PORTRAYAL OF ETHNIC MINORITIES ON PRINTED NEWSPAPERS

Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment

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A Collaborative Research Project between Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment

and Department of Sociology, Academy of Journalism and Communication

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CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

As a nation with different ethnic groups, Vietnam, throughout history, has always promoted the solidarity policy so as to protect and develop the country. The Communist Party of Vietnam affirmed that "the issue of ethnic groups and unifying them is the long-term and grassroots strategy for our course of revolution"[1]. However, due to long-standing differences in culture, livelihood and habitat, there are still misunderstandings, wrong judgments as well as social biases between the majority Kinh group and other ethnic minority groups which account for about 13% of the population. These affect the equal development of the ethnic groups and general prosperity.

The press, and in a broader sense, the media play a vital role in the elimination or, contrarily, reinforcement of those misunderstandings and biases. The repetition of positive media messages can create respect and fair behaviour toward ethnic minority groups; on the contrary, negative ones can gradually cause disrespect and lead to unfair treatment, or even feelings of inferiority in ethnic minority groups, thereby taking away their opportunities for equal development and contribution to the society.

Accordingly, Institute for Studies of Society, Economic and Environment and Faculty of Sociology, Academy of Journalism and Communication jointly conducted a research on media message about ethnic minority groups on some printed newspapers in order to (i) assess how some newspapers post articles and comments on ethnic minority people, (ii) analyze the changes in the way of posting articles and making comments over the years, and (iii) review the possibility of such articles and comments from these newspapers causing biases or anti-biases against ethnic minority groups.

The research was conducted on 500 articles which were collected randomly from the 4 most popular newspapers at present, including Thanh Nien, Tuoi Tre, Tien Phong and Cong An Nhan Dan, and

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1. Resolution of the 10th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2006.

were published in the years of 2004, 2006 and the first half of 2008. The research unveiled, for the first time in Vietnam, characteristics of the images of ethnic minority people and their cultures on printed newspapers. This book is condensedly presenting the most outstanding results of the research.

Based on the research outcomes, Dr Nguyen Van Chinh of Hanoi National University wrote an article discussing how some printed newspapers are communicating on ethnic minority groups. This article has been published on some journals, and some of its excerpts form part of this book.

Overview of the social and media context

In the past, ethnic minority groups in Vietnam were usually referred to by general titles, such as the *Thuong*, the *Tho*. Being a majority group, the *Kinh*, whether intentionally or not, usually consider themselves superior to ethnic minority groups, and refer to the *Thuong* and *Tho* as those of lower level of development who live in remote areas with somewhat weird lifestyles[2]. The gaps between these groups widened when the colonists promoted the theory of cultural evolution to argue for their "civilization quest", and applied the policy of "division for domination" to sabotage people solidarity[3]. As a result, prejudices among ethnic groups in Vietnam have more or less existed through time as a product of history.

Identification of the composition of ethnic groups only commenced in the early 1970s based on three criteria namely language, culture and ethnic awareness. Accordingly, 54 ethnic groups have been identified, which show recognition and respect for the people living in the territory of Vietnam. The country is one of the few ASEAN nations to assert the rights of ethnic minority people in the Constitution, and has a nearly full-blown legal framework for the recognition of equal status for ethnic minority groups.

However, according to the "Country Social Analysis: Ethnicity

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2. Evidence of bias and, in some cases, discrimination from the *Kinh*, as the majority group, against the *Thuong* and the Tho can be found in folk and romantic literature in the first half of the 20th century, such as the works *"Vàng và Máu"* (Gold and Blood) by The Lu, or *"Chuyện đường rừng"* (In the forest) by Lan Khai.

3. Cultural evolutionism: see Chapter III, 4.1, page 29

and Development in Vietnam" (World Bank 2009), prejudices against ethnic minority groups was still rampant, and has been causing visible effects on the equal development of the ethnic groups. Apart from clear consequences in terms of poverty, education and healthcare, the low self-esteem stands out when many groups estimate themselves much lower than others do towards them.

A survey of the frequency and position of articles on ethnic minority groups on newspapers partly reveals the modesty of this topic. Only 4 out of 500 selected articles were posted on the first page, which shows that the topic of ethnic minority groups is hardly considered to be of special significance, or to attract particular attention from the readers. The number of articles from 2006 to 2008 did not change significantly, which means the press did not show any special changes of interests in this topic.

Statistics on the areas mentioned in these articles show an imbalance in the media message on ethnic minority groups. In terms of localities or the nature of incidents at specific localities, the common trend was that disadvantaged areas were mentioned most with 54% of the articles, followed by political "hot spots" (11.5%), cultural tourism areas (11.1%), revolutionary base (6.7%), social evils and drugs "hot spots" (3.6%), and other areas (21%). In general, more than two thirds of the articles wrote about disadvantaged areas or those with political and social evil issues, which creates an overall negative impression on the localities of ethnic minority groups.

Another point, which is seemingly less important but also shows an imbalance from the media against ethnic minority groups, is that the media still fails to write the groups' names correctly and uniformly. Based on the List of Ethnic Minority Groups in Vietnam[4], 65% of the articles whereby group names were specified did so incorrectly, or even inadvertently. The act of correctly and uniformly naming the groups will show national pride, self-awareness as well as community respect for each of the group.

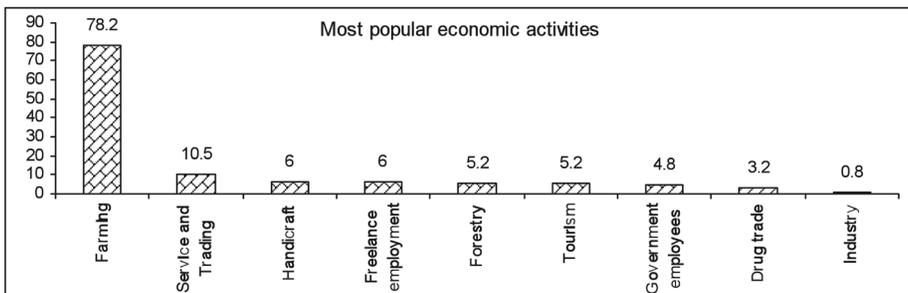4.   Published in 1979 by General Department of Statistics

II. PORTRAYAL OF ETHNIC MINORITY PEOPLE IN SPECIFIC ISSUES

1. Economic Issues

Economic issues appear more as a secondary theme rather than a primary theme of studied articles; however, leaving this aside, economic issues would be the most popular, present in more than half (51.8%) of the 500 articles in the research. Analysis of the economic issues in these articles, which ranges from types of economic operations, nature of production model, and status of the economic entities to economic-related working and living conditions, shows noticeable patterns in media messages.

Economic activities undertaken by ethnic minority people are described quite vividly, yet most are related to agriculture. Other activities such as service and trading, handicrafts, forestry, tourism or freelance employment are also mentioned at a very low frequency, which makes the image of ethnic minority people to be associated with farming works.

Most popular economic activities

	Value
Farming	78.2
Service and Trading	10.5
Handicraft	6
Freelance employment	6
Forestry	5.2
Tourism	5.2
Government employees	4.8
Drug trade	3.2
Industry	0.8

Along with linking ethnic minority people to farming works, the writers seemed to receive support for criticizing the production models of the locals, and promoting the application of new ones. Accordingly, the traditional production models are outdated and connected to instability and risks:"*...Kon Pne Commune…is the poorest and most out-of-date one in the province…*" because of "*the obsolete*

farming method, which uses buffalos to grind the soil before sowing" (case 462). In contrary, usage of the farming methods of lowlanders seems to be the only key to economic development. *"Having received basic education, Vang Mi Co pondered: "my H'mong people are not lazy. But why are we burdened with chronic poverty? It must be because of the ways we work". He read agricultural and forestry promotion books offered by the government, and attended all trainings on agricultural promotion. His family's annual income, as a result, has now reached nearly VND 300 million per year…"* (case 107).

No articles mentioned this topic under the broader context of culture, society and environment to recognize the values of production methods which were formulated in the ethnic groups' process of adapting to the nature for subsistence and growth. No questions on the suitability of development programs to geographical areas and cultures were raised, either. It is possible to say that the denial of indigenous knowledge, weighing of high against low and advanced against obsolete, and promotion of modern science and technology as the only key to economic development are clear signs of cultural evolutionism-related viewpoints[5].

The image of ethnic minority people in economic areas also appears on newspapers as being negative rather than positive. It is noteworthy that the portrayal of ethnic minority people as being self-motivated, creative and hard-working for not only self but also community prosperity appears at quite a high rate (38.2% of the articles); however, the image of ethnic minority people who are disadvantaged, stuck, dependent or looking for economic support still dominates (52.7% of the articles).

In terms of general assessment of ethnic minority people's economic conditions, apart from a modest rate of 20% of the articles covering role models who are well off thanks to utilizing the right economic methods, most describe the people in poverty and hunger (64.2%) or escaping poverty (26.6%). "Poverty" and "hunger" are still commonly-used words.

"…A Sapa is filled with the festive moods of the snowy days. The other Sapa is shivering with fears of the natural catastrophe which could rip off

5. Cultural evolutionism: see Chapter III, 4.1, page 29.

the farmers' meager capital, and push them from middle class to poverty, or from poverty to extreme impoverishment" (case 110)

"…The hamlet is strategically located and convenient for self-sufficient lifestyle; however the people of Doong hamlet are still facing constant hunger." (case 117)

"Traveling through the dry areas of the Central Highlands… drought occurs right in the middle of the rainy season…" has forced the people into "inevitable hunger, or more seriously, indebted to the bank…Millions of Vietnam dong in debt and no way to repay…" (case 375)

Noticeably, ethnic minority people who are well off are usually depicted individually, while those in poverty and in need of support do not appear alone but, instead, as a community. All of these create an overall negative impression on the economic conditions of ethnic minority groups.

Explanation of the cause of poverty or escaping poverty

In addition to the trend of associating ethnic minority people with poverty, the press also has an objective way of explaining how they are burdened with poverty, or escape the state of poverty. In analyzing the cause of poverty, a large portion of the newspapers mentioned unfavourable natural conditions (32.7%) and other factors which are directly related to the people such as lack of capital, shortage of farming land, having too many children, bad health condition (39.8%), or laziness, backward-thinking, incompetence and involvement in social evils. Only a small number of the articles (11.2%) mentioned the lack of support from the authorities.

On the contrary, in analyzing the cause of escaping poverty and reaching the well-off level, many articles mentioned support from the authorities (44%), associations as well as suitable policies of the locality.
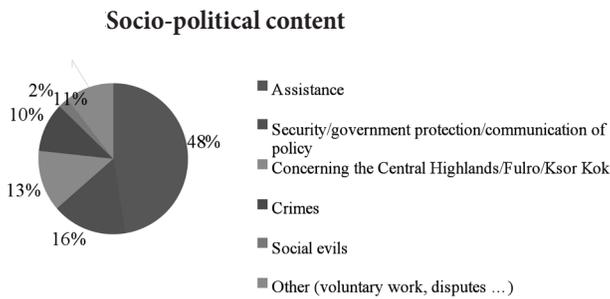
This shows that, on the one hand, the media tends to associate ethnic minority people with poverty, while, on the other hand, trying to explain the cause of poverty or escaping poverty in a subjective way basing only on visible clues. It is therefore quite fair to say that the stereotyped description and unequal judgments on the newspapers have not only created a dull image of ethnic minority

people in economic areas but also an impression that they are the only ones responsible for their difficult situations.

2. Socio-Political Issues

The socio-political area is a very broad one. Within the scope of this research, this topic is structured into 6 prominent groups based on the overall contents of the articles.

The most popular group is assistance activities for ethnic minority people (47.5%), which, for most of the time, related to support for meeting the basic and safety needs. These are considered the lowest ones in the human demand ladder[6]. The areas most commonly referred to in assistance activities are the Central Highlands, which appear at a frequency three times higher than the next one, North Central region. This difference easily leads to an incorrect deduction that ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands are the poorest and weakest ones who need the most assistance. In fact, official statistics in the same period show that the areas with the highest rate of poor ethnic minority households are not the Central Highlands but North Central region (20.4%), the North East (18.01%) and the Mekong river delta (17.55%)[7].

Socio-political content

- Assistance
- Security/government protection/communication of policy
- Concerning the Central Highlands/Fulro/Ksor Kok
- Crimes
- Social evils
- Other (voluntary work, disputes …)

The group of security and government protection and sabotage is the 2nd most popular topic (29.2% in total), which shows that the localities of ethnic minority groups are usually regarded as politically-sensitive or hot spots for political stability. The group of social evils and crimes ranks 3rd, accounting for 12.8% of the articles.

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6. According to the widely accepted Marslow's hierachy of needs (1943)
7. According to Mai Thanh Son and associates (EMWG, 2007, page 70): Report on analysis of secondary documents for the project entitled "Summary of development approaches and searching for a mechanism to improve the voice of ethnic minority groups", funded by Oxfam Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, there are very few articles on the voice, participation and decision-making rights of ethnic minority people, whereas this should make up an important part of the socio-political area. Of the 500 analyzed articles, merely 3 wrote about the participation of ethnic minority officers in local authorities, ethnic minority voters and contribution to Party documents. On the one hand, this shows the lack of participation by ethnic minority people in the policy-making process. On the other hand, it shows that the voice and participation of the people as an issue neglected by the press.

Image of ethnic minority people in the socio-political issues

It is not difficult to imagine that in nearly half of the articles about assistance activities, ethnic minority people mainly appear as those in disadvantaged situation, being passive and even dependent on external assistance rather than finding ways to overcome difficulties. Strong phrases and words showing clear social difference such as "rescue work", "aid", "give", "bring", "grant", "help", "aspire", "taking care of" etc… are used commonly, thereby widening the gap between the mountainous and plain areas, or the minority and majority. This common depiction does not only create stereotypes against ethnic minority people as being poor and dependent people, but also reduce their self-esteem and increase their dependence on external guidance and support.

Articles on the group of security and government protection topics usually describe ethnic minority people as innocent, gullible but acquisitive ones who are prone to coaxing and inducing to repel the government, for example quoting a village patriarch: "*On behalf of the villagers, I apologize the government for not being able to eliminate the people's ignorance in the recent wrongful acts*" and "*public security officers have provided wholehearted support to create favourable conditions for the villagers. However, in their moments of unthoughtfulness, some people forget this grace*" (case 460).

As the voice and right to make decision of ethnic minority people are rarely mentioned on newspapers, their participation, if written about, is understandably not in an active way. Instead, they are usually the subject for "*communication and explanation of guidelines and policies of the Party and State, and to encourage compliance…*" (case 684).

Analysis of the socio-political topics shows the patterns in media message on ethnic minority groups, i.e. they are associated with the needs for social assistance; must receive guidance so as to avoid being induced to sabotage the government; and need proper instruction to observe guidelines and policies rather than actively participate in the decision making process. In short, they are described as being dependent, backward-thinking and in need of external assistance for livelihood and growth.

3. Cultural Issues

The topic of ethnic minority culture is also divided into specific groups based on the appearance of issues in the articles as well as the viewpoints and attitude of the writers. Out of 149 articles which mentioned cultural issues, the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural characteristics is discussed the most, accounting for 55.7%, followed by elimination of depraved customs (27.5%), fading culture (10.7%), and efforts to maintain traditional cultural activities (2.7%).

More than half of these articles wrote about the issues of preservation and promotion of traditional cultural characteristics, which shows the press interests in this area. The articles described ethnic minority people as the most active participants in the preservation of traditional culture (77.8% of the articles). Nevertheless, the main characters are usually the elderly (village patriarch) or those with prestige and high social position. In many cases, it seems like the elderly are the only ones in the community who retain memories of the culture and long for preservation:

> "The Bahnar people…still maintain unique cultural heritages… and the only one capable of telling these epics is the old A Bek…" (case 680)

> "…The village patriarch will advise young villagers … so that all will maintain and promote together … " (case 69)

The youth and ordinary people rarely appear as active subjects in this process. Even though most writers asserted that the traditional culture of ethnic minority groups must be respected and preserved, the absence of ordinary community members in the process of

cultural innovation, practice and preservation is a worrying fact. The press has however only paid attention to preservation of traditional characteristics and totally neglected this fact.

More than a quarter of these articles concentrated on criticizing outdated practices, showing that the people "are not only burdened with livelihood responsibilities but also lots of depraved customs" (case number 449). These practices are quite diversified, with main focus on marriage, birth, healthcare, social evils, and details which highlight the backward-thinking as "being barbarous".

"…*the locals refuse to take medicine for any kind of diseases and sickness, as they believe that sickness is caused by ghosts, and only ask ritual priests to perform curing rituals*" (case 171)

"*Pregnant women due for delivery must go into the jungles and take care of everything by themselves …*" (case 306)

"*If the mother passes away, the child must either be buried, killed or left in the jungles for predators because it is believed that the child is a ghost*" and "*if twins are born, one must be buried*" (case 318)

"*Mr. Kring K'Hong Nha, chairman of Dac Mon commune, admitted with me that, when returning to the village at night, he had heard infants crying besides new graves many times but dared not to save them*" (case 457)

The reason ethnic minority people still exercise these practices is due to lack of legal understanding, or adhesion to the old ways regardless of the law: "… *the Law on Marriage and Family stipulates that girls can only marry at the age of 18, and boys at 20; however, we need to stick to the customs of our H'mong people*" (case 626). Anybody who dares to request removal of these practices will "*be hated by the villagers, and must move to live on the edge of the village*" (case 457). In the presence of these descriptions, ethnic minority people in the eyes of the readers are not only backward-thinking but also extremely conservative so as to maintain their obsolescence.

The content of media messages shows a serious conflict in the cultural life of ethnic minority groups under the pressure of development, i.e., with the same cultural characteristics and traditional lifestyle, the people have to preserve what is regarded

(by outsiders) as good, while eliminating what is considered (also by outsiders) as out-dated. Throughout this conflict-stricken process, ethnic minority people appear as being passive and led by external guidance rather than internal needs and aspirations.

4. Educational Issues

Education and training is an area which receives special attention from the State in the development of ethnic minority regions. This is also represented on newspapers, with a high volume of articles on educational areas (149 articles, or 30% of the total number). Students in ethnic minority region are mainly described in two contradictory perspectives: school dropouts or exemplary models.

The most widely-covered content is the school-quitting phenomenon (more than 32% of the articles) with a range of reasons relating to the students themselves or their families including inability to absorb the knowledge, lack of support from the family, working/child minding, difficult economic conditions, premature marriage. In general, the reason for quitting school can be attributed to poverty and lack of awareness because *"there would be nobody to help with farming work, and crops can be consumed, not letters"* (case number 491). Other reasons relating to teachers or language differences were only mentioned 3 times in the researched articles, whereas an independent study shows that these are the most common causes of ethnic minority children quitting school.

Nearly 27% of the articles praised examples

A study conducted in Vietnam in 2010 by independent consultants for the United Nation's Human Right Council shows that the most common reasons for ethnic minority children to drop out of schools include: high tuition fee, high opportunity costs (ethnic minority children usually have to work to help their families), difficult instructions/lessons and significant distance from home to school. The study shows that ethnic minority children could not study in their mother tongue in the first years of schooling, and thus face a lot of difficulties in absorbing the knowledge and advancing to higher grades.

(http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A-HRC-16-45-Add2.pdf)

of dedicated students, yet these were mostly related to subjective reasons such as the students' diligence and support from their families. The roles of teachers, local authorities and associations were minimal in these positive articles.

Similar to the biased explanation of poverty, the media tried to find out the reasons why ethnic minority students recorded poor schooling results in the students themselves and their families, rather than looking from different perspectives and in a broader context.

5. General Assessment on the Portrayal of Ethnic Minority People in Printed Newspapers

Analysis of each topic and group of contents shows more negative than positive image, which is based on partial rather than objective and multi-faceted viewpoints. Analysis of methodology issues such as media language and bias/non-bias attitude also show similar representations.
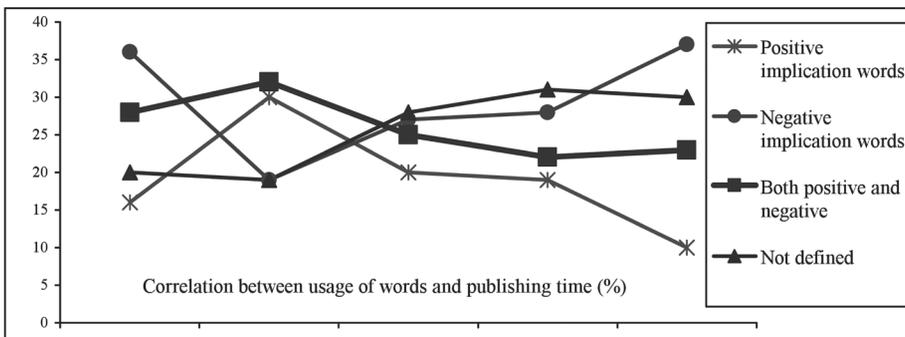
Language

For statistics and analysis purpose, the language used in the articles is grouped figuratively into the positive implication group such as *healthy – beautiful; nice, honest, warm-hearted, united, gentle, active, creative, self-motivated, intelligent, overcoming difficulties, modern, forward-thinking, advanced, preserve, promote, characteristics, loyal etc…* and the negative implication one such as *poverty/hunger, disadvantaged, shabby, deprived, backward-thinking, depraved customs, child/premature marriage, lots of children, superstition, lazy, perturbative, reactionary, induce etc…*

Using the above groupings of words, the writers use significantly more negative than positive-implication words when it comes to describing ethnic minority groups. As much as 41% of the articles use only the negative implication group of words, compared to 24% with the positive implication group, and 35% with both groups.

Among the articles where the negative implication group is used, the sub-group of words describing economic conditions, for example *poverty, disadvantaged, deprived, shabby, difficult, borrow, indebted,* is most popular, accounting for 65.8% of the total number. The sub-group of words describing lifestyle such as *backward-thinking, depraved customs,*

superstitious, lack of understanding is the 2nd most popular one (23.6%). The sub-group of words describing character and behaviour such as *lazy, pertubative, reactionary, induce, illegal* ranks 3rd (18.7%). The remainder consists of other words such as *child/premature marriage, lots of children, sick and ill, timid, shy, dependent etc…* The wide use of such negative words and expressions on newspapers can easily cause bias and consolidate the negative understanding of ethnic minority people as those who are backward-thinking, poor, dependent and non-decisive.

Analysis of the correlation between usage of words and publishing time also shows that the ratio of positive words, which is already low, tends to decrease over time, and vice versa, the ratio of negative words which is already high tends to increase over time. The ratio of positive words and expressions increases sharply from 16% in the 1st and 2nd quarters of 2004 to 29.8% in the 3rd and 4th quarters of the same year, but decreases gradually to a mere 9.8% in the 1st and 2nd quarters of 2008. On the contrary, the sub-group of negative words and expressions declines from 36.1% in the 1st and 2nd quarters of 2004 to 19% in the 3rd and 4th quarters of the same year, but rises slowly to 36.9% in the 1st and 2nd quarters of 2008. This shows, despite the development of the society and the State's efforts in narrowing the gaps between ethnic groups, the media's viewpoint and assessment of ethnic minority people seems not to have improved.

Correlation between usage of words and publishing time (%)

Legend:
- ✳ Positive implication words
- ● Negative implication words
- ■ Both positive and negative
- ▲ Not defined

As a result, while readers could picture ethnic minority people as those who are active, creative, self-motivated, intelligent, hard-working, diligent, or healthy, beautiful, nice, warm-hearted, honest, united, gentle, they can not neglect the more prominent images of the people being poor, disadvantaged, deprived, shabby, difficult,

indebted, lack of knowledge (low or no education), backward-thinking, superstitious. By repeating negative words and expressions at a high frequency, articles on printed newspapers can attach a negative image and deepen the bias against ethnic minority people.

Level of prejudices against ethnic minority people

The writers' prejudiced attitude is not only represented by words which are either negative or positive, but, in a more discreet way, is also implied. Judgments basing on the viewpoints of the lowlanders or in comparison with the *Kinh* are very common.

"Unlike with the Kinh…we have to come to them to provide healthcare services…" (Case 306)

"In the newly-built house, furniture and utensils are comparable to those of the lowlanders. There are also flat-screen television, motorbike, good refrigerator, expensive chairs and tables …" (Case 674)

"In the first days when the Ma Lieng moved to Ca Xen hamlet, Mr. Cao Chau, the then head of hamlet, insisted on a low house which is close to the main street like the Kinh's. When asked about the reason, Mr. Chau said: "I would like to see if living in a low house is better than in a stilt house, so that I could ask and encourage the villagers to follow" (Case 302)

Even when the characters are described positively, the bias attitude and lack of equality still reveal through the use of immoderate language, slang or foreign languages

"…Looking at the young and inexperienced face of the opposite person, one can hardly believe that he is the owner of the largest herd of cows and goats on the rock plateau, and the youngest best farmer in 2007 nationwide. Vang Mi Co told his life story in the Kinh language so clearly that commune officer and interpreter became "redundant"" (Case 107)

"…the house in front of us is not the usual stilt house made from wood and neohouzeaua by the highlanders but a solidly-built work with glass doors and windows, and flat roof like a real lowlander's residence. Sitting in the armchair in his spacious house which is beautifully tiled,, the old man used the remote control to turn on the 21" screen television on the magnificent stand to watch the news…"(Case 377)

The analysis of 500 articles shows most writers have prejudices

at different levels in their writing about ethnic minority people. In general, 17% of the articles are biased, 52% are strongly biased, while only 31% are identified as unbiased. In terms of chronology, the level of bias in the articles does not change much, and remains at a high level, which shows that the bias against ethnic minority people on printed newspapers is widespread and long-standing.
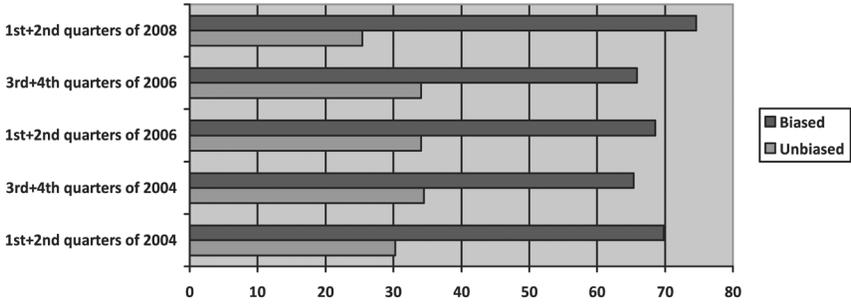
III. ETHNIC MINORITY CULTURES IN THE PRESS PERSPECTIVE

Quantitative analysis results presented above show the depiction of negative rather than positive aspects, with a high rate of prejudices, is a prominent characteristic of Vietnamese newspaper articles on ethnic minorities. The qualitative analysis continues to point out these articles usually portray ethnic minority cultures under some popular patterns, despite the diversified content and method of communication. These patterns can be grouped into three main trends, namely (1) "adding mythical flavours"; (2) "adding romantic flavours"; and (3) "adding tragical flavours".

1. The trend of adding mythical flavours to the spiritual life and traditional practices of the ethnic groups

In the past, the remote and mountainous areas with ethnic groups alien to the lowlanders' imagination always seem to be full of mythical things. Today, although stories with fictious elements are no longer popular as the gaps between the low and high lands are increasingly being narrowed, the differences in the cultural life of the ethnic groups are still of great interests to readers. This is probably why the newspapers are particularly interested in strange customs, and either describes them as mythical or labels them as outdated, wild and ignorant. This type of articles mainly focuses on four main groups of topics as follows:

- *Unique customs in relation to marriage, family and love* of ethnic minority groups such as "cướp vợ" (wife abduction)[8] by some groups in the Northern mountains, or sororate and levirate marriage[9] by some groups in the Central Highlands. Similarly,

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8. "Wife abduction" is popular in H'mong and Dao language speakers in the Northern mountainous areas. This practice usually takes place when the young ones are in love but are unable to organize a traditional wedding, and the woman intentionally agrees to be 'stolen' by the man. The practice is duly recognized by the community's common laws, but must adhere to strict conditions. There have been criticisms that this practice is an excuse for child, arranged and traded marriages.

9. Many ethnic minority groups in the Truong Son mountain range – Central Highland

there are variations of the "love market", the youth's practices for finding the love such as *ngu mai* (lay down and talk with each other), *ngu tham* (home visit at night time), *ngu chung* (sleep together), *di sim* (sleep at the village's common house), *choc san* (hit the floor with a pole); the custom of showing the breast and nude bath by mountain girls etc…

- *Differences in culinary customs* such as the practice of hunting and boning wild animals, fishing on the upstream of rivers and springs, preparation of strange dishes and eating habits of the groups. While recognizing these practices as the unique characteristics of ethnic culture, the articles tend to emphasize the "secret hands-on" techniques or assign special spiritual meanings to them.

- *Local beliefs, traditional festivals and sacred spaces* of the groups, such as rituals for the gods, offerings, sacrifices (e.g. buffalo-stabbing festival, peace festival, Gau Tao festival etc…), fertility rites and cults, and *sinh thuc khi* rituals, sacred spaces (e.g. holy forest, haunted jungle, ancient, abandoned and mythical temples, shrines and architectural structures.

- *Funeral-related practices* of ethnic minority groups are also targeted and regularly mentioned on newspapers so as to attract readers' curiosity. Regardless of their aim on attention-drawing elements of the practices, the press usually includes calls for abolition of such in their articles.

The effects of this writing trend usually result in a distorted perception of ethnic minority culture by readers, as well as adverse reactions from the concerned ethnic minority groups.

There are actually no love markets. Markets like Sapa and Khau Vai are actually the place for exchange of culture, information and feelings.

areas still maintain the practice. Accordingly, a widower can marry the younger sister of the deceased (anthropologists call this the sororat phenomenon). Similarly, the widow can marry the younger brother of the deceased (aka levirat). This practice is also popular in different tribes in the world. Human right activists claim that this is a depraved custom because it violates the humans' freedom to marry, and instead tying them to strict practices. However, there are also claims that this is a highly-humanitarian practice because it ensures that children who lost a parent are properly cared for and brought up, while the family life is well maintained.

Nevertheless, some Kinh people inflate that Khau Vai is the place where former couples meet up and do whatever they want. Those stories are totally made up. (Cu Hoa Van, 2009)[10]

2. The trend of adding romantic flavours to the cultures of the highlands

In addition to the trend of casting a mythical shadow over ethnic minority culture to draw on readers' curiosity, the other trend of 'adding romantic flavours' to ethnic culture also carries significant weight on the newspapers. In journalists' words, the landscape of mountainous regions shows up as magnificent as in scenery paintings, and there are rarely-seen products, unique specialties, ideal relaxing space, as well as special cultural characteristics of innocent people waiting to be discovered etc... In reading these, we can't help picturing a totally different mountainous area which is not outdated, backward-thinking, poor, painless, but only shows 'innocent smiles' and 'eyes which are brighter than the flames'. These 'romantic flavour' articles typically fall into the following patterns:

a) Praising the scenery with rivers and springs, mountains, valleys, terraced fields, villages and stilt houses.

b) Describing the beauty or specialty of local products such as brocade, forest and native goods, flora and fauna.

c) Introducing and promoting the mountainous culinary joys such as types of wines, traditional remedies, local dishes as well as leisurely habits such as traditional dances, singing, and drinking

d) Exaggerating the romantic side of mountainous women's beauty.

3. The trend of "adding tragical flavours" to the real life of ethnic groups

While more than 50% of the articles wrote about the actual economic state of ethnic minority groups in the mountainous areas, the topic of poverty and disadvantaged areas takes up a significant part (54%) of

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10. "Do not misinterpret national culture"
    http://www.baomoi.com/Home/VanHoa/dddn.com.vn/Dung-ngo-nhan-van-hoa-dan-toc/2871001.epi

this group. This shows that the press is particularly interested in this topic. However, with the negative language and prejudiced attitude pointed out earlier, the newspapers description, in many cases, tends to add tragical elements to the life of the people in the following patterns:

(a) Emphasizing the disadvantageous aspects in the life of ethnic minority people in order to call for interference and support from the State

(b) Describing the ravage of social evils in mountainous areas as the offspring of the poverty-stricken and problematic life

(c) Viewing the lack of education and business knowledge of ethnic minority people as a burden to the course of development

(d) Exaggerating the role of external support while neglecting the internal capacity of the people

(e) Seeing ethnic minority people as those who are innocent, easy-going, deceivable, and easily induced to follow reactionary forces

More seriously, this 'tragical' state is usually attributed to internal causes, and is repeated on different newspapers. Some examples are:

- Premature marriage and having lots of children

- Drug trading and addiction

- Using crops to make wine, and wine abuse

- Illiteracy and lack of business knowledge

- Laziness

- Obsolete farming practices, conservative lifestyle

- Ravaging catastrophe and epidemics

- Dependence on support from the State

By utilizing these factors, the journalists seem to have taken the utmost and direct cause of poverty as being due to the internal issues of the ethnic groups only. External factors such as the unsuitability of policies, repressive interference of socio-economic projects, the

implementation and organization of development policies for mountainous areas, destruction and depletion of the habitat, negative impact of development projects and market forces etc… are hardly mentioned. Such approach shows that the journalists have not tried to *comprehend* ethnic people's culture and lifestyle, but labeled their lifestyle instead. The typical labeling formula in these articles is "*backward-thinking + lazy + dependent on the State = poverty*". Unfortunately, most of the labeled subjects, due to their weak say, have virtually no opportunities to respond to incorrect information about them.

4. Factors which affect the writing style and comments on ethnic minority groups

4.1. Journalist and reader

In order to find out the factors which are affecting the way newspapers write about ethnic minority people, it is possible to begin by appreciating how the ethnicity of the journalists and the tastes of their target audience could affect the type of information that the journalists collect, the interpretation and introduction of such information to the readers.

No statistics show the ethnicity of writers of articles about ethnic minority people; however, based on the registration of more than 50 journalists, who specialize in ethnic minority groups, at a press workshop in November 2009 in Hanoi, it is possible to see that most of the journalists are of the *Kinh* group, and few are trained or dedicated only to writing about ethnic minority people. This means most of the writers are talking about ethnic groups which are relatively different to them in terms of culture and value system. Accordingly, it is understandable that the articles brought to readers are usually from an outsider and observer point of view. The issues specific to ethnic minority groups are also explained based on the personal experiences which journalists collect from their own culture.

> "Usually we see and hear false perceptions and misunderstandings of our culture on television and newspapers, yet all we could do is to ignore. When offended, ethnic minority people tend to turn away rather than to fight back…"[11]

11. Speech by poet Duong Thuan of Tay ethnic group in the article "Don't misinterpret…", quoted.

Tastes of the target audience could also affect the type of information and associated conveyance by the press. Newspapers with articles on ethnic minority people mainly target the majority of readers who belong to the majority group and want to learn about the socio-political situation and culture of other groups. However, this 'labeling' and patterned type of conveyance, with the prime aim of satisfying curiosity, usually leaves unpredictable consequences. Mr. Cu Hoa Van said that such information is very dangerous because:

"It incorrectly affects our understanding and perception. Ethnic minority people have many good and humane customs and practices. However, at times we did not understand and condemn them as wasteful, disorderly and therefore banned them. In work and production, it is presumed that ethnic minority people are ignorant, and need to be guided steps by steps; yet in fact they have valuable experience which allows them to subsist under such difficult conditions like on Meo Vac Mountains. We presume that they are ignorant, but we may not survive in those conditions"[12].

4.2. The obsessions of "cultural evolutionism", "cultural sediments" and "cultural centre"

Each ethnic culture and community has its own social structure, including a system of knowledge on production, lifestyle, ethical values and social as well as spiritual ties. All these factors form a distinctive value system and internal strength for subsistence, adaptation and growth. Why does the press usually bypass the layers of culture which make up the strengths of each ethnic group to only see, describe and provide surface information in a seemingly unknowing manner? It might be necessary to find the cause in knowledge base which has silently penetrated and dominated the thinking of the journalists so that when they write about others, such unknowingness rises and tells them what to do.

Until recently, comments on ethnic culture as being obsolete, backward-thinking and primitive are still popular on newspapers as well as scientific researches. These viewpoints have attached the human cultural development process to a strict social hierarchy system, and therefore failed to see the diversity and distinctive features of different cultures. *Cultural evolutionism* is a theory exploited by

12. "Don't misinterpret…", quoted.

colonists to defend their invasion and domination of non-European peoples under the claims of a "civilization quest". Nowadays, instead of seeing other cultures as being backward and primitive, scientists recognized the diversity as a universal characteristic of humankind[13] This ideology must be welcomed and applied by the press in their analyses of ethnic minority cultures.

Another theory which is quite popular in description of Vietnamese culture these days is temporarily referred to as the 'hidden layer of culture' theory. Stemming from Russian linguistics and then applied in studies of cultural characters, this theory presumes that culture is divided into two layers called the hidden and surface ones. The cultural values of ethnic groups usually settle in a deeper layer which is referred to as the hidden layer, aka cultural sediments. This layer of culture is considered to be

The cultural evolutionism theory was developed from the late 19th century by European scholars Edward Taylor (1881), Lewis Morgan (1877) and Frederik Engels (1884). According to the theory, all human societies must go through a single path of development from low to high, from ignorance to civilization. Under this evolution ladder, Western societies are supposed to be at the highest development level. The theory was used by European colonists as a scientific basis for their invasions out of Europe.

inherent and less susceptible to changes. The upper layer, on the other hand, is considered to be the surface which is open to new concepts but unstable, and is therefore subject to changes. It is believed that, in order to identify the characters of a culture, access to a deeper level, i.e. the hidden layer of culture, is necessary. The way newspapers add mythical flavours to cultural phenomena and focus on ancient and strange practices may be related to this approach.

In fact, it is necessary to understand that culture is not invariable but, instead, is open to absorption, adaptation and changes. By seeing culture as a static phenomenon and permanently invariable values, we have denied culture's social robustness, and, consequently, are

13. Nguyen Van Chinh, One Century of Ethnology in Vietnam - Challenges in Innovation and Integration. Van hoa dan gian, volume 5 (113), 2007, p. 47-67.

prone to localism, thereby looking down on exogenetic elements and oversighting the new vitality of endogenous factors.

The Centre – Periphery theory could also be one of the elements affecting journalists' thinking of culture. Researchers have once given prominence to cultural centres, and deduced that culture is dispersed from centres to peripheries. In other words, the periphery is subject to the influence of the centre, and is not only 'attracted by the centre but also passively absorbs the cultural dispersal from the centre'. Utilizing this theory in the context of Vietnam, some researchers infer that Thang Long – Hanoi has always been 'the quintessence of the country', and accordingly ethnic minority localities are the peripheries.

Nevertheless, when considering culture beyond national boundary and against the history, we could see that there are other cultural centres. While Vietnamese culture is subject to the influence of Confucianism, many other peoples are subject to that of Hinduism. Considering a more contracted space, there are cultural sub-centres such as Vietnamese, Cham, Khmer and Thai. In fact, most ethnic minority groups in Vietnam are transnational ones. They might be minority groups within the national territory; however their habitats cover a larger geographical space, and consequently they are also subject to the influence of other cultural centres apart from the Vietnamese culture.

This shows that the cultures of ethnic minority groups in remote and mountainous areas are not necessarily peripheral, but could be closer to cultural centres other than the Vietnamese one. The use of the national administrative border as the basis could lead to the misinterpretation that the culture of the majority group is central, and those of minority groups are peripheral. More seriously, in a multi-ethnic country, this is an implicit foundation for the ideology whereby the majority group is standard, and minority groups are passive, dependent and reliant on the centre. The way some journalists describe cultures of ethnic minority groups in Vietnam as dependent and backward may have been affected by this theory to some extents.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS ON IMPROVEMENT OF THE PRESS MESSAGE ON ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS

Upon the analysis of how some printed newspapers are portraying ethnic minority people, and of the causes of negative media message on ethnic minority groups, the research team would propose the following recommendations to gradually change this situation.

1. Formulate a public communication strategy for ethnic minority groups and mountainous areas

Ethnic economic development and cultural preservation is a guideline affirmed by the law. This guideline also receives particular interests from social organizations. Nevertheless, the press seems not to have a strategy to take part in this process. Most articles and news about ethnic minority groups, if not written on orders, only appear more regularly during holidays, vacations or some special national events. There are very few journalists dedicated to mountainous areas and ethnic minority groups so as to comment or write key articles to "direct public opinion" as expected. At the same time, there is no reliable and full database which journalists can refer to for information when writing. Accordingly, in order to carry out a progressively-oriented media strategy on the mountainous areas, the following tasks need to be completed:

- Include ethnic minority group and mountainous area issue in the journalist training programme

- Organize training courses and workshops in order to promote and improve the knowledge and argument on ethnic minority and mountainous culture for journalists, thereby facilitating their specialization for the topic

- Develop an electronic database to provide information on ethnic groups, related policies and laws as well as completed, ongoing or upcoming projects in the ethnic minority and mountainous regions for the journalists' ease of reference.

Information in this database should be of an open nature and free from comments or opinions, so that users can make their choice and be responsible for related usage[14]

- Adopt policies to encourage coverage of ethnic minorities and mountainous areas; work out plans for key and long-term issues instead of seasonal issues

- Promote a critical approach so as to bring the voice of ethnic minority people to the public; avoid one-way propaganda; at the same time focus on vital issues of ethnic minority groups and mountainous areas.

2. Improve the objectivity and transparency of information on ethnic minority groups

Objectivity is an important characteristic of news because it enables readers to believe in the information they get. However, as mentioned above, journalists still cover minority issues from an outsider's point of view, which can either be sympathetic or criticizing and imposing. This hurts the ethnic minority people, who have already felt being misunderstood. Furthermore, in an effort to catch readers' attention, newspapers also use rhetorical methods that intensify the misunderstandings. There are very few critical articles that give convincing comments, conclusions and recommendations based on intensive studies.

In order to attain the objectivity and reliability not only in ethnic minority issues, editorials need to adopt a standardized procedure to ensure the news making process is transparent.

3. Understanding, not judging, in writing about ethnic minorities

Understanding is not sympathetic or compassionate. It means putting yourself in an insider's shoe, rather than imposing and criticizing based on personal experiences of an outsider. Without an

14. According to the website of the Committee for Ethnic Minorities <http://cema.gov. vn>, on November 18th 2009, the Institute for Ethnic Minority under the Committee held a workshop on the deployment of the project entitled "Development of database on ethnic minority groups in Vietnam". This is a great idea provided that the database is developed basing on the principle of transparency, objectiveness, comprehensiveness and openness instead of introducing one-way information and communication.

understanding viewpoint, articles about ethnic minority groups are only stories of the writers but not the voice of the subjects concerned. Consequently, the real opinions, demands, issues and aspirations of ethnic minority people are virtually unknown to the society and policy makers.

Thus, in order to avoid subjective imposition and creation of incorrect message about ethnic minority people, journalists need to place themselves in the context of the history and society, to understand the ties of cultural and ethical values of the people they're writing about. In sodoing, they can understand *people's viewpoints*, and appreciate *people's perspective of their world.* Outcomes of their efforts will be articles that appreciate indigenous knowledge and cultural values, promote the voice of ethnic minority communities, and increase the mutual understanding and respect among groups.

EPILOGUE

Ethnic minority groups in Vietnam are facing the conflicts between development, integration and preservation of cultural characters. Development is an urging requirement; but the development process always brings along the consequences such as loss of cultural characters and environmental destruction. In the State's ethnicity policy system, the task of successfully resolving the conflict between development and preservation of ethnic culture is of great importance.

The press plays a significant role in this context because they are the only entity capable of linking the State with communities, and linking ethnic minority groups with the society at large. The problem is the portrayal of ethnic minorities groups in newspapers still remains partial and even prejudiced to a notable extent. Instead of respecting the cultural diversity and differences, journalists tend to use the majority's viewpoint and understanding as the basis for negative assessment of ethnic minority people and their culture. The reason, as outlined earlier, can be attributed to personal experiences of the journalists, readers' tastes, and, most importantly, influence of cultural theories and concepts which have long become obsolete. This situation needs to be changed so that the images of the people and culture of ethnic minority groups are reflected impartially on the press.

In the process of development towards a civil society, two-way communication plays a key role in creating unanimity. Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country, in which each ethnic group has its own culture and lifestyle. These distinctive characters have created the image of a culturally diversified country. By listening, understanding and defending the voice of ethnic minority groups, the vivid breaths from rich and unique cultures are brought to the society, thereby increasing mutual understanding, decreasing conflicts, and improving State policies to develop a modern, harmonious and advanced society.