Chapter 3

Communication practices in Vietnamese non-government organisations as civic actions

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Abstract

This chapter offers insights into communication practices in Vietnamese non-government organisations as civic actions. Drawing from wider research on community work in Vietnam, two examples are discussed. The first involves a volunteer community worker implementing a new teaching program in a local community-based organisation. The second involves a national non-government organisation with an international counterpart in an incident of reputational risk management. Using Habermas' theory of communicative action, the chapter explores citizens' purpose and meaning making in communication practices within their NGOs and the broader contexts of everyday life. The chapter highlights that civic values are not always absent in authoritarian contexts like Vietnam; rather civic actions are contingent on people's political, cultural and social contexts. These contexts are conditions for communication within a community group and with the state, which in turn shape people's communication practices. To understand *communication rationality* that inform actors' decision and choice to engage in civic actions or 'activism', particularly in authoritarian settings, it is important to identify these conditions and explore how people respond to these conditions. This chapter contributes to the literature on Habermas' *communication rationality* and *lifeworld* and a fruitful way to understand 'activism' in different contexts.

Key words: Vietnam, community work, communication culture, activism, civic actions, Habermas, communicative action, authoritarian context

Introduction

Studies on communication practices in authoritarian settings tend to focus on the political impact of traditional or social media as either propaganda to prolong the authoritarian rule, or providing resources for resistance by 'soft' critique of the ruling Party (for example, Esarey & Qiang 2008, Skoric et al 2016, Hyun & Kim 2015). As argued by Pham & Kaleja (2021: 147), "effective propaganda acts in the same ways that effective radicalisation does, in the creative

use of examples to teach ideologies or mobilise humans toward self-liberation." It is important to understand the social and political reality of the people engaging in that communication practice, and how such reality shape their motivation to 'speak' and what might these speech acts suggest about their self-consciousness about that reality. Without this consciousness of reality, we risk viewing media or engaging in conversations as accomplice of a legitimated truth, rather than interrogating who is the propagandist or propagandee, whether something is governmentality or democratic deliberation, or a combination of both.

This chapter explores some of the ways in which communication practices in Vietnamese non-government organisations (NGOs) act as civic actions or 'activism' within specific networked politics and broader society. The chapter draws on the ideas that NGOs, particularly in authoritarian contexts where political participation are often denied in formal avenues, can be channels through which people make their voices heard to facilitate community development as well as civil society development (Wells-Dang 2012; Pham & Kaleja 2021). Activism is understood in this chapter as active citizenship and civic engagement by ordinary citizens in the public sphere on matters that concern them. The marginalisation or exclusion of people's voices in these matters is a political problem (Habermas 1991).

The overarching question that the chapter seeks to explore is: What are choices and practices of communication that work for Vietnamese people operating in NGOs, and how are they embedded within the politics of the NGO networks and broader state-society relations? Drawing on Habermas's (1984, 1987) concept of communicative action, the aim is to understand how communication practices may create transformative conditions for civic actions, and at the same time, they are conditioned by the social, cultural and political contexts of specific situations in the public sphere. The chapter considers the communication practices in the NGOs by citizens who operate in these NGOs, paying attention to the networked politics that emerge from the cultural, political, and transactional contexts of the individual and organisation. In considering the communicative space of the NGOs as a public sphere, the intention is to understand the extent to which social inequalities within and outside the NGOs can influence the networked politics and openness of the public sphere, which Habermas (1991) sees as a foundational element in the public sphere, and how do citizens recognise the inequalities and mitigate disparities that get in the way of their participation in citizenry activism.

This chapter draws on wider research about community development in Vietnam that involved in-depth interviews with 48 participants from various parts of Vietnam who engaged in some form of community work. Community work was defined as activities in charitable organisations, humanitarian services, or advocacy carried out by individuals or organisations voluntarily or through employment. Two examples are drawn from this study to illustrate the application of Habermas' (1984, 1987) communicative action in different contexts in order to contribute to this book's conceptual understandings of how activism is framed and understood in Asian contexts, and what it means to be an 'activist' in authoritarian regimes in Asia. The next part of the chapter presents key concepts of Habermas's theory of communicative action and how they are applied in this chapter. The following part provides a brief overview of Vietnam's community development work and civil society as background context for the discussion of the examples. The chapter concludes with thoughts on the merit of Habermas' normative ideals of communicative action and the public sphere in studying activism in authoritarian contexts more broadly.

Habermas's theory of communicative action

This chapter draws on two elements of Habermas' (1984, 1987) theory of communicative action to examine the potential of communication practices as civic actions or 'activism': *communicative rationality* and *lifeworld*. *Communicative rationality* explores concepts such as meaning, truth and knowledge by analysing the realm of communication as a social interaction. *Communicative rationality* does not take for granted the world in which communication takes place, rather it considers the conditions under which people conceive the world as the background – *lifeworld* - for which people within a particular community have shared meanings making everyday communication possible. Taken together *communicative rationality* and *lifeworld*, we can understand civic action as instrumental action that fit within the larger communicative context. Applying Habermas (1987), analysis of communication practices as civic action must step back from the immediacy of communication encounters to understand the broader origin and effects of such communication as a political action.

The communication system and the *lifeworld* influence each other through the mediating space of the public sphere. The public sphere can therefore be considered as communicative spaces, or spaces that provide "conditions of communication under which there can come into being a

discursive formative of opinion and will on the part of a public composed of the citizens of a state" (Habermas, 1992: 446). For Habermas, restriction to communication arises from the system's structural violence towards the *lifeworld*. Activism is the emancipative counter potentials that are generated from the communicatively structured domains of the *lifeworld*, for example autonomous movements against religious governance, resistance of capitalist reforms, anti-nuclear or environmental movements, peace movements, women's movement, and so forth. Further, the 'public' in the public sphere is networked in ways that have multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local, and subcultural domains (Habermas, 1996: 373). Habermas uses the idea of 'networks' to refer to how different public spheres facilitate communication between different 'publics' for example, print media and social media, or online and offline public sphere, like a mediated communication (Pham & Kaleja, 2021).

This chapter applies these concepts in discussing the two instances of communication of the Vietnamese NGOs in three ways. First, to understand the objective of the communicative action, subjective factors of people engaging in the action, and normative appropriateness of the language exchange – insight into the *lifeworld* of these speech acts. Second, to understand people's use of and reproduction of shared meanings about communicative action as a civic action - insight into the *communicative rationality* that inform their decision to participate and facilitate the coordinated activities of the civic action in the NGO. Third, to understand how these communicative exchanges form part of people's socialisation into the culture of 'activism' and perpetuate or generate new culture and modes of 'activism'. The intention is to illustrate how socio-political and socio-cultural contexts shape social relations and thus construct certain meanings and rules which people accord with in specific social situations of speech acts; how such communication practices also establish people's sense of political identity within the group which may (or may not) lead to shared values and goals about community actions and autonomy to partake in activism. Further, the chapter intends to explore whether Habermas' ideals of the public sphere and communicative action can be useful in authoritarian contexts, where NGOs are not traditionally seen as avenues for political activism.

Vietnam's public sphere
With an authoritarian one-Party governance system in which the Communist Party has authority over the government, Vietnam offers an interesting case study on walking the line between political activism and conforming with restrictions of political expressions (Kervliet

2001, Pham & Kaleja 2021, Thayler 2009). The significant growth of the internet and social media has increasingly been an important tool for the Vietnamese people to voice their opinions on state issues (Khoi 2018). There has been a rise of activist activities online in Vietnam in recent years, despite the state's hard-line policy against government criticism and its strict surveillance and curbing of dissidents' activities (88 Project 2018; Defend the Defenders 2018). This has promoted the government to implement cybersecurity law that requires companies such as Google and Facebook to remove content that the government deems offensive but also to store data inside Vietnam (McLaughlin 2019). Traditional media in Vietnam are state-owned and the state has the power to decide what is permissible and not permissible to express in the public domain within boundaries of 'constructive debate'. At the same time, there is room for negotiation within these implicit rules (Pham & Kaleja 2021). Boundaries of what is permissible can shift depending on various factors such as local or central government officials involved, relationships between the journalist or whistle blower and the official in charge of the case, and the media outlet. While the media often reports stories of corruption in high places, highlights official incompetence, or questions the status quo (Heng 1998; Marr 1998), there is a general perception in society that the public sphere remains largely the forum for the political class to converse and propagate their messages.

Alongside these characteristics of the public sphere, civic actions in Vietnam are often perceived to be limited because of the fused relationship between state and society, and the state's prohibition of civic actions that are seen to be against the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) political ideologies (for example, Hannah 2007, Thayler 2009). Given that there is a large number of mass organisations that represent interest groups such as Women's Union and Youth Union which are also controlled by the one-Party state, most Vietnamese scholars living outside the country and foreign political scientists view these organisations as state apparatus to transmit the CPV's ideologies to society, as well as to allow the state to become quickly aware of any complaints or activism by citizens. On the other hand, Vietnamese writers inside the country who are often Party-affiliated, consider civic actions to be enabled by the Communist Party who ousted the French from North Vietnam in 1945. Pham Minh Hac (2012) argued that democracy is something that Vietnamese people in contemporary Vietnam generally value, exemplified through the grassroots movement that led to the State's Doi Moi economic reform in 1986. These 'insider' views are also echoed by Heng (2004) who argued that rebellions against agricultural collectivisation, mainly by Vietnamese in the South post

1975, were a form of civic action that led to the cessation of agriculture collectivisation with the CPV returning land back to its citizens. In a similar sentiment, Kervliet (2012) claimed that democracy in Vietnam is generally more effective than in the Philippines. His research found that the Vietnamese people are generally happy with the ways that the CPV has addressed security issues, general welfare of the people and responded to their complaints about local authorities in relation to abusive power and corruption practices.

Another public space with potential for civic action is community work. Studies of community work in developing countries generally, and particularly in Vietnam, tend to focus on the growth and operations of NGOs in local development initiatives and emphasise the nature of community work through informal networks. Some studies highlight advocacy actions or political activism to challenge state authorities through community work although they are situation specific (Welzel et al., 2005), and are less common in Vietnam's community work. For example, Wells-Dang (2012), Nguyen (2008), Hannah (2007) found that community work in Vietnam depends on the political context; advocacy is for the elite, well-connected urbanites or media who are connected to government officials. Providing services to improve the livelihood of the poor is usually the core of community work because poorer people and rural people have fewer chances to raise their voices through the political system (Wells-Dang 2012).

Butcher and Einolf (2016) in their book about perspectives of volunteering in the global South noted that studies about NGOs in Vietnam or China are located in the broader literature about community work and community development that is conceptualised with the Western ideals of civil society. Such ideals consider community work as grass root movements that build on people's own initiatives and actions and constitute a bottom-up approach. In this literature, social capital is viewed as an essential factor in community work because it enables people to build networks to get ahead, and provide social support for one another. Moreover, social capital is posited - in building civil society - to be acquired and mobilised through formal community associations; for example, Larsen et al. (2014) found that volunteering in informal networks is more common in traditional society, whereas participation in formal community organisations tend to happen in industrialised parts of the world. Such emphasis on social capital as membership in formal community organisations essentialises institutionalised forms of community involvement, and downplays actions through informal organisations, which are

pertinent in developing societies like Vietnam. On the other hand, there is some attention to the contexts of power, social cohesion and social inclusion in shaping people's choice and their level of participation (Larsen et al. 2014; Butcher & Einoff 2016).

Living and working within these tensions that shape activism and activist practices, it is fair to say that most Vietnamese people view the public sphere with the tacit knowledge of what they can or cannot say. As Kervliet (2012) noted, Vietnamese people negotiate in various ways that are neither explicit nor through proper channels. This is because the systems in which they work with, particularly the formal representatives of the state who have authority in specific situations can enforce injunction in various ways, and what is allowed to be communicated finally is not always determined by either a top down process or bottom up movement. Heng (2004) thus argued that the liberalist lens of 'democratic' freedom, whether it is political freedom or press freedom, as a right or a valued principle for civic actions which can be implemented through the law, is not always adequate or workable to explain civic actions or activism in Vietnam.

Two examples of communication practices in Vietnamese NGOs

Volunteering for a local community-based NGO

Kim is a 28-year-old female volunteer for a community-based NGO in Hanoi that aimed to provide early childhood literacy education. The NGO was led by a Vietnamese writer who developed curriculum and pedagogy and operated outside Vietnam's formal education system. Textbooks were sold to the public and classes were organised outside normal school hours. Teaching was facilitated by mainly Vietnamese nationals; most were above 40 years old and well known in the community. Kim took part in the NGO to implement a teaching program that she learnt while studying abroad. When asked about her motivation for volunteering, Kim spoke about always "having value for doing community work". She noted that 'civic' values may not always enable people to take up civic actions. For her, it was the sense of 'being privileged' that led to the perception that she had the opportunity and choice to make an impact for society,

> "It's not important whether the opportunity is actually there. It's whether you perceive that you have the opportunity. No one said to me 'I can make a difference'. I felt that I

can make a difference because of my position in society, my education, my family's wealth".

Kim recognised her knowledge or interest in the volunteer action through her reflection of her position *in* her environment, what Habermas (1985) refer to as 'critique' - a recognition of one's subjectivity to one's social surrounding that that enables possibility for actions that transform that structure.

However, despite her *self-reflection* of a privileged position in society and grasping the opportunity available to her, Kim found it difficult to share her values of civic actions with the Vietnamese people in the NGO. She introduced new pedagogical practices that were more student-centred than the teacher-led practices that the NGO members were accustomed to. Although everyone shared the same values and objective about the need for developing literacy, not everyone shared her student-centred teaching strategies. She found it difficult to have her voice heard because of her age and junior position within the group, and that her idea was "Western-based". She said,

> "The way I wanted to speak seemed contrary to the communication culture in Vietnam's community work that is meandering around differing ideas simultaneously to achieve harmony rather than confronting the problem to reach agreement on particular solutions."

For Kim, the communication practice carried a societal view - *lifeworld* of community work – which is about harmonising ideas rather than considering different ideas for best outcomes. Community work in this lifeworld was not about disrupting the system, so there was a need to maintain the status quo of communication practices in that specificity of community work. Kim felt she needed to use and reproduce the shared meanings among the NGO members about teaching. The action of speaking about teaching was more important than the teaching itself. The group's communication culture limited her 'activist' voice because she attempted to engage in a social practice that contrasted with the group's existing understanding of communication practices.

The simple exchange of ideas relied on a shared understanding about literacy development, the normative appropriateness of Kim voicing her idea of a different method of teaching. Her idea of literacy pedagogy as a new method was deeply intertwined with the *communicative rationality* of Kim and the group. The lack of mutual understanding about literacy resulted in uncoordinated social action and socialisation of herself and her ideas in the group. Kim's sense of opportunity about teaching innovation as a civic action was constrained within the culture of subordinating ideas for collective harmonisation. Nonetheless, communication had a constructive role in Kim's 'activism' because *communication rationality* determined her freedom to act, although such freedom was short term and not sufficient to disrupt the system that govern communication practices. As she said,

> "I am still new, but I am willing to spend more time to get to understand the system, the culture, the way people behave communicatively."

The NGO hierarchical structure can be said to condition Kim's speech act, which was not equal to other senior members of the group. As a group, the networked politics constructed dynamics between Kim and the NGO members that informed communication practices which Kim experienced as a kind of weak socialisation into the NGO communication culture.

Managing reputation of a national NGO

This example involves a national NGO operating in Hanoi as part of a global network of member national societies whose activities are governed by international principles as well as Vietnamese laws. The NGO has a close affiliation with the government and a large portion of its budget is government funded. The rest of its budget comes from internationally funded projects and private funding sources both domestically and internationally. The majority of the NGO's management and leadership team are members of the CPV and are promoted to higher positions by the CPV, which is a norm in major government agencies or other institutions in Vietnam. In principle, while the NGO has an auxiliary role to the government, it is meant to maintain autonomy from the government in order to act in accordance with the principles of the global networks to which it belongs. In reality, because of the aforementioned governance structure and funding mechanism, the interest of the organisation is largely subject to that of the CPV.

Hai is a 35-year-old male communication officer of the NGO who observed and recalled an incident involving a delegation of the NGO that was conducting a study trip in another country when a natural disaster hit that country. The delegation returned to Vietnam shortly after the disaster. The delegation members were criticised by the media in Vietnam and in its counterpart countries as failing to stay behind to support those affected by the disaster, even though one of the organisation's mandates is to save lives and help communities to respond to disasters. A photo of one of the members smiling at a collapsed house also went viral and generated a wave of resentment and criticisms particularly on social media in Vietnam.

Since the incident had a potential impact on the image of the global network and not just the NGO in Vietnam, the leaders were advised by its international counterpart in the network to issue a public statement explaining the situation to the public. They were also advised by their counterpart not to ignore and to provide a response to the comments on the organisation's social media page, as this was where most of the criticisms occurred. These recommendations were based on the principles of transparency and accountability upheld by the international partner. For them, the organisation in particular and the global network in general were answerable to the public they serve, and as a member of the network, each constituent had a responsibility to protect the image of the network as a whole. This also shows the value they placed on the autonomy to communicate, that everyone, regardless of their background and viewpoints, deserves to question and receive an explanation from the organisation. However, the leaders of the national NGO decided not to issue a public statement, deleted all of the comments, froze the NGO's Facebook page and instructed staff at all levels to stop using Facebook for professional purposes. Their reason for doing so was that the public's view of the NGO was less important than the CPV's view. Dissemination of information was dependent on the CPV's view of the situation and the interest positions of the leaders, all of whom were Party members and whose careers and reputation had much more to do with how the CPV views them rather than how the public views them.

In his account of the incident, Hai illustrated *communication rationality* in terms of individual and organisational interest position. Leaders of the NGO felt they were faced with reputational risks and chose a communication practice based on the intended purpose and audience of the communication, which was the CPV. Their decision stemmed from the autocratic position they held in the NGO and in Vietnam broadly, that is they had the right to control the media and

flow of information. They did not view equality in the process of information dissemination. This suggests that the values and equality of communication were subjective factors in the leadership decision to cut media postings, and that these factors stemmed from the mutual understanding of reputational management between the leadership and the CPV which aligned with their individual interests – *lifeworld* of public statements (Habermas 1987). In his reflection of the NGO leaders' actions, Hai came to recognise his knowledge and interest in the public communication as a civic action that the leaders had the duty to undertake,

> "They should have told the public about why they decided to return home. They hid the real reasons from the public to avoid responsibility."

However, from the leaders' perspectives, such implied responsibility did not exist. The communication action was contingent on leadership position and interlinked with state position vis-a-vis their relationship with the CPV – *lifeworld* that shaped their communication decision.

Although not everyone in the NGO supported the position of the leaders, most followed the leaders' request and ceased their use of social media to share information about the NGO. Others continued to post work-related information on Facebook. These different choices suggest *communication rationality* that depend on the person's political interest and political connections. As Hai recounted,

> "Prior to the incident, the organisation had been very active on Facebook, with an account that was administered by one of its communication staff. It had also been receptive to incorporating social media into communication capacity building opportunities for its staff, resulting in an increasing number of staff and branches using social media for professional purposes. However, despite the fact that these pages have been very active, the content was mostly one-way, a characteristic of Vietnamese traditional communication culture, especially that of government agencies and their representatives. On the surface, the interactions may seem interactive, but only so as long as the feedback is positive. Once the conversation started to take a negative turn, the organisation tended to ignore the conversation or shut down the channel of communication, until the situation calmed down. Similar to the content of web stories, the content on social media would mostly focus on featuring the leadership such as

award ceremonies or leadership visits to project sites. This 'rule' is not spelled out in any official communication guidelines, but such preference is understood through leadership's request to have more 'publicity' materials for them."

This narrative reveals Hai's tacit knowledge about the NGO's communication practices as one-way communication to promote the ideas of the organisation and individuals in control of the messages. Anything that put the reputation of the NGO or its leaders at risk is normally not allowed to appear in the public domain. The specific way that the leader chose to communicate is representative of the *lifeworld* of communication for any government agency in Vietnam. The fact that it had an international affiliation does not mean it would adopt a foreign perspective in determining its accountability nor the way it communicates with the public and donors, within or outside of the NGO. From the perspective of the international counterpart, as much as they had a set of principles upon which they expected the national NGO to adopt, they were not in the position to impose these principles as they understood very well the political pressures as well as embedded social and cultural contexts under which the organization operates. All parties could be said to act within a 'political wisdom' in that there is little point in pushing a particular way of thinking in expectation that it will bring about change.

Discussion

These examples illustrate how meanings and rules are the fundamentals of communication practice and dependent on the relationships between individuals and others, as well as the organisations in which they operate. These meanings and rules are not static; rather constantly shaped as people enter the groups and form relationships with each other. Some of these new meanings may be ambiguous or even in conflict with ones' own schema of meanings, but it is the process of interpreting these new meanings and rules and whether or not a person can internalise them that determine how well they can communicate or fit in with the group. Such meaning making also informs the support or rejection of old and new way of communicating that often complement rather than contest the status quo. This is because actors communicate based on their motivations and purposes which shape political strategies. The second example illustrate how diversion of public criticism and challenges to the legitimacy of the organisation is critical to maintain the leader's political interest position. Similarly, the first example illuminates the disposition of elite members of the NGO to the status quo. In both situations, the NGO as a socialisation agency have limited autonomy and the rule of the game tends to be

reiterated rather than challenged (Hyun & Kim 2015). While the second example suggest that cultural reproduction is a top-down decision, the first example shows how it also bears at the grassroot levels.

In both examples, those who sought the *lifeworld* as a *communicative rationality* justified the social system that they belonged to and resolved the situational problem by believing the status quo to be fair and legitimate. As such, they may suggest marginalisation of people's voices about matters that concern them because leaders of the NGOs claimed their rights to the dissemination of information as well as the purpose of disseminated information for their private not public interest. The communication processes can be said to be indicative of the compliant culture of people living in authoritarian regimes, and suggest little consensus for the ideal public sphere as space for equal political expression that Habermas (1984) envisions. But they also illustrate how activism is at stake in the public sphere and are mediated by the people involved. Both Kim and Hai, in conveying these stories, felt that they could tailor their speech acts according to their own agenda not only succumbing to what the leaders did. Their self-reflections were 'civic' moments wherein Kim sought alternate opportunities, Hai and other colleagues rejected the leaders' demands, held the leaders to account and continued posting on social media despite being told not to. They leveraged the 'networked public' to engage in activist action although their 'activism' might be conditioned by the communication culture of their NGOs. Rather than contestation against the practices or decision- making of leaders of which neither Kim, Hai or the NGO staff had the political power to do, they chose tactics and strategies that reflected the positions within the organisation and in the public sphere (Pham & Kaleja 2021). As 'activists', they operate within a functionally specific and self-regulating communication system that functioned in accordance with the normative code of Vietnam's authoritarian *lifeworld*.

As Norris (2002) noted, political activism manifest through modes and channels other than elections or contestations, and is represented by new agencies, repertoires and targets activists seek to influence. In studying activism in authoritarian states such as Vietnam, examining merely 'conventional' mechanisms such as explicit 'actions' against the government through protests, demonstrations and boycotts is inadequate to understand and account for all participatory acts of political relevance that citizens make. Following Habermas, the examples in this chapter highlight that while playing by the rules of the communication system, Kim and

Hai were enacting a self-regulating communicative space in the public sphere as members of both civil society and the political centre. Kim's situation is a kind of colonising mode of communication whereas Hai's situation suggests citizen response to a public discourse of secrecy which cannot be said to degenerate into leaders' colonising the communication. As pointed out by scholars studying activism in authoritarian states (e.g., Ford 2013; Pham & Kalēja 2020, 2021; Wells-Dang (2012), it is possible to observe 'activist' intentions through ordinary people's reflection of their situation and capacity to act even in the most difficult situations.

At a broader level, Habermas' optimistic moral normative idea of communicative action as a political deliberation allows us to see when those conditions for such communicative action do not arise and their implications for what can be done. Communication practices in both examples offer insights into how the public sphere in authoritarian contexts such as Vietnam operates. . Rather than assuming consensus towards deliberative political expressions can or should happen for civic actions or activism to occur, we see how 'activism' occurs and upon which principles of communication. If we are to understand activism in authoritarian states, we must understand how collective identity or civic solidarity is also used as a tool for self-regulation or self-censoring voices. Thus, Habermas' concept of *lifeworld* and *communicative rationality*, as applied in these examples are useful to unpack the plurality of 'public' or politics in conditions other than democracies (Pham & Kaleja 2021).

Furthermore, the application of Habermas on communicative information highlights how information was disseminated within networked public and engagement in 'activism' without necessarily becoming dissident or rebel to disrupt the system. The nuances of these examples show the importance of attending to the nature and effects of communication, and the conditions in which the communication takes place rather than their outcomes. They also show the precariousness of the space in which communication takes place, and that Habermas' openness in the public sphere may never be guaranteed. Nevertheless, his theory of communicative action allows an analytical entry point to examine communication practices by ordinary citizens in the public sphere as forms of activism, and understand how similar levels, but different styles of repression can generate different kinds of 'activist' thoughts and cultures.

Conclusion

This chapter offers insights from rare examination of communication practices in NGOs as civic actions in Vietnam. The two examples illustrate the process of communication as dependent on the social interactions between members of the group and the broader community in which the individual or the organisation position themselves. There are tacit rules understood by people who work in the NGOs, which are embedded in broader state-society and societal relations. This often results in uncertain and ambiguous ways of channelling information within an organisation and in the public sphere. The struggle for actors within these organisations, is whether they can effectively engage in communicative practices as civic actions or succumb to the status quo.

The chapter's application of Habermas' (1984, 1987) theory of communicative action to explore communication practices at both the individual and organisational level is innovative and could be further researched to provide insights about the reality of communication as potential political expression or 'activism'. Although limited to the examples and the contexts of the research study, the chapter highlights that civic values are not absent in authoritarian settings but that civic actions are contingent on people's political, cultural and social contexts. These contexts are *conditions* for communication between members of a social group, with each other and with the state, which in turn shape their choice of communication practices.

The public sphere in authoritarian governance, as manifest in Vietnam, is an interesting place with contingencies of state-society power relations. Effects of these relations are a tacit knowledge, implicit in the communication processes and content, that inform dialectical deliberations of voices that are materially and emotionally different. The aim of communication, as demonstrated in this chapter, may accord with people's political power or lack of, but it can expose much more power of the people to recognise knowledge and interests in their emerging voices. The reflections of the story tellers in these two examples demonstrate self-reflection of their position within a collective and that they operate in a discursive system of knowledge about Vietnam's authoritarian governance. The contingencies of such reflections for future actions impact the nature of activism itself. To understand *communication rationality* that inform people's decision and choice to engage in activism, particularly under conditions of democratic duress, it is important to identify these conditions and examine people's response to these conditions. This chapter contributes to the literature on Habermas' *communication*

rationality and *lifeworld* as empowerment or disempowerment of people's civic attitudes and actions and thus fruitful way to understand 'activism' in different contexts.

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