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Challenges of accessing and preserving Hmong radio

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Although it is generally assumed that radio production possesses low barriers to entry, it is important to acknowledge that this is only the case when compared to other media industries such as film or television. Objectively speaking, the costs to purchase and operate a commercially supported radio station are still prohibitively high for small communities with limited financial resources. My own research on Hmong American media practices has revealed a strong preference for radio in communities such as theirs where oral communication is culturally significant and technological literacy is low, yet there are still remarkably few Hmong-owned radio stations in the US. (Lopez 2016). The workaround that Hmong Americans have developed is to expand the category of 'Hmong radio' beyond just owning and operating traditional AM/FM radio stations. Hmong radio includes producing hour-long weekly programs on community radio stations, and purchasing subcarrier FM signals whose broadcasts are available with a special SCA (Subsidiary Communications Authority) receiver. Hmong communities have also created an innovative stream of participatory radio that is hosted on conference call software and accessed through phone calls. Hmong teleconference radio programs are so seamlessly integrated into the Hmong radio landscape that many participants do not even distinguish them from terrestrial broadcast when they describe their listening practices (Lopez 2017).

While each of these radio formats are quite distinct from one another in terms of their relationship to regulation, funding, audiences, technology, professionalization, and content, there is one feature that unites them all – it is difficult, or even impossible, to access an archive of their broadcasts. The lack of systematic preservation for this minority media culture is particularly unfortunate because this is a population that already suffers from an erasure of their own history. People of Hmong ethnicity originated in Southern China and still maintain sizeable populations there, as well as in Vietnam and Laos.

They did not develop their own written language until the 1950s, and since they do not have a country of their own, their perpetual status as a minority population often led to the suppression of Hmong documentation and archives. After suffering persecution during the Viet Nam War for allying with the US, Hmong people began migrating across the globe as refugees to countries that would grant them asylum. There are now nearly 300,000 Hmong in the US, largely centered in Minnesota, California, and Wisconsin (Pew Research Center 2017). Modern Hmong historians have worked to reconstruct knowledge of their past through oral histories and secondary sources (Chan 1994; Lee 2015), and there are many ways in which the conversations facilitated through Hmong radio could play a role in contributing additional voices to a public record. Yet the struggles of small populations to participate in media production are mirrored in their erasure from media archival practices as well.

Of the four kinds of Hmong radio described here, there is only one format that is archived in any systematic way – weekly shows that are hosted by non-Hmong community radio stations. For instance, the community radio station WORT 89.9FM in Madison, Wisconsin has a weekly show in Hmong language that is broad from 6 am to 8 am every Sunday. Since the early 2000s this station started a practice of digitizing their programs, which are temporarily made available on their website as a livestream or downloadable podcast. This helps everyday listeners to access material beyond its original broadcast, while researchers can access audio recordings from as far back as 2005 that are externally archived at radio-freeamerica.com. The same is true for a number of other Hmong shows on community radio stations, such as HmongFM on KFAI 90.3 in the Twin Cities and the Hmong Public Radio show on Wisconsin Public Radio's (WPR) WHID 88.1FM in Green Bay.¹

While these partnerships with community radio provide some historical archive for Hmong radio programs, other formats are not preserved in any systematic way – this is particularly the case for Hmong teleconference radio programs, which are so unusual that it is unclear if they even belong in the category of radio. These programs are similar to radio in providing a 24/7 stream of live audio content that is available to listeners. Individuals serve as the owners for each station, managing a roster of DJs who each facilitate a 1–2 h program every week on a specific topic such as health, romantic relationships, financial advice, or Hmong culture. The host's role is to initiate and facilitate the conversation with callers, who participate by telling their own stories and responding to one another during the program. Since the shows are maintained in Hmong language, they are largely popular with first-generation Hmong Americans ranging from 35 to 60 years old. Their participatory nature reveals some of the differences between traditional radio and Hmong teleconference radio programs, as teleconference radio programs are produced and broadcast using

conference call software. This means that anyone who dials into the call can automatically address everyone, rather than waiting for the DJ to patch their call through. As a result, these programs have necessitated the development of a careful culture of turn-taking in order to establish who is invited to speak and so the calls are not constantly being interrupted. It has become one of the most popular ways for Hmong to connect to one another throughout the diaspora, with dozens of competing programs and thousands of listeners across the globe participating at any given time. Yet it is still relatively understudied alongside all other forms of ethnic media for this small population.

Given the uniqueness of this format, it is perhaps unsurprising that there has been little attempt to archive or preserve Hmong teleconference radio. This is unfortunate, as their development could be very instructive in understanding how small communities with few resources can produce innovative and culturally specific forms of mass communication. Yet it is also important to note that obscurity and ephemerality may be key components to the popularity of these programs. Hmong radio DJs routinely strive to protect the identities of callers through reminders about maintaining anonymity or pseudonymity. This benefit is similar those engendered by social media platforms like Snapchat, a messaging app that deletes posts a few seconds after they have been read. Although users can take screenshots in order to preserve content on their own devices, the app is largely understood to have been popularized due to this feature (Bayer et al. 2016) – particularly in response to the way that users are sometimes penalized on other apps due to the persistence of their digital records.

While there have been limited attempts to systematically preserve or institutionally document the histories of many different Hmong radio formats, some individuals in the community have made personal archival efforts. For instance, some individuals have recorded Hmong teleconference radio programs and rebroadcast them on their personal YouTube channels. This remediation helps to produce a public repository where users can encounter radio content amidst more popular video content, such as dubbed Hmong movies or music videos. While traditional archiving practices include the addition of metadata to describe the content, these transformations from cell phone audio to YouTube's video repository rarely include much identifying information beyond the date of airing and a title. This means that YouTube provides a useful means for sharing recordings in the absence of any other archive, but it is very limited in the way it is currently being used – at a basic level, these recordings are intermittent at best, and constitute an idiosyncratic and sporadic archive that is subject to the whims of individual users.

There are also Hmong American individuals who have developed and maintained personal media archives, such as Xia Vue Yang in Sheboygan,

WI. Yang owns a Hmong market and has broadcast a weekly Hmong radio program on WSHS 91.7 FM since 1982. In the basement of his home, the walls are lined from end to end with racks of cassette tapes and CD jewel boxes. Not only has he recorded nearly all of his own radio programs, but he has participated in archiving other forms of Hmong media and oral culture as well – including conducting interviews with Hmong people about their personal histories, and recording Hmong traditional songs, folktales, and religious ceremonies. His personal collection also includes cassette tapes with records from Radio Veritas Asia, a Christian radio station based out of the Philippines. Since 1994, Radio Veritas Asia has broadcast Hmong sermons given by Father Bertrais, a French priest who helped to invent the Hmong written language in the 1950s (Ó Briain 2018).

There can be little substitute for the systematic archival of these important forms of Hmong history, as these current individual efforts are neither comprehensive nor easily accessible. As a result, our understanding of Hmong radio and its important social role is necessarily limited. Yet various forms of academic research can still help to document and vivify these histories. For instance, interviews can be conducted with radio producers in order to capture oral histories that narrate the ways these programs developed from the perspective of their creators. Researchers can also conduct interviews, surveys, and focus groups with listeners to document the way the programs are accessed and understood by audience members. Both of these methods rely upon memory and perception, but certainly can help to fill out our portrait of these media institutions and their meaning.

A more involved form of research that I have participated in has included working with a team of Hmong undergraduate research assistants to record, transcribe, and analyze current Hmong radio broadcasts. Our research team met up every week for over 6 months, largely focusing on the teleconference radio programs that challenged our understanding of radio. At each meeting, the students would bring recordings and transcriptions of 1–2 h of Hmong radio broadcasts, and we would discuss their meaning – including what kind of voices we heard, how their conversations connected to Hmong cultural norms and histories, what emotions were conveyed through tone and language, how the programs transitioned from one to another, what structural components remained the same across programs, and other nuances. Although the texts that were recorded and transcribed for this research are not part of a public archive and were not intended to contribute to radio preservation, the research that was produced can serve as a form of academic activism that may encourage future archival practices. This research serves to recognize and legitimize forms of media production that have otherwise gone unnoticed – particularly in the case of the teleconference radio programs, which are often disparaged within Hmong communities as unauthorized and unprofessional. It also may

inspire other researchers to continue to investigate these vital forms of media production and consumption, as there are multitudes of research questions that have yet to be asked or answered about Hmong radio in all of its different forms. As the research community that surrounds Hmong media develops and strengthens, we may one day be in a position to gain funding and support for the creation of Hmong radio archives so that these academic inquiries can continue and deepen.

Note

1. HmongFM broadcast from 2006 –2017, and Hmong Public Radio on WPR broadcast from 1985 – 2016.

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