

บทบาทของสื่อทางเลือกออนไลน์ด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมในประเทศไทย  
ต่อการพัฒนาอย่างยั่งยืนในภูมิภาคแม่น้ำโขง



นางสาวสิริลักษณ์ ศรีประสิทธิ์

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วิทยานิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรปริญญาศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต

สาขาวิชาเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ศึกษา (สหสาขาวิชา)

บัณฑิตวิทยาลัย จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

ปีการศึกษา 2553

ลิขสิทธิ์ของจุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

THE ROLE OF ALTERNATIVE ONLINE ENVIRONMENTAL  
MEDIA IN THAILAND FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  
IN THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts Program in Southeast Asian Studies

(Interdisciplinary Program)

Graduate School

Chulalongkorn University

Academic Year 2010

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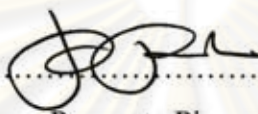
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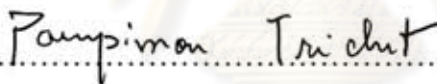
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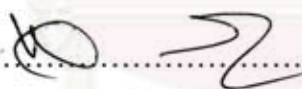
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สิริลักษณ์ ศรีประสิทธิ์ : บทบาทของสื่อทางเลือกออนไลน์ด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมใน  
ประเทศไทยต่อการพัฒนาอย่างยั่งยืนในภูมิภาคแม่น้ำโขง (THE ROLE OF  
ALTERNATIVE ONLINE ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIA IN THAILAND FOR  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION)  
อ.ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก: อ.ดร.พิชญ์ พงษ์สวัสดิ์, 123 หน้า

นับตั้งแต่ปี ค.ศ.1992 ธนาคารพัฒนาแห่งเอเชีย หรือ เอคิปี ได้ริเริ่มโครงการจีเอ็มเอสขึ้น ซึ่งมีผลผลักดันให้เกิดโครงการพัฒนาและนโยบายหลายอย่าง อาทิ การก่อสร้างเขื่อนไฟฟ้าพลังน้ำ และการระเบิดแก่งในแม่น้ำโขงสายหลักตอนบน ซึ่งโครงการและนโยบายการพัฒนาเหล่านี้ส่งผลกระทบต่อชุมชนท้องถิ่น และสภาพแวดล้อมในประเทศกลุ่มแม่น้ำโขง ทั้งนี้ ปัญหาสังคมและความยากลำบากของประชาชนกลับไม่ได้รับการแก้ไขจากรัฐบาล และไม่อยู่ในความสนใจในการรายงานข่าวของสื่อกระแสหลักมากเท่าที่ควร องค์กรชุมชน และองค์กรพัฒนาเอกชนไทย จึงหันมาเป็นผู้ให้บริการข่าวด้วยตัวเอง โดยการใช้สื่อทางเลือกออนไลน์ เพื่อสื่อสารปัญหาและความเดือนร้อนของประชาชน และเพื่อส่งเสริมการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน การศึกษาครั้งนี้ ใช้ระเบียบวิธีการวิจัยทั้งเชิงปริมาณและคุณภาพ โดยการค้นคว้าข้อมูลเอกสาร, การสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก และการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาของเว็บไซต์ โดยการนำใช้หลักวิจัยของกิบสันและวอร์ด (2001) ในการศึกษาสื่อทางเลือกออนไลน์ของ 3 องค์กร ได้แก่ (1) องค์กรพัฒนาระดับชุมชน - เครือข่ายอนุรักษ์ทรัพยากรธรรมชาติและวัฒนธรรมลุ่มน้ำโขง-ล้านนา (2) องค์กรพัฒนาเอกชนไทย - องค์กรแม่น้ำเพื่อชีวิต และ (3) องค์กรพัฒนาเอกชนนานาชาติ - องค์กรแม่น้ำนานาชาติ (ศึกษาหลักที่หน้าเว็บเพจของเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้) เพื่อทำความเข้าใจการทำงานของสื่อทางเลือกออนไลน์ด้านสิ่งแวดล้อม ที่ใช้เพื่อการส่งเสริมการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืนในอนุภูมิภาคลุ่มน้ำโขง โดยวิเคราะห์การใช้สื่อเว็บไซต์ของทั้ง 3 องค์กร ดังนี้ (1) เพื่อการเผยแพร่ข้อมูลข่าวสาร (2) เพื่อการประสานงานและสร้างเครือข่ายในกลุ่มองค์กรพัฒนาเอกชน นักกิจกรรมเคลื่อนไหว ปังเจก และกลุ่มทำงานด้านสิ่งแวดล้อม และ (3) เพื่อการรณรงค์สาธารณะ นอกจากนี้ การศึกษาองค์กรทั้งสามยังเผยถึง ความท้าทาย, กลยุทธ์ และข้อกังวลต่อการใช้สื่อทางเลือกออนไลน์นี้ด้วย ผลศึกษาพบว่า เทคโนโลยีการสื่อสารแบบใหม่นี้ส่งผลกระทบต่อองค์กรด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมและประชาชนในอนุภูมิภาคลุ่มน้ำโขงในการเข้าถึงข้อมูลข่าวสารมากขึ้น และเพื่อให้การเรียกร้องความเป็นธรรมทางสังคมบรรลุผล และเพื่อการพัฒนาอย่างยั่งยืนที่แท้จริงของประเทศลุ่มน้ำโขง

สาขาวิชา เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้  
ปีการศึกษา 2553

ลายมือชื่อนิสิต...สิริลักษณ์ ศรีประสิทธิ์.....  
ลายมือชื่อ อ.ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก.....

## 5287672720: MAJOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

KEYWORDS: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, ALTERNATIVE ONLINE ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIA, GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION

SIRILUK SRIPRASIT: THE ROLE OF ALTERNATIVE ONLINE ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIA IN THAILAND FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION. ADVISER: PITCH PONGSAWAT Ph.D., 123 pp.

The emergence of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Thailand has provided a new communication tools for people and helped to empower CBOs and NGOs to voice their concerns and to promote sustainable development in Thailand and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), which includes Myanmar/Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and two Southern provinces of China - Yunnan and Guangxi. Since 1992, the GMS program initiated by Asian Development Bank (ADB) has resulted in many development projects and policies such as the construction of hydropower dams and rapids blasting in upper mainstream Mekong River. These development schemes have had a negative impact on local communities and the environment in Mekong countries. Moreover, since the Asian financial crisis occurred in 1997, Thailand has undergone many economic and social changes and a noticeable increase in the number of and frequency of environmental conflicts between people and government over the use of natural resources. As the lack of recognition of social problems and people's hardships evidenced by government policies and mainstream media reports, CBOs and NGOs have become the media provider themselves through the use of Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) to voice out their concerns and to promote sustainable development.

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods of documentary research, in-depth interviews, and website content analysis by using Gibson and Ward's Model (2001). The examination of AOEM used by (1) Thai CBO - Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network/Mekong Lover; (2) Thai NGO - Living River Siam; and (3) International NGO - International River (Southeast Asia campaigning page), is to understand the functions of AOEM to promote sustainable development in the GMS. The three organizations' websites are analyzed as communication channels to understand how organizations employ them to achieve: (1) dissemination of information; (2) networking among CBOs and NGOs themselves, and other working individuals and groups; and (3) the organization of public campaigns. The three organizations also revealed their strategy, challenges and concerns regarding the functions of AOEM. The use of AOEM helps the examined organizations to lower the cost of campaigning, to streamline updating and reporting processes, and to increase the effectiveness of online petitions. The findings also reveal that the impact of new information communication technologies have contributed positive changes to environmental organizations and GMS citizens' access to more information and social justice in terms of achieving truly sustainable development.

Field of Study: Southeast Asian Studies

Student's Signature..... 

Academic Year: 2010

Advisor's Signature..... 

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Rockefeller Foundation which has provided financial support for my study via the “Weaving the Mekong into Southeast Asia” fellowship program.

I am very grateful to my advisor, Dr. Pitch Pongsawat, for his stimulating guidance and timely encouragement throughout the process of producing this work. Many thanks also to my thesis committee members, Assoc. Prof., Dr. Ubonrat Siriyuvasak and Miss Pornpimon Trichot.

I would also like to thank all the staff at the Southeast Asian Studies Center Chulalongkorn University for their administrative assistance during my study as well as my thesis research, and my classmates for sharing with me their knowledge and points of view both in academic and social life.

Moreover, I would love to thank my family and my dear friends who had been greatly encouraging me during a year of studying and many months of work on this thesis.

Finally, I wish to thank my thesis editor, Eric Miramon, for his meaningful guidance of systematical writing and thinking. Many thanks go to him for a great inspiration and care for me to complete this thesis in order to contribute new knowledge to the academic world and to Mekong communities.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AOEM	Alternative Online Environmental Media
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIT	Asian Institute of Technology
CAFTA	China-Asean Free Trade Agreement
CBOs	Community-based Organizations
CCA	Computer Crime Act
CSCG	Chiang Saen Conservation Group
EGAT	Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
FACT	Freedom Against Censorship Thailand
FTAs	Free Trade Agreements
GATT	General Agreement on Tariff and Trade
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIFC	Global Internet Freedom Consortium
GILC	Global Internet Liberty Campaign
GMS	Greater Mekong Sub-region
ICTs	Information Communication Technologies
IMCs	Independent Media Centres
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRs	International Rivers
ITV	Independent Commercial Channel
LRS	Living River Siam
MICT	Ministry of Information Communications Technology
MRC	Mekong River Commission
MWBP	Wetlands Biodiversity Programme
Network	Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
PNN	Prachadhrama News Net
PNPCA	Procedures for Notification and Prior Consultation
SDN	World Bank Sustainable Development Network
SEA	Southeast Asia

SEO	Search Engine Optimization
SEAPA	Southeast Asian Press Alliance
TNCs	Transnational Corporations
TPBS	Thai Public Broadcasting Service
VOA	Voice of America
WB	World Bank
WCD	World Commission on Dams
WTO	World Trade Organization



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## OPERATIONAL TERMS

Alternative Online EnvironmentalMedia(AOEM)	An online communication tool which provides community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with an interactive and real-time networking platforms, which allow for an increased ability to promote sustainable development in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) in the following ways:(1) to disseminate information to the public; (2) to network among other issue-based environmental organizations; and (3) to organize campaigns.
Sustainable Development	A pattern of resource use that: (1) aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that human needs can be met not only in the present, but also for generations to come; (2) the decision-making power of resource usage must come from meaningful and non-coercive participation and decisions of all parties and concerned peoples, specifically peoples who have a voice in decisions affecting their safety and livelihoods.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1) Background

The Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) consists of Myanmar/Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and two Southern provinces of China - Yunnan and Guangxi. These countries have been facing critical problems due to development projects along the Mekong River, specifically the construction of hydropower dams. Moreover, rapids blasting and bridge construction by Asian Development Bank (ADB) in China have also had a negative impact on downstream GMS communities for over a decade. Historically, decisions concerning such development projects have suffered from: (1) lack of people participation from residents in local communities; and, (2) the inability of the local voices in GMS communities to impact the decision making process. Such development projects have led to deforestation, ecological and biodiversity decline, impoverishment, socio-cultural changes, loss of self-dependency and food insecurity (Cornford and Matthews, 2007; Ransley et al., 2008).

Since the 1980s, the accelerated deregulation of commerce worldwide has increased the ease with which corporate investment and trade flows circumnavigate the planet. Regional and global free trade agreements (FTAs), General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) [later became World Trade Organization - WTO], mega-hydropower dam projects and investment treaties are furthering this trend. Admittedly, the projects funded by powerful economic institutions such as transnational corporations (TNCs), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank (WB) are having an ever-greater impact on people and the environment around the world (Greer and Giannini, 1999). This paper will focus on the environmental impact these projects have had on the GMS countries.

In 1992, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) initiated the GMS program in an attempt to encourage a 'regional approach' to achieve rapid economic growth among six GMS countries: Cambodia, Myanmar/Burma, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and China (especially in Yunnan and Guangxi provinces) (Ransley et al., 2008). The GMS

program has resulted in the construction of roads, bridges, airports, ports, hotels, casinos and dams across the region. Such projects have increased inequality and poverty among the affected populations and led to deforestation, agricultural hardship and loss of biodiversity in the GMS.

Figure 1.1 Map of Hydropower Damin GMS



*Source:* International Rivers (<http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/2275>)

Subsequently, an FTA between China and Thailand commenced in 2003, which negatively impacted many Thai citizens. The Chinese government conducted massive rapids blasting operations to control water levels for easier trade navigation along the Mekong River, which jeopardized the lives of villagers in northern Thailand. The villagers, whose agricultural subsistence was once fully dependent on the Mekong River, have faced radical changes in their lives. Many farmers and fishermen gave up their traditional agricultural livelihoods and traded them for unskilled labor in nearby provinces or in big cities (International Rivers, 2008).



Furthermore, the Chinese dam industry has become a global leader in dam construction over the last decade. Chinese companies have planned construction for eleven dams along upstream Mekong in China, dozens of dams downstream in other GMS countries, and many more in other countries around the world. In the past several years, Chinese financial institutions have stepped into filling gap left by traditional dam funders such as the World Bank, and ADB. The Chinese government sees the new role of Chinese enterprises, e.g. Sinohydro and Chian Exim Bank, and financiers are playing as 'win-win' for China and the host countries involved. The Chinese government's policies are to encourage domestic companies and banks to conduct business and fund building dams overseas (International Rivers, 2008).

The first mainstream Mekong dam in China, called 'Manwan' was started in 1993 and began generating electricity by 1996, which was the first year that Chinese dam began negatively impacting riparian villagers in downstream Mekong. 'Dashaoshan Dam' began generating electricity in 2003, and 'Jinghong Dam' started to store water in 2008, with 5 electricity generators operating by May 2009. The largest dam called 'Xiaowan,' which started to store water and run the generator in September, 2009. As a result, the downstream Mekong people have been experiencing rapid flooding in the rainy season and drastically low water levels in the dry season, according to Mekong Community Media Project and International Rivers Report (Nopparat, 2010).

In Thailand, for instance, Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen districts of Chiang Rai province in Northern Thailand, bordered by Bokeo province of Laos, have been illustrated as examples of critically affected areas. An emboldened people's movement subsequently emerged against Mekong hydropower dams in upstream China. In late 2008, nearly one hundred villages along Mekong River in China, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam were flooded. The event was noted as the Mekong River's worst floods in 100 years. Thousands of people were affected. Environmentalists and scientists contend that this catastrophe was the result of mega- hydropower dams upstream in China (Chua, 2008). The flood water was released from Jinghong Dam, which is located about 345 kilometers from Chiang Saen District, Thailand, had deleterious effects.. The impact of this disaster was cost at more than 85 million baht (2.65 million USD) in 39 villages in three districts in Chiang Rai: Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong and WiangKaen (Nopparat, 2010).

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) however claimed that the flooding had not been caused by water released from big dams in China. As the result, the Thai People's Network on Mekong, the Foundation for Ecological Recovery, the Living River Siam, and the Chiang Khong Conservation Group together released a joint statement responding to the MRC's claim. In the joint statement noted the severe flooding were caused by the dam, and the flood had caused serious hardship to people living along the Mekong River in Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen districts of Chiang Rai and in Nong Khai provinces in Thailand. These organizations also used their websites to distribute information and news to raise awareness regarding the critical situation.

Additionally, in March 2010, the dry weather has reduced Mekong water levels to their lowest in three decades, affecting more than 60 million people in the lower basin. Consequently, saline water intruded inland in the Mekong delta region of Vietnam and caused crucial damage to freshwater fishery and agricultural farming (Daniel, 2010). As of March 2011, one of the worst droughts in Southeast Asia in decades has lowered water levels in the Mekong River, jeopardizing the lives of residents and hampering the regional economy. Also, the severe drought has had an impact on food security, access to clean water, river transport and tourism.

As a result, the negative effects of the hydropower dam development projects in the GMS have driven local people in Thailand to organize in an effort to mitigate the ongoing threats to safety, security and the environment. The community-based organizations (CBOs), which are distinguishable from both state-run and commercial media organizations, have recently risen up. CBOs are using less centralized, affordable cost channels via online media to communicate their own sustainable development agendas. These CBOs are using online media to disseminate information, network and organize (both internally and with other CBOs) which has resulted in an increased awareness of human rights issues and an enhancement of CBOs' ability to impact the decision making process regarding development projects in the GMS.

## **1.2) Rationale**

The development projects of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) program have had an impact on local communities along Mekong River for two decades. Thai people have been facing environmental problems from such demonstrably unsustainable development schemes. Meanwhile, the mainstream media outlets, which are mostly monopolized by state and corporate interests, rarely report or cover news which affects local communities or addresses such communities' social and environmental concerns. It is hard to imagine how sustainable development is possible if local community voices are not adequately represented in the dialogue regarding such issues.

As a result, community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have begun to use online media as an alternative platform to empower their organizations and voice their concerns. Thus, Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) provides CBOs and NGOs with an interactive, real-time networking platform which allows for an increased ability to disseminate information to the public. However, there are relatively few studies concerning the role online media plays in promoting sustainable development in the GMS. The main focus of this thesis is to study how effective CBOs and NGOs located and operated in Thailand use online media to promote sustainable development in GMS.

## **1.3) Objectives**

- 1.3.1) To identify roles and functions of Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) in Thailand in promoting sustainable development in GMS countries, and its establishing origin in Thailand
- 1.3.2) To examine relations between AOEM and mainstream media;
- 1.3.3) To examine the impact and challenges of organizations using AOEM

#### **1.4) Major arguments/Hypotheses**

Thailand and other Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) countries are facing environmental problems due to GMS development projects, such as hydropower dams, rapids blasting, and road and bridge construction. Such projects are considered unsustainable, as they have resulted in an increase of inequality and poverty among the affected populations, deforestation, agricultural hardship and loss of biodiversity in the GMS.

In 1997, traditional or mainstream media faced economic difficulties as a result of the Asian financial crisis. Media agencies cut their news budgets and were likely to report soft news, such as entertainment and sports news, rather than hard news, such as social and environmental issues. As a result, many local people's problems were not recognized by these media agencies. Thus, community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) began to use online media to raise awareness regarding environmental issues and the hardships borne by local communities.

While CBOs tend to use AOEM to promote sustainable development by disseminating information and based on grassroots communities' experiences, NGOs tend to use AOEM to disseminate information about regional and international policies and legal matters. AOEM has since become an important communication channel in promoting sustainable development in Thailand and in other GMS countries.

The first role of AOEM is to disseminate information about the environmental impact of development projects and to propose development which is sustainable. The second role of AOEM is to allow for networking among related issue-based organizations within Thailand and GMS countries to strengthen alliances and campaigning abilities. Lastly, the third role of AOEM is to organize among CBOs and NGOs to pressure governments and private companies to halt or reconsider any development project which poses a negative impact on Mekong communities. Also, CBOs and NGOs use AOEM to continuously build up good relationship and work with mainstream media to promote sustainable development in Thailand and GMS.

Therefore, the major hypothesis of this thesis is that AOEM plays a crucial role as a communication medium for CBOs and NGOs to promote sustainable development in Thailand and in other GMS countries. Moreover, Thai and GMS governments should strengthen the AOEM in order to engage more voices from CBOs, NGOs and the people for the country development.

### **1.5) Methodology**

The study of roles of Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) in Thailand for sustainable development applied both qualitative and quantitative methods. This study focused on examining information that was available in three intended websites during December 2010 – March 2011, which attempted to answer the functions of websites and their roles in promoting sustainable development in Thailand and in GMS countries. Moreover, to complete the findings, the in-depth interviews with CBOs and NGOs web coordinators were very crucial in this research.

1.5.1) Documentary research

1.5.2) Website - content analysis of CBOs and NGOs

1.5.3) In-depth interviews with CBOs' and NGOs' webmasters and organizational staff of media teams

The websites are each an example of one of the following: a community-based organization (CBO), a Thai-based governmental organization, and an international non-governmental organization, all of which operate in Thailand. This study examined the use of online media of the following three organizations:

a. Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network is a community-based organization, based in one of the development project affected-areas in Chiang Khong district of Chiang Rai province, Northern Thailand. The Network's website address is [www.mekonglover.com](http://www.mekonglover.com).

b. Living River Siam is a non-governmental organization, and well-known among local, Mekong sub-regional and international communities as an organization which researches the impact of hydropower dam construction and other development

projects in GMS. Moreover, Living River Siam is the first organization to develop an alternative methodology for ecological and cultural research for local people. As a result, the research helped to empower local communities to retrieve their rights over natural resources. The organization has developed its website 'www.livingriversiam.org' to be recognized as a bay of information about dams in Thailand and in Mekong neighbor countries.

c. International Rivers is an international non-profit organization, based in the United States. This study will focus on International River's campaign on development projects that affecting Rivers in Southeast Asia (Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam). The organization is a global network and has a wide range of campaigning areas in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Their work covers over 60 countries, including Thailand. The website of International Rivers – Southeast Asia campaign page is [www.internationalrivers.org/en/southeastasia](http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/southeastasia).

The organizations' websites studied in this research have campaigns related to development projects in Mekong River, and the organizations express interests in protecting the river and the rights of the peoples who earn their living from the Mekong River. Moreover, the reasons of selection intended to study at various level and diverse working nature of non-profit environmental organizations' websites. Mekong Lover is Thai community-based organization which also works with Laos communities. Living River Siam is Thai organization but their work covers the impact of development projects in all of the Mekong countries. International Rivers is international organization, but they are partially based in Thailand and focus on the Southeast Asia region. These organizations also have been co-organizing and co-working toward Mekong campaigns in affected areas for more than a decade. They are well-known organizations among environmental activists and civil society groups in Mekong Sub-region and international community. However, each organization has a different approach in presenting information through its website.

### 1.5.1) Documentary research

This study contains information related to the origin and history of development of online media in Thailand. The causes of the need of online media in Thai social and environmental organizations are examined in this research. Furthermore, the study specifically focuses on the background and development history of community-based and non-governmental organizations in Thailand using Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM). The documentation came from two sources:

1.5.1.1) Print documents and publications such as information from books, newspapers, articles, and related research thesis;

1.5.1.2) Websites of CBOs and NGOs

### 1.5.2) Website - content analysis of CBOs and NGOs

The websites were analyzed as communication channels to understand how organizations employ them to achieve: (1) the dissemination of information; (2) networking among CBOs and NGOs themselves and other working individuals and groups; and, (3) organizing the campaigns to reach the general public.

The content analysis aims to examine: (1) how actively an organization uses its website; and, (2) how efficient the website is in reaching the intended audience. This study applied a research methodology of Gibson and Ward (2001) in a systematic and quantitative approach to web content analysis. The Gibson and Ward Model is web content analysis – quantitative method by focusing on the following detailed topics.

Gibson and Ward Model (2001) proposed methodology for studying political websites for categorizing and measuring the function of political party websites. The Model is key to development a broader understanding of the role of the Internet not just as a data retrieval tool, but also as a new type of communication tool with functions that are distinct from other forms of mass media. Moreover, the model will show how the website helps to shift Internet content consumers to be Internet content producers in the interactive, online sphere. There are six categories in this Model to analyze the website.

### 1.5.2.1) Six Major questions for Website Content Analysis

1. Website's objectives
2. Website's intended audience
3. Number of Web visitors (per month)
4. Type of information presenting on the Website (news, general information campaign messages, statements, etc.)
5. Frequency of Web content uploading
6. Level and degree of interactive communication

#### Six Categories of Website Content Analysis

- a. Information provision
  - i. Language
  - ii. Organization history
  - iii. Organization objectives
  - iv. Values/ideology
  - v. Download document
  - vi. Subscription
  - vii. News
  - viii. Articles
  - ix. Articles archive or library
  - x. People in organization
  - xi. Event calendar
  - xii. Annual report
  - xiii. Campaign information
  - xiv. Information about success
  
- b. Resource generation
  - i. Membership
  - ii. Online selling
  - iii. Publication for sell
  - iv. Networking organizations
  - v. Fundraising



- vi. Information about financial support
- c. Networking
    - i. Number of Hyperlinks (linking to)
      - 1. Local CBOs/ NGOs
      - 2. Regional CBOs/NGOs
      - 3. International CBOs/NGOs
      - 4. Governmental links
  - d. Participation
    - i. Openness
    - ii. Feedback/comments
    - iii. Opinion polls
    - iv. Interaction
  - e. Campaigning
    - i. Sign online petition
    - ii. Download logo/ wallpaper
    - iii. Download offline leaflets
    - iv. Other
  - f. Website delivery
    - *Homepage design*
      - i. Graphic/images/photos
      - ii. Moving text/images
      - iii. Multimedia index
      - iv. Sound
      - v. Video
      - vi. Live streaming
      - vii. Search engine
      - viii. Text only option-entire site
      - ix. Text only document to download and print
      - x. Foreign language translation
      - xi. Homepage icon on upper level page

- xii. Fixed menu bar on upper and lower level page
- xiii. Site map/index

- *Freshness/update*
- *Visibility/ Link Popularity – number of links to the site*

### 1.5.3) In-depth interview

Email exchanges, live-video and in-person interviews of web editors and web coordinators and key personnel were used in this research. Information from the interviews is used to attempt to answer these following research questions:

1. Reason to use online media (i.e. website, blog, Facebook)
2. Roles of online media (disseminating, networking, and organizing)
3. Usefulness of online media
4. Successful cases due to usage of online media
5. Challenges or limitation of online media

## 1.6) **Significance and usefulness of research**

1.6.1) The findings will be used as an example for other community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations in GMS countries to elaborate on the efficacy of online media used to promote sustainable development.

1.6.2) The findings will be proposed as recommendations to the Thai government and governments of other GMS countries to: (1) develop internet coverage and access to local communities and, (2) and promote media policies which support local and regional Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) so that CBOs and NGOs can effectively engage in the decision-making process of Mekong River development schemes.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For the past decade, it has been argued in academic and professional circles whether new media – specifically the Internet and burgeoning online media – has had a positive or negative impact on society in terms of development and democratization. Accordingly, the issue is interrelated with several factors, such as the government regime type, degree of Internet diffusion<sup>1</sup>, level of literacy, economy and related policies.

Since the second half of the 20th century – which has been marked by rapid globalization and an explosion of technology – there has been an increasing interest in the uses of Information Communication Technologies or ICTs<sup>2</sup>, specifically “Internet.” The ‘online media’<sup>3</sup> that exists in cyberspace has actually emerged to be the alternative communication medium for people among traditional media.<sup>4</sup>The Internet has been found to be one of the most effective channels used by governments, mainstream media, civil society groups, non-governmental organizations, and community based organizations in communication within their networks and to public.

In the context of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) countries, there are many reports and studies illustrating that development projects such as hydropower dams have had a negative impact on local communities economically, socially and environmentally. Also, in this regard there are studies which show how affected communities and NGOs are using the Internet and online media to raise awareness and voice their concerns. Even though access to online media is under state control and face repressive policies, the Internet is a crucial tool used by people to facilitate social change, specifically with regard to the environmental movement. However, there are few studies demonstrating the

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<sup>1</sup> A geographical levels (regions) that use the Internet.

<sup>2</sup>Examples of ICTs include satellites, computers, telephones, faxes, and the Internet.

<sup>3</sup>Online media that is used in this study is defined as websites, blogs, and newspaper, radio and television (or other multi media) appearing on websites.

<sup>4</sup>Such as print, radio, television, etc.

significance the Internet and online media have had in promoting sustainable development in GMS countries. Therefore, it is important to study whether the Internet and online media have been effectively used by CBOs and NGOs in Thailand who attempt to promote sustainable development in order to minimize the negative effects of development projects to local communities.

Additionally, to have a better understanding about the functions and implications that the Internet and online media have in terms of helping organizations achieve their goals for advocating sustainable development, a review of research will be conducted concerning the nature of the online media playing roles in: (1) the development and implementation of governmental policy and the decision-making process which theoretically requires the genuine participation of the people; and, (2) the effect the Internet and online media have had in the democratization process and its significance for GMS people especially in Thailand.

Furthermore, the review will study the function of the Internet and online media as used by international NGOs. The review will include significant case-studies in Thailand of how the Internet and online media have been used by local communities, NGOs, and activists in the pursuit of sustainable development at the local, regional and international levels. Lastly, limitations of the Internet and online media will be noted in order to provide a comprehensive review of the research. The review will be organized into the following sections:

- 2.1) The Internet as a tool for development and democratization in global community
- 2.2) Situation of access to online media in Southeast Asia, Mekong Sub-region, and Thailand
- 2.3) The Internet and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Thailand
- 2.4) The Internet and global environmental movement
- 2.5) Internet's strengths and limitations, and digital divide

## **2.1) The Internet: Tool for Development and Democratization in Global Community**

Tadros (2004) mentions in his paper 'Promises and Challenges: The role of the Internet in development and human rights campaigns and movements in the Middle East' that Internet has been used in human rights and development movements and campaign around the world. Tadros further explains the Internet is the quintessence of ICTs, due to its speed, lack of centralization, and citizen-to-citizen connectivity.

According to Tadros, the Internet has shifted the power to access and present information from government to people, which legitimize the claim that it is a powerful force for democratization. While there is truth in that claim, one must not lose sight of the problems and challenges which impede that process.

Tadros also points out that there is enough evidence to suggest that unlike other media, it has exceptional potential due to its interactive nature. The explosive growth of the Internet over the last decade is attributed to two basic reasons according to Tadros: (1) the non-centralized management of its development, and (2) the non-proprietary nature of its main functional units. These characteristics of the Internet determine its balanced organic growth and prevent it from suffering the consequences of monopoly.

In particular, the Internet allows for a new way of public participation, which is absolutely compatible with a completely privatized way of life. For example, individuals use e-mail to participate in any collective campaigns without leaving their actual physical environment and without disturbing their routine activities and roles. Internet also helps and confirms the viability of theories which maintain a strong relationship between Internet prevalence and democracy. Accordingly, an article 'The Internet and Democracy: Global Catalyst or Democratic Dud?' by Best and Wade (2005) concludes that the Internet affects levels of democratization. Their findings suggest that a country increases in Internet penetration also leads to an increase in democracy index provided by Freedom House.

Lessig(1999) has proposed a theoretical framework of regulability which states that Internet might act as agent for or against political and civil liberties in different contexts (cited in Best and Wade, 2005). Lessig proposes that a regulator – in this case, the Internet is democratic if it increases civil rights or political liberties. According to Lessig, civil rights include the freedom of expression and belief; freedom to associate and organize; rule of law; personal autonomy and individual rights. Political rights include the ability to enable people to participate freely in the political process, and are based on fair electoral processes, political pluralism and participation, and function of government.

Furthermore, the inexpensiveness of Internet communications better allows local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to organize and communicate, both within and outside of authoritarian nations. Best and Wade (2005) claim that NGOs have been able to cut costs and improve the effectiveness and scale of their communication, planning and logistics, and information gathering, storage, processing, exchange, and protection. A result of this is that CBOs and NGOs can better expose and pressure abusive governments.

A study done by Froehling (1997), the case study of ‘Chiapas uprising in 1994’ in Mexico is one of the successful cases using Internet in political mobilization<sup>5</sup>. Froehling’s study notes the uprising rallied an international community of supporters, largely organized through activities on the Internet. Froehling also provided examples in Southern Mexico of the advantages of the Internet as an intermediate tool for social movements. The results indicate that the Internet facilitates connections between events, people and places. Froehling firmly concludes that the success of Internet organizing in Southern Mexico is due to the constant and reciprocal connections between cyberspace and other social spaces, which avoided the restriction of events to a contained space and scale.

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<sup>5</sup> Mobilization is defined as a broad scale movement to engage people's participation in achieving a specific development goal through self-reliant efforts.

Lastly, in “The Co-Evolution of the Internet and Civil Society in China,” (Yang 2003) findings suggest that the Internet facilitates civil society activities by offering new possibilities for citizen participation and that civil society facilitates the development of the Internet by providing the necessary social basis—citizens and citizens group for communication and interaction

Ru Guanrong (1998), and Friedland and Rogerson (2009) have similar findings which show that the Internet genuinely provides a great deal of alternative space for digital media in emerging democracies. The Internet is also enabling groups previously incapable of political action to find their voices. Ru Guangrong (1998) also concludes in his study that the reasons why the Internet seems so powerful because it has at least two crucial characteristics: first, the Internet contains the biggest resource of information; second, it enables people to obtain an interactive communication with each other.

Best and Wade (2005) propose the question whether the Internet affects democracy from a quantitative standpoint. They also found evidence that this ‘Internet democracy relationship’ is not absolute; it depends on social, economic and political factors. Their findings show that Internet penetration explains more variation in level of democratic development within a country than do high literacy rates

In the study “Internet, Scale and The Global Grassroots: Geographies of the Indymedia Network of Independent Media Centres” Mamadough (2004) addresses the role of the Internet in global collective action through an analysis of the collective practices of the Indymedia network. Mamadough explains the term ‘Indymedia’ as is a worldwide network of interlinked websites run by volunteers organized in local Independent Media Centres (IMCs). This case study focuses on the role of the Internet in four facets of collective action: grievances and alternatives, organization, mobilization and identities. The study also examines scales and levels of interaction between the communities and specific government agencies. The Indymedia website has links to over one hundred local sites and is meant to empower activists groups by providing them with a media platform.

However, the decentralization and non-intervention by professional journalists that gave birth to Indymedia has also caused the Network a crucial problem. Although the site is real-time, uncensored public expression, byhosting hundreds of distinct bits of user-contributed media, many contributors reported false news. Hence, the Indymedia was widely criticized for its accountability of publishing false news.

The Internet has been used in development and democracy movements around the world. The Internet's speed, decentralized structure and people-to-people connectivity help to shift power away from government to people and allows for massive communication of an event. Moreover, the inexpensiveness of Internet allows for NGOs to communicate. NGOs can cut costs and improve effectiveness of communication and thereby better expose abusive governments. The Internet also creates new possibilities for citizen participation and for society to engage in a country's development (Froehling, 1997; Lessig, 1999; Yang, 2003; Tadros, 2004; Best and Wade, 2005).

Nonetheless, due to regulations and laws, many websites have been blocked or are under censorship in many countries. Although online media as interactive communication tool helps empowering people to express their concerns, the significant questions of information accuracy and author accountability still remains. Moreover, the degree of access to online media is varies in different countries upon different social, economic, and political contexts of the country (Mamadough, 2004; Best and Wade, 2005). In Southeast Asia where there are many countries are remain under military and civil government control, freedom of expression and access to information are limited. The next section will elaborate more in-depth of the ICTs situation in Southeast Asia, Mekong Sub-region, and Thailand.

## **2.2) Situation in Southeast Asia, Mekong Sub-region and Thailand**

Although there is substantial research showing the usefulness of the Internet in contributing to the development of society, that might not be able to apply that to the rest of



the world when other factors can mitigate the positive effects of ICT, namely political, economic, and cultural conditions. A closer look at the Southeast Asian countries, especially Thailand, will provide a better understanding of the current state of ICT and how it can or cannot be used by the people.

Thailand's ranking as a place where the public and press can freely express information and opinion has been downward in recent years due to political conflict. Reporters Without Borders reports a press freedom index of Thailand has dropped from 107 in 2005 – the year before the country's last military coup in 2006 – down to 153 in 2010. Moreover, since the Computer Crime Act came into effect in 2007, there have been thousands websites banned because of the lese majeste law abuse (Roughneen, 2011). In contrast, the number of Internet users in Thailand rose considerably since then, and significantly increased after the coup in 2006 (Internet World Stats, 2011).

Moreover, according to a Freedom House 2010 Report on Thailand's freedom of the press, Thailand experienced a decline in press freedom especially after the year 2009 as a result of the country's ongoing political contest between the allies and enemies of Thaksin Shinawatra, a populist prime minister who was ousted in the 2006 military coup. In addition, the restrictions imposed during a state of emergency in April 2009 and a significant increase in the use of long-standing lese majeste laws created even more difficulties faced by the press during the year and afterward.

Furthermore, the Internet is accessed by approximately 26 percent of the Thai population. Government censorship of the Internet has been in place since 2003, largely to prevent the circulation of pornography and illegal products. However, since the 2006 coup, Internet censorship has increasingly been used against potentially disruptive political messages and sites that are considered a threat to national security according to Freedom House Thailand 2010 Report. In Thailand, the sensitivity by which lese majeste<sup>6</sup> and online

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<sup>6</sup>Thailand's Criminal Code has carried a prohibition against *lèse majesté* since 1908. In 1932, when Thailand's monarchy ceased to be absolute and a constitution was adopted, it too included language prohibiting *lèse majesté*. The 2007 Constitution of Thailand, and all seventeen versions since 1932, contain the clause, "The King shall be enthroned in a position of revered

speech is being handled signals that the larger considerations that impact on press freedom and free expression in the country have gone away, and they remain vulnerable to the political considerations. Also, since the coup in 2006 –the Ministry of Information Communications Technology (MICT) has blocked 8,300 website pages on lese majeste grounds and more than 120,000 websites were blocked for various offences according to the Computer Crime Act 2007. In 2007, Youtube<sup>7</sup> was also blocked for several months(Roughneen, 2011).

In the case of Southeast Asian countries, although there are constitutional and legal guarantees for freedom of expression and press freedom including freedom of expression principle, the press remains vulnerable to legal attacks and repressive policies. According to Southeast Asian Press Alliance's (SEAPA) survey in 2009 of eleven countries of Southeast Asian, shows that there are many levels of freedom of the press which are practically excising their freedom under different political, economic, social and cultural climate.

For instance, in Laos, all Internet providers are controlled by the state, e-mails are monitored and any media-related offenses or anti-government sentiments, in Lao law, have corresponding jail terms. In Vietnam, government interviewers are empowered to review articles before they can be published and the government maintains active monitoring of Internet users. Singapore also has many websites blocked by its government. In Cambodia, although online media offers an adequate venue for public discussion (e.g. health, social and environmental related issues), the Internet penetration rate is very low and media is under state control. The Internet penetration in Burma is a mere 0.001% or 40,000 users out of a total population of 4.7 million people and Internet remains strictly controlled inside the country. This concerning a transparency and governance are crucial challenges that must be complemented by free, independent and stable media (SEAPA, 2009).

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worship and shall not be violated. No person shall expose the King to any sort of accusation or action." Thai Criminal Code elaborates in Article 112: "Whoever defames, insults or threatens the King, Queen, the Heir-apparent or the Regent, shall be punished with imprisonment of three to fifteen years." Missing from the Code, however, is a definition of what actions constitute "defamation" or "insult". Neither the King nor any member of the Royal Family has ever personally filed any charges under this law

<sup>7</sup>YouTube is a video-sharing website on which users can upload, share, and view videos.

Since 2000, the Internet has also emerged in China as an important communications medium. In spite of heavy government monitoring, however, Chinese media has become increasingly commercialized, with growing competition, diversified content, and an increase in investigative reporting. According to Freedom House<sup>8</sup>, its 2005 survey of press freedom rated China as having a "Not Free" environment for the media, ranking it in 177th place out of a total of 194 countries. The Freedom House 2010 Report also ranked China as "Not Free" in its most recent annual survey of political and civil rights. Moreover, the Report reveals that China's media environment still remained one of the world's most restrictive. This is likely due to the fact that the Chinese authorities are constantly increasing censorship and pro-government propaganda in both traditional and online media.

However, **online media is the new underground**, according to a survey of media in ten Southeast Asian countries, Wagstaff (2010) proposes several observations concerning the growth and changes of media and the emergence of Internet in this region. First of all, Wagstaff notes that 'online is the new underground,' in that online media journalists, practitioners, and bloggers<sup>9</sup> have found ways to overcome restrictions on news reporting, intimidation and censorship in all the countries through exchanging views and dissident voices online. Examples of this include, Burma's Mizzima<sup>10</sup> and The Irrawaddy<sup>11</sup>, two exiled media organizations operating in Thailand, and Prachatai<sup>12</sup>, an online newspaper based in Thailand.

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<sup>8</sup>Freedom House, an independent non-governmental organization that supports the expansion of freedom in the world, has monitored political rights and civil liberties in China since 1972 and press freedoms in China since 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Blog or weblog is a type of website or part of a website. Blogs are usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Blogger refers to a person who writes a blog or weblog.

<sup>10</sup> A Burmese multimedia news organization, was established in 1998 by a group of Burmese journalist in exile, hosts a website [www.mizzima.com](http://www.mizzima.com)

<sup>11</sup> A bilingual newsmagazine was founded in 1992 by Burmese exiles living in Thailand and hosts a website [www.irrawaddy.org](http://www.irrawaddy.org)

<sup>12</sup> An online newspaper was founded in 2004. It has a leading role as a Thai independent online press. It hosts a website [www.prachatai3.info](http://www.prachatai3.info)

**Social is the new news.** Secondly, ‘social is the new news’, Wagstaff shows that Internet has given the rise of the social network. “In Indonesia, for example, there are more than 12 million registered users of Facebook.<sup>13</sup>” According to the survey the information shared on these networks challenges not only the traditional notion of newsmakers, but also the definition of news itself.

Moreover, an article “Facebook’s Growing Role in Social Journalism” notes that one of the key advantages of Facebook over other social platforms is the sheer number of potential sources it presents for journalists. Facebook provides reports from people in their communities and event information. Thus, users are able to track activity (for example, what protests are being planned, time and location) and participate in that event (Lavrusik, 2011). Furthermore, the mobile computing technology and cellphone technology are merging quickly and new generations of ‘smartphones’ and ‘tablets’ device are enabling users to quickly access news and online media.

Wagstaff (2010) also presents that blogs in both English and Thai have increasingly become a forum for debate, challenging traditional media for analysis and commentary. Also, Twitter has emerged as a potent tool for politicians in Thailand. Moreover, Thais and foreigners have increasingly turned to the Internet both as a source for information and as a way to project their points of view.

However, the section of Wagstaff’s study (2010) which focused on the usage of ‘popular news websites and search-engine channels’ only focused on mainstream websites in Thailand such as, [www.pantip.com](http://www.pantip.com), [www.manager.com](http://www.manager.com), [www.thairath.com](http://www.thairath.com), [www.matichon.com](http://www.matichon.com), [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), etc. Yet, there is not much covering in Wagstaff’s study about other websites, for example, [www.prachatai.com](http://www.prachatai.com), [www.prachatham.com](http://www.prachatham.com), [www.esaavoice.com](http://www.esaavoice.com) and other alternative news-online media hosted by non-governmental organizations and community-based organization in Thailand.

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<sup>13</sup> A social network service, hosts a website [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

### **2.3) Internet and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Thailand**

It is difficult to find any in-depth analysis of ICTs roles in environmental movement and in promoting sustainable development in Thailand. However, there is literature related to similar conceptual fields.

In the latest report of media situation in Thailand “Asian Media Barometer – Thailand 2010”, notes that the mainstream in Thailand did not fairly reflect the voices of society in its ethnic, linguistic, religious, political and social diversity. The media would most of then reflect the voices of the powerful and of the state authorities. Also, the media were biased against the disadvantaged groups in society such as groups with different ethnic, linguistic, religious, political and social characteristics (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung - FES, 2010).

While the mainstream media covers the full spectrum of events, issues and cultures, including business/economics, much of the serious local news and investigative stories are missing from the mainstream media. A major reason for the limitation of local news reporting in the mainstream press is that the majority of the news media are concentrated in Bangkok and more spaces are devoted to what happens in the capital city. As a result, much of the news agenda and reporting reflected the perspectives of Bangkokians (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung - FES, 2010).

Accordingly, the thesis ‘Development of Thai civic journalism on the internet’ by Montakan Tapaneeyangkul (2002) examined five civic media websites such as the website of the Prachatham news agency ([www.newspnn.net](http://www.newspnn.net)), the Silpakam Krachok-ngao group ([www.bannok.com](http://www.bannok.com)), the Thaitopic dot com ([www.thaitopic.com](http://www.thaitopic.com)), and the Thai NGO network ([www.thaingo.org](http://www.thaingo.org)). These civic media are defined as a group of NGOs and unprofessional personnel working as journalists or information producers. These civic media publish their reports and news on their websites. The findings show that civic media plays a key role in public provision of civic information, public education about civic

matters, mobilization of resources for rural development, and centers of civic networking. The study also finds that although the Internet has many positive attributes for civic networking such as low cost, two-way communication, speed, borderlessness, and user anonymity, its rate of diffusion in Thailand is limited to only the middle-class population.

Moreover, Pornpen Payadyakul (1998) and Rachaneekorn Thongthip (2005) studied of the usage of Internet and information dissemination of Thai NGOs website (www.thaingo.org). Payadyakul's findings show the website's contents contained information which created awareness, motivated changes of attitude, and lead to behavioral changes, although this action level change was minimal. Likewise, Thongthip's findings show that NGOs attempt to construct social discourses by creating a forum for discussion and presenting different issues to be discussed but the discourses tend not to be situated as the dominant discourse because of the lack of knowledge and enthusiasms of NGOs workers, management problems (e.g. technical problems, inadequate working staff, budgeting, etc.) and users' attention. However, the civic media's websites provide in-depth information and discussion space for people to express their opinions on social issues.

#### **2.4) Internet and Global Environmental Movement**

In a working paper "Movement as Network, Connecting People and Organizations in the Environmental Movement" (2004), Rosenblatt points out that the international activism tends to be focused on environmental issues. Moreover, in order to deal with the critically environmental problems that people are facing in this new century, Rosenblatt suggests the movement requires new organizational structures and strategies to succeed in its efforts.

For this reason, Rosenblatt's paper offers the increased uses of technologies to connect and engage people and organizations to help strengthen the environmental movement. Thus, they can gain more ability in organizing, fundraising, campaigning and communicating to meet their organizational goals..

In addition, the positive impact of the employment of ICTs in environmental and

social movements as revealed in “Global Activism, Global Media, (2005)” shows that new forms of media emerge and are used to tackle social problems. The study recognizes that non-governmental organizations and activists apply the Internet to their work through ‘virtual campaigning,’ which refers to at least three activities: receiving emails, performing online petitions, and hosting news websites for up-to-the minute reports of events with the goal of helping to solve a social problem.

The study by Coyer (Willa de Jong and other, 2005) examined several prominent international civic organizations, such as: ActionAid, World Development Movement, Indymedia, International Rivers, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and Oxfam. Their research used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for the in-depth examination of the sampled cases.

First, the content analysis of the organizations’ websites analyzed the functions of the website and gave an indication of how well they performed according to Web analysis of the Gibson and Ward Model (2001). Second, in completing the findings the interviews with the tech staff about the thinking, strategy and problems concerning the website were revealed in this study (Willa de Jong, 2005). According to the findings, ICTs have played crucial roles in providing channels and acting as an intermediate platform for increasing interaction among the activists and other involved parties such as journalists, mainstream media, governmental groups, and the public. Moreover, the Internet actually helps to extend the availability of offline media and is serving to increase the informational and educational spheres, as the information can be presented in a lively, interactive multimedia format.

The Internet acts as a powerful networking tool because its connectivity allows for participatory channels such as email lists, newsgroups or chat rooms, which can be used to strengthen solidarity within the organization and engage more public involvement with its cause (cited in Willa de Jong, 2005).

Furthermore, civic organizations can use the Internet to mobilize support and

generate resources more cheaply and efficiently by receiving membership fees and online donations. More importantly, the Internet has created opportunities for innovative campaigning, activism, strategies, tactics and forms of protest to achieve their goals (Willa de Jong, 2005). Although, the civic organizations' websites are well resourced, this Internet medium is limited by its pull nature. Thus, the civic organizations need to advertise and promote their website to the public audience to gain more visitors.

## **2.5) Internet Limitations and Digital Divide**

In Maratea's (2008) study shows that the 'e-Rise and Fall of Social Problems' which related to the emergence of the blogosphere as a cultural phenomenon in Internet space that provides claims-makers with a powerful new public arena to advance social problem claims. Maraten's findings suggest that blogs make the claim-making process more efficient and universally accessible compared to traditional arenas, and provide outsiders with greater opportunities to have a voice in the shaping of particular social programs. At last the study notes that that there are only a small number of blogs that have become recognized and that bloggers still face the competition for mainstream media attention as traditional claims-makers.

There are many researchers and media practitioners who have asked whether the Internet acts as a positive force in the development, specifically as a catalyst for civil participation in the democratic process.. One of the main arguments is about society worldwide facing the 'digital divide.' The digital divide refers to the gap between people with effective access to digital and information technology and those with very limited or no access at all. It includes the imbalance both in physical access to technology and the resources and skills needed to effectively participate (Katz, et al., 2003).

Apart from digital divide, there are many new divisions of access to information happening between countries in the GMS region, and within them: for example, developing vs developed, urban vs rural, middle vs lower class, young vs old, and high quality broadband vs low quality broadband(Wagstaff, 2010: 10).



Moreover, a society might perceive that Internet continues to be an elitist tool whose access, cost, and skills make it prohibitive to many in the Global South (i.e. undeveloped and developing countries). It is specifically controversial in the area of development of should we use development in a much narrower sense where the rate of illiteracy is high in some poor countries, not to mention the rate of computer literacy and technical skills. Also, most information that is contained in the Internet is published in the English language. Since the mid-1990s, a number of governments and international institutions have sought to control Internet through laws and regulations therefore became a crucial challenge of Internet world (See Table 2.1 the summary of strengths and limitations of Internet).

Table 2.1 Internet's Strengths and Limitations

Strengths	Limitations
- Nature -	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High responsive speed</li> <li>• Live and up-to-minute</li> <li>• People-to-people connectivity</li> <li>• Non-centralized management</li> <li>• Non-proprietary</li> <li>• Inexpensiveness/low cost</li> <li>• Borderless</li> <li>• Democratized platform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Digital divide - variability of limit access due to resources and skills need to participate</li> <li>• Developing - developed country</li> <li>• Urban - rural</li> <li>• Middle - lower class</li> <li>• Young - old</li> <li>• High - low quality broadband</li> </ul>
- Enhancement -	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public participation</li> <li>• Civil rights</li> <li>• Political liberties</li> <li>• Freedom of expression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not absolute but it considers that variability among social, economic and political context</li> </ul>

## Summary

Generally, the Internet is used in a way that positively affects people and society. For example, Internet helps to accelerate more interactive participation among citizens and acts as an intermediate tool for social movements. Also, it is able to help in avoiding restrictions and limitations of broadcasting awareness of events to wider spaces and audiences. More importantly, the Internet and online media are offering new possibilities for civic participation in gaining their voices and engaging in democratic movements. Because the Internet is non-centralized and relatively inexpensive, the Internet has helped to shift power to access and present information to individual users and smaller organizations such as NGOs and CBOs, which lends credibility to the claim that the Internet is an extremely valuable tool for democratization.

As a matter of fact, for the past few decades Thailand and other Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) countries have been facing social and environmental problems due to development projects. The lack of people participation and people's power over governmental decision-making of the development projects has led to local communities experiencing environmental degradation and hardships in their daily lives. Since the Internet emerged as a communication tool for people, the affected communities, CBOs and NGOs have been more able to voice out their problems and concerns and to raise awareness towards environmental issues.

Furthermore, participation of the people is essential for sustainable development. Thai and other GMS governments need more engagement in order to make decisions regarding any development projects, and to balance the needs of people and the health of environment. Thus, CBOs and NGOs in Thailand have been using online media to promote sustainable development - termed in this thesis Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) - which will be further elaborated on in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER III

### THE RISE OF ONLINE MEDIA IN THAILAND (1997-2010)

This chapter will examine the development and roles of the Thai media and online media from 1997 to 2010. For the past decade, the emergence of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) has contributed to the rise of the Internet in Thailand. As the result, the community-based organization (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Thailand have been able to use online media to raise awareness and to voice concerns regarding social and environmental problems.

In order to provide a better understanding of the circumstances that lead to the establishment of the Internet in Thailand, this chapter will provide three major causes that led to the rise of the Internet, which are: (1) the inception of the People's Constitution in 1997; (2) the Asian financial crisis; and, (3) the emergence of information and communications technology (ICT) in Thailand.

The People's Constitution, which was put into effect in 1997, allowed Thai people more access and ownership to communication frequencies such as radio and television, which had previously been under state control for over fifty years. Since the mid- 1950s all electronic media in Thailand had been developed under state control, though the mass circulation papers remained relatively independent. Still, even printed media had been frequently suppressed by both military and civilian governments until the rights to freedom of media were inserted in The People's Constitution in 1997 along with the creation of an independent broadcasting commission to manage frequencies (Siriyausak, 2008).

Moreover, the legacies of this constitution include the more visible emergence of civil society, an increase in the number of NGOs being founded in Thailand, and the media reform movement in Thailand. The media reform movement aimed to insert key principles into the constitution to preserve the rights to information, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press, which are essential for the democratization of a country.

Secondly, the Asian financial crisis led to greater social problems for Thais (e.g. unemployment, rising food prices, increased personal debt) and forced more people and NGOs to voice out their concerns about their hardships. Furthermore, the financial crisis also caused difficulties for the mainstream media in maintaining profit margins and thus had to find ways to minimize their costs in news reporting. The lack of recognition of social problems and people's hardships in government policies and mainstream media reports had caused CBOs and NGOs to become the media providers themselves. They did this by voicing out their concerns through available online media.

Thirdly, the emergence of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) provided new communication tools for people and helped to empower the CBOs and NGOs. Since the Asian financial crisis, Thailand has undergone many economic and social changes and a noticeable increase in the number of and frequency of environmental conflicts between people and government over the use of natural resources. Many development projects and policies such as hydropower dam constructions and Free Trade Agreement have a negative impact to local communities (Bangkok Post, 2009). As a result online media has been used by CBOs and NGOs in order to voice their concerns to the government and to promote more sustainable development in Thailand. The use of ICT in this way has been termed in this study as Alternative Online Environmental Media or AOEM.

### **3.1) Historical Development of Online Media in Thailand (mid 1970s -2010)**

The paper 'People's media and reform efforts in Thailand,' written by Brooten and Klangnarong (2009) reflects the most important points of why media reform movement has been a critical issue for Thai people and Thai democratization. Brooten and Klangnarong contend that among the major limitations in the development and protection of people's media in Thailand is the constant changing of the regimes in power. Thus, the constitutions and law are interrupted and unstable.

Freedom of the press is universally regarded as one of the core principles of democracy and is necessary for the democratization process in Thailand to continue. Therefore, media, particularly online media, have become tools used by the people in political struggles. The people's media, which is distinguished from both state and

commercial media – is owned and operated by individuals and/or non-profit organizations such as community radio stations and Internet-based media (e.g. blogs, discussion boards and social networking sites). The people's media has recently risen up and has been playing significant roles in contemporary Thai politics, development, and democratization (Brooten and Klangnarong, 2009).

Media and the struggle for democracy in Thailand have had a long and interconnected relationship. Media has played an important role in opposing dictatorship and fighting for democracy since both the economic development policy and foreign investment promotion policy began in 1961. Democracy groups had become strong enough to be able to overthrow the military dictatorship in 1973. Since that time, although democracy in Thailand has risen and fallen - interrupted by military coups - the struggle for free media and for democracy have continued (Brooten and Klangnarong, 2009).

### 3.1.1) The Development of People Constitution 1997 and The Emergence of Thai Civil Society

Many have seen Thailand as a perfect illustration of the democratization and modernization theory in action by succeeding a political reform and passing 1997 Constitution. Although before the Asian financial crisis which took place in the same year of 1997, a process of reforming the constitution had already started, and was halted when the crisis hit. What had happened was the Chuan Leekpai's government during that time had used continued process of Constitution to retain support.

The 1997 Constitution was the first constitution to be drafted by popularly-elected Constitutional Drafting Assembly, hence was popularly called 'People's Constitution.' At the time there were many parties participated in drafting and holding position in Democratic Development Committee (DDC), they mostly were numerous well-known figures, former politicians, bureaucrats, public lawyers and academics, who were concerned as professional constitution drafters (Kittayarak, n.d.).

However, there were many academics claiming and arguing that the driving force behind the new constitution was the Asian financial crisis, the need to remain in power

of the military rulers and conservatives, and not a progressive middle class. Since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, Thai politics has undergone numerous political 'reforms', often accompanied by constitutional revisions, and shifts in the location of power. The student-led popular uprising against military authoritarianism in October 1973 was a major breakthrough in Thai politics, clearly demonstrating the potential for political change to arise from grassroots agitation (McCargo, 2002).

Compared to previous Thai constitutions, the 1997 Constitution had contained several innovations in key areas, for instance: election reform, legislation reform, decentralization and human rights, etc. (Uwanno, n.d.). Furthermore, the constitution is the result of an attempt to solve critical problems in Thai politics and in the parliamentary system. For example, the lack of transparency in government, the problem of corruption, vote-buying and electoral fraud, the lack of legal measures to prevent corruption, inefficiency of the political and legal processes in punishing corrupt politicians, instability of civilian government and the inefficiency of political institutions, etc. For purposes of this thesis, the key area of focus of the 1997 Constitution is the inclusion of provisions that enhanced the rights of citizens to challenge the power of politicians and the state.

Among these provisions were the ability for individuals to sue the state for pursuing projects harmful to the environment (Article 56); the right to gain access to public information from state agencies (Article 59); a requirement that if proposed legislation is deemed to concern children, women, the elderly or the disabled, representatives of those groups should take part in ad hoc committee discussions at the House of Representatives (Article 190); the right of 50,000 voters to petition the National Counter Corruption Commission to have a politician or high-ranking official accused of corruption removed from office (Article 304). In the arena of media rights, Article 40 provides for an independent regulating body to distribute broadcast frequencies and supervise radio and television broadcasting, with regards to the utmost public benefit.

Thus, having given major concessions to individuals, the 1997 Constitution has been heralded as a 'people's constitution,' but there are other reasons for this unofficial title as well. In the Constitution Drafting Assembly 73 of the total 99 members were

provincial representatives who had been chosen by a complicated nomination process. While the drafting assembly was composed mostly of local representatives, in reality, however, politicians had the final say concerning the selection of these people's representatives.

The constitution also weakened the legislative influence of civil servants and local power brokers and businessmen, while strengthening political parties and professional politicians. Most criticism was based on the perspective that the Constitution was too effective in some of its reforms (McCargo, 2002). Firstly, the drafting committees were not representative of every demographic the local people, only the middle class, and some claimed the middle class did not genuinely understand or support the poor. Secondly, the endeavor of collecting 50,000 voters to petition had been found to be very difficult because the process was limited to only who had voting rights and, frequently, the marginalized population who had been largely affected by the governmental policy or policies did not have such voting rights. Lastly, though Article 40 of the 1997 Constitution provides rights to frequencies, the military interfered by extending the distribution process and packing the broadcasting commission with military nominees (McCargo, 2002).

Therefore, the obstacles endured in exercising the 1997 Constitution have led to even more imbalances in Thai society. Local communities and grassroots organizations have been unrecognized in the policy decision-making process and their problems remain unsolved. There also exists a lack of public space and media coverage to voice out their struggles, especially when their freedoms of expression both as individuals and in the press, which are fundamental rights of people in democratic countries, have been interfered with and threatened. It is to be expected that when people lack the freedom of expression to voice out their opinions and problems, those struggles will still remain or even get worse.

#### *The Emergence of Thai NGOs, Civil Society, and Social movements*

For the last four decades, the survival of the subsistence farmers' livelihood and culture in Thailand was being threatened by commercialization, agribusiness exploitation, and increased government regulation. Moreover, the threats are including

the penetration of urban culture, the growing tug of out-migration, and the diminishing frontier of natural resources. With their voices not being heard and their problems not being addressed by the government, the marginalized residents turned activists in both rural and urban areas began forming issue-based groups. First grew scattered movements to defend the village as a culture and livelihood, and later a much more widespread movement emerged to defend access to resources of land, water, and forests in the face of urban competition (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2002).

Consequently, after 1976 the public media figured more prominently as a platform for communication within civil society, and as a focus of conflict between the state and the people. The spread of education converted the press into a mass medium. The extension of channel networks brought television into almost every home. After the 1973-6 media explosion, the press was only lightly controlled and was able to develop into a platform for debate on social and political issues. The government's attempts to monitor electronic media, especially television, prompted the foundation of new organizations to challenge government controls (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2002).

In the mid-1980s, the galaxy of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was visible as a distinct 'NGO movement', which was founded jointly by the affected people themselves and by the October students<sup>1</sup> who were aiming to empower and help the poor. Later, by the early 1990s, the former students from October incident were self-consciously discussing the emergence of 'civil society'.

Phongpaichit and Baker (2002) explain that the ventures by students into countryside in 1973-4 had produced some of the most powerful chemistry of the decade. In the mid-1980s, movements of village defense reunited the separate streams of peasant resistance and movement to national prominence. Then, in the 1990s, a wide range of rural movements exploited the space created by the retreat of dictatorship to defend their access to resources and their 'way of life.' Hill peoples, slum communities, small fishermen communities and gender groups found a voice. Debates on 'civil society' were supplanted by a vocabulary of social movements and 'people politics'.

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<sup>1</sup>Former university students who rallied in the streets in Bangkok and other big cities in Thailand, along with Thai workers and people in June 1973 - to demand a more democratic constitution and genuine parliamentary elections. The demonstrations grew in size and scope, as students demanded an end to the military dictatorship.



In 1992, the contrast between the open press criticism of the generals and the controlled coverage on television had stimulated demands for liberalization, but military opposition and other factors delayed the process. Activists inserted rights to freedom of media in the 1997 Constitution, along with an independent broadcasting commission to manage frequencies. The military resisted by extending the lease period on the main TV channel and by packing the broadcasting commission with nominees. Additionally, an independent commercial channel (ITV) opened in 1996 but was hobbled by the financial crisis; not only had ITV been halted but so was the mainstream press (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2002).

For NGOs and other entities engaged in social and environmental movements, the access to media for campaigning and disseminating information simply was not available. As a consequence, NGOs started establishing their own online media content to reach their target audience and a new, more independent media began to emerge that was distinct from state and commercial sectors..

### 3.1.2) Asian Financial Crisis and Decline of the Mainstream Media

Apart from domestic changes in Thailand during 1980s – 1990s, the Asian financial crisis was one of the factors that led to the rise of Internet penetration in Thailand and the Southeast Asian region. The Asian financial crisis, which began in July 1997, raised fears of a worldwide economic meltdown due to financial contagion. The crisis started in Thailand with the financial collapse of the Thai baht caused by the decision of the Thai government to float the baht, cut its peg to the USD, after exhaustive efforts to support it in the face of severe financial overextension that was in part real estate driven. At the time, both governments Chavalit and Chuan, were welcomed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to bail out the crisis.

According to Phongpaichit and Baker (2002), the absence of opposition enabled the IMF to act very aggressively. Over late 1997, IMF officials blamed the crisis on the Thai government's failure to follow past IMF advice to unpeg the currency and regulate the financial sector and castigated the Chavalit government for failing to comply with the conditions in the first Letter of Intent. By the time the new Chuan Cabinet was installed, the framework of the IMF program was already in place. Under IMF pressure,

the government had guaranteed all bank debts and foresworn any capital controls, allowing Thai financial institutions' foreign creditors to withdraw funds without suffering any consequence.

Moreover, after the crisis, Thailand implemented significant reforms to achieve fiscal and monetary stability, strengthen economic governance, and boost incentives for increased competition according to IMF precondition and plan. Thailand had been negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States that could have locked in ongoing reform efforts to enhance its economic freedom (Kim, 2007). However, it is still unclear when talks on a free trade agreement with the United States will resume (Bangkok Post, 2009).

Accordingly, the financial hardship in society fueled the expansion of media by the people. Hewison notes in his article in the "Reforming Thai Politics" that 'modern agriculture' is regularly blamed for having destroyed the assumed abundance of the past. Production for the market and export, the introduction of cash crops, land clearing, the use of chemicals and fertilizers and the impacts of Western concepts in farming systems are held responsible for 'food shortage, low production, financial loss and indebtedness(cited in McCargo, 2002). In fact, rural malaise and the economic crisis itself are seen to have derived from rural people's false and created need for consumer goods. Activists accused the government of bailing out the rich at the expense of the poor, and this criticism grew louder and fiercer through mid-1998 (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2002).

Phongpaichit and Baker (2002) described how the crisis caused social impact that. in the early stages of the crisis, the farmers fared relatively well in the 1998/9 harvests because international prices were good and the baht depreciation further increased their baht returns. As a result of capital flight, the IMF's policies forced the Thai government to follow. These policies were addressed; the reform of its investment climate, meeting skilled labour shortages, liberalizing the trade in services, investing in infrastructure, deepening and diversifying capital markets, and accelerating exportation. By February 1998, almost a million workers had lost their jobs in construction alone, and small firms with 6-10 workers had shed a quarter of their work force. Agriculture was also caught up in the economics of the crisis. International prices slumped.

Currency depreciation raised the prices of imported inputs. Real earnings from agriculture dropped over 15 per cent between 1997/8 and 1998/9. Migrants visited their villages for temporary relief, but then returned to seek work in the city. Furthermore, the economic stress on the countryside interacted with political pressures. People started to march out: Assembly of the Poor's 99-day protest in early 1997 (Phongpaichi and Banker, 2002).

Laborers, farmers and the poor were severely adversely affected by the financial crisis, which had an impact on the media industry as well. Lee's (2002) study shows that the crisis brought the world's 11th largest economy, Korea, to the brink of bankruptcy and led to the defaults by Russia and Brazil. Over 4000 media workers in South Korea had lost their jobs since the advent of the Asian financial crisis in late 1997. In general, there were a number of newspapers and television stations had experienced unprecedented downsizing and restructuring over many Southeast Asian countries (Lee, 2002).

Under the Chuan's administration, the poor had been more isolated and left out from governmental support and policy-making decision process. The financial crisis brought the people crises in the agricultural sector, fierce competition of natural resources, and, consequently, the advent of rural-based media in the region. According to the decline of mainstream media that cut their budget and reporting coverage, the people's concerns and problems were inadequately covered. Thus, the online media sites were founded by NGOs and CBOs, were used as an alternative news platform to report the hardships endured by residents of the GMS, especially those in Thailand. Examples of AOEM include: Prachadhrama News Net, Thai NGO, Esaan Voice, and Prachatai Newspaper Online.

### 3.1.3) Emergence of Global ICTs Trend in Thailand

The development of the Internet in Thailand originally began in mid-1987, first in Asian Institute of Technology's (AIT) computer science department, later in Prince of Songkhla University in the south of Thailand, and in Chulalongkorn University in 1992. By 1995, usage had grown extensively and the Internet commercialized and expanded outside the academic realm to the general population. The state of academic networking

in Thailand has grown significantly reaching almost every university and research institution in the country. Many Thai schools and universities are using the Internet and its applications in their curricula.

The government is planning to invest more in Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and human resources by improving the telecommunications infrastructure and providing more education. Currently, the Internet is available in almost every big city in Thailand, especially where universities are located. Anyone who can afford it can utilize the commercial Internet Services that are available and growing throughout the country (Boonsak and other, 1999).

Furthermore, Boonsak (1999) describes the phenomenon occurring due to commercialization as the Internet became more socially significant in Thailand. This was coupled with the national promotion of computer usage. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the government promoted computer usage by slashing import taxes from 30-40% to 5% for finished products and from 20% to 4% for hardware. Newspapers jumped on the bandwagon of WorldWide Web (WWW) publications. The Bangkok Post, and English-language newspaper, published the 1995 election news live on the web. In July 1995, Thailand's total solar eclipse was also published on a special homepage. Thai expatriates depended on these newspapers to keep up with current events in Thailand.

After the Thai economy began its downward spiral in early 1996, the business of providing Internet service in Thailand had become less viable. Thai commercial Internet services were hit by the lower local demand and the baht devaluation. Coupled with the recent policy to expand Internet usage in the country of the Ministry of Transport and Communications, the companies had lowered their service charges. Until recently, Thailand had enjoyed strong economic growth, especially during the first half of the 1990s. The country's growth per GDP was at an average of 7-8 percent annually. Consequently, when the national network was initiated, the country could afford the new technology. Coupled with the reduced computer import taxes, it was also easy to promote computer usage among Thais who had been excited about adopting computers to facilitate their growing businesses. The economic growth also benefited the telecommunications infrastructure, one of the most critical networking ingredients of a country.

The book 'Rethinking Southeast Asia' (2006) by Lewis shows that in a 1997 survey of 'cyber-bootsterism' by small states - referring to how smaller countries promote themselves through their Internet sites - Singapore was ranked as number one. While the world became an information-based society, these regional trading rivalries took on a new techno-nationalist dimension. Traditional competition in trade, business and finance was now expanded into a race to become regional IT, communications and media hubs, especially Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. This economic nationalism would now be extended to new IT and telecom project - satellites, computers and media. Singapore was the first Southeast Asian state to become a center for multinational electronics companies. As early as 1980, Singapore held the third largest share of global exports of microelectronics. In 1992 this resulted in 'IT 2000', the plan to be an 'Intelligent Island' - a technology center as well as a financial hub.

Lewis (2006) also points out that although Thailand was slower to commit to an IT vision of the future, the economy grew astronomically after the mid-1980s with most development centered in Bangkok and its industrial corridors and the eastern seaboard. In 1997 the main IT think-tank, the National Electronics and Computer Technology Centre (Nectec), called Thailand to become an ASEAN electronics assembly hub, but its call was rejected by the Federation of Thai Industries because they considered that the nation still lacked the skills and technology to produce high-end goods. In 2000 and International IT survey placed Singapore second in the world and Malaysia twenty-fifth, but Thailand was thirty-third, marginally ahead of the Philippines. By the late 1990s the Singaporean, Malaysia and Thai economies had made remarkable advances. Singapore led the way in planning to become part of the new global information economy, and Malaysia followed closely with its Multimedia Super Corridor. Thailand lagged well behind in IT, but its economy had boomed enormously. However, the currency crisis that began in Thailand in 1997 ended the long boom, but it would begin again after readjustment.

Nevertheless, the main obstacles in Thailand with regard to new media were that the Internet was controlled by imposed order through state control and censorship. This was not as rigid as in Malaysia or Singapore, but strict control was still in effect. This is reasonably showing the role of communications and the media in democratization and cultural change in mainland Southeast Asia, meaning primarily Thailand, Malaysia and

Singapore. Also, the new media-circulated culture is transforming Southeast Asian life.

It is well known that freedom of the press is essential for a healthy functioning democracy. In case of Thailand, it may be difficult to discern whether the press is actually free. Even though media such as an online newspapers, websites, and weblogs have opened up more space for alternative and marginalized voices, journalists in Thailand tend to exercise self-censorship when reporting on events if those events involve the military, monarchy, judiciary and other sensitive issues (Siriyuvasak, 2008).

Though the Internet in Thailand is among the freest media in the country, it still comes under government scrutiny. The Ministry of Information and Communications Technology actively blocks Thai ISPs from accessing websites it deems offensive, mainly pornography sites, but political sites, particularly those having to do with the South Thailand insurgency are also blocked. According to The Nation Daily, surfers face “some of the world’s toughest measures on Internet filtering” Pornographic sites, anti-monarchy sites and anti-government sites are targeted, the paper said (Chongkittavorn, 2009).

However, the emergence of Internet contributed significantly to Thai economic growth in the years prior to the 1997 financial crisis. The Thai government and private companies realized that the usage of Internet was the way out to bail out business and tourism of the country. Thus, the government did their best to maintain the growth of the Internet business and the network system. Eventually, it also helped the growth of Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) by providing low cost resources and space for community-based and non-governmental organizations to voice out their environmental concerns due to governmental/large-scale development projects.

In the next part an example of people’s media, which was founded after the economic crisis will be examined. Prachadhrama News Net (PNN) was originally writing news and articles sending by post mail, fax-machine and telephone. After Internet bloomed in Thailand, PNN started to develop and use ICTs to run their journalism work in 2000.

### 3.2) Example of The First People's News Media - Prachadhrama News Net (PNN)

Prachadhrama News Net (PNN) [[www.prachatham.com](http://www.prachatham.com)], formerly used '[www.newspnn.com](http://www.newspnn.com)'] is a Thai alternative news agency that was founded in 1999 leading by academics and activists in Northern Thailand, founded by well-known and well-respected Nidhi Eoseewong and social entrepreneur Suchada Chakpisute. The name of the organization translates to the Moral News Net, a name that reflects PNN's mission to encourage mainstream media to provide greater news coverage of the poor (Litvin, 2009). The founding group believed that Thailand's mainstream media outlets were not adequately reporting on issues affecting local communities and their movements. As mentioned that Thai media was monopolized by commercial media that was primarily interested in earning profits with entertainment coverage, not responsive to meaningful news coverage about marginalized or rural people. From its website and published documents, the following is a description of the organization's motivations:

To this day, the media in Thailand still suffers from a democratic deficit. That is to say that general public lack adequate space in the public media to express their opinions. The media broadly remains under the centralized control of the State and is increasingly being monopolized by private capital through concessions and licenses. (...) It results in people, particularly the poor and the marginalised, (women), lacking the freedom and the means to express opinions, particularly those which relate to public politics. Lack of access to the media cuts off people from an important means of participating in and shaping public opinion and influencing government policy in its various spheres, education, health, natural resource management, agriculture, housing etc.

Furthermore, serious and long-standing problems experienced by large sectors of marginalized groups in society have never been fully realized by the public. The powerful influence of elite groups on policy-making has an impact on the implementation of state projects whose plans are later shown to be inconsistent with actual needs of broader society. Instead, these projects become a source of conflict between the state and the people etc. (...) Also, there is a very few channels in the media to fully expresses these people's views and contest state assumptions concerning this complex issue. As result forest dwellers faced serious hardship and the issue became a major problem to extend a month long protest rally was held in 1998, which narrowly avoided military repression.

As a result, PNN aims to make the Thai population aware of the issues affecting local communities, and other important issues in Thailand. It is a people media organization that sends its small staff of reporters to report on issues affecting civil society, such as human rights, gender rights, and HIV/AIDS infection.

Through its reporting on these issues, PNN still seeks to incorporate alternative media into mainstream media. The PNN's news and articles are written and sent to established media outlets to reach the larger intended audience through print, radio, and Internet outlets. As we can see by the numbers of articles about the local community published in mainstream media: from February to July of 2001, PNN sent 112 news stories to subscribers, of which 30 were published; 112 headline articles, of which 9 were published; and 16 in-depth articles, of which 2 were published (Asoka). Additionally, PNN's news and articles which are published on the PNN website, are used in reporting over a hundred community radio (F.M.) stations (PNN).

PNN does not only cause an impact by the number of stories it publishes. It also affects gradual social change by increasing communication about impoverished communities in Thailand. PNN's coverage of the Thai government's environmentally-unsustainable and uneconomical projects, such as newly constructed dams and rapids blasting, is important to highlight the social effects, the displaced people and the migrant worker's conflicts with local inhabitants, despite the increased tourism and employment opportunities. The negative effects are the stories that the Thai government would not wish to make public (cited in Litvin, 2009).

From its website also shows that PNN tries to work at improving the media coverage in Thailand from the bottom up. PNN runs training programs in Thai communities to identify and prepare youth and adult volunteers to become journalists themselves as well. Furthermore, PNN works with many partner organizations and groups, such as; Northern NGO Coordinating Committee (NGO-COD North), Child and Youth Network, Natural Resources Management Network, Alternative Agricultural Network, People Living with HIV/AIDS Network, Women's Network, Ethnic and Tribal Peoples Network, Local Community Organization Recovery Project (CODI), People Coordination Center for Poverty Alleviation, other universities and schools.



Moreover, in the early 2000s, other alternative online media have developed in the country. For example, Prachatai [www.prachatai.com], a new non-profit web newspaper, established in 2004, seeks to provide 'reliable and relevant' news and information to the Thai public during an era of serious curbs on the freedom and independence of Thai news media groups. It started with one editor and five reporters and has grown to a staff of 14 people today (Litvin, 2008). Nevertheless, PNN and Prachatai also work and support each other's work on many levels; for instance, re-publish news and articles in one another's websites, partner in field work or interviews and exchange information among their editorial team staff.

Although nowadays, Prachatai has become a bilingual website already, PNN website is available only in Thai language. In spite of that, PNN is not as independent as Prachatai.com because PNN relies on income from readers or subscribers. PNN relies mainly from grants, according to its website, such as receiving funding from the Environmental Fund from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, the Open Society Institute and the Thai Health Promotion Foundation. Thus, however PNN can operate its media house by using low-cost medium such as websites, otherwise the organization might hardly sustain their work because they only receive grants in the very long term (Litvin, 2009).

### **3.3) Internet Usage Situation in Thailand after Coup 2006**

During the coup in 2006, all national channels were blocked and used for military announcements only. People needed to know more information of what was happening so they began using the inexpensive media channels made possible through the Internet. There were many emails of information, photos and videos from those who stayed in Bangkok of the military tanks and soldiers marching out to the street. The news quickly spread all over the country. According to the Internet World State, the number of Internet users in Thailand rose significantly after the coup. In 2000, there were about 2.3 million people using Internet, in 2006 and 2007 the number significantly increased to 11.4 and 13.4 million people, respectively. In 2010 the number of Internet users is at 17.5 million people (Internet World Stats, 2010).

Early in 2004, two scholarly alternative websites were launched: [www.sameskybooks.org](http://www.sameskybooks.org) and [www.midnightuniv.org](http://www.midnightuniv.org). Both present mostly academic content and provide a forum for academics, students and other to discuss issues that are forbidden in mainstream media; that is, issues of the monarchy and the military which are two main institutions that have dominated Thai politics for the past 75 years, since the end of monarchy system in 1932. The Midnight University website was set up by scholars and intellectuals based in Chiang Mai and its website was shut down by the military government after they held a high-profile protest against the draft interim constitution. The shutdown of the website ([www.midnightuniv.org](http://www.midnightuniv.org)) in September 29, 2006 led to the loss of 1,500 scholarly articles provided for free public education (The Nation, 2006).

As a result of the 2006 Coup, there are many websites running actively against and rising up among the censorship and of the mainstream media and breaking the boundaries of self-censorship. This digital social climate resulted in more alternative websites; such as, [www.19sep.org](http://www.19sep.org), [www.nocoup.org](http://www.nocoup.org), [www.thaienews.blogspot.com](http://www.thaienews.blogspot.com), [www.thaifreenews.com](http://www.thaifreenews.com), [www.newskythailand.com](http://www.newskythailand.com). There is also a group founded by cyber activists called Freedom Against Censorship Thailand (FACT), which is a network of people who disagree with state censorship. They are a member organization in the Global Internet Liberty Campaign (GILC) and the Global Internet Freedom Consortium (GIFC) and cooperate with more than 200 organizations and groups around the world.

The underlying theme is that ICT allows for the creation of positive social networks among people. People are more able to communicate to each other in a very informative, active and reciprocal way. People connect through social networks online to discuss a particular subject, and do some activities as well. The people who actively use the communication and networking potential of ICT can raise a local issue to become national or worldwide issue and apply pressure on the government to address the problem. Although the Internet is often discussed mainly as a medium for social interaction for support purposes and to connect with others on a personal level, it can also be used as a way to facilitate social movements and activism among users (New Media and Community, 2009).

In addition, the printed media, although known for having the greatest freedom, has experienced problems, especially in the period from 2001 to the present day, when printed media has come under the control of advertisers. Under Press Act of 1941, editors are made responsible for the articles published, with the result that editors censor themselves cautiously. This lies in contrast to other countries where each journalist must be responsible for his or her own writing, but not the editor, which allows greater space for the press. Thus, the creation of a space for both vertical and horizontal communication by the people at the grassroots has increasing importance in present times. Access to information and independent news are fundamental in a democracy. With it, people and civil society have a chance to learn and express themselves as a means to influence policy-making and project decisions (Siriyuvasak, 2008).

At the time this thesis was written the coup in 2006 had passed for about four years now, though Thai people have found the alternative ways of communicating, sharing and discussing among themselves in cyberspace, some laws have been trying to eliminate those channels. Agence French-Press (AFP) news lately reports the requesting that Thailand must halt a 'backward slide' on freedom of expression after a sharp rise in cases of people accused of insulting the revered monarchy. Not only has the tough enforcement of lese majeste law been imposed on the people, but also the new Computer Crime Act 2007 has been very active against the Internet users. Amnesty International encourages the Royal Thai government to amend the lese majeste law so that it will comply with international laws and standards.

Amnesty International further expresses their concerns that the government has characterized these laws as a matter of national security, allowing cases to be held behind closed doors. The group highlighted cases since April 2009 in which Thai nationals received heavy jail sentences for allegedly defaming the royals and said that hundreds of other cases of alleged lese majeste remained active. Many people have been charged under the lese majeste law had also been charged under the Computer Crimes Act, leading to a big increase in monitoring of the Internet for any material that allegedly defames the royal family (AFP, January 13, 2010). The Reporters Without Borders worldwide press freedom index of Thailand has dropped from 59th in 2004, 107th in 2005, in the year before the country's last military coup in 2006, then down to 153rd.

Thailand is not the only a country where media is under government and military control; it is happening elsewhere in the Southeast Asian countries. The Press Freedom House contends that there is no free media, but only partly free and not free. Thailand and Philippines press are considered to be partly free. Indonesia, Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore, Laos, Vietnam, Burma and Brunei are considered to be not free. Furthermore, the media and Internet censorship in this region are mostly about these topics: guarding national security, preserving cultural norms, maintaining religion values, shielding children from pornography and exploitation, protecting the monarchy (especially in Thailand and Cambodia), preventing online hate speech, and security of intellectual property rights.

In recent years, the Internet has become popular as it emerged among global society. It has been raised as one of the alternative communication tools for many marginalized or voiceless people and different kinds of interest groups those want to make their voices louder in the public (New Media, 2009). Accordingly, since 1990s Internet in Thailand has been used by mainstream media in seeking revenue from broader and more diverse markets. The Thai government also perceived this opportunity to enhance the country's image in promoting tourism and trade after the economic downturn since the Asian financial crisis in 1997. Meanwhile, CBOs and NGOs such as ThaiNGO, PNN, Esaan Voice, and Prachatai launched their websites as being an information hub for Thai people regarding social and environmental issues.

### **Summary**

This chapter revealed that the origin and the establishment of Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) in Thailand was due to the needs of the people during a critical time in Thai history; a time in which Thai people have been experiencing economic and social changes due to development policies and projects that caused conflicts over natural resources use between governmental and people, and a concomitant lack of meaningful democratic participation from people in rural areas.

In spite of the fact that the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) countries has been prompt in setting up various mechanisms to address environment and sustainable development concerns – especially after the 1992 Rio Earth Summit - the environmental

problems due to large-scale development projects are ongoing across the region (Habito and Antonio, 2007). The acceleration of economic growth, free trade, and foreign investment in Thailand and in other GMS countries may help increasing the country's gross domestic product (GDP), but many local communities have been suffering. Moreover, the lack of people participation and power over a decision-making, and the lack coherence in laws and policies governing environment and natural resources – these have fueled the conflicts between governments and affected local communities.

However, the rapid growth of ICTs in Thailand has been instrumental in generating more political participation on behalf of the people. The voices of affected communities that need to be recognized and their problems need to be addressed and discussed. Where traditional media is no longer sufficient in providing information and a venue for public discussion, online media has been filling the gaps.

According to Asian Media Barometer indicates The Second Master Plan on Information and Communication Technology 2009-2013, drawn up by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT) has set its goal on education and social development in line with the direction of the National Development Plan. It is supposed to build ICTs infrastructure that would meet the information needs of all citizens, including marginalized communities, the disadvantaged, the elderly, and the disabled. However, the planning process still seems rather incoherent (FES, 2010).

Even though there were several master plans including the National Broadband Master Plan that aimed at providing broadband access to at least 50% of the population within the next five years, the main problem laid with the implementation of these plans by various state agencies. Hence, there is still a huge digital gap between the urban and rural population (FES, 2010).

The next chapter will further examine the establishment and the roles of Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) in Thailand which has been used by CBOs and NGOs to help voiceless and local people who have affected by the government development projects, and for promoting sustainable development in GMS countries.

# **CHAPTER IV**

## **ESTABLISHMENT OF ALTERNATIVE ONLINE ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIA (AOEM) IN THAILAND**

This chapter will discuss the origin and establishment of “Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM)” which promote sustainable development in Thailand. The study will be divided into three parts. The first part will provide the various definitions of “sustainable development” in comparison between the meaning created by governmental and international organizations, and by non-governmental groups that have participated in environmental discussions. The second part will examine causes which lead to the need of an environmental movement in Thailand, including the need for increased online media to be used by environmental organizations. Last of all, in order to understand the motivations behind setting up AOEM by NGOs and CBOs, the study will focus at the historical background of three organizations: (1) Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network ‘Community-based Media for Mekong River’; (2) Living River Siam, ‘Rivers for Lives’; and, (3) International Rivers ‘People, Water, Life’ – Southeast Asia Campaigning Page.

### **4.1) Economic Growth and Sustainable Development**

The concept of development as understood for the past decades refers heavily to economic growth (e.g. expanding Gross Domestic Product GDP) and led by global economic integration (Daly, 1990). However, this economic globalization, specifically the growing internationalization of trade, foreign direct investment, and finance also has important implications for the quality of the environment (Clapp and Dauvergne, 2003).

Thus, the development is now more widely seen to involve improving not only a state’s economy, but also the health and prosperity of human beings, which is often referred to as ‘human development’. This view of human development includes improvements in the provision of basic human needs, such as access to nutritious food,

clean water, shelter, gender equality, environmental cleanliness and sustainable livelihoods(Clapp and Dauvergne, 2003).

The report “Our Common Future” (also known as the Brundtland Report, 1987) from the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) also emphasizes that development and environment have a close relationship. There has been a well-recognized link between sustainable development and the environment, namely that development which is not sustainable can lead to environmental degradation and competition over scarce natural resources. Thus, the development of one country must not only concern the security of its nation, but also security of the individual, community (human security), political security, food security, and environmental security (Brundtland, 1987). However, depending on the source, there are several different conceptions of what the term “sustainable development” means:

- “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, and takes the impact on the environment into account and tries to minimize environmental damage” (Brundtland Commission, 1987).
- “The reduction of hunger and poverty in environmentally sound ways. It includes the meeting of basic needs, expanding economic opportunities, protecting and improving the environment and promoting pluralism and democratic participation” ([www.developmenteducation.ie](http://www.developmenteducation.ie)).
- “It must be improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems” ([www.interenvironment.org](http://www.interenvironment.org)).
- “Environmentally friendly forms of economic growth activities (agriculture, logging, manufacturing, etc.) that allow the condoned production of a commodity without damage to the ecosystem (soil, water, supplies, biodiversity or other surrounding resources)”, ([www.ecokids.ca](http://www.ecokids.ca)).

Nevertheless, the rapid economic growths of past decades have been intensively promoted by global financial institutes and have left Southeast Asia, specifically the GMS, a polluted and ecologically degraded region. Certain development projects cause the environmental problems and unavoidably have an impact on human security in the region. Therefore, an urgent need has arisen to attain and promote truly “sustainable development” that needs to be recognized by government policies and regulations. NGOs and CBOs, through their environmental advocacy, have increased support for truly sustainable development (Clapp and Dauvergne, 2003).

For purposes of this thesis, sustainable development means: a pattern of resource use that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but also for generations to come; more importantly, the decision-making power in development must come from meaningful and non-coercive participation and decision from all parties in the society, specifically the potentially affected local communities.

According to Amartya Sen (1999), rationality and freedom (social choice) are the most critical instruments necessary for a society to achieve truly sustainable development. It stands to reason that any aspect of development under undemocratic governments which suffer from a lack of people-participation and where there is no free flow of information and no right to information would have a deleterious impact on the people and local communities. Thus, Sen’s work also shows that desirable development requires necessary elements, such as such political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency, and security. Additionally, democracy in economic and social development is crucial as it allows people to have their voices heard and thus plays a constructive role in shaping values and social norms, political rights, and personal freedoms.

Furthermore, Greer and Giannini (1999) reveal in “Earth Rights – Linking the Quests for Human Rights and Environmental Protection” that in order for affected communities to challenge social and ecological abuses of governments and corporations,



freedom of speech and freedom of association are very important. Around the world individuals and communities have come together in demonstrations and marches, boycotts and shareholder resolutions, and different forms of civil disobedience in campaigns for social or ecological justice.

#### 4.1.1) Asian Development Bank

Asian Development Bank (ADB), for example, is an international development finance institution whose mission is to help developing countries reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of people through loans and investments for development projects. Although ADB's stated mission is to improve people's lives, it has resulted in a lower quality of living for people in Asia and the Pacific. Furthermore, development projects have had and continue to have an ever-greater negative impact on environmental stability in developing countries through Southeast Asia (Greer and Giannin:28).

In 1992, ADB initiated the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Program has contributed to rapid economic growth in six countries in Mekong Region (e.g. Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and China – Yunnan and Guangxi provinces). The GMS program aims to encourage a regional approach, with ambitious vision of transforming the six countries of Mekong Region into a single, borderless economy. The program has facilitated almost US\$ 10 billion worth of investment to conduct development projects throughout GMS countries (Ransley, et al., 2008).

The GMS program has resulted in the building of roads, bridges, dams, airports, ports, hotel, and casinos across the region. Also, the program has pushed forward more international agreements on trade, energy, tourism, agriculture, infrastructure development and hydropower dams in the six Mekong countries. ADB states this development strategy is best way to alleviate poverty – by creating the macro-economic growth and measuring each country's GDP. Contrarily, the data suggests that the GMS program has resulted in increases of: (1) inequality; (2) deforestation, (3) decline in the health of rivers; and, (4) a loss of biodiversity. Furthermore, the rapid growth of GDP

actually increases hardship and signals that the development projects are not sustainable, in both the economic and environmental senses. (Ransley, et al., 2008).

Though the incidence of poverty in the GMS countries declined significantly between 1990 and 2003, reliance on economic indicators (such as GDP) for this 'improvement' may be misleading. In fact, it is quite possible for people to experience rising income and a declining standard of living at the same time. For instance, the forest resources are a significantly higher contributor of food security and health than monetary income, especially in subsistence-living communities; if people in such local communities lose access to forests, then they experience a decline in their standard of living despite the increase in their income. This is because the people likely endure less access to clean water, loss of natural resources, loss of agricultural land, increased migration to city to labored work, and other hardships (Cornford and Matthews, 2007).

Oxfam Australia has criticized the ADB as being insensitive to local communities and that ADB is operating at a regional and international level which can undermine people's human rights through projects that have detrimental outcomes for poor and marginalized communities (Oxfam Australia, January 31, 2011). Also, the United Nations Environmental Program states in its report that the growth realized from ADB projects bypassed more than 70 percent of the rural population across Asia-Pacific, many of whom are directly dependent on natural resources for livelihoods and incomes (Macan-Markar, 2007).

"Economic growth, coupled with growing population pressures, has also led to widespread pollution, land degradation and depletion of natural resources," adds the report, a groundbreaking study that examines the vital links that ecosystems and natural resources have in supporting livelihoods and poverty reduction. "Unless addressed, these changes may cause irreversible ecosystem damage with far-reaching implications for economic activities that depend on natural resources" (Macan-Markar, 2007).

There exists ample criticism that ADB's large-scale projects cause social and environmental damage due to lack of oversight. One of the most controversial ADB-related projects is the Mae Moh coal-fired power station, located in Thailand. Environmental and human rights activists say ADB's environmental safeguards policy as well as policies for indigenous peoples and involuntary resettlement, while usually up to international standards on paper, are often ignored in practice, are too vague or weak to be affective, or are simply not enforced by bank officials (Johnston, 2007; RFI, 2009).

The Mae Moh Coal Power Plant has 13 generating units with a total capacity of 2,625 megawatt (MW). It is located in the mountains of Lampang province in northern Thailand. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), it has been involved in financing the Mae Moh mine. It approved a series of loans amounting to more than US\$352 million over the past twenty years. The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) constructed the plants in four phases from 1978 to 1996. It owns and operates the Mae Moh Power Plant which is fueled by an open pit lignite mine which produces 40,000 tons per day. With an area of 135 square kilometers, it is considered the largest coal-fired power plant in Southeast Asia. The project aims to answer the growing electricity demand in Metropolitan Bangkok and rural areas. According to the ADB and EGAT, the project is highly successful since the project objectives involving least-cost nature, system loss reduction, and system stability and reliability have been met (Greenpeace Southeast Asia, 2006).

According to Greenpeace, the Mae Moh power plant contributes approximately four million tons of carbon dioxide emission in the atmosphere annually. In addition, around 1.6 million tons of sulfur gas is released from the power plant into the air everyday. Such emissions have caused severe health problems for the people near the site and have led to the deterioration of the environment. More than 200 people have died due to respiratory diseases and lung cancer ever since Mae Moh power plant began operation. (Jessica Rosien, 2004)

#### 4.1.2) The World Bank

The World Bank (WB) is another international financial institution which provides loans to developing countries for capital programs. It is well known that the World Bank's stated goal is to reduce poverty. According to the World Bank Sustainable Development Network (SDN), the work of the SDN aims to enhance the quality of growth to help developing countries move to, and remain on, a development path that reduces poverty and meets the needs of people. The scope of the World Bank SDN covers a wide range of economic sectors, such as agriculture and rural development, energy, transport, water, environment, urban development, social development, oil, gas, mining, chemicals, information and communication technologies, and sub-national activities.

The World Bank has been widely criticized by NGOs that the projects it undertakes do not achieve positive outcomes. For example, the effect of structural adjustment policies on developing countries has been one of the most significant criticisms of the World Bank. Though many of these structural adjustment policies included encouraging production, investment and labor-intensive manufacturing and altering the distribution of government resources, the alleviation of poverty was not realized. In fact, the circumstances of the poor often worsened, due to a reduction in social spending and an increase in food prices (de Vries, 1996).

A report of Pak Mun dam released by World Commission on Dams (WCD) is one of eight case studies undertaken world-wide to assess the performance and development impact of large dams. It concerns the Pak Mun Hydropower project, a run-of-river dam located in the Northeast region of Thailand.

The Pak Mun dam is a gravity dam located 5.5 kilometers west of the confluence of the Mun and Mekong rivers in Ubon Ratchathani province, Thailand. It was constructed by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) with support from the World Bank at a total cost of US\$240 million, and completed in 1994 (WCD, 2000). The World

Commission on Dams report also raised doubts about the amount of power the dam can produce. It argued that the dam could not reliably produce the anticipated amount of electricity, making it economically nonviable (WCD, 2000).

Moreover, the project has been criticized for adverse effects on the fisheries of Mun River, insufficient compensation payments to affected villages, and failure to produce the projected power output. According to WCD (2000)'s report reflects the impact of Pak Mun Dam are:

“The immediate impact of the dam was to flood 117 square kilometers of land and displace around 3,000 families. In all around 25,000 villagers claim to have been affected by the dam. Furthermore, in the post-dam period fishing communities located upstream and downstream of the dam reported 50-100% decline in fish catch and the disappearance of many fish species. The number of households dependent on fisheries in the upstream region declined from 95.6% to 66.7%. Villagers who were dependent on fisheries for cash income have found no viable means of livelihood since the dam was built. As their food security and incomes destabilized they sought various ways to cope including outward migration toward urban areas in search of wage labor.”

Although, EGAT has paid out US\$44.24 million in relocation compensation, plus US\$ 15.8 million for loss of fisheries, the affected villagers continue to stage demonstrations at the dam site and outside Government House in Bangkok frequently since the dam was built. The first protesting action occurred in 1997, where nearly 20,000 people protested in front of the Government House in Bangkok. Then, 5,000 villagers occupied around the Pak Mun dam site in 1999 (Living River Siam, January 31, 2011).

The Pak Mun project became a protracted conflict between the adversely affected villagers, the project developers, and the government. The exclusion of affected people from the decision-making process gave rise to protracted protests, demonstrations and confrontations. These actions were taken by the affected people to seek recognition and settlement of compensation and rehabilitation entitlements. These events resulted in a strong negative perception of the project within the community (WCD, 2000).

For the past decade, there have been many NGOs and CBOs whose campaigns employ various methods to stop unsustainable projects and to promote sustainable ways of development. For example, conducting pre- and post-dam research, media work (e.g. publicizing information about the dam projects and the resulting impact, press releases, and posting reports and pictures on other websites), legal approach, corporate campaigns, legislative tools and peaceful protests (International Rivers, 2008).

Although there are many organizations – both CBOs and NGOs – which use online media in their activism regarding development projects in the in GMS countries (*see* table 4.1), this study will focus on three organizations: (1) Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network; (2) Living River Siam, and; (3) International Rivers – Southeast Asia Campaigning Page.

Table 4.1 List of Mekong Non-governmental Organizations

Name of Organization	Year of Establishment	Web Address
International Rivers	1985	<a href="http://www.internationalrivers.org">www.internationalrivers.org</a>
Foundation for Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance	1986	<a href="http://www.terraper.org">www.terraper.org</a>
The NGO Forum on Cambodia	1993	<a href="http://www.ngoforum.org.kh">www.ngoforum.org.kh</a>
EarthRights International	1995	<a href="http://www.earthrights.org">www.earthrights.org</a>
Culture and Environment Preservation Association	1995	<a href="http://www.cepa-cambodia.org">www.cepa-cambodia.org</a>
Living River Siam	1999	<a href="http://www.livingriversiam.org">www.livingriversiam.org</a>
Salween Watch	1999	<a href="http://www.salweenwatch.org">www.salweenwatch.org</a>
Fisheries Action Coalition Team	2000	<a href="http://www.fact.org.kh">www.fact.org.kh</a>
3S Rivers Protection Network	2001	<a href="http://www.3spn.cfsites.org">www.3spn.cfsites.org</a>
Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network	2002	<a href="http://www.mekonglover.com">www.mekonglover.com</a>
Burma Rivers Network	2007	<a href="http://www.burmariversnetwork.org">www.burmariversnetwork.org</a>
Center for Water Resources Conservation and Development	2006	<a href="http://www.warecod.org">www.warecod.org</a>
Save the Mekong	2008	<a href="http://www.savethemekong.org">www.savethemekong.org</a>

## 4.2) Historical Background and Motivations in Using AOEM of Examined Environmental Organizations

### 4.2.1) Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network([www.mekonglover.com](http://www.mekonglover.com))

Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network(hereafter, “Network”), is a community-based organization, based in ChaingKhong district, Chiang Rai province, which is one of the development project affected-areas in Northern Thailand. Network represents a local level of organization while actively using online media to address the impact of development projects along the Mekong River. The Network, founded in 2002, is a Thai community-based organization (CBO) which formed after a multi-community discussion over how to cope with the social, environmental and economic impact of development projects in the GMS. This CBO resulted from the cooperation and support from many local environmental groups, such as: Chiang Khong Conservation Group (founded in 1995), Nam-Ing Natural Resource Conservation Group (founded in 2000), River and Community Project (founded in 1999), according to the Organization’s website - [www.mekonglover.com](http://www.mekonglover.com).

Since the early 1990s, large-scale development projects, such as hydropower dams and rapids blasting, have resulted in many effects to Mekong local communities, economically, socially and culturally. In 2002, members of local communities from Chiang Khong<sup>1</sup> and Chiang Saen<sup>2</sup> districts together with other communities along the

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<sup>1</sup>*Chiang Khong* is a district in the Northeastern part of Chiang Rai Province, Northern Thailand. Neighboring districts are WiangKaen, Khun Tan, PhayaMengRai, Wiang Chiang Rung, DoiLuang, ChiangSaen of Chiang Rai Province. To the east is Bokeo province of Laos. ([http://wikitravel.org/en/Chiang\\_Khong](http://wikitravel.org/en/Chiang_Khong)).

<sup>2</sup>*Chiang Saen* is a district in Chiang Rai Province. Chiang Saen was a capital in the ancient Lanna kingdom and had been the Burmese base of operation in the preceding years. The city was deserted. While its inhabitants resettled in other Bangkok-allied Lanna cities. Several ancient ruins are found in the old cities. Neighboring districts are Chiang Khong, DoiLuang, Mae Chan, MaeSai of Chiang Rai Province. To the north are Shan State of Myanmar and Bokeo provinces of Laos. The area around the confluence of the Mekong with the Ruak River is called the Golden Triangle. This boundary region with Laos and Myanmar is now a popular tourist area, with several casinos on the Burmese side ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amphoe\\_Chiang\\_Saen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amphoe_Chiang_Saen)).

Mekong River in Thailand protested at the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok. The protests were in response to the blasting of rapids in the river which threatened the fish population and, thus, people's livelihoods. Moreover, the dams in the upper Mekong have already caused negative impacts to the river's ecosystem. Current fluctuations have been causing riverbank erosion and agricultural land loss. The dam is also claimed to be the main cause of droughts and floods in downstream Mekong countries (International Rivers, 2008).

Accordingly, the Network's *Mekong Lover* website ([www.mekonglover.com](http://www.mekonglover.com)) publicizes the organization's objectives in promoting sustainable development: (1) to promote eco-cultural ideology and to inform the public about the status of development projects in Mekong basins; (2) to study and publicize local knowledge about nature and culture in Mekong countries; (3) to support and strengthen other community-based organizations in conserving of natural resources and Mekong cultures; and, (4) to promote and provide eco-tourism in local communities to fundraise for the Network.

Moreover, the Network has several strategic approaches to encourage sustainable practices in the region: (1) to create an environmental and cultural awareness among local people by promoting cultural and environmental activities in local communities; (2) to work towards a creation of stability and sustainability for people and nature; (3) to respect the diversity of ethnicities and cultures and to stress that everyone must be treated equally; and, (4) cooperating and coordinating with many parties (e.g. officials, private sectors, academics, educational and religious institutes, artists and mass media) in order to achieve Network's objectives.

According to an interview with the JirasakIntayod, a Network researcher<sup>3</sup>, this Network was formed by a group of native-born residents in Chiang Khong district of Chiang Rai province, Thailand. They had been concerned about the changes of Mekong River and people's livelihoods and decided to set up an organization to voice their

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<sup>3</sup>Interviewed JirasakIntayod, a local field researcher of Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network. (September 17, 2009). Sripraist, Siriluk. Working in progress paper: Downstream Development Threats and Campaign Strategies of People's Movement. Chiang Mai, Thailand: EarthRights International Mekong School.



concerns to cope with their problems. They have been working closely with local communities and ethnic groups, mainly in the rural areas in Chiang Khong and in nearby districts and provinces. Also, the Network has been monitoring natural changes, and working with villagers and farmers to create and adapt their ways of farming and living thorough the difficulties. For the past decade, the Network has been raising their concern to be recognized by the government and to address the man-made causes of changes in the environment, which they believe are largely of human origin, specifically, the construction of hydropower dams.

The Network also works closely with Chiang Saen Conservation Group (hereafter, “CSCG”). CSCG was founded by local teachers, businessmen, farmers and students in 2003, and is mainly concerned about the impact development projects have on local cultures. The group was actively formed when the Thai government proposed to operate the Special Economic and Industrial Zone in Chiang Saen district. CSCG members were concerned that local people would lose jobs, the area would become polluted, and the traditions of local cultures would be disappearing. Thus, CSCG was strongly opposed to the special zone proposal and claimed that the government did not have the right to operate the special zone in Chiang Saen. The project was eventually halted. Since that time, CSCG’s mission is to encourage people to protect their culture and environment, and to promote sustainable development.<sup>4</sup>

From August 2003 to June 2004, a *Thai Baan Research*<sup>5</sup> had been undertaken by 146 villages research from 13 Mekong- riverside communities in two locations: Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong and WiangKaen district of Chiang Rai province, with assistance by the Network and the environmental NGOs in Thailand. The methodologies were developed from the first Thai Baan research undertaken at *Pak Mun Dam*, by applying to each involved parties, focus group discussion, in-depth interview, and validation of data by local experts, data classification and analysis. Currently, Network activists in the two communities are working on a variety of campaigning tools; for instance: preparing

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<sup>4</sup>Interviewed MitiYaprasit, a founder of Chiang Saen Conservation Group, (September 9, 2009)

<sup>5</sup>See more information in 4.3.2) Living River Siam organization

educational materials, talking in community radio shows, distributing print-newsletters and maintaining a website at [www.mekonglover.com](http://www.mekonglover.com).

Figure 4.1 Mekong Lover Website



*Source:* Screen shot of [www.mekonglover.com](http://www.mekonglover.com) (February 16, 2011)

The Mekong Lover website is hosted by a CBO, which has been working closely with local communities and ethnic groups, mainly in the rural areas in Chiang Khong and nearby districts, and provinces, including local communities in Laos. Most staff that working for the organization are local who have been directly affected from Mekong development projects. They are local farmers, fishermen, teachers, businessmen, artists – who joined together to work to protect their rights and natural resources. Seemingly, their life backgrounds define the information presented on their websites. Mekong Lover website has a culture/ livelihood story-telling orientation.

Mekong Lover website was founded a few years after the founding of 'Mekong – Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network' in 2002. According to JirasakIntayod, a researcher for the Network, their work is not only partially focused on operating a website. Instead, the Network designated a Media Team to present information and to provide another communication channel via the website. The Network is primarily engaged in face-to-face education and campaigns. The Network researchers gather information through field studies, meeting with local farmers and fishermen to collect data, and organize meetings and conferences at both local and provincial levels. Additionally, the Network co-hosts conferences with national and regional governmental and non-governmental organizations.

The Network was motivated to become an information provider itself when they realized that the negative environmental impact due to development projects had far-reaching implications. . The Mekong River is an international river that flows passing many countries; therefore, environmental damage is not limited to the local areas in which it occurs. Using this rationale, campaign efforts are aimed at raising awareness among urban people and encouraging everyone to put pressure on Thai and other Mekong governments to adjust environmental policies. The website's intended audience spans the urban population, environmental activists, academics and researchers.

One notable issue the Network and other partner organizations campaigned for was the 'Mekong giant catfish and ecological conservation issue.' This issue had been initially targeted by mass media and NGO campaigns in terms of protecting the Mekong River and establishing alternative online environmental media (AOEM) of Mekong – Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network.' The Mekong giant catfish is native to the Mekong basin in Southeast Asia and holds rich cultural significance in the Mekong region. It is in danger of extinction due to overfishing as well as a decrease in water quality because of development and upstream damming.

Also, fishing for the Mekong giant catfish is illegal in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia but the bans appear ineffective. In June 2006 nearly sixty Thai fishermen

agreed to stop catching the endangered catfish to mark the anniversary of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's ascension to throne of Thailand. The Thailand Fishery Department still can catch the giant catfish for breeding purposes. However, conservation strategies for the critically endangered Mekong giant catfish were not a success. The population of the Mekong catfish has fallen by 80 percent in the last 14 years according to The World Conservation Union (IUCN). This is unfortunate because the giant catfish serves as an indicator of the ecosystem health and fisheries of the Mekong River.

The Mekong giant catfish issue was successful in attracting media attention but the mainstream media tended to focus on overfishing as the main cause of extinction. The Network, including Thai and International NGOs and CBOs attempted to give more detailed information that the giant catfish was not harmed by overfishing solely, but was possibly affected by the dam construction and rapids blasting in upstream Mekong in China. The extinction trend of Mekong giant catfish became a hot issue and widespread concern spread throughout the Mekong region and international community. The Network also engaged in campaigning about Mekong giant catfish potentially extinction by disseminating information on its website and publications, giving interviews to mainstream media, and conducting a eco-cultural tourism project – aimed to raise awareness and better understanding about Mekong people fishery and livelihood.

#### 4.2.2) Living River Siam ([www.livingriversiam.org](http://www.livingriversiam.org))

Living River Siam (LRS) is a campaign-based organization that is a well-known among local, Mekong sub-regional and international communities. LRS distributes hydropower dam development impact research in GMS. Living River Siam (formerly known as South East Asia River Network or SEARIN) was founded on March 14, 1999, the International Day of Action Against Dams and for River, Water and Life. According to its website, LRS was established by academics and NGO activists who had been working on social and environmental issues in Thailand particularly on the environmental and social problems caused by large-scale dam projects, and state policies on resource management.

LRS was the first organization to develop an alternative research methodology used by local people to study ecological and cultural impact of development activities. As a result, the research helped by empowering local communities to retrieve their rights over natural resources. The organization's website is recognized as a bay of information and research about dams in GMS countries.

Figure 4.2 Thai villagers protest at Chinese Embassy in Bangkok to demand a halt to blasting rapids on the Mekong



*Source:* (<http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/the-movement>, April 28, 2011)

According to an interview with LRS's website coordinator Teerapong Pomun, the LRS website was actually initiated in 1997 when the '99-days Occupation' took place. There were nearly 20,000 protesters in Bangkok in the name of "Assembly of the Poor," (See more detail in 4.1.2). Although the 99-days event became the focus of national controversy, the mainstream media was lacking in-depth and on-the-ground news and information. LRS staff acted as reporters and uploaded information to their website about the impact of Pak Mun dam, people's demands, and followed up on the event closely.

According to its website, LRS has been working towards several tasks: (1) to support local communities' rights to their water resources; (2) to promote local knowledge-based sustainable water resource management; and, (3) to oppose threats to rivers and riverine ecosystems in Thailand and neighbor countries in Mekong and Salween River basins, such as large-scale dam projects and water diversion projects.

Moreover, LRS analyzes the impact of Thailand's various dam projects and coordinates the research of local villagers to give them power to document the influence of local rivers and dams. LRS gained prominence during the Pak Mun Dam study period in 2001, when it developed a method for instructing villagers on how to document the effects of the dammed river on their lives. When the Thai government proposed other dam sites, LRS took its research (pre- and post-dam studies) to inform and educate communities surrounding those sites as well. Nowadays, the organization works with other CBOs and NGOs in Southeast Asia to counter government-sponsored research that encourages dam construction.

"Thai Baan Research" is research developed by LRS and studied by Thai villagers. This sort of research is meant to circumvent the traditional approach to anthropological study by allowing villagers to investigate and document, with their own language and on their own terms, every aspect of their life with regards to the river and environment. The function of overseeing organizations and NGOs was to compile the villagers' data and publish it for others to read both in print-publication and in digital files according to LRS website.

LRS also assisted a United Nations-funded NGO, the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Programme (MWBK), with running Thai Baan research in 2004. Beginning in 2006, Living River Siam began training other CBOs to conduct Thai Baan Research such as for the Vietnam Rivers Network in 2006. Later, in 2008, they worked with the Burma Rivers Network to conduct research on the Salween River. Consequently, Living River Siam is a well-known organization among CBOs in Thailand and in neighboring Mekong countries.

Figure 4.3 Living River Siam Website



Source: Screen shot of [www.livingriversiam.org](http://www.livingriversiam.org) (March 7, 2011)

4.2.3) International Rivers – Southeast Asia Campaigning Page  
 ([www.internationalrivers.org/en/southeastasia](http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/southeastasia))

International Rivers is an international non-profit organization, based in United States whose global network has a wide range of campaigning areas in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The International Rivers (formerly known as International Rivers Network or IRN, and hereafter, “IRs”) is an international non-profit organization and based in the United States. It was founded in 1985 and the focus of their work is in Latin America, Asia and Africa on environmental and human rights issues.

IRs works with a global network of policy and financial analysts, scientists, journalists, development specialists, local citizens and volunteers to address destructive dams and their legacies in over 60 countries, including Thailand. This thesis will focus on International River's campaign page, which focuses on development projects that have affected rivers in Southeast Asia (Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam).

According to the organization's website, IRs is working toward a world where everyone has access to clean water and energy and where development projects neither degrade nature nor destroy communities. Their mission is to protect rivers and defend the rights of communities that depend on rivers. IRs opposes destructive dams and encourages better ways of meeting people's needs for water, energy and flood protection – by building up the environmental movement and empowering civil society.

More importantly, IRs strives to change the terms of debates surrounding environmental issues: “We work to reform the top-down and opaque-making processes that have traditionally accompanied large infrastructure projects. We make sure that important social and environmental issues do not get swept under the rug, and that affected communities meaningfully participate in decisions that affect their lives. We provide critical analysis for dam opponents and bring the concerns of local communities to the attention of dam funders as part of our efforts to reform their policies and practices” ([www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/1568](http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/1568), February 7, 2011).

Furthermore, IRs has been working with academics, professionals, local CBOs and NGOs, and other community movements in the Mekong region, such as organizations from Burma, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. They have built determined national coalitions committed to defending the region's rivers. As widespread dam development threatens many rivers shared between countries, these groups have worked together in regional coalitions, joined by network of supporters worldwide.



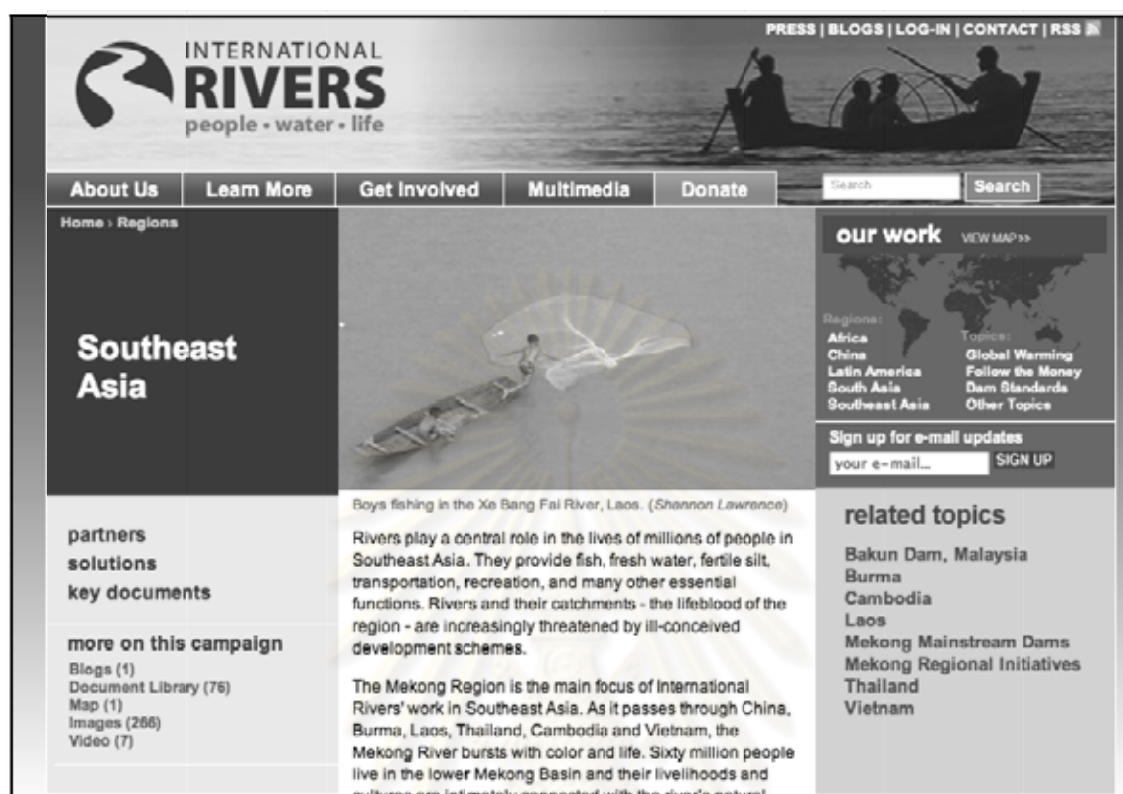
Last of all, International Rivers also provides information on a wide range of water and energy issues, as well as access to journalism which details how people are directly affected by destructive river projects. International Rivers also focuses in generating awareness for efficient, small-scale, decentralized, renewable solutions to meet water and energy needs, and to alleviate poverty(www.internationalrivers.org/node/3275, February 7, 2011).

Figure 4.4 International Rivers Website



Source: Screen shot of www.internationalrivers.org(February 5, 2011)

Figure 4.5 International Rivers - Southeast Asia Page



Source: Screen shot of [www.internationalrivers.org/en/southeast-asia](http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/southeast-asia) (February 5, 2011)

## Summary

In conclusion, the large-scale development projects funded and conducted by the ADB, World Bank, and governments in GMS countries have had a negative impact on local communities. Moreover, those social and environmental effects are inadequately recognized by GMS governments and mainstream media. Therefore, AOEM has become a crucial communication tool for CBOs and NGOs in promoting sustainable development in Thailand and GMS countries as being evidenced in the creation of websites like Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Cultural Network (Mekong Lover) and Living River Siam and International Rivers.

The three studied organizations have common goals in: (1) opposing the construction of hydropower dams; (2) protecting community rights to access and to conserve natural resources; and, (3) raising awareness and concerns to demand the governments and development projects' funders to reform their policies and practices. Although they share common goals, their origins, motivations and approaches are different with regard to the nature of each organization.

The next chapter will provide an examination of the functions of AOEM by presenting findings which were compiled from the examination of website content and information gained from in-depth interviews with web editors, webmasters and members of media teams of the three aforementioned organizations: Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network, Living River Siam, and International Rivers – Southeast Asia Campaigning Page.



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## **CHAPTER V**

### **AOEM FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: The Case of Mekong Lover, Living River Siam and International Rivers**

#### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The community-based and non-governmental organizations examined in this study are Mekong - Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network/Mekong Lover, Living River Siam (LRS) and International Rivers (IRs)–Southeast Asia Campaigning Page. The research used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for the in-depth examination of the sampled cases. First, content analysis of the organizations' websites analyzed the functions of the website and gave an indication of how well they performed, which resulted in either the success or failure of their campaigns. The content analysis categories were based on the model developed by Gibson and Ward (2001). To complement the findings of the content analysis, interviews with the web coordinators of the selected organizations revealed the thinking, strategy and concerns regarding the websites and the functions of Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) to promote sustainable development in GMS countries.

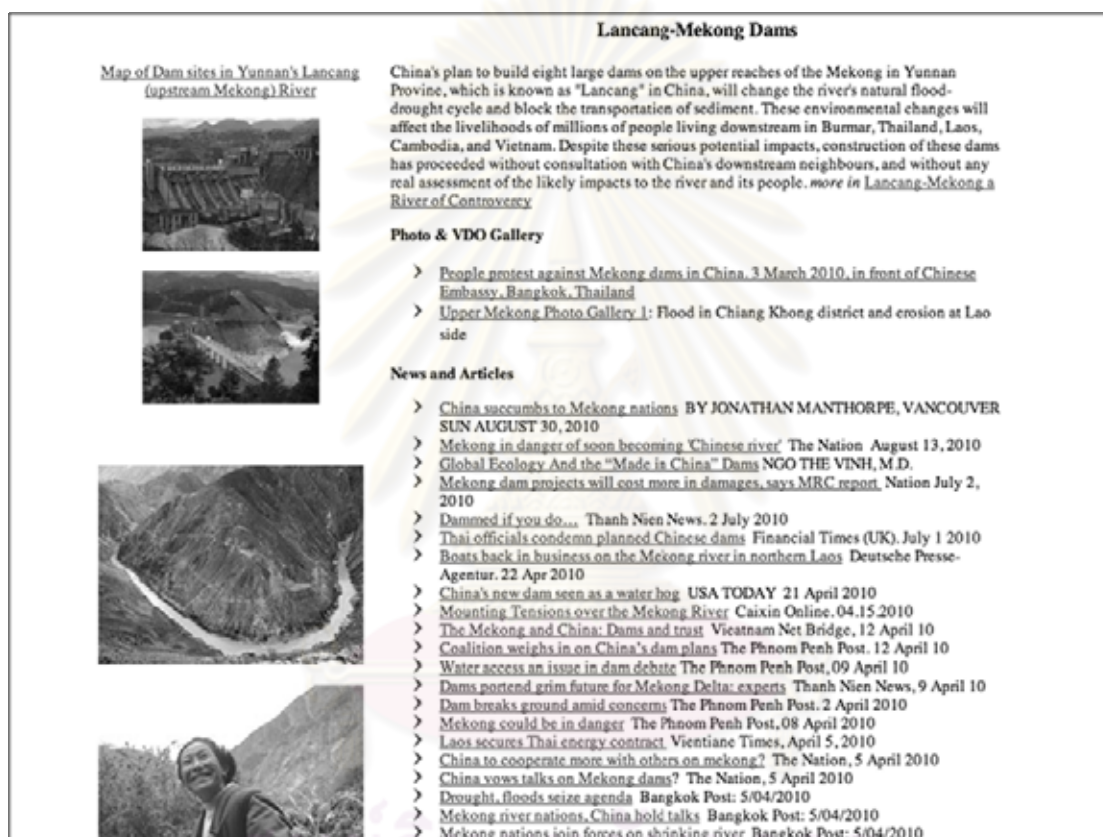
#### **5.1) Information Provision**

Content analysis showed that all the studied organizations use their websites to provide in-depth information about their mission, history, structure and goals. LRS and IRs show the clearer message of their successes in supporting local communities' rights to their water resources and to oppose threats to rivers and ecosystems in GMS. However, Mekong Lover website has no information regarding the organization's successes.

All three websites provide updated news, articles and campaign information concerning proposed and post-development projects (e.g. hydropower dam projects

on Pak Mun, Xayaburi, Don Sahong, and Sambor construction sites) within the Mekong Region. Also, the websites provide related documents and video clips available for downloading and provide windows and links to other websites such as Save the Mekong, YouTube<sup>1</sup>, Scribd<sup>2</sup>, and other media sharing websites, especially the International Rivers website.

Figure 5.1 News, articles and photos provision



*Source:* Screen shot of [www.livingriversiam.org/mk/\\_sub-eng-upperdam.html](http://www.livingriversiam.org/mk/_sub-eng-upperdam.html) (February 15, 2011)

However, because their websites are multilingual, LRS and IRs can provide information to a much wider audience than community-based organizations such as Mekong Lover. For that reason, LRS and IRs are able to provide English news and articles from domestic and international English news organizations such as: the

<sup>1</sup>YouTube is a video-sharing website on which users can upload, share, and view videos, its web address is [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

<sup>2</sup>Scribd is a document-sharing website which allows users to post documents of various formats, and embed them into a webpage for other people to read and download, its web address is [www.scribd.com](http://www.scribd.com).

Nation, Bangkok Post, BBC, USA Today, Deutche Press, etc. According to Carl Middleton, a Mekong Program Director of IRs, the International Rivers website provides many languages as English, Chinese, Spanish and Portuguese; however, the website is currently not yet compatible for Southeast Asian language as like Thai, Cambodian and Vietnamese, which is problematic because the development projects affect people in those countries and the people are unable to access the information in their native language.

Figure 5.2 Project information provision

The screenshot shows the International Rivers website interface. At the top, there is a logo for 'INTERNATIONAL RIVERS' with the tagline 'people · water · life'. To the right of the logo are links for 'PRESS | BLOGS | LOG-IN | CONTACT | RSS'. Below the logo is a navigation menu with tabs for 'About Us', 'Learn More', 'Get Involved', 'Multimedia', and 'Donate'. A search bar is located to the right of the menu. The main content area features a large image of several boats on a river. To the left of the image is a sidebar with the title 'Pak Mun Dam' and a breadcrumb trail: 'Home > Southeast Asia > Thailand'. Below the image, there is a section titled 'Boats at Pak Mun Dam' with a paragraph of text: 'The 136 MW Pak Mun Dam, which was completed in 1994, was built by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand with US\$24 million in financing from the World Bank. From the outset, the project was highly controversial due to the predicted impacts on the rich and productive fisheries of the Mun River, the largest tributary of the Mekong River. Between 1990 and 1997, there was intense opposition to the dam by thousands of people living in local communities along the Mun River. As a direct result of the dam, more than 20,000 people have been affected by drastic reductions in fish populations upstream of the dam site, and other changes to their livelihoods. The dam has blocked the migration of fish, and a fish ladder, promoted by the World Bank's fisheries experts as a mitigation measure, has proved useless.' To the right of the main text is a 'our work' section with a world map and a list of regions: Africa, China, Latin America, South Asia, Southeast Asia. Below the map is a 'Sign up for e-mail updates' form with a 'SIGN UP' button. At the bottom left, there is a 'more on this campaign' section with links to 'Document Library (6)' and 'Images (7)'. Below that is a 'learn more about:' section with links to 'Thailand' and 'Successes'. At the bottom left, there is a 'join us!' section with 'Login/Register' and social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

*Source:* Screen shot of [www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/1006](http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/1006) (March 13, 2011)

The two campaign-based organizations' (LRS and IRs) websites present scientific and statistic-oriented information while Mekong Lover focuses on presenting local knowledge and information about cultural livelihoods. To illustrate, LRS and IRs provide key documents and reports of project information, such as maps and locations of dam construction sites, lists of stakeholders and budget costs, and information regarding the potential impact of dam projects. On the other hand, Mekong Lover presents articles in a storytelling format about the lives and cultural

heritage of local people, fisherman, and ethnic elders whose lives depend on the Mekong River. All three websites hold the same vision of sustainable development which preserves healthy environments and promotes healthy societies. Also, the organizations each aim to oppose any large-scale development project that neglect local communities' voices, safety and needs.

Figure 5.3 Mekong Lover's website: feature on culture and livelihood



*Source:* Screen shot of

[http://mekonglover.com/article\\_info\\_mekong.asp?status=ArticleDetail&ArticleId=105](http://mekonglover.com/article_info_mekong.asp?status=ArticleDetail&ArticleId=105)(March 14, 2011)

Furthermore, the online media allows these organizations to promote their own point of view to the public and to the media, as NGOs, activists, and journalists are a primary audience of online communication. According to the interviews with web coordinators, the websites of Mekong Lover and LRS are also serving academic

researchers and college students who are interested about Mekong issues; users may search through Google Web Search<sup>3</sup> and find their websites, then visit them and read information regarding topics of interest.

Table 5.1 Information provision

	<i>Mekong Lover</i>	<i>Living River Siam</i>	<i>International Rivers - SEA</i>
<b>Language Thai</b>	✓	✓	✗
English	✗	✓	✓
Other	✗	✗	✓
Organization history	✓	✓	✓
Org. objectives	✓	✓	✓
Values/ideology	✓	✓	✓
Download document	✗	✓	✓
Subscription	✓	✗	✓
News	✓	✓	✓
Articles	✓	✓	✓
Article archive or library	✓	✓	✓
People in organization	✗	✗	✓
Event calendar	✓	✗	✓
Annual report	✗	✗	✓
Campaign information	✓	✓	✓
Information about successes	✗	✗	✓

## 5.2) Resource Generation

Content analysis of the websites revealed that not all of the studied organizations have the option of online transactions for donations and membership, which are crucial factors for sustaining and maintaining the operational work of websites. Although Mekong Lover and IRs provide newsletters or email alert subscriptions, only IRs has a membership system that requires some fee to access exclusive information. Moreover, IRs has a donation page while Mekong Lover and

<sup>3</sup> Google Web Search is a web search engine.



LRS do not mention fundraising nor do they have an interface for donations.

Furthermore, online selling of merchandise or publications is also developed as part of their campaign and fundraising strategies, especially on the IRs website. For the Mekong Lover and LRS audiences, users have to request by email or phone call, pay through bank and receive delivery by post. However, on all three websites, most publications, documents and pictures are free for users to download.

Figure 5.4 Publication for downloading

The screenshot shows the International Rivers website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'PRESS | BLOGS | LOG-IN | CONTACT | RSS'. The main header features the 'INTERNATIONAL RIVERS' logo with the tagline 'people • water • life' and a background image of people in a boat. Below the header is a secondary navigation bar with tabs for 'About Us', 'Learn More', 'Get Involved', 'Multimedia', and 'Donate', along with a search box. The main content area displays the article title 'Power Surge: The Impacts of Rapid Dam Development in Laos' with a sub-header 'Laos' and the date 'September 25, 2008'. The article text discusses Laos's national priority on dam construction and its environmental and social impacts. A sidebar on the left includes a world map, regional and topical filters, an email sign-up form, and a 'learn more about:' section listing various projects and topics. At the bottom of the article, there are download links for the full report in English (6.24 MB) and Lao (3.58 MB), along with a list of key recommendations for the Lao government and donor agencies.

*Source:* Screen shot of [www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/3343](http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/3343) (March 13, 2011)

Table 5.2 Resource generation

	<i>Mekong Lover</i>	<i>Living River Siam</i>	<i>International Rivers - SEA</i>
Membership	X	X	✓
Online selling	X	X	✓
Publication for sell	✓	✓	✓
Networking organizations	✓	✓	✓
Fundraising	X	X	✓
Information about financial support	X	X	X

### 5.3) Networking

All three websites have hyperlinks to local groups and international non-governmental organizations. Moreover, in the case of links to government websites, only LRS provides links to dozens of websites of Thai government departments, such as Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Royal Irrigation Department, Royal Forest Department, etc. Those government departments' websites are main sources for public and mainstream media seeking for information. The existence of AOEM used by CBOs and NGOs actually helps to create a greater decentralization of the information provision network, which means the website visitors can explore more information from other sources besides governmental sectors. Also, the governments' websites links in AOEM can provide audience the involved and responsible parties of development projects in Thailand. Furthermore, while Mekong Lover, a community-based website lack links connected to international NGOs websites, LRS and IRs provide quite a number of links to non-governmental organizations. However, LRS presents the hyperlinks as 'interesting websites' such as: environmental organizations and news media in Thailand, water and rivers issue-based organizations in Thailand and abroad, and other independent organizations in Thailand. The IRs specifically presents the hyperlinks of their ally groups or partner organizations' websites.

Table 5.3 Networking

	<i>Mekong Lover</i>	<i>Living River Siam</i>	<i>International Rivers - SEA</i>
Internal links	> 50	> 120	>60
Local CBO/NGO links	> 28	>40	
Regional NGOs links	2	>15	>10
International NGOs links	0	>60	>15
Government links	>4	>15	0

Figure 5.5 Sample of a partner organization's website of three studied websites



*Source:* Screen shot of [www.savethemekong.org](http://www.savethemekong.org) (March 16, 2011)

#### 5.4) Participation

The three websites are open to the public, in terms of the number of email contacts and distinct pages within the organization's website. Especially IRs website, where most distinct pages of information provide a specific contact person's email address who is responsible for that issue. Mekong Lover and LRS websites generally provide the organization's main emails, but not specific addresses of individuals or contributors. However, none of the studied organizations' websites fare well in terms of interactivity on their main page. Only IRs' website has an FAQ section which

merely functions as a response to their audience's inquiry. For instance, IRs responds to the question of 'whether or not critics of large dams oppose all dams' on their FAQ page. Accordingly, IRs notes that: In general, opponents of large dams do not believe that no dam should ever be constructed. IRs believes that dams (and other development projects) should only be built after all relevant project information has been made public; the claims of project promoters of the economic, environmental and social benefits and costs of projects are verified by independent experts; and when affected people agree that the project should be built ([www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/480](http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/480)).

Nevertheless, these organizations also use other forms of 'social networking' online media such as Facebook, Twitter and weblogs to both reach their audience and allow the audience to spread information throughout the online community. Therefore, in term of sharing opinions, receiving feedback, and providing interactive spaces for discussion, the main website is not responsible for these actions; the social networking websites are used for those purposes. Besides the advantages of inexpensive and free use of social networking, according to the interviews LRS and Mekong Lover coordinators refer that it helps lowering cost and bringing attention to the main websites. Also, the re-posting on Facebook assists spreading around environmental information.

Table 5.4 Participation

	<i>Mekong Lover</i>	<i>Living River Siam</i>	<i>International Rivers - SEA</i>
Openness	8	2	3
Feedback/comments	–	–	–
Opinion polls	–	–	–
Interaction	–	–	–

**Openness:** Count of email contacts and address of organization

**Feedback:** Count of email address on the site that explicitly focused on soliciting comments

**Opinion polls:** ✓ present, – absent.

**Interaction:** Bulletin board or guest book to post views, and chat room for real-time discussion.

Figure 5.6 Opinion posting on Facebook page of Mekong Lover



**Nopparat Lamun** ประชาชนริมฝั่งโขงไม่เอาเขื่อน รายงาน SEA ชีชีตมีผลกระทบ มหาศาล  
ให้เริ่มต้นเวทีชี้แจงข้อมูลอีไอเอไชยะบุรีใหม่อีกครั้ง  
ถาม ช.การช่างและกลุ่มทุนธนาคารไทยสัญญาดีอะไร?

 โครงการเชื่อมชนลุ่มน้ำโขง : ประชาชนริมฝั่งโขงไม่เอาเขื่อน รายงาน SEA ชีชีตมีผลกระทบมหาศาล  
www.mekonglover.com  
เขียนของ : ๒๒ ม.ค. นี้ เวลา ๙.๐๐ น. สำนักงานเลขาธิการคณะกรรมการแม่น้ำโขง ประเทศไทย โดยกรมทรัพยากรน้ำ ได้จัดเวทีรับฟังความคิดเห็นร่วมกับผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียต่อโครงการไฟฟ้าพลังน้ำไชยะบุรี ณ ห้องประชุมศูนย์ฝึกอบรมข้าราชการครูโรงเรียนหัวเรือยโกศลวิทยธ อ.เชียงทอง จ.เชียงทอง มีชาวบ้านริมฝั่งโขง เจ้าหน้าที่

January 22 at 10:24pm · Like · Comment · Share

**Nopparat Lamun** สามารถโหลดรายงานสรุป SEA ได้ที่นี่  
<http://file1.uploadfile.biz/i/MNEIMEIIVWNEW>  
January 27 at 8:45pm · Like

**PCha Kkumpa** บะมีเขื่อนก็จะบะมีน้ำเหลือไว้จี้ย ก็ดก้นักๆหมสั๊กหน้อย  
ได้ก่อควับ อาจจำเป็นต้องมีเขื่อนยกระดับน้ำ แต่ตางเทคนิคอาจมามือดีแม่  
น้ำกกก็ได้นาคควับ บะดีลิมเขาอยู่ได้เขื่อนจีน บะเก็บน้ำไว้ฟอง โผจะตุ๊กหนัก  
ก็คมือเคอะควับ  
February 1 at 4:57pm · Like · ๑ person

**Nopparat Lamun** คิดหนักกันมากี่เช่นคนแล้ว สายน้ำใหญ่โผจะไป  
แปงชืดน้ำ เขื่อนน้ำกก บ้าขางมนก็มาตังหน้าแล้งมีน้ำที่โหนเก็บ บนคอบขมี  
น้ำมา เมียงฮั้นเป็นเด็กคิดเรื่องเขื่อนกันแล้ว เหลือเพียงพวกโลกที่สาม จะเอา  
ไฟฟ้าหรือน้ำ เอาหือแม่ หรือเอาตังค์ เขามาเสนอเขื่อนน้ำกกที่ฮัวพญามังรา  
ยัก เอาจากโรงพักมาประตุนเมืองเก่าพคมาอีกฟากถึงวัดบ้านใหม่ตักคับ ส่วน  
เรื่องเขื่อนจีนแกได้โดยการเปิดเขื่อนหือสายน้ำโผสกติ ดีกว่ากั  
February 5 at 11:52am · Like

Source: Screenshot of [www.facebook.com/MekongLover](http://www.facebook.com/MekongLover) (March 11, 2011)

ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร  
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

Figure 5.7 Facebook page of Living River Siam

facebook Search

**Living River Siam**  
 Has worked at [www.livingriversiam.org](http://www.livingriversiam.org) Lives in Chiang Mai, Thailand

Share: Post Photo Link Video

Write something...

**Thai Climate Justice**  
 แสดงการคัดค้านอย่างรุนแรงภาคเหนือ เนื่องในวันเวิลด์ 14 มีนาคม 2554  
 แสดงการคัดค้านอย่างรุนแรงภาคเหนือ คัดค้านภาพให้กับแม่น้ำ เร่งเยียวยาผู้เดือดร้อน  
 จากการสร้างเขื่อนทั่วโลก หยุดการสร้างเขื่อนขนาดใหญ่ 14 มีนาคม ของ  
 ทุกปี...  
 9 hours ago · View note

**Living River Siam**  
 Bangkok Post : Mekong residents reach out to river's ailing spirit  
[www.bangkokpost.com](http://www.bangkokpost.com)  
 The Mekong River looks a pale imitation of the mighty waterway it once was. The water flows sluggishly in a channel which has shrunk to only a few metres wide in some parts of Loel province.  
 10 hours ago · Like · Comment · Share

Source: Screenshot of [www.facebook.com/LivingRiverSiam](http://www.facebook.com/LivingRiverSiam) (March 11, 2011)

Figure 5.8 Facebook page of International Rivers

facebook Search

**International Rivers**  
 Non-Profit Organization · Berkeley, California

Wall International Rivers · Most Recent

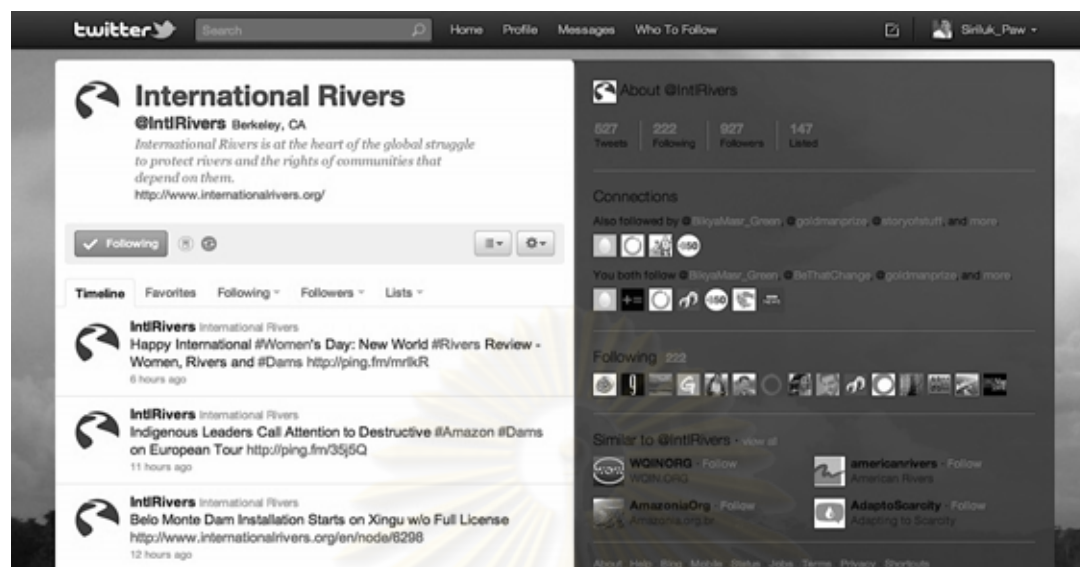
Share: Post Photo Link Video

Write something...

**International Rivers**  
 Happy International Day of Action For Rivers: More than 70 actions happening around the world today!  
 about an hour ago · Unlike · Comment · Share  
 You and 7 others like this.  
 Write a comment...

*Source:* Screenshot of [www.facebook.com/InternationalRivers](http://www.facebook.com/InternationalRivers) (March 11, 2011)

Figure 5.9 Twitter page International Rivers



*Source:* [www.twitter.com/IntlRivers](http://www.twitter.com/IntlRivers) (March 11, 2011)

## 5.5) Campaigning

In terms of campaigning, all of the surveyed organizations offer offline leaflets, campaign documents and posters available for download. This is part of an overall campaign strategy which involves materials already developed for offline campaign actions. Also, online petitions are available on the LRS and IRs websites, but not on the Mekong Lover website. The online petitions are used to demand that GMS governments reconsider environmental policies and to halt development projects due to massive public opposition. However, according to Carl Middleton, a Mekong Program Director of International Rivers, online petitions are not as effective if they are only posted on the website. IRs also facilitates offline petition and uses other tools to publicize the petition letter. For example, emailing petitions to mainstream newspaper journalists and people who work in allied-organizations to post petition information on the websites, and to forward emails to their contact groups.

Furthermore, Mekong Lover and IRs provide users with the option to join an email update list, while LRS website has none. In this respect, from interviews with Teerapong Pomun, a LRS Web coordinator notes that the organization has no person for this duty due to limited number of team staff. LRS only aims to send

updated information and urgent news to the organization's email contact lists that they have already known and contacted in the past.

According to the interviews, the three organizations realize that having their website appear in Google search results is very important with regards to increasing exposure about their campaigns. All three organizations realize the importance of search engine optimization (SEO)<sup>4</sup> and different environmental organizations all try to come up at the top of the searching-result list. Consequently, there are many sites that do not appear on the first page of results, which greatly limits the studied organizations' website exposure. For this reason, a problem arises with Internet campaigning: the difficulty of disseminating the campaign message to people who are not familiar with the organization. In that respect, the offline campaigning can be more effective in generating support, as offline it is easier to contact people personally and spread the message by word of mouth. Thus, online and offline media are both key tools for campaigning; in order to reach the maximum potential audience, campaigning requires the use of offline media (e.g. print publications, newspapers, television and radio shows) to disseminate the campaign message.

To generate support from the public, the surveyed organizations have put news and articles from other environmental organizations' websites and links to other sites of interest. Moreover, according to the interviews, Facebook pages have gained more supporters who are new to Mekong issues, especially in the case of Mekong Lover and Living River Siam Facebook Fan Pages. YouTube video clips have also helped to gain more interest from public. One reason for this could be that video provides sounds and motion pictures which can lively deliver messages to people quicker than having to reading text. Additionally, International Rivers hosts a weblog

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<sup>4</sup>SEO is the process of improving the visibility of a website or a web page in search engines via the 'natural' or 'un-paid' search results, which in general, the earlier or more frequently a site appears in the search result list, the more visitors it will receive from the search engine's users. As an Internet marketing strategy, SEO considers how search engines work, what people search for, the actual search terms typed into search engines and which search engines are preferred by their intended audience. Optimizing a website may involve editing its content and HTML and associated coding to both increase its relevance to specific keywords and to remove barriers to the indexing activities of search engines, to promote the site and it is resulted in more number of web visitors/clicks.



– an additional site in the main website – which it uses for staff to report stories from the ground (e.g. meetings, conferences, field trips).

Table 5.5 Campaigning

	<i>Mekong Lover</i>	<i>Living River Siam</i>	<i>International Rivers - SEA</i>
Sign online petition	✗	✗	✓
Download logo/wallpaper	✓	✓	✓
Download offline leaflets	✗	✓	✓
Other	✓	✓	✓

Other: Download publication and posters  
 Showing video clips and YouTube  
 Links to Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, Orkut, DigThis, Google Buzz, etc.

Figure 5.10 Print documents for downloading



Source: [www.livingriversiam.org/work/tb\\_research\\_en.htm](http://www.livingriversiam.org/work/tb_research_en.htm) (March 15, 2011)

Figure 5.11 DVD and VCD about rivers and dams



*Source:* [www.livingriversiam.org/pub/vcd.html](http://www.livingriversiam.org/pub/vcd.html) (March 15, 2011). A visitor can request to have these DVDs and VCDs hard copies or download directly from the website in .wmv format.

Figure 5.12 YouTube video clip on Living River Siam website



*Source:* [www.livingriversiam.org](http://www.livingriversiam.org) (February 4, 2011)

## 5.6) Delivery

As for website delivery, the examined organizations attempt to use most capabilities of online media to provide information in new ways. The use of multimedia and interactive features tends to be developed for all three organizations' websites. In addition, most of the organizations fare well in terms of website design by providing access to information as both text and photos. Also, most of the organizations' websites fare well in terms of navigability, as all of them have internal search engines and a fixed menu bar on all pages. As for freshness, Mekong Lover and Living River Siam tend to update their websites weekly, apart from International Rivers – IRs who updates daily.

In terms of visibility, the number of links visible on the organization's website, LRS has the most links appearing on its website, while Mekong Lover and IRs both have lower visibility. For that reason, the three studied websites have different designs; the LRS website is structured as if it is a database website, full of photos and hyperlinks. Mekong Lover and IRs tend to show more photos on their websites but IRs has the cleanest design with a bold headline for each page, a few photos, related-story links and a contact person's email address for each article published online.

Furthermore, as for link popularity, the number of links from other websites to the site of the organization, as counted by Submit Express (*See* Table 5.6), shows IRs has the most popularity, followed by Mekong Lover, while LRS has the lowest popularity of all. This order seems to simulate their exposure in the online media.

As IRs is a well-known global organization in the environmental community, its website provides many languages for the audience and it has high link popularity. Interestingly, Mekong Lover, a community-based website where very limited information in the English language is provided, has higher link popularity than LRS, a bilingual, regional NGOs website. It seems the word 'Mekong' may be searched and viewed by the public more than other keywords such as, 'River' or 'Siam,' specifically for those who are interested in issues related to the Mekong River and the surrounding region.

According to the interviews with RamunBomrung, Mekong Lover web coordinator, the website has approximately 5,000 visitors per month; however, they are not distinct users. Moreover, the visiting number is not stable through year; it depends on situation involving the Mekong River: whenever the Mekong current is increased and tending to flood or decreased toward becoming dry, there will be many visitors to Mekong Lover website to follow up the news regarding the river. For example, during the Mekong flooding in August 2008, approximately 10,000 visitors viewed the site within a few weeks.

Living River Siam has approximately 300-400 unique visitors per month, and there are about 500 page-loads. The number of visitors who view the entire International Rivers website is at 60,000 per month, and about 1,200 unique visitors per month specifically for the Southeast Asia Campaigning Page, according to the interviews with IRs' Mekong Program Director.

### **5.7) Analysis of AOEM's Roles**

The content analysis shows that Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) has been significantly used by community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to promote sustainable development. First, AOEM is used as an extension of offline media (e.g. publications, print reports and hard copy CDs, campaign leaflets, etc.). Second, it is used as a livelier, more accessible and interactive communication tool, as evidenced by the examination of the three organizations' campaign strategies. Moreover, the study shows that all three of the examined websites aim to assist and strengthen their campaigns by disseminating, networking and organizing through the use of AOEM.

According to the research, online media functions as a key tool for environmental organizations to distribute information to the public. Thus, the first role of AOEM is to **disseminate information**, which is shown in terms of information provision, resource generation, and participatory provision. AOEM provides news, articles, maps, photos, reports and research (such as analysis of governmental EIA-Environmental Impact Assessments and SIA-Social Impact Assessments) in both hard copy and electronic formats, which the audience can download from the

organizations' websites. AOEM also serves the needs of journalists, academics, researchers and college students who are interested in reporting and learning about Mekong issues.

Table 5.6 Website Delivery

	<i>Mekong Lover</i>	<i>Living River Siam</i>	<i>International Rivers - SEA</i>
<b>Homepage design</b>			
Graphic/images/photos	✓	✓	✓
Moving text/images	✓	✓	✓
<i>Multimedia index</i>			
Sound			
Video	✓	✓	✓
Live streaming			
Search engine	✓	✓	✓
Text only option-entire site	-	-	-
Text only document to download and print	-	-	-
Foreign language translation	-	✓	✓
Homepage icon on upper level page	✓	✓	✓
Fixed menu bar on upper and lower level page	✓	✓	✓
Site map/index	-	✓	✓
<b>Freshness/update</b>	Updated weekly	Updated weekly	Updated daily
<b>Visibility/Link Popularity</b> number of links to the site	4,035	2,093	35,880

Note: Link popularity is evaluated by a tool which show how many other sites are linking to the 'website'. Most search engines use this data to calculate how popular a website is. The more links to that website, the better the website search engine rankings will be. (*Source:* [www.submitexpress.com/link-popularity-check.html](http://www.submitexpress.com/link-popularity-check.html))

However, in terms of raising awareness and concern, the intended audience of AOEM campaigns is outsiders. Admittedly, their governments do not recognize the affected local communities, and they therefore lack power to demand their governments to act differently. The ‘outsider community,’ which includes shareholders of private investment companies, civil society groups, and urban people, tend to have a louder voice in society. Therefore, to communicate with people in local communities, online media, specifically AOEM, is becoming a competitive tool against the economic majority. Regarding the Sambor dam in Cambodia, for example, people received information about the project and its potential impact by listening to a radio frequency-broadcasting show, Voice of America (VOA)<sup>5</sup>, according to International Rivers.

Secondly, AOEM functions as a **networking medium** among CBOs and NGOs specifically by providing a participatory platform for conversations regarding environmental issues. In this respect, the organizations use AOEM to provide many organized hyperlinks leading to local environmental groups, regional and international NGOs. Also, all examined organizations introduce each other by mentioning the names of other organizations’ websites on their website as well. This shows that AOEM helps CBOs and NGOs who work in similar fields can introduce each other’s organizations to visitors. Also, AOEM is used to provide hyperlinks to definitions of terms and vocabulary in their articles. The additional explanations of the article help the audience to gain more awareness about environmental campaigns and to expand their interests to related subjects. Specifically, articles found on the International Rivers website were organized in this way, but Mekong Lover and Living River Siam website are lacking of this sort of provision.

Moreover, AOEM generates and strengthens interactive platforms already in use by the public through adopting the functionality of websites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, weblogs, and others. When it comes to the impact of the new medium on the public sphere, AOEM constitutes a new space, which is open to all

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<sup>5</sup>Voice of America (VOA) is the official external radio and television broadcasting service of the United States federal government. Its oversight entity is the Broadcasting Board of Governors. VOA provides a wide range of programming for broadcast on radio, TV and the Internet around the world in forty-four languages, promoting a positive view of the United States. Its day-to-day operations are supported by the International Broadcasting Bureau.

organizations who wish to publish their opinions and interact with other who held common interests. Thus, AOEM helps intensifying information and support network.

AEOM helps the examined organizations to disseminate information through various channels (i.e. websites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and e-mails) that are perceived as active tools, these can also be seen as passive in some respect as well. In regard to information receivers may not check emails or open links on these examined organizations' websites.

The last function of AOEM is to empower CBOs and NGOs in **organizing campaigns**. AOEM is used with offline media to organize environmental campaigns. According to interviews, the use of AOEM helps to: (1) lower the cost of a campaign; (2) streamline updating and reporting processes; and (3) increase effectiveness of online petitions.

To lower the cost of campaigning, an organization's staff increasingly tends to use emails to distribute information and to contact members of other organizations, journalists and other parties instead of using more costly methods such as postage mailing and faxing. Moreover, the use of free social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube which are already established and ready for environmental CBOs and NGOs to deploy in publishing reports and promoting sustainable development. The above strategies resulted in reducing cost for the three organizations. To streamline updating and reporting, AOEM is used to speed up the process of updating news (e.g. situations from the field and/or protests), by both emailing contact groups and by uploading media on their websites which can be accessed almost immediately after upload.

The next section will reveal that the three studied organizations have used AOEM in many ways as evaluated according to the six categories of previous Web-content analysis model. Also, the three organizations' campaigns are examined along with offline media and mainstream media works for educating and campaigning for sustainable development. The selection of these cases is due to the high level of coordination among the CBOs and NGOs and impact degree of the issues.

### 5.7.1) Mekong Flood and Drought Phenomena

China started operating its first dam – the Manwan dam – on the Lancang (upper Mekong) mainstream in 1992. The second and third dams, Dachaoshan and Jinghong, were completed in 2003 and 2008, respectively. In October 2009, China also announced that its fourth dam, the massive Xiaowan dam, had started filling its reservoirs. This has resulted in downstream Mekong fluctuations, causing an epic flood in August 2008 and a severe drought in March 2010 (Bangkok Post, March 31, 2010). The unnatural flowing of the Mekong River is also adversely impacting local communities (e.g. declining fish catches; scarcity of water for drinking, irrigation and livestock; how river transportation has been grounded, affecting tourism and trade (International Rivers, 2010)).

This flood crisis in 2008 was recorded as the most severe flood case since 1966, though back in the past the water slowly rose up, this latest flood came quickly overnight. The total loss was estimated at over 85 million baht in 39 villages in Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong, and Wiang Kaen districts of Chiang Rai province, Northern Thailand. Nearly 90 percent of agricultural lands were destroyed. The damages happened in Baan Huey Sai, Boe Kaew district of Lao PDR as well. Substantial soil and riverbank erosion occurred along the Mekong River; the record states that riverbanks were eroded at one place about 200 meters long, and only 10 meters deep. Both sides of the river faced a huge loss, socially, economically and environmentally (Nopparat, 2010).

As a result, the people organizations, environmentalists and NGOs have aggressively criticized the Mekong River Commission (MRC) for allegedly failing to alert people in member countries about flooding. The Thai People's Network on Mekong, which consists of the Foundation for Ecological Recovery, the Living River Siam and the Chiang Khong Conservation Group, in their statement also rejected the commission's claim that the flooding has not been caused by water released from big dams in China.

Chiang Mai-based Living River Siam reported the severe flooding had caused serious hardship to people living along the Mekong River in Chiang Khong and



Chiang Saen districts of Chiang Rai and in Nong Kai provinces. The MRC claimed that they had posted flood warnings on their website. In spite of MRC's claim, however, villagers had very limited access to the Internet and even if they could, they would not have been able to read an English warning. The Thai People's Network on Mekong's statement expresses the social, economic and environmental concerns due to the flood and upper stream dams. They demanded that the Chinese government and the MRC to be more reliable regarding the upstream dam flood warning system, to free up information on Chinese dams, and demanded that Mekong governments re-consider the dam development.

The CBOs and NGOs attempted to spread information that this incident was not a seasonal flood, but it was due to the Chinese dam releasing water. The Mekong Lover website was treated as a hub for update information about the flood situation, according to RamunBomrung, a web coordinator, as the website hits reached 10,000 during the crisis. There were many reports which investigated the actual cause of the flood and the cost of its damage. The Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Culture Conservation Network, Living River Siam and International Rivers were closely monitoring and reporting about the events.

The flood waters in 2008 inundated parts of LuangPrabang and Vientiane provinces in Laos and at least seven northern and northeastern provinces in Thailand. The river levels reached a high of 13.7 meters on August 14, as the previously recorded highest floods occurred in 1966 when river levels reached 12.4 meters. This 2008 flood was widely reportedly the worst in a century for some areas (McCartan, 2011). The national and international mainstream media paid more attention to this flood event, and the information from Mekong Lover and Living River Siam websites were used in reports by the mainstream media, which also brought attention from national and international journalists to the affected areas for covering the issue, and to interview local people.

In March 2010, the press headlines were full of a 'Mekong drought' contributing a hard time for Mekong people. The dry weather had reduced Mekong water levels to their lowest in three decades, affecting more than 60 million people in the lower basin. Moreover, in the Mekong delta in Vietnam, saline water intruded

inland caused a crucial damage to freshwater fishery and agricultural farming. The drought had lowered water levels in the Mekong River, cutting people off from their source of livelihood and hampering the regional economies. Also, the severe drought had an impact on food security, access to clean water and river transport and tourism. As a result, in April 3, 2010, some 250 Thai activists protested outside the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok against China's dams on the Mekong (Deutsche Presse-Agentur, 2011). These two severe events had been reported and disseminated constantly by using AOEM, which resulted in more attention from the mainstream media and an increase in exposure to the intended audiences.

Figure 5.13 Covering Mekong Drought Issue by Thai Mass Media 'Matichon'

**matichon Online**  
www.matichon.co.th

หน้าแรก การเมือง บันเทิง-วัฒนธรรม กีฬา ในประเทศ ต่างประเทศ เศรษฐกิจ

**หลังไหลท่วม**

**เปิดผลวิจัยปมแม่น้ำโขงแห้งขอด พบ"จีนสร้างเขื่อนกั้นทางไหลน้ำ"เป็นไปได้สูงสุด**

วันที่ 21 พฤศจิกายน พ.ศ. 2553 เวลา 23:15:15 น. Share

ระดับน้ำโขงที่แห้งตลอดชายแดนไทย-สปป.ลาว ลดลงสามารถเห็นเกาะแก่งและเนินทรายโผล่จากผืนน้ำจำนวนมาก โดยเฉพาะบริเวณบ้านห้วยลึกและแก่งผาโต ต.ม่วงยาย อ.เวียงแก่น จ.เชียงราย

เมื่อวันที่ 20 พฤศจิกายน ผู้สื่อข่าวรายงานว่า ดร.ชินวัชร สุรัสวดี จากศูนย์วิจัยสิ่งแวดล้อมและภัยธรรมชาติอันตัมกัน (เอเอ็นอีดี) คณะเทคโนโลยีและสิ่งแวดล้อม มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตภูเก็ต ได้ใช้ข้อมูลดาวเทียมเพื่อพิสูจน์สาเหตุที่แท้จริงของความแห้งขอดของแม่น้ำโขงตั้งแต่ต้นปี 2553 จนถึงปลายปี โดยผลการวิจัยสรุปว่า เมื่อต้นเดือนเมษายนที่ผ่านมา ประเทศไทยเป็นเจ้าภาพในการประชุมสุดยอดผู้นำลุ่มน้ำโขงตอนล่าง เนื่องจากปัญหาปริมาณน้ำในแม่น้ำโขงลดลงต่ำสุดในรอบ 50 ปี ปัญหาความแห้งขอดของแม่น้ำโขงได้เริ่มมีความรุนแรงขึ้นอีกครั้งในช่วงต้นเดือนพฤศจิกายนนี้ ข้อเสนอแนะที่นักวิจัยกล่าวถึงว่าเป็นสาเหตุของความแห้งขอดของแม่น้ำโขงนั้น ประกอบด้วย

1. ปริมาณฝนและหิมะที่ตกลงน้อยลง ทำให้ปริมาณน้ำในแม่น้ำโขงลดลง
2. หิมะและธารน้ำแข็งบนเทือกเขาทิเบต ที่ละลายและไหลลงสู่แม่น้ำโขง มีปริมาณลดน้อยลง
3. การสร้างเขื่อนกั้นกักน้ำในบริเวณ "โขงตอนบน" ของประเทศจีนทำให้แม่น้ำโขงแห้ง







*Source:* [www.matichon.co.th/news\\_detail.php?newsid=1290340094&groupid=01&catid=no](http://www.matichon.co.th/news_detail.php?newsid=1290340094&groupid=01&catid=no) (April 30, 2011)

Figure 5.14 Covering Mekong Drought Issue by Thai Mass Media 'The Nation'

**THE NATION**  
IN SIGHTFUL  
TREND  
DEPENDENT

บ้านกลางเมือง  
Urbanion

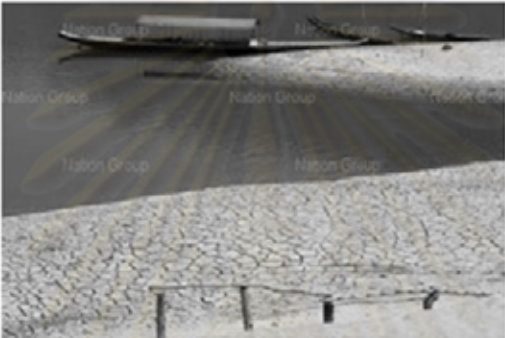
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**BUSINESS »** Share |      

MEKONG RIVER CRISIS TEXT SIZE

## China brushes off accusation on dams' effect

By The Nation  
Published on March 9, 2010



A tourist boat docks in Chiang Rai as Mekong River dries up

**Senior Chinese and Thai officials brushed off claims yesterday that Chinese dams had dried up the Mekong River, saying China had only a small proportion of water flowing into Southeast Asia's longest river.**

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Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Hu Zhengyue told Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva during a meeting at Government House that Chinese dams on the upper Mekong in Yunnan province made no significant impact on water flow into the lower part of the river, according to an official at the meeting.

Beijing and local administrators paid a lot of attention to drought within the region and China would not do anything to damage mutual interests with neighbouring countries in the Mekong, Hu was quoted as telling Abhisit.

Source: [www.nationmultimedia.com/home/2010/03/09/business/China-brushes-off-accusation-on-dams-effect-30124233.html](http://www.nationmultimedia.com/home/2010/03/09/business/China-brushes-off-accusation-on-dams-effect-30124233.html) (April 30, 2011)

Figure 5.15 Covering Mekong Drought Issue by VOA on YouTube

YouTube  Search | Browse

## Drought Drops Mekong River to 50-Year Low

VOA News.com 5,456 videos

1:19 / 2:55 CC 360p

**2,234**

Uploaded by VOAvideo on Mar 31, 2010

A severe drought in Southeast Asia and southern China has caused the Mekong River to drop to a 50-year low. In Thailand, trade on the river has dried up and farmers say they do not have enough water for their crops. Many blame China's dams upstream but, as VOA's Daniel Schearf reports from Chiang Rai province, experts say the dams may prevent worse problems on the river.

6 likes, 0 dislikes

Source: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVcwTR1d5XE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVcwTR1d5XE) (April 30, 2011)

### 5.7.2) Save The Mekong Petition and Campaign

The combination of AOEM and offline media such as print newspapers, radio and television is the most effective strategy for raising environmental awareness. The case of a consultative meeting for the proposed Xayaburi Hydropower Project, in January 22, 2011 - Chiang Khong District, Chiang Rai Province, Northern Thailand serves to illustrate this point. The meeting was conducted under the Procedures for Notification, 'Prior Consultation and Agreement' (PNPCA) as required by the 1995 Mekong Agreement. The meeting aimed for countries to jointly review any development project proposed for the mainstream to reach a consensus on whether it

should proceed, and if so, under what conditions. Although there were a few mainstream journalists who attended the meeting, it was mostly representatives from CBOs and NGOs present at the meeting who reported the event on their websites, Facebook pages and email alerts, as well as uploading video clips on to YouTube.

To increase the effectiveness of online petitions, the use of AOEM makes the process online petitioning much faster and more accessible to the public. For instance, ‘Save the Mekong: Our River Feeds Millions’, was a campaign in 2008 by Save the Mekong coalition<sup>6</sup> urging the Mekong governments to keep the Mekong flowing freely to save the critical source of food, income and life for present and future generations. The petition called on the Prime Ministers of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam to keep the Mekong flowing freely as the governments are currently considering plans to build eleven massive hydropower dams on the river’s mainstream.

According to the petition, if these dams were to be built, they would block major fish migration and dramatically change the Mekong forever, placing at risk the food security and income of millions of people. The petition was conducted in two stages; first, by collecting signed postcards from people in the countries who would be affected by the projects and around the world; second, people showed their support by adding their names to the corresponding online petition.

A few months later, the Coalition sent the 23,110 signature “Save the Mekong” petition to the Prime Ministers of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam on 19 October, 2009. In Bangkok, the representatives from the Save the Mekong coalition handed the petition to Thailand’s Prime Minister, H.E. Abhisit Vejjajiva, and also delivered a statement asking him to work with the region’s leaders to protect the Mekong River and its fisheries, which feed millions of people. Afterwards, a lively press conference was held. The resulting media coverage successfully broke the news

---

<sup>6</sup> Save the Mekong coalition is founded by bringing together non-government organizations, local people, academics, journalists, artists and ordinary people from within the Mekong countries and internationally ([www.savethemekong.org](http://www.savethemekong.org)). The Coalition was created to protect the river, its resources and people’s livelihoods, and to encourage policymakers to adopt more sustainable ways of meeting people’s energy and water needs.

to the wider public (Care2.com<sup>7</sup>, March 24, 2011).

Figure 5.16 Save the Mekong Online Petition Page



*Source:* Screenshot of [http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/2486/t/8905/p/dia/action/public/?action\\_KEY=638](http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/2486/t/8905/p/dia/action/public/?action_KEY=638) (March 15, 2011)

Though there is no official letter or response from the Thai government or other GMS governments due to this particular petition, the Save the Mekong Petition website still runs the online petition page for people around the world to sign on, up until the time of writing this thesis.

<sup>7</sup>Care2.com is a social network website that was founded by Randy Paynter in 1998 to help connect activists from around the world. It has approximately 15.4 million members. Care2's stated mission is to help people make the world a better place by connecting them with the individuals, organizations and responsible business making an impact, its web address is [www.care2.com](http://www.care2.com) ([www.care2.com/c2c/groups/disc.html?gpp=219&pst=1141285](http://www.care2.com/c2c/groups/disc.html?gpp=219&pst=1141285), March 24, 2011).

Figure 5.17 Save the Mekong Online Petition Page – Showing Signatures

1-25 of 9349 signatures				
Number	Date	Name	Location	Share your thoughts on why a ...
9349	Tue Mar 15 15:32:01 EDT 2011	Andrea Kopp	Olympia, US+WA , US	The Mekong is one of the planet's great treasures, and the biodiversity of the Mekong (especially its delta) is of greater economic and spiritual value than any amount of electric power that dams <a href="#">More....</a>
9348	Tue Mar 15 12:39:08 EDT 2011	Mara Kardas- Nelson	Cape Town, ot , ZA	
9347	Tue Mar 15 12:36:12 EDT 2011	Anonymous	Portland, US+OR , US	
9346	Tue Mar 15 12:19:41 EDT 2011	Alexis Harris	Portland, OR , US	
9345	Tue Mar 15 07:53:38 EDT 2011	Andy Holyoka	Yellow Springs, OH , US	
9344	Tue Mar 15 03:05:30 EDT 2011	Alexey Zimenko	Moscow, ot , RU	
9343	Mon Mar 14 23:16:04 EDT 2011	Anonymous	Hanoi, ot , VN	

*Source:* Screenshot of [http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/2486/t/8905/p/dia/action/public/?action\\_KEY=638](http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/2486/t/8905/p/dia/action/public/?action_KEY=638) (March 24, 2011)

Figure 5.18 Save the Mekong flyer: online petition information

## Save the Mekong

### Our River Feeds Millions

**Take action now to Save the Mekong! Write to the Prime Ministers of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam and ask them to keep the Mekong flowing freely.**

**Sign the petition online : <http://tinyurl.com/Save-the-Mekong>**

The Save the Mekong coalition is open to non-government organizations, community groups, academics, artists and ordinary citizens within the Mekong region and internationally. It was formed in response to the public's growing concern about the effects dams on the Mekong River's mainstream would have on the Mekong's ecology, regional food security, and the livelihoods of millions of people. The Save the Mekong coalition aims to raise further public awareness about the risks associated with damming such an important international river, and to persuade policymakers to adopt more sustainable and peaceful ways of meeting people's energy and water needs.

**[www.savethemekong.org](http://www.savethemekong.org)**

*Source:* Screenshot of <http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:61J0McSYRAMJ:www.fivas.org/sider/fil.asp?id%3D181+save+the+mekong+online+petition> (March 13, 2011)

### 5.7.3) Opposing Xayaburi Dam Petition and Campaign

In March 2011 thousands of villagers from the South, the North and the Northeast of Thailand gathered in Bangkok in the name of Assembly of the Poor (AOP)<sup>8</sup> to voice their problems and demands. They demanded that the Thai government permanently open the sluice gates at UbonRatchathani's Pak Mun dam<sup>9</sup> and compensate the people affected by the dam's construction. The Pak Mun people's struggles seemed never to end. The cabinet's decision was to reject the proposal by local communities to open the gates of the Pak Mun dam year - round (Bangkok Post, 2011).

In early March 2011, the Government of Lao PDR, the Thai dam consortium, and Ch.Karnchang (Thai-based enterprise) declared that the Xayaburi hydropower dam project's Concession Agreement had been signed. Though the Mekong River Commission (MRC)'s regional decision-making process on the Xayaburi Dam – called the Procedures for Notification and Prior Consultation (PNPCA) process – has already been completed, it has been widely criticized for its lack of information disclosure and quality of public meetings. Despite the fact that the Xayaburi project is currently in the advanced stages of decision-making, the project's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report was released to the public after the project was signed, according to International River and LaoFAB<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> AOP was established in 1995 and has since held many demonstrations to promote policies that favor the downtrodden and to demand compensation for villagers who have been affected by state projects such as dams and power plants.

<sup>9</sup> Completed in 1994, the dam was constructed by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand with support from the World Bank at a total cost of US\$240 million (7.24 billion baht). The project has been criticized as harming fisheries in the Moon River, failing to produce the projected power output, and for inadequately compensating affected residents. The immediate impact of the dam was to flood 117 square kilometres of land and displace around 3,000 families.

<sup>10</sup> LaoFAB is a forum for sharing information about agriculture, rural development and natural resource management in Laos. The group's interest is focused on the livelihoods and welfare of rural people. Members of the forum include Government officials, staff of donor agencies and NGOs, project experts, academics and business people. LaoFAB is managed by the Coalition for Lao Information, Communication and Knowledge (CLICK). Other information services managed by CLICK include the LaoLink discussion group and an online library (in Lao) at [www.Lao44.org](http://www.Lao44.org).



The Xayaburi Dam has been seen as a threat to the Mekong River. The planned hydropower dam will be located in a mountainous valley in Northern Laos and is the most advanced of eleven large dams planned for the Lower Mekong River's mainstream. If built, the dam will cause irreversible and permanent ecological change to the Mekong river which feeds millions of people, forcibly resettle over 2,100 people and directly affect over 202,000 people, and could push iconic and endangered fish species, such as the Mekong Giant Catfish, to extinction. There has been clear public opposition to the Xayaburi Dam for the past two years, including by local community, governmental officials and NGO representatives in a series of MRC-sponsored meetings on the project held in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam in early 2011 (International River Fact-sheet, 2011).

The AOEM has been used to follow up and update information on the Xayaburi Dam constantly. Mekong Lover, Living River Siam (LRS), and International Rivers (IRs) have been disseminating the project information, networking among their partner groups, and organizing an online campaign against the dam's construction. They mark the International Days of Action for River on March 14 every year to voice out opposition to the planned large-scale hydropower dams and to send a message to governments and the public regarding the impact of completed dams. In order to publicize information, the CBOs and NGOs use AOEM through many online channels, e.g. email-groups, website, weblog, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

As a result of the opposition movement, on April 19, 2011, government representatives from Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia met to conclude the regional decision-making process on the Xayaburi Dam, the first dam proposed for the Lower Mekong Mainstream. At this meeting the four lower Mekong Basin countries agreed that the decision on the Xayaburi Dam be deferred and elevated to the Ministerial level. This decision brings temporary reprieve to Mekong River (International River, 2011). However, Ch. Karnchang, Thailand's second-largest contractor, insists that banks and the government of Laos remain committed to the Xayaburi dam the company plans to build on the Mekong River. This is evidenced that construction work around this dam in Laos is undergoing, and there are villagers preparing to be relocated - despite the project not yet receiving official approval (Bangkok Post, 2011).

Figure 5.19 Sample of Email-group informed about Pak Mun Dam



*Source:* Screenshot of an email received by Mekong Watch, Japan, informing about news updates from the Pak Mun Dam affected villagers' rally in Bangkok. (See [http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/PM\\_8March11.pdf](http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/PM_8March11.pdf), March 16, 2011)

Figure 5.20 Mekong Lover Website reports news on March 14 Event



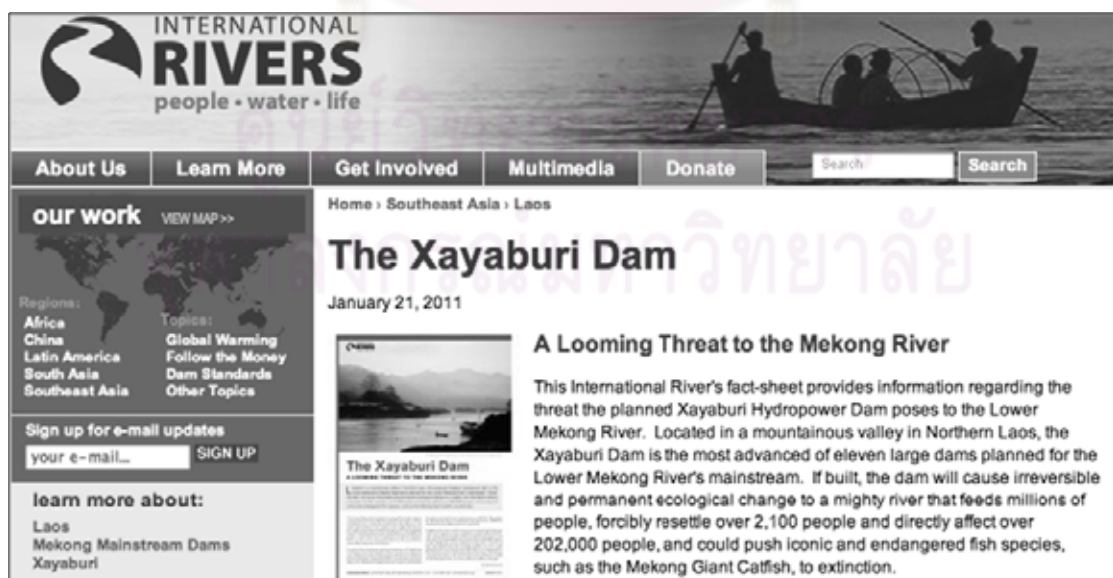
*Source:* Screenshot of [www.mekonglover.com](http://www.mekonglover.com) (March 16, 2011)

Figure 5.21 Living River Siam website reports news on March 14 Event



*Source:* Screenshot of [www.livingriversiam.org](http://www.livingriversiam.org) (March 14, 2011)

Figure 5.22 International Rivers Page on Xayaburi Dam



*Source:* Screenshot of <http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/southeast-asia/mekong-mainstream-dams/xayaburi/xayaburi-dam> (March 16, 2011)

Figure 5.23 Mainstream Online Newspaper report on Xayaburi Dam

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### Mekong residents reach out to river's ailing spirit

Villagers fear the worst as the Xayaburi Dam project in Laos takes shape

Published: 13/03/2011 at 12:00 AM  
Newspaper section: News

The Mekong River looks a pale imitation of the mighty waterway it once was. The water flows sluggishly in a channel which has shrunk to only a few metres wide in some parts of Loei province.

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The 8.8-magnitude earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan today will not have any impact on Thailand, Somsak Kaosuwon, director of the Natural Disaster Warning Centre, confirmed on Friday afternoon.

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FLOW WITH IT: Bu Pengkham leads villagers in a ceremony to improve the health of the Mekong River in Loei.

Source: Screenshot of <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/226414/mekong-residents-reach-out-to-river-s-ailing-spirit> (March 14, 2011)

In conclusion, the overall study shows that AOEM can be used effectively for the dissemination of information; however, interactive and participatory functions of AOEM are largely in the process of being developed as they gain increasingly more interest from public. In terms of networking and organizing, the study shows that AOEM has been used as one of the key elements for campaigning. That said, the combined use of online media and offline media is the best strategy for successful environmental campaigning. However, regarding the structural nature of AOEM, though it can be used to provide information and an interactive platform, it also requires active effort on behalf of the intended audience to receive important

information and to meaningfully participate (i.e. to read, to watch and to act forward such information), thus contributing to campaigning efforts as well.

Table 5.7 AOEM's strengthening and challenging factors in campaigning

Strengthening Factors	Challenging Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-depth and key information</li> <li>• Updated, active and interactive platform</li> <li>• Online plus offline campaign</li> <li>• Initiate issues for mainstream/mass media</li> <li>• Reproducibility: web-to-web posting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Passive act (no opening e-mail, no reading key info.)</li> <li>• Limited scope* and scale** of intended audience</li> <li>• Limited access and attention of local audience</li> </ul>
<p>*Scope – Numbers of active audience  **Scale – Quality of activity and participation</p>	

A closer look at the goals and strategies of the studied organizations reveals that well-resourced organizations also have well designed websites and higher numbers of web visitors. Specifically, IRs has the largest web team and is indeed driven more towards innovation, but this innovation concerns mainly the functions of information provision and campaigning. Therefore, not all voices are equally strong, as organizations with better resources have more sophisticated websites and possess a greater degree of visibility and link popularity on the Internet. The last chapter will reveal the challenges and future trends in using AOEM to promote sustainable development and will also provide critical remarks regarding the future of studying online media.

ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร  
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

# **CHAPTER VI**

## **CHALLENGES AND FUTURE TRENDS OF AOEM**

### **Challenges and Remarks of AOEM**

According to the interviews, the examined organizations express the common challenges of AOEM; first, the news and information are perceived as less credible and less reliable than other mainstream environmental offline sources (i.e. books, newspapers, print publication). This is because the information is often biased and sensationalized, presenting one-sided stories from residents in affected communities. Moreover, according to Mekong Lover, whose writers' writing styles are more like telling a story, seem less journalistic due to a lack of back-up statistics or academic sources (Ramun, 2011; Teerapong, 2011). On the other hand, International Rivers (IRs) website experienced that their distributed information is too academic and too difficult to understand due to the use of many specific terms (Middleton, 2011).

In order to overcome these challenges, the studied organizations strengthen their staff through extended journalism skills training. Moreover, Mekong Lover and Living River Siam (LRS) attempt to add more academic research and scientific sources to back up their information, while IRs attempts to bring more stories and information from the local communities. Also, IRs tries to use less jargon and adopt a more journalistic writing style by re-designing both writing and visual format of information before publishing it on their websites.

Secondly, the studied organizations informed that the demographic of website viewers is still limited to people in cities and to very specific groups such as academic researchers, activists and NGO representatives. This is probably because the level of Internet penetration in GMS countries is relatively low and only people in the cities can access online media. Also, the lack of exposure to the intended audience is affected by censorship regulations and governmental policies that scale down the Internet access in Mekong countries.

However, the numbers of Internet users are significantly growing across the region, specifically in Vietnam, Burma/Myanmar, and Laos (*See Table 6.1*). Furthermore, GMS governments have been improving institutions for cooperation, infrastructure for ICTs operation and management and piloting ICTs applications services across the region, all of which aim to serve increased demand of the people and to close the digital divide (Mekong Development Forum, 2010).

Table 6.1 Growth of Internet users in Mekong countries

Country	Populations (2011)	Latest number of users	User growth (2000-2010)	Penetration (% Population)
Burma/Myanmar	53,414,374	110,000	10,900.0%	0.2%
Cambodia	14,753,320	78,000	1,200.0%	0.5%
Laos	6,993,767	527,400	8,690.0%	7.5%
Thailand	66,404,688	17,486,400	660.3%	26.3%
Vietnam	89,571,130	24,269,083	12,034.5%	27.1%
China	1,330,141,295	420,000,000	1,766.7%	31.6%

*Source:* [www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm#asia](http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm#asia)

The last common challenge of AOEM, according to the interviews, is public perception of environmental issues as a sophisticated and complicated subject, which leads to the view that the environmental news is not of high interest to them. Also, people think that environmental issues are preserved for an exclusive club. Moreover, despite the fact that most environmental issues involve governments, business sectors, and public goods, the CBOs and NGOs hardly get mainstream media attention to report about environmental issues.

From the interviews, the reasons environmental issues get less attention from the mass media are: (1) **News value.** The editorial board and journalists have a tendency to report on mega-development projects because they seem to encourage ‘positive development’ of the country (often using the term ‘sustainable development’) and economic growth. In contrast, CBOs and NGOs claim that the development projects cause hardship to people and environmental degradation, and that the projects are not examples of sustainable development; (2) **Power.** The

environmental issues often involve national interests, politicians, and business agencies that are influential in controlling the press outlet and have a vested interest in keeping development projects alive through promoting a positive image of such projects; (3) **Editorial censorship.** Though mainstream journalists write about the impact of development, their reports are often not published; and (4) **Self-censorship.** Journalists themselves often avoid reporting such news to stay secure in their career.

Ultimately the main challenge to environmental news reporting is the structure of mass media, namely the fact that it is state controlled and determined by financial incentives. It is no secret that the mainstream media works for the interests of the state and corporations, not for the interests of the people. Consequently, AOEM is quickly becoming the primary communication tool for CBOs and NGOs to raise environmental and social concerns. However, AOEM has to rely on offline media and mainstream media as well as it is likely that all these communication tools help to facilitate environmental campaigns to have more potential for success.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Greater Mekong Sub-region or GMS, comprises Cambodia, Laos, Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Chinese provinces, Yunnan and Guangxi. For the last decade, about US\$ 11 billion has been injected into infrastructure investments in the GMS region, with one-third of funds coming from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). This aid has been channeled into so-called “economic corridors” – multi-country transport arteries now being built across mainland Southeast Asia (Wade, 2011).

Moreover, the Chinese government has been playing a more critical role in development in GMS countries and openly declares that GMS is the most effective economic mechanism in the region (Wade, 2011). The Mekong River, one of the world’s great rivers, already has four dams on the upper part of the river built by Chinese companies. Currently, the Chinese government is investing in three hydropower dam projects in Laos and another in Cambodia, and plans eleven more on the lower part of Mekong River. Under its new Five-Year Plan, the Chinese government proposes to build 130-140 gigawatts of new hydropower plants. China



already has about half the world's large dams within its borders. It has also paid a huge price for this development. Chinese dams have already displaced an estimated 23 million people, and dam accidents have killed approximately 300,000 people, according to International Rivers.

Furthermore, the China-Asean Free Trade Agreement, initiated on 1 January 2010, has greatly increased Chinese trade and investment in the mainland Southeast Asian countries. The funding for economic development of the GMS region is derived from both ADB coffers and Chinese loans and investments; specifically, China is establishing a US\$10 billion China-Asean Fund on Investment Cooperation to support regional infrastructural development. Integration measures include communications and transport infrastructure. An integrated railway system will connect all GMS countries by 2020, with China key in providing skills and funding. China-funded high-speed railways and roads will connect Kunming with Yangon, Bangkok, Vientiane and Phnom Penh, while a network of hydro-dams, power-transmission grids and energy pipelines also tie the mainland states to China (Wade, 2011).

As a result from the development and economic growth in GMS, the economy of Thailand experienced gross domestic product (GDP) growth by 8.0% in 2010 making in one of the fastest growing economies in Asia and the fastest growing economy in Southeast Asia. However, Thailand's public debt at end-April 2010, stood at 4.108 trillion baht (126.945 billion U.S. dollars), or 42.23 percent of GDP according to Thai Finance Ministry's Public Debt Management Office (People's Daily Online, 2010n.d). While the GDP of the country was rising, Thai people experienced a different scenario in their daily lives.

The media is necessary for the presentation of socio-cultural, economic, and political concerns in a society. Though the traditional media is under state control and monopolized by corporations, online media has become an alternative communication tool for CBOs, NGOs and the general public. Specifically, the environment and local communities affected by large-scale development projects are not recognized by the government and mainstream media. Thus, Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) is being used by community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a crucial medium to voice out environmental

concerns and local communities' problems.

The Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) governments are planning to improve the ICT infrastructure across the region. Accordingly, Thailand's Second Master Plan on Information and Communication Technology (2009-2013) has set its goal on education and social development in line with the direction of the National Development Plan. This means GMS governments have prioritized ICTs as an important matter for citizens and that it is a tool to engage more voices in public discussions, which increases the rate and quality of a country's development.

However, for GMS governments to promote ICT and to promote development, they must promote peoples' rights in terms of communication as well. The rights to information and freedom of expression for all people are required as being as fundamental rights in democratic countries. As a result, there should be the provision of information access for citizens that they can be informed and be able to participate in the governmental development decision-making process meaningfully. AOEM can be a part of that process.

The Mekong River is an international river flowing through many countries, though the Mekong nations' sovereignties are divided and independent from one another, the Mekong River is borderless and it cannot be managed by one nation. The River must be taken care of by every community in every country through which it runs. Therefore, Mekong people need to unite to discuss the priorities of the Mekong River as it pertains to their lives. .

In the case of the controversial Xayaburi hydropower dam, the construction site is proposed along the mainstream Mekong in Northern Laos, but Thailand will buy most of the electricity from the hydropower plant. This is evidence of an unequal distribution of resources among the people affected by the construction of the dam.

Furthermore, this 1,260 MW dam will trigger an ecological crisis of tremendous proportions to Mekong River and people. Due to social and environmental concerns, on March 22, 2011, a group of 263 non-governmental organizations from 51 countries has called on Laos to cancel its proposed Xayaburi dam project (Asia-Pacific News,

2011). Upon the realization that the dam would affect millions of people, the Thai and International NGOs had been campaigning about this dam project since 2007 when construction companies first prepared plans to build the massive dam.

In the current ICTs environment, the Alternative Online Environmental Media (AOEM) has become one of the communication tools that contributes the very real possibility for local communities in GMS (i.e. Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and two Southern China provinces) to come together to make better decisions about development in the Mekong region. Also, with the help of AOEM, the GMS governments should be able to engage more local communities' voices to make better decisions for sustainable development of the region.

The findings of this thesis have showed that AOEM, as a communication tool, has helped to strengthen CBOs' and NGOs' campaigns in many ways: (1) to increase the use of offline media for spreading information and campaigning; (2) to allow CBOs and NGOs to connect directly with their intended audience, independently of conventional, mainstream media channels; (3) to lower costs associated with communicating and campaigning and to do those things much faster and more effectively; (4) to provide an interactive and lively participation platform for intended audiences; and, (5) to increase reproducibility, as the examined organizations' information has been copied from website to website; thus, the information can spread more quickly, which makes inter-organizational credibility worldwide more possible.

Moreover, the major findings of the thesis will contribute to Southeast Asian Studies at the grassroots level in the environmental movement. The area studies in Southeast Asia have been much highly highlighted on governments, economies, histories; local communities or grassroots, however, currently become new actors in this new political and socio-cultural landscape of 'the Greater Mekong Sub-region.' It is hoped that these findings will encourage people and communities in the Mekong Sub-region, specifically in Thailand, to empower themselves through online media. Although, the rise of difficulties and hardship borne by the people in the GMS due to development projects is ongoing, the CBOs and NGOs continually employ many tools and strategies to deal with the impact. One of those tools is AOEM, which has been

used to empower local people; to disseminate information, to network among different organizations and to do campaigns, in order to oppose development projects that tend to harm the people and environment. However, in terms of sustainable development, the governments must balance both the well-being of the public and the well-being of the environment. The government must also respect indigenous communities' rights and to engage more peoples' participation in the development decision-making processes. Only then will development be truly sustainable.

This research was conducted in Thai social and political contexts and some aspects might be familiar to residents of neighboring Mekong countries; the adoption of research methodologies and analysis for further studies would be significantly useful. The future study of practical uses of ICTs in environmental movements in other GMS countries where diversity exists among political systems, economic growth rates, natural resources and ICTs development stages would also be crucially beneficial. In fact, inter-governmental and inter-organizational communication is necessary for academic researchers and government staff to have a more complete understanding about the relationship between ICTs and the socio-environmental movement. The roles of online media can be expected to contribute positive changes to increase peoples' voices and engagement in GMS countries' development, in order to assist governments to shape a stronger goal towards 'sustainable development' as being necessary for the well-being of both people and the environment.

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Siriluk Sriprasit was born in Chiang Rai province, Thailand in 1983. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in Mass Communications, majoring in journalism from Chiang Mai University in 2006. From 2005 – 2009, Siriluk worked at an online news magazine 'Local Talk' ([www.localtalk2004](http://www.localtalk2004)), the umbrella organization of Prachadhrama News Net as a journalist and content Editor. In early 2009, she won a fellowship from Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) to attend a-month-journalism-training course and to cover news about informal labor sector/home-based labor in West Java, Indonesia. In mid 2009, she won a scholarship from EarthRights International (ERI) – Mekong program to study environmental and human rights issues concerning Greater Mekong Sub-region countries at Mekong School for six months. In late 2009, she won a scholarship from the Rockefeller Foundation to study in the Master's program in Southeast Asian Studies at Chulalongkorn University. She is planning to work at educational and advocacy organization to learn, to give and take more knowledge about environment. She loves her dog and travelling, as much as she loves advocating sustainable development.

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