

# What's the frequency, general?

Community radio DJs across Thailand are struggling to come to terms not only with military control but whether they can survive under the new regime *By Jitsiree Thongnoi*

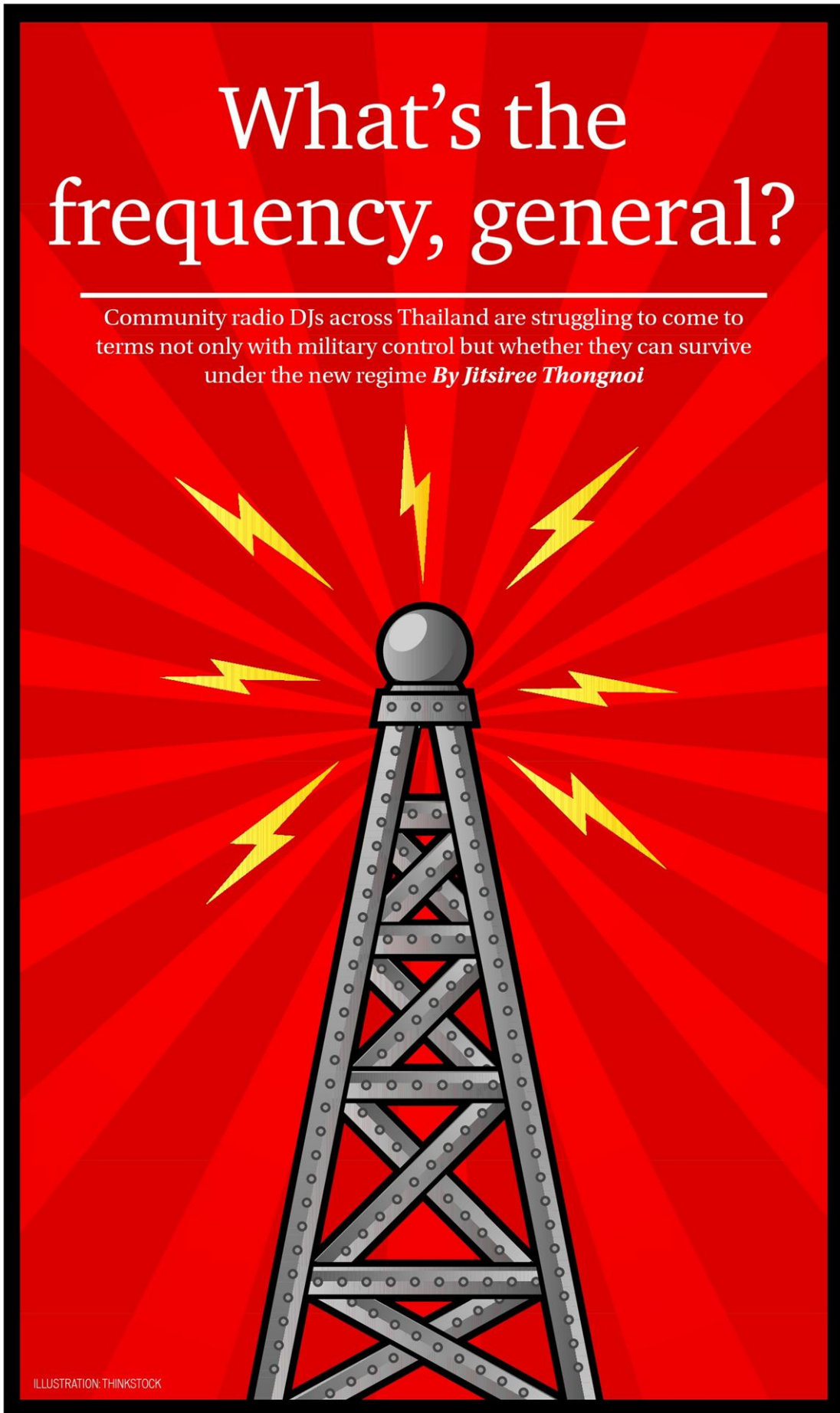


ILLUSTRATION: THINKSTOCK

**T**he northern province of Chiang Rai has 18 districts, and Jeeranant "DJ Boom" Jantawong has fans in every one. "Chiang Rai is a red province, you know," the host and manager of the province's Grass Roots Radio Station for Democracy said by way of explanation. But since the coup, it has been more difficult for her to reach them.

After the military takeover, the grass roots sector of the media was among the hardest hit. Following a blanket order to shut down television and radio stations across the country on May 22, a large number of community radio stations simply disappeared from the airwaves.

DJ Boom has been back on air for three months, but under strict conditions. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between her station and the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission before she could resume operations.

The agreement was signed at the Surasak Montri army camp in Lampang province, and the stipulations, which have not been made public, are believed to set out strict guidelines for content and a station's technical capabilities. Despite the secrecy, the agreements are being carefully followed by those radio stations which have resumed broadcasting.

NBTC regulations specify community radio stations must have power of no more than 500 watts, have a broadcast radius of less than 20km and an antenna of no more than 60m. The NBTC says several thousand stations have signed the agreements.

Since signing the MoU, DJ Boom's station has not been able to reach out to all of Chiang Rai's districts as it did before.

DJ Boom's role is identical to other community radio DJs in the red-shirt stronghold of the North and the Northeast. They act not only as DJs but community leaders and activists.

The ability to reach out to the people through the use of community radio, a "democratic" tool built on volunteers, is their weapon.

In the past decade, there have been claims that the service has been abused by politics and money. This is the opposite of how it should be: of the community, by the community and for the community.

But it is an undeniable force in instigating community dialogue about politics and money, as well as other matters such as the environment, prostitution, local merit-making or even promoting daily market offers.

Academics claim politics gives community radio a bad name when it should instead be used to benefit the population as a whole. There are also many radio operators who spend the bulk of their air time talking about their businesses.

Under military rule, some stations have chosen to turn away from broadcasting, at least for now. Even though their content is non-political, they believe that community radio should not be regulated from the top as it is now.

But for DJ Boom, financial reasons have compelled her to resume broadcasting, and that

means complying with the MoU. The name of her station has also changed. "Leave the world 'democracy' at the end out," she said.

### MAKING COMPROMISES

On Nov 24, Chiang Mai's Kavila Army Camp opened its doors to more than 100 radio DJs from the northern provinces who were again warned about an army rule against instigating conflict through their radio outlet.

The meeting was held in the wake of open resistance in Khon Kaen a week earlier when five university students upstaged Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's first visit to the province with three-fingered salutes and an anti-junta message on their T-shirts.

During the meeting, DJs were asked not to discuss the three-fingered salute from the Hollywood blockbuster *The Hunger Games*.

DJ Boom was there and told *Spectrum* that the military does not interfere with her radio's operation as long as it follows the rules. "There is one community radio station in a nearby province that does not comply with the MoU and that makes the military stricter on the rest of us," she said.

"For example, I cannot allow the audience to phone in like before because I have no idea what they are going to say on air.

"I can invite guests to talk on the programme as long as they are not politicians."

DJ Boom started the station in 2009. She has a background working for an NGO on the rights of hill tribes and ethnic minorities, and she has put her networking from that time to good use as a red-shirt activist.

Employing her station as a way of reaching out to villagers across the province, DJ Boom has gained recognition for lending strong support to the Yingluck-Thaksin political camp and the Pheu Thai Party. On numerous occasions, she has led groups of red shirts at rallies and has confronted opponents, including Democrat MPs, when they visited Chiang Rai.

Her station is linked with Gen Chaiyasit Shinawatra, a former army chief and cousin of fugitive former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. One of the station's main projects is providing free fertiliser, and giveaways of money and other items. The biggest prize, supported by Gen Chaiyasit, is a house and land package for farmers who participate in a quiz game.

This popular game is enjoyed by both sides of the political divide and has not been banned. "As long as we are good kids, I hope the army won't interfere," DJ Boom said.

### LET'S GET LEGIT

Not all community radio stations enjoy the financial backing DJ Boom does, and many have only become legal very recently.

Nathong Punnavat, 54, is a Chiang Mai native who has been a radio DJ since 1997. The recent curbs on community radio stations nationwide have forced her to seek an NBTC contract, for fear of being driven out of business.

She is in the process of requesting a business-



**AN UNDERSTANDING:** Jeeranant 'DJ Boom' Jantawong signed an agreement to resume broadcasting in Chiang Rai province.



**SPREADING THE WORD:** Nathong Punnavat broadcasts through modest devices in her condominium in downtown Chiang Mai.



**SWITCHED OFF:** Pornpipat Wat-aksorn has refused to sign up to the military's new rules and return to the air.

type contract in order to air commercials, which would mean more revenue for her. Business and public stations can air commercials, while community radio cannot. The mention of products is also barred.

At the moment, Nathong plays several commercials, including one for a local herbal drug that airs 13 times a day. Kam Thieng market, one of the biggest in Chiang Mai province, has a spot on her station for a couple of days in November to promote its food fair. These earn her only a couple of thousand baht, but that is fine with her.

While waiting for her contract to be processed, Nathong is keeping herself and her station busy. She plans to expand and make her

station appealing to rural listeners, and to do so she wants to recruit DJs who speak local dialects.

"I have already met people who can host programmes in Isan, Ngong and Tai Yai dialects. I will host a show in the Lanna [Northern] dialect myself. This is particularly important for older members of the audience since the younger generation no longer speaks the dialects."

Her audience includes *sam lor* drivers and shopkeepers as well as food sellers. The kind of DJ she is looking for should be "someone who is a fighter" like her and be able to communicate their hard-knock experience with the audience.

Community radio DJs do not need to pass the news anchor course, organised by the Department of Public Relations, the main aim of which is to standardise the use of the Thai language and manners on national media. This difference is appreciated by Verapong Ponnigongit, a lecturer on Communications Arts at Suranari Technology College, who said Thai people have the right to consume media in their local dialects.

"Community radio is meant to represent the diversity of Thailand's local communities," he said.

"The station should be a platform for communication among the community. By having standardised DJs, there will be no difference from the state media's form of one-sided communication."

**WAIT IT OUT**

On Nov 29, in the southern province of Prachuap Khiri Khan, the military also held a meeting of community radio DJs in the area to "adjust their understanding" of certain rules and regulation.

Pornpipat Wat-aksorn, a community radio operator and DJ from Bo Nok district, felt there would be no point joining the meeting as he already had some expectation of what it would be like.

"They want to ask for a meeting, hoping the media can help reduce political conflicts. They [the military] just shut the DJs up but can they shut their minds and thoughts, too?"

Pornpipat has operated the Bo Nok community radio station since 2004, the year his brother, environmental activist Charoen Wat-aksorn, was assassinated.

Pornpipat has remained true to the station's objective in the decade since. With no ads and all the DJs being volunteers, the Bo Nok community radio station has been able to push its agenda of protecting the local environment and promoting organic farming, issues that the slain activist was known for along with his stance against a planned coal-fired power plant.

But the Bo Nok station has not resumed operating since the coup. Pornpipat said he has no plans to return any time soon, because it would



**SHOWING THEIR COLOURS:** Left, DJ Boom and red-shirt supporters travelled to meet Thaksin Shinawatra during a visit to Myanmar in late 2012.

**REACHING THE COMMUNITY:** Below, a truck promoting Gen Chaiyasit Shinawatra's anti-poverty project, which has ties to the Grass Roots Radio Station for Democracy.



**BROADCASTING BASICS:** Community radio stations cost between 60,000 and 150,000 baht to set up.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF NATIONAL FEDERATION OF COMMUNITY RADIO

mean signing an MoU with the military. He said that under such conditions, the concept of his station would be exploited.

"Bo Nok community radio station is a continuation of Charoen's activism," he said.

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As long as we are good kids, I hope the army won't interfere

**DJ BOOM  
CHIANG RAI  
BROADCASTER**

"Before 2002, Charoen travelled throughout the province and distributed countless pamphlets to let the public know the environmental damage the power plant will bring to our home town. Since 2002, the radio station replaced those activities, allowing us to reach the public more quickly and give the people information the state media did not air."

The financial burden of the Bo Nok station is little more than the 2,000-3,000 baht monthly electricity bill. It receives donations from the community, and judging from the number of callers per day — as few as one and as many as 200 — has an average fan base for a station of its kind.

The biggest costs for community radio stations usually come when they are being established. A transmitter, antenna, mixer, microphones and computers cost between 60,000 and 150,000 baht, Pornpipat said.

"Our station's rule is there are no commercials since the community supports us through donations. Politics has changed the image of community radio, but in order to bring change to the country the media must act as a tool to educate the people on politics. It has to be able to act and speak freely, not under certain conditions.

"I spoke to many of the red-shirt community radio DJs and learned they still have not changed their political preferences. Neither have those on the other side. Harmony is achieved from the ground up, so the military needs to listen, but first let us speak." ■