# Transnational Networks and Slum Mobilities

**Amanda Williams**
Wyld Collective Ltd
www.wyldco.com
meta@wyldco.com

## INTRODUCTION

As researchers and knowledge workers, we occupy a privileged position with regards to transnational mobility. Many of our narratives of technologically mediated mobility portray mobility as a privilege, and conversely portrays the poor as being pinned in place, or inherently local rather than cosmopolitan or transnationally connected [3]. However, the production of poverty is transnational, as is the fight against it. Here I present an ethnographic study of a slum community center and its uses of digital media to create both local and transnational support networks. After describing my field site, I first describe the setting in which it operates, and then outline its strategies and engagements with technological infrastructures.

The Mercy Centre[1], where I conducted field work, has been operating in one form or another in Bangkok slums for over 35 years, focusing on "simple-but-progressive solutions" implemented in "partnership with the poor". It is located in a neighborhood called "70 Rai" in the district of Khlong Toey in Bangkok, Thailand. Across many of the Centre's core projects — preschools, orphanages, and AIDS hospices — an important cross-cutting concern is to create a stable anchor for people who may have very little control over their mobility: migrant laborers, children shuffled between extended family members, or slaughterhouse workers whose livelihood has literally become a moving target.

The metaphor that best describes the Mercy Centre's strategies of stabilization, is that of *staying afloat*. In order to do so, the Centre draws upon a broad and diverse network of local and transnational support, opportunistically using whatever anchors might be available, and shifting as those anchors may move out from under them.

These practices of staying afloat span many domains – legal, educational, political, medical. Here I focus on one in particular that I was well-positioned to participate in: the use of digital media to rally broad support networks and remain accountable to supporters.

[1] While I use pseudonyms for the staff, I refer to the organization and its founder by their real names. The founder is a published author and well-known public figure in Bangkok. I urge readers to consider donating at www.mercycentre.org.

## FIELD WORK

The Human Development Foundation Mercy Centre was established in 1976, as a school, in Khlong Toey, the largest and arguably most politically organized slum in Bangkok. The Mercy Centre now runs multiple schools, an orphanage, an AIDS hospice, legal aid services, a credit union, and various outreach services in several slums around Bangkok. The headquarters in Khlong Toey remain the organizational hub.

Over the course of seven months from October 2007 to May 2008, I engaged in participant observation at the Mercy Centre's headquarters, visiting the center for about two afternoons per week (more or less, depending on what work might need to be done). For some descriptions of the field site's context and history that I did not directly experience, I rely on the founder's written accounts [7], drawing from his many years living and working in the neighborhood. Participant-observation took place largely with the staff members who served as fundraisers and liaisons between the center's accountants and donors around the world. Questions were asked opportunistically as a part of everyday work. I was gradually introduced to the daily life of the Mercy Centre and the children who lived or attended school there, spending time with them in their dormitories, arts and crafts space, and computer lab.

Additionally, I took charge of managing web content, graphic design and layout, as well as underlying technical details. Eventually, I was tasked with redesigning the whole website, partly in order to implement crucial improvements to the online donation system. Supplemented by once or twice yearly visits of two or three weeks, my involvement in Mercy's digital media production and technical infrastructure continues until the present.

## SITUATING SLUM MOBILITY

In 2008, according to Thailand's Transport Ministry, Thailand received 5.78 million TEU (Twenty-foot Equivalent Units, the standard size of one shipping container) of container shipments from abroad [12]. A long-time node in regional and global trade networks, and one of Thailand's two main ports, Bangkok has the capacity to handle about 1.5 million TEUs. That cargo comes and goes through the port of Khlong Toey, coming in by boat on the Chao Phraya river and leaving in a cloudy jam of trucks (with motorcycles darting around them) on Kasem Rat Road. It is the largest slum in Bangkok, with a

population estimated at 130,000 people — ethnic Thais both Khlong-Toey born and from the provinces, long-term Vietnamese residents, and migrant workers from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar — mostly squatters on Port Authority land.

Mobile labor, we are told, plays a critical role within global networks of production [3]. This is nowhere more evident than in Khlong Toey, where laborers' daily commutes take place against a backdrop of regional and transnational shipping. Here a seemingly minor shift in national policy can profoundly disrupt the rhythms and movements of everyday life.

> It is government policy to move most port activity to the modern container port of Laem Chabang on the eastern seaboard. If this is accomplished, the Klong Toey area, where the port is located, can be redeveloped. Redevelopment of the area will need to take into account that the area contains Bangkok's largest slum (containing approximately 100,000 people)… [6]

In contrast with the sorts of mobility often imagined by technology designers – voluntary, empowered, freeing – personal mobility for the poor slum dwellers is often involuntary, chosen as the least of several evils, or otherwise impelled by forces not controlled by the mover. Far from being "pinned in place", the poor do move frequently, though the experience of slum mobility is often far from freeing or empowered. Movement begets movement: a parent involuntarily moved to jail may then result in their child moved to a relative in the provinces. These many impelled mobilities aggregate into a shifting, unpredictable landscape.

Father Joe Maier, the founder of the Mercy Centre, has lived in the neighborhood since 1971; he had originally been sent to serve a parish of Vietnamese Catholics who worked at the local slaughterhouse. He gives an evocative description of the changing interrelations between legally enforced industry standards, transit infrastructures, mobile labor, and the social fabric of the neighborhood, with a focus for how these broad factors – summarized above by Kaothien and Webster – are experienced on the ground:

> In its early days, almost fifty years ago, the Slaughterhouse [in 70 Rai] actually was a safe and fairly healthy place to live. … Seven years ago, it all began to unravel. Authorities decided that the old method of butchering pigs, the way we had been doing it for generations, was not hygienic, and that it was time to move the Slaughterhouse. No work meant no cash for food. … The Slaughterhouse residents were told they would soon have to leave, that they were being evicted from the homes and shacks that their families had homesteaded for over fifty years — that they had no rights. This in a legal sense is kind of true. The Port Authority of Thailand actually owns the land and most of the slum residents are squatters. … Authorities tore down the pigpens and cemented them over as a massive parking area for the trucks that carry products to and from the adjacent Klong Toey Port. … With the trucks came their drivers seeking drugs, alcohol and temporary female companionship. … The authorities would provide housing in new suburban slums outside of the city, miles and hours away from where they could earn a livelihood.… [7]

Identifying linear causality in this perfect storm of poverty feedback loops is hardly straightforward — the neighborhood was poor and illegal drugs were not unknown before the Port Authority and new rules for pig slaughter changed the landscape. Yet this description supplies us with truths not captured by phrases like "spaces of flows", "decentralization of employment" or "production of space" even as it concretely illustrates the concepts. The removal of the neighborhood's primary employer required "flexible labor" to seek work in factories, hotels and food stalls out of the neighborhood, such that wage-earning parents see less of their children and neighbors see less of each other. Simultaneously, the infrastructures that support the flows of goods into and out of Bangkok (and through Bangkok, all of Thailand) also, in practice, provide sufficiently flexible laborers with opportunities in the informal sectors of drug walking and sex work, both of which tend to spread HIV and thus orphan children early and prune the branches of extended families. Long absences for work, disease, drug addiction and the organized crime that accompanies it, predictably then damage some of the social structures that people might have been able to fall back on in difficult times. (An aunt who is addicted to amphetamines makes a poor babysitter.) With higher rates of organized crime, however, it might be easier to borrow at high compound daily interest rates from lenders who have a capacity for violent reprisals. The cumulative result: a pool of labor, mostly working in the "informal sector" (which by various estimates [1, 11] comprises more than half of Bangkok's economy), which has grown more desperate and harder to organize politically. If, as Castells claims, the global network society requires laborers to be flexible, the decline of the Slaughterhouse section of 70 Rai provides an object lesson in how such a flexible labor force can be produced.

## STABILITY WORK

In an inherently unstable environment like the Khlong Toey slum, an organization must use some of the same fundamental survival tactics as a person or an extended family: cultivating diverse allies and means of supporting themselves in case any one resource fails.

An analogy to slum house-building technique may be illustrative here. Slum housing, particularly in a city like Bangkok that is full of canals, is often built on shifty swampland. If one sinks stilts into the ground to construct the elevated platform house typical of Southeast Asia, the foundation will eventually sink unevenly into the mud, and the previously sound house becomes increasingly crooked

and ramshackle. The best practical solution is to use old beer bottles. Tied together side to side into a platform, with the bottoms facing up and open mouths facing down, they trap air inside them and float level in the mud; the floor stays flat and is resilient to shifting water levels. With a few good anchor points, a stable house can thus be built.

The most effective way to achieve stability in an environment of pervasive (and often involuntary) mobility is not to lay a solid foundation that will provide permanent support, but to use locally available resources to *stay afloat*, to choose good anchors, and to constantly maintain them, untying and retying as necessary.

### Local Network Support

The Mercy Centre operates on the notion that social connection with the neighborhood, face to face and over time, is necessary to get anything accomplished. In order to be effective, they must be a trusted entity. This is part of the reason that the Mercy Centre runs a selectively open organization, hires staff from the neighborhood, and takes care to remain transparent to the community over time. It is in this manner that a parent can trust the Centre to care for their child if they themselves have a drug problem, that a neighbor or teacher ay decide to consult them if they suspect a child is in danger, or that a person with AIDS can accept help from them without fearing social repercussions.

Practices of photo capture reinforce Mercy's reputation as trustworthy. Their most prolific volunteer photographer, "Jung", has taken many thousands of photos at the centre and around the neighborhood over the course of several years. He has become a familiar face in the neighborhood, and because he has consistently given photos back to the people he photographs, he established himself over time as a photographer who could portray slum residents as they would wish to be shown: dignified and part of a living neighborhood. He has been allowed access to settings where photographers are typically prohibited – particularly treatment of HIV/AIDS patients either in the Mercy Centre's hospice or their own homes. So long as AIDS remains a stigmatized disease, any breach of trust in this area could cause enormous damage to Mercy's collaborative treatment of patients and their families. Mercy's commitment to represent their neighbors as they would want to be portrayed is critical to their local effectiveness.

Being embedded in local networks of exchange and sociality is what allows the Mercy Centre to know which judges can be trusted, which good (or bad) parents have worsened (or improved), or which police officers will let an illegally located kindergarten keep running because they have a niece attending. A good ear for neighborhood gossip and a local reputation for discretion can help them place resources and take action where they will be most effective.

### Building a Transnational Network

In order to be able to intervene with authorities, to work with police on people's behalf in crime investigations, or to take care of someone's paperwork so they can get medication, a passport, or go to school, the Mercy Centre must have significant resources. Recognition from powerful people and, most of all, money are crucial elements contributing to the organization's influence.

International fundraising, as it happens, is where the money is. The Mercy Centre's website, notably, is primarily in English rather than Thai, though it is now moving towards producing bilingual content. While much of the administrative staff speak English (well) as a second language, and many of the teachers and house-moms speak only a little, the public relations staff that are primarily responsible for fundraising events, web content, and donor outreach are native English speakers. Of the 73 donations submitted on their website from January through October 2009, 34 were from the United States, 19 from Europe, two from Australia and three from Canada. Of the 11 donations from within Thailand, eight came from donors with clearly Western names. To some degree, the fact that the website is in English, rather than Thai or Spanish, will influence who reads it and who donates; but at the same time, for a charity that depends on donations, the incentive to cater to the most promising groups of potential donors is strong. English (as a second language, at least) can reach a large international audience. In reaching that audience, the purpose of the website and its photo galleries is not just to induce donors to throw money at a charity, but to create a connection that feels intimate despite its distance. Though perhaps not an equal exchange, donors receive news, children's art, regularly updated photo albums, and other such emotionally laden content in exchange for their donation.

The donations submitted on the website are by no means the Mercy Centre's only source of income (large corporate and philanthropic donations are crucial), but the number of relatively small donations from many individuals attests to the wide network of support that the Mercy Centre enjoys.

### Exposing Infrastructure

Though it has been stated before by respected academics, any slum dweller could tell us that infrastructure is not neutral; while it connects certain locations to one another quite smoothly, it in turn cuts off other people and locations [4]. For example, Khlong Toey is not wired for the 16mbps Internet access plans available in more affluent parts of Bangkok, though the Mercy Centre would subscribe to such a plan if it were available.

The technologies and underlying infrastructures that we create will be encountered differently by people in different social, economic and cultural positions. As noted by Star [10], "Struggles with infrastructure are built into the very fabric of technical work". Inasmuch as my fieldwork at the Mercy Centre included technical elements, it exposed infrastructural struggles inherent in their particular position, in ways that observation, interviewing or non-technical participation might not have. Improving distribution of informative digital media to donors (and improving

donation rates) via the Mercy Centre's website was one area that foregrounded infrastructure and its struggles.

The Mercy Centre owns several domains, which have been set up by an amalgam of local and international volunteers and donors (the broad and diverse network that helps them stay afloat), and are hosted by various different companies in different locations. Distance mattered differently in these infrastructural encounters. For some time, my colleague Dtik wanted the new web site hosted locally. She wanted the option of making a phone call or stopping by someone's office, equating "local" with "available". However, the person on whom she'd relied on for website and mail server maintenance was frequently unavailable and seemed to be becoming more so. As it became clear that the advantage of the local solution was rapidly waning, the website was ultimately hosted by an American web host with near 100% uptime and customer service that was responsive by email.

At the same time, while Paypal's money transfer service ostensibly works anywhere in the world, if one is located in Thailand, an international phone call is necessary to contact customer support. (Fortunately, the call goes to Singapore, so while there may be a hefty phone charge and language barrier, the hours of operation do coincide with local working hours.) When I returned to North America, I continued doing design and development work for the Mercy Centre, which made it considerably easier for me converse with Paypal to confirm Mercy's status as a charity. While my physical remove from the field site presented some well-known inconveniences of distance, my location in North America provided advantages in dealing with technological infrastructures that, despite global reach, are still often centered there.

## DISCUSSION: TRANSNATIONAL METHODS

### Multi-sited Ethnography

For a research project around mobility, multi-sited ethnography would appear on face to be a relevant method. Anthropologist George Marcus [8] describes organizing principles for multiple sites, such as *follow the people*, or *follow the thing*. I would propose that in studying mobile technologies and communication technologies, it would be reasonable not only to *follow the device* but also to *follow the bits*, *follow the emails*, or *follow the youtube videos* as well.

Going beyond the mobile fieldwork techniques suggested in Marcus's description of multi-sited ethnography, however, we can see that it is an important theoretical framework requiring certain commitments on the part of the ethnographer. Crucially, it entails more than simply visiting multiple sites. Where modern ethnographies are often concerned with mapping the relationship between local experience and global structures, multi-sited ethnography as a theoretical framework acknowledges that ethnographic informants already consider their relationship to the global, and that consideration is itself an important form of local knowledge:

> The distinction between lifeworlds of subjects and the [global] system does not hold, and the point of ethnography within the purview of its always local, close-up perspective is to discover new paths of connection and association by which traditional ethnographic concerns with agency, symbols, and everyday practices can continue to be expressed on a differently configured spatial canvas. (ibid.)

The goal of the ethnographic work presented here is not just to present the ways in which participants fit into global systems of mobility and technology, but to uncover *how they see themselves fitting into it* and how they act upon that knowledge.

### Virtual Ethnography

As mediated communications become a larger component in the production of culture, we increasingly encounter the premise that "the organization of social relations is not necessarily linked to local context in a straightforward way" [5]. This premise underlies the project of *virtual ethnography*, a methodology that "involves intensive engagement with mediated interaction" (ibid), typically involving the Internet.

Of course, "the Internet" is not, itself, a field site. It is an inchoate patchwork of overlapping networks, standards, texts and practices; its physical existence is scattered amongst cables and server-farms in various physical locations around the world, and diverse groups of people use it for diverse purposes. For many virtual ethnographies the field site must emerge from the field work [2], its boundaries constructed in the process of engaging with some cultural practice which is the focus of the study.

It is not necessarily productive here to view the boundary between "real" and "virtual" as a natural border of the field site of a virtual ethnography [9]. A more useful characterization of virtual ethnography might assert that it is very much about representation — unavoidable when one is dealing with technologies of representation. Crucially, it calls into question "pure" practice, and the ethnographer's status as the only one doing interpretation. The ethnographer's "raw data" gleaned from participant-observation is always already a little bit cooked. With technologies of representation, there is no getting around the fact that representation is part of practice. Whether socializing, performance, raising money, participating in politics, or generally getting things done, representation is something that participants are always doing. This isn't necessarily unique to the Internet — the practice of ethnographic interviewing and other forms of elicitation can also highlight these issues — but it is inescapable on the internet.

Because of my role working with the Mercy Centre on designing their self-representations to donors, as well as redesigning and supporting their web site from locations on two different continents, a significant portion of my ethnographic engagement with them was virtual. The

crafting of a sort of online extension connecting myself and others (not only donors but former volunteers) to the everyday happening of the centre highlights the idea that places we think to be physical or geographical entities — home, or nation — are now being produced, in part, in global Internet publics.

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