

Impacts of Globalization on Public Opinion in Ethnic Minority Areas in Vietnam¹

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Abstract: *Since Doi Moi (Renovation) in 1986, integration and globalization has made an increasingly large impact on the economic, cultural and social life of the ethnic minorities, resulting in changes in their related practices that form the public opinion of the local people. Our survey results show that ethnic minorities, thanks to digital social media, have continually raised and shared their opinions over the issues of the new context to a broader audience and space and at different times and in more diverse ways.*

Keywords: Public Opinion, Globalization, Ethnic Minorities, Vietnam

Introduction

Vietnam is home to 53 ethnic groups. Ethnic minority areas, according to Decree 05/2011/ND-CP dated January 14, 2011 of the Government of Vietnam on ethnic minority affairs, are the areas with a large number of ethnic minorities living together to form stable communities within the country's territory.

Considering economic integration as a driver for the development of other fields,

Vietnam has experienced dramatic changes in its economy, society, and culture. In particular, even in high mountainous and remote areas and areas of ethnic minorities, the integration process has brought about massive changes, including changes in the public opinion of the local people.

1. Overview of ethnic minority areas under the influence of globalization

Vietnam's ethnic minority areas have been placed in the same context with other areas as the country promotes integration. Particularly since Doi Moi, Vietnam is one among developing countries aided by international donors and organizations with various economic and social-cultural

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projects that target mainly those ethnic minority areas.

Ethnic minority people have therefore embraced both the greatest flows of globalization: economic and cultural globalization.

* *As for economy*: Globalization has created fundamental changes in Vietnam's economic activities, which contributes to bridging the markets of ethnic minority areas and the international markets for commodities, services, finance and banking, and so forth. Both positive and negative impacts have been brought about to the life of the local people accordingly. Regarding the positive side, *firstly*, the country's economic integration has turned the economy of the ethnic minority areas into part of the outside world with more opportunities for market and investment searching. *Secondly*, integration into the global economy allows localities to advance economically by making the best use of their competitive advantages (in tourism and traditional agricultural products, etc.). *Thirdly*, globalization opens up prospects for the science and technology application in order to shorten the development gap between such areas and other regions.

Nevertheless, globalization has also created some concerns in the areas of ethnic minorities. *Firstly*, the promotion of resource exploitation for the purpose of industrialization, together with consequences of the conversion of crop structure to serve exports, has cut down the local production materials for ethnic communities. *Secondly*, massive investment into ethnic minority areas has adversely affected both the natural and social environments, causing the increase

of pollution (land, air, water), diseases, and social evils. *Thirdly*, the mass migration to the upland areas elevates ethnic conflicts since indigenous people have restricted capability of self-defense (due to limited financial and social capital and so forth), resulting in uncertainties in the areas of ethnic minorities. *Fourthly*, the novel context does not make employment opportunities more available for the indigenous people when it comes to requirements of qualified education, skills, or experiences. *Fifthly*, low market capacity when participating in the global economy also puts ethnic minority people at risk of falling behind and widening the gap between the rich and the poor.

* *As for culture*: Globalization promotes the exchange between the world's cultural value systems and the national value systems, facilitating the introduction of new cultural systems from the outside. People thus absorb new standards/values while re-evaluating and re-adopting old standards/values in different fields of life, contributing to changes in the local culture of many ethnic groups. In particular, the globalization process allows various ideologies in the world to be accessible to ethnic people, resulting in a review of the discourse of evolutionary theories and, thereby, increasing local people's consciousness about the issues of ethnicity, democracy, human rights, and so forth.

Cultural globalization, much alike economic globalization, also produces multidimensional effects on ethnic minority people. On one hand, the culture of each nation could be able to diffuse into its outside world and enrich itself with new factors. On the other, the ethnic communities also

face threats of blurring cultural boundaries that could make possible cultural conflicts and even cultural assimilation.

2. Impacts of globalization on public opinion in the ethnic minority areas

As globalization has created strong effects on ethnic minorities, their public opinion is also significantly affected. This section represents the results of our field studies in 11 provinces from north to south under the framework of the state-level research project “Theoretical and practical issues of social opinion in Vietnam’s ethnic minority areas in the context of globalization”¹.

2.1. Mass media as a means for ethnic minority people to enter globalization

This part focuses on the two main channels of mass communications, *television* and *the internet*, which brings the whole world closer to ethnic minority people and thus has a key role to play in their life.

Our survey shows that television is one of the most important channels for information access to local people (as answered by 72.6% of the survey respondents).

Television is also confirmed in a study by C. Baker (2008) as the public’s favorite information channel in the world. In today’s Vietnam, as we found, television remains its significance in information provision to ethnic people, particularly for the issues

beyond the national borders. It has gained a strong foothold in the local people’s spiritual life through the widespread presence of TVs in their families. People of ethnic communities are no longer in the state of information shortage, even when they are illiterate (thanks to the availability of ‘pictorial’ broadcast media communications). Among television programs, the news (including international news) is one of the favorites of many ethnic people. Paid TV channels have also become familiar to the households in the more central areas or with better-off conditions in the outskirts.

The internet is another important channel for information searching and exchanging to people in the ethnic minority areas. Although such areas are not covered totally with internet connections, more than one-thirds of respondents reported their daily use of Internet. Among those, 76.3% of them surfed the internet once a day, 16.9% for once every three or four days, and only 6.8% for once a week. Those figures could be considered significant in comparison with the findings by Trend (2005: 2) more than a decade ago when the majority of ethnic groups did not have the internet access due to lack of money, accessibility or appropriate knowledge.

Despite controversy, the internet is seen as a space of democratization (Poster, 1997). First of all, it facilitates communication and circulation of information. Owing to the hypertext feature as electronic links enable the connections between documents/texts, readers on the internet tend to be more positive (Landow, 2005). All of this is tied to democracy, of which information freedom is always its cornerstone.

¹ The two-year surveys were carried out in 2018 and 2019 and in 11 provinces heavily populated by ethnic minorities (namely Lang Son, Ha Giang, Lai Chau, Son La, Nghe An, Kon Tum, Dak Lak, Ninh Thuan, Binh Phuoc, Tra Vinh, Kien Giang) and aided with 3,283 questionnaires and 550 key informant interviews. The figures and data for this article were drawn from the survey results while the people’s opinions were extracted from key informant interviews at the field sites.

In fact, the internet has brought about opportunities for multilateral dialogues and created a free space for the public of Vietnam in general and for the ethnic minority people in particular. Everyone, through the internet, can access and share information, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, age, occupation, and social status. The internet, as in the words of Sassen (2002), is a tool for ordinary people who are often perceived as “non-elite” to contribute to a more democratic civil society. Put another way, it allows the participation of marginalized groups in democratic processes.

Our survey results revealed that people often use their smartphones rather than other devices for access to the internet. It is mainly due to the technological convergence (multifunctionality) and user-friendliness of smartphones. Of the 83.7% of correspondents, up to half own smartphones. Whereas, most internet surfers are also smartphone users (93.7%).

Smartphones are still counted as valuable assets for many people in ethnic minority areas. On the periphery of such areas, it is a definite amount to possess a smartphone. “I purchase my phone in monthly installments. [I am] Not be able to pay in full. [I pay] VND 500,000 per month. People can have it [smartphone], so I can have it. People can afford it, so I can afford it also. It’s the technological era.” (Male, 40, M’Nong group, Yang Tao commune, Lak district, Dak Lak province). On the contrary, in the centers of ethnic minority areas, smartphones are particularly popular and it would be bizarre to not have one. “Today, not using it [smartphone] is abnormal” (Male, 40, Nung group, That

Khe township, Trang Dinh district, Lang Son province).

In sum, the picture of public opinion in ethnic minority areas is closely attached with communication conditions as the connections with the outside world has been improving.

2.2. Changes in subject and form of public opinion in ethnic minority areas

Globalization has influenced greatly both the subject and form of public opinion in the areas of ethnic people.

** Subject of public opinion*

Under the impacts of globalization, Vietnamese people in ethnic minority areas no longer frame their “model of interest” only with events and phenomena that affect themselves directly (Cantril, 1966). Due to the boom of information, the local people are becoming interested in social issues, not just locally and regionally but more globally, such as environmental pollution, terrorism, cross-border trafficking, counterfeiting, and so forth.

Although global environmental pollution is often mentioned, the concerns of local people are still centered around critical issues, of which the most prominent is their livelihood related issues. The widely discussed topics include degradation of production land and water due to environmental pollution, disabled indigenous knowledge in agriculture, inevitable dependence on external economic systems, inequality in income and access to development opportunities, inadequate compensation for production materials lost to development projects, and so forth. Such issues are more or less related to the new values that are formed during the globalization process. Of particular awareness is the matters of human rights and ethnic groups.

** Form of public opinion*

Information associates: Thanks to the internet and various digital means of media, people now can easily interact in virtual spaces with others (even strangers), not just their acquaintances as in the past, for information exchange. In other words, people from different background are connected on the internet where each of them plays part of an association that spreads beyond the users' imagination (Shields, 1996: 7). Owing to various features and functions of social networks, people participating in public opinion related practices can communicate and express their views over the issues of their interest. Surveys with local people show that they often use official channels (i.e., political or civil organizations) to speak up about a local issue, but would switch to social networks for expressing their opinion on the issues that upset them. From their viewpoint, social networks would spread their messages to a broader audience.

Locations: It is stated in Croteau and Hoynes (2003) that the internet has eliminated geographical distance between its users, which is also true to today's ethnic minority people. There exists no physical space between information providers and receivers as all boundaries have been blurred in the cyber world. "This is the infotech era, not the old days. You do not need to gather together [physically] to discuss an issue" (Male, 53, Thai group, Residential Unit 7, Song Ma commune, Song Ma district, Son La province).

Putnam (1995) was once concerned technical trends would lead to the absolute "privatization" or "personalization" of our use of leisure time and, thus, our

communities would become broader but shallower. In many of our case studies, however, people claim that their relationship with others in the community is not diminished but even deepened via social networks. "Everyone is busy with earning for living and the housework, so it is hard to see each other. Thanks to the phone that we maintain regular communication and share many things with each other. Having the same interests might even increase the closeness" (Female, 35, Tay group, Zone 1, That Khe township, Trang Dinh district, Son La province). Cyberspace thus appears to create favorable conditions for enhancing the vitality of public opinion related practices among local people.

Time limits: Mass media has removed time limits for interaction, which is supposed to be the time for privacy and personal activities (eating, sleeping, etc.). There are alternatives for the recipients, to respond immediately or not, with the information sent in. "The communication now is very convenient and at any time. Not like before when opportunities could be missed without timely decision making due to late information exchange" (Male, 56, Thai group, Zone 11, Muong Te township, Muong Te district, Lai Chau province).

Opinion-delivered modes: On the consideration of information before communicating, only 21.2% of the respondents said they would respond instantly while 49.4% of them would be more careful in information exchange and 27.7% of them would decide their responses depending on the actual issues (Table 1). Thus, more than three fourths of the respondents showed their caution in responding to the information they received.

Table 1. Times for responding to important information received (%)

	Internet users	Non-internet people	General
1. Instant response	12.9	26.3	21.2
2. Response after careful consideration	57.8	44.2	49.4
3. Either instant response or response after careful consideration depending on situation	28.6	27.2	27.7
4. Other	0.7	2.2	1.6

One explanation is as follows: “People today with improved awareness and various information sources should take more thorough consideration and choice of words. Particularly when talking to people from governments and organizations about the issues related to national interest, you cannot speak indiscriminately. That should be also perceived as civic responsibility” (Male, 61, Thai group, Zone 4, Tan Lac commune, Quy Chau district, Nghe An province). It can be

seen that internet users are taking most consideration in sharing and exchanging information in comparison with the group of people not using internet (Table 2). In case of disagreement with the solutions to a problem given by commune or township officials (a multiple choice question), 55.7% of the respondents prefer communication and discussion until an agreement is reached; 55% for consultation at village/hamlet meetings; 20.2% for collective discussion; 12.1% for denunciation; 8.7% for vehement verbal argument; and 0.6% for physical violence (Table 2). Answers to the same question for officials at village or hamlet level were almost similar. It is noticeable also that internet users tend to take most of the suggested solutions except using physical violence.

In order to inform all-level authorities, people often let their opinions be known

Table 2. Solutions in case of disagreement of settlement results (or settlement methods) by the district/township authorities (%)

	Internet users	Non-internet people	General
1. Communication and discussion to reach an agreement	61.5	52.2	55.7
2. Collective solution	22.0	19.1	20.2
3. Vehement verbal argument	10.6	7.5	8.7
4. Consultation at village or hamlet meetings	58.5	52.8	55.0
5. Denunciation	16.3	9.6	12.1
6. Physical violence	1.0	0.4	0.6
7. Compliance without responses	15.3	29.1	23.8

via official channels, such as through village/hamlet officials (82%), prestigious people in the communities (48.4%), and civil organizations like the unions for the youth, women, veterans, etc. (42.5%). The less common solutions include making proposals at local vote-based elections (29.7%), verbal proposals to government authorities (23.1%), written proposals/complaints to the appropriate levels following the administrative hierarchy (16.8%). Only small numbers of people prefer giving opinions via social networks

(3.3%), local mass media (1.5%), or letters to the superior levels of the administrative hierarchy (1.2%). It can be seen that there are various choices for the people to deliver their opinions. In particular, internet users, once again, seem more proactive than others for different modes of raising their voices to authorities (Table 3).

Table 3. Modes for delivering opinions to authorities (%)

	Internet users	Non-internet people	General
1. Opinions proposed through prestigious people in the communities	46.8	49.5	48.4
2. Opinions proposed through village/hamlet officials	79.8	83.4	82.0
3. Opinions proposed through civil organizations (youth union, women union, veterans union, etc.)	44.6	41.2	42.5
4. Opinions proposed through the local press and mass media	2.5	0.9	1.5
5. Opinions proposed through social networks (Facebook, Zalo, etc.)	8.0	0.3	3.3
6. Opinions proposed through local vote-based elections	34.1	26.9	29.7
7. Opinions proposed directly in verbal communication at public authorities	26.2	21.3	23.1
8. Opinions proposed in written (letters, complaints) to appropriate levels following the administrative hierarchy	23.3	12.8	16.8
9. Opinions proposed in written (letters, complaints) to superior levels of the administrative hierarchy	1.2	1.3	1.2

In the context of globalization, the ethnic people participating in our surveys appear to clearly demonstrate a sense of their rights and responsibilities through their consideration before exchanging information, in dealing with conflicts

with local officials regarding settlement results or methods, and in their choices of delivering their messages to authorities. Among those, internet users have “strong responses” to proposed options. Put another way, they are more resolute in protecting the legitimate interests of themselves and others.

Thus, globalization has been a critical factor influencing the public opinion in Vietnam’s ethnic minority areas. A quite positive picture, as evidenced by the survey results, is highlighted with the confidence and assertiveness of the internet-connected people. This is another illustration of how the virtual space has played part in forming the actual reality.

Conclusion

It would be a figment, according to Jamieson et al. (1998), to believe that ethnic minorities would remain static in history without interacting with the outside world. Globalization has created, indeed, a context for rapid and diverse changes in the ethnic minority areas in Vietnam. Its great

influence therefore is obvious. Thanks to the tremendous advance of the information technology, social practices related to public opinion of the ethnic people have been transformed with their access to the outside world □

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