These relationships with the Thai authorities afforded the Burman activists a level of protection far higher than that enjoyed by the undocumented Burmese in Thailand. Group leaders could then extend this protection to varying degrees within their own group, which in turn increased their power and perpetuated the gendered and hierarchical nature of the patron-client pattern of personal relationships.
The turn toward nonviolence

The power of the Internet and information became more important to the opposition movement after the alliance headquarters at Manerplaw fell to the Burmese troops in 1995. I will now describe how, despite a turn toward nonviolent opposition strategies within the opposition movement, the interception of information and its manipulation for political purposes facilitated militarized thinking about information. Information had become increasingly commodified for use by individuals, groups and institutions with varying agendas. Opposition activists were finding that their legitimacy and often their funding relied not just on their ability to send information into Burma, but also on their ability to find and make public information about what was happening there. As I will explain, activists in Thailand had been working to help spark another uprising in Burma, which led to tensions between activists outside the country and those inside, who would have had to bear the brunt of any violent retaliations by the Burmese military.

In late 1999 and 2000, although sharp differences of opinion existed, the democratic forces within the opposition movement had increasingly been advocating nonviolent means of solving Burma's problems. This was no doubt a response to Aung San Suu Kyi's calls for reconciliation, but it was also true that most funding agencies would not fund armed groups. "Political defiance," or the technique of applying military strategies to the use of nonviolent acts of civil disobedience, became a buzzword in the movement. A former U.S. Defense Attache' to Rangoon, Robert Helvey, has held political defiance training in the border areas for many years, and has used the book From Dictatorship to Democracy, by Gene Sharp. The book's influence was widespread,
which Aung San Suu Kyi noted in her weekly column in the Japanese newspaper, the *Mainichi Shimbun*\(^{29}\) In her column, she described how Gene Sharp and his political defiance trainings had disturbed the military regime (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1997, p. 163). When Helvey’s trainings and Sharps' book were denounced on Burmese state-run media, there was a sudden and sharp increase in demand for the book. Thousands of copies were secretly distributed (Helvey, 1996).

Despite ongoing debates about whether or not armed struggle should continue as part of the overall opposition strategy, the move to non-violent resistance among several opposition groups led them to value information more than ever. Opposition political groups, in addition to the military forces, now listened regularly to the SPDC’s radio communications, increasing the intensity of what many activists referred to as the “information war.” According to one activist, every unit of the opposition armed groups that remained in Burma had at least one communication expert who could monitor the movement of the SPDC troops (personal communication, August 23, 2000), and it was clear that both armed and unarmed opposition activists were working together to get and share information. Interception had become a primary source of information about Burmese government activities, and many groups used this information for their opposition media campaigns (personal communication, August 23, 2000). Interception was especially easy since poor and corrupt Burmese officials could be bribed to provide a copy of the regime's radio communications encryption code, which changed every two or three months.

\(^{29}\) These columns were later reprinted in the collection *Letters from Burma* (1997).
This increase in the importance of interception in turn called attention to the risks of planted misinformation, making information from inside Burma less trustworthy. One of the founding members of the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) radio, Khin Maung Win, told me that opposition groups had become very careful about using information obtained through interception. They knew that the regime was aware of their monitoring, but also that the regime had no alternative means of communicating with its officers across the country. When we spoke, Khin Maung Win had recently received information about a SPDC plan to initiate a fake story about the arrest of an elected NLD member of parliament (MP).

They are sending this information . . . because they want the opposition groups and DVB and RFA to broadcast it. If they broadcast it, what the government will do is bring the NLD MP to Rangoon and show him in the press conference, [saying] "You see, DVB and RFA broadcast wrong information. They said this NLD MP was beaten and put into prison, but now he is free, nothing happened to him, so don’t believe the outside broadcasters," and so on. This kind of thing they want to do. They systematically planned this. We also know that two or three weeks ago there was a meeting in Rangoon to set up this plan to produce wrong information, (personal communication, August 23, 2000).

In order to check the accuracy of information received through interception, activists often called people in Burma for confirmation, but this could be a dangerous call to receive. There have been several publicized arrests of activists and writers accused of providing information, or in the government's view, misinformation, to the outside media. The Burma Media Association reported in a recent post to the Internet that two

Shortly after Khin Maung Win described this to me, a story describing this misinformation campaign appeared in *The Irrawaddy*, attributed to the DVB ("Intelligence", 2000, September).
prominent writers had been arrested after frank interviews they had given to international broadcasters. They cited "local residents" as sources (Burma Media Association, 2002). Thus, people in the local area were asked to confirm the arrest of these two writers, who themselves had been asked by the media to provide information.

The 9/9/99 campaign

The "four nines" campaign was a particularly well-publicized attempt by activists to create another uprising in Burma on September 9, 1999, to commemorate the 1988 uprisings. This campaign was one in a series of planned events that fell flat, false alarms that seriously undermined the credibility of the opposition movement and weakened the morale of activists in Thailand. These events also included the tenth anniversary of the 8/8/88 uprisings on August 8, 1998; the August 21st deadline a few weeks later by which the National League for Democracy (NLD) demanded that the regime convene the people's assembly; and an alleged plan by the monks in Burma to march on the capital Rangoon in May, 2000, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the NLD's election victory. Although activists made clever use of opposition media and communications technologies, they are also said to have tried to engineer the 9/9/99 campaign from outside the country, rather than facilitate the plans of the opposition inside Burma. Some activists believed this was in large part why the expected unrest inside Burma never materialized, causing this string of hyped media events to fall flat.

I followed the media reports of the 9/9/99 campaign carefully, and discussed it with several activists. The campaign involved many groups, both inside and outside
Burma, and a variety of creative uses of communications technologies and media. Especially innovative was the use of the telephone by activists outside to gather information about events in Burma and to convince the military and others inside of the need for change. In this campaign, activists in Thailand called people inside Burma, including military officers, sometimes pretending to be military intelligence (MI) officers and demanding information. "All people are scared of MI and so they give us information so we can know what's happening in the military," explained one activist involved in the campaign (personal communication, March 6, 2000). Activists in Thailand could then warn students inside Burma about possible actions against the students in Burma. The Thailand-based activists also used the telephone to confirm rumors, such as reports of the arrest of an activist in Burma, which once confirmed could then be reported to human rights organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch.

Activists in Thailand also used the phone to try to convince military officers and government staff inside Burma of the need for change. The callers would introduce themselves honestly, and explain that they were not enemies of the military, but that they were trying to improve the situation in Burma. They asked those listening to think about the changes taking place in Indonesia and the Philippines, and also to think about how military leaders could become elected government leaders if they had the support of the people. As one phone campaigner described it, "We explain democracy and that it is the only way to solve our problems, so we try to show them that we will work together . . . Sometimes they don't have the time to talk, so they record it or they put it on the speaker
in the office so everyone can hear. Sometimes they say 'Okay, try to accomplish your movement, and once there's a movement, okay, we'll join'" (personal communication, March 6, 2000).

The activists also tried to exacerbate existing tensions between branches of the military, such as the army and the military intelligence (MI). Pretending that they were frontline soldiers, they would call the military headquarters and request reinforcements while complaining that the MI had a better quota yet did less work, a feeling that activists knew many of their superiors at headquarters shared. Or they would call a general in Rangoon at 3 AM saying that they were from MI and asking for information which the general, though angry, felt compelled to provide. Then the next day they would call the same general in Rangoon, saying that they were calling from the front line, and would complain angrily about the late-night call they had received from MI the previous night. The general would then corroborate, and he and the phone campaigners would have a good time together complaining about MI (personal communication, March 6, 2000).

The phone campaigners tried to find out what problems existed between the officers and the rank-and-file soldiers in the military, and especially about the soldiers' hardships, such as watching their officers confiscate their belongings or not having sufficient food. The activists then created radio dramas based on these problems that they aired on the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) radio station. As one activist explained, they would collect "some real information so they can make it into a story so it makes sense for the soldier" (personal communication, March 6, 2000).
According to activist Win Min, this telephone campaign affected the military's ability to communicate. He said that three or four days prior to 9/9/99, the military found out about the campaign, and instructed their officers not to give out any information or even pick up the phone. The telephone activists continued, making use of the fear that is employed by the regime to keep its soldiers in line. As Win Min explained, "If we scolded them angrily they got scared and talked to us. The Burma army works like that" (personal communication, March 6, 2000).

It was clear early on that the regime was concerned about a possible uprising on 9/9/99. They held a press conference on August 13, 1999, warning the opposition that they had intelligence of their campaign plans for September 9th (Radio Myanmar, 1999). At the press conference, a staff officer of the Directorate of Defence Service Intelligence presented "facts exposing the conspiracy by the anti-government organizations inside and outside to create disturbances" on September 9th, 1999 (Radio Myanmar, 1999). His presentation included detailed information regarding planning meetings in Thailand for the 9/9/99 campaign, including names of those involved and the ways these activists had exchanged information with those inside. In the days leading up to September 9th, opposition activists in Thailand made claims that an uprising was imminent and that there were debates raging within the Burmese army regarding whether or not to take action. The activists urged people inside to take part in a general strike and other acts of resistance to the regime, including tearing up government-run newspapers in a boycott of military-controlled media ("Myanmar Warns", 1999). The regime threatened to clamp down on any unrest, erected roadblocks manned by riot police around Rangoon, put up
barricades outside of the NLD compound and the home of Aung San Suu Kyi, tightened security around schools and monasteries, and arrested dozens of dissidents ("Myanmar junta", 1999).

The campaign fizzled. There were reports of students protesting here and there, and then fleeing or being quickly arrested, and of monks and students handing out pamphlets. The opposition activists had indeed been able to get the news out, as there were reports of opposition pamphlets, leaflets, and posters appearing in many places around the country. The international broadcasters also covered the events in their reporting, both the preparations leading up to the day and then the day itself. This made it even more difficult for many Burmese activists in Thailand to understand the lack of action by people inside. But the results of the campaign help to explain this. As many as 500 activists, monks and NLD members were arrested and detained in the six weeks prior to 9/9/99 (Fink, 2001).

The outcome of the 9/9/99 campaign prompted introspection among many activists. Several Thailand-based activists stressed the positive aspects of the effort, primarily that it kept hope alive for many inside the country, who knew people were working on their behalf. They reasoned that if they hadn't done anything, the people inside would have become discouraged. A few people expressed the need to learn from the experience. Others said that they were still trying to figure out what went wrong and what to do differently next time. There were those, however, who believed that the 9/9/99 campaign was ill conceived. One of these was Win Naing, an activist who was involved in the student demonstrations in Burma in 1996 and 1998. MI had tried to arrest
him in 1998, and after living in hiding for eight months, he came out of Burma in April, 1999. His arrival in Thailand just over a year before we spoke gave Win Naing a different perspective on the situation inside Burma than many of the other Thailand-based activists. He did not like the 9/9/99 campaign.

The 9/9/99 campaign targeted the people inside. The people inside think that if they want to do a campaign inside, the message must come from inside Burma. . . . If you do it in the media, and you broadcast saying "hey, do this, on this day and at this time," the people, they know themselves the real situation, and the students know the real situation. When they will do something, they can decide and do it. We can't command them, we can't create it from the outside. . . . So we can't say the 9/9/99 campaign was profitable. We didn't get anything. Before 9/9/99, nearly 100 students were arrested by MIS just because of this campaign. The people inside were really angry, (personal communication, August 15, 2000)

Win Naing and others believed that the external opposition would be most helpful by finding the means to support those aspects of the campaign that had been initiated by Burmese inside the country. Nevertheless, he recognized why those outside had worked so hard on the campaign.

It's like hope . . . Even for me, once in 1996, we hoped that we would be successful this time to destroy the SPDC. So I couldn't stop doing it, because my hope was really big, and what I thought was based on my hope, not systematically on reality. So I go, go, go, and finally, I can't control my hope. And finally, I see it didn't happen, (personal communication, August 15, 2000)

The opposition groups based along the border were working with their UG members inside Burma to build a base of support for a mass uprising among the people and to eventually spark another mass action, but some questioned the methods used to
communicate with those inside. Bo Kyi was a student activist inside Burma just prior to the 9/9/99 campaign, and he told me about the problems he faced when activists from outside tried to contact him for his help in organizing to mark the day. He had been released from a lengthy prison term only shortly before that, vowing to himself that he would not return. Because 9/9/99 was fast approaching, the MI officers visited Bo Kyi two or three times a week to ask him what might happen and for his opinion of the NLD. "They also warned me that if someone from outside contacts me, I must contact them or they will know that I support 9/9/99," he told me. He tried to cut connections with people from outside, "but I couldn't cut them all, because many people knew me. . . but I couldn't do activism" (personal communication, August 18, 2000). Bo Kyi concurred with Win Naing's view that the activists outside of Burma must take their lead from the activists inside, rather than trying to lead the movement from their offices on the border. "We should ask them, 'What is your strategy?' and we should discuss it again and again and sometimes we should suggest something to them. If they agree, we will do it, but if they don't agree, we should not" (personal communication, August 18, 2000).

In addition to those activists I met in Thailand who were critical of the 9/9/99 campaign, there were also those in Burma who were critical of attempts by activists outside to exacerbate the unrest in Burma. In Rangoon I met a former close ally of Aung San Suu Kyi, Ma Thanegi, who had become a controversial figure in the Burmese opposition. She told me that there remained no functioning underground movement and no real current UG leadership inside Burma. She said that the leaders from 1988 were gone, that when things got really difficult they had disappeared. She also had harsh
things to say about those Burmese living outside the country who complained that no one inside was willing to do anything. If they came back inside and risked their own lives, she told me, then there would be people willing to follow their leadership. But unless they were willing to do this, they should not complain and should make more of an attempt to understand the risks involved in what they were asking people inside to do (personal communication, December 26, 1999).

Opposition groups in Thailand and in Burma operated under different constraints, and the lack of efficient means of communication between these groups exacerbated their differences. Win Naing noted that along with differences in freedom of movement and communication, there was a greater need for those inside to work closely together, given limited resources. In his experience, the loyalty of the activists inside was to the opposition movement as a whole rather than to a specific group (personal communication, August 15, 2000). He also noted that the activist leaders outside had a responsibility to support their followers and secure their safety. When we spoke, his group, the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) had recently split into two factions, in large part over charges of misuse of funding by members of the other faction. Win Naing had no funding for his faction. "I am the leader often members. I need to take care of their survival. . . I need to raise the funding to support these people" (personal communication, August 15, 2000). The formal structure and increasing professionalization of opposition groups in Thailand made their daily operation quite different from the opposition inside Burma, which had to remain flexible, relying on less
formally structured social networks for support, such as family, friends and neighbors. Activists inside organized covertly to ensure their own survival.

The desire for information from inside Burma and the need for opposition groups to prove to funding agencies that they had accomplished something inside the country with the money they had been granted created a dangerous situation for activists inside. Opposition groups outside used various means to document their work, including collecting information from inside and making it public. The harassment or arrest of an activist inside Burma was also a way to reassure funding agencies that groups were indeed active and work was being accomplished. The arrest of an activist inside Burma in this way was perversely beneficial to the group based in Thailand. In addition, since the practice of announcing opposition plans on international broadcasts had become problematic, dissidents inside Burma had become more selective in their communications to outsiders, even to opposition activists. Those inside had learned, for example, to be vague about the times and dates of planned actions. "If we give them the message," Win Naing told me, "they can't keep it [a secret] and they will tell the media. If they announce the plan. . . then our plan will be destroyed" (personal communication, August 15, 2000).

Opposition groups working in Thailand had come to depend on external funding, thus increasing the commitment of activists to the survival of their group, and exacerbating political factionalism and competition between groups. This funding combined with the difficulties of communication between groups inside and outside Burma led to attempts by activists outside to engineer a movement for change inside.
This externally-driven approach to the use of communications to engineer social change is similar to the tactics of totalitarian regimes (Friedrich, 1954), and can thus be seen as a setback in the process of moving from a totalitarian approach to information and communications to one that is more democratic. The fact that the attempt backfired could be seen as a positive sign that resistance to totalitarian approaches within Burma is alive and well. It could also be argued that the amount of attention devoted to this campaign and to externally-focused lobbying campaigns distracted opposition activists from dealing with some of the most difficult issues facing the Thailand-based opposition movement’s efforts to democratize internally. Although foreign and indigenous NGOs had begun addressing inequities in opportunities for education and participation in the public realm, I found a strong strain of denial among many Burman male activists that these inequities even existed.

Non-Burman leaders and ethnic media

The non-Burman opposition groups functioned under different sets of environmental and historical constraints than the Burman groups. The majority of non-Burmans were from rural areas where they were less likely than those from urban areas to have been exposed to electronic technologies or other modern luxuries more commonplace in urban settings. Many of the ethnic peoples’ lives had been focused on the survival of their families, their villages, and their way of life. Until recently, few had

31 It also bears a striking resemblance to the "social engineering" approach employed by communication and development practitioners.
considered it worthwhile to spend time presenting their situation to outsiders beyond a small group of foreign supporters.

What many older leaders described as a discomfort with new technologies seemed to some younger people to have more to do with their elders' lack of attention to the importance of involvement with the outside world. Mon student Nai Kyin Shwe,\(^{32}\) for example, came to see that international information campaigns focused on human rights strengthened the movement, and in the mid-1990s urged the older leaders of the New Mon State Party (NMSP) to begin an information campaign like the one the ABSDF was aggressively engaged in. "But at that time the leaders weren't interested. They were interested in the war in the jungle, they were isolated from the world, and very few people knew the Mon people," he explained (personal communication, July 22, 2000).

The most direct criticism of the ethnic nationality leaders often came from young people. Younger activists described, for example, how older non-Burman leaders had at times tried to discourage women's groups or student groups from organizing activities with people outside their ethnic circle. As one Karen student activist said about some of the Karen leaders, "I feel like they are a very big truck and they want to go, and they don't want the little car to go past them. They cannot go quickly, but they also don't want the little car to go past them" (personal communication, April 18, 2000). Other Karen students told me that the nepotism that for years had ensured that the leaders’ children got the best opportunities was slowly giving way to a more equitable distribution. This was partly due to the fact that several funding agencies were making specific efforts to include a wide range of Burmese peoples in their programs. Several

\(^{32}\) Nai Kyin Shwe is a pseudonym.
people told me that the best hope for reconciliation in Burma remained in the hands of the younger generation, including some younger leaders already entering the ranks with new ideas and more flexible attitudes.

It was the younger people who were most eagerly taking to the newest information technologies. Many of them used the Internet on occasion for research and to take advantage of online training opportunities. They learned their computer skills through the ad hoc training sessions provided by opposition groups and NGOs, or they taught themselves using online training manuals and trial and error methods. Several activists I spoke with were taking advantage of online educational programs. They were especially popular among students whose flight from Burma in 1988 cut short their academic studies, as well as many young people who had left the refugee camps to try to find opportunities to build a better life by working for NGOs or in Thai cities as domestic servants or child care providers.

Many young people believed that they had an important role to play in the movement. As Karen student Naw Mu Si told me,

> The leaders and the people in the camps, there is a gap between them. The leaders are doing the political work, but there is also the civilian population in the camp who don't know anything. . . . When it is time to really cooperate, there is a gap between them and then we will not be able to cooperate together. So, we want our students to be a bridge between the people and the leaders. (personal communication, April 18, 2000)

Several younger activists, especially non-Burmans, had been documenting human rights abuses against their people, and saw NITs as an inexpensive way to publicize this work.
They understood that information had become an even more valuable campaign tool, since its dissemination was cheaper and faster than ever before.

The emphasis on documenting human rights abuses since 1988 corresponded with a growth in the number of ethnically-focused opposition newsletters and journals. Several of these publications had become significant voices in the overall media environment among the opposition groups in Thailand, and will be described in more detail in the next chapter. In the face of what the ethnic minority groups perceived as a loss of influence within the opposition movement, these media worked to encourage their people to continue the struggle against the Burmese regime. They tried hard to keep people committed to working against the regime rather than defecting to it, as so many ethnic groups had already done.

**Ceasefires, national reconciliation, and invisibility**

The last decade has seen a decline in the power and influence of the non-Burman elements of the political opposition, which has significance for the diversity of views included in opposition decision-making processes. Several ethnic nationality leaders attribute their loss of influence at least in part to the opposition's move toward nonviolence and the success of the Burmese government's formal ceasefire agreements with fourteen larger ethnic groups, as well as several other smaller "ceasefire forces" (Smith, 1999). These ceasefires have been used by the regime to lend credence internationally to their claim to desire a peaceful transition to democratic rule. They have also seriously weakened the opposition alliance of armed ethnic groups, the National
Democratic Front (NDF). NDF General Secretary, Khaing Soe Naing Aung, pinpointed the cause of the ceasefires as the popularity of nonviolent action in countries around the world, which he says "fanned into Burma in 1989" with the political defiance trainings that were being sponsored on the border (personal communication, July 8, 2000).

While Khaing Soe Naing Aung didn't claim that the political defiance trainings led directly to the ceasefires, he did argue that the Burmese regime cleverly manipulated this post Cold War trend toward nonviolence, which coincided with the war-weariness of many Burmese peoples, the messages of reconciliation from Aung San Suu Kyi, and the foreign policy objectives of the U.S. and other world powers. In addition, many of the ceasefire groups and their leaders had benefited handsomely from the surge in business activity in Burma since the early 1990s (Smith, 1999). As Khaing Soe Naing Aung explained, "The government allowed those groups to do business. When their business prospers, these people will not have the mind to revolt. In other words, to kill the spirit of insurrection, the government enticed them with business" (personal communication, July 8, 2000). The military regime successfully combined the language of peace with the lure of good business.

The capture by Burmese troops of the opposition alliance headquarters at Manerplaw in 1995 caused a loss of face for the armed ethnic groups and disrupted communications between the opposition groups. Leisurely conferences stretched over a week or two were now impracticable. As Pa-O leader Hkun Okker put it, "in Manerplaw, security and funding was no problem. If there was food, okay, you can talk ten, twelve, thirteen days, no problem. Now we can't do it, so preparation is very important"
Now that they must pay for security, transport, food, and accommodations, including a place to meet, these leaders have come to rely on communications technologies such as e-mail to help them in their preparations for much shorter conferences of two or three days at most.

During the time I was in Thailand there were two significant efforts underway aimed at improving both communications between ethnic groups and access to NITs for those ethnic groups that were politically active but not yet online. One of these was the National Reconciliation Program (NRP), initiated by Dr. Sein Win of the NCGUB, and Harn Yawngwhe, a Shan intellectual living overseas, and financed with help from the Norwegian government and other organizations (Khon Manko Ban, personal communication, August 8, 2000). The objectives of the NRP were for "all nationalities" to discuss and define their own political goals, engage in dialogue with the country's other nationalities regarding the political future of Burma, prepare to establish their desired political goals, and create the conditions necessary to safeguard them (National Reconciliation Program, n.d.). The program aimed at preparing the ethnic nationalities for the possibility of tripartite dialogue between the ethnic groups, the NLD and the SPDC. In order to get all parties to agree to common goals for that time in the future when they would need to articulate them, the NRP programs consisted primarily of meetings between non-Burman leaders, most often between the political factions within one ethnic group, so that they could identify and communicate common goals. There was also some support for cultural exchanges between groups. When I met with Khon Manko Ban, a founding member of the NRP, he and other NRP members had been meeting
regularly with the various Rakhine political factions, trying to help them achieve "unity" in agreeing upon a set of stated political goals for their people (personal communication, August 8, 2000).

The second project, called Ethnics Online and funded by the OSI Burma Project, was intended to improve the communications capacity of the non-Burman political leadership and grassroots organizations by providing funding for new technologies and training in their use. The program was intended primarily to help ethnic leaders who needed to communicate during their frequent travels, but also ethnic organizations that weren't yet online. Since the Karenni leader Rimond Htoo, for example, was the Chairperson for the National Reconciliation Project (NRP) along with his work for the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), he needed to be able to communicate well with the other leaders, so he was provided with a laptop in 1999. The project provided laptops to several of the other key NRP leaders, as well as funds to support the e-mail accounts and phone bills of several groups (Kyaw Kyaw, personal communication, November 23, 1999). In this way, Ethnics Online was vital to the communication of those involved in the NRP. The project also supported a few training sessions for non-Burman groups, such as the computer training for Karenni organizations described at the beginning of this chapter.

Those leaders who had received this funding cited it as a rare example of foreign financial support for the ethnic minority political leaders. When I spoke with National Democratic Front (NDF) General Secretary, Khaing Soe Naing Aung, for example, he told me that the NDF had not been able to get funding from the National Endowment for
Democracy (NED) or other organizations because NDF is an alliance of armed groups. The NED also would not fund the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), an alliance of armed and unarmed groups representing both Burmans and non-Burmans, for the same reason. NDF had received a bit of funding for non-military activities (US $500 per month), channeled through the government-in-exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), during the years 1997 and 1998, but had stopped receiving this funding in 1999. He argued that the NDF conducted non-military activities with a political wing that he admitted had been established specifically to try to get funding. These activities mostly included various means of gathering information on human rights abuses. "Our office building is not a military building," he told me. "In fact, [NDF] is a political wing. So we ought to be given funds" (personal communication, July 8, 2000).

While a detailed analysis of the history of funding for the Burmese opposition is beyond the scope of this work, it is clear that funding throughout most of the 1990s resulted in patterns of access to and use of NITs that fell along ethnic and gendered lines. This was apparent from the emphasis on information and communications activities that were themselves highly gendered, being considered primarily within the public realm of politics. Men ran the political groups, held office, wrote most of the news, and were dominant in the information campaign to raise awareness and lobby national and international policymakers. Men also organized the state-building activities such as the major effort to draft a constitution for a future federal system in Burma.
Although there were non-Burman men involved in these political activities, non-Burman organizations were especially well supported in their efforts to document human rights abuses by the Burmese regime. This was undoubtedly an important aspect of opposition activity, as community involvement in documenting abuses is understood as crucial to the process of empowerment (Dias, 1993), or what Freire (1970) called "conscientization." Nevertheless, the consistent and repetitive nature of human rights abuse reporting has also worked to maintain stereotypes of non-Burmans as victims. In the public realm they remained invisible except as symbols of Burmese military oppression. While there were exceptions, the very fact that they were exceptional proves the rule - that the popular conception within the opposition was of the non-Burmans as lacking political skills. This, then, made it seem "natural" that they lacked access to communications technologies and did not participate in the public realm.

The feeling of being overlooked was a consistent theme in my conversations with non-Burmans, and reinforced in their own minds the notion that they were "behind the Burmans." This phrase was repeated most vehemently among refugees, but was also heard at the highest levels of non-Burman leadership. "The ethnics are too late in communication," said Hkun Okker, the President of the Pa-O People's Liberation Organization (PPLO), explaining why he didn't use e-mail until 1999. At that time the PPLO received support to buy a desktop computer, he explained, but since then members have had no training in how to use it. They must also now pay for an e-mail account and much higher phone bills. He pointed out that the smaller groups had the most trouble
maintaining online access and paying their bills, especially if there was no follow up
from the funding agency.

Non-Burman leaders I spoke with often compared their funding with that
provided to groups they perceived as primarily Burman, such as the All Burma Students
Democratic Front (ABSDF) or the Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS). They
argued that these groups, while they may be doing good work, nevertheless were working
in exile, far from home and therefore unable to claim (and without the responsibilities of)
a constituency. The funding patterns benefited the same groups repeatedly, they
maintained, because those groups that were funded then gained the skills necessary to
complete increasingly sophisticated grant proposals.

The donors don't understand well, so they donate their
money to those who are clever, more advanced because of
the assistance from the international community. So they
enjoy that and they can make better proposals. . . . Then
they get money and they become more clever. Those who
are not clever and who do not have a chance to get
assistance, they never get assistance, so the gap within our
movement is very wide. (Hkun Okker, personal
communication, July 5, 2000)

In the politics of the Burmese opposition, the Burmans were generally considered
more educated and therefore skilled in reading and writing, and thus "naturally" the most
active and best funded. Ethnic groups remained for the most part focused on issues of
survival and self-determination (which, they pointed out, was not an issue for the
Burmans), issues that got labeled as "development" or "cultural preservation." This
reinforces the observation by Clarence Dias (1993) that "civil and political rights have
tended to become the focus of international human rights advocacy while economic,
social and cultural rights have tended to become the focus of international development assistance" (p. 705). Conceptions of development or cultural preservation issues as separate from the mainstream "political" issues removed all but a few of the non-Burmans and the issues they were working on from the public realm of political action, except insofar as they are useful symbolically in lobbying efforts. The symbiotic relationship of those issues seen as "politics" with those understood as "development" was in this way masked (Dias, 1993). This relationship between politics and development, as well as the way it becomes masked, was reflected in several people's comments about their rights. Several people told me that they did not yet feel ready to assume their democratic rights because they were not yet at a high enough level of understanding and knowledge. They saw their lack of development as a barrier to their assumption of political rights rather than as a violation of their economic rights. Granting them political and civil rights would thus do little on a practical level to improve their daily lives.

As Eghosa Osaghae (1996) has argued by using Nicaragua as an example, "without redressing inequalities, the entrenchment of individual human rights would be meaningless to members of disadvantaged groups" (p. 177). He maintains that discrimination cannot be prevented where gross inequalities exist among competing groups. Thus, the human rights approach to conflict resolution "should involve the right of backward groups to approximate the levels of the advanced groups, which requires affirmative action. The right to non-discrimination cannot be meaningful unless this is done" (Osaghae, 1996, p. 184). Osaghae (1996) argued that if the root cause of the
differences in qualifications between individuals is a group disadvantage (such as discrimination based on ethnicity), then the granting of special privileges is not discriminatory. He goes so far as to argue that without granting special privileges to level the playing field for disadvantaged groups, the attempt to treat them equally with those more advantaged would systematically preclude them from attaining their rights. In other words, special privileges for individuals belonging to disadvantaged groups will be a necessary means of creating genuinely equal opportunity for all.

Those opposition groups that have been disadvantaged by the status quo recognized this. As Hkun Okker of the Pa-O People's Liberation Organization explained,

> If your knowledge is level, you are level. If your knowledge is still too low, you cannot ask for equality. If I want equality with you, my knowledge must be just nearly your knowledge. . . The ethnics have less knowledge than the Burmans. Why? We have no opportunities, (personal communication, July 5, 2000).

These same concerns were echoed by women in the opposition. Mi Sue Pwint, a founder of the BWU, for example, was initially worried about starting a women's organization because women in the opposition movement had been given very few chances for study outside of their border camps. This limited their abilities to communicate with outsiders and gain funding. Although there have been many training sessions conducted in Chiang Mai and Bangkok, or overseas in the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and other places, she argued that very few women had been chosen for inclusion by the leadership of political organizations (personal communication, July 3, 2000). She told me about her frequent arguments with the ABSDF male political leadership on this issue, but said the men's position was that it was not safe for women to
travel in Thailand. "We can see easily," she explained, "that in every organization, women are working under or behind the men . . . . They never choose the women to go to trainings, seminars, workshops, like that, and it's very difficult to contact each other outside the camp. So slowly, slowly, women's abilities and men's abilities are different" (July 3, 2000).

Women of the opposition

Although women time and again told me that they were not yet "ready" for involvement in the political process in Burma, which many of them attributed to a lack of opportunities to develop their skills, these women were not inactive by any means. It was rather the way "active" was defined that blinded the movement to the way that women's work was political in that it supported the military and governing activities of the men. This work included income generation to support the family and the care of the elderly and the sick, not to mention raising new soldiers and politicians. Women's focus on the domestic sphere and issues of daily survival demonstrate how the global phenomenon of the public/private divide that naturalizes a gendered division of labor has been perpetuated within the opposition movement.
This evening over dinner I got into an interesting conversation with XXX over the issue of women's rights. Although I found it hard to keep my mouth shut and not get heated, I also found myself listening to repetitive and superficial arguments about how we must all get along. It came up in a conversation among the guys in Burmese, I think, and then Kyaw Kyaw told the others that I would be going to the women's meeting. Kyaw Kyaw asked me whether or not women had their rights in the U.S. When I said no, there were grunts of dissatisfaction around the table. XXX then said that woman was made from the rib of man, and so woman was made **after** man. Another man added that it cannot be denied, as it is the word of God. I asked "Whose God? Most of the people of Burma? " and Kyaw Kyaw said no and laughed. XXX then said that most of the people in the world believed this. Then he went on at great length about how the women were now raising questions and arguing with the men and how it is causing problems. Both men and women each have their own work, he argued, but the women were weakening the movement. They were no longer focused on the work they do best.

I told him that I was sorry I couldn 't do much for him about this — that it was an issue to be solved between Burmese men and women. He suggested that maybe I could help the women realize the problems they were creating. I told him that the Burmese women I 'd met were very smart and didn 't need my advice, but he countered that maybe I could "open their minds " about this issue.

Shortly after that I ended the conversation, since I realized I was listening for about the fourth time to the argument that if we all talk and work together we will understand
each other. I wondered whether he considered his monologue "talking together" — did he really think we were having a conversation? He went on again about how women and men must do their own work, which is fine in my opinion, if the work you do is fulfilling and the unfulfilling work is shared. But I realized that he wasn’t interested in my opinion, which to me, and probably to most Burmese women fighting this attitude, lies at the heart of the matter.

Social conceptions of gender and gender roles meant that information technologies were seen as most effectively used in the service of war and its related surveillance and security functions, in state-building, and in externally-focused lobbying efforts. This merged with the gendered nature of Burmese opposition politics to ensure that comparatively few women had access to the newest communications technologies in late 1999 and 2000. Those who did have access often felt uncomfortable with the technologies, or that their access was contingent on their support of political organizations as (unpaid or unrecognized) secretaries or typists, or as leaders of women's organizations. Even though a computer expert had visited the Burmese Women's Union (BWU) offices, for example, and provided them with some training on e-mail, not many of the BWU women actually used e-mail or the Internet. The biggest issue for the women was the language barrier, and the concern that someone would find mistakes in their written English. They would most often get an English-speaking friend to correct or even write their correspondence for them. This was slowly changing as the BWU worked to build the capacity and skills of their members, but even when I left in August
2000, there were few BWU members who could send a confident e-mail message in English. And although there had been women's organizations for many years, and several had recently gained access to NITs, their activities were understood to be primarily relief and development efforts in their local communities, since women have had to bear the largest responsibility for the maintenance of the family while their fathers, brothers and husbands waged war or political battles. For this reason, even those women with access to NITs were not generally perceived as participating in political work, but rather in work to maintain the family and community.33

Many women I spoke with expressed feelings of inferiority when speaking of their role within the opposition movement, not only to the men who dominate politics, but also to other women. During the forum that established the Women's League for Burma (WLB), for example, many members of the newly-formed women's organizations, such as the Pa-O Women's Union (PWU), felt inferior in education and abilities to the more outspoken women there (Nang Aine, personal communication, July 5, 2000). This underscores the fact that the politics of women's organizations were as complex and contested as the mainstream male-dominated groups. Feelings about ethnicity and class run deep, and women were as vocal and impassioned as men in expressing their discontent with the racism as well as the sexism they had experienced.

33Nevertheless, women's groups in the Burmese opposition are as varied as their histories would suggest. Groups such as the Karen Women's Organization, first formed in 1949, and have had much experience dealing with outsiders and organizing different kinds of projects. Others have only recently formed, such as the PaO Women's Union, organized in March, 2000. Terms such as "women's groups" or "women's movement" make invisible the differences between women and the divisions that passionately concern them.
Although women's groups had received sporadic assistance throughout the years, attention to Burma and its exiles increased after 1988, and with gender becoming an increasingly important focus of development agencies, Burmese opposition women have received more funding. Until the recent formation of the umbrella organization, the Women's League for Burma (WLB), the most visible group of Burmese women in Thailand was the Burmese Women's Union (BWU). The BWU was founded by female students who left Burma after the 1988 uprisings, many of whom were also members of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF). Mirroring the situation with the ABSDF and the ethnic-based political organizations, the BWU received funding for publicity and information work earlier than other women's groups. This, in turn, increased their chances to get more funding. The BWU set up the first women's organization office along the Thai-Burma border when they rented space in Mae Hong Song in late 1997 (Mi Sue Pwint, personal communication, July 3, 2000). What distinguished the BWU from the ethnic-based women's groups, especially at first, was their emphasis on outreach to the international community and their use of communications technologies and media to do so. During my time in Thailand, the BWU was the only women's organization producing a regular newsletter. The BWU was also instrumental in organizing the formation of the Women's League of Burma (WLB).

Two major surges of organizing energy in the development of the Burmese women's movement corresponded with significant international events and the desire to communicate with the international community. The first was the NGO Forum that was held alongside the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference, and was followed by the first
"shadow report" to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in January, 2000. Women's participation in these two events provides evidence of a move among Burmese women activists from a focus on political and civil rights, perceived by many minority people to concern primarily Burmans, to a heightened awareness of race and its related problems.

The Burmese Women's Union (BWU) was formed in 1995, and after a few months was informed about the Beijing Women's Conference by members of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), the opposition government-in-exile. The BWU and NCGUB arranged for two Burmese women living overseas to attend the Beijing NGO Forum as representatives of the BWU. Especially because Aung San Suu Kyi gave the opening address to the NGO Forum via videotape smuggled out of Burma, a Burmese presence was important to help raise awareness of the oppression in Burma. Two days of campaigning by the women and their supporters were described by the ABSDF's *Dawn* newsletter. According to the article covering BWU involvement in the Forum, this campaign focused on the release of all political prisoners in Burma and on providing moral support to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Although there was discussion of ethnic issues when two films about violence against women were screened, this was not the focus of the campaigning at the Forum by the BWU ("Burmese Women's", 1995).

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34 Different women remember the men's involvement in these events differently, with some suggesting that the men encouraged the formation of the BWU in order that there be a Burmese presence in Beijing. Others insist that the BWU was formed before anyone learned about the upcoming Beijing NGO Forum. What is clear is that the NCGUB supported the women in order to ensure a Burmese presence at the Forum.
Then, in January, 2000, a multi-ethnic committee of women presented their "shadow report" to the UN to counter Burma's own report to the CEDAW. This committee of women had compiled information and written this document for presentation at the United Nations in order to counter the arguments made by the Burmese government regarding the advancement of women in Burma. It was the first time women from different ethnic groups had come together to write a document of this magnitude. It is significant that these women decided to focus on the plight of ethnic women in the rural areas of the country, as it indicates their willingness to directly address the racism facing the most vulnerable of their countrywomen.

During the time I spent with members of various opposition groups, I found that in general, women's style of organizing and interacting among themselves differed in significant ways from many of the male-dominated groups. Monthly meetings I attended of the Mae Sot Women's Exchange, initiated while I was living in Mae Sot, exemplified the ways in which women's organizing around specific issues, such as domestic violence and child nutrition, cut across ethnic lines. The organizers of the Mae Sot Women's Exchange were a diverse set of women leaders from different opposition organizations who valued the fact that women from a variety of ethnic groups attended the meetings. There was a concerted effort to include everyone in the discussions. Women sat on the floor together, and everyone had a turn to speak if they wished. This raised problems with language, since many of the women were not native speakers of Burmese. When someone's language problems became apparent, the other women were careful to find a translator within the group rather than discourage her from speaking. Concerned that
women have been silenced through years of socialization, they understood the value of these meetings to lie primarily in the opportunity they gave women from diverse backgrounds to speak up in a safe public place.

These women, then, were developing their own grassroots, participatory channels of communication that transcended ethnicity and typified the process of "conscientization" (Freire, 1970). Many female activists spoke openly about problems they had faced in their meetings and organizing efforts, including those related to ethnicity, both within their organization and between groups. I did not often find such self-critical introspection about problems within their own organizations when I spoke with male activists.

Although it is too early to know how women might use NITs as they gain access to them, the differences in their style of organizing are likely to also be mirrored by uses of NITs that differ from those of male activists. Many women's groups intentionally distanced themselves from the masculine realm of politics because they saw it as contentious and divisive. When women described how they would make use of access to the Internet and e-mail, for example, they often said that they would seek contact with women from other ethnic groups and from other women's groups around the world. Their interest in NITs very often revolved around the development of relationships with people at the local, regional and international levels. This is in contrast to what many male activists answered when asked the same question, which was that they would like

35 There are other reasons for this distancing, however, such as the fact that calling what they do "political" can make it more difficult for women to get foreign funding. This is especially true in the refugee camps, where the Thais have prohibited "political" activities, and because many women don't perceive the work they are doing as political.
more time online to either send or seek out information. As women gain access to NITs, and as long as they are free to develop their own agendas regarding their use, the desire to build relationships both locally and around the world promises to open up new ways of thinking about communications technologies and media use. I also have no doubt that many Burmese women feel it necessary that more women's voices be included in the public dialogue.

**Communication and change**

The environment of surveillance and suspicion in Mae Sot and elsewhere along the border helped to shape conceptions of the proper and most efficient uses for communications technologies and media among the opposition movement. It had also resulted, at least in Mae Sot, in a fragmentation among opposition groups that inhibited pluralistic dialogue. This was not yet significantly affected by the introduction of computers and the Internet. These were still unfamiliar presences in opposition offices along the border, many of which had neither the technical nor the human capacities to communicate electronically. Nevertheless, while the technologies may have seemed alien initially, they were also welcomed and were quickly becoming important tools in activists' work to make their concerns known to more people around the world. There existed, however, significant differences in access to and use of NITs between the border areas and the urban areas of Thailand.

The events of 1988 and 1990 and the resultant movement for democracy in Burma coincided with the needs of U.S. foreign policy interests. By making use of the
discourses of democracy and human rights, the movement for democratic change in
Burma became a powerful moral and political symbol as well as promising a potentially
useful ally for the U.S. in the Southeast Asian region in the long run. The Reagan
administration's concept of low intensity warfare and its exportation to Southeast Asia
led to some militarized approaches to communication, much like in totalitarian regimes.
When applied in the Burmese context, such approaches proved ineffective and
demoralizing to opposition activists.

In addition, the history of U.S. involvement in the movement for a New
International Information and Communication Order (NIICO) helps to place in a global
context the emphasis on human rights within the Burmese struggle. Funded in large part
by Western aid agencies, including the National Endowment for Democracy (NED),
many groups in the Burmese opposition emphasized political and civil rights over
economic, social and cultural rights. These latter were categorized as rights abuses when
useful for condemning the regime, but as "development" when it came to appropriating
funding. Movement inequities were exacerbated by unacknowledged assumptions that
political and civil rights abuses occurred primarily to Burmans, while abuses of
economic, social and cultural rights affected ethnic minorities. While I recognize that
these statements are true in numerical terms, what is not generally acknowledged is the
privileging of the "first tier" individual political and civil rights within the opposition
movement. This occurs, for example, when the arrest of a writer inside Burma becomes
bigger news than the suppression of an ethnic people's right to learn their own language.
Both events have inhibited communication, but one is seen as a political right to freedom of expression, while the other is labeled a cultural right.

A greater examination of debates over the meaning and scope of "human rights" provides some insight into how this concept can paradoxically contribute to the marginalization of specific groups in society. Critical scholars have made important contributions to our understanding of the problematic framework of human rights that emphasizes democracy as the main goal, marginalizing women and minority groups in the process. Human rights approaches that interpret the civil and political rights of individuals as belonging to public life, while (at the regional or national level) relegating village and family life to the private sphere, produce a dichotomy between the public and private spheres that prevents women and many minority groups from participating fully in the public sphere. Women and rural minority groups are inhibited in their ability to use the authoritative forms of speech and dialogue that democratic participation demands. Yet by placing a premium on speech, persuasion, and rhetorical skill, the practice of democracy, then, ensures that the citizen who makes the most persuasive argument has the most to gain and that those without these skills remain unable to fully participate (Romany, 1994).

With a public/private divide that relegated women to the private sphere (and in the Burmese case, relegated minority peoples to villages or to "the jungle" as guerilla fighters), there has developed a hierarchy resulting in a gendered and ethnically inequitable conceptualization of human rights. Recognition of the so-called "second generation" of social, economic and cultural rights has clarified the inconsistencies
inherent in a global system that rhetorically upholds principles of justice and dignity while at the same time denying basic rights of self-determination to colonized or minority peoples (Romany, 1994). The current structure of international relations mirrors the construction of the liberal state, in that it presupposes the will of people to institute the legal order, yet does not recognize or admit to the naturalized normative order that guides such constructions (Romany, 1994). This normative order includes the glorification of feminine values and of ethnic nationality cultures without a corresponding examination of the ways this normative order is constructed through patriarchal power structures and the structural position of women and minorities within them. In other words, it is the structural positioning of women and minorities within society that elicits many of the (politically) significant behavioral differences between them and the majority (mostly male) elite which are constructed as "natural" by those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. The patriarchal narrative that perpetuates these cultural definitions results in a form of domination that strips women and ethnic minority groups of the opportunities to develop the very skills they need to resist this domination.

Claiming the existence of "natural" differences between men and women, or between "simple" rural people and the urban cosmopolitan, aids the state and its elites (both men and women) in enlisting culture, especially cultural "tradition," as a means of creating and perpetuating the hegemonic subordination of women and minority groups. This system of subordination also acts as the organizing principle in the distribution of resources within various groups in society, further compounding the subordination of minority groups. As Romany (1994) argues, "[t]he legitimation of human rights
discourse must therefore rest on the renunciation of hegemonic communicative competence held by a few" (p. 110).

Feminist communication studies have in recent years moved beyond a focus on the gendered nature of media content to contribute to more nuanced understandings of the impact of communications and media through exploring the gendered nature of technological development and use. Lana Rakow (1988) maintains that most discussions of technology mask questions of gender and therefore preclude a gendered analysis. She argues that a gendered approach to understanding technological developments challenges hidden assumptions about "the values expressed by technologies and the purposes to which they are put, about the creation and organization of culture, and about the structure of power relationships" (Rakow, 1988: 57). Following Baudrillard, Rakow (1988) argues that ideology does not exist before it is channeled through the media, but rather that it exists in the media itself. Ideology is lodged in the ways that technologies and media are understood in society, and in the ways they are used to exercise power, especially through the creation and maintenance of cultural metaphors and meanings. Feminists have demonstrated how technology expresses "mainly male values and meanings", and that technologies are ways to "think the world" (Rakow, 1988, p. 67).

If we hope to understand and change communication as the process by which we take up our places in a particular kind of world, we should look to how the gendered meanings and metaphors of technology not only describe but inscribe us. (Rakow, 1988: 67)

The hierarchy of access to communications technologies within the Burmese opposition movement offered in this chapter is intended to paint in broad strokes the
patterns I found within the opposition movement. There were exceptions that did not fit this framework, and I hope to find an ever increasing number of these. Nevertheless, leaving these broad divisions unspoken does the opposition movement a disservice, since it is in the recognition of inequities and the tolerance to discuss and address them that the foundation of a future democratic society lays. This was the powerful yet unacknowledged contribution being made by those in the Burmese opposition movement willing to confront and address contentious issues of race and class.
Chapter 5

Opposition media

Burmese opposition media are many and varied, with different goals and target audiences, different internal structures and missions. They have in common that they work for change in the political landscape in Burma and an end to continued militarization and violence. The environments in which these media are produced also help to shape them, so that the international Free Burma Coalition Internet campaign, the mainstream opposition media produced in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and those ethnic media based primarily on the Thai border, all reflect the impact of their environmental influences. This chapter provides an overview of Burmese opposition media, and although I do not provide an exhaustive account of such media, I do examine issues and problems they all face in their work and document some of their successes.

I have demonstrated in Chapter 3 the environment of suspicion in Burma, and in Chapter 4 I described how this atmosphere has influenced the opposition movement along the border. Within the Burmese opposition, there is a correlation between location in physical space and the freedom to say what one thinks. Those opposition activists furthest removed from the militarized environment of the borderlands have the greatest access to communications technologies and the feeling of safety necessary to use them to speak freely. The borderland areas, on the other hand, physically straddle the divide between authoritarian Burma and the freer communications environment in Thailand. In this chapter I will show how the producers of Burmese opposition media struggle to
negotiate the gulf between democratic and authoritarian approaches to communication, and create a "middle zone" between them that is freer than but still constrained by the communications environment inside Burma.

I begin with a view from the cyber-campaign for Burma, initiated and largely carried out from outside of Thailand, far from the fear restricting those living along the border. The Free Burma Coalition (FBC) offers an interesting case study of an activist movement and its Internet campaign that mastered both the art of alternative media production and the development of a democratized communication system. The FBC campaign created a powerful sense of camaraderie in the "creative making of a social order" (Hamilton, 2000, p. 361) involving hundreds of people corresponding over vast distances about a country few of them had ever visited. And while significant elements of the campaign's rhetoric involved militarized responses to the regime and militarized efforts to enact change in Burma, the Internet also provided a forum in which alternatives to militarized thinking could be introduced and discussed.

**Spiders on the (World Wide) Web**

The Free Burma Coalition (FBC) is an umbrella organization coordinating groups around the world working on various local, national and international campaigns for change in Burma. During the mid-1990s, the organization claimed member groups in over 100 universities and high schools in the U.S. and overseas, as well as affiliations with a large number of environmentalists, labor organizers, and human rights campaigners from around the world. The FBC's high-profile Internet campaign was
often cited as an example of what has been constructed rhetorically as a new international cyber-activism (Doherty, 1997; Matthews, 1996; O'Neill, 1997; Tyson, 1995; Ureschel, 1996). Some even claim it was the Internet itself that spawned the movement for human rights in Burma, and that in providing the communicative framework for this new kind of movement, the Internet has fundamentally changed international activism (Holloway, 1996).

To get people involved, however, required more than a means of communication. It required a good story, and the Burma campaign provided activists with a cause as dramatic as that found in any legendary tale: an evil military dictatorship in power since 1962 violently oppressing brave freedom fighters; a massive general strike in 1988 in which troops killed unknown thousands of unarmed demonstrators; complicity by western businesses willing to profit while looking the other way as the government they deal with abuses its own citizens; the photogenic, somewhat frail Nobel-Prize-winning leader of the opposition forces standing strong against constant surveillance, her movements restricted despite her ostensible release in 1995 from six years under house arrest.  

She fought back by holding a series of standoffs with the Burmese generals, sitting in her car under a blazing sun after being prevented from visiting party members in an outlying district, her deteriorating health a source of concern for the international community.

In 1998, a group of eighteen activists from six countries slipped into Rangoon and distributed thousands of palm-sized pamphlets printed with phrases in support of

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36 Aung San Suu Kyi was recently re-released from house arrest to great media fanfare. As of this writing in July, 2002, she has been free to move around and conduct the business of her political party, the NLD.
democracy. Their arrest, detention, trial and deportation made international news headlines. Two other foreigners, Rachel Goldwyn and James Mawdsley, both British, were arrested in two separate incidents in Burma and later deported for their equally high-profile actions in support of the democratic resistance. They were all part of an international grassroots movement in support of democracy in Burma, a campaign in which individual activists often began their online postings with "Dear fellow spiders," in reference to the campaign's motto, "When spiders unite they can tie down a lion." The FBC lauded its Internet campaign as the largest cyber-campaign devoted to human rights in a single country, in which students and others from around the world pressured many corporations to rethink their Burma connections. The FBC approach to communicating its message included networking with labor unions, environmentalists, and activists worldwide, including many from countries such as Nigeria, Indonesia and East Timor.

The FBC campaign made use of its international reach to create a "bottom up" strategy that drew on the power of Burma's story to bring activists into battle against the Burmese regime. Social movement theorists have shown how collective behavior becomes possible when activists define themselves using categories, constructed and contested through language, which help to build motivation for collective action (Hopkins and Reicher, 1997). The issues involved in the Burma campaign were framed as problems between the good democracy activists and the evil Burmese regime, and these categorizations motivated activists, in turn creating a sense of identity for them.

The Free Burma Coalition's use of the Internet capitalized on the international nature of the Web, promoting this interconnectivity as a source of legitimacy rather than
fearing it, and cultivating an identity among democracy-loving activist "spiders" around the world. As I have detailed elsewhere (Brooten, 1998) with regard to the Internet campaign that celebrated the tenth anniversary of the 1988 uprisings, the rhetoric of activists constructed those working for democracy in Burma as reflecting, in contrast to the Burmese government, not just the values of the Burmese people, but also of "all pro-democracy people of the world" and even of "all people in the world today."

Central to the Burmese opposition's online presence has been the BurmaNet listserv, founded in 1993, which quickly became the primary source of daily information for most Burma watchers. The impact of the Internet and, specifically, BurmaNet, took the regime by surprise, and it soon recognized that effective control of communication required different strategies. Shortly after the founding of BurmaNet, the Burmese embassy in Washington and other known military representatives subscribed and began to post their own messages. Despite protests from some listserv subscribers, in 1994 BurmaNet's editors decided to allow the military to post messages to BurmaNet, "in the interests of free speech and full debate" (Danitz & Strobel, 1999, p. 13), and to include excerpts of the military regime's messages in the BurmaNet daily news summaries (former BurmaNet editor Christina Fink, personal communication, August 14, 1998).

There was at this point a history of online communications between representatives of the Burmese regime and members of the opposition in exile, in which both sides had attacked, cajoled, and poked fun at the other, and at times even managed a sort of debate. The BurmaNet listserv had become arguably the most significant forum for discussion between the regime and the opposition, and despite limited access for many inside and
even outside Burma, was a significant step toward a more polycentric, non-hierarchical system of communications among the Burmese.

Despite its structural and practical contributions toward a more democratic form of communication, the Internet has also played host to militarized rhetoric from both the opposition and the military regime in their continual rhetorical battle over which represents the true aspirations of the Burmese people. The regime has shown a propensity to engineer wedges between various groups, especially the Burman majority and ethnic minority elements of the opposition, while proclaiming itself the fulfiller of the "people's desire." It has emphasized the distinction between those ethnic groups that have signed ceasefire deals and those that have not, and between Burmans and non-Burmans. In the tense days just prior to the tenth anniversary of the 8/8/88 uprisings, for example, the ceasefires signed between the military and several ethnic groups were raised in postings to the BurmaNet by the military regime's representative, Okkar. Okkar argued that sixteen armed ethnic groups had come "to a peaceful solution," and there was therefore "no need to buy the arms." Then he added that "the arms may still be needed for ABSDF [All Burma Students Democratic Front] regiments," thus setting in opposition the ABSDF and the ethnic minority groups. The government's rhetoric is also aimed at creating divisions within groups. A recent article in the *New Light of Myanmar*, for example, portrayed the KNU leadership as violent in direct opposition to the desires of the majority of the Karen, or the "Kayin," as the regime calls them. The article refers to the breakaway Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, which is discussed in detail in the next
chapter. What is interesting here is the contradiction between the stated desire for peace and the justification given for the DKBA violence.

The KNU members' desire for peace is the driving force behind the breakaway of the Buddhist Kayins ... As they wished peace [sic], the Buddhist Kayins founded the DKBA, launching attacks on the KNU, which is just a group torturing the public. (Kyaw Htin Nawrahta, 2002).

Militarized metaphors involving communications use also abound in international news stories about communications and media use among the Burmese, as well as in Burmese descriptions of their own use of information technologies. Activists have been described as "online on the frontline" ("Activists Online", 1998), engaged in "cyberwarfare" (Strobel et al., 2000) in which they use the Internet as a "weapon" (Crampton, 2000) used in "waging propaganda wars" in the battle for freedom (Peck, 1995). The military regime has warned against the "psychological warfare" being waged against it by "opposing forces" using the Internet ("Myanmar Junta", 1999). Several of the opposition activists I interviewed in Thailand used the term "information warfare" and other military metaphors when describing their use of information technologies, and an activist in Rangoon has been quoted as saying that "The junta is implementing a well-planned psychological warfare campaign against the opposition and the media" (Zarny Win, September 26, 2001). In addition, accusations have been made against the military regime for targeting its opponents on the Web with a computer virus (Strobel et al., 2000), and against opposition activists who are said to have hacked into the government's website and to have "hijacked" at least one e-mail listserv (Crampton, 2000). Many of these accounts were written by journalists who proclaim a Utopian role for the Internet as
the frontline weapon in a war against repression and control that will usher in a new era of democratic change and a freer world.

Although this campaign has been conducted far from the activists along the border and elsewhere in Thailand, they were nevertheless involved, both as an audience for media stories about the campaign, and as a source of information on human rights abuses used as a "weapon" in the struggle against the military government. The borderland is home to a variety of opposition media, a bridge between the authoritarianism of the Burmese regime and the ability to communicate freely represented by Burma's cyber-activism. The media have worked to negotiate between these two extremes in their attempt to develop a pluralistic public dialogue within the opposition.

**Opposition media: a brief history**

The Thai-Burma borderland has for decades provided activists with the freedom to develop and distribute alternatives to the government-controlled media in Burma. Numerous clandestine radio stations have operated from these border areas, the earliest of which was the Karen-controlled *Radio Kawthoolei*, which began broadcasting in 1949 and continued intermittently during the 1970s and 1980s (Smith, 1999a). Although these stations were no longer broadcasting in 1999-2000, the armed groups waging military offensives as well as those involved in nonviolent resistance inside Burma made use of wireless transmitters that provided local radio communications. Several reporters and stringers for the international broadcasting networks were based in Thailand, traveling or
sometimes living along the border. Journals and information sheets of various kinds in a range of languages had long been published on the border, usually with little funding and lots of propagandizing. In recent years, however, increasing attention had been paid to standards of "objectivity," and the meaning and value of "propaganda" was shifting. This was partly in response, also, to the expectations of increasing numbers of aid agencies and non-profit groups funding opposition media projects.

In this section, I will provide an overview of the variety of opposition media found in the border areas, including the more mainstream opposition media and the ethnic media, each of which has had a different history. I then examine the impact of new information technologies (NITs) and conceptualizations of gender on opposition media. I discuss several functions of the Burmese opposition media as described by their senior staff members, such as cultural preservation, education, a call to action, the development of participatory communication, and their use of human rights discourse to both liberating and oppressive ends. I will begin, first, however, with an overview of the variety and creativity of the various opposition media used by the Burmese opposition.

**Overview**

The opposition media that have evolved outside Burma through the years have been distributed both back inside the country and to activists and interested people around the world. These media range from the more stable and continuous forms such as the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) radio station based in Oslo, Norway and broadcast into Burma, to what Downing (2001) has identified as "ephemeral media," acts
of defiance that work by manipulating an aspect of ordinary activity and coding it with new meaning (Scott, 1990). In Burma, ephemeral media has included wearing yellow clothing to symbolize support for the opposition, or the sudden appearance of an unusually large number of monks, in a show of quiet defiance, making alms rounds at exactly the same time. These were often, but not always, preplanned moves intended to communicate without the risks involved in more flamboyant displays. A Greenpeace activist has dubbed these ephemeral media "mind-bombs": influential, sometimes archetypal images that can cut through the hypnotic drone of the day-to-day babbling to reach people at a deeper emotional level" (as cited in Downing, 2001, p. 102).

To reach those inside, activists along the Thailand-Burma border have made creative use of opposition media, including printing stickers, posters and leaflets that are then smuggled into Burma. A 1997 newsletter of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which funds many of these projects, described little red stickers made on a dot-matrix printer that "don't seem like much" ("Burmese Democrats," 1997). These and other similar stickers have been printed in the border areas, then smuggled into the country and slapped on walls, posts, fences, and military vehicles. The stickers described in the NED newsletter were reportedly difficult to remove, and because the military hated them so much that they would not allow the soldiers to ride in trucks adorned with these stickers, their appearance sometimes forced the soldiers to walk ("Burmese Democrats," 1997). Another example is the calendar I helped design when I was staying with an activist group in Mae Hon Song. They wanted a simple pocket calendar that would encourage people inside and celebrate the beginning of the new
millennium. I saw a copy of the finished calendar a few months later. It folded down the center, and on the outside were printed innocuous pictures of the Shwedagon Pagoda and other tourist sites. Inside it contained pictures of Aung San Suu Kyi and demonstrators during the 1988 uprisings, words of defiance against the military, and a simple rhyme.

\[
\text{All marching to the same drum} \\
\text{There's nothing we can't overcome} \\
\text{As we begin the new millenium}
\]

\[\text{Figure 10.} \quad \text{Posters such as these adorn the walls in many opposition group offices.}\]

Posters and calendars were popular, adorning the walls of NGO offices, homes and refugee camps along the border, where they were often the house's sole decoration. The Federation Trade Unions, Burma (FTUB), for example, printed a popular poster outlining the basic principles laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Burma was a signatory in 1948. FTUB is concerned primarily with migrant workers in Thailand, informing them of their rights as workers and teaching them about
how to work together for collective bargaining strength. Many of the factory workers in Mae Sot placed these posters in the rooms in the factory dormitory where they were staying, but here, too, the environment of suspicion limited what they felt safe doing. Workers believed that there were translators and interpreters among them who could inform the factory management of the meaning of the posters printed in Burmese (Saw Min Lwin, personal communication, May 31, 2000).

There have been several other important types of alternative or opposition media that are worth mentioning. These include opposition music, produced outside of the country, broadcast on international broadcasting stations and smuggled inside on cassettes or CD-ROMs. Cartoons have played an important role in the opposition movement, especially since they appeal to a wide range of people, including those who cannot read well. Comedians have also been important for the opposition movement, and several high-profile cases of their arrests have damaged the credibility of the government. Opposition groups also used satellite phones inside Burma to communicate with people on the border and elsewhere in Thailand in 1999-2000, but they were still fairly expensive, so their use was limited. Like most of the newer technologies, their use was reserved for military or political purposes, was generally kept secret, and was almost exclusively the responsibility of men.

Several groups had reached out to SPDC soldiers using opposition media, although this also had consequences for local villagers. The FTUB, for example, distributed their posters to SPDC soldiers through the network of KNU soldiers operating on the Burma side of the border. In one case, FTUB staff member Saw Min Lwin told
me, KNU soldiers hung one of the human rights posters on a tree near a village not far from a KNU army base and the nearby SPDC troops. The villagers reported the appearance of the poster to their area SPDC army camp. The soldiers took the poster, threatening to detain the village head for not reporting the presence of KNU troops in the village. They were satisfied to drop the matter only after they received a basket of sticky rice from the villagers, who once again were caught in the middle of maneuvering between two armed forces. Although these particular soldiers then took the poster to their commanding officers, Saw Min Lwin believed that many soldiers kept them in order to study them (personal communication, May 31, 2000).

The opposition print media have perhaps made the greatest impact on the communication environment in the borderlands. These media could usefully be divided into two broad categories during 1999-2000. The first was composed of a few well-funded, widely read and increasingly professional opposition media that were “unmarked” in terms of ethnic identification. These media included *The Irrawaddy* (in English and recently Burmese) and *New Era Journal* (in Burmese). They were perceived by many non-Burmans who read them as originating from Burman activists and their sources, and therefore as addressing issues of most concern to Burmans. These magazines were not explicitly described this way by their Burman staff members, however, who saw themselves as providing a service to all groups in the country. Both *The Irrawaddy* and the *New Era Journal* were produced and published away from the border, *The Irrawaddy* in Chiang Mai, and *New Era Journal* in Bangkok. They were both printed in large runs and distributed to offices all over Thailand, to the refugee
camps, and abroad to friends and supporters. These papers covered the activities of a wide variety of groups in Burmese society and addressed important issues in international news, especially if they concerned Burma in any way. These media were similar to the *samizdat* media of the former Soviet bloc in that the *samizdat* writers were primarily the intelligentsia, based in leading urban areas and with connections to Western journalists. It was these writers who produced the writings that had the greatest international impact and most disturbed the Soviet block elite (Downing, 2001, p. 358).

Since the mid-1990s there had also emerged a number of media identified with the ethnic nationalities, which I will call ethnic media. These were produced primarily from locations along the border, although not exclusively, since there were also some ethnic media printed in Thai cities and by groups in exile. Several of the Thailand-based ethnic media had become significant voices for ethnic nationalities, putting them "on the map" for outsiders interested in the situation in Burma, and for the other groups in the opposition. Many of them grew out of information groups established to document human rights abuses by the military regime. These groups had begun publishing newsletters for their own peoples in their own languages, as well as for the international community. But reports on human rights abuses figured prominently even in those media that did not specifically grow out of this human rights documentation effort.

Many of these print media were going online, as the Internet increasingly blurred the distinction between print and electronic media. In addition, with improvements in computer skills and the use of desktop publishing software on both the Thai side of the border and in urban areas in Burma, opposition groups had begun smuggling their
publications inside the country on CD-ROM or computer diskette, which were generally easier to hide than hard copies of a publication, and lessened the risks for those smuggling the information.

Although media created at the border have made their way into Burma, it is hard to know how much or what kind of impact they have had. What is clear is that the media and their messages, no matter how widespread, were not themselves enough to motivate mass action, as the analysis of the 9/9/99 campaign in the previous chapter has shown. Yet I reiterate Downing's (2001) point that the impact of these media is more of a slow burn, invaluable in "recovering memory that had been banished," so that their presence "lights a flame that, like some trick birthday cake candles, obstinately refuses to be doused" (p. 392).

The Impact of NITs on opposition media

The introduction of NITs has enabled the development of more complex networks of information between activists and civilians inside and outside Burma. Opposition groups in Thailand get information from their contacts inside Burma, then feed their statements, news, and opinion pieces to the media, such as the BurmaNet News listserv and the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) radio. Messages posted to BurmaNet News and other Burma-related listservers are now regularly read and often reported on by the wire services and other news services, including the major international Burmese-language broadcasters like the Voice of America (VOA), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Radio Free Asia (RFA), and DVB, which then broadcast much of the
information back into Burma. The DVB is based in Oslo, Norway, and would have difficulty surviving without the use of the Internet. The station bases much of its own reporting on the information it collects from wire services and major publications throughout Asia using the Internet. The Internet is also important because it enables field reporters to send reports as e-mail attachments, saving the editors back in Oslo the trouble of retyping them during the editing process (Khin Maung Win, personal communication, August 23, 2000). Thus, the Internet is a source of information for the print media published along the border and elsewhere in Thailand, and these media are then distributed in Thailand and overseas, and smuggled or excerpted for broadcast back into Burma. In this way, even those without access to NITs are affected by the increased number of sources NITs make available to more traditional media.

In addition to publications, Burmese opposition media in Thailand have developed websites and posted information regularly to the Burma-related listservers. In the years since I returned to graduate school in Fall of 1995 and went online myself, the number of postings by ethnic nationality organizations has increased significantly. Perhaps the most visible online group is the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), which in addition to participating in several Shan-related e-mail listservs, posts information regularly to Burma-related websites (including its own). SHAN's messages appear regularly as part of the BurmaNet News. Other ethnic nationality groups are also active online, several with their own websites or listservs. The Mon listserv, for example, had about 100 members who posted messages of interest to the Burmese opposition
groups and to the Mon online community, including many Mon living in the United States and Canada (Nai Kyin Shwe, personal communication, July 22, 2000).

**Gender**

A word or two must be said about gender at this point. Media work, while less gendered than the work of political groups in the opposition movement, is nevertheless primarily the realm of male activists, although this is changing. There are also ethnic differences in this regard, as it was educated, mostly Burman women who came to the border after 1988, many of them from urban areas in Burma where women have long been respected as writers. In the rural areas of the country, however, the lack of educational opportunities and the need for female labor in the home meant that girls received less education than boys. While life in exile and the opportunities for education provided by funding agencies has begun to change this, the effects of this prejudice can be seen in the lack of women writers, especially among the non-Burmans. In general, however, opposition media are starved for capable writers, and therefore provide more options for women than other roles in public life. Women's lack of access to NITs, however, has acted to further discourage their involvement in opposition media. Women's involvement would increase if opportunities were made available for a wider diversity of people and if Burmese opposition media avoids an overzealous emphasis on professionalization that acts to exclude women and others who have yet to gain the confidence to make their voices heard.
Self-determination and ethnic minority media

The new ethnic media respond to the need that non-Burmans feel to protect their identity against the assimilationist policies of the regime, and their dignity against the feeling many have of being overlooked by the Burman opposition groups. Soon after the Burman students and politicians had arrived at the border areas in 1988 and 1990, they and the ethnic leaders realized that their interests differed. The Burman groups, struggling primarily for democracy, were not especially concerned with the non-Burmans’ desire to protect their group identity and right to self-determination. Some of the Burmans even perceived this desire for autonomy as a threat to the strength of the opposition, a distraction from the most pressing issues of political change. As a result, the non-Burman students involved in 1988 often felt their loyalties divided once they reached the border areas. Nai Kyin Shwe, a Mon, was a twenty year old student in Rangoon in 1988 when he became involved in the demonstrations. When he returned home after the demonstrations in March, he found himself confronted by Mon family and friends who challenged his loyalty to his people.

Many Mon or Shan or other ethnic people were confused when the 1988 uprisings started. The Burman people are for democracy, but the Burman people don't say anything about a federal union or about the unity among the nationalities. They just ask for democracy, and ask for an interim government. When I arrived home to my native home, many people asked me, "You are for democracy, so you don't work for the Mon people? Are you sure [this is good] for the Mon people?" (personal communication, July 22, 2000)

37Nai Kyin Shwe is a pseudonym.
Once at the border, Nai Kyin Shwe, like other students from non-Burman communities, had to decide whether to affiliate primarily with the democratic struggle or with his ethnic group in its struggle for self-determination. Nai Kyin Shwe decided to work with the state-wide Mon organization created a few weeks after the demonstrations on August 8, 1988 and now called the Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF) (personal communication, July 22, 2000). But as Nai Kyin Shwe explained, the Burmese students criticized the formation of the MNDF as dangerous competition within the opposition movement that would create disunity and give the government the opportunity to increase its control. "They said, 'You are Mon, you should join our democracy movement, you should not create our own separate group,'" Nai Kyin Shwe told me. "They said 'Democracy must come first, and then we can talk about self-determination later,' they said like that. So that's why many ethnic people were confused. 'Should we participate in this struggle or not?'" (personal communication, July 22, 2000).

Many of the Burman students and politicians who arrived at the border after 1988 and 1990 approached their organizing among non-Burmans with the concepts they had internalized back home, especially the danger of national disintegration that requires a specific type of unity, defined as the absence of dissent. It is not surprising, then, that a central motivating factor in the development of the new ethnic media appearing in Thailand in the last decade has been to provide these groups with a means to express themselves freely regarding issues facing their own group. The staff at the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM), for example, explained the importance of their publications in terms of the platform it provides for people to speak openly, despite the
staffs inability to protect people from the consequences. As Nai Kyin Shwe explained about the Mon people,

They never had an experience like this is to create their right of freedom of expression. They have no rights in Burma. They’re always afraid to say what is in their hearts, their minds, so if we inform them [that] this is what you can say, we are trying to create their right to freedom of expression. . . . But. . . we cannot protect them. . . . Our message is a very small one. Now they can tell me their feelings, and . . . we can make the world pay attention and cause some change in Burma, (personal communication, July 22, 2000)

Cultural survival

By providing a forum for discussion of issues affecting their groups, these media perform what has been called the "cultural transmission" function of ethnic media, which helps to revive or reinforce ethnic identity and pass it along to the next generation (Viswanath & Arora, 2000). The Karen journal, *Kway K’Lu*, for example, has as a central goal to inform Karen people of the situation of other Karen. The journal is named after the *kway*, a horn made from the tusk of a wild animal such as a boar or buffalo. Making different sounds to represent different meanings, the player of the kway would inform the Karen in neighboring villages about community projects or celebrations. *Kway K’Lu’s* editor, Saw Thaw Thi, explained why the *kway* is a fitting symbol for the newspaper he publishes.

We want to let the people know each other by reading this newspaper. . . . People in Papun can know what happened to the Karen people in the southern part, like this, Mergui-Tavoy. And people here can know what happened to the Karen in Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai, and what the Karen people in America or Australia are doing. So this is
Concern for literacy and the preservation of their national languages was a motivation for many of the groups publishing ethnic media. The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) publishes some of the few regular Mon language publications, as well as reports of the suppression of Mon language training by the Burmese military government. In the October 30, 2000, edition of *The Mon Forum*, for example, HURFOM reported on the SPDC's attempts to close down the Mon National schools in Kawkareik Township, Karen State. The report pointed out that although Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt and the SLORC agreed in the 1995 ceasefire deal to allow the teaching of Mon language in both government and private schools, "actually, both SLORC and SPDC never kept their promise for the promotion of Mon literature role [sic] in Mon community and still operate their assimilation policy" ("SPDC's MI", 2000, October 30).

The editor of the Karen journal *Kway K'Lu*, Saw Thaw Thi, told me that his objective in publishing the journal was to "raise the level of Karen literature and culture in the Karen society" (personal communication, July 24, 2000). He explained that Karen literature used to be taught in Karen schools up to the tenth standard. But nowadays, he told me, the Karen language cannot be taught in the schools in Burma, except by some Christian groups who can teach Karen in Sunday school. According to Saw Thaw Thi, many older Karen believe that the standards of Karen literature have been declining gradually, and are alarmed that many of the Karen young people "do not know exactly that we have a good culture" (personal communication, July 24, 2000). These examples

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38 The Karen schools run on the British system, in which tenth standard is the equivalent of the U.S. high school senior class.
of ethnic opposition media alert us to the fact that in a militarized setting where one's group is under attack, the cultural transmission function of ethnic media is matched by an equally important focus on cultural survival.

**Education**

Many of the ethnic media also work to educate their people about international politics and its relevance to the Burmese situation. To this end, HURFOM began publishing a second Mon-language journal, the *Northern Star*, with its first issue on the auspicious date of September 9, 1999. The *Northern Star* is an independent newspaper, the first of its kind for the Mon people, Nai Kyin Shwe told me. The newspaper includes information on the Burmese political situation, translated into Mon from other news sources such as the online *BurmaNet News*, the Mon listserv, *The Irrawaddy*, the two Thai English-language dailies the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*, and other sources. Like *The Northern Star*, much of the information published in *Kway K’Lu* comes from other news sources. Saw Thaw Thi explained that *Kway K’Lu* addresses questions such as "What is national democracy? Who are the power-holders who abuse the people?" (personal communication, July 24, 2000).

**Call to action**

Many of the staff of these media see their role as maintaining people's motivation to struggle in whatever ways they can on behalf of their people against the Burmese regime, while resisting a dependence on outside forces to change the situation. This
could be termed a "call to action" function of alternative or ethnic media, which seems to combine the functions described by Viswanath and Arora (2000) as boosterism and mobilization. On the one hand, these media help their readership feel good about themselves, and on the other hand attempt to mobilize them to support initiatives for the improvement of the group situation. The following cartoon (below) from Kway K'Lu is a good example.

1st man: Hey, we have graduated from school. Let's go back to our country and help our people who had to run away [to the jungle].

2nd man: Oh, I can't do anything, so it would have no meaning.

1st man: It has meaning! We will learn from the medical school and take care of their health.

2nd man: If so [if you go], who will come and feed me?

Woman: Oh, I'm going to teach the young people who have no chance to go to school. You can do something!

Figure 11. Cartoon from Kway K'Lu, May 10, 1999
Saw Thaw Thi explained that Karen people living in their own villages bury their dead in a cemetery. At the refugee camp, though, they are not permitted to have a cemetery, so they must burn the corpse, which they do using old tires. "So it means, 'oh you are fit for this tire, you are not fit for the country'," he told me and laughed. He explained that the Kway K'Lu staff had heard reports from readers who felt discouraged to work, given the harsh situation, and that this was one of the cartoons that points out a weakness in Karen society.

This cartoon exemplifies an approach to social change that encourages action on behalf of the community, with a corresponding denigration of selfish motives. Kway K'Lu readers are encouraged to get involved in the opposition efforts, although Saw Thaw Thi insisted that the magazine does not tell them specifically what to do. "We just encourage them, we don't show the way, because some will want to fight by means of arms, some will want to fight by means of politics, like that. Let it be, whatever they want to do," Saw Thaw Thi explained. What is clear is the expectation that they will work in some way for the Karen people as a group.

**Participatory communication**

These ethnic media involve their communities in the process of their production to varying degrees, but different journals conceive of their audiences differently. The staff of HURFOM, like that of Kway K'Lu, saw its Mon language publication as targeted toward the grassroots, and tried to get content and ideas directly from the Mon people by providing a place in their publications for the villagers to express their views. They
encouraged readers to write in, and received between 15-20 letters a week in response, letters delivered by hand from travelers coming from inside Burma. They chose the best written letters, those that to Nai Kyin Shwe were "more effective" in describing the suffering of local people or in expressing an opinion or idea. Saw Thaw Thi also emphasized the role of the readers in the production of Kway K'Lu. "They also can respond to each other by sending their articles or their news to this newspaper, and we include them" (personal communication, July 24, 2000). Khuensai Jaiyen, of the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), explained that the Independence journal is difficult reading for the less-educated, and that their target audience is the group of educated Shan, which he said is considerable. He also told me that the SHAN receives many letters each month, "mostly about the news reports we produce. Some [people] are satisfied, some are not. We receive a lot of criticism, too, but that's good" (personal communication, June 28, 2000).

These media have employed various strategies to reach out to larger audiences, such as printing their magazines in several languages and adjusting their physical shape for easier distribution inside Burma. The Shan language Independence newsletter, for example, was printed monthly in three sections, using the Shan, Burmese and English languages in a single issue. And the Human Right Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) had begun printing four pages of Burmese-language information in the Northern Star, which they were sending to other Burmese opposition organizations in Thailand and inside rural Burma. Although Northern Star was dangerous to carry inside Burma, the staff had changed its design several times so that the newspaper was easy to fold and
conceal, and about 300 copies of each issue were smuggled into the country. To varying
degrees, then, ethnic media were encouraging the development of a more participatory
communication environment which included those inside as much as was possible under
the circumstances.

**Human rights**

The global focus on human rights in the post-Cold War era has provided
marginalized groups around the world a tool with which to generate sympathy and more
successfully lobby internationally for their cause. Increased funding for human rights
abuse documentation and for the development of Burmese opposition media has led to
new office space and access to new information technologies for ethnic nationalities and
other opposition media groups, as well as some additional training in journalistic
techniques. Training sessions along the border have focused on methods of documenting
human rights abuses for submission to international organizations and for posting on the
many websites devoted to human rights violations in Burma. Yet there is concern that
human rights discourse has also acted to perpetuate the very inequities against which
these groups are fighting.

One result of the publication of these new media was the growing recognition of
the value of information about human rights abuses as a basis for advocacy campaigns
targeting the international community. Nai Kyin Shwe's decision in 1988 to work for the
promotion of ethnic self-determination, for example, led him to work with several NGOs
and human rights organizations, which in turn led him to want to document the human
rights abuses against the Mon and to disseminate this information to the outside world. He helped to found the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) in 1995 for these purposes, and the group began publishing their information in both Mon and in their monthly English language publication, *The Mon Forum*. *The Mon Forum* provided detailed coverage of human rights abuses in Mon areas, along with conflicts between Mon people and the SPDC authorities. The audience for *The Mon Forum* was primarily outsiders, and HURFOM sent out over 400 copies of each issue to people and organizations around the world, especially to government, UN, and labor and human rights organizations, but also to women’s organizations, development organizations, and other Burmese opposition groups. HURFOM also maintained *The Mon Forum* website, which provided online access to back issues of *The Mon Forum*, information on the Mon people and Mon history, and pictures of victims of human rights violations. The website also featured scanned images of written orders from Burmese military battalions for forced labor and other demands made of Mon villagers, directly refuting the regime’s claims that it has stopped the practice of forced labor.

Many of the new ethnic media grew out of efforts to document human rights abuses and were working to educate the people of Burma about their rights under international law. Saw Thaw Thi, for example, explained that *Kwqy K’Lu* discusses the meaning of human rights, women’s rights, children’s rights, ethnic or indigenous rights, genocide or ethnic cleansing, and democracy. In addition to *The Mon Forum* in English, HURFOM published *Our Time*, a journal in the Mon language that worked to educate refugees in resettlement areas near the Thai border and people inside the Mon State.
"Especially we put in the human rights education for empowerment," Nai Kyin Shwe told me, "so we try to show our people what are the international principles for human rights protection." For example, he said, "the ILO has decided that Burma still has not stopped using forced labor … so we translate it and inform our people about how the international community is trying to protect [their] rights." This has clearly disturbed the military regime. A few years ago, Nai Kyin Shwe told me, the Burmese government officially placed Our Time on its list of unofficial, illegal publications, sending word to the New Mon State Party (NMSP) office and to Mon villages that anyone caught with the journal would be arrested and detained (personal communication, July 22, 2000).

These journals have thus helped to raise the profile of their communities, both within the opposition movement as well as with outsiders. In March 2000, for example, The Mon Forum printed information about forced labor around the Yadana gas pipeline, a controversial project to pipe natural gas to Thailand involving the California-based company Unocal and the French company Total as partners. Nai Kyin Shwe explained that after The Mon Forum printed this story, several organizations wrote letters to Total using the information and citing a "Mon human rights organization" in their arguments to urge the company to pull out of the project (personal communication, July 22, 2000). HURFOM also sends its information to the UN Special Rapporteur, and as Nai Kyin Shwe noted, the Special Rapporteur points out every year in his report, albeit not in great detail, that the situation in Monland is not good. He also pointed out that HURFOM is frequently contacted by the ILO or other labor organizations who appreciate their information about forced labor (personal communication, July 22, 2000).
The emphasis on human rights has other, less desirable consequences as well. Without denying that the victims of human rights abuses suffer and that their plight must be effectively addressed, it is important to consider the cumulative effect of these images, and to recognize that they perpetuate the perceived differences between Burmans and non-Burmans. There are significant exceptions, of course, but the images of human rights abuses present broad tropes that portray Burmans and non-Burmans differently. The Western emphasis on civil and political rights has led to their association (and many would say they are synonymous) with democratic governance. In the overall picture painted by both opposition and international media, it is primarily Burmans who are portrayed as victims of abuses of these rights. Specifically, Burmans are associated with restrictions on freedom of expression (most jailed writers and activists are Burman), restrictions on freedom of movement (the focus here is on Aung San Suu Kyi and not, for example, on the refugees in Thailand), restrictions on freedom of association (Burmans who might be organizing inside the country), and so on.

The non-Burmans, on the other hand, are seen primarily as victims of abuse against social, economic and cultural rights. In the big picture, it is the non-Burmans who are understood to suffer most of the forced labor, forcible relocation, and overt violence of various kinds, especially violence against women. Even the rights of non-Burman groups to teach, speak and write in their own languages is portrayed as a struggle for cultural rather than civil rights. While I am not questioning that the non-Burmans do suffer these kinds of abuses at greater rates than Burmans, what I would like to point out is the consequences of this picture. These unacknowledged divisions among categories
of human rights abuse victims tend to make the abuse of non-Burmans' civil rights invisible, emphasizing instead their image as victims of violence in need of protection. This image upholds the notion that the Burmans are the capable politicians, working to protect the victims of human rights abuses through their political work. These stereotypes and their unacknowledged division into a hierarchy of rights abuses perpetuates and naturalizes the status quo of ethnic inequities within the movement.

**Media independence - a debate**

This section explores the debates among opposition and ethnic media staff and their audiences regarding the role of the press in crisis. While there is a strong tendency toward proclaiming media independence from political groups, there are those who believe that media must also serve a role in motivating people to work for the cause. This meant promoting "unity" of the people, although the definition of unity seems to be shifting. Despite the opposition media's moves towards independence, there was also evidence that the motivation to proclaim political independence may have stemmed as much from the demands of funding agencies as it did from a genuine desire for freedom from political power-holders. A great deal of self-censorship still occurred within the opposition media. Nevertheless, opposition media staff often challenged opposition political groups directly. This contributed to a decrease in the practice of silencing others and in the militarization of communication and media use. It also offered a hopeful sign of change.
Unity and independence

"Unity" is a term that comes up repeatedly in discussions with opposition activists and in the writings of scholars and commentators, yet is very often used without being explicitly defined. The assumption in these cases seems to be that unity means agreement on political goals and actions, and the ability to act unhindered by fighting or factionalism. Several scholars have remarked upon the emphasis on unity in Burmese political culture, a unity defined as unanimity and manifested through consensus (Callahan, 1998; Silverstein, 1980; Steinberg, 2001). Callahan (1998) has argued that the political party that grew out of the resistance to British colonialism, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), "never developed any mechanisms to accommodate and resolve conflicting views, visions, and objectives" (p. 53). Mechanisms that suppressed dissenting viewpoints became the norm at that time, impeding the development of government structures that could tolerate competition and political differences (Callahan, 1998). Thus, Callahan (1998) argued, Burma emerged as a state through a series of military actions aimed at restricting expressions of dissent and emphasizing unity, defined as uniformity or unanimity. Even the period between 1948 and 1962, commonly referred to as the "democratic era," was characterized by challenges to the government and within it, often backed by arms and violence (Callahan, 1998).

The legacy of this history was apparent in the disagreements within the opposition over the role of media in a time of crisis.^{39} Within the opposition movement, media had begun to serve as a public space in and about which people were challenging long-held

^{39} This begs the question: How long does a conflict have to go on before it is no longer referred to as a "crisis," implying a temporary state, but has been recognized as a way of life?
conceptions. Debates on media's role during a crisis revolved around whether or not to censor some kinds of information to achieve unity. That these debates emerged at all suggests changes in the way unity was being thought of. The debate regarding opposition media centered on whether or not "unity" required unanimous agreement, or whether it could be understood as flexible enough to accommodate the possibility of continuing debate. The definition of "unity" was thus closely related to practices of censorship and the media's independence from external control.

Several opposition media staff members stressed the importance of their organization's independence from opposition political groups. "We were the first people to use in Burmese the words 'independent media,'" explained Aung Zaw, editor of The Irrawaddy magazine. "People were disgusted with us, and snipped at us, 'What the hell? What is that? Independent media?' We didn't care, you know." That strategy seems to have worked, and The Irrawaddy has grown, becoming more professional in appearance and more widely read than in its early days as a simple information sheet. But he alluded to a kind of coercion forcing opposition media to proclaim their independence from local political organizations. "Now a lot of people are using this word, 'independent,' whether they like it or not. This may be eye-catching for donors" (personal communication, April 18, 2000).

Many of those working in Burmese opposition media in Thailand claim they are independent, but definitions of independence are vague and the desire for it can cause problems. As Aung Zaw explained, "People are sitting here, staying here, asking for democracy, which includes press freedoms, right? But they don't practice it here. You
say something critical of them and they really attack us . . . A lot of people here . . . become dictatorial, one-sided, very narrow-minded." Once a few years ago, when *The Irrawaddy* was about to publish an interview with an ABSDF leader, for example, several ABSDF members came to his office to see the magazine prior to its publication. "They didn't say 'censor,'" he explained. "They wanted to request that if it's too sensitive they don't want us to publish it. But they were also worried that I would put out just a blank page with only the headline" (personal communication, April 18, 2000).

Silencing dissent has been the practice of those opposition political leaders who think of democracy as an end state rather than an ongoing process. Enloe (2000a) has argued that the fight against silencing and being silenced is a means of demilitarizing the situation and promoting democratization. Many opposition writers insist upon using their press freedoms to promote a free media, despite challenges from both the Burmese government and opposition groups. They claim the freedom to criticize if it is warranted, and they challenge the view that press freedoms can be given, like a "reward" in the aftermath of a change in political leadership. As Aung Zaw said about some of the political opposition groups,

> They always say, "As long as the movement goes on, don't criticize. After the movement is over, after the revolution is over, write whatever you like. You will get press freedom, everything." But I said, "No, it's not like that. Democracy doesn't come in a chest or in a box. It doesn't come like, 'Here is democracy'. . . 'Today we overthrow the government, the government is gone. Tomorrow we will get press freedom, everything is fine, do it." It's not like that, (personal communication, April 18, 2000)
Other media staff reported similar experiences. When the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) was founded, Nai Kyin Shwe explained, they intentionally did not invite anyone from the New Mon State Party (NMSP) to get involved, so that they could work free from the influence of any political organization. Nai Kyin Shwe told me that they would sometimes print a story criticizing, for example, the continuation of people's suffering in the aftermath of the New Mon State Party (NMSP) ceasefire. "Does this mean the New Mon State Party (NMSP) can't protect them?" So, like that I criticize. Whether they like it or not, I don't know . . . I write the truth, but I send it to them" (personal communication, July 22, 2000). When I asked him whether or not they had received feedback about this, he said that they had received feedback only once. "When we had some news about some NMSP leaders involved in corruption, we put this news [in the paper]. And they said it made disunity among them, and they sent a letter back to us, and we also put this letter [in the paper]."

"And they got angry?" I laughed, imagining their reaction.

Yeah, but no problem. We also told them that you must become a democratic government, not like a dictatorship, so if someone analyzes you, talks to you, you must accept it. If you don't agree, you say you don't agree . . . . It's no problem. We try to improve our Mon community to [have] a more democratic way of thinking, of participation (personal communication, July 22, 2000)

"One time we published a report about the people's plight," Khuensai Jaiyen explained. He continued, describing the report.

One rural villager said, "Every four times I hit my hoe on the ground, the first time is to feed the Burmese army, the second time is for the Shan army, the third time is for the village and the monks, and the fourth time, only then is it
for my family." And one of the SSA officials was angry. But they shouldn't be. We told them, "We are not criticizing you at all, but it's true. We didn't make it up. It was said by the people themselves. You should listen to it and become more humble in dealing with people" (personal communication, June 28, 2000)

I asked if their attitudes had changed over the years, and he answered that it takes time.

"They have become more and more understanding about the way the media works. They thought I would be a cheerleader for them all the time. So I asked them, 'You don't want me to become The New Light of Myanmar, do you?"' (personal communication, June 28, 2000).

**Self-censorship**

Although they struggle for independence from opposition political groups, media workers often intentionally censor themselves. Aung Zaw provided his own assessment of the degree of self-censorship he sees among media workers.

It's very sad, you know. They want to keep the information quiet. Even among journalists, I hate the people who want to keep the information quiet, deciding which is right and which is wrong . . . . I think a lot of opposition-minded, pro-NLD minded reporters writing here use a lot of self-censorship. Which is bad, I think. I myself, also, I am one of them. But I am coming out of a shell, becoming more professional, more independent, (personal communication, April 18, 2000)

But not all media workers see the withholding of sensitive information about opposition groups in this way. The opposition radio station, the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), was established as the official voice of the opposition political leadership, but there was contention among political leaders regarding who would control the station,
its budget and its programming. Despite the fact that the DVB had negotiated to achieve independence in its day-to-day operations, especially its reporting, the staff saw its mission primarily as providing information for the people of Burma about the work of the opposition organizations. DVB founding member Khin Maung Win explained that the station was meant to be a mediator between the people in Burma and the leadership of the National League for Democracy (NLD). He identified the opinions of these leaders as especially important for airplay on the DVB.

> We consider it important to get reconciliation in Burma. The Shan people must know about the opinion of General Bo Mya, or the Karen people. And NLD must know what General Bo Mya is saying. The same, how Dr. Naing Aung thinks, how Moethee Zun thinks. They should be informed, the rest of the people in Burma, (personal communication, August 23, 2000)

As people at the grassroots level were "armed" with more information, Khin Maung Win told me, they were beginning to criticize their leaders. DVB staff, however, did not perceive the station as a forum for this criticism.

The concept of unity was central to decisions to practice self-censorship in reporting for opposition media. According to Khin Maung Win and confirmed by other DVB staff, the station "never criticizes any organization, not just NCGUB. They never criticize rights violations in ABSDF or KNU or any other organization . . . . It's not written policy. It is understood. We don't criticize" (personal communication, August

40 After much discussion and some heated debate among opposition groups about the role of the government-in-exile, the NCGUB, in the operation of the station, the DVB staff was promised independence in its operations. The only requirement was that the station continue opening each broadcast with the statement, "this is the Democratic Voice of Burma of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma." This compromise allowed the NCGUB to remind people in Burma every day of its continuing opposition to the military regime, while giving the DVB editorial control (Khin Maing Win, personal communication, August 23, 2000).
23, 2000). He went on to explain that there were many forums for the criticism of opposition politicians, but that DVB wouldn't play that role until a later day. For now, he explained, the role of the DVB was to inform people inside Burma about the rights violations by the SPDC, international support for change in Burma, and the activities and opinions of various political organizations. If DVB criticized these organizations, he told me, "we would never get unity. DVB doesn't want to be part of the fighting in the present movement" (personal communication, August 23, 2000). Unity, once again, was seen here as the lack of opposition or critique.

Complicating the opposition movement's communications environment, and specifically its journalism, are the political affiliations of many of those staff working for opposition media. For example, at the time of our interview, Khin Maung Win was a member of the ABSDF as well as a correspondent for DVB. This connection made his critical reporting a political issue. For example, if he wrote about rights abuses within the KNU, he told me, the KNU would criticize the rights violations by the ABSDF, and this would perpetuate a process of accusations and counter-accusations within the movement. He saw his job, therefore, as one of reducing fighting and forging consensus.

Several Burmese opposition media staff felt that freedom of speech and total independence of the media was not appropriate under the current circumstances. They argued that given the struggle they were engaged in, and the history of factionalism within the movement, this was not the time to do anything that would undermine unity. Saw Thaw Thi, the editor of Kway K'Lu insisted that his newspaper was and would remain independent of any outside influence, including the Karen National Union
(KNU), but he was also determined that Kwqy K'Lu not be a forum for criticism of any Karen organization.

We think that it will not create understanding. . . . Our problem is to make the Karen people understand each other, regardless of what organization they belong to, what religious belief they have. Our problem is to make them understand each other and unite, (personal communication, July 24, 2000)

As a result, he told me, they did write about breakaway groups of Karen such as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), or problems with individual Karen leaders, such as several of the high profile defections from the KNU, but they handled these stories with care. "We have written about it very politely. We try to wipe out pain from the society" (personal communication, July 24, 2000). In the case of Kwqy K'Lu and several other opposition media, then, unity required independence from political organizations, but also an avoidance of criticism or disagreement between and within groups in the opposition movement.

**Change**

Nevertheless, recent developments suggested that opposition media were also changing ideas concerning both the meaning of unity and potential sources of legitimacy. Although there was no consensus on the most effective role of the media during the opposition struggle, those who most vehemently claimed independence from political groups also seemed the most willing to raise contentious issues and criticize the weaknesses of the opposition, and to work to protect their right to criticize in this way. Those that were most successful in this regard had done much to open space for public
debate over issues of political legitimacy. For the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), unity had paradoxically come to be associated with a separation from all of the competing Shan political organizations. According to SHAN's Director, Khuensai Jaiyen, things changed once he and his staff decided to distance themselves from the propaganda efforts supporting the infamous Shan drug "warlord" Khun Sa, as well as other Shan leaders. As he explained, "it's not propaganda anymore. We have become . . . maybe to use the right word, professional." This shift in the understanding of propaganda has also led to new ways of thinking about unity.

When we left Khun Sa, we were then without any organization . . . and when we thought about which organization to back up, we found that just backing up one organization would be a bad idea. Supporting, cheerleading just [one group] against other Shan groups, [this is] what we've done in the past. It wouldn't be a wise thing to do when we are thinking about unity. We want to be a neutral ground where every group can meet, (personal communication, June 28, 2000)

Khuensai Jaiyen added that once they'd begun thinking in this way, they found that people saw them as more credible, "even more than other political organizations, because we are independent" (personal communication, June 28, 2000). Nevertheless, he described the process of changing from a propaganda organ to a professional media source as difficult, involving "several reorientations" over several years, including workshops with local NGOs interested in journalism and the opposition press (personal communication, June 28, 2000). The source of legitimacy had thus begun to shift for the staff of some of the opposition media, from a dependence on political leaders to a focus on the organization's credibility with the people at "the grassroots." Unity had taken on a
very different meaning for some, defined as an apolitical stance that allowed every group a voice.

This view of unity and the media's role in it was an important step in the move away from militarized views of communication and appropriate media use. This kind of unity, which I heard referred to a few times during my time in Thailand as "unity in diversity," would require the inclusion of dissenting non-Burman voices in Burman or "unmarked" media, as well as the ability of ethnic media to criticize their political groups and leaders. Because the non-Burman groups have been the victims of military aggression for so long, it is unlikely that they will be willing to risk being seen by the Burmans as vulnerable through their lack of unity. It will likely be the professional, "unmarked" opposition media that will allow space on a regular basis for voices of non-Burmans critical of the Burman majority. The non-Burmans will probably take a bit more time to feel secure enough to loosen the restrictions on dissent from within or critiques of their group.

41 The term has also been used by academics, such as Martin Smith (1994) and Chao Tzang Yawngwhe (1995).
Chapter 6

Militarization and rights in Umphien Mai refugee camp

Civilians bear the brunt of militarization anywhere, and this is true in Burma, where thousands of civilians have become refugees in neighboring countries or remain internally displaced. People have become refugees in Thailand for different reasons. Some escaped attacks on their villages by the Burmese troops. Others fled from requirements for forced labor that made it impossible to make a living. Many fled for reasons that would be recognized under the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees, except that Thailand has not ratified this convention, and refers to the refugees instead as "persons of concern." Many of the refugees, however, have become caught in a cycle of fear described by Hazel Lang (2002) in the recent book Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand. Lang (2002) has described how civilian villagers become targets of Burmese troops who suspect them of supporting anti-Rangoon rebels. Their fear leads villagers to run away when the troops arrive, which in turn reinforces the troops’ suspicions that the villagers are fleeing because of their guilt in supporting the rebels. In addition to direct armed conflict and the resultant pattern of fear and flight, the "ongoing process of militarized surveillance and control" that characterizes the border areas has led to displacement and insecurity for many local people (Lang, 2002, p. 78).

42 Internally displaced people become refugees or asylum seekers if they flee their homeland across a national border. The U.S. Committee for Refugees estimates that in the year 2000, there were between 600,000 and one million internally displaced Burmese, and more than 380,000 Burmese refugees and asylum seekers in neighboring countries, including Bangladesh, India, China and Thailand. There are an estimated quarter-million refugees from Burma in Thailand (United States Committee for Refugees, 2002).

43 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees recognizes as refugees those people who flee their countries because of "a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."
 Attacks on the Karen camps in Thailand, along with the threat that Thailand could repatriate the refugees at any time, have in recent years prompted non-governmental organizations to teach the refugees the basics of international human rights law so that they are better able to advocate for their own protection. This has led to the development of a discourse of "rights" among refugees that provides them with a powerful tool for advocacy. But refugees' interpretations of media stories also illustrate how they interpreted the concept of "rights" in different ways and for various purposes, to highlight some acts of violence while leaving others unquestioned. This selective attention to violence was a reaction to and also mirrored the global situation, in which an international discourse of human rights, relayed through global media, has called attention to some forms of violence while leaving other, often structural violence unrecognized.

I begin this chapter by providing a brief history of the Karen and the Karen refugees, highlighting the militarization perpetuated by recent events in the lives of the people now living in Umphien Mai. These include a series of attacks on Karen refugee camps in Thailand and the eventual consolidation of the refugees from two separate camps (Huaykaloke and Maw Ker) into Umphien Mai, where they have become more isolated and their movements more tightly restricted than before. In-depth interviews reveal the way stereotyped gender roles and militarization reinforced each other to form a dominant "frame" through which people understood their own media and technology use, as well as their lack of access. These gendered and militarized stereotypes also worked to frame the refugee camp as a privatized, apolitical space. The final section of this chapter
considers the refugees' comments in light of current discussions regarding the interpretation of "human rights" in various societies. I examine refugees' descriptions of two events they identified as important - the October, 1999, attack on the Burmese embassy in Bangkok and the seizure of a hospital in the Ratchaburi province of Thailand in January, 2000. The refugees' use of the term "rights" or "human rights" to refer primarily to the needs of the Karen as a group reflected their awareness of this structural violence. For many Karen, the forces working against them had come to be so entrenched as to seem insurmountable. Their demand for rights called for the protection of what they saw as most under attack - their identity as Karen. In general, the different ways Umphien Mai refugees used human rights as a concept provide insight into whether or not individual and group rights are incompatible concepts and demonstrate the need for a flexible and contextually-based understanding of rights.
Huaykaloke refugee camp, Thailand, 1989

Three kilometers from the Moei River which forms the border between Thailand and Burma, the thatched-roof bamboo huts of Huaykaloke refugee camp sit huddled quietly in the midst of rice paddy fields. The early morning brings the sound of whisk brooms as women sweep the dirt grounds around each house, and the sound of cooking pots add a sparse percussion as the breakfast rice is put on to boil in houses all around. Young people walk through the camp with the lopsided gait of water carriers, a tin of water hanging off either end of a long bamboo pole worn across one shoulder. The smell of freshly cooked rice rises through the air with the sun.

The school day begins, and hundreds of children chant their lessons, a cacophony of competing verses as children in adjoining classrooms try to out-sing each other.
Sounds of the occasional car or motorcycle engine chop through the air of the camp, which is also punctured occasionally by the low thud of mortars being dropped on the army base across the river. In the classroom, I stop talking at this sound and look around, but my students don't seem to notice. The explosions are part of the soundscape here, as common as the crow of cocks.

In homes women cook and clean. Some weave ethnic Karen clothing on backstrap looms, others sell snacks from bamboo tables in front of their homes. The few with sewing machines operate small businesses sewing or repairing clothing for the other refugees. Some people weave baskets of bamboo or use dried grasses to make roof thatching that can be either sold to other refugees or used to repair their own homes. Others head out to work illegally for the Thai farmers who own the surrounding paddy fields. Every day people pay the Thai soldiers who man the checkpoint at the camp entrance for a day pass to Mae Sot to shop or work in ramshackle factories. These jobs are risky for the refugees who can be fined or imprisoned if caught, but they are the only source of income to supplement the rice, fish paste and salt provided to each registered family by aid agencies. Many families also grow small plots of vegetables or raise chickens or the occasional pig, although this is officially prohibited by the Thai officials. And everywhere in the camp are small children, many of them dirty and partially-clothed, running, playing, laughing and greeting all foreign visitors, whether coming or going, with their enthusiastic "bye-bye, bye-bye!" At times, small boys imitate the distant sound of machine-guns. "Toom-toom-toom," they shout, running after each other aiming imaginary weapons.
I visit my neighbor, who sits on her porch with her baby in her lap. "He's my little soldier," she tells me as she bounces him up and down on her knee. The thought that he might grow up to do anything different is probably not one she lingers over. The Karen call this their "father to son war," but it might more accurately be called the "grandfather to son war," or even the "great-grandfather to son war," as the fighting stretches into its fifth decade. The legacies of this war are all around us, from the landmine victims hobbling around on crutches or crude wooden legs, to the women who have lost brothers, fathers, husbands and sons to the fighting, to the children who have known no home outside of this refugee camp.

It is paradoxical that such a seemingly peaceful setting grew out of and later became the scene for great violence, a creation of the global workings of militarization. This phenomenon infiltrates our daily lives, and does not affect only soldiers or those associated with the military. As Enloe (2000b) has argued, "people can become militarized in their thinking, in how they live their daily lives, in what they aspire to for their children or their society, without ever wielding a rifle or donning a helmet" (p. 2). In the interviews discussed here, the refugees interpreted their own lives through the lens of social norms that have developed within this militarized context, which itself was a legacy of a long history of militarization in Burma involving colonial rule and the enduring conflict between the Karens and the Burmans.
The militarization of the Karen and Karen refugees

Figure 13. Children and soldiers in a boat on the Moei River, which forms the border between Thailand and Burma (early 1990s)

The Karen people constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. They live along the border in both Thailand and Burma, and have been divided by the designation of national frontiers into either Burmese or Thai Karen. Estimates vary, but the most disinterested state that there are between three and four million Karen in Burma, with another 200,000 or more in Thailand (Smith, 1999a). The Karen revolution began in the days just after Burma's independence from the British in 1948, and since then the
Karen governing body, the Karen National Union (KNU), has been working to maintain a degree of autonomy over the Karen land, which they call Kawthoolei. The KNU and other ethnic nationalities and Burman dissident groups have been drafting a constitution that provides for a system of semi-autonomous states within a federated union. The Burmese government has been fighting to gain control over the border areas and to suppress these efforts. A significant tool in this battle is the propaganda campaign inside Burma that paints the dissident ethnic groups as "destructionists," bent on the breakup of the Union of Myanmar. This threat to national "unity" has been used to justify the regime's control over power, its military buildup, and its attacks on "destructionists," resulting in increasing numbers of refugees fleeing Burma.

The first long-term Karen refugee camps in Thailand were established in 1984. At that time, the Burmese Army changed its tactics in Karen areas from attack-and-withdraw to attack-and-hold, and villagers who fled from the fighting found that they could no longer return to their villages without facing abuses by Burmese troops (Karen Human Rights Group, 1998). The Thai government allowed the refugees to build shelters once they'd arrived, but they wanted to avoid the permanency of having the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) involved in the operation. A consortium of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was organized, but the Thai authorities restricted them to providing the bare minimum in aid so that new refugees would not be enticed into Thailand and those already in Thailand would not be tempted to stay (Lang, 2002). This arrangement allowed the Karen to run the refugee camps using their own village system of leadership through a council of elders, and gave them
some freedom of movement into and out of the camps. Although the arrangement
provided them with no real international protection, the camps were relatively peaceful
until 1995, just after the formation of the breakaway Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
(DKBA).

The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)

The DKBA was formed when the venerated Buddhist monk, U Thuzana, who
many believe was backed by the Burmese government, was able to convince
disillusioned rank-and-file soldiers of the KNU, largely Buddhist, that they were
suffering because of their leaders. The leaders, primarily Christian Karens, were
portrayed as caring little about them (Karen Human Rights Group, March 31, 1996). The
rank-and-file soldiers were well aware of the conditions at the front lines, and at the
comparatively luxurious KNU headquarters. Many of those who defected to the DKBA
were attracted by promises of an end to abuses by the military regime and to the years-
long deadlock in the fighting. Others were convinced to join the DKBA through
inducements such as cash salaries provided by the regime or freedom from forced labor
for their families (Karen Human Rights Group, 1998).

The DKBA played a decisive role in the Burmese regime’s capture of the KNU
headquarters at Manerplaw in January, 1995, when it provided the Burmese troops with
inside information about the layout of the area surrounding the army base (Lang, 2002).
Shortly after Manerplaw fell, the DKBA also assisted the Burmese military in capturing
Wangkha (also known as Kawmoorah), the army base across the border from
Huaykaloke refugee camp and one of the Karen's most symbolically important military sites. The formation of the DKBA and the fall of Manerplaw and Wangkha made life more difficult for the Karen and seriously undermined their struggle.

**Attacks and resettlement**

The Burmese government regarded the refugee camps as embarrassing sources of information for journalists as well as bastions of KNU support. The DKBA, vowing to destroy the refugee camps and drive all of the refugees back across the border, began a series of cross-border attacks in 1995. The Burmese regime had reportedly cut off the salaries and supplies that had initially attracted many to the DKBA, and as a result cross-border incursions to loot the markets in refugee camps became so frequent throughout 1995 and 1996 that an exact compilation is not available (Karen Human Rights Group, August 1, 1996, p. 2).

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44 According to the Karen Human Rights Group (1998), the Burmese regime supplied the DKBA with uniforms, weapons and food, yet claimed it had no control over them. At least at first, Thailand accepted this explanation and continued its lucrative trade deals with the Burmese generals. However, in recent years tensions between the Burmese government and the Thai government have increased as violence along the border continues and amphetamines from Burma have flooded Thailand.
The first major round of attacks against refugee camps came in February, just after Manerplaw fell, and again in late April 1995. A second major offensive came in January of 1997, when Huaykaloke and another camp called Huay Bone were both attacked and destroyed, a third camp attacked, and a fourth one shelled. In the attack on Huaykaloke, residents fled their houses with just enough time to gather their children and get out. Most people lost everything they owned. By the next morning, between 70 and 80 percent of the camp was completely destroyed. Fortunately there was only one casualty, but most people had no place to go. For over a month, the refugees lived in makeshift shelters on the burned camp site. Most would not stay there at night, but headed out into the fields to sleep in the open air.
Figures 15 (above) and 16 (below).
A refugee and his son stand on the remains of their home (above). Refugees hold a protest after an attack on their camp (below).
There was a third round of attacks in March 1998, when Huaykaloke was attacked and burned again, along with another camp, Mawker, and a third camp that was shelled. By the end of the attack on Huaykaloke, about 1,300 houses were burned, many people were wounded, and four refugees were dead (Karen Human Rights Group, 1998). To ensure the refugees' safety, between August and November, 1999, over 15,000 residents of Huaykaloke and Mawker camps were consolidated into Umphien Mai, which now houses over 16,000 refugees. The new camp is about a two-hour drive from the nearest towns of Mae Sot (to the north) and Umphang (to the south), a less than ideal site located...
in the mountains. In the cool season the camp is bitterly cold and wet while the rest of Thailand is a comfortable temperature. Umphien Mai is also significantly more isolated than either Huaykaloke or Maw Ker were, with consequences that affect the daily lives of the refugees.

When they lived in Huaykaloke, the refugees were close to Mae Sot, and the camp was surrounded by fields and factories providing opportunities for work. The situation in Maw Ker had been similar. The work opportunities in Umphien Mai, on the other hand, were sparse. There was backbreaking work for a select few on nearby cabbage farms, and then there was the lucrative trade in amphetamines. This was a serious concern for the refugees. A leader of one of the Karen student groups told me that he estimated three in ten teenage Karen boys in Umphien Mai were using amphetamines, and other refugees described the rude and sometimes violent behavior of the boys and men who took the drugs. Although local NGOs and women's groups had developed income generation projects for women in the camps, and a few refugees had gotten work with local NGOs, many of the refugees found it very difficult to earn anything to supplement what they received in aid. So while Umphien Mai may have been physically safer from Burmese attack than Huaykaloke or Maw Ker, it was difficult for the refugees to feel comfortable or secure there.

I first saw Umphien Mai when I returned to Thailand at the end of 1999. The day I arrived, it was windy and chilly, and as the truck I was traveling in climbed the steep, muddy hill to the camp, I felt sad for my friends there, whose lives had been so disrupted by factors beyond their control. Since I had seen them last, they had lived through the
DKBA attacks, the fall of the Karen headquarters at Manerplaw, the loss of their army base Wangkha, and the move to Umphien Mai. Armed guards manned the entrance to the new camp, and the refugees reported being far more restricted in their movements than they had been in Huaykaloke or Maw Ker. The refugees were subject to an environment of militarized surveillance and control that characterized the borderland and the camp itself. During the interviews featured here, for example, several refugees worried that the information they provided might be somehow traced back to them and used to harass their family members in Burma.

The next section of this chapter explores how the process of militarization was reinforced in Umphien Mai by conceptions of gender that establish women as paradoxically dangerous and vulnerable, and thus in need of the protection offered by the authority of male leaders and soldiers. Resistance to these stereotypes helps to clarify how the concept of "rights" was used and needs to be understood in different ways depending on context. While a focus on group rights was prevalent in those interviews, individual rights were also important, especially to those in subordinate positions within the camp, including women.

**The gendered nature of communications and media use in Umphien Mai**

As people in Umphien Mai described their media use, women were generally considered uninterested in politics, or if they were interested, were said to have become interested through the influence of their fathers or husbands. Many women reported that they did listen to news from international broadcasters via shortwave radio, but often
reported listening because their husbands turned on the radio. The women were often said to be "not free," a phrase meaning "occupied with work." Women needed to be concerned with cooking or getting the children to bed, while the men had more free time, especially in the evenings. One 40 year-old man, when asked if anyone listened to the radio with him, answered "No, only me. My wife, as a mother, isn't interested in politics." Another man said, "My wife has to cook, so she is not free to listen." That a mother was uninterested in politics, or that cooking and politics were mutually exclusive interests were taken as "natural" in comments such as these, which reflect how a gendered division of labor was played out in daily life in Umphien Mai. Comments like these reinforce a stereotype of women's apathy toward political matters but do not explain it. They act to further entrench community conceptions of security and politics as masculine work, perpetuating the structural position of women at the bottom of a militarized hierarchy. As the following sections illustrate, gender is a key structural element of a system of inequality that affects both men and women, and determines everything from who uses the most advanced technologies to whose conversations are valued.

**Conversations**

*The scent of flowers is carried by the wind
The news of the people is carried by people.*
(Burmese proverb)

The refugees said that they get most of their information from other people, and information was said to travel "step-by-step" from one to another: from neighbors,
friends, new arrivals and visitors to the camp, and those who came to Thailand for work. People got information from Karen soldiers who went in and out of the camps, from traveling missionaries, traders and other travelers. They also heard information from the camp security guards, sometimes meaning Thai soldiers posted to guard the camp, but more often male Karen refugees acting as security guards who heard information from KNU officials or Thai soldiers. People from rural Burma periodically traveled into and out of the camps, bringing news and an occasional letter. "Sometimes if people come to visit, we go and ask them... We want to know if our parents are still living, how they live, how they eat," explained one refugee. Visitors from Burma who then return often have trouble with the Burmese authorities, especially if they are known to have returned to Burma from the refugee camps. Several refugees had heard about people who had returned and been arrested or killed. Whether or not these reports were true, they illustrate the climate of fear in which the refugees lived. Most of them had completely lost contact with their home villages. In this way, the Burmese regime had managed to divide the Karen by cutting off communications between the refugees and their families and friends within Burma.

Several refugees openly questioned the veracity of information obtained from non-official sources (generally women or non-official men). As one refugee put it, "We hear information from what people say... but we do not accept it. We have to investigate it carefully... Not every word is true." Some people said that information from other people was less "exact" than information from the media, and several men stated that this was especially true if the information came from women. One middle-
aged, unmarried man said, "I think the women's word is not true. Where do they hear it? I don't know."

As KNU soldiers and camp security personnel, men had access to communications technologies that increased their status as personal sources of information. This setup also helped to sustain the idea that technology should be at the service of political and military work. KNU soldiers, for example, used walkie-talkies and the teletype along with camp security guards, and there was regular communication between them. Men often reported hearing from their KNU soldier friends or from KNU leaders regarding the activities of Burmese and Karen soldiers along the border. Thai soldiers communicated information regarding potential dangers in the camps to the Karen camp security guards, who in turn warned the villagers. Thus, the use of many of the communications technologies in Umphien Mai perpetuated the idea that men were the primary leaders and protectors of the community, and women and children the ones in need of protection.

Men were recognized as the bearers of official information, while women were regarded as an information source separate from other categories of people, such as "friends," "neighbors," or "camp security guards." For example, it was typical for someone to say that he or she got information from security guards, from people met on the road, and from women. Women themselves often noted that they received their information from other women, such as the wives of soldiers, or during the monthly meetings of the camp's women's organizations. "We are a group of women, and because we have no work, sometimes we go visiting, sit down in a group, and sometimes we talk
about other people's situations," one woman explained. Another woman reported that she heard most information from other women because men don't share information. "If the men hear something, they dare not tell us. If they tell us, we will tell other people."

Women were popularly understood to be interested mostly in issues of family life, religion or health. These conceptions of masculine and feminine approaches to communication in Umphien Mai support the argument that feminist scholars have made for some time - that a distinction between the public and private realms can be found in most societies and is always connected to gender (Franzway et al., 1989; Enloe 2000b).

These examples illustrate how the public/private divide is maintained both within the camp, where the home is recognized as the private sphere, as well as within the opposition movement, where the camp is constructed as a privatized sphere outside of political activity. This is partially due to the restrictions of the Thai government on political activity in the camps, and has been exacerbated by the refugees' move to a more isolated area. This public/private divide works to hide the power dynamics both within the camp and within the opposition movement. With women considered as both in need of protection and as talkative and therefore dangerous, on the one hand, and information technologies as vital for safety on the other, then it follows "naturally" that these technologies would be reserved for those with official positions as local protectors - security guards, soldiers, administrators, or political campaigners. The fact that women were constructed rhetorically as a providing a separate source of (often unreliable) information exemplifies the way that gender divisions become manifest in differing
conceptions of how and why men and women communicate. These gender divisions also affected media use in the camp.

Media use

Most of the refugees interviewed saw the media as vital for understanding the political situation in Burma, and considered this primarily the job and interest of men. A KNU soldier explained that if he could not listen to the radio or watch TV news, "the connection between me and politics and my understanding of politics decreases. And the education that I have received about politics . . . our education will be lost because politics changes fast." Another man, a teacher and camp office worker who listened to the radio for four hours a day said, "If I could not listen . . . it is like there is a job that I must do but I haven't done." Although this man's wife also listened to the radio, he explained that she listened less than he did because she was "not free."

The importance of the media to those refugees interested in political issues was illustrated by how often they compared media access to a vital necessity. "Just yesterday I couldn't listen," explained one man, "and it was like I was thirsty and I wanted to drink water." Another man who did not own a radio but made an effort to listen with friends said, "If we could not listen to the radio . . . we would be seriously depressed. We are like a patient that has a drip, so that if we could not listen we could not live." "To tell you the truth," said another man, "it's like people who take opium. I can't bear it. If I can't listen to radio and read books, I can't bear it." A teacher explained why he
regularly rearranged his schedule so he could listen to the news every night. "If we cannot listen for only one night, it is like something very important is lost for us."

Sharing information was seen as a neighborly gesture, establishing at the same time a local media elite, who could read, or could understand Burmese and translate the radio news, and generally became known as sources of information for others. Several people noted that information was important for them because they could tell their neighbors the news if they were asked about it, noting especially those friends who could not read or who had no radio. As one man put it, "I want to search for the information in order to tell the people when they come and ask me. As best as I can, I will tell people who cannot read like I can." Access to information also opened the way for social interaction within the camp. One woman said, "many people come and visit me, my neighbors, my friends. Sometimes I tell them the situation in Burma and they like to listen, and sometimes they come and ask me the information about Burma. If I could not read I could not tell them."

Those most serious about the media approached its content as material for study and analysis, especially if it could be related in any way to the Karen situation. One camp official discussed an unusual program he had heard:

I heard an unusual thing, like about the refugees in Bangladesh, the reason why they were sent back, and the situation when they were relocated back in their country. As for us like that, if we are sent back, we should control our people so that they relocate themselves in an orderly manner. I think that the Bangladesh situation is a little different. So we should find out and understand that. As we are those who listen to the news, when we hear this, we compare the Eastern Burma refugees and the Western Burma refugee camps when refugees were sent back to our
This man was a leader who saw himself as a source of information for other people. He regarded information as useful for political analysis and for planning ways to "control our people" so that they would be protected from the kind of harm that befell the refugees from Western Burma.

The language used in these and other comments about the media framed news as data, and political analysis as the activity this data was meant to inform. There were those who read and listened to the news (mostly men) and those who didn't (mostly women). Those who paid attention to the news often regarded their ability to be a source of news for others as part of the value of listening to the radio and reading newspapers. Information was important for gauging events in this precarious environment, and the ability to report the news to others provided some refugees with a sense of mission and a position of authority in the camp. Those who spent lots of time listening to the radio and reading (i.e., the camp's media elite) were most often men, although not always; several women resisted the stereotypes of their talkative and dangerous "nature."

**Women on the gendered conceptions of women**

Women's own perceptions of their communication style and their "political" abilities varied. Some women stated openly that they were not interested in politics, or that they were burdened with other chores, so therefore didn't pay attention to the news. One woman, when asked why she didn't listen to the radio, answered,
Niece, I will tell you. We are women, right? Your uncle has to go for his job in the camp during the daytime. Aunt has to stay at home and do the selling and the cooking, and we are tired. When the BBC comes, aunt is asleep already, and the person who listens is only your uncle.

It was thus often a practical matter of women not having enough energy left to listen after working to maintain the household.

Women frequently reported feeling inferior because they had no experience with politics, which they attributed to their lack of education. Education was highly valued, and seen as especially important for Karen children. Often in Burma, however, the girls lost out when times got tough. This was especially true in the rural areas, where the value of education was not always clear to families who expected to "lose" their daughters to marriage when they moved into their husbands' households (Altsean, 1997; Images Asia, 1999). That education was not valued equally for girls and boys was made clear in the following comment from a Karen Muslim woman. "We are like fools. We cannot read and we do not know anything, and I have a small face [I feel inferior]. If another person gives me a letter, like one time when my brother wrote a letter to me and I could not read it, I had to ask someone to read it to me, and so I feel inferior." She could not read the letter her brother had learned how to write.

In this camp of mostly Buddhists and Christians, Muslim women were arguably the most marginalized group, especially because the darker skin of many Muslims distinguished them physically from the lighter-skinned Karen. Given the chance to express themselves, however, Muslim women explicitly detailed the need for change

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45 The Karen often use familial terms to refer to each other. In this case, 'niece' is used as an informal title to refer to a younger woman.
despite the fact that they were silenced within the camp by their marginalized positions. Muslim women spoke the most passionately about their lack of education, which they often compared to a physical handicap. "I can't read Burmese words," said one woman. "I feel depressed because I can't read and I feel my face is small [I feel inferior], and I have no chance for improvement.... If the newspapers or journals come, or if we receive a newspaper, we can't read and if we can't read, we are like people who are blind. We can't do anything and we can't know anything." One visibly poor Muslim woman, interviewed in her small and unfurnished house, emphasized the importance of educating her children to provide them with better options than she'd had.

Now our children, if we had stayed in Burma, they couldn't go to school. . . . We want them to have an education. It hurts our heart. The other people can listen [to the news on the radio], but we can't listen, because we couldn't go to school. It passed us by.

While many women felt unable to contribute toward social change, others found motivation for action in the stories they saw or read in the media, thus resisting the stereotype of politically inactive women. And while they may have perceived their communication style as different from men, women often represented this difference in a positive light. One woman, who liked to read the Karen-language environmental newsletter, *Thoo Lei Kaw Way*, talked about an article she had read.

What is unusual for me is that they are going to build a dam on the Salween River. Will it work or not? I read that and I got very angry. It will be good if it isn't built. If it is built, a lot of trees and bamboo and places will be destroyed. People will have trouble. . . . If possible, if it's not good, we should protest it together. . . . *I'm very talkative. If I read something unusual for me, I go around and tell my friends about it.* . . . So, I say this, if we are
able to dissuade them, we should dissuade them and work together so that it isn't built. [italics added]

The activist stance taken here stood out among the comments from the refugees interviewed, and while it reinforced the idea that women are talkative, this talkativeness was framed as a source of strength for organizing against an unjust situation.

Women also expressed interest in media stories about how other women were responding to the challenges they faced. One woman recounted a story she had read in *The New Eye*, a magazine of cartoons published by the NGO, Burma Issues.

They write about a woman who stays in the village, and if the enemies come, if our Karen soldiers come, she arranges things bravely for the village to stay comfortable. She has to stand up to them bravely. Like men can do things, we should not think little of ourselves. Women can work also. Now in villages in the rural areas like Pa Lu, men do not dare to become village leaders, so women have to become village leaders. Because for women, they dare not act towards the Burmese in a hard way [i.e., to shoot them, beat them, etc]. Like women, they would not be able to arrest people like men can. [If a woman becomes village leader], *there will be no fighting and no death by weapons. She talks with her mouth and protects them*. Women before didn't dare do anything. They would just stay in the house and weave and breed pigs and chickens. *But now some women are braver than men, and they go among men like Aung San Suu Kyi. . . .* We have to stay in the refugee camp, but our heart grows stronger. . . . We should not feel depressed, [italics added]

This story and the journal article it describes reflect the changing circumstances of leadership at the village level in areas of heavy fighting between the KNU and the SPDC and illustrates how flexible gender roles can be in reinforcing the status quo despite shifting circumstances. Whereas in rural Burma village heads are usually men, this job has become especially perilous in areas patrolled by both the KNU and the SPDC. Many
men have fled the dangers they would face as village heads, leaving older women to fill
the role. In these cases, the shift in gender roles relies on a different kind of authority -
that of the mother. Because the women who step in as village head are usually much
older than the SPDC soldiers, they draw on their status as older women, using their words
and wits as opposed to physical strength. Nevertheless, that maternal authority only goes
so far. As the quote above indicates, women lack the authority to make arrests as men
can. A woman's mouth becomes her weapon. It is most effectively used as a weapon of
defense, as it was in this story of the female village head and the SPDC soldiers. But the
weapon of words can also be aimed at the destruction of attitudes and stereotypes women
feel need to be changed.

Women's ability to speak sharply and in ways that challenge common attitudes
toward the situation was celebrated by some refugee women as a strength, thereby
contradicting the stereotype of politically apathetic women. The woman quoted above
regarded the female voice as a means of defense when she said, "She talks with her
mouth and protects them." Also, some women respond enthusiastically to media stories
about women who break stereotypes of passivity or incompetence to challenge the
gendered division of labor that keeps women out of positions of authority. The
conviction expressed by the women quoted above, both against the dam and supportive of
the strength embodied in a female village head, indicate resistance to stereotypes of the
unreliability of women's style of communicating and their lack of leadership abilities.

The popular image of the passive, apolitical woman may help to suppress female
criticism of the male Karen leaders and the militarization of life for the Karen, but the
resultant appearance of social consensus is not genuine. The refugee women interviewed here, protected by anonymity, revealed at times what James Scott (1990) has called "hidden transcripts," those communications hidden from popular view that provide the space for critique and resistance to being silenced. In a study of violence against refugee women whose anonymity was protected, several women criticized the exclusively male Karen camp leadership for its lack of attention to domestic violence and to the need for female representation in camp policy-making bodies ("The Most Silent", 2002).

Women spoke about their use of the media in ways that suggest that many took a keen interest in world news, but that their interests tended to be framed or explained differently than those of men. To say that women weren't interested in what was happening in the world, or even in politics, would be inaccurate. In addition, the burdens of life in the camp were not shared by all women equally. Muslim women, for example, were often much poorer than other women, and uneducated as well. Their experiences of communications technologies and media were very different from those of the more educated women, many of whom were connected with camp leaders. Many women felt inhibited by their lack of education or experience, and intimidated (although not always uninterested) by the suggestion that they participate in politics. For both men and women in the camp, however, perceptions of themselves as backwards or behind-the-times served to perpetuate and at the same time explain why many refugees lacked interest in opposition "politics."
A state of backwardness

For many of the refugees, their lack of access to the newest technologies, such as cell phones, e-mail and the Internet, led them to define themselves as "backwards" and "behind" others. One man noted that "the others have used telephones, e-mail and Internet, but we haven't used them, and don't know about them. How is it effective? How is it easy? We don't know. If we had used it, our knowledge would be greater, and all things would be easier for us." Many of them described themselves as overtaken by the fast pace of change, hopelessly behind others and unable to join the modern world. In discussing these new information technologies (NITs), refugees seemed to see themselves not so much as laggards at the tail end of a race, but as still trying to make their way to the racetrack.

Most of the refugees had never used a telephone, and almost without exception had never used e-mail or Internet. One woman explained, "I have never called on the telephone. Where would I call? Also, I cannot talk on the phone, I am an original [mountain] Karen. Aunt is not capable." Although both men and women described themselves as incapable or incompetent, women often compared themselves with a man they knew or with men in general, such one woman who said, "Now I want to use the phone also, but... how to use it? I cannot use it. I watched my husband talk on the phone. He said "hello!" I watched beside him, I was nervous for him because I had never used it before."

Some of the refugees distinguished between rural people and more sophisticated urbanites. One woman, who had not used or even heard of e-mail and Internet before this
interview, said, "Because we cannot use these things, we feel like rural people . . . Rural people never see these things, they never touch these things, they are not capable of using them." There were others who believed that their status as refugees made use of the newest communications technologies unnecessary. As one 23 year-old woman who had worked with several opposition groups put it,

Now we live in the camp. If we don't have access to [e-mail and Internet], it's okay. Even if somebody gave them to us, we couldn't use them, because the electricity doesn't reach in here. . . . I think it won't work. In the rainy season, the wind blows and the thunder and lightening strikes.

In this and other comments, the refugees conceptualized the camp as outside the realm of politics, and by extension, the lack of access to the newest information technologies as a "natural" condition for themselves as refugees. Thus, the refugees' potential contribution to the opposition movement was limited by the notion that political action is the terrain of the well educated who understand how to use the newest technologies. Thus, many of the refugees presented themselves as apolitical. To the extent that the camps are seen as outside of the political realm, the refugees have been feminized within the opposition movement. This is perhaps one reason why so many of the male refugees expressed a strong interest in the political knowledge they gained through the media. For these men, many of whom used to pin their hopes of victory on the fighting, it was as though the daily activity of listening to the news or reading newspapers was a means of resisting their de-politicization (and resultant feminization) within the camp, and a way of contributing to the political work necessary for a return to Kawthoolei.
All of the refugees regarded NITs as symbols of development and education, and as such wanted them for their children, but most of them also described themselves as "obsolete" or incapable of learning about these things. The refugees interviewed expressed an overall feeling of discouragement, a sense of hopelessness and inability to do anything that would change their circumstances. But to say that the refugees were passively accepting this state of affairs would be incorrect. Refugees actively interpreted events, shaping the stories that explained their situation to each other and to outsiders. I have demonstrated how the process of militarization interacted with stereotyped gender roles to shape the communications and media environment in Umphien Mai. In the next sections of this chapter, I will examine how the refugees filtered the stories and events they heard from the media through this frame, and the implications this has for current debates about the meaning and value of different conceptions of human rights.

**Constructing and interpreting stories, re-constructing lives**

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the refugees' narratives, which both described the past and recast and reinterpreted it in moral terms. Refugee studies scholar Liisa Malkki (1995) has argued that such narratives are neither purely history nor myth, but that it is more productive to describe them as a "mythico-history" (p. 54). In her groundbreaking work, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, Malkki examined the mythico-history constructed by Hutu refugees as they discussed the events leading to their lives in a refugee camp in Tanzania. Drawing on Foucault's concept of the refugee camp as a "technology of
power," she examined how the camp produced "refugees" both as an object of control and as a "categorical historical subject empowered to create a mythico-history of a people" (p. 237). As Foucault argued, a camp is more than a device of control and enclosure. It is both limiting but productive as well, as it becomes a site for "continual creative subversion and transformation" (Malkki, 1995, p. 237). Similar to Karen refugees, creativity for the Hutu refugees took the form of an "urgent preoccupation with documenting and rendering credible to outsiders the history that had brought them to [the refugee camp] and which they could not escape living" (p. 53). For the Hutu refugees, and as will be shown with the Karen, the purpose of these narratives was to "educate, explain, prescribe and proscribe" and they contained guidance for conduct through powerful moral lessons (p. 54).

The development of a mythico-history, while beneficial to the extent that it serves as a basis of social cohesion, is also commonly relied upon by those in power, who can create "an illusion of social consensus" useful to buttress the authority of a regime (Hirsch, 1995, p. 26). The manipulation of history is a type of political power, since it determines what memories are worth preserving and which symbols come to be valued. There is nevertheless a multiplicity of sources in the construction of history these days, when people are likely to remember events portrayed through the mass media, "often enhanced by the combination of other sources, such as personal experiences, stories told to them by others, events they think they remember, and myths" (Hirsch, 1995, p. 24).

Much as history has never been solely the creation of historians, in the construction of
Karen history was not just the work of Karen leaders and historians, but was an important aspect of communal life in the camps.

Stories contain the most subversive elements of history, where what is overtly threatening to the powerful is encoded into covert images of resistance in "a collective process accomplished within a community bound by a particular historical purpose" (Honor Ford-Smith as cited in Mohanty, 1991, p. 35). Like the Hutu refugees, the Karen refugees of Umphien Mai presented a consistent account of oppression. For the Karen, it was abuse by the government troops in Burma and also by the Thai authorities. Like the Hutu refugees, their stories "explored, reiterated, and emphasized the boundaries between self and other . . . and good and evil" (Malkki, 1995, p. 54). As the next sections details, the refugees not only described their experiences, but also recast and reinterpreted events in direct opposition to the version presented by the Burmese government, which denied abuses against the refugees by labeling them as insurgent sympathizers. Refugees' stories also challenged the Thai media, which frequently portrayed them as unwanted troublemakers.

Malkki's (1995) otherwise sophisticated analysis of the Hutu refugees' mythico-history has been criticized for not adequately addressing the gender divisions that create what Malkki herself identifies as women's unwillingness to "assume authorship of narrative expression . . . [as] they readily referred me to their husbands, fathers, brothers, or other men" (1995, p. 50). While many female refugees in Umphien Mai were willing to be interviewed, as a group the refugees rhetorically constructed gender stereotypes that acted to perpetuate the political status quo. The effects of militarization and the
importance of gender as a frame through which the refugees explain their situation became clear in their stories of how and why they became refugees. The following sections will provide an overview of the refugees' stories of abuse and disruption, and in the process will detail how these stories, while relating horrible incidents of actual violence, also served specific social and political purposes as a mythico-history.

**Constructing stories: disrupted lives**

When asked how they had become refugees, the residents of Umphien Mai told stories of oppression or violence by the Burmese troops that had forced them to leave Burma, often on the run. Refugees' narratives consistently established that they had faced serious turmoil in their lives, from the loss of close family members to war or disease, to having to flee persecution or destitution in Burma. Most had endured several such disruptions. When asked, "How long have you been a refugee?" several answered that they had been refugees since they "became human" or since they were born, because they had been fleeing successive homes all their lives. Although they understood the intent of the question, they emphatically rejected any distinction between their lives inside Burma as "non-refugees" and life in Thailand as refugees. One twenty-three year-old woman, whose mother died when she was 9 and who moved to a refugee camp in 1990, said, "All my life I have been a refugee, because my father is a revolutionary."

Comments like this reinforce the point made by Hazel Lang (2002), who has shown how, in Burma, "insurgency and counter insurgency have blurred the boundaries between combatants and noncombatants" in a system of low intensity warfare (p. 57).
Stories of abuse came up again and again, and were used by the refugees to explain why they were now refugees. One man explained that he had been a farmer, but that he had to give the government whatever he earned. When there was a flood and the rice paddy died, he could not give rice to the government, so he was punished. "I resent them bitterly and came here to join the army [KNU]," he said. A young woman explained that she had left for Thailand after Burmese soldiers had forced people to work in the military compound near her village. "We had no time to do our own work. If we could not build the road, we had to go and build the military compound and had to carry stones every day. We did not have time to study." These stories demonstrate how a process of militarization within Burma had distorted an earlier form of voluntary labor on community projects. While the "traditional" and "voluntary" nature of this labor was for a long time the primary defense of the Burmese regime, the flight of people from Burma as refugees and the increasing international condemnation of this forced labor caused the regime to agree to a plan for abolishing the practice, thereby inadvertently acknowledging that it was occurring. Ironically, the government's abuse of the practice of community-oriented voluntary labor may have inadvertently strengthened the refugees' attraction to individualized conceptions of human rights, which protect individuals against abuses by the state or other powerful institutions.

In addition to problems surviving the military's demands for labor, many refugees have faced direct physical attacks on both their villages and their bodies. While these attacks affect all villagers, women have suffered especially because of both their sex and their gender roles. In addition to the ever-present threat of rape, women have also faced
especially grueling conditions because of their responsibilities as mothers. One 45 year-old woman, who lost her father at age four and her mother at age 12, estimated that she had been a refugee for 23 years.

When my first baby was over one year old, at that time I was pregnant with the second baby. Since then I have had to flee from the Burmese. I cannot remember when or in what year. . . . After that, the Burmese tried to kill all of our Karen people . . . So we fled into the jungle beside the Salween River. . . . We stayed in a hut, and I gave birth to my baby in the jungle. The night when my baby was born, Ta Maw Yart village was burned, and the battle started. . . . Later, people said we could go back, and we went back to our village. And then things got confused again and we moved to Kyauk Daung. We stayed there for two years and then moved to Huaykaloke camp.

Another woman, a 38 year-old teacher, told her story.

In our village, SPDC oppressed us. At that time, my daughter's father died. He died and then we left. If we stayed we could not earn our living. I stayed as a widow with my four children, and after that we thought that if we stayed, we would have to be porters, and we could not carry [the things]. Females, people who stay there have to pay porter fees [if they do not act as porters themselves]. As my children were still small, I could not do this either, so I came to the refugee camp.

When this woman's husband was killed by the SPDC soldiers, she was not yet two months pregnant with her youngest child. She had also heard just prior to our interview that her "aunt" (a distant relative) had died after being gang-raped by SPDC soldiers. She had heard this from another "aunt" who was visiting from Noh Poe camp.

As in most wars, women in the contested zones in rural Burma often face danger because of their connections to the fighting through their fathers, brothers and husbands.

46 This is a common way for Karen women to refer to their husbands.
But even those who are not directly connected with opposition military groups are easily suspected of these connections. The families, or suspected families, of KNU members get especially harsh treatment. As is true elsewhere, warring men on different sides of the Burmese conflict communicate through their control of women in various ways. The systematic raping of women and girls, sometimes called genocidal rape, has been used in war to humiliate the enemy and undermine its strength as a nation through impregnating its women and thus reducing the purity of the race (Peterson and Runyan, 1999). The rape of ethnic women by Burman soldiers has been systematic in areas of rural Burma (Apple, 1998; Shan Human Rights, 2002), but the Burmese also control ethnic minority women and their sexuality in other ways that send powerful messages to their enemies.

One woman explained her experiences this way:

> All the families of the revolution were arrested [by Burmese troops] and put in jail because they could not get our husbands. . . If we traveled, or went to take a bath, we didn't have a chance. They followed us and asked us to carry charcoal. . . . They arrested us in 1974 and released us after seven months, then arrested us for three months again and released us, and then they arrested us for two months again and released us. After they arrested us, they told us, "You cannot contact your husband. If possible, you should remarry a new person." [italics added]

Terrorizing a population is a means of symbolizing control over it, and since girls are often seen as the most vulnerable and innocent members of society, their abuse is most effective in promoting terror (Nordstrom, 1999). Images of girls victimized physically "function as political symbols: as policy justification, as military propaganda to engender nationalist loyalties, and to call people to arms" (Nordstrom, 1999, p. 65). It is therefore not surprising that the most horrific stories of abuse in the Umphien Mai
refugee narratives contained accounts of Burmese military abuse of Karen women or girls, reinforcing a conception of Burmese soldiers as the epitome of inhuman evil.

One 78 year-old woman describes a particularly gruesome story she read about in the Karen opposition newsletter, *Kway K’Lu*[^47]

> I saw that a teacher was arrested by the Burmese. Her husband was a captain and he escaped. The Burmese arrested his wife and cut their child's stomach. Then they asked the child's mother to eat her child's heart and lungs. She could not eat them, so the Burmese raped her and killed her. That woman I still remember in my eyes, because she came and stayed with us before.

Even the less horrific stories people remembered from the media established young girls and women as those in greatest danger of becoming victims of abuse, and portrayed the Burmese regime as cunning and lying. One 58 year-old woman remembered this story:

> One article I read in *Kway K’Lu* was about a little girl who went and worked in the farm, and two Burmese soldiers came and raped her. And that little girl went back home and told her parents and her parents told the head of the village. . . . But the Burmese major hid his two soldiers and called that little girl. . . . and asked that little girl to show the two soldiers who raped her. That little girl looked and the two soldiers were not there. And the Burmese major told her that she had tarnished their dignity and he asked for compensation. . . . That little girl and her parents had to sell their place and give the money to the Burmese.

Many of the refugees' stories also described dangers faced by Karen women in Thailand, such as being "sold" into debt bondage in Bangkok through a Thai middleman. Many people were becoming more aware than previously of what was happening to

[^47]: As was true of many people, this woman used the word "Burmese" to refer to the Burmese soldiers and government troops. This reflects the fact that for many refugees, their experience of the Burmans has been limited to the oppression they have faced from Burman soldiers.
young women who went to work in Thai cities. One middle aged woman described what she had heard about Bangkok. "I heard about people who went to Bangkok and were lost, people sold them, people lied to them. Things like this we heard from people, our neighbors. They talk about it, and we do not dare to go." This clearly affected the way this woman felt about her Thai hosts. "I do not like Thais even a little. . . . My heart feels like if we get Kawthoolei, Thais cannot come to my country even for a short time. I would not like to see this." Even for refugees who did not themselves face such abuses, the stories were told and retold through the anecdotes of others and descriptions in the media. While the stories of abuse by Thais provided a grounds from which to advocate for better conditions as refugees in Thailand, the great number of stories of abuse by the Burmese soldiers helped the refugees justify their presence in Thailand and their need for foreign assistance.

The refugees described abuse by the Burmese soldiers as the reason for their flight from Burma, and several men responded to media stories of violence with a desire for revenge on those who had harmed Karen villagers. "We pity them [the villagers], and we want to get revenge. Now we can't do anything. I don't want them [the Burmese soldiers] to stay alive on the Earth. I want to kill all of them." Another man said, "Because I read these books, as I am Karen, we read that our people were persecuted by the military government. . . . We would like to fight with them and kill them like they kill my people." A young KNU soldier said that when he reads journals,

I feel sad for our Karen people who were killed, burned until they died, killed by guns and knives, and for all the churches that were burned down. Because we read this in the newspapers, we feel unhappy. . . . We feel that by
reading these newspapers, we want to kill all Burmese at once. Our hearts are enthusiastic... our hearts become strong and we want to shoot the Burmese.

Comments like these were not uncommon, yet they conflicted with another image that arose in refugees' stories - that of the Karen as a peace-loving people, fighting only because they were forced to defend themselves against extermination. One woman, for example, paraphrased the Burmese Foreign Minister whom she heard on the radio discussing Karen refugees: "They are the families of the KNU, so we have to kill them all." But she resisted his definition of the Karen as eager to fight. "We are people who escaped from Burma because of war. We are people who really want our country. But the Burmese government will not give it to us, and they plot against us and want to kill us when we live in another country. . . . The Burmese government, they don't consider making peace."

Another woman described what she read in a Burmese magazine.

When I read it I saw the news that included news of the KNU. I hadn't seen writing like this before . . . . They wrote and insulted us, saying that the KNU is fighting against the government and plants poppy, kills people and makes disputes. They insulted Karen people by saying that Karen people do not want peace, they love war and destroy the country. Like this, they put in the magazine that we read, and we know it is not true. Our Karen are a people who love peace. . . . They write so that people in Burma will not be willing to help the Karen people. Therefore, because of the writing, we feel unhappy.

Thus, the refugees in Umphien Mai described many kinds of oppression from the Burmese military, and the telling and retelling of these stories became a means through which they could make sense of their situation and explain it to outsiders. Most refugees
wanted to hear about the oppression of Karen people by Burmese soldiers, and many said they were most interested in information about conditions for the Karen inside Burma. This seemed to reflect people's concern for how family members back home were surviving, but also confirmed the wisdom of their decision to flee to Thailand as refugees. Women described especially difficult conditions, sometimes because of their responsibilities as mothers, but also because messages between men on the different "sides" of the fighting were communicated through the "media" of women's bodies. This became clear in accounts of rape, or of other violent acts by the Burmese soldiers against Karen women.

Despite the desire for violent revenge expressed by some refugees, and the continuation of armed struggle between the Karen and the Burmese military, there have been influential changes in global discourse and policy in the post Cold War era, promoting nonviolence and conflict resolution through democratic processes. As the next section will demonstrate, Karen losses on the battlefield and the move away from armed struggle by the Burmese opposition movement have altered the movement's internal balance of power, reinforcing the refugees' conviction that outside intervention is necessary in order to enact change in Burma.

**Interpreting stories: nonviolence, unity, and the role of outsiders**

**Nonviolence**

The turn towards non-violence within the Burmese opposition movement challenged the official KNU preference for armed struggle, which was already proving
difficult to maintain given the KNU’s financial difficulties. Many opposition groups had felt a need for change, especially after military defeats and ceasefire deals that reduced opposition control over borderland areas. The Karen were still holding arms as a defense against the SPDC, but they had lost control over most of their former customs gates along the border that had supplied them with tax income from smuggled goods. Foreign funding agencies were unwilling to fund armed groups, exacerbating the KNU’s financial problems.

Many men were in the camp, directly or indirectly, because of Karen losses on the battlefield. If they had been soldiers before, they were now unarmed and unemployed. For Karen men who had spent decades fighting with the KNU against the Burmese military, the Burman-led turn toward nonviolent strategies within the opposition movement may have been a bitter pill to swallow. Some men’s resultant lack of occupation reportedly led to alcohol abuse, which has been reported by refugees and refugee leaders as a common cause of violence in the refugee camps ("The Most Silent", 2002). In Umphien Mai the use of amphetamines worried some women, who said their husbands used them, or that they knew someone who was using them and would at times become violent. So while armed struggle had become less relevant, in many ways undesirable, violence at the local level, in the camp and in the home, had not ended. Evidence suggests it may have been on the increase ("The Most Silent", 2002, Moe Moe, personal communication, May 24, 2000).

The battle seemed to have shifted for many of these men, from armed struggle to political struggle. Attending to the news seemed to have provided some former soldiers
with a means of feeling that their attention and energy was invested in something meaningful. One man explained why he found news so important:

We are people who struggle for our revolution. If we fight with weapons, we cannot fight. We know that the Burmese have many soldiers and good ammunition. Therefore, if we listen to the radio, we can know information about their political activities, and then we will know what to do politically. With our strength, we cannot prevail over them. So the information about Burma is really important for us.

This same man, however, echoed an implication made by others, that information was not necessarily relevant to them as refugees, reinforcing conceptions of the camp as apolitical.

I think of the radio like a school for me, because I understand and know about politics, education, trading and then about other countries' situations. ... If we know about these things, when we get to our country we can understand the system of education, of trading, and it will benefit us. If we cannot understand, we cannot do anything, so the information that comes is important for us to get.

Despite this man's passion for information, he saw it as necessary not for what he could do with it in the present, but for possible action later, "when we get to our country." This echoed statements by many of the refugees that there was little they could do in their current situation to improve their lot. When asked how the refugees could best get the information they need, he said, "it is not in our hands. People have to do this for us. It is also in our leaders' hands. We cannot do anything."

Similarly, comments about nonviolence or a halt in the fighting often made reference to external pressure for non-violence and for outside intervention, seen as necessary for a resolution of the conflicts in Burma. One man explained how the Karen
struggle for recognition as a "nationality" of Burma was changing as world opinion changed.

In the past, our KNU organization resisted for a long time, about 50 years already. But we still have not gotten our rights. However, nowadays with the fighting and the death all over the world, people shout that they no longer want fighting even a little bit. . . . We need the UN to arrange for us in a peaceful way so we can stay in unity to get our country and our rights. [italics added]

Karen losses on the battlefield and the emphasis on nonviolence meant that many KNU soldiers were in the camp without work, and some of these men seemed especially interested in the news as a means to keep involved in the struggle. Nevertheless, the refugees also expressed feelings of powerlessness to change their situation and a growing dependence on outside intervention. The refugees' feelings of impotence were reinforced by their perceptions of the Karen failure to achieve unity as a group, a topic to which I turn in the next section.

Unity

Many refugees rhetorically connected their struggle for freedom for the Karen with the theme of unity, which was consistently presented as something the Karen lacked. Perhaps most notable was that unity was presented as a Karen issue throughout these interviews, and was generally not associated with Burma's other ethnic groups. In fact it is remarkable how rarely the other ethnic groups were mentioned. The refugees said that they learned from the media that other peoples in the world were facing war and
oppression, but with few exceptions those they mentioned were not other Burmese peoples.

The references made to other groups often described the success of their struggles for freedom through unified effort, often in contrast to the failure of the Karen struggle and its lack of unity. One man wondered,

Not only Burmese, but Thais, they both oppress us . . . . I think about why our Karen people are so subjugated. Is it because we are not united?

Another man explained,

I see people play football nowadays and . . . they play with high-level and strange techniques. Then we use their techniques when we play. . . . I think in my mind about why we cannot play as other people play. It becomes a lesson. . . . The best footballers have teamwork with unity, and the result is victory.

The implication in this statement, that the Karen are not unified, was echoed throughout these interviews. In many comments, the lack of good news from Burma was associated with this lack of unity among the Karen. One woman said,

We hope to hear about our people staying in peace and cooperating. But we never hear about this. We hear only that we are faced with problems. We hope to hear that we can get our freedom, and that we can go back to our country. . . . If our people are unified, we can hear that.

The lack of unity was understood by these refugees as a failure of the Karen, and was not associated with their marginalization as a group. This led many refugees to imply or state outright that they and the other refugees were unable to contribute to the movement for change in Burma, which they felt must now be managed by outsiders.
Bourgois (2001) shows how the boundary between protector and coward is often ambiguous in counter-insurgency warfare, and how this ultimately "obfuscates responsibility from those primarily responsible for the terror" (p. 16). The psychological challenges of life as a guerilla warrior include dealing with the patterns of blame and feelings of betrayal over human failures that abound in situations of counterinsurgency warfare (Bourgois, 2001). These feelings of blame and guilt "contribute to a form of symbolic violence whereby survivors focus their recriminations on their fellow victims' as well as their own character flaws, rather than on the agents who actually perpetrated terror" (p. 13). This corresponds strongly with the narratives of the refugees, who associated their losses in the fighting with their own lack of unity rather than with the structural violence of their situation as Karen and as refugees.

The symbolic violence that manifests itself in feelings of guilt and inadequacy "divert[s] attention away from the repressive political violence" that makes it necessary to choose between survival and betrayal (p. 17). The example Bourgois (2001) gave will make this clearer. He told the story of a mother who, caught in a cave with two crying children making enough noise to give away their position to the Salvadoran military, was forced to choose between leaving the cave or stuffing rags into her children's mouths. After the two children suffocated, the woman's husband left her, and doubt remained as to the "moral worth of the hapless mother, yet again blurring the boundary between hero and villain in counter-insurgency war" (p. 18).
The role of outsiders

Over and over the refugees expressed the belief that outsiders were their primary source of hope for change. They appealed repeatedly to "the developed countries," to "Westerners," to "educated people," and to the UN and other organizations for guidance in achieving peace so they could return home. Many refugees made comparisons between the Karen situation and that of East Timor, which was often in the news at the time of these interviews. Some refugees admitted they were tired of waiting for change, and said that if they couldn't go home, they wanted to move to a third country. One 38 year-old woman said,

We want other people to help us. The people who have an education, the people who have high rank. For example, now we rely on the Westerners [white people]. We want them to help us, to ask for us to go back to our country. . . . Because our Karen don't have our own country, our lives are not easy. We want to ask Westerners to call us to their country and we will work for them as their servants.

Several refugees requested that the information they provided in these interviews be used to report on their situation to people who could help them. "I want the teacher to go back and write her thesis, and to write about our situation and report it," said a pastor. And another woman said, "I want to say that, like you come and ask like this, if you write and submit this information, we who live in the refugee camp want to go back and live in our country. . . . So, other countries' leaders, the whole world [should] consider our Kawthoolei case and try, and we will have a chance to go back and live in our country."
Although they wanted to return to Kawthoolei, the Karen refugees also expressed concern about reports that they might be forced to return to Burma soon.\(^{48}\) They wanted reassurance that they would not have to face violence from the Burmese troops once they returned. Most of them stated that they were relying on the UN for protection. "They will arrange to make peace with the Burmese and they will take care of us, provide us with food, and we know that the UN will open a school for our children," said one man.

Unfortunately, this optimism may be misplaced. Refugee lawyer B.S. Chimni (1998, 2000) has argued that the financial dependence of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on major donor countries has led to the gradual erosion of basic principles of refugee protection. There has been a paradigm shift in international refugee policy since the end of the Cold War, and refugees no longer hold the same ideological value they once did when they were welcomed into western countries as defectors from a communist system (Chimni, 1998; Matas, 1993). This shift has resulted in a containment policy, often framed as a kind of "compassion fatigue" (Lang, 2002), that has been called the "non-entree regime" (Chimni, 1998). This new policy approach calls not for resettlement in a third country but rather for providing assistance and protection to refugees in their geographic region of origin so they can eventually be voluntarily repatriated (Chimni, 1998; Matas, 1993).

This new refugee policy has itself been articulated through the language of human rights. In the post Cold War climate, humanitarian discourse and the concept of human rights have become central to the language of policymakers, who now appeal to the "natural" desire of refugees to return to their country of origin (Chimni, 1998). Matas

\[^{48}\text{The Thai government has on many occasions indicated its desire for the refugees' repatriation.}\]
(1993) has argued that although the language of human rights and humanitarianism has had a positive impact overall for refugees, humanitarian language at times weakens their legal protections by making resettlement a matter of discretion rather than law. Chimni (1998) has found that the policy of repatriation has been justified by the position that its denial violates the human rights of the refugees to return to their homes. He has called this the "repatriation turn" in refugee policy (Chimni, 2000). The shift to a goal of repatriation has led critics to charge that an increasing number of repatriations are actually involuntary. It also requires us to pay greater attention to the increase in the number of internally displaced peoples (IDPs) (Chimni, 1998, 2000).

These international trends affect refugees everywhere, including Thailand. During the Cold War, Thailand's population of Indochinese refugees was at first welcomed for resettlement in the West, because of their role as "potent symbols of foreign policy [which] implied a condemnation of the situation - that is, Communism - in the country of origin" (Lang, 2002, p. 91). Later, however, international refugee policy became more restrictive, and entry and resettlement opportunities gave way increasingly to containment and eventual repatriation. Chimni (1998) argued that this change in refugee policy internationally was justified through the creation of a "myth of difference" that represents the flow of refugees from the Third World as fundamentally different in nature from the refugees that flowed from Europe after the First World War. This argument posits that refugees from the Third World have been fleeing from problems arising from the instability of postcolonial states, which effectively masks the significance of external factors (Chimni, 1998).
Repatriation has not been a positive experience for Burmese refugees. Lang (2002) documents how Mon refugees from Burma taking refuge in Thailand became increasingly vulnerable to political circumstances that eventually culminated in their involuntary repatriation in 1996, in a process that "did not satisfy minimum refugee protection standards" (Lang, 2002, p. 123). A program of mass repatriation of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh in 1994, that both the Bangladeshi government and the UNHCR claimed was voluntary, was criticized by the U.S. Committee for Refugees and other relief agencies at the scene that contested its voluntary nature (Lambrecht, 1995). Ironically, the concept of rights has been used to justify a policy of repatriation while at the same time, discussion of these issues within some camps was suppressed by the pervasive climate of fear and the refugees' concerns that speaking with UNHCR officials would result in punishment by camp officials (Lambrecht, 1995). The discourse of rights, then, can be helpful for the refugees, but can also be used in ways that work against their interests, or at least limit their options for how they live their lives.

History shows us that different conceptions of human rights are used for various purposes, not all of them benign, and that one human rights focus often masks other human rights issues. Researchers, then, can fruitfully examine how different conceptions of human rights are being used, and then unmask what is being masked in any given situation, and to whose benefit. The next section examines how refugees in Umphien Mai spoke about rights during the course of open-ended interviews in which the concept of rights was not a topic of focus. Rights as a theme emerged during the analysis phase of this research, when it became clear that the refugees were using the term "rights"
regularly. The conceptions of rights they used, while dependent on who was speaking and in what context, tell us much about how the refugees themselves conceived of their needs. This then contributes to current discussions regarding the value of focusing on individual or group rights in situations of ethnic conflict.

Re-constructing lives: using a discourse of "rights"

In Burma, we didn't know what kinds of human rights exist for the people. Some people in Burma, they don't know about it, so BBC announces about this, and we can know about it.

When I returned to the border in 1999, a decade after I'd first arrived there, people had begun to refer regularly to their "rights," and to a whole collection of rights, such as human rights, women's rights, labor rights, child rights and ethnic rights. This body of "rights" has provided the Karen refugees with a discursive tool with which to seek help from the international community. Its use was noticeable by 1994 (Fink, 1994/1995). The fear of possible repatriation of the Karen refugees had prompted non-governmental organizations and others to teach the refugees about the protections provided them by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In addition, a large number of training workshops have been carried out along the Thailand-Burma border, including ones on human rights and the documentation of human rights abuses. Alternative media along the border have helped to reinforce the concept of rights by regularly reporting on rights abuses by the Burmese military. The popularity of the concept of "rights" among refugees and other dissidents can thus be traced to 1) the influence of international advocacy organizations, 2) the work of indigenous groups on
issues of human rights, and 3) an increase in funding for media and communications projects along the border.

Rights as discussed by Umphien Mai residents were occasionally interpreted as referring to the rights of individual refugees in specific cases, but most often rights were discussed in terms of Karen interests as a nationality. "I want to tell you, we are the Karen nationality, and as we are people in the world we want our country, our rights. Our culture and our literature should also stay with us," explained one man. In this and many other comments, rights were discussed as a means of protection against violence targeted towards the refugees as Karens. Precise definitions of "rights" were rarely offered throughout these interviews, but refugees often repeated the well-known promise made to the ethnic minorities by Burmese independence hero, Aung San. Referring to the Burmese currency, the kyat, Aung San used the phrase "Burmese one kyat, Karen one kyat" to reassure the minority groups that when the Burmese benefited from government expenditures, other groups would also benefit. One man said, "We are a Karen nation and we have suffered like that and we should have equal rights." When asked what he meant by equal rights, he answered, "It doesn't mean anything except that we want to stay in peace." What is clear is that the refugees had learned to use the concept of rights as a tool for dramatizing their plight, but also that they felt the greatest need to protect the rights of the Karen as a group, rather than emphasize their needs as individuals.

This is not to say that the concept of individual rights had no meaning for the refugees. Some refugees interpreted their rights as including fair treatment by the Karen leaders and equal access to resources. Explicit criticism of leaders was not common in
the interviews, but there were several refugees who did express dissatisfaction with the
Karen leadership. One man talked about a film shown in the camp by the non-
governmental organization Burma Issues, which obviously impressed him.

I watched the wife of a general ask a pastor to come and
baptize her son at their house. Then the pastor said, 'if you
want your son baptized, he must come and show himself at
the congregation, at the place where the congregation
decided to baptize people, and I can baptize him.' It is like
the people who have power . . . want to control all of us . . .
That pastor works for a lot of people. He did not favor
the general. He stood up bravely. . . . We are people and
each of us has our rights. We should not be afraid of
leaders, we do not need to worry about anything. . . . For
the [foreign] people who help us, their support should
arrive directly to the public. . . . People should not be
corrupt in our Karen refugee camp, [italics added]

Comments like this articulate the desire of individuals for freedom from intimidation by
the leaders, for transparency, and for an end to what some saw as an unfair system of
resource distribution in the camp. Used this way within the local context of the camp,
"rights" promoted individual claims against an unfair or corrupt camp leadership.

A rare statement critical of alternative media illustrates tensions between concepts
of collective rights for the Karen and the individual rights of the refugees. A middle-aged
teacher and camp office worker was critical in his assessment of press freedoms among
opposition media, in particular the Karen journal, Kway K'Lu.

The aim is one day we must have independence and books
must also be free. When we have our country I believe that
this journal will be free. But now they cannot do it
completely. For example, people are asking questions like
this: Why is our organization broken and why do we have
to scatter? Is it because of our leaders? And Kway K'Lu
mostly answered that "It is because of you [the public]" . . .
The way they answered makes it seem that [the newspaper] is not completely free.

This comment reflects the sometimes uncomfortable coexistence between the concept of rights couched in individual terms, such as the freedom to criticize the group leadership, and the perceived need for restrictions of these rights for the success of the group struggle. This man, who was more critical of the media than most, perceived of freedom of the press as possible only after independence, since right now "they cannot do it completely." He believed that press freedoms would be a **result** of liberty or independence rather than a necessary **prerequisite** to such liberty. This way of understanding "rights" was similar to arguments expressed by several political dissidents, who maintained that agitation for freedom of the press against the censorship of movement leaders, or for women's rights within the movement, required criticism that would undermined the unity necessary to achieve freedom from the military regime.

Despite the value placed on individual rights expressed by some refugees, the violent events discussed in the remaining sections of this chapter evoked an overwhelmingly communal sense of entitlement among the Karen that could not be effectively addressed with an approach to human rights that emphasized the rights of the individual. This reinforces the argument made by some scholars that the conceptualization of rights and the needs motivating people to claim them are very different given different positions within the social order (Chimni, 1998, 2000; Osaghae, 1996). A member of a former colonizing country has had very different experiences than those of a member of a former colony. A member of the elite group within a society has had experiences vastly different from a disadvantaged minority of the same nation. For
these various groups, and arguably because of this kind of diversity, a focus on both individual and group rights is necessary for managing conflict (Osaghae, 1996).

In discussions with Umphien Mai refugees, the concept of rights was employed to obscure some kinds of violence while highlighting others in ways that mimicked the strategic uses of rights language within the larger, global picture. When asked for examples of unusual media programs or articles they had seen or heard, the refugees brought up two events repeatedly. These were the October, 1999, seizure of the Burmese embassy in Bangkok by five armed men, and the takeover a few months later of the Ratchaburi hospital in January, 2000, by ten gunmen. Refugees' descriptions of these events illustrate the ways they understood their relationship with the Burmans and the Thais, and the degree to which their experiences as victims of violence and exploitation have shaped their conceptions of rights and their needs for protection.

Interpreting stories: Burmese Embassy and Ratchaburi Hospital incidents

On October 1, 1999, five young men calling themselves the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors stormed the Burmese embassy in Bangkok, taking the staff hostage using guns they had brought into the embassy in guitar cases. They asked first for amnesty for all political prisoners in Burma and for initiation of a dialogue between Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese military. When it became clear that the Thai government had no means of negotiating these issues with Burma's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the gunmen agreed to a deal in which they would get safe passage to the Thailand-Burma border. The Thai Deputy Foreign Minister, M.R. Sukhumbhand
Paribatra, accompanied them by helicopter to the border, where they slipped into Burma and took refuge with a splinter group of Karen soldiers calling themselves God's Army. Thailand's handling of the situation angered the Burmese, who closed their border with Thailand and drove Thai fishing boats from their waters.

After the embassy seizure, God's Army found themselves facing attack by the Burmese on one side, and shells from Thailand on the other. Many Karen civilians fled into Thailand to escape the shelling but were forced back across the border by the Thais, where they found themselves facing Burmese troops. Many of them then attempted again to flee back into Thailand, where they faced arrest and deportation for illegal entry. In late January, 2000, after watching the refugees being battered from both sides, a group of ten God's Army soldiers decided to take action. They hijacked a Thai bus near the border just before dawn and forced the driver to take them to Ratchaburi, the capital of the Thai border province, about an hour's drive away. The bus drove unhindered through this sensitive border area. The ten armed men went to the hospital in Ratchaburi, which they stormed with automatic rifles and grenades, taking several hundred staff, visitors and patients hostage. They demanded an end to shelling of the God's Army area, prosecution of the Thai general who ordered it, medical aid for their injured people, an end to what they alleged was cooperation between the Thai and Burmese militaries, and refuge for God's Army's followers in Thailand without having to pay "fines" commonly demanded of refugees in the region. As talks dragged on throughout most of the day, the gunmen were led to believe that they, too, would be granted safe passage to the border. But Thai

49 At this point, Thailand was reportedly trying to mend ties with the Burmese government by taking a stand against the group (Mitton, 2000).
special forces stormed the hospital in the early morning of the following day, killing all ten gunmen. Newspaper reports quoted eyewitnesses as saying that the men had been shot in the head after surrendering, leading to much criticism of the handling of the incidents and a debate in the Thai press. Critics of the Thai handling of the situation focused on the human rights abuses meted out to the ten gunmen, while others, including Thai Interior Minister Sanan Kachornprasart, maintained the gunmen deserved their deaths because of the terror and trauma they had inflicted on Thais (as cited in Mitton, 2000).

In the aftermath of these events, life became more difficult for Burmese in Thailand. Although most Burmese opposition organizations denounced both actions and denied ties with either group of commandoes, security tightened for the refugees and other Burmese living in Thailand. The events and their aftermath were important stories in international Burmese-language radio broadcasts and opposition journals produced in Thailand, and became an important topic of discussion among the refugees.

**Seizure of the Burmese Embassy**

Most notable about the refugees' descriptions of these events was how similar they were, and how the same images were repeatedly evoked. Although the refugees mentioned both episodes, the comments focused overwhelmingly on the takeover of the Ratchaburi hospital, which was seen as a "Karen" event because of its connection with the God's Army. Those that addressed the Burmese embassy siege did so in order to compare the two events.
For the most part, refugees who mentioned the seizure of the Burmese Embassy by the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors praised the action and cited it as a source of encouragement since it suggested to them that the world's attention might lead to a resolution of the country's conflicts. "Their work will be a benefit for other people," said one man who used to work as a medic with the KNU. "Because we heard about the embassy, our hearts grew stronger and we think we can have democracy quickly."

Refugees reserved their angry reactions for the Burmese government. They described the students as "asking for their rights" in events regarded as the inevitable outcome of the circumstances they were facing. One woman said, "Their work is good. . . . We got angry not at the students. We got angry with the leaders that did wrong to them and caused them pain like that. [They did this] because they wanted back their rights. . . . people did not give them enough rights. They had to act [italics added]."

Another woman explained that the students "entered the embassy and asked for rights, rights to get democracy. . . . What they did is right. We can say that because they did this, our hearts grow stronger about whether we can get our independence soon, like that [italics added]."

There was some ambivalence about the violent way the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors acted. Reactions tended to mix admiration with a conviction that although it might be inspiring, this kind of action would not be the "Karen way" of dealing with their troubles. These views were articulated by a 49 year-old man:

Our Karen people, even though we are oppressed by many things, we dare not do like the Burmese students do. The Burmese students are brave. Even if it is another country, they dare to go in with guns and they make the news spread
to the other countries and it also becomes a lesson. One way that we get a lesson is not to do like they do. We will struggle. Our Karen people love their people but we never act like the Burmese students do.

When asked how he felt when he heard about this, he replied, "Because we heard this news, it became a kind of encouragement for us to try to go ahead, to be at the same level as others. The others can do things, but we can't. So we need to try and think and study more." Thus, this man implied that the Karen way of dealing with such a situation would be less violent, but also less "brave." Only a few months later, however, ten God's Army commandoes struck in another act of violence on Thai soil, this one ending far less peacefully.

**Takeover of the Ratchaburi Hospital**

That the Karen sympathized with God's Army is clear from the way the refugees repeatedly characterized the ten men who entered the hospital as "the same people" as themselves, or as "our Karen people." The images that emerged from the interviews depict God's Army as "innocent," suffering pain for their people, no longer able to bear the oppression of the Burmese, asking for their rights, doing good things, making no mistakes in their plan, and then surrendering and being killed unfairly, thus "sacrificing their lives." As one person described the group, "the aim of the God's Army is to release their people from oppression and to fight for all Karen people. They are our Karen people also." A 73 year-old man described the God's Army commandos as men who "have great love for their people, and they were willing to sacrifice themselves. They didn't want a dispute, but because they suffered, they did it." One woman said, "For
many people they sacrificed. . . . They wanted the other countries that take responsibility to care for the refugees to know the things that they suffered.” The God’s Army commandos were described again and again as acting in the interests of the Karen villagers or the Karen nation. The refugees interviewed all expressed sympathy with them and almost all of the refugees condoned their actions, which were framed as a communicative act designed to throw a spotlight on the situation facing the Karen civilians trapped by the war.

Most of those who described the takeover of the Ratchaburi hospital did so using very similar terms, suggesting that the events had been discussed thoroughly. Many people began their account of the story by expressing surprise that it had happened at all. They said things like, "We have never heard of events in our nation like this," or "We did not think our people would dare to do this.” As mentioned earlier, the Karen refugees described themselves as peaceful people who in the past have chosen to move rather than fight over land with others. Many comments reinforced this social construction of the Karen as peace-loving people, fighting only in self-defense. Overall, the refugees felt the most disturbing aspect of the event was the killing of all ten God’s Army commandoes, a view reinforced by gruesome media images of the ten corpses.

People often referred to the pictures published in newspapers and broadcast on TV of the dead God’s Army commandoes in order to reiterate the insecurities they face as Karen in both Burma and Thailand. These pictures showed ten bodies lined up on the ground, their hands tied behind their backs, their heads wrapped in bloody white cloth. Many refugees questioned the Thai role in the events outright, such as this (male) pastor:
People asked them to put down their weapons. We read and it said that people tied their hands behind their backs and people asked them to take off their clothes. Then people shot them in their heads and they died. It is strange for me because a person who surrenders should not be killed. And why is this information not being accepted by Thai leaders? They did not tell the whole story. If it is true that God's Army fought with them, one of them should have died or been injured, even one. But no Thai people were injured.

This man agreed with sentiments many others expressed when he continued, "Because I read this information, I worry for our refugee people. Even though this country [Thailand] is a developed country and a democratic country, what they did to God's Army was crude, compared to other countries." The focus in these comments was on the appropriateness of Thailand's response, and the individual rights of the ten gunmen were portrayed as having been "sacrificed" for the greater good of the Karen people or nation.

Nevertheless, the violence at the Ratchaburi hospital contradicted the peace-loving aspect of the Karen self-image and caused concern about the reputation of the Karen. As one man put it,

the news said that people went and fought at the Thai hospital. . . . We know our Karen people and we know that we never harm other people, but now we heard that Karen people harm other people. . . . So, we feel unhappy about this. We don't think that our people would do this. But it was said by many people, so we feel that we are also harmed by bad words about our people.

"We also cannot say how other countries will see this incident," said one woman, "so we feel unhappy about this."

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This man, like others, used the term "people" euphemistically to refer to the Thai authorities.
The refugees dealt with this contradiction between their non-violent self-image and the Ratchaburi hospital violence by presenting the God's Army members as having had no other choice. An elderly man said,

They had no hope for any other way. And then they acted in this way and they all had to give their lives, and it became one thing that hurt us ... because the oppression came from the two sides of enemies, and these two sides of enemies strongly closed off their hope.

Rather than emphasizing the violence of storming a civilian hospital and taking many hostages, the refugees emphasized the potential for violence that remained unrealized through the restraint of the gunmen. No civilians were hurt. These comments were often juxtaposed with praise for God's Army, or employed the language of human rights to point out the perceived injustice of the situation. One young woman said,

Thai people said that [God's Army] went to oppress the Thais. But the Thais had been shooting them [when they were in Burma] until they could no longer stay, so they went [to Thailand] to ask for rights. But they did not torture or kill any nurses or doctors. They were very brave, but people [Thai government] killed them. . . . They did not make mistakes, so why did they have to kill them? [italics added]

Many of the refugees associated the concept of human rights with the Karen as a nation, and this became one means of explaining the actions of the God's Army members. One woman said,

Because of the situation of our nation, they were not eager to do it, but they had to do it. . . . Because of the fighting they had to intrude into the hospital and ask for human rights. . . . Rights, like the Thais should give them permission to come in [to Thailand], give them medicine and help the refugees and protect them from the fighting.
A middle-aged man reacted this way to the story.

If we look at human rights, they asked for help for their people who had to flee to Thailand because the Burmese attacked them. So they asked for medicine and treatment from the Thai authorities. Because we read this, we feel that God's Army soldiers are people who really love their nation [their people] until they die. [italics added]

The language of human rights is used here to refer to violations against the God's Army and the larger Karen "nation" as a group, and in this way draws attention to the structural violence causing such difficulties for Karen civilians.

Even those rare comments that were openly critical of the God's Army's actions still framed them as having been carried out valiantly on behalf of the group.

We heard from the radio that they surrendered and they did not hurt any patients in the hospital. . . . A leader among God's Army is Bay Da. The words that he said were "Our Karen refugee people, Burmese refugee people, how we endure problems in Burma, we are doing this to let the world know." This person gave his life, died for us. But the way he did it was the wrong way.

When asked why he saw their actions as "the wrong way," this man's response made clear that he was not willing to discuss the issue at length.

A hospital is a peaceful place, so they should not have gone and taken weapons with them. . . . There is one Burmese phrase, 'We do good works, but they become bad works.' I do not feel good for them, also because they are our own people. It is in the past already. We do not need to talk about it.

Although this man disapproved of the methods used by the God's Army commandoes, he is still appreciative of the soldier-heroes, who sacrificed their lives to publicize the
structural violence causing misery for the God's Army people. This act of loyalty had effectively quieted this man's criticism.

With few exceptions, the refugees were critical of the Thai response, yet many also felt the need to silence themselves on this issue, illustrating the refugees' insecurities regarding their situation in Thailand. One woman asked, "What did they do so that they were killed like this? We feel unhappy. For the Thais, because it is not their own people, after they did this, they said whatever they wanted to say about it. We just had to listen."

And a young man said, "In my mind, I feel that our people went [there] to do good things. They were killed for no reason, and there was no benefit, so I feel unhappy. But I don't say anything. It's in my mind." These acts of self-censorship demonstrate a fear of reprisals from Thai authorities. As an elderly man explained,

We are worried that if the Thai government doesn't like this, they will make trouble again for us and will force us back to Burma. . . . The war has not stopped, so that we cannot go back.

For several refugees, the fact that the gunmen were not stopped en route to the hospital was seen as evidence of possible complicity between the governments of Thailand and Burma. For example, one young woman said, "Unexpected things happened. God's Army did this and it was a surprise for me. . . . Ten people came into Thailand, and on the way there were no police to check them. Or did the Thais trick them?" An elderly woman explained,

I do not feel good because the Thai soldiers and Burmese soldiers are loving each other and oppressing our Karen people. They [Thai government] do not work in a just way.
They support the Burmese. Others get angry with the Thai and the Burmese.

Others emphasized the different outcomes of the two situations, which many attributed to Thai prejudice against ethnic minorities. One man said, "We are ethnic, not Burman. During the Burmese embassy siege, people [Thais] sent them [the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriros] to the border in a helicopter. As for our people, they [the Thais] shot and killed them without an investigation. They [God's Army] didn't kill anyone, so our heart is also not feeling good." And a middle-aged former KNU medic said,

The ten God's Army members who seized the hospital, they did not kill anyone and did not hurt Thai people. They went there to help their people . . . But if it is Burmese students, when they went and asked for rights [by seizing the embassy], they [Thais] helped them. But if it is God's Army, they killed them all.

These comments indicate the distrust of both Burmans and Thais that has accumulated during decades of warfare. "Once a Burman, always a Burman," is a phrase used frequently by Karen and other non-Burmans, indicating the degree of suspicion that still exists even of Burman opposition activists. Those who had direct contact with Burman students differentiated them from the Burman-dominated military government, but such comments were rare and overwhelmingly outnumbered by expressions of distrust. Such suspicion offered fertile ground for the various conspiracy theories that were hatched along the border, and contributed to the maintenance of militarism by creating fear, requiring extra vigilance and justifying heightened surveillance and security measures.

51This woman used the term "Burmese" to refer to the Burmese government.
The refugees clearly valued and made use of both individual and group conceptions of rights. As a general rule, they framed their most pressing concerns in terms of the Karen struggle and Karen needs as a group. There were occasions, however, when refugees emphasized the rights of individuals, especially when discussing problems in the camp requiring individual rights protection against corrupt leadership. Their use of groups rights indicates that the improvement of their situation depends not on a focus on individual civil liberties such as freedom of expression or the right to vote, but rather on those issues that would address the structural inequalities facing them as Karens that limit their options for bettering their lives.
Chapter 7

Violence, invisibility and the international order

Shortly after I arrived in Thailand in 1999, newspaper headlines featured "the Battle in Seattle" next to pictures of thousands of protestors thronging the streets of the city, demonstrating against the actions of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Coverage in the Thai press indicated that the protestors were there for various reasons. A primary concern for many, however, was their criticism of the governments of the most powerful nations and the multilateral trade bodies they largely control. Protestors criticized their lack of consultation over trade issues with the peoples of the world and the non-governmental organizations representing them. Groups from developing countries called for greater attention to the difficulties faced by their most marginalized citizens. Then in January, 2000, as described in the preceding chapter, ten God's Army gunmen were killed after they stormed the hospital in Ratchaburi. These two events felt like a symbolic opening to my fieldwork, and it occurred to me at the time that they were linked to the issues I was exploring in the Burmese opposition movement, although I couldn't yet identify how.

I see now that both events illustrated and contributed to the process of militarization globally, in particular to a militarization of media in which a focus on overtly violent events leads to representations of complex issues in simplistic black and white terms, and in this way obscures an underlying system of structural violence. I refer to the definition of structural violence offered by Philippe Bourgois (2001) and discussed
in Chapter 1. He defines the term broadly, as the organization of society in such a way that it imposes conditions of physical and emotional distress on people. The term "violence" is a necessary component of this concept because it underscores the extent to which global inequities lead to death through malnutrition and other less sensational means than death through overt violence. Scholars and activists, many from the South, have thoroughly critiqued the system of rules and restrictions controlling the planet's resources and global trade as organized by the major multilateral financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB) and World Trade Organization (WTO), and I will not detail those arguments here (Bello, 2000; Capdevila, 1999; Danaher & Burbach, 2000; Das, 1998; Khor, 2000, 2001; Raghavan, 1990; Shiva, 1996, 2000; WILPF, 1994).

The issue I would like to address is the extent to which media coverage of the overtly violent aspects of an event shapes how other aspects of the same event are framed, and how this influences what we believe about an issue. As Tehranian (1999) has argued, despite the attention paid to an issue during major flare-ups, contemporary violence is at root structural and largely invisible. He points out that while over 500,000 children die yearly from chronic diseases and malnutrition, the media focus much more attention on the 400,000 adults who die violent deaths each year. At the Seattle protests against the WTO, violence took physical form in the demonstrations in the streets, the aggressive police presence, broken windows, teargas, rubber bullets, and so on. But for many of the protestors, this distracted from their primary concern with the structural issues that have led to global inequities in access to resources, and to the discontent and
violence this engenders around the world. At the same time, many of the delegates from
the developing world participating in the WTO meeting were expressing anger at the
non-democratic practices of the organization, especially the African delegates, who
threatened to boycott the meeting’s closing statement, which in the end was never

Reports vary as to the content and impact of the media coverage of the WTO
protests. A study reported in the Columbia Journalism Review (Giuffo, 2001) critiqued
the reporting by major U.S. news outlets on the four largest anti-globalization protests
following Seattle (in Prague, Quebec City, Gothenburg, and Genoa) for its focus on the
anger of the protestors without providing adequate coverage of the context for that anger.
William Solomon (2000) found big differences in his comparison of the coverage of the
Seattle protests by the New York Times and Los Angeles Times with that of the
Guardian/Observer of London. In the Los Angeles Times, for example, he found that
"violence" was "defined solely as social unrest and damage to private property, not as
environmental damage and human suffering" (p. 17). In addition to the broader range of
issues concerning non-Americans covered by the Guardian/Observer, including the
views of disgruntled WTO participants from developing countries, Solomon (2000)
found that the mainstream U.S. media tended to trivialize the activists' perspectives,
"thus devaluing them and rendering them more compatible with corporate values" (p.
20). A report by the group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) maintained that
mainstream U.S. media "treated protestors' concerns with indifference and often
contempt" (Ackerman, 2000). Even those nonviolent aspects of the events that did receive coverage were widely sidelined by the media focus on the acts of overt violence by a fringe of protestors.

Studies by DeLuca & Peeples (2002) and Rojecki (2002) both determined that while the U.S. media tended initially to focus on the damage to commercial property caused by a small number of protestors, reports eventually appeared concerning the issues raised by those taking to the streets of Seattle. DeLuca and Peeples (2002) maintain that the violence that became an initial focus of the media's reports was in fact necessary to attract media attention, which in turn encouraged more extensive coverage of the issues. In other words, they argue that the violence caused the media to pay attention to the protests and in turn expanded the totality of coverage (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 144). Rojecki (2002) concurred that the media's initial coverage was superficial and trivialized the protestors' arguments. But he concludes that the coverage was characterized by an "evolving sympathy" with the Seattle protestors that reenergized a discursive pluralism and a "countervailing power" to unfettered mass markets, "in which the mass media may play a constructive role in building democratically responsive institutions" (p. 167).

Even the most optimistic of these observations make clear that the media tend to show an interest in overtly violent or controversial issues, and that at least initially, if they offer reasons for the violence at all, these reasons are generally superficial. Initial coverage misses entirely or at best glosses over the story of the underlying structural
violence that is commonly a root cause of the overt violence to begin with. To the extent that the media focus exclusively on overt violence and its victims, they deflect public attention from the victims of less sensational yet equally deadly effects of structural violence such as widespread global poverty and the disease, malnutrition, and general lack of access to resources that is its result. This is true of local reporting as well as reporting on events globally by international media conglomerates. Overall, then, the coverage of these events was militarized to the extent that it portrayed the complex issues involved in simplistic black and white terms. For anyone who has not studied these events in detail, such dichotomous images are what remain in our minds about the protests in Seattle, and I believe this is true of many of the complex stories covered in the media.

This chapter will revisit some of the issues discussed in this dissertation and place them within the frame of this larger global media context. First I will describe concerns raised by Burmese activists regarding the introduction of new information technologies (NITs) and funding patterns among opposition groups. I will then address the ways that the discourses of human rights and democracy have been used for both liberating and oppressive ends, and contend that we might usefully conceive of communication as a process that can be militarizing or demilitarizing in any given context. A discussion of group versus individual rights then leads to an examination of what implications all of

52 In many situations around the world, this structural violence implicates the operations of multinational corporations. The commercial press in the U.S., however, is unlikely to focus on that aspect of a situation. Studies of U.S. newspaper editorials have shown them to be heavily weighted towards the corporate perspective in matters of global trade agreements (Giuffo, 2001).
this has for political mobilization. Finally, I return to the discussion of gender. This research has made me aware of how deep-seated many of our gender stereotypes really are, including within myself, and how these stereotypes influence global patterns of militarization. In this way, what happens at the local level, as this study shows, both reinvents and mirrors events globally.

This dissertation has provided a detailed account of the environment for communication and media inside Burma (Chapter 3) and along the border (Chapter 4), including the development of a civil society in exile that includes an increasingly diverse set of voices. As Chapter 5 described, there is ongoing development and use of alternative forms of media along the border. NITs have been central to this process, used in many creative and innovative ways by those activists with access and training in their use. But this study has also revealed the complexity of the movement, with its tensions and internal divisions. The focus on these divisions will upset those in search of "unity" understood as consensus, who would rather not address such problems publicly, and who often maintain that the use of undemocratic means is a necessary and temporary shortcut to achieve the ultimate goal of democracy.

Ethnographer Philippe Bourgois (2001), in an article reflecting on his twenty years of fieldwork at sites of violent conflict, recognized in hindsight how the political context in which he was operating affected what he was able to document empirically and analyze theoretically. He explained how the Cold War context of his work in Central America led him "to sanitize. . . depictions of political violence and repression among revolutionary peasants" (p. 7). This, he argued, caused him to miss "the multi-sided
character of violence and the commonalities among its various subtypes across historical, cultural and political settings" and to "under-report and misrecognize the power of violence to buttress patterns of social inequality" (p.7).

Bourgois (2001) reflected on how he had seen structural violence at work in producing extreme social and economic marginality in East Harlem, but had been unable to recognize the same factors at play in El Salvador, where he took the violent radicalization of small farmers as a manifestation of "the liberating dynamic of political violence" (p. 11).

In highlighting the difference between direct political violence and invisible structural violence. . . I thought I was transcending Cold War ideology, but instead I merely mimicked it. . . I maintained a moral opposition between "worthy" political violence that rallies the subordinate in the face of repression by an authoritarian state versus "unworthy" violence that confuses and demobilizes the socially vulnerable in neo-liberal democratic societies. . . . I failed to see how political repression and resistance in wartime reverberate in a dynamic of everyday violence akin to that produced by the fusing of structural and symbolic violence during peacetime (Bourgois, 2001, p. 12)

Thus, what he categorized as "worthy" violence directly shaped what he was able "to see, hear and believe," what he interpreted as "data" and what he took fieldnotes on. Thus, Bourgois concludes, he was back then blind to the ways in which the revolutionary movement in El Salvador "was traumatized and distorted by the very violence it was organizing against. . . The government's brutality was transposed into the guerillas' organizational structures and internal relations, as violence became a banal instrumental necessity" in an environment where "gender power relations under rural patriarchy fuel
the coalescence of political, structural and symbolic violence to render even more natural the personal aggression that constitutes everyday violence" (pp. 19, 22). The concept of symbolic violence used here is intended to illustrate how those who have been marginalized at times collude in their own oppression by perceiving and judging the world through categories that make it appear natural and self-evident (Bourgois, 2001).

In the end, the centrality of structural violence... becomes obscured by a maelstrom of everyday violence... that in turn propagates a symbolic violence which convinces the dominated that they are to blame - at least partially - for the destitution and destruction visited upon them. (Bourgois, 2001, p. 29)

Bourgois (2001) concludes that the role of the ethnographer is to curb the urge to sanitize and instead "to clarify the chains of causality that link structural, political, and symbolic violence in the production of an everyday violence that buttresses unequal power relations and distorts efforts at resistance" (p. 30). I offer the findings of this work in an attempt to avoid such a dangerous sanitizing of the Burmese opposition movement. Discussing the structural and symbolic violence within the opposition movement is not likely to be welcomed by opposition activists, but addressing this violence is essential for efforts to demilitarize Burmese society, just as addressing these issues at the global level is essential to demilitarizing relations between all peoples of the world today.

The conflict in Burma is a local manifestation of a global environment of increasing militarization buttressed by gender and ethnic inequities. The statistics on war and conflict provided in the opening chapter tell the story of global militarization in the abstract. The framework outlined in Chapter 4 indicates who has access to which
communications technologies and media within the Burmese opposition movement, and addresses in general terms the issues posed by the first of my research queries: what communications technologies are being used, and by whom, among the Burmese opposition groups based in Thailand?

Scholars have also shown that militarization is upheld by ideas about the "proper" uses of technologies, and that such "practices involving technology are constituted (i.e. understood and undertaken. . . ) . . in and through relations of gender" (Rakow, 1988, p. 67). In other words, men and women make use of technologies as they perform work commonly associated with their gender, and in this way the technologies themselves become gendered in the process. Therefore, technologies are one means through which gender differences and hierarchies are both constructed and maintained. As discussed in Chapter 1, gendered hierarchies are used to construct and maintain other types of hierarchies, such as racial hierarchies. This is useful to keep in mind while addressing the second issue raised in this research: how NITs, specifically computers and the Internet, are helping to reduce, maintain, or intensify ethnic conflict within the movement. To understand this, it is necessary to examine the overall impact as well as the specific changes brought about by the introduction of NITs.

**Impact of NIT use and consequences of funding patterns**

The use of the computer, e-mail and Internet has changed the work of the opposition groups in several ways, not least of which is an increase in the pace of their work. E-mail offers a solution to international time differences and the rapidity with

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53 See Chapter 1, pp. 24-31.
which information now travels has enabled the Burmese and other activists to make use of information in a timelier manner to lobby governments and obtain funding. Once communication was simplified, the funding began coming more quickly, and was more useful, since it generally arrived, as one activist put it, "before the situation deteriorated" (personal communication, March 6, 2000). It also became possible for the first time to organize a campaign simultaneously in countries worldwide in rapid response to events unfolding in Burma. All of these changes indicate a professionalization of the opposition, and the desire of many activists to be part of an organization or movement respected for its transparency and effectiveness.

The trend toward professionalization reflected the desire of writers and other media activists to write without pressure from political groups, but was also promoted by external funding groups. For example, foreign scholars, funders and other friends criticized the early control exercised over the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) radio station by the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). As a result, in 1996, a new director was appointed who has emphasized training in journalism and fundraising in order to diversify the sources of DVB’s funding (Khin Maung Win, personal communication, August 23, 2000). Many of the organizations providing financial support for opposition media encourage or require the media they are funding to remain independent of political organizations, yet they are also required to have the skills necessary to apply for funding. Most funding agencies themselves operate with restrictions on how they can distribute their money, and the arms used in the struggle by ethnic minority groups has kept funders away. Thus, the emphasis on writing skills and
the move away from armed struggle has served to widen the digital divide between the Burmans and the non-Burmans within the movement, especially those who are still armed.

The Burmans in general have had greater success in finding support to gain access to NITs, and thus to the freedoms these technologies provide, despite the efforts of projects such as the Ethnics Online project (discussed in Chapter 4) to change this. The introduction of NITs has also made movement easier for many activists with access to them who need to remain agile in the uncertain environment in Thailand. In the past, when for security reasons the ABSDF moved to a new office, they had to contact all the people they corresponded with to inform them of their new mailing address. Inevitably some messages would fall through the cracks. With the use of e-mail and cellphones, however, they could move and still receive their messages. These technologies have helped activists with access to them to overcome some of the obstacles to effective communication in the militarized environment of surveillance in Thailand.

Nevertheless, Internet use also reflects inherited behavioral patterns from life under military rule, such as the spread of misinformation about rivals within the opposition. In a hypothetical case provided by DVB founder and ABSDF member Khin Maung Win, "ABSDF wants to promote the ABSDF's role, so the NLD or KNU or DPNS would not be happy, because being popular is one way to become a leader in the near future" (personal communication, August 23, 2000). As a result, he said, misinformation campaigns targeted others within the movement in addition to those in the Burmese regime.
The influx of money into the border area in the last decade also created friction between groups. The struggles between opposition groups and schisms within groups often manifested themselves in accusations of misuse of or dependence on foreign funding. Many of the non-Burmans I spoke with resented what they felt was an inordinate degree of international support for the Burmans while they were forgotten. Although the Burman opposition's calls for democracy and human rights merged nicely with the foreign policy concerns of the U.S. and other western powers, many minorities were not convinced that their concerns for equal representation and respect would be taken seriously by a new Burman-dominated government. In addition, a widening gap was noticeable between the elite of the opposition and its grassroots, in part due to the increasing professionalization of the movement.

**Professionalization and foreign funding**

The preponderance of group splits and fighting over funding suggests that the particular form Burmese political factionalism takes had been sustained, if not exacerbated, in the Thai context where followers were especially dependent on leaders for their livelihood. An additional unintended consequence of border life and the reliance on external funding for survival appeared to be an emphasis on organizational and funding logistics that critics said had grown in some cases to supercede the struggle itself. Critics argued that the increasing professionalization of Thailand-based activists, while positive in that it helped groups gain the skills necessary to apply for funding, also tended to shift their focus from work to support the movement as a whole to the survival of the
group and its funding base. One activist suggested that funders' attempts to get groups to diversify their funding sources had encouraged a belief among activists that they had a better chance to get funding by starting a new organization than by working with already established ones. By funding almost all projects during their initial proposal period but then gradually reducing this funding in subsequent years, funding agencies had provided activists with an incentive to periodically start entirely new organizations to ensure at least continued funding, if not increased amounts. "Some people think, 'Oh, we'll just create a new organization and we'll just apply for whatever amount we can get,'" one activist explained (personal communication, August 23, 2000). In addition, personal relationships between members of specific funding agencies and the groups they fund had reportedly contributed to factionalism among the funding agencies themselves. Although activists recognized that funding agencies had begun to address some of these issues by increasing their coordination, these concerns are worthy of more extensive exploration and discussion.

Several activists who had arrived at the border in recent years were critical of the activities of their fellow students, in exile since 1988. There was the sense that border activists were often out of touch with what was going on inside the country, and that their activities outside were in many ways irrelevant to those inside. For example, Bo Kyi, a former political prisoner who had recently arrived at the border, did not openly criticize border activists, but emphasized that he was not interested in the internal politics of the exiled opposition groups. "I work together with them if we have the same idea, but especially for the struggle, not for any organization. I'm not interested in any
organizations, but in the struggle." When I asked him if he thought the activists on the border were not interested in the struggle, he said, "Many people are interested in the struggle, but some people may be interested in themselves." He then went on to say that while many border activists had good relations with those inside, others did not (personal communication, August 18, 2000).

It is also important to examine critically patterns that privilege funding for specific activities for different groups, in the process contributing to greater perceived differences between these groups. Broadly, women have primarily gained funding for technologies intended to support income-generation, such as looms and sewing machines, or community development, such as typewriters and other low-tech library and school supplies. Ethnic minorities have been widely supported for the portable technologies necessary to document human rights abuses and for the subsequent development of ethnic media, which features news of human rights abuse. Burman leaders and some ethnic leaders, mostly men, have received support for technologies promoting the crafts of state: political diplomacy, lobbying, and state-building efforts. Without exception, the Burmese I spoke with associated new information technologies (NITs) with progress and "development," and this indicates the perceived inequities from the perspective of those without access to these new technologies. Yet while inequities in access to NITs were frustrating to some ethnic leaders, women, and refugees, others did not feel the need for access given their understanding of themselves as apolitical. This self-concept was due at least in part to conventional and unquestioned understandings of who does what best
within the opposition movement. These attitudes have been reinforced by conventional and narrowly-defined concepts of human rights and their relationship with democracy.

**Human rights discourse and democracy**

Human rights and democracy are widely-used concepts framing the debates and discussions among refugees, activists, NGO workers, journalists and foreign supporters involved with Burma. This dissertation has explored the ways in which global media and the discourses they promoted have been used by the opposition. As I have illustrated, there have been both positive and negative consequences of the dominance of these discourses.

Human rights discourse has proven an effective tool for both Burmans and non-Burmans to advocate on their own behalf. The opposition has made good use of NITs to employ the language and symbols of human rights in order to win sympathy for their cause and increase international attention to the abuses occurring in Burma. The discourse of human rights has also turned a spotlight on the Burmese regime, forcing them to at least mimic a situation of transparency, in which they must either refrain from oppressive practices such as forced labor, or work hard to make them invisible. The human rights focus has also prompted opposition media to print articles about the struggles of the various ethnic groups in Burma in order to clarify for the Burmese and the rest of the world the systematic patterns of abuse taking place around the country. Some people believe that the focus on human rights, as one activist put it, has noticeably "improved the behavior and thinking" among workers and refugees. Saw Min Lwin of
the Federation of Trade Unions, Burma (FTUB) told me that their trainings in workers' rights and strategies for acting in unity when dealing with management had made an impact. He gave an example of female factory workers who were often the target of sexual harassment or abuse on the job. Saw Min Lwin noticed that some of the women had begun banding together to protest this type of treatment, and saw this as a sign that workers were beginning to recognize and act on their rights (personal communication, May 31, 2000).

But the emphasis on human rights has also reinforced stereotypes of both women and non-Burman groups primarily as victims, and this was depressing for many people I spoke with. There was a feeling among some, for example, that the focus on human rights had become excessive.

People get scared. People are already scared. There is fear. You have to tell them to do something. Courage! Create the stories to have more courage, not to tell people about the scary, scary army unit that came to [a village], killed all the people, raped all the women. That's also very depressing. I think we've got to change. (Aung Zaw, personal communication, April 18, 2000)

An article in a recent edition of *Burma Issues*, an alternative publication focused on grassroots organization, addressed just this issue by pointing out how rarely the nature of conventional human rights reporting is critically examined (Miller, 2002). The article noted that although frequent training sessions on international human rights standards and methods of documentation have been held for individuals and groups along the border, the documentation of abuses, when stripped of contextual data including the cultural and economic realities of the situation, "becomes universal and quantitative in nature" (p. 2).
As the process of human rights abuse documentation becomes "institutionalized" both within organizations and within villages, and with the documentation of abuses often used as the basis for funding, "it becomes imperative for information collectors to vigorously seek out incidents of human rights abuse" (p. 2), leading to a devaluation of other aspects of villagers' lives, including the ways in which they are active agents of their own lives rather than solely passive victims. The article maintained that the social and psychological side effects of this continuing process are rarely acknowledged, but suggested that to avoid these negative consequences, each incident of abuse should be contextualized so that marginalized people are recognized by others as effective participants in their own lives. The extent to which the refugees interviewed for this study felt unable to affect changes in their own lives indicates how stereotypes of refugees as victims can become internalized. Yet there are many stories of courage and tenacity that could also be told. I remember the first time I sat among a group of refugees that had just fled from attacks on their villages inside Burma. Clustered together on blankets and under plastic sheeting that had been erected hurriedly, these refugees talked and laughed at the antics of the small children. They were not sullen and defeated. While I found myself depressed with the gravity of the situation they faced, I was surprised and heartened by the resilience of those around me. At dissonance with my own reaction to the situation was the fact that disruptions like this were commonplace for these people, and while they were not pleased with the situation, they had learned to move on. I could not imagine a group of Americans reacting with the same sense of calm and equanimity.
As far as alternative media is concerned, Aung Zaw warned that an overemphasis on reporting human rights abuses also brands those who do this reporting as "junk news makers" rather than professional, independent journalists whose work would be remembered as helpful or useful in the years to come. Credibility, argued Aung Zaw, is fragile, and this fragility is a real source of danger for those opposition activists working in the media. Some feel, for example, that the news and reporting from the DVB "is still very, very one-sided, very much in line with the [party line of the] opposition, which gives them a bad reputation" (personal communication, April 18, 2000).

It is perhaps not surprising that those labeled primarily as victims have begun to express concern with the emphasis on human rights abuses and other bad news. Saw Thaw Thi, for example, admitted that a few readers had complained that the news in *KwayK'Lu* was all bad, and that this had made them feel lonely and depressed. "So we have to encourage them," he told me, "that you are not alone. All the people at the grassroots level, they are suffering like you. . . . [We have to] encourage each other, 'Hey Karen, we are not alone. Let's rise up and stand for our rights'" (personal communication, July 24, 2000). The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) also received some negative feedback from the readers of their journal *Our Time* who complained because they felt the journal included a lot of news about people's suffering, but not enough about the positive developments in Mon communities. One letter writer argued that these positive developments included the successful struggle for everyday survival, and for the establishment and survival of Mon schools and the Mon language. "There are so many positive things, he said, 'so please write about this information also.'
And we agreed, we agreed," said Nai Kyin Shwe (personal communication, July 22, 2000). Thus, there was a growing sense among those I spoke with that the opposition needs to move beyond the common stereotypes of refugees and rural villagers as simple, unsophisticated people and to portray people at the grassroots as the active decision-makers they are rather than merely as passive victims of fate. The need to recognize these positive aspects of the human ability to respond to tragedy, however, is at odds with a media system that requires violence and controversy as a driving force.

**Militarism, information and propaganda**

Many in the opposition, including Karen refugees in Umphien Mai, used media as a means of reinforcing the values they held as individuals and as a community, and as a means of interpreting and explaining the circumstances in which they found themselves. The stories they told and the ways they read and understood the media reveal a great deal about the militarization of their everyday lives. This was reflected in the way they described their media use. The refugees were most interested in stories detailing the kinds of disruption they had faced all their lives, and related especially gruesome stories of violence against women and young girls to symbolize the essence of the evil forces the Karen face. These images also helped to propagate conventional concepts of masculinity and femininity and to justify men's violence with the understanding that they were the primary protectors of the community. This worked to keep women out of the formal power structure and in this way prioritized things associated with men and their power struggles, such as armies, security, and the use of communications technologies. These
priorities were then further justified by the association of negative characteristics with women, such as "talkative" behavior, described by men as untrustworthy and dangerous.

Some opposition activists acknowledged that this militarized thinking is characteristic of the regime and its attitude toward information and media, yet is often reproduced within elements of the opposition leadership for whom the ends at times is used to justify an undemocratic means. Another opinion, however, was that the use of e-mail had begun to change militarized concepts of technologies and information. For some activists, the practice of keeping information secret had been a means to establish control or express power. But this had made it difficult to coordinate with each other or communicate with the regime, and the use of the Internet made it increasingly difficult to keep information from spreading. "Things are getting into the media, one way or another, so you can't hide," activist Win Min told me. "You can't make yourself powerful through keeping information. You have to share the information." In fact, he argued, sharing information had become not just a responsibility but also a means of establishing legitimacy. "People are trying to share information as much as they can, so it makes them look like they are in the movement and they are doing something" (personal communication, March 6, 2000). He also said that this had increased communication with the regime, albeit indirectly. "Previously, the regime didn't know what we wanted to do, and we didn't know what the regime wanted to do. So we are sharing more and more of this information" (personal communication, March 6, 2000).

Nevertheless, the activists I spoke with did not go so far as to say that this was encouraging a genuine dialogue with the regime. As one activist put it, "They think that
dialogue and compromise are weakness. So they don't want to engage in dialogue because people will think they are weak. . . . The regime will only think about dialogue when they are really, really weak." Old patterns die hard, and several activists acknowledged that this was not limited to the regime. "That's the main problem in Burma, not only in the regime but also in the movement. . . many people rarely compromise with each other," explained Win Min. For this reason, he argued, sharing the information on the Internet would not by itself lead the regime to accept a dialogue with the opposition. Instead, he believed that the use of NITs would strengthen the democratic opposition, which in turn would force the regime to the table (personal communication, March 6, 2000).

For many in the opposition, familiar ideas about the relationship between information and power had begun to change. Only recently, for example, had the value of "propaganda" been questioned within the opposition. As Khin Maung Win explained,

> We did not know about journalism. What we called it was propaganda. Even in the organizations, you will hear sometimes about the Propaganda Department. We thought that this is information, this is true, and since we are involved with information activities, we can say whatever we want. This is what people even in the democracy movement think, (personal communication, August 23, 2000)

The ABSDF had a Propaganda Department at one time, he explained, but this had changed as the students heard more about the importance of a free press and responsible journalism. These ideas had come about as a result of training programs, pressure from outside organizations or critics, and in some cases because of a change in an opposition group's leadership.
Communication is a process, and approaches to that process can become militarized in any media system, from the most authoritarian to the most democratic. Militarized approaches to communication include the tendency to emphasize the divisive and violent aspects of a situation, focusing on the immediate and short-term consequences and in this way masking structural violence and its long-term consequences. Looking at the militarization of the process of communication is more useful than sticking to static models of democratic or authoritarian media systems, as it allows us to see the characteristics these two "opposite" kinds of media systems have in common. In addition to a focus on overt violence, this includes the increasingly frequent conceptualization of information as commodity.

The commodification of information

For the Burmese opposition, the Thai context and the availability of foreign funding contributed to the commodification of information, which had become a key resource in border diplomacy between the opposition groups and between these groups and outsiders. Visits by Thai military intelligence (MI) were a regular occurrence in the local offices of the Burmese opposition groups, and not usually cause for alarm. Offering information about developments inside Burma to their Thai hosts ensured activists a degree of freedom to move around safely in Thailand. This relationship had a history; the Thais years ago established listening posts at several places along the border, including Mae Sot, and many of these posts employed radio intercept operators and translators (Ball, 1998). The Thais had also worked with the Karen to intercept the radio
communications between Burmese military units for some time, including operating a joint signals intelligence (SIGINT) station during the 1995 battle for the last remaining Karen army stronghold of Wangkha, across the border from Huaykaloke refugee camp (Ball, 1998). This is a history populated by men, in which women are for the most part absent or invisible.

Information had also become a tool used to obtain and maintain funding from NGOs and other agencies. Gathered in various forms, information was used to provide material for newsletters and reports, and to post on the Internet, increasing one's legitimacy within the opposition movement. Information has always been commodified for presentation in printed works (including this dissertation), and there have always been attempts by opposition groups to promote their own viewpoints to the writers of such works. Yet as groups have begun to write their own accounts of events and to push for their own agendas, information has become an increasingly important resource for which groups in the opposition movement and their supporters compete.

Activists expressed significant concerns regarding this emphasis on information. First, it was beneficial and sometimes necessary to prove to funders that they had accomplished something with their grant money. The need for proof could be risky for the activists inside Burma, and had increased tensions between activists on both sides of the border. As Win Naing explained, "Every funder who gives money would like to see accountability, proof. So some people draw up a program or project that leaves people inside in a difficult situation that they cannot implement" (personal communication, August 15, 2000). One way to prove that work was being accomplished was for groups
to produce information about what was happening inside Burma. This led Win Naing to argue that

some people are focusing on information, information, information, and not on the work... If you have more information, you have more credibility and more funding. Like I have a connection with the inside, so I got the message. This is proof... we are like journalists. What about the political activities? We need to balance the work. For example, organizing the students’ affairs inside - how can we show the report? Should we write their names, addresses, and show their photos? If we buy a house from their budget, should we take a picture to show it? Some of the work we can’t prove, (personal communication, August 15, 2000)

The need to prove that one's group was accomplishing something had set up a troubling situation in which the arrest of an underground (UG) member involved in dangerous information-gathering inside Burma could be held up as reassurance that risks were being taken and work was actually getting done inside. In this situation, a focus on the violent consequences that occur when UG activists inside are harassed or arrested at times had the unanticipated consequence of helping groups outside obtain, maintain or even increase their funding, thus increasing the "value" of such violent consequences for those groups.

**Dependency and neocolonialism**

Despite the space for public discussion opened by opposition media, several media staff members voiced important concerns about a growing dependency on outside interests, to which I will add a few cautionary remarks. Several staff members mentioned to me that the emphasis placed on the independence of opposition media was at least in
part (and in many cases in large part) motivated by the expectations of funding agencies. This was especially true when it came to media that had previously been identified as mouthpieces for political organizations. Khuensai Jaiyen admitted that it was partly the need for funding that drove the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN) to make the transition to an independent news organization. The first funding they received independent of the Shan political movement was from the Open Society Institute (OSI), which agreed to fund them only after several prominent Shans wrote letters on their behalf with assurances that the SHAN was no longer associated with the opium warlord, Khun Sa. Their previous association with Khun Sa also got in SHAN’s way when they applied for funding to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which turned down their first proposal. After investigating, the NED eventually agreed to fund the SHAN, which helped to increase their profile (Khuensai Jaiyen, personal communication, June 28, 2000).

While the short-term impact of external funding had helped to open crucial space for dialogue between opposition groups, it had also created a dependence on this funding and a media culture increasingly shaped by Western journalistic values and a professionalization of the media. As Hamilton (2000) warned, the professionalization of media tends to separate media producers from their audiences, and rather than encouraging those who are not producers to participate in the communicative process, it encourages them to be merely consumers of information. "In this way, the social goals of building an active, resilient, indigenous, and democratic popular movement or coalition
of movements are impaired from the start by the imposition of such individualizing social
relationships” (Hamilton, 2000, p. 361).

Burmese activists were sensitive to charges of neocolonialism, and what they
seemed to fear most was the threat of being pressured or influenced to change their work.
Aung Zaw expressed his worries about the National Endowment for Democracy's
funding for the *The Irrawaddy*, and especially about his magazine's future.

> When we go back to Burma, how will we print it? We could be politically sensitive because we received this money . . . But I want to run *The Irrawaddy*, I think it is a good magazine, and we've gotten lots of good feedback. But to continue our operation I have to get the money, as long as there's no interference. So far there is no lecture, no interference. If they do so, we will tell them "get out." (personal communication, April 18, 2000) \(^54\)

Despite the insistence of many opposition media staff that they were independent,
many of them were reliant to a certain degree on the political organizations from which they desired independence. This was the case because these media needed to use the
networks of the political organizations for distributing their newsletters and journals
inside Burma. While the media staff members often felt strongly about and promoted

\(^54\) Developments since this interview demonstrate that *The Irrawaddy* has reason to fear interference. After the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington D.C., *The Irrawaddy* published an editorial critical of U.S. foreign policy. During a panel discussion at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand in May, 2002, the U.S. charge d'affaires in Rangoon, Priscilla Clapp, openly chastised the magazine's editor, Aung Zaw, claiming the editorial said that "America deserved the attack of September 11\(^{th}\)” and that the editorial did "not go unnoticed in Washington” ("Envoy Blasts,” 2002). The editorial, while critical of U.S. foreign policy, did not endorse the attacks on the U.S. Staff members at the magazine have said that the NED has attempted to interfere with editorial decision-making, and that junior diplomats from the U.S. embassy in Bangkok have visited the magazine's office to express displeasure with articles perceived as critical of the U.S. ("Envoy Blasts,” 2002). At the time of this writing, Aung Zaw was uncertain of the status of continued NED funding for *The Irrawaddy* (personal communication, September 24, 2002).
independence from the political leadership, they nevertheless had to negotiate this relationship in terms of their ability to get their newsletter distributed.

Although none of the people I spoke with during my fieldwork in Thailand reported feeling pressured to change their work by funding agencies, several people raised this as a concern without any prompting from me, even if only to insist that should any such pressure occur, they would not accept it. This indicates an underlying fear of dependency that is at times apparent in the content of opposition media, as in this cartoon (below) from the Karen journal *Kway K’Lu*.

![Cartoon from Kway K’Lu, February 29, 2000](image)

**Woman:** Oh my son, you must have had enough.  
**Woman:** Saw Pa Kaw, it’s really enough now.  
**Woman:** There, here comes your stepfather.\(^{55}\)

**Boy:** No.  
**Boy:** No.  
**Boy:** Release me quickly, I tell you!

**Figure 18.** Cartoon *from Kway K’Lu*, February 29, 2000

\(^{55}\) “Stepfather” here is used to refer to someone cruel or cunning.
Saw Thaw Thi, the editor of *Kway K’Lu*, interpreted this cartoon to mean that although this boy is no longer a child, he still wants to be breastfed. "I think the idea is that people inside Thailand, they still want to be fed by the NGOs, they do not want to work." But the dress of the man in the final panel indicates that he is Thai, and Saw Thaw Thi explained that the cartoon is warning readers that there will come a time when they may want to run away from Thailand. "This is Thailand, not the Karen land. Being satisfied in Thailand has no, what can we call it? It is not reliable" (personal communication, July 24, 2000).

Win Naing pointed out the relentless nature of the SPDC’s propaganda about dependence on neocolonialist outsiders, and maintained that the Burmese must decide what is to be done and then act for themselves. Outsiders’ attempts to enter Burma and change the country should be discouraged, and as an example explained how the Burmese government reported the story of the "Rangoon 18" incident (discussed in Chapter 4) to the Burmese people. "The SPDC showed them the people in the newspaper, saying 'we didn't arrest them. We settled the case.' They showed it as though they were really flexible." He maintained that this kind of message, repeatedly endlessly as it is inside Burma, has a significant impact on people's thinking (personal communication, August 15, 2000). Aung Zaw argued that the best role for foreign funding agencies would be to provide financial or technical assistance, such as training in journalism, without interference in the editorial policies of the media outlets they finance (personal communication, April 18, 2000). It would be unfortunate, however, for this kind of training to preclude the development of indigenous forms of communication that
don't conform to the standards of Western journalistic notions of professionalism. Such a professionalization can be intimidating for those without advanced skills who would otherwise be motivated to participate, and who might also be inclined to counteract the media's tendency to emphasize violence and controversy with stories about their community's resilience in the face of adversity.

**Group vs. individual rights and the digital divide**

While activists did not explicitly discuss this, many alluded to the tensions between different concepts of rights in their discussions of technology use. One of the perceived threats of new technologies was their use to promote the goals of individuals or small groups rather than those of the movement as a whole. "If you know how to use it constructively, it's very effective, very good," said Aung Zaw. "But also could be very harmful. You become addicted to it. You sit there," he said, laughing, "divorce rates in America . . . husband and wife sit there, glued to an Internet computer, and they forget everything. That could be very harmful, I think" (personal communication, April 18, 2000). Others alluded to the individualistic nature of some groups' approaches to NIT use, accusing them of using their access to promote only their own group rather than the opposition struggle as a whole (Hkun Okker, July 5, 2000).

Win Min expressed a concern with an unregulated freedom of expression that was echoed by many people I spoke with, and reflected a desire for balance between rights and responsibilities.
In the Burmese movement, sometimes you see too much criticism on e-mail. Some is not necessary, just ridiculous accusation . . . . This is a side effect of the quick freedom of information . . . . People get freedom, they can write anything they want, there is no censorship. Some of the people use the advantage a lot, and say whatever they want. They don't care about ethics or friendship, you know. They go beyond. So it's no good. But on the other hand, it makes people more transparent. (personal communication, March 6, 2000)

Reflecting the influence of their international supporters, the Burmese opposition movement narrowly defined what was considered "political," and its rhetoric most often emphasized the need for political and civil rights. This relegated economic, social and cultural rights to a different set of categories, such as "development" or "capacity building." This made invisible the political nature of marginalization and how it was accomplished and maintained through a hierarchy of rights that was gendered and racist in its construction. These limited conceptions of what was "political" also exacerbated the digital divide and the corresponding knowledge gap among elements of the opposition. Many women and refugees expressed their belief that they had no use for communications technologies, since they had no political or security-related business. There was also a palpable feeling of despondency among many people I interviewed, especially the refugees, who often expressed the belief that they were not capable of contributing toward change. This has serious consequences, undermining efforts to motivate people to take part in the movement. This also brings us to the final issue posed in my initial research query: what implications do these findings have for efforts towards political mobilization?
Human rights and political mobilization

The discourse of rights, unlike the rhetoric of unity, seemed to provide refugees and other members of the opposition with a means of understanding their own situation in relation to the larger struggle for rights in Burma. The concept of unity was used by the refugees, for example, to refer to the unity of the Karen as a group, and primarily with the Karen failure to unify. The refugees did not use the concept of unity to refer to their relations with other Burmese peoples. Several refugees, however, used the concept of rights in connection with the larger national struggle for rights in Burma. The discourse of rights also offered activists and refugees a means to express their needs and concerns in rhetoric understandable to outsiders, including aid agencies. Funding for Burmese opposition media promoted democracy and nonviolence, and the discourse of rights fit these goals in ways that had proven useful for refugees in their attempts to publicize the violence perpetrated against their people. In this way, rights rhetoric provided a discourse for establishing what Chandra Mohanty (1991) would call "common contexts of struggle" between the Karen and others. It became a far more unifying concept than that of unity itself, and far more successful as a tool of political mobilization.

Perhaps because the concept of human rights is so useful as a tool for advocacy, there is not much critical attention to the concept itself among those NGOs and other supporters of marginalized peoples around the world who most actively evoke the concept in their work. The criticism that does exist is hardly a feature of mainstream or even alternative media coverage of human rights issues around the world. The most publicized critique of Western notions of human rights is summed up by the "Asian
values” argument espoused by the leaders of several Asian governments, such as Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore’s elder statesman, Lee Kuan Yew. They claim that Asians have a unique set of cultural traits that need protection, including hard work and discipline; an emphasis on the family and on social harmony; a paternalistic approach to politics valuing respect for elders and other authority figures; consensus-building; centralized decision-making; and patron-client relationship patterns (McDaniel, 2002; Pravit, 2000). This idea has been roundly critiqued by critical Asian scholars such as Chandra Muzaffar (1993), who is also critical of the concept of human rights as it is used by Western human rights organizations working in developing countries. Muzaffar (1993) argues, as do Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew, that the "centres of power in the North have narrowed the meaning of human rights itself in order to perpetuate their dominance. Human rights are synonymous with individual civil and political rights within the nation-state" (Muzaffar, 1993, p. vi). He points out that while cultural rights are given some attention, economic and social rights, such as freedom from hunger and disease, are not even considered human rights among "certain circles in the North" (p. vii). Muzaffar (1993) argues that the dominance of the United States, which some argue is the single remaining superpower, is a historically unprecedented form of authoritarianism in international relations. He warns that it is now imperative for their survival that the peoples of the developing world and the marginalized within the industrialized nations insist upon their rights to equal access.
There is no denying that what has emerged in the course of the decades is an international system in which the poor and powerless who constitute the overwhelming majority of the human race have very little say over their own destiny. A system which virtually disenfranchises the majority cannot be democratic. It cannot claim to protect human rights or human dignity. (Muzaffar, 1993, p. 15)

What is missing from Western concepts of human rights, according to many critics, is a balanced between individual rights and collective rights within the state, with individual responsibilities in addition to rights, and with the rights of nations and peoples within both the national and international system (Muzaffar, 1993; Musa Bin Hitam, 1996; Osaghae, 1996). These critics point to the arrogance of Western government officials and human rights workers who uncritically consider their own nations as in a more "advanced" state of political development specifically because of their attention to political and civil rights.

Like any discourse, the rhetoric of human rights is manipulated in pursuit of specific aims. In Umphien Mai the refugees used the concept of rights to call attention to discrimination against the Karen by both Burmese and Thai officials, but also to rationalize the attacks on the Burmese embassy and the Ratchaburi hospital. Comparisons between the outcomes of these two incidents evoked nationalistic responses among the refugees, as people described their "nation" or their "people" being unfairly attacked by the Thais and the Burmans while the Burman students were allowed to go free. The refugees constructed a mythico-history of the Karen as naturally peace-loving people who had been forced to fight in self-defense as victims of the Burmese and Thais, emphasizing the nature of abuses they faced as Karens. They used the discourse of
rights to direct attention to the killing of the God's Army gunmen by Thai commandoes rather than other violent consequences of the action, such as the suffering of the patients in the hospital who were taken hostage.

By emphasizing their rights as a group, the refugees called attention to what was missing in most media accounts. These were concerned mostly with the individual rights of the ten gunmen who were reportedly killed after they'd surrendered. What this story about individual rights neglected to take into account was the underlying structural violence in which a largely civilian population was targeted on two sides by "enemies" engaged in political maneuvering. The control and manipulation of ethnic minority groups in the power plays between different governments was also obscured by the attention to individual rights, as was the Burmese government's abuses of civilians caught in rural areas of the country. I have already detailed in the previous chapter how at the international level, the rhetoric of rights has been used as a justification for the non-entree regime in international refugee policy, acting to support the continued existence of Karen refugee camps in Thailand rather than encourage the refugees' resettlement in third countries. What all of this suggests is the need for a more critical and contextualized examination of the meanings and uses of human rights as a concept in different situations, and how these various uses promote specific interests and act to hide other ways of understanding a given event.

Also important to consider in terms of political mobilization is the observation that the Karen refugees discussed almost exclusively their own situation, providing an example of the segmentation required for continued militarization. This isolation also
supports the argument raised in Chapter 5, that alternative media targeted to a specific group can provide fertile ground for a process of "inbreeding" that stunts the development of inter-group contact necessary for democratic change (Pellegrini, 1996, p. 97). The fact that the refugees made so few references to other Burmese groups has important implications for those attempting to promote pluralistic dialogue and tolerance, a stated goal of many opposition media staff. Opposition journals were writing about other Burmese ethnic groups facing similar oppression, but whether or not the refugees read these stories or discussed them is unclear. They did not raise them as significant in reporting their media use in the course of interviews for this study.

What became clear during the course of this research is that many refugees and women felt discouraged and inadequate when considering their role in the opposition movement. The introduction of NITs had caused many of those without access to feel anxious about how quickly the world was changing and leaving them behind. Nevertheless, women and ethnic minorities were organizing and actively participating in various (often invisible) ways in the struggle. Women's groups also showed signs of organizing differently than groups dominated by men, indicating that they might very well use NITs differently if they had training and access to them. This can only happen, however, if there is a recognition that conventional ideas about gender and gender roles act to reinforce the militarization of not only the regime, but also the opposition.
Gender, militarization and peace

Let us now return for a moment to the discussion presented in Chapter 1 of how militarization, gender and ethnic discrimination interact and mutually support one another. In that discussion, I introduced the work of critical scholars detailing the ways in which the colonial project was upheld by specific notions of Victorian femininity and masculinity that worked to demasculinize or "feminize" colonized Asian men. This worked through exalting a specific notion of the Victorian "lady," and by claiming that colonized men were not yet "manly" enough to protect and revere their women as men in "civilized" societies had learned to do.

The global emphasis on human rights is in some situations becoming the newest "civilizing" influence in contemporary neocolonialist maneuvers. The discourse is used in ways similar to the use of the "civilizing" discourses of the colonial period to justify what is, if not explicitly stated, then implicitly understood to be the "superior" western model of democracy and human rights. By repeatedly emphasizing the status of Burmese women as victims, media reports contribute to a subtle demasculinization of Burmese men. This is especially the case with ethnic minority men. The fact that it is largely ethnic minority women who are perceived as victims of rape and other violence by Burman soldiers works to lend credence to these perceived differences between Burmans and non-Burmans. Yet the picture is more complicated than that. The varying emphases on political and civil versus economic, social and cultural rights tends to reify images of Burman men as the most politically savvy while ethnic minority peoples and women are relegated to "second tier" status because of their unspoken association with the "second
tier" group of rights. To the extent that these stereotypes uphold unquestioned assumptions about "the way things are" and about who does what best, they contribute to militarization by sustaining "us" versus "them" dichotomies that tend to make invisible acts of violence within each community. These stereotypes also limit our understanding of people's abilities and potential contributions to the opposition movement. This, I came to realize, was the subtle but powerful process at work in my own earlier marginalization of Burmese women, described in Chapter 2, which I recognized with a shock during the women's issues panel at the Free Burma Coalition conference in 1997.

**Concluding thoughts**

The year 1988 was a turning point in Burma's history. It was also the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the tenth anniversary of UNESCO's Mass Media Declaration, seen by many as the threshold event in attempts to establish a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), envisioned as a means to put the mass media at the service of peace and international understanding (Bruck, 1993; Frederick, 1989). This raises the question of how different the current situation in Burma and worldwide might look if negotiations on the development of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) had turned out differently. Superpower status has provided the United States with the capacity to push for increased globalization and privatization, particularly in the fields of economic and cultural power, and especially through the organization of media, so that "a Third World journalist working for the local CNN bureau is the closest the Third World seems to come to a new
international communications order" (Galtung, 1998, p. 215). What would the situation in Burma look like now if there were a global agreement on the rights of peoples not just to speak but to be heard - both as individuals and as groups - and not only when their interests coincided with those of the U.S. and other world powers?

Although there is evidence that a more inclusive public dialogue is developing among the Burmese groups in exile, the ethnic minority groups continue to be marginalized despite and perhaps because of the introduction of NITs. The Burman elements of the opposition benefited earlier than other groups by employing the language of human rights and democracy that coincided with the foreign policy interests of Western powers funding the opposition. This allowed them to take advantage of those skills that ensured their continued support from foreign funding groups. This has increased the perceived differences between Burmans and non-Burmans, who have generally been portrayed in a stereotypical fashion, exacerbating their marginalization. This has been accomplished through advancing a gendered division of labor that promotes militarized ways of thinking about the situation in the country. The concept of human rights as disseminated through the media at both local and global levels has become a discursive tool through which local and global power struggles are negotiated, and as such has been put to oppressive as well as liberating uses.

Much has been learned since 1988. It is clear, for example, that technologies will not end suspicion and bridge ethnic rifts for us. Oppressive structures trade on insecurity in order to justify repressive measures, and this is accomplished in part through preventing the circulation of alternative ideas and contacts. It is in this regard that the use
of communications technologies and media become so crucial. To break down the
distrust that has developed over decades in Burma the country’s various peoples must
talk to each other. This means that each group must have the ability and the means to be
heard and to disseminate their messages through the media. In other words, despite the
failure of the NWICO, there continues to be a need for recognition of a peoples’ right to
communicate. The struggle for democracy will require that attention be paid especially
to the concerns of the least fortunate, and that those least often heard are provided with
the means of expressing themselves so that they can be included in the development of a
democratic Burma. This will require not just the improvement of the communication
skills of those most silent, but also the listening skills of those most often heard. This is
as true for different countries and groups globally as it is in Burma and within the
Burmese opposition.

Attention by the opposition movement to the least fortunate among them will help
to head off the regime's own attempts to use the language of peace to further its own
agenda. Already the Burmese government has been quite effective in its use of this
rhetoric. The regime has recently been countering the human rights claims of the
opposition activists with talk of reconciliation, aimed at wooing back to Burma those
providing support to the remaining armed opposition groups. This is most apparent in the
junta's ceasefire agreements, but the regime has moved beyond these efforts recently to
target refugees as well. The Irrawaddy reported in April, 2002, that the regime was
distributing leaflets in refugee camps in Thailand promising people peace and amnesty if
they return to Burma, aimed at both the Karen refugees and at KNU soldiers staying there
(Ko Thet, 2002). The pamphlets appealed to them to return to their families back home, and guaranteed that they would be welcomed home as "peace delegates." Although the *The Irrawaddy's* article dismissed the effects of these pamphlets and many opposition media reports write disparagingly of the ceasefires, it may be worthwhile to give this more thought. It is clear from interviews in Umphien Mai that at least some refugees are war-weary enough that they are ready to accept even difficult terms in order to go home to their villages in peace.

The regime's "peace" is a superficial one that works to conceal its violence, much as the work of international organizations such as the IMF and WTO has wrought "benefits" that are unequally distributed throughout a structurally violent global system sustained by an undemocratic decision-making process. Those in opposition to these trends can gain the upper hand to the extent that they recognize them as weaknesses and use them to develop their own strengths. To attain a lasting peace, forms of violence at every level will need to be unearthed and rooted out, especially from within each organization in the opposition movement itself, and from within each home. These differing types of violence are inter-connected and are not unique to the regime. We all have blind spots built into the assumptions by which we live. These are powerful because they are invisible. Each of us can find examples of such blind spots; my own blindness to the significance of Burmese women is a good example. An authoritarian approach to dealing with our own prejudices attempts to mask both the violence of these prejudices as well as its consequences. Yet when violence of any kind occurs, a demilitarized approach requires that we expose it, name it, and deal with it.
Tehranian (1999) has pointed out that today's violence tends to be structural and invisible at the international level, its invisibility aided in large part by the workings of global media.

Although all reality is socially constructed, when the commercial media manufacture it to achieve high entertainment value and ratings, the sensational and abnormal take precedence over the routinized forms of human suffering, such as malnutrition, child mortality, forced migration, and short life expectancy, (p. 172)

To the extent that local media mirror their global counterparts by focusing primarily on the violent and the stereotypical, such sensationalized stories continue to deflect attention from structural inequities at every level and our role in sanctioning them. These forms of structural violence, if not addressed, manifest themselves in overtly violent ways, which can only be understood through the kind of careful and detailed analysis precluded by militarized approaches to communication. The development of equitable means of hearing from all of the world's people requires the promotion of various forms of media, especially those local media that allow communities the access and the ability to counter both the stereotypes and the emphasis on violence and controversy characteristic of mainstream media. Only in this way can we counter the increasing militarization and restricted content of mainstream media both locally and globally.


http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/inked-over-ripped%20-out.htm


http://www.ibiblio.org/freeburma/docs/school_for_rape.html


http://sunsite.unc.edu/freeburma/assk/letters/letter041.html


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Hello. I am_________. I am doing some research on a project about communications in the refugee camp. The project is being sponsored by Ohio University in the United States.

The principle researcher for this project is Lisa Brooten, who is now living in Mae Sot. Lisa used to live with the Karen from 1989 to 1992. First she lived in Huaykaloke camp, where she taught in Kaw Moo Rah High School, and later in Pwe Baw Lu, where she taught at the Karen Teacher Training College (KTTC). She is now doing this research as part of her doctoral dissertation (Ph.D. degree). We are trying to learn about the communications situation for the Karen refugees. We want to learn who has access to what kinds of communications technologies and what kinds of information, and what kinds of technologies or information the refugees want or need.

We would really appreciate your help with this research. The interview will take approximately one hour. We will not ask you for any identifying information, and your name will never be used.

If you agree to participate, you have several other rights:

— your participation is voluntary

— you are free to refuse to answer any question at any time

— you are free to stop the interview at any time

The information from this interview may be included in the final research report, but your name will never be recorded or used in any way, and no other identifying characteristics will be included in this report.

Will you agree to participate?
Appendix B: Umphien Mai interview protocol

Introduction read and agreed to: Yes_______

Date: ____________________________

Time at start of interview:__________________

Time at end of interview:__________________

1) Person's sex:

2) Age (or approximation)

3) Ethnic background of mother:

   Ethnic background of father:

   Person's self-identified ethnic background:

4) Residence pattern: (identify whether each place is a small, medium or large place, a village, town, camp, or rural area)

   born in __________________________ lived there until ________description_____________________
   until ________________
   until ________________
   until ________________
   until ________________
   until ________________

How long have you been a refugee?

5) birthplace of mother (describe it):

   birthplace of father (describe it):

Place for any comments (continue on the back of this sheet):

6) Birth order (circle one): 1st  2nd  3rd  4th  5th  6th  Other:
7) Brothers:
present age now lives in ______________ (describe)

8) Sisters:
present age now lives in ______________ (describe)

9) Parents:
mother's age OR died in what year your age then
father's age OR died in what year your age then
mother's occupation
father's occupation_

10) marital status: single married divorced widowed remarried

11) respondent's education - highest level:
(emphasis/specialty, if any):
[can he/she read and write?]?

12) occupations held (from previous to current or most recently held):

13) children (ages and gender):
(if children have died, ask for reasons if it is possible to do so with sensitivity)
age gender now living where?
age gender now living where?
age gender now living where?
age gender now living where?
age gender now living where?

14) religion:
How often do you worship?

15) What things that you own are most important to you? (please list about 5 or so)

Why are they important to you?

16) How do you find out about what happens in the camp?

How about what happens in Bangkok?

In the border areas?

In Rangoon?

In the rural areas of Burma?

17) Journals/magazines/newspapers

Do you ever read journals, magazines or newspapers?

(If not) Why not? (if appropriate:) How do you feel about not being able to read them?

(If so) Which ones can you get?

Where do you get them? (Ex: from whom?)

How often do you read them? (be as specific as possible)

Do you have any examples here that you can show me?

Which are your favorites? Why?

Can you give me an example of an article or journal you have read recently that was unusual or especially memorable?

How did you feel about that?
How would you feel if you couldn't read these journals/magazines/newspapers?

18) Radio

Do you have a radio? (If so, can I see it?)

Do you ever listen to the radio somewhere else (besides at home)? Where?

(If no radio access) How do you feel about not being able to listen?

(If listens) How often do you listen? (be as specific as possible)

Does anyone else in your house listen? If so, how often?

What stations/programs do you listen to?

Which are your favorites? Why?

How would you feel if you couldn't listen to the radio?

Can you give me an example of a program that you heard recently that was unusual or especially memorable? What was it about?

How did you feel about it?

19) TV/videos/movies

Do you ever watch TV? Videos? Movies? Where?

What kinds of shows are your favorites? Why?

How would you feel if you couldn't ever watch these shows?

Can you give me an example of a show you saw recently that was unusual or especially memorable? Tell me about it.

How did you feel about it?

20) Telephone

Do you now or did you in the past have access to a telephone? (If so) Where?
What about e-mail or the Internet?

(If not) How do you feel about not having access?

(If so) How often did/do you use it? (be specific)

Who do/did you receive calls from?

(If e-mail or Internet) Who do you send or receive messages from?

What do you use the Internet for?

Are/were there any limitations on your use of these technologies?

How would you feel if you didn't have access to the telephone/e-mail/Internet?

21) What kinds of information do you want or need that you cannot get?

How do you think you could get this information?

22) Is there anything you want to say that we haven't asked you about, or you want to say more about?
Appendix C: Introductory statement for open-ended interviews

My name is Lisa Brooten, and this interview is part of the research for my doctoral dissertation in international telecommunications, which is sponsored by Ohio University in the United States. The research examines the use of communications among various groups working for change in Burma. If you agree to do this interview, I need to inform you of your rights during the interview. First of all, the interview is entirely voluntary. If you want to stop at any time during the interview, we can stop. Also, if there's anything I ask you that you don't want to answer, or you can't answer for whatever reason, you can just tell me. Okay?

(If the respondent says yes) We also need to figure out the best way to identify you. You can use your name or a pseudonym, or you can remain anonymous. We can also use a mixture of methods, so that if you decide to use your name, but then there's some part of the interview that you want to remain off the record, or for which you feel more comfortable remaining anonymous, then you can just tell me. If a sensitive topic comes up, for example, and you don't want to be quoted, just tell me. As long as you tell me on the tape, then when I make the transcript I'll know not to use that part. So what would you like to do?

(Respondent answers)

I also need to know how to identify your group association. Would you like to use the name of your organization?

(If so, make sure to get the name of the association(s) the person is affiliated with, the person's official title within the organization(s), and the proper spelling in English of the person's name)
This study examines the impact of new information technologies (NITs) on the Burmese opposition movement-in-exile based in Thailand. The intent of the research is to determine whether NITs, primarily computers and the Internet, are helping to reduce, maintain, or intensify ethnic conflict within the movement. The study explores implications for political mobilization by examining what groups within the movement have access to which technologies, and how these groups understand and use global media and the discourses they produce. The research is a multi-sited ethnography conceived within the epistemological framework of standpoint theory, providing an empirically grounded exploration of the Burmese opposition movement in both its local and global contexts. It employs participant observation, in-depth interviews and discourse analysis to examine the impact of global communications at the local level. The work begins with an historical examination of the development of the modern state in Burma, which provides the context for exploring how militarization, gender and ethnicity have affected the development of nationalisms and conflict defined largely as "ethnic" in nature. This is followed by a discussion of how the history and current state of communications both inside and outside Burma constrain attitudes toward the possible uses of communications technologies and media among the opposition-in-exile. An overview of opposition media investigates the degree to which these media have opened
a space for dialogue between groups. Interviews with opposition activists and refugees from Burma demonstrate how the Burmese regime's militaristic values are both perpetuated and countered within the opposition movement itself. The research finds that the introduction of NITs and patterns of foreign funding have reinforced existing hierarchies within the opposition movement. Finally, this study demonstrates how the "local" reinvents the "global" through the use of a global discourse of human rights which acts subtly but powerfully to shape social conventions within the movement. This results in an unstated hierarchy of human rights that perpetuates the inequitable gender and ethnic composition of the opposition political groups and the hierarchy of access and use of technologies among these groups.

Approved:

Signature of Director