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PRESENTATION

“Dealing with Media Ethics in Lao PDR”

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✿ PLAN OF MY PRESENTATION:

- 1/. Overview of the Lao Media in a changing landscape
- 2/. Media legislation in Lao PDR
 - Codes of Media Ethics
- 3/. Challenges and possible solutions
- 4/. Conclusion

Overview of Lao Media in a changing landscape:

- Lao multi-ethnic people had been under colonialism and foreign aggression for over a century.
- Their fundamental rights including human rights and freedom of expression had been seriously violated and deprived.
- The history of Lao media started a century ago, with the birth of the first Lao newspaper appeared in 1930 when a group of Lao people began a one-page news bulletin.
- Their purpose was to build patriotism among the masses and encourage them to cooperate with the people of the Indochina peninsula to fight for independence.

- After the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic 1975, the Lao multi-ethnic people were liberated and their fundamental human rights gradually restored and protected
- In parallel, the media have gradually seen significant changes and important improvement not only in terms of organizational structure and activities but also in terms of legislation and responsibilities.
- They play an important role in promoting national development and unity.
- In 1986, the Lao Government opened the country to the world and allowed the private sector to be more active in the society and to operate in the media field.

- Under the new regime, the main role of Lao media is to disseminate information through their own organizations, including print media, electronic media and media products.
- These media, have multiple roles/ duties:
- Voice of the people, as well as of the party and the state and of the social organizations.
- These media organizations encourage the involvement of the people in national patriotism and provide information about every sphere of activities
- They contribute to the prevention of social obstructions and distortion of facts, and are a stage to promote democracy and the rights of ethnic people throughout the nation.

Lao Media Evolution:

- Lao population: about 6.5 millions.
- Lao PDR counts today nearly 2,000 journalists who work with media organizations around the country.
- Only 40 percent of its citizens have access to the print media covering today approximately 100 different newspapers, including daily, weekly, monthly, yearly magazines, journals and news bulletins.
- They are in Lao, English, and French languages. Most of them are produced in Vientiane, the capital city, under the ownership of state bodies, public organizations, state institutions, individuals and private companies.

- Laos has about 50 radio stations.
- All radio stations in Laos are owned by the government, but not fully funded; about a third of the budget is earned by advertising revenue.
- Lao National Radio broadcasts on AM, SW and FM frequencies and are also transmitted by satellite and via internet.
- For Television, there are about 40 television stations with six channels at national level, including the Lao National Television (LNTV) beaming their programs by satellite which are replayed by regional television.
- The analogue broadcasting television system has been replaced by a digital format.
- The sector plans to transfer the entire system to digital by 2015.


- Private media including printing press, Radio and TV has significantly increased, especially during these last 5 years with the emergence of the first private magazines, radio and TV stations such as : Mahason Magazine, Update Magazine, Target Magazine, Butterfly Radio FM 98.8 Mhz, Phoenix VIP Radio FM 95.00 Mhz and Grade A Radio FM 97.3 Mhz, Lao Star TV, PSTV, MVLao or TVLao.

Lao people enjoy their freedom in consuming media products under the law:

- Lao PDR is one of the countries whose people have the most of freedom in consuming media products without any restrictions.
- Today, the Lao public can access hundreds of radio channels and more than 60 uncensored TV cable programs including the BBC, CNN, TV5, HBO, etc.
- Civil society has therefore gained full access to foreign media.
- The public have a better understanding of global issues.
- Lao People may be daily watching or listening to foreign channels, but they also listen to or watch very closely the Lao news to check the accuracy and preciseness of the information.

- The Lao Constitution stipulates and guarantees that Lao citizens have the rights and freedoms of speech, press and assembly.
- The government has to do what is necessary to let the people to have full and free access to all types and sources of media, including the internet.
- In 2009, about 40,000 people were officially 3G subscribers.
- Social networks like Facebook and Twitter are booming among young people in the cities. Facebook has become a platform for many young people to discuss issues and share information. Blogs, social networks and YouTube have become venues for (young) Lao people to express freely their ideas and concerns.

- The citizens of a democratic, independent and peaceful Laos have themselves to balance the information they receive and to make judgments on what is wrong and what is right and also to freely express what they think and want to say.
- The government will not interfere or dictate whatsoever to obstruct the rights and freedom of the Lao people on this matter.
- Accordingly, many radio live programs provide a forum where people can share views and information through online discussion, with call-in questions and answers on different sensitive issues including negative social phenomena such as corruption among others.

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- Some TV programs allow the public to view open discussions on legal and development issues focusing on addressing the needs of the people.
 - Newspapers feature editorial page and columns that express the personal opinions of writers on various hot topics of public interest.
 - Live radio and TV broadcasting of National Assembly debates is also organized as well as a telephone hotline is available to allow the general public to voice their hot concerns and complaints.



Media legislation in Lao PDR:

State-run Media:

- In Lao PDR, the government plays a major role in both regulating and operating the media.
- However, since 2000, the government allows the private sector to publish some magazines and also to enter into joint-venture with government radio and television.
- With the assistance of some international organizations like UNESCO and UNDP, the government has allowed the setting up of community radio at district village level.

- The Constitution stipulates that the media should be guided by the Party and the state, and is officially supervised to serve their policies through the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism (MICT).
- Accordingly, the ministry conducts every week meetings with editors to discuss the news reporting and give feedback in case of critical reporting or if the news has negative impacts on policies and the state. Journalists who are critical of the government policy or high-level authorities will be either warned or restricted in their coverage.
- It is important to note that so far, any journalist has reportedly been jailed for their works; interference usually comes in the form of internal disciplinary actions by their offices.

Existing models:


Media Law:

- Approved by the Lao National Assembly in July 2008, consisting of ten chapters and 64 articles, and determining the roles, principles, responsibilities, duties and activities of the media.
- Providing the legal instruments for the State to more effectively guide and manage the media which have the main role to serve the peoples' interest and to safeguard and develop the country.
- The media belong to the government, but the government is the representative of the people, while the media should be from the people, for the people, and serve all the needs of the Lao people and also contribute to reduce the poverty of the people.



Ten-point Code of ethics:

- A ten-point code of ethics, considered as the co-regulation for the media has been set up by the Lao Journalists' Association to define the role and responsibilities of journalists in Laos.
- The Lao Media ten-point Code of Ethics provides the framework for freedom and right of expression of the media in communicating and delivering news assuring ethical practice in journalism, as well as objective truth, justice, accountability and fairness before the society.

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- Compared to those various existing universal codes, the Lao media ethics do share many common elements including the principles of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability.
 - The Lao media have to act like a watchdog, bravely reporting or commenting on any issues, problems or illegal activities and negative social phenomena such as corruption, and responding on time to any denouncement that accuses unjustly or distorts facts in a way that is detrimental to the nation and people.


- Somsanouk Mixay, vice president of Lao Journalists' Association, summarizes the code of ethics: "The duty of a journalist would be to relay the official policy to the people and also to reflect the peoples' opinion and decision to the policy makers and leaders. A journalist has to be a bridge between the State and the people".

- Pineprathana Phanthamaly, Director General of the Mass-Media Department describes the code of ethics: "Lao journalists or reporters should not conduct mass media for the sake of mass media. It is mass media for the people to bring out the interest and the voice of the people and not to serve one's self and not to be a tool for commercial purposes or for private use.


The media's main goal is to fix the basic policy to develop Laos to be a wealthy, peaceful, equality-driven and prosperous society. Lao media should follow this guideline and they should regulate themselves in front of the constitution and law”.

The ten-point Code of ethics for Lao Media:


1). The duty of the Lao Media is to serve the national cause of defense and construction of a peaceful, independent, democratic, united and prosperous Laos, under the leadership of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP); no matter for which medium and under what circumstances he/she works, the Lao journalist has to conduct his/her activity in accordance with these ultimate goals.



2). The Lao Media fulfils their rights in disseminating information to the people; the journalist has to be objective, honest and realistic (telling the truth); every piece of news/information that is delivered to the society has to reflect the real fact as it truly is, according to the objective reality in the real situation of the society without any defamation or falsification; the journalist is responsible for providing news/information to the people based on the truth and corresponding to the reality of the evolution of the fact; this in order to respond to the opinion and feedback of the society.



3). Media is a necessary information vehicle for the social life, in particular the cultural life; the journalist respects and implements his/her media freedom, his/her accountability towards the society, as well as to the people's democratic state, the ethnic people and towards the freedom in fulfilling his/her activities under the constitution and the law; the journalist has to implement correctly the rules of the Lao Media organization; even if he/she is under any pressure or constraint, the Lao journalist should not behave in the ways that are against the ultimate goals of the Lao Media and the national interests.




4). In parallel with the implementation of the freedom right in disseminating news/information, the implementation of the right of asking questions and refusing to answer to questions which is the freedom principle of the media, the journalist has the right to stick on his/her correct information position, but needs to respect the right of answering to questions and the legal right of refusing to answer of the public.

5). The journalist has the duty to protect his/her sources of information and also protect the confidentiality for the individuals who legally provide information to him/her.

6). The Lao media strengthens the beautiful culture of the nation; at the same time, they respect the human's culture and spiritual virtue, assembly the unity of the Lao ethnic people, for peace, friendship and the understanding between Lao PDR and the world.

7). The journalist contributes to enhance the interests of the Lao community, respects the human rights, does not make wrong use of the information vehicles to oppress the human's virtue and create damages to the interests of other people.

8). The journalist has to always have a pure virtue, does not take profits from any situations, must not be selfish at all when he/she is being asked to disseminate or not disseminate news/information.



9). The journalist respects the opinion and feedback from the society and from the colleagues; he/she is solidary, cooperating and mutually helpful in the exercise of his/her work together with his/her colleagues and in his/her private life; fights against all harmful activities that are against the nation and the interests of the people, and that violate the ethics of the Lao Media.

10). The journalist leads his/her life which is pure, civilized, studious and modest for his/her personal advancement; the constant upgrading of his/her knowledge, competence and professional expertise is the lifelong yearning and aim of the Lao journalist.

Validity and effectiveness: Regulatory Bodies

- An independent press council doesn't exist in Laos.
- The LJA (1968) caters to the interest of members.
- The association is under the MICT, and functions as an umbrella organization to bring together editors, journalists, photo-journalists and television and radio producers and technicians.
- Encouraging exchange of professional ideas and learning.
- Organizing training and development programs for editorial and technical staff of the media.
- Protecting the benefits of its members and media practitioners.
- Participating in the implementation of the party and government's direction, policy, laws and the media policy.

- For all journalists, to be a member of the LJA could be a privilege, facilitate their work, provide support for professional trainings, and protect their rights.
- The association attempts to address complaints or concerns of journalists and other members and also attend to public's complaints in case of objectionable media reports. However, the public can complain directly to the media organization concerned, while journalists are free to defame (criticize) people if they have been officially condemned.
- So far, under the new regime, no one has been jailed for defamation or for disapproval or criticism against the party and state's policies.
- The journalists practice the principles of constructiveness and self-censorship when they have to deal with newsworthy or sensitive stories.



Challenges:

- Lack of journalistic training and professionalism, absence of ethics and practice of corruption among some undisciplined journalists due to low payment.
- Absence of professional journalism schools; the quality of the existing mass communication degree program at the LNU is still very poor.
- While the issue of ethics is required to be incorporated in journalism training and newsroom policies, it cannot be effective in a society where corruption and unethical practices still exist.



Media Accountability Systems:


- The Lao socio-political system does not allow the existence of media accountability systems.
- The state determines the main duty of journalists which is to relay official policy to the people and express peoples' opinion of the authorities.
- However, the media are allowed to report on issues like malpractice, corruption and poor governance and express peoples' views of the government development programs.

Solutions:

- A media system that can contribute to the eradication of poverty and to development.
- Journalists require training and need to be exposed to outside information.
- Legal and social development are required for the media to be responsible and accountable.
- Initiating changes in the infrastructure to help journalists to have easier access to information.
- The Media Law should be widely available to the people to make them aware of the role of the media.
- The enforcement of law should be effective and assist in the protection of journalists.
- Economic progress in the media sector through reform and competition for better benefits for journalists and enhancing people's participation.

Conclusion:

- Continued economic growth and positive changes in the country as a whole over the past years have created the opportunity for the Lao media to develop and to have more and more freedom under the law and with higher social responsibility.
- The general public has shown more and more interests and demands for further accurate news, information and stories that contribute to the protection and the development of the Lao nation and society, as well as to the promotion of the relations and the understanding with other nations.

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- It is important to ensure that the related policies and regulations are implemented and that they contribute to strengthened media sector, improved delivery of news and services and poverty reduction.
 - Enhancing the cooperation between various actors in the international media community in promoting and enhancing the media ethics.
 - What would be the future of media ethics...?
 - Concerted and coordinated efforts have to be made to better serve the people and facilitate the global development processes.

THE END



THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION !