

TODAY'S MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINIONS TOWARD SOME PRESSING SOCIAL PHENOMENA^(*)

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I. Rationale

Thanks to the application of modern technologies in information and communication nowadays, there's virtually no gap between messengers and receivers. Accompanied with conventional techniques of broadcasting and television, internet is virtually converging and replacing all other means of communication. Baring an outstanding technological development in information storage, publication and processing, internet has rapidly overcome the limitation of a media to become an environment of communication where traditional means of communication are available including newspaper, broadcasting and television to the new ones like social network, personal blogs and websites. Researchers have mentioned the concept of converged media in order to illustrate the orientation of media integration into a consolidated environment of internet. Furthermore, with the popularization of modern technological products and applications in recent information and communication field, the borderline to distinguish messengers and receivers has becoming blurred. One individual with a

smart phone and an account of a social network like Facebook, G+ and Zingme can become an amateur messenger with a great speedy dissemination. The public, or simply fans of a social network, growing in a number up to tens of million people can rapidly update the news and response toward events uploaded to the internet at the same time.

Digital media brings out litany of attractive and appealing activities. Mobile phones have become more and more diverse with multi-functions including voice recording, photo capturing and internet connection, etc... Many highly interactive websites allow users to leave their opinions in open forums where they are freely to express their thoughts, judgments, evaluations and feelings instantly. Simultaneously, opinions of the public in websites may also vary

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rapidly depending on the rate of accessing and development tendency of reported events as well as on the extent of “shock creation” from the messengers.

In such diverse communication society, breaking news and events with massive volume of information are instantly transmitted every single second, which has made people no longer able to control. With such a multi-media world, the messengers, the receivers as well as the being-mentioned-subjects are all under the pressure of public opinions. In other words, flows of public opinions have rapidly been formulated in such media environment, through which “agenda settings” of the public in general and of the media in particular have been adjusted and re-defined.

II. Media events - impressive images and public opinions

1. Pressing social phenomena

In 2013, several storms of public opinions were witnessed toward incidents such as injustice, looting, doctors' indifferent behaviors to patients, and negative attitudes of public officers to citizens, which hit headlines of newspapers and many social networks.

- *The incident of beer looting*: on the 4th of December, at the roundabout of Tam Hiệp district (Biên Hòa city- Đồng Nai province), a truck carrying 1500 carton boxes of beer got an accident. Hundreds of people living nearby rushed to loot the dropped boxes of beer, some even pulled their tricycles to “rob” and “loot” as much as possible despite the miserable driver who was begging in vain. However, this was not the first time this kind of looting happened. Previously, there had been cases of stealing 60 beer crates from a truck crashed in Tân Thới Nhất ward (District 12,

Hồ Chí Minh City) or scrambling for 50 million VND splashed on the road when a man was robbed at the intersection of Bà Huyện Thanh Quan - Võ Văn Tần (Hồ Chí Minh City); instead of helping the victim, witnesses ran out to cash-in. Such incidents of “money looting” have happened several times and were all reported by the media.

- *The incident of Cát Tường Beauty Salon*: On the 19th of October, Mrs. Lê Thị Thanh Huyền came to Cát Tường Beauty Salon (No. 45 Giải Phóng street, Hanoi) for breast plastic surgery and tummy liposuction. The procedures caused her death, but the doctor threw her body into Red river to destroy evidence.

- *The incident of health test duplication*: From July 2012 to May 2013, at Hoài Đức General Hospital (Hanoi), the Laboratory department conducted medical tests and distributed the test results for 2,237 patients in which 1,149 blood tests reported the same results and 1,037 ones were based-on-nothing test reports. On average, one test result was used for 2 to 5 people. Many patients of great differences in health conditions and ages still got the same diagnose. Basing on the total number of tests reported, the hospital did cash-in from health insurance agency up to over 60 million VND.

- *Other incidents related to health sector*: In 2013, a number of children died after 5in1 Quinvaxem vaccination; many pregnancy women ended to death in hospital due to the indifference and irresponsibility of the medical team; other incidents included misdiagnosis, wrong treatment, wrong surgery, stealing medicine of leprosy patients in Hà Đông center of Dermatology and eye lens swapping at Central Eye Hospital.

- *The incident of “10-year-sentence injustice”*: Prisoner Nguyễn Thanh Chấn was freed after 10 years being a victim of an injustice and the entire development of this case was finally exposed by the press. Following the incident of Mr. Chên, tens of other injustice cases were brought on by the media; they were victims of the similar motif of negligence investigation procedures and series of extortion tricks, amongst whom some were unlucky to ever come back alive.

- *The incident of street vendor trampling*: Mr. Trịnh Xuân Tình, a street vendor, while doing his business on the road (ward 25, Bình Thạnh district, Hồ Chí Minh City), was cruelly coerced by a group of 9 men including street wardens and urban management staff, blatantly in front of hundreds of people. He was left for about an hour of unconsciousness on the ground whereas his hands were still cuffed behind his back.

- *The incident of violence against children*: a video clip capturing the scene of torturing children at Phương Anh private kindergarten (Hiệp Bình Phước ward, Thủ Đức district, Hồ Chí Minh City) demonstrated that two kindergarteners named Lê Thị Đông Phương and Nguyễn Lê Thiên Lý continually abused naive kids by disgusting tricks such as forcing onto the children foreheads, slapping onto their face, putting down their heads and hit on their backs, dipping them in water bath during those kids' meals. Yet another case of day-care in Cần Thơ city, Nanny Hồ Ngọc Nhờ even flung a little baby onto the ground and trampled him to death.

- *The promulgation of state management documents*: thousands of degrees and regulations regarding social administration are promulgated yearly by the state management agencies. In 2013, people and

the public were many times panic because of unrealistic management provisions which were thought to be airy-fairy and “unfeasible”. Those include regulations promulgating the sanctioning of administrative violations such as “undutiful to parents”, “husband's curse to his wife”, “husband's forbidding his wife from seeing friends”, “the flat-chested are not allowed to drive”, “glass square on a coffin's cover is forbidden”, or the additional of prior subject to Vietnamese Heroic Mothers and people with meritorious services to the Revolution from the August 1945 Revolution when they have the formal college and university entrance exam, etc.

2. Reflection of the media

When these incidents happened, rare images were virtually filmed, photographed, recorded and published via newspapers, radio, television and social networks. Impressive image on the media of “beer looting” incident is the scene of residents in Biên Hoà (Đồng Nai), up to hundreds of people including the young, the elderly, men and women, who were contently embracing or using their cyclos or three-wheelers to occupy boxes of beer cans (which were spreading on the road from the crashed lorry) right beside the slim and dark-skinned driver who was crying in panic and begging people to stop; The heart-touching images of the incident of medical tests duplication were tears from complainants for doctors' medical testing results duplication from patients to patients in order to cash-in from medical insurance as well as hospital fee from patients; The indifferent face of the doctor and the funeral without a coffin have obsessed various people of conscience in the case of Cát Tường Beauty Salon; the images of

grief-stricken face of husbands by the bodies of their wives and fathers and mothers by the bodies of their infants due to deadly carelessness and ignorance toward lying-in women or mistaken vaccination; The images of “cruel kindergarteners” who were maltreating innocent children in an unruffled manner in the clip about children violence; The image of Mr. Trịnh Xuân Tình who was choked while his two hands being handcuffed behind his back laying pitifully on the ground; and the image of Mr. Nguyễn Thanh Chấn with his astonishing face in the embrace of tears from his family and friends not knowing whether he had really been released or not.

When all these incidents came to a climax, media jumped in to discuss, accuse, analyze and comment on newspapers or blogs. People following the move of these incidents showed their sympathy toward unlucky victims and, at the same time, extreme anger about inhuman behaviors and actions of doctors, kindergarteners and street wardens, and also the shame toward actions of asset looting.

All these incidents show clearly the indifference of various people and unhappiness of many fates as well as the grief, sense of shame and powerlessness of people.

These incidents have become the central point to catch attention and judgment of the public. Character of human being is weighed on the scale and self-respect is hurt. All the society and individuals are astonished by the incidents and actions that occurred. The initial feeling is that all the values are turned around and living norms are violated and the greed of people is virtually under no limitation.

The flow of negative or positive public opinions is actually not taken into consideration in these incidents. With the contribution of mass media, storms of outrage, frustration and indignation overwhelmed social networks and forums. Words such as “all online press shows shocked”, “all Facebook of Vietnamese people get shocked because of the savage”, “the public showed intensive concern and outrage”, “the public cannot hide panic and extreme outrage” or “the public got shocked, astonished, disgusted”, “the public strongly reacts”, “the public has become really shocked”, and “the public cannot believe” have been conveyed via mass media.

Via writings and comments, issues were analyzed under different points of view and aspects. Was the asset looting a test for the greed of Vietnamese people? Duplication of medical tests, severe attitude toward lying-in women, and the discharge of dead patient into the river were the tests for the ethics of doctors? Did the story about kindergarteners test the human building of education sector? “Unrealistic” decrees presented for the immaturity? It appears that all the incidents were attributed to nature (potential behavior of people) of wild and unrestrained outburst.

+ The hash curve of the driver has become a reluctant “test” for the dignity of Vietnamese people and also become a hash curve to change the dignities of many people. Hundreds of people, the young and elderly, men and women, could not overcome the test of greed; they grasped that pile of beer and collected wildly. The famous accident became a notorious one, became the shame and even disgrace of Vietnamese people, in the eyes of international friends. Reported by one of the

leading televisions of Russian Federation RenTV, foreigners were astonished and conscience of the whole society was “blushed” by the incident.

+ The phrase “a physician is like a clement mother” has been quantified; the fear of losing clients, of reducing prestige of the clinic, of being made fun of let the doctor throw his patient’s body into the river to destroy the evidence. Just because there was no envelop of some hundreds of thousand dong, the doctor was willing to let the laying-in woman and her child threatened (to dead). Just because of some income from insurance, they involved a whole group in duplicating health tests and replacing the health indicators that the patients need to know to protect their lives which are being threatened by severe illness.

+ The desire that kindergarten children would obey the cruel regulations on school diet has led many kindergarteners to commit a crime and maltreat children innocently, which overcomes the limitation of forgiveness and brings parents to tears and “dare not to watch till the end of the clip because it’s too cruel”. These kindergarteners acted without being conscious about their cruelty. Weren’t they born and didn’t they grow up in a civilized and humanistic society where people are respected? Do they tend to live in a social environment where the bad and the good abound?

+ The desire of achieving a feat to report their performance, policemen of Bắc Giang province and probably of many other localities, together with careless trial have led guiltless citizens to the prison, causing stolen lives and broken homes.

+ A dynamic society with constantly changing practices and a desire to manage the society to become better and better, but

in an air-conditioned working room, have made many people half crying half laughing. Being shocked, sad, indignant, ashamed and even disgraceful for Vietnamese people is the mood that many people expressed via means of communications when they have to witness the degrading morality of the society; when they have to witness the asset looting and indifference with patients; when they have to witness and encounter irresponsible administrative regulations, etc.

After the storm of public opinions via mass media, we have the chance to witness many good deeds. The banner of dignity was shown in the place where beer looting happened. Money was collected and donated to the driver; Tiger beer declared that the driver would not have to compensate for the loss. The driver returned 200 million dong to benefactors because he would not have to compensate for the beer. Hanoi Department of Health granted merits to courageous people (in the incident of health test duplication), etc.

However, there have been actions that pour more “fire into public opinions”. Chairman of Ward 25, with his own statement, covered the wrongful deed of his subordinates and ignored the incident that street wardens hit the street vendor; Minister of Health did not drop by families of 3 children who were the dead victims of mistaken vaccination despite the fact of her business visit to this locality for the ground breaking ceremony of war martyr cemetery while the incident happened. However, under the pressure of public opinions, they finally had to apologize to the public and admit their mistakes. The question is that if there were no evidence of words, clips, recordings, pictures thanks to the modern technology publicized to the society, would

the awareness and kindness of these people be raised? Or whether restrictive administrative measures in “unrealistic” regulations would be annulled?

III. Pressure from media and public opinions

When these incidents were exposed via media, family circumstances of the victims (of each incident) were pushed to the drama; families, relatives and superiors of “beer looters”, kindergarteners, doctors and street wardens could not stay indifferent. The topic of morality of the society once again was brought to discussion by the public. Appearance of the “shame banner” showing dignity of the ones who were still aware of the matter did raise an alarm.

Since then were valuable lessons recognized. Turning on your television or opening newspapers, you see yourself contently embracing a dozen cans of beer, how do you feel? Your child has seen you looting; your child has seen you hitting the weaker; your child has seen... In term of an individual, “I am really ashamed and find myself not eligible to educate my child any longer” said a mother in the looting incident; “the cans of beer have become so bitter” said a young person. In term of a community, a resident from Biên Hoà confided “the behavior of only several people has brought a notorious reputation, hope that not all residents of Biên Hoà will be thought in that negative way”. Or “Hearing the news, our family feels very painful and upset”; “We have to stop our business because of people’s cursing” (families of kindergarteners).

+ In the medical sector, the ethnic predicament was exposed onto the press. At first, the Minister neither admitted her responsibility nor apologized but dodged

around and blamed to her subordinates. Until being under the pressure of public opinions did she admit partial responsibility (the incident of Cát Tường Beauty Salon). The pressing of public opinions was raised to such height that there were many opinions and recommendations that the Minister should resign. “Not only have this case but others related to medical sector caused outrage of the people” said Mr. Vũ Đức Đam, Minister-Chairman of Government Office.

+ Only under pressure from public opinions as well as actions of competent agencies, did police of Bắc Giang province officially admit their mistakes and shortcomings in the case of Nguyễn Thanh Chấn, victim of an injustice.

+ Under such requirements from public opinions on complimenting courageousness against negatives, did Hanoi Department of Health organize an (“unwillingness” though) award ceremony to 3 women at Hoài Đức General Hospital.

+ Having watched behaviors of the kindergarteners, immediately, a storm of outrage, pressing and indignant feelings spreaded all over means of communications, social networks and forums. Hồ Chí Minh City Department of Education and Training requested a clarification as well as strict punishment over kindergarteners who hit and threaten children. The Department also proposed to Hồ Chí Minh City People’s Committee a request on promulgating the Instruction “Reorganize and enhancing the quality of children caring and educating at nursery schools and establishments” which would annul the former Instruction and be suitable with new circumstances. Series of movements have been carried out to

reorganize and check up to avoid violence in kindergartens; which partly helps the community feel secured about the safety of children at kindergartens.

+ Forbiddance of using glass cover for coffin was immediately criticized since it was inappropriate to prohibit a cultural activity which was of traditional and personal matter by an administrative measure. Finally, the document on this issue was recommended to be annulled by competent agencies.

+ Under pressure from public opinions, Chairman of Ward 25 was on behalf of the ward People's Committee to apologize, admit the mistake and agree to support medication expenses, compensation for damaged goods and wages for Mr. Trịnh Xuân Tĩnh and simultaneously to make decision on dismissing the two street wardens.

The dignity that appeals the inclination to the good of Vietnamese people with a hope to cure the pain inside the society has partly been interpreted. Some believe that, the incidents have certainly become unforgettable lessons in the hearts of millions of Vietnamese to which thousands of citizenship education textbooks and millions of morality ones that we have learned in 12 years cannot compare. These lessons do not cost a penny and consume no time to learn by heart; they are automatically recorded in our mind and are unforgettable.

IV. Orientation to healthy public opinions: enhancing the role of the media

Some wishes that we all the Vietnamese people have the sense of shame, self-respect and regret for mistakes and share with others' misfortunes; that "ugly" and indifferent behaviors will become less and less among the society.

At present, it is believed that it is still difficult for the society wound to skin again. Without strong medications at a macro level, similar incidents may occur in different motifs. However, waiting for strong medications at a macro level, medications at a micro level would also initiate healthy flows of public opinions.

When the beer looting incident happened, via movements of the media, is there any better orientations of public opinions and better supervision than a sign board "*Being a resident from Biên Hoà, being a Vietnamese, I am ashamed for those who "looted some cans of beer" here at the noon of April 12th*"? It is this action that inspired the voices of many people: "Everywhere, there are good ones and bad ones. In Biên Hoà, there are people who loot but also people who exhibit such meaningful message"; "I am happy for the deed of this person since it shows that there are still many people who are self-respectful and willing to criticize bad actions. Though they are ugly images of my own hometown fellow", said a young person living in Biên Hoà.

After that, representatives of Tiger Beer also officially declared that the driver of the beer looting would bear no damage compensation for the incident. Simultaneously, the driver would continue his job at the company. Such fully humanistic decision made public and network communities to breathe a sigh of relief; they were glad for the driver and thankful to Tiger Beer; the driver also returned all the donations to benefactors.

A story thought to be sad finally came to a happy ending; belief is just starting in each person that there is still kindness, sense of shame and dignity among many Vietnamese people.

Thanks to the media, the effect of “shameful beer looting” immediately came to operative. A lorry transporting thousands carton boxes of Dutch Lady milk got an accident (in Cẩm Phả, Quảng Ninh) and another one transporting full of instant noodle overturned (in Thủ Dầu Một, Bình Dương); however, nothing was looted from those lorries.

The belief that there would be no more looting, no more cruel kindergarteners, no more victims of injustice and no more duplicated health tests, is being approached by public opinions, though it is still very difficult to achieve. The story of “beer looting” was mentioned in the Literature test of Specialized Secondary School Hùng Vương (Đắc Lắc) with a desire that “students are the first to access and they have to express their thoughts and opinions about the story”, which was being widely supported by public opinions. Step by step, we are orienting a dignity solution for students as well as for “adults”, aren't we?

It could be said that, over the past time public opinions via media have shown its gradual growth up in judgment and evaluation towards reported events; and in expressing clear attitudes towards the good and bad, right and wrong deeds. Accompanied by the institutionalization of management mentioned in the Decree No. 72/2013/NĐ-CP of the Government regarding operation methods and contents via internet, the gradual maturity of public opinions is an intensive factor which enhances the selection to more reliable sources of news as well as an embracement of more diverse, multi-dimensional and objective information. In addition, the most important thing is to raise the voice to strongly disagree with inappropriate actions and accordingly to

arouse dignity and sense of shame and also to encourage the right and the good.

Listening, analyzing and orienting public opinions toward each social phenomenon should be processed by a logical mind rather than being flown by “an emotional heart”; we should be unruffled to contribute thoughtful ideas and discussions, and avoid being flown by emotional, monotonic and one-dimensional opinions □

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