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Paper No. 2
Country Report - Media in the Lao PDR

In 1986 the Lao PDR began its economic market reform and set up solid investment and trade tides opening up for new international contacts. This has affected every part of society including mass media. The number of papers and magazines has increased during the last years, as well as TV and radio broadcasts.

In this process of change, from a state planning subsidy economy to a market oriented one, mass media play an essential role informing of the political, social and cultural development and changes. Viable, informative, entertaining and reliable electronic media, especially radio, will form basis for further achievements enhancing the ongoing socio-economic development.

New and increasing international contacts give new influences on society. The globalisation of media also affects Laos. Electronic media as radio and TV has no boundaries and in line with the development of new electronic devices at decreasing costs, possibilities using computers and Internet, international media will be more easy assessable for wider groups of the population.

Spill-over radio and TV from the neighbouring countries, especially Thailand with a language close to Lao, already attract quite some audiences, and is a vast competitor to the Lao media.

However, the current general media development level in the country gives radio the position of being the most promising mass media in the Lao PDR, if it will be provided necessary resources for staff training, programming and technical upgrading both for programme production and transmission.

Print Media

There are about twenty (20) registered newspapers and magazines in Vientiane, with a circulation between 1 000 to 10 000 copies. Ministries and mass organisations as the Ministry of Information and Culture, Women's Union, the Youth Union and the state tourism organisation are running these papers.

Of these papers and magazines there are only two (2) daily newspapers printed in Vientiane, the Pasason, the biggest paper with a circulation of 10 000 copies and the Vientiane Mai, with a circulation of 2 000 copies.

The Vientiane Time is the only newspaper printed in English, bi-weekly, published by the Ministry of Information and Culture.

In addition every province prints its own paper, or rather a quite simple bulletin, published on a regular basis with an even more limited circulation.

The Lao News Agency, KPL, provides daily bulletins in French, English and Lao, and is the main source of news, however, international news media is also used as a source for reporting the news in domestic media.
Due to high printing costs and low circulation, and the low capacity of the road- and transport system, print media can not on time reach a wide audience in the rural areas. Especially in the remote mountainous areas daily newspapers become weekly or even monthly by time they reach their readers.

Television

The television channels in Vientiane, Channel 9 and Channel 3, broadcast about 10 hours per day in the capital, and the programmes are relayed through satellite and transmitted in the provinces provided with terrestrial TV transmitters.

Some of the provinces also have facilities for TV production and broadcast locally produced programmes.

Including the national and provincial transmission system, TV covers about 30 - 40 % of the country. However, geographical reasons and e.g. lack of electricity, especially in the remote areas, makes both transmitting and receiving TV programmes difficult. In some areas families use battery-run TV sets and they have to bring their batteries almost every day to be recharged in townships and cities.

Radio

Compared to other means of communication in the Lao PDR, radio is the most potential media to serve large audiences in a cost-effective manner.

Radio broadcasting as a mass medium has many advantages. It is cheap and simple, and is accessible to everyone regardless of literacy. It is fast and immediate, live and vibrant. It speaks directly to the individual, one-to-one and 'now'. It can be available everywhere, and is accessible to everyone regardless of literacy rate or educational level.

Radio is a medium of information providing news, background information and comments on current affairs.

It is a medium of entertainment, with music and drama, and even if it is a blind medium it can stimulate the imagination so the listener can visualise and create a picture in the mind's eye.

Radio is also a medium of education and can effectively reach out to meet the formal and informal learning needs of a wide range of people who want to develop.

The Lao National Radio (LNR) was set up already in 1951 in Vientiane and is administratively organised under the Ministry of Information and Culture. The present broadcasting facilities, constructed 1968, is still in use, and both production and transmission equipment is old, some is out-dated and there is a lack of spare parts.
Part of the transmission system has gradually been upgraded, however, maintenance is still a major problem. For example, in 1985 a 150 kW AM transmitter was constructed outside Vientiane through support given by the former Soviet Union. The technology used was from the 1960's, and today the transmitter site has huge maintenance difficulties since it is very hard to find spare parts for this kind of out-dated transmitters no longer manufactured.

The Lao National Radio (LNR) is responsible for the national radio broadcasts and also for giving advise and support to provincial (local) radio in the provinces.

There are 18 local radio stations covering 75% of the country with an average on-air time of 6-10 hours per day.

The provincial radio stations are relaying national programmes received on AM. The amount on national programme put on air depends on the amount of local funds available, the standard of the equipment, the educational level of the staff and numbers off staff, as well as the local capacity of programme production. At least the national news, broadcast by LNR, is relayed in the provinces.

LNR broadcasts on both AM (MW), SW and FM. The present main AM transmitter, installed two years ago, is tuned to 580 kHz. This covers an area of 150 - 200 km around Vientiane. It has an ERP (radiated power) of 200 kW. A 50 kW SW transmitter on 6130 kHz covers the whole country.

A separate LNR local channel broadcast on FM 103,1 MHz between 6 a.m. and 19 p.m. This is mainly targeted at Vientiane and surroundings.

The radio in Vientiane has six studios all together of varied standard. Some of the equipment is old but well functioning of acceptable standard and some is out-dated, manufactured in East Europe as e.g. sound mixers and reel-to-reel tape recorders. There are obvious problems to find spare parts.

One exception from the above is the FM-studio and transmitter situated in a new building with up-to-date equipment procured two years ago (1997).

LNR is also in possession of an OB-van used for outside broadcasts in the area of capital. It contains a transmitter on 93.8 MHz.

Regarding training of the staff, some training in co-operation with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ABC, has been carried out in Vientiane and some of the staff have been attending training courses arranged by other organisations as UNICEF and AIBD (the Asia-Pacific Institute of Broadcasting Development) in Malaysia.

Volunteers from international organisations are also working at the radio in Vientiane for the international programming such as in French and English.
The Lao National Radio is a member of the Asian Broadcasting Union (ABU).

Development Needs

The Lao Radio, as well as radio in other countries in the region, is in the process of creating new roles for itself in society.

Today, lack of modern broadcasting equipment and related know-how, as well as bounded skills in the profession of journalism, media management and organisation, development strategy and audience research, are the main constraints.

Radio and TV spill-over from the neighbouring countries, especially Thailand, is a competitor attracting audience. This competition increases the willingness of changing the existing working methods and programming, to be able to establish a competitive viable radio playing important new roles in the Lao society.

Radio is also recommended as a means of information by e.g. UNICEF for the use of radio for HIV/AIDS messages. The potential, according to a UNICEF report from 1997 regarding communication and media, is very promising. In remote areas there are often few alternatives for entertainment. However, radio is hampered by the low FM coverage (about 50-60%), the low transmission quality on AM, lack of electricity and also lack of radio sets in the rural areas.

The Lao radio needs to interact more with its listeners and elevate itself as a two-way communicator to keep and reach new audiences,, Therefore, the first initial, step should be to develop the organisation and the quality of the work performed by journalists, technicians and managers.

Yet, this is a process over time and has to done in a step-by-step approach, including a wide aspect of components needed to evolve the radio broadcasts.

The prerequisite, to be able to utilise radio as an efficient means of communication, is that radio must be reliable and trustworthy, provide the listeners with useful information and be based on listener participation. The programmes, put on the air, must be attractive and enjoyable. Thus, the first step is to up-grade radio programme production.

The training project should be regarded to be a platform for further achievements in the field of radio broadcasts. This by improving the work situation of the journalists, allowing production of programs of higher journalistic and technical quality for the general public and for specialized audiences, e.g. for educational purposes and health related information. If the programs are improved the people living in the coverage area will probably find it worth while investing in radio sets, and the rating will rise.
Accordingly, three components must be developed to make this possible, they are the organization and management quality and standard of the radio equipment in use the staff's skills.

These three parts are closely related to each other, and subsequently need to being developed simultaneously. This since new equipment does not by itself solve problems or improve broadcasting quality. The staff needs to be trained using it. The quality of the programs will not automatically increase by installing new equipment. The journalistic skills need to be improved through training. However, professional broadcasting equipment and skilful staff are not enough, the work has to be organized in an efficient way.

By following these principles, in a step-by-step approach, the intention is to reform the radio broadcasts to be integrated in the general development process of the modern Lao society.

Since there are no ready-made solutions, the upgrading the radio program should be seen as a first step, of several, in order to gain experience developing a modern Lao model for radio broadcasting.

- FM 103.7 MHz was established in 1997 with a 2.0 KW transmission
  Broadcast 16 hours/ day.
- No private media.