

**The New Media Landscape
and the Challenges for Local Policy
Communication in Vietnam**

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Abstract

Communication plays an essential role in the policy process from agenda setting to formulation, adoption, implementation and evaluation. Policy communication aims to inform, persuade people to follow and support government policies. In Vietnam, the mainstream media is considered the official means of policy communication from the government to the people and the channel for feedback from the people to the government. This traditional concept of the media has been challenged with the introduction of the new technology and the rise of social media. In the new media landscape, mainstream media remains the important but not the only single means of policy communication, which means people have alternative means and sources of information. Local policy communication in Vietnam is characterized by an uneven distribution or inequality of information between urban and rural areas. The application of ICT, therefore, has become both the answer and challenge to the innovation of policy communication in the era of technological development. This research aims to answer the following questions: What are the characteristics of the new media landscape in Vietnam? How is the quality of government-media-people relationship evaluated? Based on such evaluation, what are the challenges for local policy communication in Vietnam anchored on the reality of the country? And finally, what will be or should be the government's response to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of local policy communication?

Keywords: local, policy communication, ICT, challenge, Vietnam

Introduction

Policy communication has an essential role in promoting the dialogue between the government and the people (Røys, 2009; European Consensus, 2017; Lenihan, 2009). It also enhances government's effectiveness and efficiency (Truong, 2017; World Bank, 2009). That is why governments have to find ways and technology to get the messages to the people. It has become more and more complicated for governments to communicate to their citizens as they are segmented and scattered (Vu, 2018). Government's policy communication has to compete with commercial communication, which is more taste-tailored and entertainment-driven. Government's policy communication is generally aimed for people to know, to support and to follow the policies.

Technological developments bring opportunities for governments to bridge the communication with the people while poor ICT infrastructure can be a "major hindrance" to developing countries (John Vong, Insu Song and Purnendu Mandal; Pujan Ziaie; Airi Salminen, 2013). Technology to some extent has enabled governments to become more active, transparent and democratic in the dialogue with the people. As a utilization of technology, e-Government has become a trend among governments in their efforts to build a sustainable and transparent society, in which people can participate in poli-

cy-making process. According to UN e-Government Survey 2018, ICTs have “transformational and facilitating powers” to disperse public services to people and leave nobody behind. It is also noted in the survey report that all 193 UN member states had “portals and back-end systems to automate core administrative tasks, and 140 provide at least one transactional service online”.¹

In Vietnam, people’s right to know and participate in policy-making process has long been a crosscutting slogan. The document of the National Party Congress 12th Tenure in 2016 continued to state, “Democracy must be exercised fully and closely in all the fields of the society. It is important to ensure that people participate in all the stages of the process to make decisions, which influence the interest of the people”.² The “democratization” of social life in Vietnam is partly understood as the communication of Party’s directions and government’s policies so as to ensure people’s “right to know, to discuss, to implement and to examine”. The relevant ministries namely the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC) and Government’s Office are mainly responsible for specifying Party’s directions into communication plans. Other ministries such as Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Healthcare, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Ministry of Industry and Trade, etc. have their own strategy and plan to communicate the policies in their sectors.

The policy communication by ministries often see shortcomings and limitations due to the lack of resources, inadequacy of communication expertise and the slow application of technology. Their policy communication takes the model of public information, which is done by the Press Office within the Department of General Affairs. Information about the new policies is normally given to the media via press releases, press conferences, meetings and sometimes interviews while their draft is published on the ministry portal. This traditional model of information is strongly challenged by the rise of the social media. With their highly interactive and open character, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. allow people to post anything they want and find the information that they don’t find on mainstream media. When people cannot find the information that they want to know from mainstream media, they will try to find it from alternative sources.

For the last few years, there has been a big concern about the capacity of social media in publishing information in Vietnam. The concern gets even bigger as young people are mostly spending their time on social media, instead of paying attention to mainstream media. Social media has become an environment for fake news and distorted information, which make it extremely difficult to distinguish right from wrong. Some government officials and media managers see social media as the competitor and threat to mainstream media as they are concerned that without proper regulation, social media can spread wrong information to the people, which stirs public distrust, reduces government’s credibility and provokes social instability. Social media in such case is not necessarily seen as an added means of policy communication but a disturbance to the

flow of information.

The Cyberspace Security Law, which was adopted by the National Assembly on 12th June 2018 and became effective on 1st January 2019, is seen as government's response and effort to manage content on social platforms. This law specifies forbidden behaviors in online environment such as organizing information campaign against the government; distorting historical facts; providing false information and causing public confusion and requires foreign media enterprises to establish representative office or branch in Vietnam. While proponents of the law stated that it is a necessary legislation to purify online content for the sake of public stability, opponents argued that it would limit the scope of online discussion. Given this context, the approach to social media as a means of policy communication remains controversial.

As the new media landscape presents unprecedented challenges and opportunities to policy communication, it is important to understand this reality as the foundation for government's response. The new media landscape is characterized by interweaving opportunities and challenges depending on how technological advances are utilized. Technology is comparable to the two-edge knife, which cannot be justified by the simple functional definition. In addition, the government's legislations, i.e. Cyberspace Security Law, remain important but they can only deal with issues in legal aspects while several social and ethical aspects need to be patched bottom up by enhancing public media literacy. The application of ICT, therefore, has become both the answer and challenge to the innovation of policy communication in the era of technological development.

This study aims to answer the following questions: What are the characteristics of the new media landscape in Vietnam? How is the quality of government-media-people relationship evaluated? Based on such evaluation, what are the challenges for local policy communication in Vietnam as seen in the reality of the country? And finally, what will be or should be the government's response to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of local policy communication?

I. The New Media Landscape

The new media landscape in Vietnam is driven by technology and is characterized by the high Internet penetration of population, rise of social media and fake news, and the emergence of multidimensional flow of information. When it comes to local policy communication, there has been an asymmetry of information between urban and rural areas and the competition for public attention between mainstream media and social media. The rapid explosion of technology is one of the most important factors, which affects the formation and development of the new media landscape. Technology has in it both the powers of push and pull, give and take, emancipation and control. On the one hand, technology pushes communication beyond the limits of time and space, allowing government to reach more and more people. On the other hand, it endangers human touch in communication while spreading fake news and provoking hatred speech. That is why Neil Postman (1992) considered technology as both "friend and enemy"³ in his book

Technopolopoly.

High Internet penetration of population

Since its commercial introduction in the country in 1997, Internet has quickly become popular with the steady increase both in bandwidth and speed. The number of Internet users in Vietnam has increased sharply, especially after the year 2000 with the establishment of big Internet service providers namely VNPT, FPT and NetNam. According to Statista, the number of Internet users in Vietnam as of March 2019 is 59.2 million people, accounting for about 67 per cent of the population. This number is projected to increase to 75.7 million people in 2023. This can be an advantage to government effort to communicate with the people online and to offer electronic services. We Are Social's Digital Report 2018 estimated that Vietnamese spent averagely almost 7 hours a day on Internet, including 2.5 hours on social media.⁴ This means if the government wants to communicate with the people, find them on the Internet.

Internet gave birth to online newspapers and influenced the government authorities to establish their online portals to communicate their activities and policies. Que Huong (Home Country) was the first online journal established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1997 as the official channel of information from Vietnam government to overseas Vietnamese. This online journal was created with the view to provide external information to Vietnamese overseas at a time when postal delivery of hard copy publication was extremely difficult and costly. At its early stage of development, Internet had already become the answer to government communication beyond the borders. After Que Huong, Vietnamnet was founded in 1998, followed by Nhan Dan's (People) and Lao Dong's (Labor) online edition. Given the popularity of online newspapers, the Academy of Journalism and Communication, the biggest institution in Vietnam for journalism and communication education, offered the major Online Newspaper in 2004.

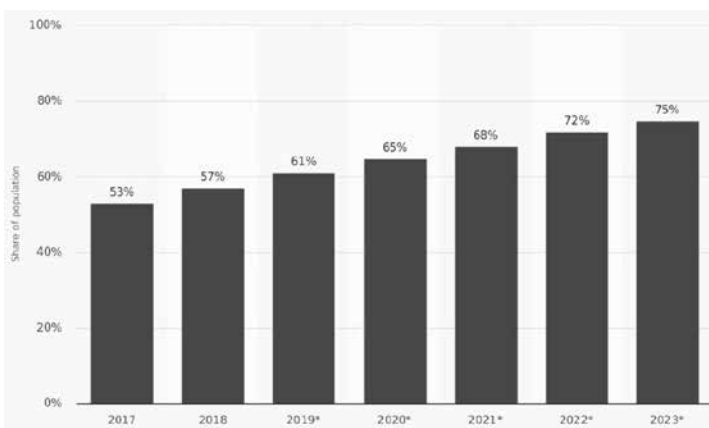


Figure 1: Internet User Penetration in Vietnam from 2017 to 2023

Source: Statista 2019

According to a report by MIC, as of 2015 Vietnam had 105 online newspapers and magazines and 207 information websites run by media organizations.⁵ Online newspapers pushed the competition for audience to the next level, as they have to thrive for both speed and reliability of information. More and more people, especially young people are reading online newspapers, instead of buying print newspapers. The popularity of online newspapers eased the early concern with Internet as some central officials were hesitant with having Internet in Vietnam. They were concerned that Internet could be the access point, which flooded toxic and hostile information into the country, making it extremely difficult to manage content. Former vice minister of Post and Telecommunications Mai Liem Truc, who is credited with facilitating Internet presence in Vietnam, once said, “The birth of online newspapers gave me more reasons to believe in the license of Internet”.⁶

However, the high Internet penetration of the population should be more closely examined in two issues. First, while Internet connections become a common thing in urban areas, especially in big cities like Ha Noi, Da Nang, and Ho Chi Minh City, it is still difficult to get connected in remote and mountainous areas due to poor infrastructure. There is an information gap between urban areas, which are flooded with information and the mountainous areas, which are constrained by the lack of information. This inequality remains a challenge to the government in their effort to communicate on even basis to people across the long and narrow country. Second, media literacy in general and Internet skills in particular remain an issue as people lack skills to use Internet reasonably and responsibly for their personal development. According to a survey by Consumer Probe authorized by PC Tools in 2011, Vietnamese Internet users lacked knowledge and skills for online security.

Rise of social media and fake news

The explosion of Internet in Vietnam has led to the popularity of social media. As of January 2018, Vietnam has a total of 55 million active users of social media with Facebook and YouTube as the two most active social media at 61 and 59 per cent of users respectively. Social media is widely used especially among young people for the purposes of sharing information, chatting with friends, posting photos and videos, watching videos and searching for information. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Zalo etc. have become very popular means of information exchange and entertainment. The foreign social media dominates the society as domestic IT enterprises do not have enough resources to build comparable platforms. Zalo has been the only domestic social media, which ranked fourth as the most active social platform in Vietnam after Facebook, YouTube and Facebook Messenger.⁷

Social media has become an alternative source of information in Vietnam as people would go to social media like Facebook and YouTube to look for information that they cannot find on mainstream media. Several bloggers, journalists and other influencers publish their writings on their Facebook accounts, which are followed by thousands of people. Social media has become an enabling platform and environment for user gener-

ated content and shifted the role of the audience from passive recipient to active producer and distributor of information. With their flexibility and interactivity, social media allows people to publish any information that they want. This user generated content according to Nic Newman (2009) does not replace information from mainstream media but “create an important extra layer of information and diverse opinion”.⁸

The availability of user generated content on social media has challenged the mainstream media in at least two aspects. First, it increases the intensity of the competition for public attention between social media and mainstream media. Mainstream media appears to be slower than social media in providing timely information due to the rigorous editorial process. It is also the case that audience can find on social media some information that they cannot find on mainstream media. However, the accuracy of the information on social media remains as an open question. Second, it is difficult to verify social media information, which in many cases turns out to be fake news. Some people even created fake Facebook page of government agencies and politicians to mislead people with wrong information. In March 2019, a fanpage entitled “CPV’s Central Commission for Communication and Education” was discovered to be unauthentic. It was created with the aim of capitalizing on the credibility of central organization to provide misleading information to the people.

This may be why politicians and government officials are still hesitant to use social media as a means of communication with the people. They are worried that social media channels may bring unwanted information and unexpected problems so the approach “better safe than sorry” is taken. In such context, the former minister of healthcare Nguyen Thi Kim Tien stood out when she established her official fanpage, followed by almost 320,000 people as of April 2019. She created the official fanpage to collect feedback from people about healthcare policies and hospital activities. In an interview with Tuoi Tre (Youth) newspaper in March 2016, she said “Many people provided valuable contribution to the policy, which helped us to improve the healthcare services”.⁹

However, it will take time for social media to become a more effective and reliable means of policy communication in Vietnam. The unrestricted and uncontrolled nature of social media makes people doubt its capacity as a reliable and trustful means of policy communication. In other words, social media is not considered essential means for government authorities to communicate with the people. Government officials and politicians remain cautious about social media as they consider it more a harm than good. Meanwhile, in a context of overloaded and complicated information, mainstream media have their own advantage. Social media might be a complement, instead of a competitor to mainstream media once the legal framework is well established and the public literacy is further enhanced.

Emergence of multidimensional flow of information

As mentioned earlier, policy communication in Vietnam is mostly done using public information model. For example, when a ministry has a new policy, they will provide in-

formation about it to the people via their portal, mass media and other traditional channels of communication. The public information model is characterized by the linear, top down and one way information from the ministry to the people. The ministry provides people with information that they have, but may not be the information that people want. Information is conveyed in the channels, which are convenient for the ministry but not necessarily accessible for people. In policy communication, the ministry starts to give information to people when the policy is already formulated and adopted. This linear and hierarchical flow of information is now strongly challenged by the emergence of multidimensional flow of information.

In the digital environment, information is conveyed not only vertically but also horizontally and diagonally. The networking communication on social media, for example has allowed the information to flow out of the rigid patterns imposed by traditional media. Thomas A. Bauer (2017) argued that “the use of social media generates structures of self-organized communities increasingly less bounded to established societal structures”. The multidimensional flow of information comes as a result of the social and cultural, instead of the functional view of the media. Media both traditional and social should not be seen as the means to do something but as the context for social and cultural actualization, interaction and participation. Thomas Bauer, therefore, identified public communication as “opinion sharing, instead of opinion making or opinion leading” and “public discourse management, instead of linear (one-to-many) journalism”.¹⁰

Online newspapers and social media have facilitated the bottom up communication from the people to government. The interactive feature of the Internet has allowed people to voice their concern and provide feedback to the government while it was difficult to do so with traditional media. Several online newspapers allow their audience to post comments, adding more dimensions and sentiments to their story. In many cases, the stories by the newspapers serve as the conduit for public opinion, which in its turn builds up the pressure to politicians, government officials and policymakers. Recently, when Vietnam Electricity (EVN) — the state corporation in electricity services — raised the electricity price by 8.36 per cent, they were bombarded with questions from the audience’s comments on online newspapers and social media. Several similar campaigns are started this way to require the government to modify the policy and the politicians to mend their decision.

The multidimensional flow of information facilitates the discussion and debate in public sphere so as to increase the rationality and reasonability of public policy. It requires the politicians, government officials and policymakers to consider as many aspects of their policy and decision as possible and plan the communication carefully in order not to upset the public. They will also need to be more open to the feedback and to be more considerate to the wishes of the people. In addition, the multidimensional flow of information requires people to be wiser and more selective recipient of the information. They have to enhance their media and information literacy in order to classify, verify and disqualify fake news and misleading information.

Quality of government-media-people relationship

It is important to understand the quality of government-media-people relationship in the new media landscape as the foundation to identify the challenges for local policy communication in Vietnam. The Press Law 2016 of Vietnam specified that “The media in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is the essential means of information for social life; the voice of Party and State organizations, political and social organizations, professional organizations; and the forum for the people”.¹¹ This official view of about the function of the media in Vietnam reflects the fact that the media is under the leadership of the Party and there is no space for private media in the country.

Table 1: Number of Central and Provincial Media Organizations in Vietnam

	Central level	Local level	Total
Newspaper	86	113	199
Magazine	521	137	658
Television	2	64	66
Online newspaper	105		

Source: MIC, 2015

In Vietnam, the media system is an integral part of the political system under the leadership of the CPV. The media is considered the “revolutionary press”, which serves as the bridge between the state and the people. Different from many other countries, Vietnam media organizations are established under the umbrella of a parent organization and are assigned with specific mission. For example, the People Newspaper is the central organ of the CPV; the Military Newspaper is the organ of the Central Military Commission and Ministry of Defense; the Labor is the organ of the General Confederation of Labor, etc. Each of the 63 provinces and central cities has their own newspapers and broadcasting stations.

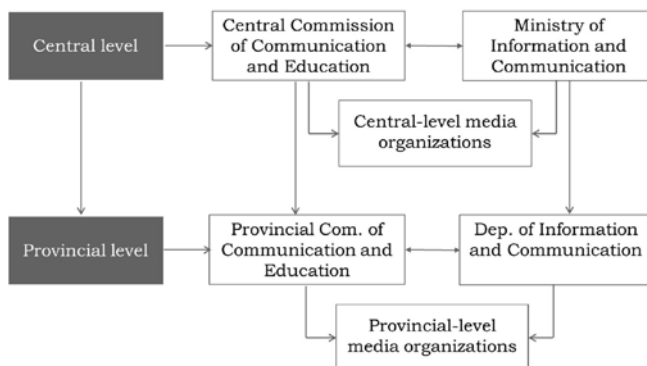


Figure 2: Central and Local Regulation of the Media Organizations in Vietnam

The view about media is functional in that media is the tool at the service of the Party, State and people. This view is recently repeated in the National Masterplan for Development and Management of Media towards 2025 that “The media is the means of information, the instrument of communication, the ideological weapon of the Party and State, the forum of the people under the direct and comprehensive leadership of the Party, the management of the State and operate within the framework of the Constitution and legislation”.¹² The National Masterplan for Development and Management of Media towards 2025 passed by the Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc on 3rd April 2019 aims to restructure the media system and to build some major media outlets, which can play important role in shaping the public opinion and leading external information. It also aims to merge similar media organizations in order to avoid the waste of resources while enhancing the professional capacity of the journalists.

As a result of this functional view about the media, the information flow is more top down than bottom up. However, for policy communication to be effective, there must be a symmetrical two-way interaction between government and the people with the facilitation of the media. Ta Ngoc Tan (2019), a known professor of communication at the Central Council for Theoretical Study, claimed that “Policy communication is the reciprocal interaction from the policymakers to the people and vice versa. This is the decisive factor to the successful implementation of the policy”.¹³ The traditional model of public information should be modified to consider a more audience-centered approach, in which the people are not the passive recipient of information but an active and equal participant and co-creator of the communication process. The quality of government and people relationship depends on the shift from a functional and traditional view of media to a social and cultural one.

In addition, the quality of information depends a lot on the knowledge and skills of the journalists, who serve as the intermediary between the government and the people. Media has played very important role in keeping the politicians and government officials accountable for their decisions. Media often takes the lead in fighting corruption in the bureaucracy while protecting innocent people. For the last few years, as the Party leaders initiated the anti-corruption campaign, the media has investigated and brought out to light several wrongdoings by politicians and government officials. Thanks to the active coverage of the media, some high-ranking officials and politicians such as the former minister of industry Vu Huy Hoang, former minister of information and communications Truong Minh Tuan, two former vice ministers of public security Tran Viet Tan and Bui Van Thanh, former secretary of Da Nang’s Party Committee Nguyen Xuan Anh, former secretary of Ho Chi Minh City’s Party Committee Dinh La Thang, etc. were brought to justice, losing both their position and dignity.

The people always have more to expect from the government and the media in the anti-corruption efforts and the administrative reforms. It is complained that corruption is still a headache in the country and the punishment for wrongdoings is not threatening enough to prevent continued attempts. This legitimate concern cannot be addressed

overnight as the government has to improve the legal framework and the media needs to enhance their expertise and techniques. Several political and social issues have their deep roots and it would be naïve to expect radical remedy in a short period without creating instability. The quality of government-media-people relationship will improve over time, especially when the media becomes more professional and the people become more media-literate.

It is important to note that Internet, social media and digital technology have contributed to the enhancement of government-media-people relationship. Internet and social media have empowered the people to voice their concern and in some cases to build up public opinion and social pressure about issues, which affect their interest. As of April 2019, when EVN increased the electricity price at the beginning of the summer, several questions have been raised about the reasonability of this corporation's decision. The people started to pose many questions to EVN such as: How can the increase of electricity price be justified? How will the revenue from the increased price be used? Is it true that EVN increased the price to cover the loss linked to their prior investment out of the electricity sector?, etc. Social media has allowed people to know more and participate more in the discussion about issues related to their life. Though the influence is modest, it is optimistic to believe that Internet and social media will continue to play their part in making political life in Vietnam more transparent and accountable.

II. ICT Challenges for Local Policy Communication with Case Studies

Technology has become the keyword for policy communication in Vietnam, especially after the commercial license of Internet in 1997. Recognizing the importance of technology in the industrialization and modernization of the country, in October 2000, the CPV issued Directive 58 to lay the path for ICT development and application. The objectives of the directive include: to create an enabling environment for the use and development of IT in support of modernization; to ensure widespread and efficient use of IT in all sectors; and to develop the national information network to reach global levels in coverage.¹⁴ Almost a decade has passed ever since and the country still has a lot to do to overcome the ICT challenges for policy communication, especially in the context of social media and digital communication. The challenges can be seen in the limitation of resources and the slow application of technology; the inadequacy of competence among policy communicators, especially to the audience of ethnic minority groups and the diversity of the local audience across the country. These challenges will be discussed with the illustration of three case studies in Vietnam.

Limitation of resources and slow application of technology

The resources for ICT development have been a huge challenge at both central and local levels in Vietnam. In 2017, the Authority of Information Technology Application, MIC conducted an evaluation of the technological infrastructure at the ministries, provinces and central cities. The evaluation was conducted on 6 constructs: IT infrastructure; domestic application; policy for IT application and e-Government development; provision of information on portal; provision of online public services at level 3 and 4

and human resource for IT application. The findings, which were publicized at the conference Digital Government Progress towards Modern and Effective Administration organized in July 2018, showed two important points.

First, a number of authorities, especially at local level have initiated the provision of online public services but there were few actual applications. It is also the case that they have not effectively utilized the information system in their leadership and management in order to make government services more accessible to the people. Statistics from the Authority of Information Technology Application showed that 18/19 ministries and 50/63 provinces have installed their WAN network; 18/19 ministries and 54/63 provinces had the data centers, which host the server; 12/18 ministries and 18/54 provinces had backup data centers in order to ensure information security.¹⁵ These numbers appear encouraging as the ministries and provinces start to utilize ICT for better governance but there is a lot to do in both improving the system and enhancing the capacity to deploy ICT effectively. In addition, the infrastructure has been invested for a long time without proper upgrade and will not be able to meet the requirements for future development.

Second, ministries and provinces are using different and unconnected softwares, which make information exchange and inter-department cooperation difficult. The technical infrastructure at district and commune level is understandably worse than that at the central and provincial level. The reason for this poor synchronization among ministries and provinces lies in the mechanism for bidding and installing ICT system. Each ministry and province has their own budget and agenda in selecting the ICT service providers, who offer different softwares and platforms. Let's take the population database as an example. The Ministry of Security, the Ministry of Justice and provinces have different population databases, which are not interconnected. As a result, the government established the project National Database of Population, which requires ministries and provinces to integrate their system into the Ministry of Security and not to develop any new database. The project aimed to concentrate the financial resources to build a common national database of population, which then serves as the foundation for processing public administrative services and prevent the waste of resources.

The situation can be explained mostly by the shortage of funding for ICT development and application. The funding is not only insufficient in amount but also slowly and irregularly allocated whereas the development and application of ICT often require tremendous investment of resources right from the beginning. There is a gap between the recognition of ICT importance and the actual investment of resources for its development. In many cases, the ministries and provinces have to divide the phases of investment across several years because they do not receive enough financial investment for the whole system. In addition, the slow establishment of regulation and legal framework hinders the synchronization and collaboration among ministries and provinces. For example, the government decree about connecting and sharing data among state authorities has not been passed, which means ministries and provinces will continue to estab-

lish their own systems.

In addition, the limitation of resources is seen in the shortage of qualified IT human resource. Khanh Tran and Graham Kenneth Winley (2018) argued that Vietnam's IT human resource is inadequate in both quantity and quality as "IT professionals lack project management, presentation, entrepreneurial, and other business skills and they have relatively poor English language skills".¹⁶ According to MIC, Vietnam will be in need of 1.2 million IT experts in 2020 and they anticipate the shortage of 500,000 personnel. Big central cities like Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City will be the biggest employers of IT staff with the requirement of about 16,000 staff a year.

A survey by Vietnamworks - an employment and recruitment service company - about the employment opportunities in IT sector indicated that the period from 2014 to 2017 saw an increase of 2.5 times for IT human resources, which is expected to continue to increase the following years. This finding is corresponding to the statement of the Authority of Information Technology Application about the shortage of qualified human resources for application and development of e-Government in ministries and provinces. The number of IT specialists is at 2.1 persons per district, which means the IT personnel at town and commune level is much lower. With government's requirement to reduce the number of personnel in the national system, it will be very difficult for ministries and provinces to maintain enough IT staff, especially when the payment in the public sector is not as competitive as the private sector.

Case study I: Local speakers in Ha Noi

Ha Noi is the capital city of Viet Nam. It is the country's political, cultural and technological center with an important role in the national economy and international trade. The population of the city was about 7 million people as of 2015. The city communicates their activities and policies via their portal at <http://hanoi.gov.vn>. In terms of technological development, Ha Noi is understandably better than many provinces in the country. However, the use of local speakers to inform city's activities and policies is still very popular despite the rapid development of ICT.

Speakers were installed in many wards of the cities to provide local residents with essential information. For example, they can give the announcement of vaccination for children at local medical centers, spray against mosquitos in early summer, meetings of local residents, financial contribution of local residents to support the poor and victims of flood to the call to the voting sites during the National Assembly election, etc. The announcements are normally made by the local chief executive early in the morning when people are still at home. While old people consider it a part of life since war time, young people feel inconvenient as they are used to smartphones and laptops.

Speaking at a meeting of the Hanoi's Department of Information and Communications on 9th January 2017, city president Nguyen Duc Chung suggested that use of local speakers should be stopped as they "have fulfilled their mission". He claimed that "The use of the speakers during war time was effective. But in the age of information technology, the city has different ways to reach the people, for example, to provide environmental indexes by Internet".¹⁷ After the meeting, the Department of Information and Communications conducted a survey with 2,000 people about the role of local speaker and 90 per cent of the respondents supported its termination.¹⁸ A second survey was conducted in 2018 found similar finding as 70 per cent of respondents believed local speaker should be replaced by modern means of communication.¹⁹

As a result of the city president's direction, a pilot project of smart communication was launched to install the smart gateway in 200 households in Ba Dinh, Hoan Kiem and Cau Giay districts. This smart gateway entitled M-Gateway to serve as the replacement for the local speaker and provide households with city news and services such as paying Internet, electricity and water bills. The installment of the smart gateway for all the households in the city, however, remains an open question as the city residents are concerned with the installment fees and the equipment operation. Otherwise, it will cost the city a huge amount of money to install the equipment to households for free.

The case of local speakers in Ha Noi shows how important it is to innovate the means of communication between the city authority and the people and how difficult it is to apply modern ICT for the improvement of public communication and public service. Given the fact that Ha Noi is the capital of the city, one can anticipate how many other provinces, especially remote and mountainous ones have to struggle in their policy communication with local residents.

Inadequacy of competence among policy communicators

As discussed earlier in the evaluation of government-media-people relationship, the quality of policy communication depends a lot on the media. Policy communicators, including the communication staff at the government authorities and the journalists at media organizations have very important role in informing, explaining and analyzing the policy to the people. The challenge to policy communication lies in the inadequacy of competent policy communicators, which sounds paradoxical. This is because policy communication, especially communication to local audience requires good understanding of the policy, knowledge of audience's reception psychology and the skills of explaining, analyzing the policy in simple terms. Successful policy communication also requires the communicators to apply ICT to provide the audience the information that they want on the medium that they prefer and at the time that they find convenient.

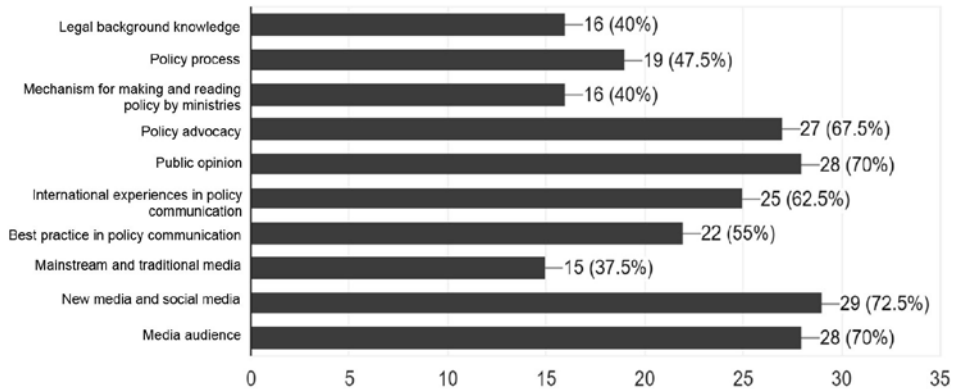


Figure 3: Essential Knowledge for Successful Policy Communication

Source: Van Vu's survey with central and local journalists

In 2018, the author conducted a survey with 40 central and local journalists, who have experiences in communicating security, defense, economic, healthcare, education, environment and science policies, etc. to determine, based on their understanding, the barriers to policy communication and the essential skills and knowledge required for successful policy communication. 85 per cent of the respondents agreed that the capacity of the communicators, including the legal understanding, analysis skill and subject matter knowledge is the main barrier to policy communication. 60 per cent believed that the slow application and deployment of new ICT such as digital communication and e-Government added to the ineffective communication of the policy to the people.

The competence of the policy communicators includes essential knowledge and skills. According to the respondents of the survey, the knowledge of social media and new media; public opinion and policy advocacy are three most important prerequisites for policy communicators. This finding is in line with the explosion of social media in Vietnam society, which allows a more interactive and symmetrical model of communication between the policy communicators and the audience. Nguyen Duc Chung, President of Ha Noi City Council in the speech at the conference The Role of Communication to Ha Noi City in the Context of Information Society stated that as multimedia communication has increasing importance in the media ecosystem, it is essential to employ both mainstream media and social media in policy communication.

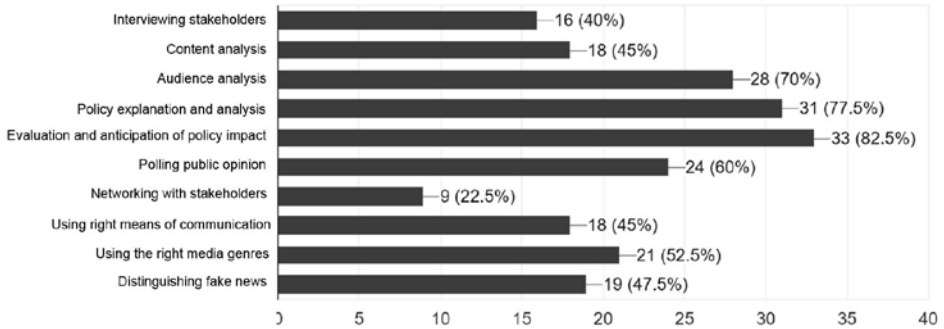


Figure 4: Essential Skills for Successful Policy Communication

Source: Van Vu's survey with central and local journalists

It was also interesting to find out that evaluating and anticipating policy impact; explaining and analyzing policy; and analyzing audience are three most important skills, which constitute the competence of the policy communicators. In fact, the first two skills are not educated in the school of journalism and communication so the policy communicators have to learn them on the job. It can be the case that some policies fail not because they are not good enough but because they are poorly communicated. In a next-to-next and peer-to-peer communication society, the policy communicators must understand their audience carefully and change their mindset to place them on an equal equation with the audience. The model of public information has to shift to the model of symmetrical two-way communication as suggested by Grunig and Hunt (1984).

Dinh Thi Thuy Hang (2018) argued that Internet has changed the way and habit of the audience in receiving the information. Their attention is divided for different means of communication, instead of giving the focus on one media like before, i.e., they leave the television on while swiping on smartphone screen for news updates. They are not as patient and "obedient" as they used to be so the policy communicators have to find way to attract and please their audience, which was not the case in the traditional model of public information. Therefore, she recommended the policy communicators to take the integrated connection communication, which employs the combination of mass media such as television, radio and online newspaper; organizational means of communication such as the portal; and social media.²⁰ This approach will certainly require the policy communicators to further improve their competence.

Case study 2: Application of multimedia in policy communication in Dong Thap's Portal

Dong Thap is a province in the Mekong Delta in the south of Vietnam, 165 kilometers from Ho Chi Minh City. It is a big producer of rice in Vietnam. The Dong Thap's Portal was established on 15 January 2007 to provide local people with in-

formation about the provincial policies and activities. The Portal is located at <https://dongthap.gov.vn>. The Portal operates under the umbrella of the provincial Department of General Affairs. In addition to the provision of official information and documents of the province, the Portal integrated some online services on the platform.

For the last few years, the Portal developed a strong focus on the multimedia content to communicate the provincial policies more effectively to local people. This development can be seen in the application of mega story; live streaming of important events on province's official Facebook page; and the design of infographics. This application and innovation of ICT help to make the provincial policies and activities become more accessible and attractive to the local people.

- **Mega story**

The mega story was introduced by the Portal on 21 February 2018 to improve both the form and content of the information. Mega story is the combination of text, image, infographics, audio and video on an interactive platform to convey an important story. This has been popular to some big online newspapers in Vietnam such as VnExpress.net and Zing.vn but not very popular at provincial portals. Dong Thap is one of the first provinces to apply mega story to communicate the policy with the people.

It takes a lot of time and effort to prepare a mega story, which is normally divided into chapters. The production of text, infographics, image, audio and video requires the collaboration of a team, instead of an individual person. The first mega story on Dong Thap's Portal is about the president of the province, which included a video introducing his working experiences, an infographics of his important decisions, a photo story of his visits to local units, and his social activities.

The mega story is a creative application of ICT to communicate provincial policies and Dong Thap's Portal have produced some of them. However, their mega stories are mostly the introduction of provincial leaders and the content of the stories has a lot to improve to look more professional. The Portal can produce mega story about the landscape, history, culture, tourism, and economic development of the province to attract more audience.



A simple infographics of Dong Thap President's important decisions

- **Live streaming on province's official livestream page**

Since October 2018, the Portal started to live stream the video, which summarized main daily and weekly events of the province on their official fanpage. The weekly news bulletin is broadcast at 19:00 every Sunday and the daily news bulletin is broadcast from Monday to Friday. These fanpage bulletins provide local people with short and accurate news, illustrated with photos.

As of April 2019, the province's fanpage has more than 24,000 followers with regular updates of provincial activities. The fanpage is integrated with radio programs, online forum, question and answer section, and the infographics. However, the province's fanpage is still in its early development as the interaction is not very good with fewer than one hundred likes for each post on average. The content focuses mainly on the activities of the province leaders and should be more diversified in order to meet the need of information of the local people.



Dong Thap's official fanpage

• Application of infographics

The infographics is much simpler than the mega story but effective in providing information in an eye-catching way. Dong Thap's Portal had designed many infographics about the new village movement, the labor export program, the restructure of agricultural industry, tourism development, etc. The typical infographics include a short text on the background of a photo.

According to the Portal, they have produced 47 infographics until 2017 to inform people about the policies, projects and plans of the province. The infographics make the information more accessible and understandable to the people. They also produced interactive infographics to explain the administrative procedures such as the application for renewing driver's license and application for legal certification.

Dong Thap's Portal is a good example of application of ICT and innovation of policy communication. Though their operation still has a lot to improve with regards to the content and design, it is the right start to communicate the policies in a more attractive and creative way. This innovation of policy communication requires a lot of training for people, who are working at the Portal in terms of writing skills, designing graphics and understanding of policy.

Diversity of local audience across the country

As Vietnam is a long and narrow country with 54 ethnic groups, the audience for policy communication is widely segmented. The unequal development of provinces and the uneven literacy of people create unique challenges for local policy communication. It also means that it is increasingly difficult to reach diverse and segmented audience via traditional means of mass communication such as television, radio and newspaper. The use of new media and social media becomes essential to reach the audience horizontally. Part of this challenge will be further discussed in the competence of the policy communicators with the case study of VOV's radio program for ethnic minority audience.

The policy communication is characterized by an unequal distribution of information among urban, remote and mountainous areas with information overload in big cities and information scarcity in disadvantaged towns. Recognizing this information gap, in 2012, the prime minister approved the National Target Program to Convey Information to Mountainous, Disadvantaged, Remote, Border and Island Localities. The program aimed to establish and reinforce the local system of information to ensure that information about Party and State policies are fully communicated to the people in mountainous and disadvantaged areas as well as to bridge the information gap among different regions of the country.

Communicating with different segments of audience often faces with the challenges such as the difference of language; the illiteracy among old group; the lack of communication infrastructure; and the reservation of ethnic minority audience, etc. Huynh Quy and Thai Thanh Ha (2018) conducted a research about public policy communications in the Central Region of Vietnam and found out that it "have been characterized by unpredictable patterns of policy adoption, the geographical distance, and the economic disparity as compared to the capital city of Hanoi".²¹ They also found that the theme of policy communication in the Central Region focused on the fight against local corrupted high-ranking officials. This means for policy communication to be successful, it must be tailored to the specific interest of the target audience in the segments as decided by geographical, psychological or demographic features.

It is important to note that when it comes to remote and mountainous audience, the two-step flow of communication will be more effective than the communication by mass media or social media. Local audience, especially those in ethnic minority community tends to receive essential information from key opinion leaders and influencers, instead of getting it directly from the media. The chiefs of the community, normally the old wise men have a lot of say and influence to the local community. The policy of the government should be directed to them first, who will then explain it to other people in the community meeting or briefing. The research project "Communication in Regions of Ethnic Minorities: Reality and Solutions" found that 45 per cent of ethnic minority audience received information from local meetings; 42.3 per cent from the television; 17.4 per cent from the radio; 16 per cent from the print newspaper and 15.7 per cent from

the online newspaper.²²

Therefore, policy communicators have to be selective with the messages that they want to get across to the targeted segment of audience as this indirect communication mode cannot be overwhelmed with too much information. It is a long way to go in order to innovate the policy communication to remote and mountainous areas. While changes accumulate slowly, it is important to communicate to the local community the way they do. It is also important for the policy communicators to gradually apply ICT to reach different targeted audience as the government improves the local general condition and ICT infrastructure.

Case study 3: Voice of Vietnam's effort to communicate with ethnic minority groups

The Voice of Vietnam (VOV) is the national radio of Vietnam with the function of communicating government policies to nation-wide audience, who includes people of many ethnic minority groups such as Mong, Thai, Dao, Bana, Ede, Cham, Co Tu, etc. The ethnic minority groups live mostly in remote and mountainous areas and they are not fluent in national language. The radio programs in national language are mainly for the audience in urban areas. Therefore, VOV established VOV4 channel, which specializes in radio broadcasting for ethnic minority groups. VOV4 currently offers programs in 12 local languages, including Mong, Thai, Dao, Bana, Ede, Cham, Co Tu, etc.

Vietnam has 54 ethnic groups with the Kinh as the majority group and many ethnic minority groups. The government has a comprehensive development strategy, which ensures that nobody is left behind in the cause of national industrialization. Therefore, communicating government policies to ethnic minority groups is the task of central media organizations like VOV. The population of ethnic minority groups is estimated at 14 million people, who live mainly in mountainous, border and disadvantaged areas, where the distribution of print media is a challenge. A big percentage of the ethnic minority population is illiterate in their own local language and is not fluent in the national language.

That is why it is a challenge for the policy communicators to meet the need for information of ethnic minority audience in their own language. The policy communicators without further training normally lack understanding of ethnic minority group's reception behavior and habit and skills of explaining the policy in simplest terms that an average person in the minority group can understand. It is important to note that it is considered unattractive and low profile for the journalists to work in department for ethnic minority audience. It is therefore difficult to find the journalists, who can speak the local language and have good journalistic skills. This is the case with VOV.

The programs at VOV for ethnic minority groups have not been diversified and seem to be “monotonous”. Each of the programs is about 30 to 45 minutes long and there is only one program in each of the 12 local languages a day. Therefore, the format of the 12 programs is quite similar and have not been improved much for a long time. In 2015, VOV collaborated with UNESCO Vietnam to compose the Handbook for Ethnical Communication, which provide fundamental skills and tips to communicate with the audience of ethnic minority groups. They also cooperated with one another to organize training seminars for the journalists working for ethnic minority programs.

In an effort to raise the quality of ethnic minority group programs, in 2017, VOV conducted a survey with 6 ethnic minority groups including Mong, Dao, Ede, M’ngong, Xo Dang and Khmer about their habit of listening to radio. The survey found out that radio is the most popular means of communication among ethnic minority groups and there was a trend among ethnical audience to listen to the radio on the phone. The findings showed that 47 per cent of Dao; 43 per cent of Ede; 38 per cent of M’ngong; 33 per cent of Khmer; 30 per cent of Xo Dang; and 26 per cent of Mong were listening to the radio on their phone. Young people are the biggest group of audience who listen to the radio on the phone. The survey also found that a small number of ethnical audience listen to the radio on the Internet.

Based on the survey findings, VOV considered investing more in developing the radio programs on phone and Internet to meet the need for information of the ethnic minority groups. Ms. Dang Thi Hue, vice director of VOV4 recommended that in addition to the improvement of the local radio system and the provision of free radio sets to ethnic minority communities, it is important to improve the radio programs on the phone and on the Internet. She said that “Using new media such as phone to listen to the radio is the new trend among ethnic minority audience, especially young people and commune staff. Therefore, the investment in new radio technology with a focus on the convergence of telecommunication, computerization and radio and the live broadcasting of radio programs on Internet will be the solution to meet the increasing demand for information among the ethnic minority audience”.²³

VOV is a pioneer media organization in providing content in ethnic minority groups in their effort to meet the needs of the diverse audience across the country. There are challenges in terms of VOV staff’s capacity, the poor local ICT infrastructure and the low education of the ethnic minority audience. VOV’s finding about the trend of listening to radio on the phone and internet is a good point for them to pick up to further satisfy the needs for information of the special segments of ethnic minority audience.

Conclusion

The conclusion aims to answer the last question of “What should be or will be government’s responses to enhance quality of local policy communication?”. The new media landscape has presented unique challenges for local policy communication in Vietnam. The high Internet penetration of population, rise of social media and fake news and the emergence of multidimensional flow of information have built up the pressure for more innovation in policy communication. It is time for the government to apply and deploy ICT to communicate the policies more effectively, which helps to increase the government’s efficiency and quality of governance. This is also to ensure the people’s right to information and to make the politics and administration more transparent, accountable and professional.

The application of ICT is both the answer and challenge to the efforts of policy communication. This is because technology has in it both the powers of push and pull, give and take, emancipation and control. The success lies in how creatively and wisely the government utilizes technology to dispose the policy and service to people. The challenges of local policy communication include the limitation of resources and the slow application of technology; the inadequacy of competence among policy communicators and the diversity of the local audience across the country. As the case studies discussed earlier showed, there is always solution and creative practice to further enhance the effectiveness of policy communication. Dong Thap Portal’s use of multimedia is a good example of how a province in Vietnam utilizes the modern ICT to meet the people’s needs for information in an attractive and creative way.

It is important to note that the improvement of policy communication is closely connected to the reconsideration of the information model. The linear, traditional and top down model of public information should be altered with a symmetrical, two way and interactive model of communication. With its flexibility and interactivity, social media allows a multidimensional flow of information, which is not only vertical but also horizontal and diagonal. In this regards, social media should be considered a complement, instead of a competition to mainstream media in policy communication. As discussed earlier, ICT such as Internet, social media and digital communications are double-edged knives. Therefore, a functional sense of media should be replaced by a social and cultural thinking of media’s role. Policy communication is not the simple choice of media, which answers the question “What can the media do best in its function?” but “What can the policy communicators do with the media and for what effect?” A more emancipative approach to the media will help to improve the quality of policy communication fundamentally.

Given the inequality of information between urban and rural areas, there should be a stronger focus on improving the technological infrastructure and the public literacy in local communities, especially in remote, mountainous and disadvantaged areas. While big cities like Ha Noi, Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City are overloaded with information,

remote and mountainous areas are short of both technology and information. It would be ideal to close the gap of information, which will take much more time and effort from the government. Meanwhile, there must be specific action plans in order to keep the local audience, especially those in regions of ethnic minority group updated of national policies and activities. This is important to keep the country connected as a whole and to leave nobody behind in the cause of national modernization and industrialization.

It is also as important to enhance the public media and information literacy as to improve the competence of the policy communicators. Public media and information literacy is not the outcome of official education but the product of lifelong learning. The public should be (educated to be) able to use the mainstream media and social media responsibly, reasonably for their personal growth and social development. They learn to do this via their participation in the policy process from agenda-setting to formulation, adoption, implementation and evaluation. The more that they participate in the policy process in general and the policy communication in particular, the more that they improve their skills of accessing, analyzing and evaluating information. therefore, a national strategy for more effective and efficient policy communication, if any, should start from the enhancement of public media and information literacy.

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