Unsettled Post-Revolutionaries in the Online Public Sphere

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The internet is opening up new spaces for communication between young post-revolutionary urbanites in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and the exiled communities of the diaspora in the United States and elsewhere. While the Lao Government values the internet for its ability to harness the economic potential of these communities, it also exposes young elites in the capital, Vientiane, to critical debates about what a future Laos 'should' be. Such debates are almost non-existent in the tightly controlled authoritarian public sphere within Laos. This article analyses the participation of post-revolutionaries in debates in the online public sphere and argues that it is informed by an ethics of reconciliation and responsibility lacking in the anti-communist politics of exile inspired by the West. The article is the product of extensive fieldwork in Laos and ongoing participation in online communities, discussion forums and messaging networks.

Keywords: Laos, internet, diaspora, politics, cosmopolitanism, space, place, networking, public debate, self-censorship.

Introduction: Into Cyberspace

"One day, we'll make it!", exclaims the website of a Lao students association in Australia below a picture of a cosmonaut with a Lao flag on his shoulder.[1] Laos has not made it into space, but it is making its very own cyberspace. Students abroad have opened a series of websites in Australia, East Asia, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere promoting Laos in new worldly ways. They stand alongside older, more politically charged websites in the diaspora and a growing number of official Lao Government websites. Online debates over how the government should "open the door" to the

world and exiled communities abroad typically separate *lao nai*,[2] "Lao (living) inside" Laos and *lao nok*, "Lao (living) outside", a virtual extension of the political divisions of the recent past, which saw a Westernized urban elite flee abroad after the Communist revolution in 1975. Expressions such as "One day, we'll make it", however, reflect a contemporary, third stream of ideas about Laos that differs from the division between the bitter anti-communist rhetoric of the old exiled elite and the revolutionary propaganda of the new regime. In this new stream, people share dreams of a worldly Laos not confined to the narrow field of ideas that have come to define the revolutionary state.

The Lao Government has retained the Marxist-Leninist ideology that legitimated its seizure of power in 1975 whilst striving to integrate itself into the global market economy. Evans (1998, p. 1) describes Laos as economically and socially capitalist but with "political continuities remaining between the revolutionary and 'post-socialist' phases". By undertaking an analysis of expressions of "Lao-ness" on the internet, this article posits the possibility of a new political imagination emerging among young urbanites. The term "post-revolutionary" encapsulates this imagination by referring to moves away from the period of "revolutionary" struggle that led to regime change and continued in attempts to achieve social and cultural change throughout the 1980s.[3] I use it to refer to the complex cultural and social environment that has emerged since the decline of the Soviet world in the late 1980s and come to fruition in the new millennium in which urbanites participate in a new internationalism combining a desire for access to global capitalism with a tolerance of authoritarian rule. The post-revolutionary generation is that group of Lao that has grown up participating in the current transition to capitalism. This transition has resulted in the emergence of new public spaces that potentially overcome the divisions between the authoritarian Lao state and the democratic opposition outside of Laos.

Research for this article was undertaken from 2004 to 2006 and treated the internet as a field site for participant observation with a

dynamic relationship to the offline social world. Hage (2005, p. 467) argues that multi-sited ethnography of diaspora networks is practically implausible and that instead we should take up the notion of a single "geographically non-contiguous" field site. The internet connects geographically diverse offline sites making it perhaps the only space where it is truly possible to conduct simultaneous multi-sited ethnography. This article combines interviews and observation undertaken in the offline world of the internet shop, the classroom and other places with ethnographic observations of online spaces in order to understand how the internet is socially constructed. The approximately fifty internet shops in downtown Vientiane are popular sites for online connectivity, but online sociality itself transcends these offline places, which is precisely why internet users seek to connect. The public sphere of internet participation in Laos is mediated by the offline world, but is ultimately constituted by the techno-culture of the computer interface. It is the online public sphere that is the subject of this article.

Space and Place

In her analysis of exiled families in France, Si-Ambhaivan (1999, p. 122) argues that for the first time in Lao history, one sees the emergence of a transnational elite operating in an extensible social space without a territorial anchorage. While the older generation of exiles remains torn between France, the United States or Australia and a country they were forced to abandon, it is the young generation who are rebuilding links with Laos. The experience of exile dictates that they can return to (re)discover Laos because it has become a place virtually unknown to them. Conventional discussions of transnational de-anchoring assume that it originates "over there" among the exiled communities. This article argues that it is also being participated in by young elites whose lives are situated inside Laos and whose statements are measured by an awareness of post-revolutionary politics. A key arena for this re-working of ideas about Laos is the internet.

The internet is a contemporary techno-cultural conduit for new expressions of spatial belonging. The Lao Government may view its use as a good way to reconnect overseas communities who were exiled after the revolution but now have economic capital earned in the West to re-invest in their homeland (Abbott 2004*a*, p. 8, 2004*b*, p. 99). The internet's ability to overcome the geographical constraints of place facilitates the desire among exiled Lao to maintain news and communications links to their homeland. But it is also the first media to bring the exiled community into direct contact with Lao in Laos on any recognizable scale. Bakker (1999, p. 3) argues that the internet provides the means for the creation of virtual communities constituted by people who share common ideas or beliefs but without a state and without soil. Unified common ideals, however, are complicated by the rifts and struggles occurring among Lao online fueled by differing dreams of a homeland state and soil. The online public sphere provides an arena for young Lao from inside the country whose attachment to place has been made problematic by flexible work, education or lifestyles to come together and debate ideas about the future of Laos.

Ethnographic accounts show how the radical freedom to construct online identities and relationships is reigned in by existing offline values and ideals that serve to construct a new moral place with traces of the old (Dibbel 2001). Yet they also point out its potential to transcend offline relationships and put into practice imagined ones. Miller and Slater (2000) show how the internet in Trinidad is not only a vehicle for nationalism but a forum for "Trinis" to get together and debate and enact new forms of "Trininess". Chapman (2004) shows how the internet facilitates expressions of "Lao-ness" among diasporic youth through the circulation of Lao music. For those without an offline state, such as the ethnic Hmong, internet use as consumption of images and representations (Tapp 2000, p. 73) is an attempt to colonize a new place. This article argues that the internet also forms a space for communication between the diaspora in the West and a young generation in Laos. This communication involves new expressions among post-revolutionary youth about what

Laos "should" be in the future. Such expressions are limited by a digital divide in which the poor majority remains disconnected and overshadowed by attempts from the government to survey and control online activities. Moreover, fears of surveillance and an authoritarian offline public culture imbue *lao nai*'s online expressions with a reticence to engage in the same vitriolic political critiques that their exiled kin do.

Post-revolutionary urban elites cultivate online networks and profiles that serve as public expressions of worldly exploration. These form the basis for a re-evaluation of ideals for a future Laos. This re-evaluation occurs in an environment of rumour and propaganda, reflecting attitudes in Laos and the diaspora, toward public expression and social control. Online interaction is shaped by an underlying assumption that social connections defined by a combination of wealth, education, and social and geographical mobility, provide opportunities for public expression, where "public" means those issues pertaining to a broader collective, such as the people or the nation-state. The radical possibilities for communication and information exchange offered by the internet fuel a Western assumption that the Lao discourse of *nanyobai peht patu* or "open door policy" is one of democratic transition. The idea that economic growth leads to the emergence of an articulate middle class more inclined to liberal democratic norms (Abbott 2004*a*, p. 7) is hinged upon a vague, often unarticulated, understanding of the role of a "public" in producing such change.

The Online Public Sphere

Jurgen Habermas (1989, p. 27) charts the emergence of a new space for opinion-making in early modern Europe where formerly "private people come together as public" took responsibility for commenting on matters of state away from the authorities. In salons and coffee houses, merchant capitalists, bureaucrats and intellectuals left behind the status of their wealth, authority and private connections and engaged in debate about the affairs of the state that affected their

common interests in a way that "replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals" (Habermas 1989, p. 36). Central to the debates that went on was the question of the transformation of the modern state, from one which presupposed the unquestionable authority of the king to one which operated according to abstract constitutional law. The new bourgeois intelligentsia consummated the public sphere precisely because of the autonomy from stately authority that their economic capital afforded them.

Ideals of public debate and the politics of self preservation are inseparable and the desire to maintain and improve the self is central to representations made in public. People consciously seek to present a public image of themselves that is most beneficial to their interests. To this end they provide information in formal public settings which contradicts opinions and actions displayed in informal private situations. As Jackson (2004, p. 204) argues of Thailand, while people feel relatively free to do what they like in private, the public sphere is governed by a "regime of images" in which power is not mobilized in the name of truth (knowledge) but rather to enhance the "prestige of images". An untarnished image is an expression of high status. For post-revolutionary Lao this image involves appearing connected, socially mobile and worldly. The internet, however, promises a subtle inversion of this logic. Users are required to take anonymous individuals at their word and in the ideal sense subscribed to by Habermas, the word, opinion or expression becomes the main source of legitimacy whereas formerly the status of the person influenced the significance of the word. It is the internet's potential to transform the relationship between private opinions, public practices and hierarchical relationships in Laos that this article addresses.

Internet use is not primarily a physical space of public interaction in itself, configured as it is around the personal computer. Even in the publicly accessible internet shop, users are hooked up into different physical spaces. The publicness of the internet lies instead in the space for communication that it provides. While Habermas spoke of public places such as the coffee house, he also conceived of a

public space where debate occurred in which people abandoned their private interests and engaged with issues they considered to be in their collective interest. In the same way internet technology informs a sphere, a virtual space, imagined as egalitarian and theoretically accessible to all and sustained by anonymous expression.

Rehbein (2008, pp. 460–61) refers to different Lao vocabularies (such as the language of the markets, the courts, or the temple) as "sociolects" and argues that the political elite's ability to control them is compromised when they enter a public sphere of anonymous linguistic encounters defined by a struggle over how to adapt to modernization. It was in a language free from the cultural and political constraints of social context that Habermas (1989) saw the radical potential of the public sphere. Here we can qualify Habermas by arguing that while language is never free of the context in which it is socially constructed, the internet provides an online context, disrupting the taken-for-granted meanings of the offline social world and allowing actors to say new things in new ways.

While a number of Lao language websites are now emerging in Laos and the diaspora, the dominant language of the Lao websites most frequented by my informants was not Lao at all, but an improvised variant of English. Interspersed with English words and phrases is a form of Lao written in English phonetics, known colloquially as *pasa karaoke* (karaoke language) as it resembles the phonetics used in Lao and Thai karaoke music videos. This internet language has arisen partly due to the technology's lack of compatibility with the Lao script. Until 2008 the existing Lao scripts for web browsers were plagued with technical problems and impractical to use. It has also arisen because the use of English to communicate ideas that are unacceptable to Lao Government audiences is tolerated due to the fact that the majority of Lao speakers are considered isolated from it.

While it began as an elite forum for communication in Laos, internet use has risen in the past few years to encompass a broader group of educated urban youth primarily with English language skills and access to personal computers. Statistical records of computer use

in Laos compiled in 2000 show just 2.6 personal computers for every 1,000 people and just 6,000 users (Evans 2004, p. 15). In 2003, the number of users had risen to 25,000 (Evans 2004, p. 15). In 2005, The number of home users rose from 3,638 people in 2005 to 3,941 in 2006 (*Kaosan Pathet Lao*, 17 June 2006). Over the past eight years total internet use has expanded more than tenfold but still represents only a 1.5 per cent penetration of the total national population. A generous estimate of the number of current users would be 100,000 among a population of 6.6 million with 3,600 broadband subscribers (*Internet World Stats* 2008). Despite this growing number of private connections, use largely takes place in the approximately fifty internet shops, private schools, business, and government offices in Vientiane and other major towns. Transient users are conspicuous in internet shops, particularly tourists and Chinese and European expatriates who use the internet to keep in touch with the places they have left behind. New urban social groups such as motorbike clubs emerging out of the cultural spaces created by economic growth (Mayes 2009) are also creating websites. A growing number of university students and junior government officials are also going online.

Networking and Internetworking

For young urban Lao in a society where opportunities for advancement in the social hierarchy are shaped by having powerful relatives as patrons, being connected is a practice of survival. The term *sen sai* ("connections" but with the literal meaning of "threads, strings") is a key way of explaining the privileges that come with even a marginal place in the new urban elite in Laos. Connections present opportunities for advancement in the social hierarchy by linking people with patrons who control access to resources, development aid and promotions. Those who successfully access such networks are referred to as *dek sen*, meaning literally "connected children", an amalgamation of *sen sai* with *dek*, the referent to childhood. The majority of new urbanites are from business and political families that

have access to foreign capital and are socially immersed in a consumer economy to a far greater extent than the rural majority. At the same time they have at best only weak links to the few highly wealthy, historically dominant families and the political elite, membership of which is accessed primarily through marriage (Rehbein 2005, p. 31). Being connected has another meaning for these young urbanites. It means not being isolated or distanced from what is going on in the region and the world. Crucially, it is the assumption that privileged access to global experiences and knowledge underpins cultural and political authority (Helms 1988) — a combination of the hierarchical and spatial meanings of the term "connections" — that is under threat by the new opportunities for global exploration available to the emerging middle class Lao population.

Online connections do not consist simply of maintaining offline social relationships through communication technologies (such as mobile phones) but of expanding on them. Users typically engage in networking with the use of instant messaging software, while accessing data in the form of music, images, and news is a less frequent activity. In an online survey questionnaire[4] I sent to students using the internet, a majority said they would most often access news content, but in private conversations and other online interaction the same informants spent most of their time using messaging software. Young women frequented downtown shops to chat with men, mostly Lao overseas, that they met on the internet and maintained networks of prospective boyfriends. Students at private colleges would use instant messaging during class to make friends with students abroad and government officials had messaging software installed on their computers which they used to keep in touch with colleagues overseas.

Informants build online networks using free instant messaging software in order to overcome the constraints of locality and maintain relationships. The messaging network is a communication technology for building the self as it is constituted in relation to others. It allows a single user to build a network of friends around them

and constitute their own stable online space of shared memories, aspirations and dialogue. The other users in that network can only communicate with each other at the request of the network owner. They do this to maintain the cultural situation that they enjoy in Laos as connected young urbanites even though they have or are preparing to subvert the experiences of government work, business profession or higher education that they share offline. The constraints felt by Si-Ambhaivan's old elites (1999) do not apply to increasing numbers of post-revolutionaries. A young government official may become a university student abroad and engage in business with Lao of the diaspora and even live abroad and then return to live and work in Laos. Their network is built on flexible and constantly changing offline situations and because of this, the network itself provides an online place in which they can exist regardless of their offline migrations. Lao online are more likely to be those who constantly subvert place so that a simple distinction between those abroad and those in Laos cannot be maintained.

In a private network discussion between a student in Vientiane preparing to study in Australia and two others already in Australia, one participant began talking about the differences between *lao nai* and *lao nok*. He echoed official government statements aimed at discouraging migration and said the *lao nok* might live in rich countries but that life was harder and that they had forgotten their culture. Another suggested that many of the Lao people she met online were unable to be described by the conventional dichotomy between inside and outside saying she thought of them simply as being Lao. "My cousin grew up in Australia but now lives in Laos working for a private business. I don't think he is different," she said. Lao who travel around and live, work or study abroad were called *khon na na sat*, or "international" people, but it was also said that Lao people could live anywhere and still be Lao. Conversations like this one might signal the beginnings of a Lao discourse of cosmopolitanism, a being "worldly at home" sustained by a deeper underlying cultural assumption about the need for connections. The Lao online flirting between places and nationalities were often also

dek sen (wealthy, connected children) but with a different kind of connectedness than that which they enjoyed with their families in Laos.

To explain this connectedness I use the term "worldliness" not in contradiction with the political sphere of the nation-state, but instead to evoke the common desire to expand upon it. The term has two related meanings — the first is to be experienced in human affairs, sophisticated, and worldly-wise. The second meaning, a devotion to worldly affairs to the neglect of spiritual needs, also applies to the extent that worldliness is connected to urban Lao desires to participate in the material world of global capital; desires that are perceived by some to endanger the spirituality associated with traditional culture. But this worldliness is also "turned upside down" so that the new enchantment for contemporary urbanites is global exploration.

To be an urbanite in Laos requires the ability to negotiate global influences. To have this ability requires a special knowledge of, and empathy with, the foreign. "We need to be *than lok*" said a university student in Vientiane preparing to study abroad. The word *than* means to keep up with or to stay in touch with the world, *lok*, and is similar to *than samai*, modern, meaning "to keep up with the era". According to Thongchai (2000, p. 531) *than samai* emerged in late nineteenth century Siam as part of the new Thai discourse of *siwilai* (civilization). It became popular in the 1960s modernization movement and indicates a temporal consciousness in which historical progress was possible. *Than lok* has a slightly different inflection to being progressive. A young international business worker explained that someone who is *than lok* is *khon hu than khon*, (in touch with others, wise about them) and is thus clever, not easy to fool. Someone who is *than lok than het kan* (up-to-date with current affairs) knows what is going on around them and is not lost in the world. The notion of *than lok* is not antithetical to the nation-state. Instead, it turns the nation-state into a more critical point of reference, and in doing so shows the potential to transform it.

For post-revolutionary youth who have moved abroad, the experience of Laos is mediated in large part by online networks. Souk worked in an internet shop in Vientiane and found her Lao husband in the United States after meeting him through an online network of friends. The information she stored from the internet, such as saved emails, instant messaging dialogues, and the swapping of photographs became evidence that documented the relationship as genuine when she applied for a visa to go and live in the United States with her fiancé. She now works in a computer parts factory and says her entire workplace is full of Lao people, even her boss is Lao. She sent pictures of her honeymoon at Disney World in Florida but admitted that life was harder than this display of participation in American culture suggested. She says the internet has become even more important now because she does not meet many people outside of the Lao community in which her husband grew up. She misses the freedom and life she had in Laos but says she wanted the adventure of coming to America. Her network helps her to escape an offline situation in which she feels trapped.

A growing number of Lao students and government officials studying abroad use online networks to maintain links to Laos and also to cultivate worldliness (Mayes 2007*a*). These networks are an extension of their already achieved mobility. Tuan expresses a new worldliness among urban youth. He trained overseas as a government official before quitting his position to join a company owned by an American living in Laos and then moving to Cambodia and later Thailand and Malaysia on renewable tourist visas. Tuan was able to emancipate himself from the poverty of junior government work and earn enough money to achieve a flexible citizenship akin to the multiple passport holders described by Ong (1999) but more precarious, as he is only a multiple visa holder. He uses the internet to keep in touch with his old friends in Laos, always telling them about his latest success. But he also wants to remember the old days in Laos where life was much easier, if poorer, and to remember his colleagues, who are themselves online because they go to study or attend meetings and training courses abroad. In some cases, such as

an informant who had been studying for a masters degree for four years in a small city in Poland, the personal computer is a way to escape the perpetually unsettling environment outside her dormitory room. She has cultivated a large network of Lao friends in Laos and abroad who keep her company online. She tells stories about how being Asian in Poland is hard because of discrimination but also expresses a love for the strange natural environment of snowy mountains and windy seas. "I really think I love this country", she said, "even though I don't like many Polish people." The internet might be a reflection of the drift and lack of place experienced by these young people. But it is also a tool for remembering home and for communicating current lived experience abroad. It is an umbilical connection between places used not only for holding on to relationships that post-revolutionary youth have lost, but for expressing a new worldly self.

Whether inside Laos seeking connections abroad, or abroad seeking a new site to be Lao, the internet facilitates public expressions of self related to struggles over feelings of belonging to Laos. Public networks of Lao people are emerging around popular online communities like hi5, which allow users to construct their own websites and link them with other users, establishing vast networks of friends who can each see how many degrees of separation they are from the other users in their networks. Hi5 allows users to set up a public profile detailing basic biographical information and interests and receive comments from other users that they moderate and approve themselves. The profiles constitute a particular kind of performance. They are often voyeuristic, with users posting pictures of themselves scantily clad or in sexy attire. Music, photography and video are the central mediums of expression. Students abroad post photographs of themselves in front of major international monuments and symbols or views of regional metropolitan centres. They also post photographs of their desired offline practice of modernity. Two users in Laos took photographs of themselves sitting in cars, even when they did not own them, to distinguish themselves from motorbike riders. Others used their mobile phones to take photographs in the mirror so they

could show their latest phone models. They also posted Western hip hop and rock music videos to express the attitudes of romance or confidence they typified.

These online profiles display an inseparable mixture of romance, desire for worldly adventure, and expressions of Lao-ness. Noy is a student at a private college in Vientiane preparing to study in Australia. To the consternation of her teachers she spends much of her time communicating with Lao and foreigners abroad while in class. Noy has constructed an online profile in the hi5 community in which she has posted a message addressed to "anyone in Australia" that she is seeking friends there and offers them her email address. Her profile is lined with background photographs of popular American hip hop idols and photographs of herself posing in various close-up body and facial shots. She has a photograph of a group of young European male tourists indicating her interest in foreign men. But Noy also includes a series of photographs of her with friends traveling to the old royal capital of Laos, Luang Prabang, and posing in a traditional Lao skirt at a wedding. Her network includes many Lao living in the diaspora or studying abroad. Boys send messages of interest and girls encourage her to study overseas. These profiles reflect a desire among the new generation to be seen by the world and to be connected publicly often due to offline experiences of transience. These online performances are based on a desire for common affiliation.

Online expressions are attached to offline relationships that are themselves perceived to be under threat. Tham argued with her older brother over the content of her profile, which he thought presented her as a loose woman looking for men. Her older brother also has a profile and is currently studying in Australia while she wants to study abroad in the future and is using the site as part of her own cultivation of worldliness. Her brother certainly does not have a problem with sexy, loose women but in the kin relations in which they both exist, the older brother is a protector, and it is his duty to safeguard the moral propriety of his young female kin. Many families in Vientiane would not let their daughters go out at night except

with a trusted older male relative. So the internet profile is akin to the girl "going out alone" in the eyes of her big brother. And just like "going out alone" these expressions are linked to debates about the role of the family and about broader social change and cultural breakdown in Laos.

Thousands of young Lao women are constructing online selves free from the restrictions of family and other offline social institutions that ultimately shape them as domestic and conservative. Through the Lao Women's Union, the government encourages the Lao woman to be a "good citizen, a good mother and a good wife to her husband" who does "her duty towards society and the development of the nation" (Trankell 1993, p. 19). Lao President Choummaly Sayasone described women of the union as symbolizing "dynamism, thrift and pillars of the family who support their husbands and children" (Xayxana 2005). As revolutionary ideals of equality fade, urban women are seen as the bearers of national culture with an emphasis on their role in protecting tradition from the negative influences of globalization through appropriate marriages, reproduction and domestic practices. Online spaces allow freedom from such social pressures and enable young women to develop alternative relationships, cultivate expressions of romance and desire, and play with and manipulate a broader masculine obsession with female sexuality that permeates conventional media representations in advertisements, film and music.

For diaspora youth who have found their ethnicity denationalized by the experience of education abroad, a specifically Lao internet space may not yet hold any particular enticement. Tik, a Lao-Australian girl who attends annual temple ceremonies with her family also has a hi5 profile. Rather than identify as Lao, she calls herself a Southeast Asian. She says she would not dare post photographs on her profile of her recent appearance in traditional dress for the end of the rains retreat, *ok phansa*, at the temple. Instead she posts pictures of herself drinking alcohol and dancing with friends and expressions of "gangsta" youth culture. She is an invisible Lao, someone who uses the internet to express a non-Lao regional identity. Rather than being a product of techno-freedom, however, her abandonment of

Laoness is more likely due to the insecurity of the exiled diaspora. Her socialization and partial deracination in Australia alienate her from a family history in which her grandparents escaped their country as exiles and still looked at it today in largely negative terms as the evil communist Other. She has no space to be Lao although she may start to question and reinvent it and seek to become the "Lao cosmonaut" when she gets older. Despite the methodological problem of identifying them, there are countless other hidden Lao identities on the internet, of all ethnic minorities and parts of the diaspora. While many participate in online forums and expressions where this identity is hidden, they also engage with and debate Lao-ness elsewhere online.

Propaganda and Counter-Propaganda

The worldly connections that urban youth in Laos cultivate online are the foundation for a public questioning, debating and reworking of Laos and ideas about what it should be in the future. For students and officials who travel overseas and experience a heightened feeling of being Lao that comes from the engagement with difference, information about Laos helps them to maintain a sense of belonging and involvement, but may also lead to a questioning of official propaganda. For *lao nai*, communication through the internet in the form of worldly relationships and performances may also lead to more critical self-reflection. Those eager to learn about home engage in an online public sphere characterized by propaganda, rumor and low levels of activism. Students and officials in Laos are taught to reject anti-government websites run by exiled Lao who aim to destabilize the new regime. Once abroad however, such websites become sources of information about home that is not otherwise accessible in the government news media. The experience of *lao nok*, particularly as it filters through internet links to the diaspora, may expose students and officials to critical opinions about the current regime.

Until its webmaster retired in 2008, the <vientianetimes.com> was the main source of online news about Laos used both inside

and outside the country but run by exiled Lao in the United States. It reflects the political destabilization of place that has emerged from the formation of the diaspora during years of conflict leading to the revolution in 1975. The website, intentionally named after the official English language *Vientiane Times* newspaper in Laos, was set up in 1997 by the Lao-American community and was the most prominent of a growing range of cultural and political websites in the diaspora. Its homepage was lined with photographs of prominent political figures, both those who support and reject the current regime, superimposed with a slogan "the gateway to democracy", a comment on the single party political system in Laos. The website collected and presented news stories about Lao people both in Laos and overseas regardless of political content. For this reason it published information that the official Lao media cannot. It was considered a dissident website because it advanced an ideal of free public information about Laos that is interpreted as potentially destabilizing by the Lao Government. The website was deemed so offensive by a senior foreign ministry official that he instructed his daughter not to read it. When this daughter caught a colleague in Vientiane opening it one morning, he was heckled for reading anti-government propaganda. For many English-speaking internet users in Laos who can access the internet anonymously, whether government officials, business people or overseas students, the <vientianetimes.com> is an important source of information about their home, particularly when official news sources greet them with silence.

In reaction to the anti-government emphasis flowing through exile sites, the official *Vientiane Times* newspaper was the first organization to build a website in Laos without foreign assistance. The aim of the website is to present Laos as striving toward new heights of development and prosperity and encourage foreign investment and diplomatic support. While it was created at least partly in response to the <vientianetimes.com>, the content of <vientianetimes.org.la> is aimed at advertising development, business and government interests. It is the official representation of Laos in the English language, so

content is chosen in a way that provides a positive image of the country, the people and the government of Laos. It tells a story of how the country is steadily improving society with an emphasis on education, governance and international cooperation. It provides young government officials with a discourse in which they can talk about their country. "We are implementing government policy step by step in accordance with the real situation as you can see", said one young official while reading an online article. He had been practicing official rhetoric and was buoyed by the image of success accompanying it in <vientianetimes.org.la>. There was no need for this image to reflect the environment of poverty and corruption he was embroiled in. In fact, the environment around him made the need to present a positive public image of place all the more important.

The <vientianetimes.org.la> is like other post-revolutionary media dominated by descriptions of official bureaucratic ceremony such as signing ceremonies, hand shakes and meetings. They demonstrate that high government officials can command almost godlike respect, their meetings attended by lines of underlings, new projects opened only when they cut the ribbon, new trainees become professionals only after receiving certificates from them. They also appear as the worldly face of Laos, meeting foreign dignitaries and proclaiming eternal friendship between nations, hailing development cooperation and participating in regional and global meetings. Such media are informed by assumptions akin to the publicness of representation that Habermas identifies before the emergence of a rational-critical public sphere. Leaders "were the country and not just its representatives … they represented their lordship not for but 'before' the people" (Habermas 1989, pp. 7–8). In 1993 the Politburo of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party issued a resolution stating that the role of the media was "to disseminate information on the Party's directives and policies as well as to disseminate information on the law of the State" (Vorakhoun 2005). There was no indication in this resolution that a politically independent public existed in Laos and while a law outlining the rights and responsibilities of journalists was drafted in 2003, it was sent back by the government on the basis that it was

not the right time. The core justification offered for control of the media at an international workshop on media freedom in Laos in 2005 was that Lao people do not have the ability to participate in an unregulated public sphere. State control of the media continues to be seen as necessary because "the overall capacity of citizens is not so high, their interest in the media is limited, and the level of the rank and file working in the media is also limited" (Vorakoun 2005). A law on the mass media was finally approved in 2008 (National Assembly 2008) but has not altered the official emphasis on disseminating state control.

The media in Laos operates under an instructive logic, one where information is tailored to enforce the interests of the state, as propaganda. Propaganda, *kan khosana suan seua*, meaning literally to "advertise make believe", is qualitatively different from the notion of propaganda that informs Chomsky's conventional view of the pre-internet Western media. According to Chomsky and Herman (1988, p. 2), money and power filtered out the variety of news sources and accounts, marginalized dissent, and allowed dominant interests to influence the public. In Laos, government officials, business people and even foreign governments and organizations are complicit in the filtering of news. Governments representing countries with laws espousing media freedom have little choice but to use officially controlled media in Laos to promote their interests and activities. Propaganda's root meaning derived from Marxism-Leninism and represented in Lao (*khosana*) is to inform, publicize and advertise (Kerr 1972, p. 186). It is in this sense that the term is used officially by the Lao media. Propaganda is considered a positive, educational and stabilizing force, more akin to a regime where images are valuable statements of authority (Jackson 2004) rather than the telling of lies. This partially explains the media's stated aim to "psychologically influence the population" by being the "steward" and being "directly responsible for the people's wellbeing", according to the head of the Lao Journalists Association and former Deputy Minister of Information and Culture, Bouabane Vorakoun (Bouabane 2005). The strict controls on this offline public sphere

do not prevent commentary on society from taking place online but concerns over surveillance do shape its manifestation. Informants made it clear that offline anything could be talked about "but some things we only discuss among close friends because you don't know who could be listening."

Panoptic Nightmares

While users can make statements and cultivate relationships in the relative anonymity provided by the internet this is still overshadowed by regulatory concerns. The internet differs from conventional media in that the Lao Government does not currently have the skills or resources to regulate it although given the increasing availability of expertise from China and Vietnam, this freedom is unlikely to last. Despite regular reports that users are discouraged from accessing inappropriate websites (Morris 2006, Supalak 2001, Mills 2004) and that filters block access to most of these sites (Supalak 2002), it is still relatively easy to access them from inside Laos from a public internet shop or a government office. Lack of laws and vague policies about what is acceptable foster a reticence of expression among people who are concerned not to get into trouble.

The internet, to someone who does not know who is watching, rather than requiring official policing, involves a self-disciplining and, rather than connoting a new age of freedom, resembles more the telescreen from George Orwell's novel, *Nineteen Eighty Four* (Chase and Mulvenon 2002, p. iii), a constant source of surveillance, a panoptic window subverting the public-private divide. The internet here resembles observations about disciplinary power made by Foucault (1977) of early modern European institutions that enticed subjects to increasingly monitor and regulate their own conduct rather than requiring them to be coerced and directed. Such Orwellian self-consciousness had not yet struck the government officials I found huddled around computers watching Western pornography after their bosses had gone home. Online, however, there were fears about the kind of discussions that go on in chat rooms with some

participants afraid that people were hacking into the discussions and banning them from chat rooms. Information was simply not sent and replies not made because users were "not sure if [they] are allowed to tell you that". According to one webmaster, discussions have been hijacked and people barred from participating by unknown intruders (*Laoupdate* 2006*b*). Foreign residents were also more aware of the surveillance potential of the internet. A French advisor at a government office was convinced the Lao government had an office of specialists monitoring his online activity. "Be careful what you write and what you download", he warned.

But such panoptic nightmares are only part of the experience of internet use. Surveillance may be built into the fabric of the internet and the notion of public activity in general in so far as it is under a scrutiny denied by the very notion of the private. The internet as relationships and identities embodied in "computer mediated communication" (Lyon 2003, p. 68) is defined by surveillance, not necessarily as a negative top-down function of government, but as a broader "focused attention on behaviours and trends" (Lyon 2003, p. 69) with a view to cultivating, managing or otherwise influencing them, which is a form of governance in itself.

In his exploration of the emergence of the modern museum, Tony Bennet identifies a public institution which, rather than articulating power and knowledge as forms of control and confinement akin to Foucault's (1977) study of the prison, produces an "exhibitionary complex" that shapes, rather than confines, relationships and transforms "the problem of order into one of culture" (Bennet 1995, p. 62). When internet users go online they express themselves, leave footprints, display who they are to others and how they fit in, or don't fit in, to broader groups. This public surveillance can have as much in common with voyeurism as it can with regulation and it has descriptive effects.

When users go online they express themselves, leave footprints, display who they are to others and how they fit in, or don't fit in, with broader groups. For Laos, a country whose population has been

subject to low levels of state census, and lower levels of access to consumer markets, the internet is like a new window of exhibitionary description. Even if it only describes the elite few, it allows a public participation in trends, ideas and practices. Descriptions are also gendered with particularly conspicuous images of female beauty reflecting notions of desire connected to traditional culture or Western sexuality. The internet describes the people who access it, people who would otherwise not be describable in the official media because of official regulations. This description is more fluid and transformative than the propaganda of official media.

Public Debate and Reconciliation

Perhaps because of the constraints that the state's propagandizing imagination places on official media, unofficial websites have emerged in Vientiane run by young urbanites newly returned from overseas study. The <laoupdate.com> was started up by young professionals educated overseas who returned to Laos and modeled the website on popular Thai sites accessed by Lao youth. Web bulletin boards, a form of correspondence dating back before the invention of instant messages or internet telephony are the most popular medium for communication on <laoupdate.com>. The boards allow anonymous responses and consist of an accumulated gathering of interconnected ideas in a single space, the product being a dialogue on a designated issue or theme. In China, web discussion boards are being linked to rumour and propaganda and resulting mass campaigns, called 'web hunts', against individuals deemed to have committed unethical acts (French 2006). A much weaker, less unified moral voice is heard in the online debates among Lao people and its ramifications for offline relationships are far less dramatic.

A brief analysis of the contributions to web boards[5] on <laoupdate. com> shows that reference is often made to missing Laos and wanting to return home, mainly by students and officials abroad. Comments are made about how Lao who travel abroad are not accepted by exile communities or questions are asked about why Lao women abroad do

not return to Laos and look for husbands, while Lao men commonly return to find wives. Within these debates distinct differences emerge between the expressions made by Lao overseas, *lao nok*, and Lao living in Laos, *lao nai.*

This occurred during a particularly heated racial nationalist commentary about the historically fraught relationship between Laos and Thailand, its larger, culturally similar neighbour. In one discussion in September 2005 involving the controversial selection of an Australian-Thai girl at the Miss Thailand Universe 2005 beauty contest, the Lao could not understand why they would choose a half-caste, *luk sot*. The word *sot* translates as mixed (as of a breed), and is also known as *luk kreung* in Thai, which is a term denoting a new hybridity (Pattana 2005). Overseas Lao in particular accused the Thai of ignoring their own people, of trying to be Western and of having low self-esteem. It was even suggested that Thai women were loose because of their desire to be Western. One also launched into a bitter tirade about how the Thai did not like black people and certainly would not choose a Thai-Lao "half breed". "Thai people always think they are better than Lao regardless [of] whether you [are] well educated or not", he said (*Laoupdate* 2005*b*). Thai contributors also joined in the debate. They apologized for the condescending representations of the Lao as backwards and rural made in the Bangkok-centred Thai media. They also expressed feelings of hurt and dismay at the racist backlash from the Lao. This was followed by a clear voice condemning the discourse by a contributor calling himself/herself "Khone Lao [Lao person] in Laos":

> I believe that if they are Lao people in Laos, they would not say any harm or bad things to Thailand. But when they are Lao people, especially those who study in America or civilized countries, they like to complain, speak more than act, they sometimes do not know how the real culture of Laos is (lao nai). (*Laoupdate* 2005*b*)

Another Lao supporting the Thai-Australian winner noted that the competition was "universal" incorporating "all existing things". "Perhaps the new generation should stop discriminating [against] each

other, but rather find ways to grow together", he/she said (*Laoupdate* 2005*b*).

This critical reserve among many Lao users inside Laos extended towards the making of any kind of political comment. Almost nothing is said about Lao politics. When comment is made by youth inside the country it is largely apolitical. Comments about *patu sai*, Vientiane's *Arch de Triumphe*-style monument, complained that it was always draped in long-winded salutes to the Party when it was "not the right place to be advertising politics" because it was meant to be an attractive public place (*Laoupdate* 2005*a*). Others express more private frustration in their online networks. "I am just so bored about this issue [politics]. I don't like to talk about it", said one Lao masters student in Bangkok.

Online comments are often made expressing a desire for Lao worldliness that attribute responsibility to the government for Laos' successful integration into global society. Lao people asked why the world's richest man, Bill Gates, did not visit Laos when he came to Vietnam. In a debate in April 2005 overseas Lao contributors asked why Vietnam was opening itself to the United States while Laos still had its doors closed. "The current Lao PDR leaders are still kinda paranoid of anything yankee [American] and *patikan* [political reactionary] or perhaps they don't know crap about hightech and stuff or they are not savvy enough about worldly affairs", said one (*Laoupdate* 2006*c*). "It is the attitude we embrace that eventually determines our own destiny", said another (*Laoupdate* 2006*c*). Calls were made for a reconciled Laos. "Are the laonai under the leadership of the Lao PDR willing to talk with the laonok??? So much distrust and paranoia still exists on both sides more so on the Lao PDR side than us out here", said one (*Laoupdate* 2006*c*). Others agreed with this: "At this stage of *meuang lao* [Laoland] as a nation, it must seek reconciliation of all its children scattered at the four corners of the world (*lao nok*)" (*Laoupdate* 2006*c*).

An unprecedented example of the current fermentation of ideas about the future of Laos was a web board created in March 2006 that involved a debate between *lao nok* and *lao nai*. The online

debate was about whether the Lao Government was genuinely accepting the participation of overseas Lao and foreigners in a new era of free market development or whether its attempts to solidify power were getting in the way (*Laoupdate* 2006*a*). Overseas Lao were scathing in their accusations of government corruption and the trickery of officials using sweet words to entice overseas Lao to invest and then seizing their profits. Some branded the government "Vietnamese puppets" and others said a "communist is a communist" and would not change. Others advanced theories about the relationship between single party politics, corruption and the lack of development. They made explicit calls for the kind of representative democracy that they had experienced in their exile communities in the West.

Amidst these *lao nok* voices were Lao from Vientiane who argued a range of opinions. One fought back hurling insults at the *lao nok*, arguing Laos was poor but peaceful and its people enjoyed an easy life. He was rebutted by accusations that he was a corrupt elite living in luxury in Vientiane who did not know how hard his fellow country people worked. Most *lao nai* were more diplomatic. They displayed opinions grounded in an awareness of the need to take responsibility for what they said because these may have ramifications for their offline relationships. They lacked vitriol and were reticent to draw on negative stereotypes of the other in stark contrast to the words of *lao nok,* which expressed the bitterness of exile. Some *lao nai* admitted that the government was corrupt but appealed to overseas Lao to focus on helping the people instead. Some ventured muted criticism, arguing that the government did nothing while the people were working harder than their buffaloes. Some said that if *lao nok* returned home, then the government would change, but that this would only happen slowly. One even pointed out that the current leaders were dying off and a new generation would soon be given more power. Others pointed to the example of the Chinese diaspora that went to study in the West and then returned home to encourage the economic boom in China.

> Laotian[s] overseas should join to improve our beloved nation's reconstruction. We all know that there is big corruption and other problems here, but we can't eliminate it today or tomorrow. Forget about government, think for our people … (*lao nai*). (*Laoupdate* 2006*a*)

And in reply another said:

> You sound like a real *ai nong* [literally 'big brother, little brother'. A derogatory term describing the nepotism and lacky culture of the new regime] and the Vietnam's puppet government must love people like you. What [have] the selfish, greed[y] and corrupt government officers … been doing for the past 30 years or so? Unless there is guarantee[d] personal security and freedom to all Lao people I doubt any smart businessman would go there (*lao nok*). (*Laoupdate* 2006*c*)

The most salient voices on both sides were appeals to a new idea about Laos. They encouraged *lao nok* to come home and also called for foreigners to come and invest in Laos. They called for a reconciled, worldly Laos.

> Come on Laos gov. [government] open the door for us, give Laos a chance one UNITED LAOS would be dream come true for all Laos … lets the new history begin for LAOS future … (*lao nai*)." (*Laoupdate* 2006*c*)

These comments reflect a new cosmopolitan sensibility among these networkers. The explorations that constitute their attempts at self-improvement produce more flexible ties to nation. They find the constraints of official nationalism increasingly slippery, relying on the internet to re-establish a sense of place. While internet use reflects a pre-existing uprootedness from place experienced by users, this new worldly space also offers urban youth in Laos a new exposure to debate about what Laos is and should be that is at least partially outside of the narrow terms of reference set by the current regime or the bitter vitriol of the old exiled elite.

Silencing and Self-censorship

In late 2006 the <laoupdate.com> website was closed indefinitely for renovations. The young officials and businesspeople responsible

for the website said they "wanted to take a break for a while". Rumours circulated among users that the webmaster had come under some pressure to close the site because of the political character of some of the discussions, although this was denied by friends of the webmaster, who said he just did not have enough time to run the site. More tangible evidence of censorship emerged on another website called <laosmile.com> that was launched in the aftermath of <laoupdate.com>. Users began sending in posts asking why parts of their previous posts had been cut. By allowing a web board debate about censorship on <laosmile.com> the webmaster indicated that he did not see censorship and public debate as antithetical, but a part of the same communicative practice.

One of many contributors in the debate to post abusing and accusatory messages to the webmaster asked: "Why are you censoring and deleting posts? The post that I posted doesn't have anything to do harm. It was about Hmong using Lao names for the better politically for themselves [changing their names to ethnic Lao names to avoid discrimination]." Another explained that his comments were not only being cut and censored but that words were actually being added and changed to make it look like the comment had not been altered at all. "What a retard, I can't believe my comments and posts, and replies get edited and filled in with unwanted not my own words. NICE TRY LAOSMELLS.com!"

There were also contributors who accepted the authority of the webmaster to run the site as he deemed fit. Said one: "the term 'webmaster' is used for a reason … seems to be that the webmaster is the master here O-K?! So he can delete or add anything he wants … and u can whine and moan and complain or whatever … guess what … um WE DONT CARE … just reality … so wake up … u can keep posting but if the webmaster doesn't like it … plz [please] go educate yourself on dictatorship ok." The webmaster himself made an appearance in the web board debate and gave the following response: "What I can say to you is I am really sorry! The site will get the problem if I don't delete it. I just want to keep the site as long as I can. Sorry *lai lai* … [very sorry]" (*Laosmile* 2007). In order to

avoid being directly influenced by a centralized bureaucratic agency regulating internet content, webmasters on these popular websites are under some pressure to censor themselves. Realization of such a censorship environment means that the closure of popular sites like <laopupdate.com> is steeped in rumours about government control that may or may not be true. Just as the panopticon does not require a watcher, nor does the internet.

Conclusion: A Space of Worldly Description

Despite common Western assumptions that the internet forms part of a connection between capitalist economic development and European-style democracy, or greater social and cultural liberalism (Abbott 2004*a*, p. 7), its adoption by young urban Lao suggests that there is no common model. Radical claims made about the potential of the internet to produce new kinds of interaction echo Habermas' idealized conception of the public sphere. But such claims also sit alongside fears of a dystopia of government control, denial of access and a digital divide. Theories of democratization however, ignore the virtual constraints informing Lao relationships, from love matches to political campaigns, which connect online discourse and relationships among the young elite in Laos to an awareness of their potential to impact offline relationships. New ideas about what Laos should be and how they are acted upon in offline contexts are informed by this awareness.

In his analysis of the structural transformation of the public sphere, Calhoun (1992, p. 34) argues that it is a vibrant source of self-understanding that "plays a crucial 'world-disclosing' role alongside of, or possibly independent of, its problem-solving one". If the offline public sphere is a place that discloses the world, then the online public sphere discloses a space holding multiple worlds. These include a Lao world hidden behind status politics, representative publicness, rumour, and propaganda. It provides a forum in which young elites gather outside of the terms prescribed by official nationalism and enact and debate the cosmopolitan ideals that they associate with a future Laos.

This new online Laos expressed in the ideas of young people inside Laos cannot be totally separated from the offline world, just as the public and the private constantly intervene and transform each other. The place imagined offline as Laos comes into new online existence as a space filled with ideas of worldly exploration and reconciliation. Much like the imagined space in which the Lao cosmonaut roams, it is an infinitely debatable territory only marginally held in check by the authoritarian discipline of the offline state. The diaspora, the authoritarian state and its post-revolutionary functionaries are held suspended within it. It produces a new imagination about Laos precisely because of the public space of debate that the technology opens up that would not otherwise exist in Laos. Yet this public space is not an ideal arena of free debate. Its new ideas only have salience because they are in dialogue with offline relationships, experiences and controls.

Ultimately, the online public sphere does not just disclose the world to participants but describes those participating in it. It describes young elites re-fashioning themselves as Lao, but not firstly as nationalists or patriots, or even as detached cosmopolitans, but as explorers. At first glance the Lao cosmonaut is an absurdity, a reflection of the self-awareness of marginality by the webmaster who created it. But it is also the ultimate image of contemporary global exploration and this is reflected in the deeper excavation of its meaning for young post-revolutionaries that this article has undertaken. Their cosmopolitanism consists of a negotiation between travel — both virtual and actual — and continual attempts to retain connections to place where, rather than being divorced from home, these young people remain Lao on their journeys (Mayes 2007*b*). With few exceptions, the great cosmopolitans and the great explorers are all considered to be culturally sophisticated Europeans and members of the emerging Chinese and Indian powers. The desire for exploration is also felt on the margins, where being interconnected with the world is the new enchantment.

NOTES

I am indebted to Nicholas Tapp and Andrew Walker for their constructive criticism of earlier drafts of this article. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments.

1. LSAV, "Lao Student Association of Victoria homepage". 2002 <http://www. geocities.com/laosav/LSAV.htm> (accessed 19 October 2006).
2, There is no universally agreed upon system for the transcription of Lao into English. Academic authors consistently follow a system of their own making except in situations where "convention" suggests otherwise. An example of this is the name of the Lao capital, "Vientiane", which is the universally used French corruption of the original Lao word, *viangchan*. A system of transcription elaborate enough to include all vowel and tonal differences is too complex and confusing for the lay reader. For this reason, I have chosen a simplified orthography that draws on Kerr (1972, pp. viii–ix) but abandons his use of International Phonetic Alphabet symbols, so as to seek a more accessible phonetic approximation of the Lao word.
3. The use of the term "post-revolutionary" here is not to be confused with the period of time falling immediately after the seizure of power in 1975, which was not itself a "revolution" in the full sense, but resembles 'a prolonged *coup d'etat*' instead (Askew, Logan, and Long 2007, p. 153).
4. The short survey was sent to a group of 40 Lao students, of which 26 returned completed questionaires (12 in Laos, 9 studying in Australia, 2 in New Zealand, 1 in Poland, 1 in Vietnam and 1 in Thailand). Respondents were contacted through the email networks of key informants and through scholarship contact lists. The questionnaire was aimed at understanding the internet usage patterns of students (who they communicated with) and the range of interfaces that they utilized on the internet (messaging software, discussion boards, and news sites).
5. All contributions to web boards have been reproduced as close as possible to their original form with minor grammatical alterations made to facilitate understanding.

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