

## **NEW MEANS OF COMMUNICATION AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGES IN VIETNAM**

BÙI HOÀI SƠN. **New Means of Communication and Socio-Cultural Changes in Vietnam.** H: Social Sciences Publishing House, 2008, 329 pages.

*Summarized by  
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### **I. The development of new means of communication in Vietnam**

New means of communications (NMCs), typically in the form of cell phones and the Internet, have appeared recently in Vietnam, but have quickly risen in popularity and have had a drastic impact on social life. Within 12 years after the first mobile phone network began operating in 1994, there were already 12 million subscribers. Vietnam has become one of the fastest growing mobile phone markets in Asia with an annual growth rate of 50%. The Internet is also new to Vietnam but has attracted 14 million users in just 10 years. The openness of society combined with a high rate of economic growth has enabled NMCs to become deeply embedded in Vietnamese society. Rapid, substantial development in information technologies worldwide and their timely application in Vietnam can be seen as

the main force behind new technologies in Vietnam.

Vietnam was slower than other countries in the region and worldwide in adopting Internet and

mobile phone services, yet these services have been constantly upgraded and have managed to keep up with developments worldwide, even surpassing those of some neighboring countries.

Today there is tough competition in the Vietnamese market between mobile service providers such as VinaPhone, MobiFone, and Viettel (using GSM technology) and S-Phone and EVN Telecom (using CDMA). Bùi Hoài Sơn predicts that this market will continue to

boom, reaching around 40% of the population by 2020. Mobile networks will switch from talk to value-added services and will begin to cooperate with fixed phone networks to provide customers with different services. Competition among service providers will be an impetus for the development of the Vietnamese telecommunications market, especially the mobile phone market, and economic reforms within that market (pg. 26 – 33).

The author also touches on current services offered in Vietnam, popular mobile phone brands, favorite features on mobile phones, calls made per day, persons called per day, SMS text messaging, and other topics (pg. 36- 37). In addition to mobile phones, the author summarizes Internet use in Vietnam, including suppliers, 64Kbps Internet direct subscriber market shares, ADSL subscriber market shares, the proportion of contract subscribers, frequent user accounts, location of use, duration of use, and favorite activities on the Internet. The author concludes that using the Internet has become common for Vietnamese, especially young, urban Vietnamese (pg. 52- 58).

## **II. Theories for the study of new means of communication in Vietnam**

To facilitate further research in Vietnam, the author reviews a number of theoretical perspectives on the impact of NMCs, raising some of the following issues:

*First, mutual influences between NMCs and the tendency toward individualism.* The most important impact of NMCs on

society is the way they facilitate the tendency towards individualism in every area of society. According to the author, individualization has both advantages and disadvantages. In a certain cultural environment, everyone wishes to behave according to their own ideas, which on the one hand disrupts the collective order, but on the other hand stimulates individual creativity. Currently, the stimulation of individual creativity is placed in higher regard than the maintenance of collective order, especially among young people. In the opinion of the author, in the future “software that encourages people to express themselves will be more and more common because it meets the demands of the wide-spread tendency towards individualism in our world. This is the age of the individual. Never before have there been so many individuals, both literally and figuratively.”

*The second is a change in the cycle of silence.* The “cycle of silence” refers to the human tendency to hold one’s peace when confronted with the fact that one’s opinion is in the minority. The invention of NMCs has largely curtailed the “cycle of silence” existent for the majority of human history, making it possible for everybody to speak their thoughts and desires aloud, regardless of whether they are generally accepted by society. Evidence of this tendency has come from various cases of minority opinions that eventually became public opinion, for example, the social movement to overturn President Joseph Estrada of the Philippines, the election of President

Roh Moo-huyn, and the May 2007 strike in Tiananmen Square (China) against a chemical company (pg.68). Another illustration for the role of NMCs in omitting the “cycle of silence” is the flood of online blogs. It has satisfied certain social needs, including the need for personal expression and the need to find information from diverse sources. The author concludes that as minorities supported by MNCs start to raise their voices, society will become more democratic (though, on the negative side, it will also become more chaotic due to information overload). However, the “cycle of silence” will not completely disappear, but will affect only those who cannot access digital technologies and NMCs (pg.69).

*The third is the coming into being of the virtual world.* This is the most crucial contribution of NMCs such as the Internet and mobile phones to human society. Virtual space has made users braver and more self confident in communicating and expressing themselves in society. In the virtual world, people can easily display themselves, their thoughts, and their affections in a way that is difficult to do in real life. Virtual communication can re-establish psychological, social, and cultural balance for users; nevertheless, it also exercises certain negative influences. For example, it can become easy for people to fall behind schedule if they become addicted to the Internet; people’s language can be affected; virtual life can come to have more importance than real life or even replace it; and in particular, virtual

communication can increase at the cost of face-to-face communication. (pg.70-72).

*The fourth is the borderless world.* Information technology and NMCs are key factors in “flattening the globe” and fostering globalization in every aspect of life. With a connected PC, people can find out about events in any corner of the world and stay in touch with friends anywhere; with a cell phone, people can keep in touch twenty-four hours; and so on. Thanks to NMCs, especially the Internet, obscure cultures have become more and more widely known, and every culture and individual can raise their voice on the Internet. Because borders between countries have been removed and transportation has become much more convenient, individuals can be much more dynamic in their activities, especially business activities.

### **III. New Means of Communication and Socio-Cultural Changes in Vietnam**

Regarding the changes that NMCs effect on culture and society, the author focuses on 12 basic areas, detailed as follows:

1. *Changes in communication by the individual and society.* According to the author, the most obvious impact of NMCs is to increase communication within society and between individuals. Positive impacts include greater speed of information access, preservation of contact between relatives, bridging of the communication barriers of space and time, cheaper and faster communication, and new methods of communication (online customs procedures, online purchasing, and online meetings).

Negative impacts include the tendency for communications between individuals, families and society to become less familiar, causing some individuals to experience loneliness (specifically, people with NMCs stay in closer contact with each other than with those without access) (pg.72-80). Based on this the author holds that NMCs can be considered an extension of individual and social contacts that help make contact more effective, but that these technologies are neutral, and the quality of their effects depends on how they are used.

2. *A society of increased "selfhood."* NMCs can be seen as a catalyst for increasing the "selfhood" of users. Economic growth and rapid integration into world politics, culture and society have considerably altered the cultural life of the Vietnamese, especially urban dwellers, and the role of the individual has come to be highly regarded. Under the influence of NMCs, individuals have become more aware of themselves through their interactions using private means, private addresses, and a private name. The "selfhood" that the author mentions here is closely related to the cultivation of an individual style and to displaying one's affluence or "class" when choosing communication equipment, three types of which the author examines in depth: blogs, YouTube, and cell phones. The author concludes that "cultural life is greatly affected when people focus too much on themselves. When people care too much about themselves, they will become

selfish and forget about the collective good" (pg.86 – 107).

3. *Changes in social and personal space.* The extension of personal space and an incursion into collective space is one of the changes brought about by NMCs, especially cell phones. According to traditional Vietnamese conceptions, people must obey certain rules when in public places, but since the appearance of NMCs, these rules have been partly disrupted, affecting socio-cultural life in Vietnam. Many people allow themselves to carry on personal communication in public places. They think of this as a way to express their personality or to show off their affluence. With cell phones and the Internet, people have more private space in which to escape from social and family supervision. Virtual space is a place where people can relax, release stress and do what they want. Cell phones erase the division between private and public relationships, mixing both friends and strangers into a single virtual world (pg.108 – 110). Yet the author holds that not only individual incursions on communal space, but communal and societal incursions into private lives through the use of NMCs has become more and more noticeable.

4. *Changes in entertainment.* Thanks to NMCs, people have become busier in both positive and negative ways. Negative effects include the following cases: sometimes people get wrapped up in the virtual world and find it difficult to put it away; some young people have

become addicted to online games, neglecting their work and study; cultural traditions can fall into oblivion when people are overly fond of new kinds of entertainment; the tendency towards individualism can make people more selfish; ailments can be caused by working for prolonged periods at the computer. On the other hand, positive activities include: various games online suitable for groups of people who enjoy challenges, logical thinking, sports, etc. The greatest benefit of NMCs is the expansion of entertainment and the high level of interaction made possible between users and suppliers. This change takes place in two main ways: when technical tools create changes in modes of entertainment, and when user demand dictates changes in technology (pg. 113 – 115).

5. *Democratization of social life.* Great efforts by the Party and the Government during its process of comprehensive social reform, globalization and the political, economic, and social integration of the country, and the people's demands for involvement in the management and administration of their country are key reasons for the current process of democratization happening in Vietnam. However, it is impossible to ignore the role of NMCs. The author insists that together with the mass media, NMCs are important in contributing to the following: dissemination of Party and governmental guidelines and policies, as well as transmitting the people's

requests to the authorities; bringing to light corruption and negative cases; and acting as an important supervisor of civil authorities. What is special about NMCs, according to the author, is that their method of communication is interactive and bi-directional (two-way). The people can directly share their opinions and desires and be directly listened to by related officials – this process is an expression of social democratization (pg.130 – 131).

6. *Misinformation and cultural groups.* Information on the Internet is largely unchecked and therefore very chaotic. It is difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood (except when the information is uploaded by a reputable organization). Googling information on the Internet has become very popular, leading to complex situations, for example: habits of accessing information and reading documents change; contradictory sources of information greatly affect the shaping processes of the personalities of young people; cultural groups are formed online (pg. 139 – 143).

7. *Changes in the transmission of knowledge.* Newer and more advanced technologies create not only new sciences, interests and studies, but also changes in knowledge acquirement. Experience no longer plays such a key role in teaching and learning, and study and research habits have become much more important. Hence, guidance for students must be updated in order to be suitable. Moreover, one-sided thinking is no longer appropriate in a time when

many different sources of diverse information on any and every subject are available online, causing students lose confidence in the one-sided dogmas of the past. The author emphasizes that working and studying on the computer is a new skill that is essential for Vietnamese students to gain if they wish to bridge the gap between themselves and education in advanced countries worldwide. In addition, using NMCs (primarily the Internet) helps change students' way of thinking (pg.145 – 147).

8. *The digital divide*. The digital divide refers to the unequal access to digital technology available to different groups that results in unequal burdens and benefits. The advent of NMCs in contemporary Vietnamese society has facilitated the formation of various social groups dependent on the use of this means of communication, and this has created a digital divide. This divide is present among individuals of each generation, family, and region of Vietnamese society, considerably influencing socio-cultural life. It is also a reason for social conflicts among some groups (pg.149-154).

9. *The development of new crimes*. The appearance of NMCs in Vietnam has enabled social evils to spread. Typical new crimes include fraud, blackmail, video pornography, prostitution services, harrasment through text messaging, instigation of violence, hacking, spreading of computer viruses, distortion of cultural and artistic works, and so on (pg.155-165).

10. *Changes in business and service practices*. The author considers E-business a new business style which is becoming more and more developed thanks to the influence of NMCs. It allows consumers almost unlimited choice among many different commodities with different features and breaks down barriers of time as well as distance. This type of business has a heavy impact on culture and society in Vietnam. Some traditional businesses practices have also been changed, and in addition many new social practices have appeared since the application of NMCs (pg.168 – 171).

11. *New demands, life styles, and language*. The appearance of NMCs has lead to a new cycle: new services => new demands => new life styles => new habits => new services. The desire to express the “self” and the demand for many different kinds of entertainment increase, ostentatious purchases become more obvious, consumer patterns and communal and individual activities gradually change, and everyday language is replaced by obscure jargon or even by a distorted form of Vietnamese (pg.171-185).

12. *Changes in individual psychologies*. Under the impact of NMCs, a virtual world is set up parallel to the real world. This virtual world “has a drastic influence on the individual psychologies of a society. Various ideologies and theories coexist, and people must choose which of these to follow, or risk becoming lost in a disorienting world of

information.” In the author’s opinion, besides a limited number of positive effects, most of the effects that NMCs have on the shaping of the personalities of youth are negative. Some even suffer depression, become distant from people around them, or find it difficult to communicate with others (pg.189 – 193).

In addition to analyzing these twelve basic changes in Vietnamese culture and society under the influence of NMCs, the author also makes predictions for the further development of NMCs that will have influence on socio-cultural life. For example: Internet popularity and its effects will spread to many fields and social classes; many entertainment programs will aim at advertising for NMCs; the importance of cell phones as a decoration will decrease; cell phones will come to fulfill many different

functions; many new services will be developed; new communication technologies and their application will exert a deep influence on every aspect of life, in both positive and negative ways; social conflicts related to NMCs will increase; a life style including the frequent use of NMCs will reach rural areas; the negative effects of NMCs on community health will receive more attention (pg.198-205).

Based on the above-mentioned criticism, the author affirms that while socio-cultural changes in Vietnam do not originate solely from NMCs, they are however a specific indication and forecast of these changes. At the same time, the author mentions several solutions for the negative use of NMCs through policy, communications and education.