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Author

Li, Zizi

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Micro Media Industries: Hmong American Media Innovation in the Diaspora

by **Lori Kido Lopez.**

Rutgers University Press.

2021. 184 pages.

\$120 hardcover; \$29.95 paper; also available in e-book.

Lori Kido Lopez's second book, *Micro Media Industries: Hmong American Media Innovation in the Diaspora*, draws on her multi-year fieldwork from 2012 to 2018 with Hmong American communities in Wisconsin (Appleton, Green Bay, and Milwaukee), California (Fresno), and Minnesota (Minneapolis–St. Paul) to provide an account of Hmong media industries. The Hmong diaspora is constituted in relation to a non-sovereign homeland that is not bounded by a specific nation-state, for Hmong remain an ethnic minority in countries of origin such as Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and China.¹ Hmong Americans face vastly different challenges than diasporic populations originating from and identifying with a nation-state with a strong popular media presence. Lacking a home country of their own limits the scale, power, and available resources of Hmong media. Despite all these difficulties, Hmong Americans have found ways to build and maintain a vibrant media landscape composed almost exclusively of micro media industries and small-scale legacy and new media productions ranging from newspapers to podcasts, from radio shows to social media influencing.

1 Kou Yang, "Hmong Diaspora of the Post-War Period," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 12, no. 3. (2003): 271–300; and Sangmi Lee, "Between the Diaspora and the Nation-State: Transnational Continuity and Fragmentation among Hmong in Laos and the United States" (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2015).

Contra the mainstream growth mindset that devalues media limited in size, scale, and budget, this book positions micro media industries as innovative models of media production worthy of close examination. Lopez uses Hmong American media as a specific and complex case study with which to propose a theorization of micro media industries. Her approach to micro media industries considers its possibilities for visibility and community empowerment via self-representation alongside its limitations, such as the high concentration of media power in select few entrepreneur-owners, lack of infrastructural autonomy, and a high degree of burnout and creator precarity. In contouring Hmong micro media industries, the book challenges the binary of mainstream conglomerate media and alternative grassroots media to examine “media projects that occupy a shifting ground in between” for a more expansive framework around media industries.² In studying Hmong American journalistic media across print, radio, and digital platforms, Lopez shows how many of these small-scale entrepreneurial media entities are modeled after and perpetuate the aesthetics and operation of established media. Lopez also documents how the affordance of digital media has enabled Hmong Americans to produce a wide array of traditional media and develop hybrid media platforms, which further blurs the boundary between legacy media and digital media.

Micro Media Industries beautifully weaves together a comprehensive examination of small-scaled media industries and snapshots of Hmong American media reception. The focus on Hmong American media ecology complicates our understanding of micro media vis-à-vis ethnic and diasporic media. The book is a welcomed challenge to film and media studies’ tendencies of (1) centering East Asian diasporic communities in conversations around Asian American media and (2) privileging media that serve the dominant ethnic group of any given sovereign state, thereby eliding differences and heterogeneity within diasporic media. The book captures Hmong American mediascape as a kind of minor media, to follow Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.³ Hmong Americans are a minority within minority (e.g., Asian Americans), just as the Hmong population are a minority in Southeast Asia and China. Lopez correspondingly maps out the Hmong American media ecology as a network of micro-sized minoritized cultural productions that commit to the building of local, regional, and transnational Hmong identities, which in turn showcases “the breadth and depth of Hmong American experiences.”⁴

Lopez works within a production studies methodology, analyzing data generated from interactions with Hmong American communities, media production site visits, and interviews with Hmong media producers. *Micro Media Industries* documents a history of Hmong American media makers that spans from the early 1980s Hmong radio programs through local community radio

2 Lori Kido Lopez, *Micro Media Industries: Hmong American Media Innovation in the Diaspora* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 7.

3 Here, “minor” media refers not simply to media of minorities and minor nations but also media that mobilizes deterritorialized languages, connects the individual to the political, and produces collective voices. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

4 Lopez, *Micro Media Industries*, 18.

stations to the 2010s hybrid or all-digital multimedia outlets, shedding light on Hmong American media entrepreneurship while also pointing out how micro media production cultures perpetuate (chapter 3) or challenge (chapters 4 and 5) social hierarchies. While micro media industries “push back against forces such as commercialization or conglomeration,” there are many instances wherein “the structures of micro media industries are actually prohibitive to new voices, shoring up already existing power dynamics within the community that they serve.”⁵ The consumption of Hmong American media is another key area of investigation. Lopez conducted interviews with everyday Hmong American consumers and audiences and met weekly with a group of bilingual Hmong American research assistants to analyze various Hmong media texts. Lopez explains the latter process in her introductory chapter, yet it was difficult for me as a reader to discern how the research assistants’ work contributed to specific textual analyses. That matters, because Lopez is a tenured, non-Hmong professor, whereas her assistants are Hmong graduate and undergraduate students.

Micro Media Industries starts with two chapters on print and televisual news. Chapter 2, “Without a Newsroom: Journalism and the Micro Media Empire,” focuses on the operation of traditional forms of print media within the Hmong American media ecology. Hmong American newspapers are run by extremely small labor forces, usually just the owner and a couple of their family members or friends. Small journalism is not unique to Hmong American media, but Lopez’s industrial analysis of Hmong American newspapers, such as *Hmong Today* and the *Hmong Tribune*, emphasizes the importance of seeing Hmong media owners as entrepreneurs, as more than journalists. Lopez argues that these outlets’ “survival and resilience amid immense resource scarcity has been predicated on a number of different innovations” in business management, content production, and distribution.⁶ The turn to multi-skilled, multimedia operations by these micro media outlets are not primarily motivated by increasing Hmong community participation; rather, they “retain a commercial sensibility and hierarchical relationship to audience members, even amid their efforts to support their communities.”⁷

Chapter 3, “TV without Television: YouTube and Digital Video,” further addresses the challenges facing and innovations of Hmong news channels on YouTube, some of which started off as traditional television and radio stations, while others are digital natives modeled after TV news aesthetics. Lopez focuses on “the digital textuality of these programs [such as Suab Hmong News and 3HMONGTV] and the impact of digital affordances on micro media users,” which allows for the rare existence of a digital archive for Hmong micro media content.⁸ Toward the end of the chapter, Lopez critically analyzes a controversial incident concerning a misogynist video on Hmong TV 24 Hours in July 2015 titled “Hmong TV #1 *Poj Niam Tsis Zoo* (Bad Women)” and the community’s responses. This case study demonstrates the

5 Lopez, 10.

6 Lopez, 26.

7 Lopez, 43.

8 Lopez, 45.

disproportionate amount of power that a single micro media platform wields and how Hmong American community members perceive that power, as Hmong TV 24 Hours is popularly assumed as a community TV station even though it is a privately and personally owned digital outlet. It also lays out the complexity of Hmong American news as a male-dominated industry that perpetuates existing gender hierarchy. With this, *Micro Media Industries* pivots to study the inner workings and complications of Hmong American micro media entities, giving special attention to the role of gender and sexuality.

Lopez's next two chapters focus on audio media; my favorite discovery within them was the teleconference radio program discussed in chapter 4. Such programs ingeniously facilitate low-cost yet low-tech and somewhat anonymous interactions across the global Hmong diaspora using free conference call platforms and affordable cellphone plans with unlimited calling. Hmong teleconference radio programs are popular yet controversial within the community, and Lopez attributes that positioning to the gendering of these largely women-owned, -operated, and -hosted programs, which also attract mostly female participants and "play a transformative role in [their] lives, opening up communication networks for validation and support during difficult times."⁹ While they provide unprecedented space for active audience participation, literacy education, and conversations around taboo topics such as sex, domestic abuse, and child brides, these female-centered programs are often belittled by traditional Hmong American media entrepreneurs as overly emotional and intellectually lacking. In chapter 5, "Queer Sounds: Podcasting and Audio Archives," Lopez further examines women-led Hmong media outlets through discussions of the queer Hmong American radio show *Nplooj* (leaves), podcast *Hoochim* (a combination of the Hmong word *hwm chim*, which usually refers to male prestige or authority, and the English word *hoochie*, an offensive word used to describe provocative women), and radio series *Poj Laib* (Bad Hmong girl). If the teleconference radio programs are Hmong-language spaces for predominantly first-generation global Hmong diaspora, the queer programs examined cater predominantly to English-speaking Hmong American youths and younger adults to challenge the heteronormativity and patriarchy of mainstream Hmong media and community discourse. These two chapters demonstrate how micro media can be mobilized for alternative and even resistant uses even if it is not inherently so.

While much of the book focuses on news and audio content, chapter 6, "Alternative Aspirational Labor: Influencers and Social Media Producers," attends to Hmong American social media micro-influencers such as Phillippe Thao and Naomi Kong in the construction and branding of their selves. This chapter brings Hmong American creators into the existing scholarly conversation around influencer culture, highlighting how monetization and capitalist growth are not necessarily the goal for many social media producers. Importantly, Hmong American creator culture offers further insights into how platform capitalism and the gig economy are shaping the possibilities and limitations of individualized micro media making. To that end, *Micro Media Industries* concludes by summarizing some directions to apply the

9 Lopez, 85.

notion of micro media industries outside of the context of Hmong American media ecology.

An important book, *Micro Media Industries* contributes to a new wave of scholarship in media and culture studies that is rethinking possibilities and categorizations of media industries. It is a must-read for scholars interested in media labor, notions of authorship, platform and infrastructure, diasporic media, and ethnic studies. The book's relevancy to media convergence and entrepreneurship along with its rather accessible language suggest that it would also appeal to a popular audience outside academia interested in contemporary media culture.

Zizi Li is a PhD candidate in Film, Television, and Digital Media at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her work on influencer labor and digital capitalism addresses how class, gender, and race figure into nested extractions and (im)materialities.