

Beyond Merely Impoverishment: Representation of Rohingya in Thailand through Alternative Media

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Abstract

In recent years, Rohingya arrivals in Thailand have drawn tremendous public attention. While media and academia have been the main sources in representing the Rohingya image to the international community, self-representation by the Rohingya are emerging on alternative media through their negotiation. Since there has been more than a single wave of Rohingya migration into Thailand, the Rohingya in Thailand are very diverse in terms of social and economic status. Diversity of Rohingya in Thailand revolves around their field of interests including trade, religion or humanitarian aid. In the midst of scattered and overwhelming information, Rohingya issues have become more or less, a controversy serving religious or political ideals. This paper tries to show how Rohingya are represented through alternative media of organizations which are White Channel and Amnesty International Thailand. This study employs participatory approach and interview. Through the notion of Representation, it explains the characteristics of Rohingya across the media. The findings show that the Rohingya aim to present a new image by engaging in the alternative to create representation to respond and counter their reputation of being victims which have been invented by the Burmese government and the global mainstream media.

Keywords: Rohingya, Refugee, Alternative media, Media, Representation

1. Setting the Scene

In recent decades, a large number of Rohingya people from Myanmar have fled their homeland to escape economic hardship and human rights violation. The severe discrimination of Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar has led to vast migratory movements of these people, forming a vast, globally spanning and transnational Rohingya refugee community. There are a few sizable Rohingya refugee/migrant communities in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Australia, Japan, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern states. Among those who settled in different countries, many have come together to share information and cooperate on improving

situations of the Rohingya. Others have attempted to voice the plight of Rohingya to make it globally known. Regardless of whether the real changes in the lives of Rohingya have been brought about, this research attempts to understand how the Rohingya living outside their homeland forms their networks in an attempt to tackle the Rohingya issues and to end the suffering of the Rohingya people. It focuses specifically on the Rohingya refugee community in Thailand whose actors and/or activists come from diverse backgrounds and present different voices of the Rohingya.

The origin of this group of people who recently started calling themselves “Rohingya” is indeed controversial. Some argue that they are indigenous to the state of Arakan while others contend that they are muslim migrants who originated in Bengal which later became Bangladesh and migrated to Burma during the period of British rule (Chan 2005; Leider 2012). Regardless of whether they are immigrants or natives of the state of Arakan, the fact that the Rohingyas are muslim living in the land of Buddhist domination makes their life difficult. While muslims in Burma generally face social and political discrimination, the Rohingya muslims encounter much worse situations. Burma’s 1982 Citizenship Law, implemented during the time of General Ne Win, has denied Burmese citizenship to the Rohingya population. Without citizenship, their freedom of movement is severely restricted. They are banned from owning land and are subjected to various forms of extortion and arbitrary taxation, land confiscation, forced eviction and house destruction (Amnesty International 2004). Facing poverty, misery, and human rights violations in Burma, thousands of Rohingya muslims tried to escape this harsh reality by risking their lives sailing across the ocean only to end it up in Malaysia or Thailand. Once their boats arrived onto Thailand’s coastline, most of them ended up in detention centers.

The plight of Rohingya people has widely received attention from both media and academic research. However, media and academic interest in the Rohingya tend to perceive and portray these people as either passive victims of oppression in Burma or the violent actors causing conflict with the Arakan Buddhists. Studies about the Rohingya people have always been politicized from both the sympathizers or the Burmese nationalist perspective to lay claim that they are either natives of Arakan or purely immigrants who migrated to this area only recently. While Rohingya studies have been limited to only attempting to find their origin, there has been a gap in knowledge about these people in terms of recent refugee communities outside Burma, how they survive in displacement, and how they group together in order to improve their situations.

With respect to the issues about representation of the Rohingya, several studies have attempted to locate how the Rohingya have been portrayed in the media and how the representation of the Rohingya

shaped these people's lives. Studies by Mohd Nor (2017), Potjes and Salathong (2017), Preeda (2016), and Wannataworn (2017) show similar findings of how the Rohingya have been represented in media and the impact mainstream media make on the Rohingya people. Just as Stuart Hall (1997) claims that representation is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people, and events. The ideas and concepts of "Rohingya" have been created and made "real" by various groups, including the media. The questions this research tries to answer is whether those who have been represented can claim their own representation, and if so, in what ways, they choose to represent themselves. Furthermore, what is needed to re-construct their self-representation that is different from those which have already had their representation constructed.

Refugee issues generated a strong interest in the world today because of the alarming depiction. Depiction which has become their simplified representation includes the plight they are facing in their home country and in the countries that they migrate to. However, each local press and global media deliver different news coverage on this issue because local news has to answer more stakeholders with their interest and priorities. Depiction of refugees can be presented sympathetically, inhumanely, negatively or even be silenced altogether. News coverage in Thailand on the global refugee crisis referred to international media coverage that has massive attention. Media attention brought many refugee stories to the public.

However, the presence of refugees in news coverage in Thai press is scarce compared to other social issues in the country (Kaur 2007; Mohd Hamdan 2007). Local media in Thailand often portray the Rohingya living in Thailand in a demeaning way when compared to a more sympathetic portrayal in the mainstream press. In the Thai media, reports on the Rohingya have been limited compared to other social issues, even though refugee issues have received more attention with a significant rise in the last ten years, despite the low coverage. For example, the media have covered political uprising in the Middle East in Egypt, Libya, and Syria and their plight of these internally displaced people with much more detail (Arzura 2012).

This study explains relevant concepts of media and representation. The nature of selected alternative media will be explained with the attempt to understand why the press has responded to the matter the way they have. Additionally, the representation of the Rohingya in alternative media is explained to understand the reasons behind these depictions.

2. Contextual Background: Who are the Rohingya?

There are two main ethnic communities in Rakhine state neighbouring Bangladesh; the Rakhine Buddhist and the Rohingya muslims. The Rakhine Buddhist in the area shares religion and language with the Burmese in other parts while the Rohingya muslim ethnically and religiously related to the Chittagong people in Southeastern Bangladesh. Some Rohingya claim that their history in Burma goes back to the 8th century when they settled in Rakhine from their Arab trader ancestry line. The influx of muslims was due to the British Burma Gazetteer in 1957 when Mahataing Sandya founded a new city of old Ramadi in 788 AD. Another influx took place after 1404 when Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah (the Sultan of Bengal) tried to help Rakhine's king who had just lost the throne to the Burmese King to regain his throne. The Sultan sent tens of thousands of soldiers to help the Rakhine King and later those soldiers decided to settle in Rakhine (Habibulla 1995). In 1660, the Mughal Prince, Shah Shuja fled to Rakhine. This important event brought a new wave of muslim immigrants to the kingdom of Rakhine (Habibullah 1995).

Habibullah also asserted that other ethnic groups such as Mughals, Turks, Persian, Central Asians, Pathans and Bengalis came in to mix with the Rohingya because of the Sufis and merchants. Therefore, the Rohingya people are not homogeneous because they did not develop from just a single race or ethnicity but different ethnic groups. They have a distinct culture and civilisation of their own (Habibullah 1995). Being in the middle of muslim-ruled India and Buddhist-ruled Myanmar, they have their own history with an independent sovereign monarchy ruled by Hindus, Buddhists and muslims for some period. From 1685 to 1710, the political power of Rakhine was completely in the hands of the muslims. Muslims ruled for approximately 350 years, until it was invaded and occupied by Boddaw Paya, the Burmese king, on December 28, 1784. Boddaw Paya may rightly be called the harbinger for destroying every Islamic symbol in Rakhine and for sowing the seed of distrust between the two communities, Rohingya muslim and Rakhine Buddhist (Siddique 1999).

Buchanan (2003) writes that "Rohang/Roshang/Raham" were the names that muslims in Rakhine or Arakan area were known by. The name "Rohingma" identifies the muslims of Arakan as natives of Rohang or of Arakan. They prefer to be referred to as "Rohingya" and not as "Burmese muslim" because it showed how they have developed a culture and language (a mixture of Chittagonian, Burmese, Hindi and English),

which is absolutely unique to the region (Lewa 2010). The ethnic majority Rakhine (mostly Buddhists) reject that the Rohingyas are an ethnic group with true historical roots in the region (Buchanan 2003).

Aye Chan (2005) argues that the term “Rohingya” was used for the first time only in 1951 by a few Bengali muslim intellectuals of the Northwestern part of Arakan. They were the direct descendants of immigrants from the Chittagong District of East Bengal who had migrated into Arakan after the province was ceded to British India in 1826. While Aye Chan’s work implies that there never were Rohingya people in the history of Burma and these people were indeed immigrants, Jacques Leider (2014), an Arakan history expert, points out that the term “Rooinga” or “natives of Arakan” was in fact used in the late 18th century. Although the origin of this group is controversial and is significantly the main reason that has caused the conflicts in Arakan state today, it is beyond the scope of this study.

Studies on the recent Rohingya group are quite limited. Berlie (2008) studies the assimilation of the muslim in Burma through the Burmese education system and the Burmese language usage in 2008. He argues that the Burmese education system and the Burmese language never reached out to the Rohingya population and they have always been seen as Bengali (not native Burman). They have also been accused of being terrorists, weakened by being put in jail, restrained from family-making, and/or traveling. Berlie suggests that it was many centuries ago that the Rohingya lived in Arakan State. Yegar (1972) also points out that muslims in Burma can be divided into four different groups; Indian muslim, Arakan muslim, Panthay (Chinese muslim) and Zarbadees (mixed marriage of Indian muslim men with Burmese women) in the Myanmar census. While muslims in Burma generally face social and political discrimination, as already stated the Rohingya muslims encounter much worse situations. Besides being denied citizenship, restricted movement and banned from owning land, recently, their reproductive rights have been limited to only two children (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In sum, they have been deprived of their rights in economic, political and social terms (Yegar 1972; Berlie 2008). They have been described as “one of the world’s most persecuted minorities.”

The approximate number of Rohingya muslim population is around 3.5 million. However, after a large scale persecution including ethnic cleansing and genocidal action since Burma gained independence in 1948, nearly half forced to flee (Alam 1998). Those people became refugees and illegal immigrants in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Malaysia and more. In Thailand, the Rohingya population is small. Thanin et al (2014) states that there are about 100,000 Rohingya with an illegal immigrant status mostly working in the fishing industry, while the two relevant diasporic communities in Ranong and Mae

Not consist of a few thousand people. Moreover, my preliminary fieldwork found that there were many waves of Rohingya migration. The early groups started migrating to Thailand over 50 years ago for business opportunities while the latest group escaped from conflict in Rakhine. The Rohingya are scattered all over Thailand through their relative networks, especially in the Central, Southern region and on Burma borderland. Only a small group lives in the Northern and Northeastern region.

3. Literature review and Methods

Media play a pervasive role today as a purveyor of information. The information reach has become global and more accessible via new media across the internet, as well as traditional media such as the newspaper, radio, television and news agencies. The role of media has also become increasingly important within the mounting international rage everywhere in the world today. Events such as the Iraq invasion, the Arab uprising, ethnic cleansing in Myanmar and Cambodia have received much attention from media agencies. Stuart Hall (1997) had posited that media as a principal, partakes in the dissemination of ideologies and produces a representation of the social world via images and text narrations. This manufactures a network of understanding what informs us of “how the social world works”, “why it works the way it works” and “how it is shown to work” (Hall 1990 in Fatimah Awan 2008: 14). In this context, it is important to note that the media as a conveyor could not work on neutral grounds. The agencies attached to and owned by the media are likely to perpetuate their social and political power differentiation. In other words, the coverage of a particular issue more often than not, privileges certain voice/s, ideology and measures, inherently marginalizing the other.

Foucault had stressed that discourse produces knowledge, and this knowledge is inextricably in relation to power. This entails, with regards to media representation as a discourse, those who control the media, control how issues in the media are being represented. However, power over discourse is not static, as power and/or knowledge according to Foucault, is influenced by ideologies. In *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, Hall (1997) highlights the ideological role of the media and other public institutions in the development and dissemination of representation. Representations are images, descriptions, explanations and frames for one’s understanding what the world is, why and how it works in particular ways. The main role of representations is the system of producing meaningful symbols to create

a reality in many contexts. However, if we want to specify media representations, it would mean the representation that we see on media space which can be many things: texts in news, blogs, photographs and articles advertisements, radio programmes, YouTube videos, Facebook pages, websites, podcasts and more.

Just as Hall claimed, “Representation is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the ‘real’ world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people, and events.” There are three approaches to representation - the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist, which explain how the representation of meaning through language works. The reflective approach refers to simply reflecting a meaning which already exists out there in the world of objects, people and events. The intentional approach focuses as expressing meanings of only what the speaker or writer or painter wants to say, while the constructionist approach conveys meanings through a language system that people used to represent their concepts.

Among these three approaches, the constructionist approach is the core theory that this research employs. The constructionist approach does not deny the material world where things exist as well as the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning, and language operate. Rather this approach claims that it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts (Hall 1997). The constructionist approach recognizes this public, social characteristic of language. It acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of the language can fix the meaning in language. Constructionists argue that people use signs, organized into languages of different kinds, to communicate meaningfully with others. Hall gives readers a vivid example of the traffic light which serves as an important principle about representation and meaning. Meaning does not inhere in things but constructed and produced by various practices, in the world. Representation is, therefore, not a mirror of the world but enters in the process of meaning construction. In sum, “reality” does not exist outside the process of representation.

According to Hall (1997), although representation attempts to fix the meaning, meaning can never be fixed. Meaning can change while social actors interact and re-assign new meaning. Hall argues that making meaning is always a process of interpreting what is represented. While power intervenes representation, the relative openness of meaning makes change possible. Shapiro (1988) points out that the contestation among groups over what should be accepted as the appropriate or correct meaning is referred to as the “politics of representation.” The heart of the constructivist approach is that humans can make sense or get meaning from things around them and become objects of knowledge only within discourse. Each individual has a

different level of capacity to construct or negotiate to make meaning. Hall is interested in the role of the media in producing systems of representations that fulfil particular interests and identities over others, and so systematically distort particular representations and sustain systems of power and inequality. So, representation is in the ongoing ideological construction of reality.

Linking the concept of representation with the issues about the Rohingya, Afzal (2016) investigated how newspapers in 2015 framed the issues about the Rohingya crisis. Using the concept of representation and discourse analysis, Afzal argues that the Rohingya crisis has been framed in multiple ways. It has been represented as a refugee crisis, citizenship war, political battle of survival, xenophobia, islamophobia, anti-muslim racism, an issue of ethnic minority, genocide and more. Afzal suggested that media framing is significant as it serves as an alternative to those Rohingyas who have been voiceless. As news coverage could bring changes in public opinion and promote particular definitions and explanations of political issues, they can influence decision making (Afzal 2016). His findings suggest that representation is never a mirror of the event; it enters the process of meaning construction in order to create understanding about the “Rohingya crisis”. Regardless of what the Rohingya actually meant and what the crisis was all about, the newspapers have created the meanings of what the crisis was. From a different angle, Brooten (2015) explored the Rohingya crisis and its representation on social media sites, particularly how the Rohingya facebook community in the US expressed their opinion towards the crisis. Brooten found out that Facebook users, both the Rohingya and others, who have joined the page have expressed their opinion that the action should be taken by the United States towards the Rohingya sufferings. Brooten pointed out that the United States had been seen as the “savior” with the power to stop the violence towards the muslim minority of Rohingya people. These two studies mentioned above show different views on the media representation of the Rohingya while at the same time illustrate that representation is by no means a mirror of the event. It enters into the process of constructing the meanings of the thing it depicted.

Using discourse analysis to study the representation of Rohingya in online English-language news in Burmese media, Roe (2017) revealed that the Rohingya has primarily been depicted as “others” in online Burmese media. He suggested that there is an over-tendency to use strong emotional language which connotes desperation and fear when describing the Rohingya. He argued that this may be due to the intention of the newspapers to highlight the sensation of the stories by reinforcing the Rohingya’s helplessness. However, Roe focused only on Burmese media publishing in English language, whose target audience may be different from the general Burmese audience. Therefore, the message those English-

language news stories conveyed may differ from the Burmese-language news. This illustrates the ways in which media choose to represent the topic, the object, or the people, can vary depending on their position and ideology.

Employing the concept of representation, this study explores the Rohingya networks in Thailand through an analysis of media texts as well as personal narratives of the Rohingya refugees. While the Rohingya are not favourably depicted in mainstream media, those networks comprised of the Rohingya refugees/migrants, local muslim organizations, and international NGOs use their platforms to change the plight of the Rohingya while at the same time engage in re-creating and re-constructing the Rohingya representation. With the advent of social media, it is interesting to understand how those networks co-constitute the new representation of the Rohingya. In highlighting the idea of representation, I do not mean to leave out other religious, human rights and humanitarian aspects of those networks. Those individuals and organizations while advocating for human rights, helping the Rohingya on humanitarian aid and everyday struggles, actively producing their own media texts. Some Rohingya who work for Amnesty International Thailand also work as a self-employed journalist while being an active member in a muslim organization. This study will look at the representation of different individuals and organizations which may shape Rohingya representation and identity on different levels.

Methodology

	Alternative media	Rohingya Activists
Data collection	Interview and Participate	Interview
	Website data collection (news, documents, and video)	
Data selection	Selected the materials that mostly relate to questions.	

Table 1: Methodology

Because the Rohingya presence is limited in Thailand, qualitative data collection was essential. The collection ran from March until May 2018 of fieldwork in Bangkok. I carried out 11 interviews with Rohingya activists and alternative media journalists. Data was collected on alternative media websites and

other platforms including news reports, documents and videos both in physical and digital format. Analysis of discourse was used with contents from alternative media. There are two main elements which are from Rohingya activists and alternative media was also taken into consideration.

During participation in public and private seminars with three alternative media organizations, writing was employed. I collected the secondary data which was approximately 26 news reports. After a careful data selection to disregard the irrelevant data, 8 news reports were used for an in-depth analysis. The selection and analysis processes were based on research questions to understand representations of the Rohingya on alternative media.

Limitations of the research and Research Gap

For the full legitimacy and transparency, I recorded video and voice clips while Rohingya interviewees were making many insightful comments. When the camera was causing too much pressure for some sensitive issues, I decided to take notes to capture personal and subjective responses. Sometimes, the interviewees were too anxious while being filmed to open up and answer the questions. Unfortunately, I could not get access to interview Rohingya who currently live in Myanmar and Bangladesh, so I cannot deliver a complete picture of the situation.

The main two gaps in the research literature on Rohingya were clear. For the first gap, there is a lack of studies on identity and representation of refugees which were conducted in Asian countries. Government policies and socio-political development are the shared theme of studies on Rohingya from Asian countries. Research on the discourse of refugees in Asia is rather limited. On the other hand, more studies of refugees in Western countries are about written and spoken media and political discourses. For the second gap, Rohingya people are often not included in studies on media representation of Rohingya. In the process of planning and conducting research, Rohingya are usually not involved. While there is plenty of media coverage on the Rohingya situation in Myanmar, narratives on this are much less present in Thailand. Media space in Thailand on Rohingya issues normally only include Thai media agencies, Thai government, and Thai citizens. This results in very limited actors on media.

This study tries to address the research gap by exploring alternative media in Thailand through concept of representation. Even though alternative media is important by allowing Rohingya people in setting agenda, studies on alternative media are limited. The reason may be limitations of organizational size, capital and access to news sources. It focused on personal narratives of the local producers and Rohingya

refugees. It is undeniable that media contributed to representation of Rohingya in Thailand. It played an important part in creating representations which lead to an impact on political context to a certain level. Nevertheless, several Thai media agencies are working on the Rohingya crisis using different tools to publicize their situation and to raise the audience's awareness with the aim of it leading to more people taking action.

4. Media Representation

Thailand is among destinations of choice for forcefully displaced Rohingya as a point of transition or a place to seek refuge and resettle. Despite being one of the major hosts, many Thai people are still oblivious to the presence of the Rohingya or their plight. They are under the assumption that the media provides distinctive information about the discursive strategies when representing this group. These depictions can elevate their status, dehumanize or even silence them altogether. From studying representation of the Rohingya in Thailand in news reports from various organizations, including White Channel and Amnesty International Thailand. The two most general characteristics in the news reports are a threat to the national security or victims of circumstances, in need of protection. This study argues that representation of the Rohingya on Thai media often favours more with the stance of the government even when they may try to balance the depiction. The media has become global and more accessible via the internet, making it a pervasive promoter of information. It is very important to use various approaches when trying to understand the big picture of Rohingya representation. There are books, websites and YouTube channels created by Rohingya people offering various self-representations.

Media Representation of Rohingya

The Rohingya account for approximately 1% of the Myanmar population and 4% of the population in Rakhine State. However, the Rohingya account for up to 45% of the Muslim population in the country as a whole (Mazhar and Goraya 2016). They have always been recognized as an indigenous muslim ethnic group since Myanmar received independence in 1948. In 1982, the enactment of the Citizenship Act has effectively rendered them 'stateless' (Afzal 2016). The Rohingya lost benefits afforded by citizenship to a sovereign state, even though they had citizenship in the past.

The definition of Rohingya is not straightforward. Leider argues that there is no single description agreed upon the term 'Rohingya'. According to him, their identity is fluid. On a superficial level, the Rohingya identity is uncontroversial, obvious, and easy to defend, but at second glance, it is just as easy to contest because it is diffuse and historically opaque (Leider 2012). There is limited discussion on Rohingya identity and history. The common view that violence in Rakhine is xenophobic, religiously, and ethnically driven has led to an international level of solidarity and sympathy for the Rohingya, 'Shows of solidarity with Muslim misery have had nothing to do with the discourse of the Rohingya about themselves' and a discourse of 'Rohingya identity' has been 'inadvertently acknowledged as true in the sense of political rightfulness' (Ibid.). The definition of Rohingya became one-sided with limited discussion on community formation.

Although, their identity could be contested, their suffering is hard to dispel. The Rohingya are, "one of the most vulnerable populations in the world" (Ullah 2016). He argues that legitimate legislative records show that the Rohingya should be entitled to claim citizenship in Myanmar. However, they have not been granted citizenship in recent years, and are facing restrictions on their freedom of movement, discriminatory access to education, forced labor, and the confiscation of owned property without reasons (Ullah 2016).

5. Correspondents as Key Informants

Here is an overview of key players in news production that discuss the complication of working with the authorities, and describes local producers working on the news on the situation of Rohingya in Thailand .

White Channel

White Channel is the only Thai Muslim organization that have visited Rakhine state, Myanmar to advocate for the Rohingya. It is interesting because it is an all-round organization. They not only work on religion issues but also advocate for human rights issues and run their own media. It plays a significant role as an alternative media to introduce new representation of Rohingya to the Thais.

Amnesty International Thailand

Amnesty International Thailand is an international non-governmental organization (INGO) with the most diverse activities on media platforms such as online articles, short films and documentaries. They worked on a wide variety of issues but they have followed the Rohingya issue very closely in the last two years. They have organized small and big scale seminars conducted in Thai and English, focus groups and film screenings related to the Rohingya issue.

In conclusion, these organizations have been working on Rohingya issues with different tools. Directly or indirectly, they have in a way constructed Rohingya representation for the Thais. An interesting point is that even though all of them are concerned about the plight of the Rohingya, they do not work from the same thinking foundation or political goals. All of these organizations are taken as agencies in this study. They have all made a contribution to the negotiation of Rohingya representation on a national and transnational level.

6. Alternative Media Representation

What is the 'Alternative Media' ?

The definition of 'alternative media' is controversial because of its nature with various modes of contestation of mainstream practices. The highlight of different approaches of alternative media is diverse issues with the emphasis on instances of media operation – creation, production, distribution – as well as on the process of the communication practice itself and its manifestations of empowerment, in symbolic (Couldry 2001), and reflexive terms (Atton 2002).

Alternative media have been evaluated in terms of incorporating decentralised, non-mainstream, non-commercial practices in their operation. These practices are in their production and dissemination process. In this sense, all media discussed in this paper are considered alternative media. In addition, alternative media registers different citizens' groups and grassroots organizations. They engage in the practice of it. There are many alternative media projects around the world addressing participatory community, local or minority in various contexts such as social, cultural, political and historical. Alternative media is a result of a complex interaction of people's attempts to democratize the mediascape and their contextual circumstances. (Meadows 2009)

Portrayal of Rohingya on Alternative Media

Reports on the Rohingya were collected to analyze and summarize the main Rohingya representation. The most common descriptions that the media use is that they are a vulnerable group. The Rohingya are usually described as the group who have to encounter statelessness, impoverishment and inhumane treatment.

Amnesty Thailand	White Channel
Impoverishment	
Statelessness	Inhumane treatment

Table 2: Alternative media representation

Impoverishment

The Rohingya are under adverse living conditions according to many alternative media. Reports were set to show the poor living conditions of Rohingya refugees on White Channel. As in “The Secret of Rohingya’ (See: White Channel on Youtube), they use a narrative style with the quote from a Rohingya making it emotional. From 'Pre-monsoon' rains begin in Bangladesh; highlighting the plight of Rohingya refugees, the weather in Bangladesh was a breakthrough to show the impoverishment of Rohingyas. As another way for media to cover the impoverishment, they reported what happened after the pre-monsoon rains, in the camps of refugees, to show the impoverishment. On the alternative media, issues regarding the Rohingya with little access to shelter, aid, clean drinking water, food and healthcare have been reported repetitively. Meanwhile, short video clips with the impoverishment faced by the Rohingya are also published on social media platforms of the alternative media. As an example, White Channel released a video of an elephant taller than the house in the camps destroying a refugee camp with loud screams from the Rohingya. Many social media users who saw the video expressed sympathy for them.

Pictures on the media normally show the poor living conditions and their sad faces. Amnesty Thailand released many pictures with the intention to show the impoverishment. In the picture shown above, Rohingya families with babies and elderly walked an arduous journey to an IDP camp in Bangladesh. It also shows the conditions of refugee camps in Bangladesh which is crowded, unorganized and unsanitized. Starvation and poverty are also hidden in the meaning. With the theory of visual representation, these visual

elements could influence how audiences form their representation when it evokes the feeling of compassion. The audience may form an impression that these people are weak and in dire need.

Alternative media usually emphasize the fact that the Rohingya are stateless because the Burmese government denied their rights to citizenship and regard them as illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. The statelessness issue can be broken down into many aspects; historical background and the attitude of several governments. White Channel released a report “Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis” with a map of legends for the audience. The mainstream media also highlight this point by use of repetition in the news when reporting on the background of the Rohingya crisis.

Alternative media often attributes the statelessness to the violence from the Burmese government and the religious conflict which can be seen on the report “Rohingyas Muslim refugees have fled Buddhist-majority Myanmar”. Religious issues are a sensitive topic, therefore they only go over the issue partly or even avoid it altogether.

White Channel released a series of documentaries that allow the Rohingya to tell their own narratives and feelings by themselves. It can show political situations and stands of the Rohingya well. Countless of Rohingya are forced to relocate to Bangladesh even though they are not welcome there. There is a video that recorded their voice, gestures and their facial expressions, particularly. Despair, confusion and disappointment can be seen through the camera lens. The information that is sent across is also how the Rohingya used to be proud of their identity, but now they are confused about it. They seem to be questioning where to go and where they should belong. Children are also shown there, but no smile can be found on their faces, only blank stares.

Amnesty International Thailand

Rohingya migrants are one of the groups which Amnesty International has given attention to on its media and public media. Their goal is to create a true understanding about the Rohingya. The focus is on human rights, globalized nations and racial prejudice. They show hardship and the mistreatment of Rohingya in the origin country and Thai government officials. With the ultimate aim for a quality and just society, they work hard to help Rohingya on human rights principles.

“Amnesty tries to understand the root problem why the Rohingya are mistreated by Myanmar. From the appearance, they look very poor. Honestly speaking, racism is present in Thailand. I do not agree with people who think racism does not exist in Thailand. So it is our responsibility to make people

understand that they are not like that. These boat people are in serious trouble. We need to help them in a basic way first because they arrived here. It is basic human rights. We are continuing to make article and news stories.” (Amnesty officer, May 2017)

The Rohingya migrants issue has received great attention from the public. With religious conflict in Rakhine state starting in 2012, a huge number of Rohingya fled by boat. Because the public did not get enough information, Amnesty set an agenda on Rohingya migrants with other alternative media. Articles were published to get a proper understanding of the situation.

An interesting point of articles on the Rohingya produced by Amnesty is that they allowed Rohingya in Bangkok to be involved in the decision process. The Rohingya could brainstorm and discuss the issue with Amnesty staff. To produce an article, they started with a meeting to choose a perspective they want to present and who is the best producer for such articles on Rohingya. However, it was criticised for not reaching a space in the media and being overlooked by professional journalists.

Moreover, Amnesty has been careful to not create pitifulness with images full of impoverishment, discrimination or oppression. Instead they told the truth about what actually happened to their human rights. They interviewed a diverse group with different opinions about the deserved rights for migrants. The goal is to encourage a change in policy, government operations and society in which people can debate on reasonable information and see structural problems in the big picture.

“We always work on the basic foundation - ‘equality for everyone’. We tell a story from a perspective of the Rohingya who are asking for equal rights from the government. The Rohingya are finding an ideal society where they have potential and dream of equal human rights. Citizenship does not matter because all of us have liberty to find new homes with our own free will as the Rohingya have equality and rights to find a better life.” (Amnesty officer, May 2017)

White Channel

White Channel produced a video and released it on YouTube showing how Myanmar denied rights of citizenship and education to the Rohingya making them illegal labourers. As illegal labourers, they wanted to find their way to countries with a Muslim population as a majority like Malaysia and Indonesia, although they did not seem to be welcoming. They also had to tolerate hatred and persecution from Buddhists in Thailand and neighbouring countries.

White Channel show how the Royal Thai Navy treated the Rohingya by pushing them away from their naval base. They also show the treatment from Malaysia. Even though Malaysia has a high demand for labourers, they still let the Rohingya sit on a boat drifting. The Malaysian government was afraid of disapproval from society if they welcomed the Rohingya.

Rohingya was defined as the unwanted people being oppressed by many countries, especially Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, in social, economic and cultural aspects. White Channel presented these three neighbouring countries with a capacity to help but were not willing to. However, online media in three countries produced this topic from a different angle. Therefore, online media by White Channel offered a definition of social practice of each country towards the Rohingya which was filled with discrimination and prejudice. White Channel has shown its power to conclude and define 'Rohingya migrants labors' given by many countries.

"We produce articles about Rohingya from perspectives of Rohingya themselves. We are a Muslim organization so we can easily hire Rohingya. The difficult part is to communicate without bias. We hold many conversations with the Rohingya, reporters and lawyers. Our contents often refer to the government, military, and even mafia group working with migrants labors. We really listen to the Rohingya but we also have to be careful about safety". (Abdul Mahbud, December 2017)

A point that makes White Channel different from other media is that they receive donations to the cause of Rohingya living in Thailand and in Myanmar. It is the only Muslim media organization which is committed to helping the Rohingya crisis with physical objects such as Halal food and religious items for praying.

White Channel use various emotional appeals about the Rohingya Muslim crisis. They claimed that the crisis is a result of an anti-Muslim chauvinism within its Buddhist majority in Myanmar. They emphasize the plight of Rohingya Muslim refugees with the shocking picture of the Rohingya drifting in the Andaman Sea. They convince the audience to help alleviate the crisis. They also respond to the resettlement plan of the Rohingya and call it "cruel". They reject this plan because Rohingya will again be displaced.

7. Media Negotiation on Rohingya

News coverage on Rohingya has been minimal in Thailand compared to those with other social issues. However, attention given to Rohingya has been rising significantly in the last five years. Rohingya issues have become more included in Thailand's public debate, especially on alternative media. There are many influencers of Rohingya representation in Thailand and that includes media, Thai Muslim organizations and INGOs. Many people contribute to this debate on social media websites. The themes of representation on media and social media have been similarly negative on dehumanization, sensationalization and simplification.

Rohingya are often depicted as 'boat people' as if it is a metaphor of force threatening other countries. The Thai government took action to prevent them from entering Thailand. The government used the excuse that they could hurt Thailand's sovereignty. Thai mainstream media often portrayed them as a threat to the security of Thailand. They were afraid that with many Rohingya entering Thailand, crime would rise.

Rohingya do not usually have a space on mass media to express themselves while they get to respond and perform on social media. Representation of Rohingya on social media is usually more diverse because it allows them to connect with various organizations, especially those working on the Rohingya cause. Interacting on social media allows them to negotiate with representation during the latest migration wave in 2017. A number of Rohingya has new opportunities offered to them and some have become reporters for small news agencies. Some of them have been a news source for INGOs.

One of the worst reputations is that they were accused of being 'terrorists' which was invented by the Burmese government and picked up by mainstream media. However, new images of Rohingya have been put forward by Rohingya organizations that work with INGOs with a hope to create a new representation. This is why it has been gradually changing into a positive light.

Many alternative media agencies have been aware of limited representation of Rohingya and have been giving a more positive depiction. Unfortunately, they do not have a huge following like the mainstream media has. Because they do not have a big platform, their audience is limited to those who are aware of the situation.

Self-Representation of Rohingya through Alternative media

From interviewing Rohingya activists, they explained that as common Rohingya people, they are confused about the cause of the Rohingya crisis and why the Myanmar government changed their opinion towards the Rohingya. They could not understand why they have not been accepted by the Myanmar government or why their rights to their own assets were removed when they used to have ID cards as citizens. Even though they believe in different religions, they regard themselves as Burmese because they have lived there for a very long time, “We only want a normal life like everyone else, having an ID card in Myanmar so we can work legally in Thailand.”

They also emphasized how the Myanmar government is the reason for inhumane sufferings and their poverty, “We are very poor. We have never received any donations. Our house in Rakhine was burned down and we had to completely start again in Nonthaburi.” They emotionally shared their opinions that the government should take full responsibility for the current suffering of the Rohingya.

Regarding the participation of Rohingya in the Thai media, even though Rohingya has been a hot topic on mainstream media and alternative media in the last decade, it has mostly been from the outsider perspective.

Thai PBS, a public media in Thailand, was the first in opening space for the Rohingya to tell their own stories by working with their citizen journalist (Wannataworn 2017) and it was the first time that Rohingya had the opportunity to help define and share their thoughts on issues that they felt were important. Unlike other mainstream media which strictly set their own agendas, agenda setting has always been used as a tool.

There are three cases of alternative media that each have their own interesting value. White Channel has Rohingya and Burmese Muslim field reporters working in Thailand. They raised issues on the international relationship among Burma and neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia and Thailand which are places the Rohingya are migrating to. From the interview, it was found that a Rohingya reporter used to work as an activist, which is a major factor that can influence this media to contribute towards a wider representation of Rohingya. White Channel is following and presenting the Rohingya issue persistently. They have better access to important religious actors than mainstream media.

“As a Rohingya, I want to convey issues on my own. I want to communicate what the migrants need here. We want people to understand that we do not want to snatch resources in Thailand or anything like that but as media, we want to present a dynamic identity more than what mainstream media are

doing. At the very least, we are putting out an image that we want. We have this space to negotiate. "

(Identified as Aslam, Rohingya Activists, July 2017)

Meanwhile, Amnesty International Thailand have created some interesting work as well as becoming an INGO. Their short documentary named 'Are they the refugees you think they are?' shows different voices of the Rohingya from various classes. It included day laborers, stateless refugees to business owners. Amnesty did not take a typical news reporting approach, they instead observed while talking about human rights to decide how they could help. Then, they decided to make a short documentary to communicate. The Rohingya were allowed to truly tell their stories, in much more detail than they could when being interviewed for news stories..

There are many more aspects of Rohingya representation to be studied outside of the scope of this research. Research on Rohingya conducted in Thailand is limited considering the humanitarian role of Thailand. Kaur (2007), Bolte and Keong (2014) stated that research and reporting on refugees remain limited with regard to the humanitarian role, which Thailand plans to take for a considerable number of refugees staying in the country. A study of discourse of Rohingya on media could show political and social changes which is useful for people in the field. Even though representations exist in the media, many people who are exposed to it may consider it as real in their minds (Hall 1997). Hopefully, this study could provide information for further studies on how representation is dynamic and that it is necessary to study representation beyond mainstream media. There are currently other significant forms of media such as films, documentary films and news reports on social media.

8. Conclusion

Representation of Rohingya on alternative media were mainly on a limited theme of inhumane treatment, impoverishment, discrimination, and statelessness with a tendency to overstate religion, generalize the Rohingya as a homogeneous group and express sympathy for the Rohingya while avoiding the role of the Myanmar government. They were often portrayed as a vulnerable minority in Myanmar with limited ability to improve their situation. Many videos and photographs of poor living conditions in desperate sorrow were dispersed. This study was set to explain patterns of Rohingya representation on media to show how the media use linguistic choices that could misrepresent situations and promote divisiveness. A majority of

content is one-sided while alternative media add to the representation with some self-constructed images of Rohingya activists. However, interviews with Rohingya show that they were optimistic with a strong hope for the future. They would like to be recognized as legal citizens in their motherland. They also want peace and equality. They hold faith in their future so the media should realize their potential, perseverance and determination.

Representations of Rohingya should not be one-sided and it should reflect their diverse identity and attitude. It is undeniable that media is powerful because it could shape and influence the perceptions of the public. Rohingya representation should not be limited to being a helpless ethnic minority. All media should be encouraged to find a new perspective for the audience.

Alternative media played a significant role in framing a portrayal of the Rohingya Muslim crisis in Thailand. They have adopted a similar stance in representing the crisis, i.e. the pro-Rohingya Muslim minority and anti-Myanmar ruling elite. All of the alternative media included in this study share a belief that the Rohingya Muslim community was rightful in demanding citizenship in Myanmar while the Myanmar ruling elite has been severely criticized for mistreatment, discrimination and depriving the Rohingya of basic rights to live as human beings.

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