

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Always on the Phone: The Invisible Role of Hmong Women in Diasporic Media Industries

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This article examines the emerging media institution of Hmong teleconference radio, a global form of mobile communication that is largely operated and accessed by Hmong American women. Interviews with Hmong Americans about this participatory form of mass media reveal the ways in which it is opening new pathways for diasporic communication, but also the ways that it is criticized and delegitimized. It argues that Hmong teleconference radio offers a rich case study for analyzing mobile phone cultures in a digital era, ultimately showing how women's labor and entrepreneurship within the mobile media realm can be minimized or altogether obscured through gendered hierarchies of value.

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The mobile phone is often viewed as a symbol of modernity, technological capital, and cultural mobility, as it can open up new possibilities in an era of globalization and digital communication. Its portability and relative affordability in comparison to landlines offers sustainable forms of telephony in particular to rural and low-income communities all over the world (Mariscal & Rivera, 2006). But it is important to also attend to the ways in which mobile phone practices are simultaneously reflective of immobility and disempowerment, given that mobile cultures take on specific meanings in relation to local cultures and the identities of its users. These contradictory perspectives are particularly visible within the way that women's uses of mobile phones have been understood. While women throughout the world can benefit from the way that mobile phones allow them to navigate and transgress gendered socio-cultural boundaries (Wallis, 2013), many women nevertheless continue to struggle against barriers that limit their usage of mobile phones and the political potential they might otherwise facilitate (Lim, 2014). Youna Kim's (2011) research on the mediation of transnational migration similarly reveals the way that Asian women in the

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diaspora constitute displaced subjects who are caught within competing discourses of emancipation and vulnerability. The media practices of diasporic communities are necessarily global in scope, and it is unclear how the opportunities afforded by mobile phones can accommodate these specific struggles.

Building from these explorations of the way that global mobile media cultures impact political potential for women, this study examines the use of mobile phones by Hmong women in the diaspora. In particular, I focus on the creation of a new mobile media practice that I call Hmong teleconference radio—a digital, transnational form of radio broadcast that is operated through conference call software and accessed through mobile phone calls. Largely operated and accessed by Hmong American women, these mobile phone radio programs have become one of the most popular forms of diasporic Hmong mass communication. Even when Hmong women are physically confined to their homes or are living in areas with a limited Hmong community, they are able to participate in a form of cultural exchange, public discourse, and collective meaning making. Moreover, given the structure of Hmong teleconference radio programs, I argue that they constitute an emerging form of media industry—and as such, the owners and entrepreneurs behind these formats should be recognized for the role that they are playing in shaping this new industrial formation.

Much research on women's mobile practices has focused on individual uses and impacts, such as considering mobile phones as technologies of the self that shape women's individualization and subjectivity (Bosch, 2011; Kim, 2012; Wallis, 2013). But mobile phones allow users to participate in much more than interpersonal communication and consumption, as we can see in the case of Hmong teleconference radio. This particular practice allows Hmong women to use their mobile phones to connect to Hmong around the world, effectively creating an unregulated and participatory form of mass communication. Like all mobile cultures and practices, this medium is articulated within a specific cultural, social, and technological context. This nexus of factors contributes to a uniquely Hmong form of "mobile as media" that moves beyond seeing the mobile phone as a platform for merely telecommunications, but also does not rely on smartphone technologies as a means for accessing media (Goggin & Hjorth, 2009). Here we can see an instance of the mobile phone itself—not its Internet capabilities, but as a tool for making phone calls—being used for producing, distributing, and consuming media.

This investigation is part of a larger qualitative study of Hmong American media practices that remedies the dearth of scholarship on Hmong mass media cultures and industries.¹ In particular, there has been little scholarship on Hmong mobile cultures or the relationship between gender and Hmong mass media practices. My findings are based on interviews that were conducted in 2015 with 52 Hmong Americans from different age, gender, education, and generational categories.² I spoke to individuals with a wide variety of relationships to Hmong teleconference radio, ranging from those who owned channels and served as DJs, to those who simply listened, to those who never participated at all. Our conversations—41 of which were conducted in English, 11 in Hmong through the assistance of a translator; 42 in-person, and 10 over

the phone—each lasted 30–45 minutes. They followed a semistructured interview guide that focused on what kind of media participants consumed, and more specifically how they interacted with or responded to Hmong teleconference radio. Participants were recruited through the personal networks of the researcher and research assistants, university-related listservs for Hmong students, and visits to Hmong community spaces and events. Snowball sampling was also used to locate participants outside of these original networks, and in particular to reach participants who did not speak English or were first-generation immigrants. I also analyzed over 100 hours of Hmong teleconference radio programs that were transcribed and translated³ by a team of undergraduate research assistants who are fluent in Hmong. The content of these programs is not the focus of my analysis in this chapter, and therefore I do not conduct a close reading of what is said on the programs, but these transcriptions provided a general familiarity with the way this format played out on a regular basis.

In this study, I first examine Hmong teleconference radio programs as a form of media, exploring their structure and the cultural context into which they intervene. Based on findings from the interviews, I explore what kinds of conversations are taking place, who participates in them, and how the programs are perceived by the Hmong community more broadly. The powerful role that Hmong women have played in initiating and sustaining this new space for communication is clearly elevating the voices of some Hmong women and beginning to change the shape of communication in the Hmong diaspora. Yet I also uncover a deep suspicion and criticism of the shows—including condemnation of the intimate and emotional tenor of conversations, the lack of professionalization and regulation, and the ethos of participation and polyvocality that often contributes to conflict and cultural negotiation. Together alongside gendered understandings of mediated communication, unpaid labor, and telephony, I argue that these critiques must be understood as reflective of patriarchal inequalities. As a result, Hmong teleconference radio programs are often not regarded as a legitimate form of mass media or media industry, and the women who play a leadership role in this innovative cultural form are not recognized as communication leaders. Thus, Hmong teleconference radio offers a rich case study for analyzing mobile phone cultures in a digital era, ultimately revealing the way that women's innovative forms of labor and entrepreneurship within the mobile media realm can be minimized or altogether obscured through gendered hierarchies of value.

Women and mobile media cultures

This study of Hmong teleconference radio is positioned within the broader arena of scholarship on women and mobile cultures—a burgeoning area of investigation that recognizes the complicated interplay between culture, identity, and gender in understanding how communication technologies are adopted and made meaningful. Beyond their use in facilitating interpersonal communication for women (Lee, 2005; Uy-Tioco, 2007), mobile technologies are now being used for a wide range of media

creation and consumption such as mobile television, podcasting, photography, and social media (Zainudeen, Iqbal, & Samarajiva, 2010) in countries all over the world. Many studies have emphasized the way that mobile technologies have played a role in empowering female users (Tacchi, Kitner, & Crawford, 2012; Uy-Tioco, 2007; Wallis, 2013), as the dual role of mobile technologies in pivoting between mobility and immobility can serve to open up new possibilities for communication that were previously unavailable to many populations. Moreover, in her studies of Asian women and mobile phones, Larissa Hjorth (2009) notes two interrelated social phenomena that further account for shifts in the political potential for engagements with mobile media—the rise of women who produce as well as consume, and the employment of women in media industries once dominated by men.

The present study of Hmong women and teleconference radio programs builds from this productive confluence while also considering feminist critiques of technodiscourses that remind us that technologies cannot altogether liberate us from the limits of cultural and social hierarchies (Balsamo, 1996; Everett, 2004). Indeed, to make sense of the cultural context for how women are engaging with new media such as mobile technologies, we must begin by considering the low social status accorded to all media commonly presumed to be primarily for women—including soap operas, romances, tabloid magazines, daytime talk shows, and anything falling into the category of “chick lit” or “chick flicks” (Modleski, 1990). As feminist media studies scholars have long argued, media that is presumed to be for a female audience is automatically devalued and considered less intellectual and overall to be of poorer quality (Ball, 2012). The gendering of media technologies and programming is often connected to assumptions about emotion, as men’s ways of thinking—and thus the media that they produce and consume—are thought to be rational and intellectual, while women’s media are thought to be more emotional, affectively volatile, and melodramatic.

We must also connect this kind of gendered discourse to the medium of the mobile phone, given that telephones have long been scripted as a feminized technology. Assumptions that phones are a domestic technology to be used within the household were upheld through the historical use of women as switchboard operators, as well as general assumptions about the proclivity of women to chat and keep in touch using the phone. Contemporary advertising for mobile phones has been found to deploy gendered scripts that reinforce narratives of feminization and encourage women’s usage and consumption in the United States and abroad (Shade, 2007; Soriano, Lim, & Rivera-Sanchez, 2015). Moreover, emerging forms of media industry that rely on telephony must also be understood within the constructs of feminized labor. In her investigation of media work, Vicki Mayer argues that labor becomes feminized when it is associated with both domestic duties in the house and the affective labor of caring for others. Together, this gendering serves to de-emphasize the powerful role that women are playing in shaping mobile phone technologies and subordinate the role of women’s labor in mobile phone-based industries (Mayer, 2014).

Hmong teleconference radio as media industry

This body of research on women's mobile phone cultures and feminized labor help us to better understand the meaning of Hmong American media practices and cultures. Hmong Americans are a relatively small population; of the roughly 5 million members of the global Hmong population, around 260,000 live in the United States (Pfeifer, Sullivan, Yang, & Yang, 2012). They first began to arrive in the United States as refugees of the Vietnam War, as the U.S. government had recruited Hmong soldiers to fight against the Communist Pathet Lao and Northern Vietnamese armies in what is known as "The Secret War." Since 1975, Hmong immigrants have largely settled in central California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, where there are now sizable communities with their own media ecologies. This geographic dispersal is reflected in the way that Hmong American media have developed in the United States. In areas where Hmong communities are more densely clustered, such as St. Paul, Minnesota, and Fresno, California, Hmong entrepreneurs have been able to establish broadcast media outlets such as radio and television, as well as a handful of weekly or biweekly English-language newspapers. Yet in the state of Wisconsin, Hmong communities are more spread out across over 15 smaller cities, each with populations of 4,000 Hmong or less. For Hmong people living in states like Wisconsin, where it is much more difficult to establish traditional broadcast or print media, the most common way for Hmong to access information about Hmong communities was through their mobile phones.

Mobile technologies are extremely common within Hmong American families, as they are used to maintain interpersonal relationships with friends and relatives and generally share information about goings-on in the Hmong community. Mobile phones are a relatively affordable and accessible communication technology that is easily utilized by even older Hmong Americans with low levels of English proficiency, literacy, or technological savvy. But this research focuses on the way mobile phones are being used to create an innovative new form of mass communication where individual calls into extremely large conference calls become a form of radio. The free conference call platforms that are usually used by businesses can host up to 2,000 or 3,000 participants at a time. Although owners purport to occasionally reach these maximums, most programs sampled for this study appeared to range between 500 and 1,000 callers at a time. All of the participants and programs discussed in this study are based in the United States, but the audiences for these programs are members of the global diaspora of Hmong, including those in Laos, Thailand, Australia, France, and other countries in which there are sizeable Hmong populations (Lopez, 2016). There is not a specific Hmong term for these programs, but what I call "Hmong teleconference radio" provides a way for thousands of Hmong across the globe to use mobile phone technologies to produce a popular, reliable, and cheap form of Hmong mass media.

While this platform does not have the industrial constraints placed upon radio, Hmong teleconference radio is run in a way that is based on and extremely similar to traditional broadcast radio stations. Each conference call number is owned by an

individual who is responsible for using (usually free) conference call software on their computer to initiate the call, which we might consider a “channel.” The owner then manages the channel by scheduling DJs to serve as hosts throughout the day, and more generally shaping the mission and programming for the channel. DJs are assigned consistent blocks of time every week that they are in charge of facilitating. Each show lasts 1 to 2 hours and is centered on a specific topic, such as music/singing, health, relationships, youth issues, folktales, and many others. The entire staff is unpaid, given that the conference calls are free to own, operate, and participate in. But those in leadership positions take their role very seriously, particularly in their goal of creating a forum for communication that is open to participants across the Hmong diaspora. One owner stated:

The overarching theme that we have is that we are not local, but rather on the cellphone waves and anyone can call and listen. It does not matter if you are young or old, you can call and listen. All you have to do is call the number and you are in. They can also speak up, communicate with others because we are not a listening show, we are a show where we can communicate with others.

We can see from the owner’s comments that the participatory quality of the show is a deliberate feature, created in opposition to the one-way forms of communication that only allow for passive consumption. This forum is then able to facilitate connections between Hmong who are dispersed across the United States and the globe, many who otherwise possess limited access to the broader diasporic community.

Although it is difficult to estimate just how many of these conference calls exist, in my research I have located over 20 different channels and it is likely that there are dozens more in existence. There are some websites and other online forums that promote the shows, but most of the participants had learned about the call-in number from a family member or close friend. Listeners use their mobile phones to call in, placing the phone to their ear or using speakerphone (rather than using digital forms of telephony such as Skype or Google Voice). One of the key attributes of teleconference radio is that it does not rely on possessing a smartphone or an Internet connection—this form of radio is accessed entirely through phone calls. When callers first dial in, they are greeted with a prerecorded welcome to the show and information for how to proceed as a listener or a speaker. While the vast majority of participants simply call in to listen, all listeners can become speakers through dialing a certain code into their phone. The format of the shows is generally that they begin with the DJ introducing the designated topic for that hour, but the bulk of the conversation is collectively produced through the participation of those who call in—whether that is through callers performing a song, telling a folktale, giving advice about health, discussing current events, or holding forth on any number of topics of conversation. Hmong teleconference radio programs are a deeply participatory way of creating media in the digital age, offering a way for diasporic Hmong to bypass the financial, geographic, and cultural barriers that have limited the ability for traditional Hmong American media industries to thrive (Lopez, 2016).

The term “media industry” might appear like a strange fit for a small-scale form of media communication such as this one that is not premised on financial profit or monetary exchange, and skirts any form of industrial regulation. Yet I use this term to call attention to the ways in which this form of communication is structured very similarly to a traditional media industry—it assembles a hierarchized labor force that reliably produces a stream of mediated content that competes among a thriving marketplace of similar products. Moreover, the failure to produce material commodities and reliance on nonprofessionalized labor can both be recognized as attributes of many forms of digital media industries. Terranova (2000) argues that the undervalued “free labor” that sustains so much of the digital economy is pleasurable and fulfilling, but that this immaterial labor is not often recognized as creating value when it is based on knowledge, culture, or affect. If we are interested in the labor that goes into creating and sustaining this mobile platform and the value of what is produced, we must take a closer look at those who participate in Hmong teleconference radio.

Hmong women as owners, hosts, and listeners

As with all mainstream media industries in the United States (Federal Communications Commission, 2014), traditional Hmong media industries such as newspapers, television, and broadcast radio are largely owned and staffed by men. Even emerging forms of media such as Hmong news programs that only exist on YouTube⁴ feature male broadcasters. Within this context, it is particularly noteworthy that Hmong teleconference radio programs are described by interview subjects as being largely owned, operated, and hosted by women. This gender imbalance is visible on the webpages for radio programs like Xov Tooj Cua Phooj Ywg Tiam 21 (phoojywg2009.com), where there are photo rosters of DJs that consist of an array of dozens of women in traditional and contemporary Hmong clothing. Beyond the information available on websites, I also spoke to many owners who confirmed that the majority of their DJs and hosts were women. One owner stated:

On our show it seems that the men do not have time to become hosts since they seem to have duties that help out with families. So most of the men are spending their time hunting, or having family duties away from the home while leaving the wives home alone. That is why there is a majority of women DJs. We have about 70% women and 30% men.

Beyond owning the shows and serving as DJs, Hmong women are also perceived to be the primary audience of callers and listeners. This is not a quantifiable statistic, as the gender breakdown of those on the conference calls is not collected, but the participants I spoke to believed this to be the case. Moreover, many participants characterized the callers in gendered terms, talking about their wives, sisters, mothers, aunts, and other women they knew who listened to the shows.

Mobile phones are often understood as a domestic technology that blurs the line between the home and the workplace (Lim, 2014), and this is clearly the

case for women who operate and participate in Hmong teleconference radio programs—using nothing but their mobile phone, they are able to integrate the labor of owning a conference call number or hosting a show into the rhythms of their everyday life. The participants I spoke to often described negotiating the demands of a day job as well as their familial role as wife, mother, and any number of other extended familial obligations. Yet the gendering of these shows was not a commonly recognized feature of Hmong teleconference radio. While women clearly play an important role in shaping this emergent media industry, it was rare for participants to describe the programs as being by, for, or about women. When asked about whether or not the prevalence of women hosts had an impact on the shows or their function, listeners were often ambivalent and indicated this was something they had not thought about before. We can see this kind of thinking in the following statement from a college-aged female listener:

Both women and men are on there. I would say there are more women hosting. But there are also men. The issues that I heard are mostly related to women's issues, like there will be the issue of how married men might try to go to Laos and marry a younger woman, and they talk about if they should do that or if it's wrong of them to do it. So in a way, mostly women's issues. Men don't have a lot of issues going on, since in the Hmong culture the men have more rights.

We can see that her initial response was to back away from the claim that the shows were dominated by women, but that she slowly began to discuss how this was so. By the end of her statement, she connected the kinds of topics being discussed to what she saw as the patriarchal nature of Hmong culture and the practice of Hmong men marrying younger women from Laos—topics that frequently arose in conversations about Hmong culture, particularly among college-aged participants. It was often taken for granted by female participants that Hmong culture had a conservative perspective on gender roles and those young Hmong women faced difficulty in gaining social power. One second-generation female listener stated, "Growing up as a Hmong girl, you are taught to be submissive and silent and you couldn't really speak out. You had to be obedient. Throughout my life that's how I was taught. If I ever spoke out, I was treated as the girl who would not get a suitable husband." We can see strong evidence of patriarchal norms in this statement, in everything from the silencing of girls and women to the heteronormative expectation that girls and women must prepare their whole lives for marriage to a man.⁵ These norms influenced the way that the shows were perceived in relation to gender, as it was assumed that the status quo for Hmong culture was to center patriarchy and the voices of men.

Other participants directly spoke about the liberatory potential for women who participate in Hmong teleconference radio. One woman in her 40s stated that she thought listening to the conference calls was positive for Hmong people because in a society that often devalues women's opinions, the radio programs could go so far as to support women who may be suicidal. She said:

In this culture there's a lot of suicide for women because they hold things to themselves. I've heard a woman say, if I didn't come to this conference call, I would have committed suicide two years ago. But someone told me to listen and I realized I'm not the only one who faced this issue, someone has the same problems as I do.

Another woman said that some men did not want to let their wives listen to the shows because they might get ideas about how to stand up for themselves. These stories offer strong examples of the way that teleconference radio programs could play a transformative role in the lives of their female participants, opening up communication networks for validation and support during difficult times.

Beyond simply giving women a space to voice their perspectives and hear responses to their problems, the shows also provided a rare opportunity for women to voice their perspective on sensitive or intimate topics. For instance, during interviews many participants talked about the fact that romantic relationships were often discussed within Hmong teleconference radio programs. This included everything from advice about how to improve one's relationship to explicit discussions about sex, marital infidelity, domestic abuse, child brides, polygamy, and other taboo subjects. One female DJ from Wisconsin stated that these were among the most popular issues:

Even though people say topics are taboo, those are the ones that have the highest numbers [of listeners]. We are lying to ourselves or we're still hiding in the closet but yet we want to listen. For example, people don't like to talk about behaviors like sex behaviors or romantic stuff. Hmong people think it's taboo to talk about love between men and women. But they listen all day and night when it comes to those topics that attracts the most callers. So I'm saying they say one thing and do another.

This description points to a reason for the popularity of these shows—they often discuss topics that people feel uncomfortable talking about, or are unable to talk about, among their close friends and family. On the shows, women are able to share stories, get advice, hear about people who are in similar difficult situations, and discuss important issues that would otherwise be considered taboo and silenced.

While all cultures have issues that are considered taboo, Hmong culture in particular can be very guarded around issues of sexuality. In a study about family secrets, researchers found that a high percentage of Hmong families thought that marital arguments, extramarital affairs, marital violence and abuse, delinquent children, and personal issues such as depression and financial problems should not be talked about outside of the nuclear family (Xiong, Tuicomepee, LaBlanc, & Rainey, 2006). This is significant because the fear of stigma and shame can make Hmong women less likely to seek professional help or utilize services for these kinds of issues, despite their significance in maintaining healthy families. Hmong girls have also been found to encounter extreme challenges in communicating with their parents about sexual health issues due to a combination of factors, including proscriptions within the Hmong community against open conversations about sex and sexuality (Meschke &

Dettmer, 2012). If this is the case, then we can see Hmong teleconference radio as an important intervention into this dearth of information and suppression of discourse surrounding these issues.

Another aspect of Hmong teleconference radio that promotes women's participation is its emphasis on anonymity. This is accomplished through the hosts often requesting that participants not identify themselves by name, as well as by participants sometimes deciding to use a pseudonym when they speak up. This allows participants to reach out far beyond the boundaries of their own local communities, where their voice or stories might be recognizable. Together, the anonymity and dispersed geographic reach of the shows contributes to a sense that one's own family members are not listening in. Yet the closed nature of the shows being conducted only in Hmong also allows a degree of cultural specificity that helps participants to feel understood and validated as members of an often marginalized ethnic community. This feeling of intimacy that comes from participating the mobile public constituted within Hmong teleconference radio programs reflects Hjorth and Lim's (2012) theorization of mobile intimacies. They argue that women are most implicated in the turn to mobile media practices for the blending of work and leisure, private and public—both of which can be seen in the way that women facilitate conversations about extremely personal subjects on a conference call that is open to hundreds of listeners. Rather than discussing current affairs or public events, the most common topics of discussion are simply the personal stories and inquiries that participants want to share with others who are like them. One elderly female listener spoke about the shows that she felt were the most popular and beneficial:

During the times and topics that are being discussed about how to keep your husband from not having a girlfriend or if he does have one, what can you do to bring him back, love him and your family back so that it does not end up being destroyed, and what can you do to help it. It is topics like this that brings out a lot of listeners and speakers to the shows.

These discussions are of course no replacement for professional counseling, sex education, or other kinds of meaningful conversation with trusted family members that many Hmong women seek. Nevertheless, we can see that this form of radio is opening up new pathways for women's communication that reside outside of the cultural boundaries and limitations that traditionally serve to silence conversation on a number of important subjects.

Belittling women's labor and participation in media

While the opportunities provided to women by Hmong teleconference radio are encouraging, we must be careful to temper this optimistic reading by considering some of the ways that its impact might be limited. First, some women who regularly participated in the shows believed that the women who owned or hosted the teleconference programs were not necessarily progressively minded, but could in

fact be very traditional and conservative. One woman hypothesized that this was because hosting the shows demanded extremely proficient Hmong language skills, given that the shows take place completely in Hmong. She stated, “The people who tend to speak Hmong very well aren’t as acculturated, they’re first generation who haven’t adopted Western views. And also it’s not a good idea for someone who’s not traditional to lead those shows because they might get eaten alive.” This perspective appears to imply that the programs did not always provide a space for challenging hegemonic norms or giving voice to oppressed viewpoints. We can also note from these statements that the nature of the show’s reliance on the oral tradition can be a strength when it allows participants to voice controversial opinions under the cloak of visual anonymity, but that the language skills and fluency of participants become so central that it may exclude participants who are less confident about their Hmong speaking skills.

Beyond political limitations within the content itself, we must also acknowledge the negative ways in which the shows are perceived. When interviewing Hmong community members, the general response to the existence and development of teleconference radio ranged from mildly positive or neutral, to outright condemnation and disapproval. Negative perceptions of the programs predominated, with very few participants expressing strong support or enthusiasm for this form of communication. As might be expected, the strongest voices of criticism came from interviews with those who participated in more traditional Hmong broadcast media, such as radio and television. This makes sense because the teleconference shows could be perceived as competition to their own programming. Their disdain for the shows became evident in numerous criticisms—including that the sound of the shows was inferior because it was not clear and had a lot of static, that the DJs could not properly control their audience and allowed everyone to talk at once, and that they were merely “wannabe” news shows. The most common and forceful complaint about the shows was that they were not regulated in the same way as “real” radio stations, which meant that they talk in ways that were indecent, profane, or taboo. This included discussions of topics such as sex and religion, which traditional broadcasters felt they were restricted from discussing. Worst of all was the fact that on Hmong teleconference radio programs, people did not have to tell the truth, and thus the programs often participated in spreading poorly researched misinformation. Many traditional radio broadcasters interviewed for this study worried about the quality of information that was being spread using the teleconference radio programs because it was the professional responsibility of broadcasters like themselves to conduct research, vet their facts, and only invite credentialed experts to speak about serious issues on their programs. Teleconference radio programs were likened to “online chatrooms” instead of journalism, and many people could cite health or public safety stories they were hearing spread through the teleconference programs that were dangerously incorrect.

These value-laden critiques reflect the same cultural hierarchies that all female-centered media face—women who participate in Hmong teleconference radio are criticized for engaging in discourse that relies upon an overabundance of

emotion and is lacking in rational or intellectual contributions to society. The gendering of media technologies and programming is often connected to assumptions that men's ways of thinking—and thus the media that they produce and consume—are thought to be rational and intellectual, while women's media are thought to be more emotional, affectively volatile, and melodramatic. These critiques can also be understood within the context of how women were historically treated within radio industries, as women have long been considered inferior radio announcers. Michele Hilmes (1997) cites an outpouring of misogynistic rhetoric that surrounded the advent of female announcers, including questions about whether women's voices and vocal performances could possibly compare to the authority, affective modulation, volume, personality, appeal, experience, or expertise of men. Although women nevertheless made headway into the radio arena, such criticisms of women's voices continue to this day with women being policed for uptalk and vocal fry, among other maligned aural qualities. Together, these criticisms serve to wholly obscure the actual labor of the women who put many long hours into creating and running these programs. We can acknowledge that being seen as a competitor or threat to traditional media professionals is actually a sign of their legitimacy, but in my conversations with Hmong Americans it is clear that the belittling and dismissal of the women who run these programs has effectively diminished their status as communication and media leaders. While traditional broadcast professionals are often recognized by community organizations or made visible at cultural events, the women who run these programs are never given the same treatment. As with so many women who labor invisibly to provide a platform for women's voices, Hmong teleconference radio owners are given little tangible reward for their efforts.

Pathologizing and feminizing listeners

Criticisms of Hmong teleconference radio also extended beyond the perspectives of traditional broadcasters, with many other Hmong community members expressing strong concern or disdain for the shows. Sometimes these feelings manifested in subtle ways, such as participants laughing nervously when they talked about how often someone they knew called in to the shows. Most participants knew someone who called in to the shows every day and left the phone on all day long. This sense that regular participants were “always on the phone” was sometimes pathologized as an “addiction” to the shows, which was seen as sad or strange. One woman recalled that her mother listened to the show so excessively that the phone company canceled her phone contract. Others more explicitly discussed the negative social impact of the shows, such as this comment:

A lady called me and said, my husband is listening to [the mobile phone shows] day and night! Even after they cook he doesn't want to eat anymore, he keeps listening to that radio! It creates probably marriage disturbance, you know? Misunderstandings, something like that.

There was often a perception that listening to the shows could become an impediment to many forms of health, including physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness. It became clear that calling into the shows was seen as a time-wasting activity that indicated a lower status in society, or at least simply that this was an activity that many participants found shameful or less desirable.

These sentiments that the shows had a negative social impact or a lesser social status must again be connected to the assumption that participants were women, or that they inhabited a panoply of feminized or socially inferior positions. One man described his perception of the audience in terms of both gender and status: "I was told a lot of people who are listening are distressed people like widows or people with spiritual problems, all those people who have time to listen to it. A working person doesn't have time, but a lot of people listen to it. There's no way to tell who listens, but probably more women." Another person stated that the conference was good for people who had disabilities or were older than 60, since neither could work anymore and this was a way for them to connect to other adults. Such comments reveal a common perception that Hmong teleconference radio is primarily the purview of women and other individuals with less social capital in Hmong society. These assumptions align with the way that Kylie Jarrett (2014) finds that "the free, unpaid, affective, immaterial labor of the digital economy" suffers the same lowly status as "women's work" within contemporary capitalism, as neither are attributed an appropriate use-value (p. 14). In the case of Hmong teleconference radio, the devalued designation of "women's work" is overdetermined through assumptions about what type of people participate in the programs, what type of conversations take place, and what contributions these programs make to Hmong culture more generally.

This understanding of the audience for Hmong teleconference radio can also be connected to discourses of mobility, as the experiences of Hmong refugees being dispersed from their home country and arriving in the United States are marked by both mobilities and immobilities. In one sense, many Hmong in the diaspora are transnational migrants who have connections to other Hmong all over the world, which is what necessitates the creation of this global form of communication. Yet these experiences are often coupled with the immobility of being unable to work in the United States due to mental and physical health problems, as well as a lack of language skills or literacy (Collier, Munger, & Moua, 2012). One woman described why her mother listens to teleconference radio programs:

Because of language barriers she can't listen to American radio, she can't listen to what's going on. Because of mobility issues she can't drive or walk around the neighborhood very much. She needs to know what's going on in the world, but she can't listen to American news. So she listens to [mobile phone shows] to keep her entertained.

Thus, it is important to acknowledge the complicated interplay between the opportunities afforded by mobile phones and the social circumstances that necessitate their usage and integration into daily life. Unlike many Asian immigrant populations in the

United States, many Hmong Americans do not have reliable Internet connections or the technical literacy for using their computer or a smartphone to access any other forms of global media. Teleconference radio programs then become a necessary life-line to the outside world because so many other opportunities for communication, social interaction, or information gathering are unavailable.

Fears of unregulated debates

Other concerns about the shows were that they were harmful to Hmong society because they provided an outlet for so much fighting, disagreement, and expression of negative emotions. In yet another gendered form of critique, the Hmong women on the shows were often criticized for not having appropriately gentle voices, or for speaking too harshly and engaging in arguments. Such complaints extended to the entire premise of the programs, as interview subjects stated that callers and hosts who engaged in impassioned debate on topics of central importance to Hmong society were seen as failing to fulfill the mission of radio programming. One man said:

I get that arguing is part of a debate or a discussion, but most of the time their arguments are pretty elementary. They resort to a lot of name-calling. I talked to my dad yesterday and he said you shouldn't listen to them because they don't do anything productive. Radio is supposed to bring people together, and these type of shows that are primarily arguments don't do that. That's why I don't like them.

When combined with the perception that the shows also focused on taboo topics such as sexuality and transgressive behaviors, many worried that the shows were giving Hmong communities around the world a bad impression of Hmong Americans. There was a perception that Hmong Americans did most of the talking, but that listeners were from all over the world, tuning in to learn about Hmong American life and culture. When the topics of the shows revolved around Hmong Americans cheating on their spouses, getting divorces, wanting to marry members of their own clan, moving to Laos to marry a child bride, engaging in polygamy, or other shameful behaviors, this was feared to give Hmong Americans a bad reputation.

The fear of allowing an outlet for unregulated discourse and debate appears to ignore the ways in which these characteristics can be seen as a strength, as well as the way that the shows have evolved over the years. One DJ I spoke to agreed that the shows were very chaotic when they first opened the lines and invited callers to participate in 2009. People would talk on top of one another and rogue participants could use the open air to say whatever they wanted. Yet over time, DJs and callers together created and enforced a set of community agreements that served to regulate the space while still allowing everyone to have their say. Although there can still be interruptions, participants became quite respectful in deciding when to speak up, often allowing the host to assign numbers to participants and then waiting to be called upon—a remarkable feat of turn-taking for a collective conversation that can include thousands of participants. The polyvocality of the teleconference radio programs could

easily result in overwhelming cacophony or sonic pandemonium if even a small number of participants refused to participate in listening as much as they did in speaking up. But the reality is that teleconference radio programs are often indistinguishable from traditional radio programs to their listeners because participants respect the explicit or implicit contract of participation. The agreed-upon values of listening and giving equal access to speakers is what leads to the creation of a lively counterpublic sphere for members of the Hmong diaspora to come together and discuss important issues outside of the mainstream media—where Hmong voices, Hmong women's voices, as well as other Asian American immigrant voices, are systemically silenced.

The existence of this public forum for debate offers the ability to facilitate discourse about issues that strike to the very core of what it means to be Hmong—how to uphold cultural practices and norms, how to negotiate cultural change, how to integrate into or resist assimilation into American society, or how to be successful in a challenging world. Indeed, the very concept of a democratic and productive public sphere is often argued to rest upon the ability of individuals to express themselves openly, engaging in debates and arguments that are unregulated and unruly (Connery, 1997). Zizi Papacharissi (2004) argues that in assessing the democratic potential for a communicative space, we must be careful not to demand mere politeness as a marker of healthy interaction, as “a sharply-defined conceptual distinction between civility and politeness acknowledges the passion, unpredictability, and robustness of human nature and conversation, with the understanding that democracy can merit a heated discussion” (p. 262).

These programs are also inherently multidirectional, allowing individuals throughout the Hmong diaspora to listen, speak, or take on a leadership role regardless of their geographic location. There does not appear to be an inherent power structure within the geographic reach of the shows that privileges a one-way flow from Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, the United States, or other specific spaces within the Hmong diaspora. Rather, this invitation for diverse and conflicting perspectives reflects a community in motion, struggling against the hegemonic and patriarchal voices that continually participate in silencing some voices and elevating others. Frequent discussions about what it means to be Hmong and how best to maintain Hmong culture work to continually constitute and reconstitute Hmong identity through these shows. DJs and callers hold forth on these topics on a daily basis, providing listeners with a wide breadth of perspectives on the meaning of Hmong identities in today's society. As a people who are dispersed across the globe and have no territorial homeland, diasporic Hmong are continually faced with the threat of losing their own unique culture and identity to the processes of assimilation and acculturation. In providing a forum for explicit discussion about what it means to be Hmong in a site that is marked by disharmony and a multiplicity of voices, this emerging and constantly evolving form of media allows opportunities for growth and change, rather than settling upon a single rendering of Hmong life in the diaspora.

Conclusion

This investigation of Hmong teleconference radio reveals the active role that Hmong American women are playing in using mobile media to spread information and facilitate dialogue. In creating their own form of media industry, they are able to make use of new technologies in a way that strengthens communication within portions of the Hmong diaspora through the format's openness, accessibility, and participatory nature—reminding us that “women’s work” can include the creation of global platforms poised to powerfully impact the shape of a diasporic culture. Yet in exploring the gendered discourses that surround this form of Hmong media culture and the use of the phone, we are also reminded that the existence of a mobile platform that facilitates women’s participation does not automatically challenge the patriarchal status quo. The opportunities for counterhegemony provided by these programs are not always recognized or validated, and those who create and use them are often left invisible and marginalized. Further research is needed to more closely examine the actual discourse that takes place on these programs in order to more accurately assess their role in shifting communication practices or creating new communicative forms for Hmong in the diaspora.

Yet this study calls attention to the ways in which certain marginalized communities are using mobile media platforms in unique, culturally specific ways. As new media technologies continue to develop and open up new opportunities for grassroots forms of global communication, we must be attendant to the gendered dynamics of participation and the way that such communication is valued. This research suggests that there are likely other forms of mobile communication being developed within other communities who struggle against some of the same constraints, and whose emerging forms of media may similarly intersect with gender and gendered discourses. Hmong teleconference radio programs show us one way that more traditional media industries of film, television, and online platforms can be bypassed in order to create and participate in a less professional forum for sharing stories and hosting debates. It is within these messy, open-ended, everyday conversations that we must continue to ask whose voices are invited to participate and what is accomplished when they are allowed to do so.

Notes

- 1 There have been some studies of Hmong diasporic video production, including both home videos and the video industry. But there is very little research on any other form of Hmong media.
- 2 Participants included 28 men and 24 women; 6 from California, 10 from Minnesota, 36 from Wisconsin; 28 first-generation and 24 second-generation immigrants. Twenty-five were identified as media producers (hosts, DJs, owners, etc.) and 27 were identified as media consumers (including listeners), but given the participatory nature of the media being described here, it must be noted that these are porous categories with some overlap.

- 3 The research team also met up in person every week to discuss the cultural meaning of the transcribed broadcasts.
- 4 Some examples of these include Suab Hmong Broadcasting, 3HMONGTV, and Hmong TV 24 Hrs.
- 5 Such narratives should not remain unchallenged, as they are certainly vestiges of the Orientalist belief that Asian cultures are primitive in their treatment of women — a perspective that denies the patriarchal culture of the United States and problematically posits “the West” as superior to “the East.” Hmong scholars have worked to dislodge these narratives by specifically examining resistance and agency in Hmong women (Vang, Nibbs, & Vang, 2016). Yet here I simply echo the words of Hmong participants in this study, who state that this is how they understand Hmong culture.

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