Print Media Survival in the Era of Digital:

The Transformation of Thai Comic Magazine's Kai Hua Roh

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Abstract

Traditional media, especially print media, has been affected by the information technologies that appeared after itself. The industry is facing the sharpest decline ever. Publishers are struggling to survive in the world of communication and are forced to transform. Digital publishing, or an e‑book, has long been hyped as the solution for publishers to survive. Nevertheless, whether or not e‑books will eventually usurp printed books in the marketplace, publishers must recognize the vast opportunities created by digital technology. This is the main reason this paper investigates the survival strategies adopted by Kai Hua Roh (Laughter for Sale), the longest‑running assorted humor comic magazine in Thailand, to deal with the decline and see how it survives in the digital era. Gathering data through academic research and literature provided by the media firms, the study identified both the successful and the failed strategies adopted by Kai Hua Roh. The thorough interrogation leads to the conclusion that, to survive, the media should emphasize its distinctive character and creatively blend that with current media consumption without losing the character itself.

Keywords: Organization Transformation, Print Media, Media Industry, Digital Disruption

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Introduction

Digital technology is seen as disruptive in the traditional print publishing environment. The developments happened in information technologies affected and rearranged the way people reach out for information. With the emergence of digital, mass communication is going from simple communication to mutual communication. The global publishing industry had its share of this challenge, including Thailand's.

Thailand Media Landscape Report stated that the Thai media industry had been primarily affected by digital disruption, which completely altered the behavior of media consumers and the business models of media companies. (Infoquest, 2019) With technology, readers overwhelmingly favor online and social media as the main channels to read news, stories, and articles. A large amount of money has flowed into online media. Unable to grapple with the change in reader behavior, a large number of both Thai and foreign newspapers and magazines were forced to go out of business or cease publication and opt to make their content available online instead.

Not only newspapers and magazines, the Publishers and Booksellers Association of Thailand (2018) also revealed that from 2014 to 2017, Thailand's publishing industry had been declining continuously (Figure 1). This decline affected the whole industry, from publishers to distributors. However, in contrast with the downward industry trend, comics and novels were reported to be favorable genres, with more than 40% growth in the number of books purchased in three of Thailand's national book fairs (Figure 2). It was not surprising that readers preferred these two categories to others as entertainment genres. Nevertheless, preference is not the only reason contributing to sales growth.
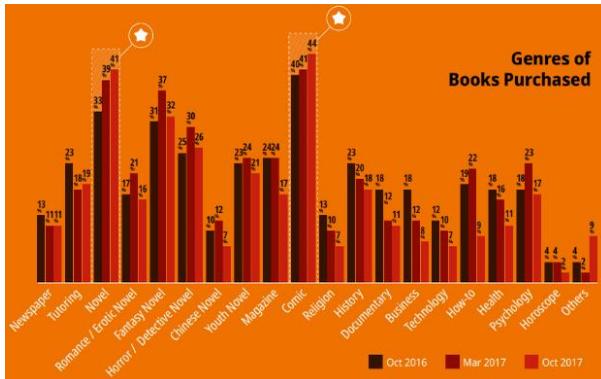
Figure 1

Thailand's Publishing Industry 2014 - 2017
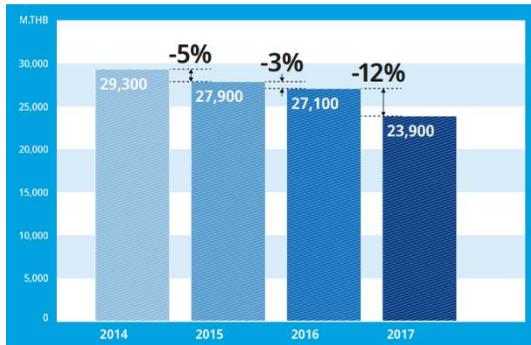
Source: The Publishers and Booksellers Association of Thailand, 2018

Figure 2

Genres of Books Purchased in 3 Thailand's National Book Fairs

Source: The Publishers and Booksellers Association of Thailand, 2018

In order to survive in today's mobile, tech-savvy audience, the industry has adopted digital technology to stay relevant. Digital publication or e-books has been seen as a prominent and promising strategy. However, more opportunities are provided for publishers in the digital

era to create a more effective business model and efficient supply chain for a more profitable future (Guenette et al., 2010). In such a speculative environment, Thailand's longest‑running and top‑selling assorted humor comic magazine, entitled Kai Hua Roh (Laughter for Sale), had developed various strategies to penetrate the digital world. Being with the Thai society for nearly 50 years, the comic magazine has been through changes and shifts in Thailand, both in the publishing industry and the country economic. The current paper, therefore, examined the factors influencing the effectiveness of the strategies intending to provide direction in the transformation from traditional to digital publishers.

Background of Kai Hua Roh

Banluesarn, the publishing house under Banlue Group, launched its gag and comic magazine called "Kai Hua Roh," which means "Laughter for Sale," to break into the adult reader market in 1973. Vithit Utsahajit, editor‑in‑chief of Kai Hua Roh, started Kai Hua Roh as a 68‑page monthly with a 5‑baht cover price (Humour Business, 2016 cited in Verstappen N., 2017). The slogan of Kai Hua Roh is 'The Household Humour'; it means that every generation in the family and every family in Thailand can enjoy it (Verstappen N., 2017). At first, the magazine was launched in approximately A4 size. Nevertheless, with the rising trend of pocketbooks in Thailand, the magazine size was reduced to A5 in 1986, and the price rose continuously to the current price of 20 baht. According to Lent (1997), Vithit Utsahajit brought the books out in pocket‑sized formats as children "supposedly prefer the pocket comics, and they are favorites of Bangkok drivers, who spend a great deal of time stuck in traffic gridlocks."

Targeting adults, Kai Hua Roh contained gags with senses of political, sarcastic, love affairs, husband and wife, conversational jokes, and short funny stories in the written form (Utsahajit P., 2016 cited in Verstappen N., 2017). Of all Banluesarn titles, the pocket comics are the best‑sellers, with Kai Hua Roh comic magazine reaching

a weekly circulation of 1 million copies. A massive fan base makes Banluesarn the leader in Thai comics, with the highest comic book readership in Thailand (Banlue Group, 2018). The magazines have also been recognized internationally and selected for exhibit in a Japanese Manga Museum, reflecting that Kai Hua Roh has a unique and distinctive style that sets it apart from other comic publishers.

As a gag comic magazine, Kai Hua Roh features mostly 1‑page strip cartoons. The longer‑form comics, such as short stories, would be presented in another title comic magazine Mahasanook which, as well, was managed by Banluesarn. Therefore, the stories in Kai Hua Roh are pretty short and straightforward. The gags are created based on the real‑time situation in the general environment, allowing every audience to consume the content easily.

The main characters in Kai Hua Roh's gags are Vithit, the super editor, and the gang cartoonists. Banlue Group (2018) stated in its company profile that Vithit, the Super Editor, is well‑known among fans as a fat and cruel but funny boss who has authority over all employees and likes to punish them if they miss their deadlines. Nevertheless, he is a true 'family man' to his family (p. 8). Since its creation, the characters have been loved for their uniqueness and humorous moments. Chotika Utsahajit (2016), deputy managing director of Banlue Group, mentioned that even though Banluesarn is a publisher, its actual products are not books or magazines printed by the house. The valuable assets rely on unique characters and memorable humorous stories. Also, having been launched for 47 years with almost 1,500 issues published, Kai Hua Roh has a large fan base, covering every part of Thailand and even Thai people living overseas.

Kai Hua Roh is not just an entertainment magazine but also a record of Thailand's social landscape. Nantawan Thongtiang (2020) conducted a textual analysis of 43 volumes of Kai Hua Roh and found that the magazines' gags and cartoons portrayed the Thai social phenomena during the printed period. Moreover, critical mocking, ironic

and satirical humor gags are essential to Thai society as it was the tool for the younger generation to ridicule old beliefs without abrupt confrontations. Hence, Kai Hua Roh could be said to be one of the media that impacted the formation of Thai thinking and ways of life.

First Step to Embrace the Digital Era

Like other publications, Kai Hua Roh started penetrating the digital world with a digital publication strategy. At first, the Kai Hua Roh e‑book was launched in Ookbee, a start‑up e‑book store in Thailand. Later, in 2011, Banlue Group announced to invest 10 million baht in turning the Kai Hua Roh into a digital application for smartphones and tablets using the iOS and Android platforms. The application called Kai Hua Roh Happlication, which came from happy and application, was expected to cover 1,150 pocket‑sized issues of Kai Hua Roh in digital format, ready for reading on tablets and smartphones (Pornwasin A., 2011).

Launched in 2017, the Happlication was expected to offer Banlue Group two sources of revenue: one from app purchases and another from advertising. The proportions of the two revenue streams were expected to be similar to those in conventional publishing - revenue from advertising should outstrip that from app sales. However, even though the application had more than 100,000 downloads (data from Google Play only), the application had not been widely used and stopped all updates since 2018.

Leveraging Social Media

As social media has become today's main communication channel, organizations, whether large or small, have implemented social media as their own marketing communication tools. Among the platforms provided in Thailand, Facebook

is the most popular, with 93 percent of internet users reporting using the platform (Hootsuite and We are social, 2019). Banlue Group also opened a Facebook account for its products, including Kai Hua Roh, which had more than 544,000 followers.

On the Facebook page, Kai Hua Roh has updated their news and created exclusive content for the platform, such as Last Meal Standing, which contained a nice photo of tasty dishes made from the characters（Figure 3）. The content is also mainly real‑time. For example, after the Miss Universe 2019 competition, Thai people were discussing the question that Miss Universe Thailand was asked, which is 'what is more important to you, privacy or security? Kai Hua Roh then updated the gag related to the question but in Kai Hua Roh‑owned style（Figure 4）. These led to engagement and discussion with followers. Kai Hua Roh's fan base, therefore, has been expanded.

Figure 3

The sample Last Meal Standing Gag

Source: Kai Hua Roh, 2019, December 6

Figure 4

The sample of Real-Time Content after Miss Universe Competition

Source: Kai Hua Roh, 2019, December 9

Kai Hua Roh Online on Line

        In collaboration with Line, a popular chat application from Japan that reached more than 18 million Thai users (Veedvil, 2013), Kai Hua Roh turned its well‑known characters into Line stickers launched in 2014. Unlike the other organization stickers that were distributed free of charge in exchange for adding friends with the organization's official Line account, Kai Hua Roh was the first set of Line stickers designed by Thai creators for sale.

        Sold at 50 Line coins (about 30 baht), the Kai Hua Roh sticker set reached 135,000 downloads in just two weeks after being launched and ranked 1st on the best‑selling stickers chart for weeks (Khajochi, 2014). The sticker also had the highest revenue record in one day for paid stickers. Following the success, Bunlue Group, therefore, launched the second set called 'Kai Hua Roh the Champion' and the third set as animated

stickers titled 'Kai Hua Roh: Animated Gags.' These were also successful, with the highest downloads of their launching round (Banlue Group, 2018). The accomplishment not only brought the company revenues but also led to the Line sticker creation of other characters licensed in Banlue Group and opened the opportunity for Banlue Group to be the creator of other organizations' official Line stickers.

Moving on to Podcast

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Noticing the rising trend on Podcast, Banlue Group brought Kai Hua Roh into the digital broadcasting world on July 2019. Airing on the website, Soundcloud, YouTube, and Spotify, the Kai Hua Roh podcast featured four programs as following:

1. Laugh is More: An interview program where guests known as entertainers in various circles were invited to talk about other sides of 'funny people' that have more than smiles and laughter.

2. San (Short) Story: The podcast adapted popular short stories for over 40 years from the Kai Hua Roh comic magazine into dialogue, dubbed by professional voiceovers.

3. Unmask Happiness: The program moderated by Ngarmpun Vejjajiva, the author of the S.E.A. Write Award novel 'The Happiness of Kati,' revealing the true story of happiness that had never been written in novels.

4. The Deadline Survivors: A fun talk program organized by Kai Hua Roh editorial team with the gimmick that everyone had just survived the deadline crisis. The stories were full of laughter and smiles.

The podcast might not do well as it lasted for only four months and has had no update since the end of October 2019.

The Era of Mass Self-communication

The success and failure of each attempt in the digital world of Kai Hua Roh could be explained by the development of communication. Human communication begins with interpersonal communication, sending messages from one to one with feedback loops. With the invention of communication technology, the organization employed technology to communicate with a large audience, which was when mass communication occurred (Baran S. and Devis D., 2015).

According to Manuel Castells (2009) , with technology development, communication has evolved from interpersonal communication to mass communication and, then, mass self- communication. Interpersonal communication refers to communication where the message is sent from sender to receiver interactively, while mass communication is mainly one‑ directional communication to massive receivers through media. As for the mass self‑communication, Castells (2009) explained that

> It is mass communication because it can potentially reach a global
> audience… At the same time, it is self‑communication because the
> production of the message is self‑generated, the definition of the
> potential receiver(s) is self‑directed, and the retrieval of specific
> messages or content from the World Wide Web and electronic
> communication networks is self‑selected (p.74).

Instead of replacing each other, the three modes of communication coexist and complement each other.

Audience‑Centric Transformation

As the mean of mass communication, Kai Hua Roh comic magazine reached its peak triumphant in era of mass communication. Once the Internet was introduced and

mass self‑communication emerged, it can be seen that the successful movements are the adaptation done according to the change in the way audiences communicate.

Behind the Success on Facebook

The platform's popularity is not the only reason that contributes to the success of Kai Hua Roh on Facebook. This social network site offered the opportunity to broadcast and engage more closely with audiences through its community‑building affordance (Driscoll, 2014) . With the strength in turning the current situation into entertaining real‑time content, Kai Hua Roh fits perfectly with Facebook content consumption, whether to gain attention or interact with the audiences.

Expanding the number of followers also brought more revenue to the company. As a comic magazine, Kai Hua Roh was a content provider, and this character was transferred onto Facebook. Sybil Nolan and Alexandra Dane's (2018) research found that while social media was once about building a community of followers for broadcasting the brand's marketing messages, it is now more concerned with manipulating the audience to collect information on audience segmentation and user preferences by using analytics tools. Kai Hua Roh also embedded its audience insight into content production and took the opportunity to co‑create with brands for their marketing communication strategy. The precision and depth of insight open the opportunity to survive as the content creator who serves the need of current digital marketing.

Behind the Success on Line

In this era of mass self‑communication, various social software has prompted the development of interactive communication that connects one sender to a massive audience at the chosen time (Castells, 2009). As Thailand's number one chat application, millions of messages are transferred via Line daily. Line, therefore, provides stickers, cartoon‑like, and character‑driven emoticons that portray both body language and facial reaction in order to allow productive emotional communication, as these symbols

facilitate the absence of nonverbal cues in the computer‑mediated communication environment (Lo, 2008). As emoticons are used in different social contexts to symbolize one's feelings (Derks et al., 2008), it was no surprise that senders in the era of mass self-communication love using them to avoid misinterpretation of feelings.

Shaojung S. Wang's (2015) research suggested that the cartoon‑like Line stickers communicate positive emotions because the detailed depiction is more similar to real‑life nonverbal action expressing laughter and joy. Moreover, the stickers encourage imagined closeness between contact partners while moving through space. Hence, Kai Hua Roh's stickers, which convey positive feelings and good intentions, matched how consumers used Line stickers.

Santi Laohaburanakit, deputy managing director of Banlue Group's Vithita Animation, stated that the creation of the first Kai Hua Roh sticker set had been discussed thoroughly, from finding the cartoonist, actions, to words, allowing consumers to use them conveniently (Thairath Online, 2014). The investment of effort together with the Kai Hua Roh fan base, which had been gathered for more than 40 years, resulted in the success of Kai Hua Roh Line stickers.

Behind the Failure of Application and Podcast

While Kai Hua Roh's Facebook and Line stickers focused on audiences' needs and behavior as the center of the products, the application and podcast were created with company‑based ideas. The application needed a paid subscription to entirely consume the content; however, with the style of a 1‑page gag, only a few audiences drowned in the story and could not resist paying for further reading. As for the podcast, the technology is reported to be consumed mainly by the Millennials and becoming more popular with Generation Z. Research also found that podcast listeners preferred comedy audio to other genres (Adobe Insight, 2019). This might seem to match with Kai Hua Roh fan base. However, in Thailand, podcasts were listened to by a niche group of

audiences. Moreover, the content in the podcast lost the distinctive character of Kai Hua Roh, which are unique cartoon and simple humorous story.

Design Thinking and Transformation

Proposed by Stanford d. school, Design Thinking is a design methodology that provides a solution‑based approach to solving problems in human‑centric ways. The method is comprised of five stages as follows: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test (Figure 5) (Dam R. & Siang T., 2019). The method tended to proceed with a logical conclusion for user testing from one to the next. In reality, however, the process takes place more dynamically and non-linear manner. Often, testing results can show any user insights, leading to another Idea or Prototype process (Terra D., 2018).

Figure 5

Design Thinking Process
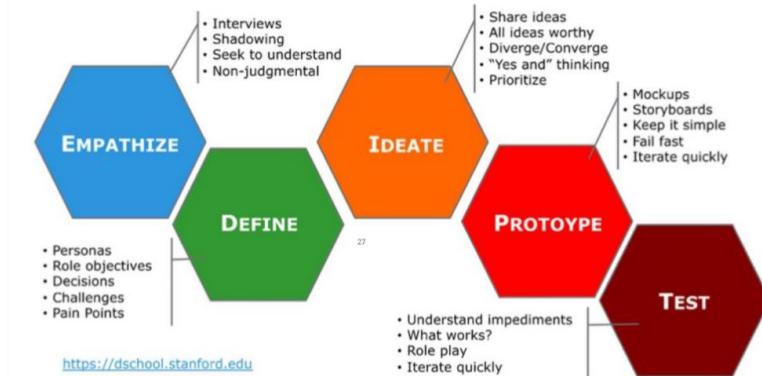
Source: Terra D., 2018

Kai Hua Roh's transformation seemed to implement the design thinking process from the first to the last. It starts from gaining an empathic understanding of the

audiences, defining the needs, ideating new products, prototyping, and launching to test in the market. As a flagship product of Banlue Group, Kai Hua Roh has been used to lead every movement for transformation from traditional to digital. Even though it experienced some failures, Banlue Group took them as a lesson to learn and develop. For example, after the failure of the Kai Hua Roh podcast, Banlue Group had recently launched the 'Salmon Podcast' in September 2019. The fans of Salmon book, another publisher under Banlue Group, were matched with podcast listeners. Furthermore, the content featured celebrity writers' stories in a more cheerful tone. These led to the rising popularity of the podcast channel.

Conclusion

Print media companies, or publishers, have long pursued classical strategies by building solid and profitable positions in a particular market niche or geography. These worked well in the stable, relatively predictable environment of the last half-century when companies were protected by high entry barriers, among other factors. The digital revolution has brought down those barriers. Today, when it is difficult to predict or alter the future, companies must reinvent themselves and their strategies at a rate matching that of the external change they face. They need to understand the core value of the business and be ready to develop an adaptive strategy that responds to whatever may happen. For example, Kai Hua Roh, which has been in the publishing business for 47 years, was focused on its famous characters and unique style as a strip comic and brought them to become one of the most successful online content creators on Facebook.

Figure 6

Kai Hua Roh Transformation

The review of academic research and literature provided by the media firms indicated that, as the world is moving towards consumer‑centric, the transformation for publishers to survive in the digital era should be aligned with the changes in audiences' behavior caused by the development of communication. However, to generate adoption from the existing fan base, the transformation needs to maintain the distinctive characteristics of the publisher. Kai Hua Roh is an example of Thailand's print legend that has adopted various transformation methods to survive in this competitive media market in the digital era, as shown in Figure 6. Throughout the transformation, the tangible assets of the publisher, Banluesarn, are not just the license of the comic magazine Kai Hua Roh. The unique characters and their humorous stories are memorable to the audiences and were utilized in every platform and form the company penetrated. Successful transformation, then, requires embedding creatively in blending the core assets with the changing preferences of consumers in the digital era.

The findings also recommend that publishers see new communication technology as something other than a disruption but as an opportunity to venture into the digital communication world. As a content creator, Kai Hua Roh has never stopped utilizing technology to broaden its product lines. The creativity might fail at some point,

but the experiences gained will lead to successful adaptation afterward. The only concern is that Kai Hua Roh has been transformed for an existing audience‑centric. The number of fans accumulated over 47 years might be numerous, but Kai Hua Roh still needs to broaden its consumer size and generations concerning the sustainability of popularity. However, in the bigger picture, Banlue Group may rely on Kai Hua Roh only to communicate with its existing audiences and try out the initial transformation. As the company has other products to communicate with the younger generation, such as Salmon House, once the transformation of Kai Hua Roh seems to be successful, that transformation will be applied to other products as well.

This article explores the transformation of Kai Hua Roh based on secondary sources, including company profiles and news articles. Therefore, with limited access to in‑depth information, the tensions and unfavorable issues are not mentioned. Further study with other methods, such as in‑depth interviews, may need to unveil every aspect of the transformation process.

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