

Of Subcultural Media and Media Variation

By Sim Jui Liang
IPS Research Assistant

In January, I attended the 6th Annual Anthropology Postgraduate Student Forum organised by the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), where around 50 postgraduate students presented their research findings and fieldwork experiences. As budding researchers, we were fortunate to learn from anthropologists and sociologists teaching in the Hong Kong universities that acted as discussants (that is, critics) of our work.

Over the one and a half days a wide spectrum of topics was covered, from religion to gender, ageing and migration. I was part of the “subcultures” panel which included presenters studying a Japanese fan fiction community, the Goth culture in Japan and Hello Kitty fans in Hong Kong. My presentation was based on my master’s thesis on the culture of subcultural media writers and editors in Singapore.

Subcultural media is produced by and for members of a subculture, that is, a group of people with values, beliefs and practices different from the rest of society. My research included a printed magazine written by and for Buddhists and a website for paranormal enthusiasts in Singapore. For my presentation, I spoke about whether the subcultural media writers and editors I studied identify themselves as journalists.

Professor Lang Graeme of the City University of Hong Kong was our panel discussant. He began by describing how anthropologists work: to enter a world in which we have little knowledge, to find out why and how the people of a culture act in a certain manner. Professor Graeme cautioned against the tendency to suggest that the people we study are all similar and urged us to portray them in their variation.

The idea of variation is a good reminder for researchers of the ever-changing media landscape in Singapore and beyond. Alas, our low level of understanding of the media could be seen in the rather limited vocabulary used to describe the types of media: traditional versus online, mainstream versus alternative.

While we are familiar with categories of media such as traditional (newspapers, television and radio) and new/social (such as blogs and Facebook) there is a tendency to generalise online media as “alternative” and traditional media as “mainstream”. But whether a media is alternative should not be determined by its medium, but its content and values, its journalistic practices and the media as a business.

In this light, subcultural media does not fit into either category neatly. On the one hand, it can be traditional in the form of printed magazines and newspapers, or online in the form of blogs and websites. Also, it can be journalistically mainstream in that, it depends on advertising revenue for survival. On the other hand, subcultural media can be alternative. Since it caters to social groups that are distinct from the wider society, the topics and perspectives it explores are often specialised and unconventional, and not covered regularly in mainstream media. Furthermore, it might not have any advertising or might not consider news objectivity as important.

The media landscape of any society is typically more varied and complex than imagined. Making sense of this landscape should entail acknowledging and learning about the less common forms of media, subcultural media included.

The research paper presented by the author at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) during the 6th Annual CUHK Anthropology Postgraduate Student Forum is available [here](#).

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