

# Global Media Journal

German Edition

Vol. 6, No. 2, Autumn/Winter 2016

URN:nbn:de:gbv:547-201600631

## “New Wine in an Old Bottle”? – Anniversary Journalism and the Public Commemoration of the End of the War in Vietnam

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**Abstract:** April 30th, 2015 marked the 40th anniversary of the end of the war in Vietnam. This article discusses the role of Vietnamese journalism in the coverage of this commemorative date as well as the history and events it is linked with. It addresses the question of how coming to terms with the past plays out in the journalistic field of an increasingly globally connected and economically continuously growing Vietnam. By means of qualitative content analysis and expert interviews with Vietnamese media professionals the paper characterizes the nature of anniversary journalism on this particular event and elaborates on its meaning for the construction of cultural memory in Vietnam. In that context, it also touches upon transnational relations with and controversies of remembrance in Vietnamese diasporic communities. The study found that anniversary journalism in Vietnam goes beyond the mere coverage of a single commemorated day along state ideological lines and constitutes part of a larger context of cultural memory in Vietnam and the diaspora. It is itself subject to change over time and of tensions between state, economic, professional and personal interests in a vastly changing, but still state-controlled media environment. Such tensions can result in ambiguities, vagueness and the coexistence of a variety of narratives in the reporting. Despite slight liberation tendencies, however, anniversary journalism on the contentious meaning of April 30th does not represent a transnational forum for negotiating the past in Vietnam and its diaspora.

**Keywords:** cultural memory, anniversary journalism, Vietnamese media, Vietnamese history, Vietnamese diaspora, Vietnam War

### Introduction

On April 30th, 2015, Vietnam marked the 40th anniversary of the end of a conflict that is locally often remembered as the “American War” (Margara, 2012, p. 13). This historical date is officially celebrated as a public holiday (*Ngay Giai Phong*)<sup>1</sup> in Vietnam, having led to the reunification of North and South. Weeks before the actual holiday, special exhibitions as well as public banners and billboards, e.g. at major traffic intersections in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, served as symbolic re-

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: Day of Liberation.

minders for the upcoming anniversary. They also represent communicative and commemorative means of the leadership's memory politics, reminding the population of the historical date. Approximately two thirds of Vietnamese today were actually born after the Vietnam War, so that their knowledge on this historical period was appropriated through communication only (Lang & Lang, 1989, p. 125).

The official historical narratives surrounding April 30th that are publicly disseminated in Vietnam, however, do not remain uncontested. In exile communities of the Vietnamese diaspora (generally known as *boat people*),<sup>2</sup> whose members fled from poverty, prosecution and lack of future perspectives after the establishment of communist rule in South Vietnam, the very same date is commemorated as a day of loss and mourning (*Ngay Quoc Han*, translation by author). The painful memory is also articulated publicly by diasporic groups and in some cases linked to present human rights demands as for example during a protest march in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin in 2015. They forged alternate forms of cultural memory in the Vietnamese diaspora (Großheim, 2010, p. 160).

Given these controversies of remembrance, this article traces how coming to terms with the past materializes in the field of journalism in an increasingly globally connected Vietnam. Walter Hömberg (2010, p. 15) described mass media as “great centrifugal forces of history” (translation by author). More precisely, the question is therefore: How is the historical event of April 30th, 1975 and its controversial meanings dealt with and negotiated in Vietnamese media outlets four decades on? In order to examine such relations of cultural memory and anniversary journalism in Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora, the study focuses specifically on views from Vietnamese journalists and narratives in Vietnamese commemorative reporting as one form of public memory (Volkmer, 2006).

I argue that anniversary journalism in Vietnam goes beyond the mere coverage of a single commemorated day along state ideological lines and constitutes part of a larger context of cultural memory in Vietnam and the diaspora. It is itself subject to tensions between state, economic, professional and personal interests in a vastly changing media environment, particularly in the urban centres of post-reform Vietnam. Such tensions can result in ambiguities, vagueness or even paradoxes in the reporting as well as in constraints and opportunities for journalists.

The following sections discuss first, the theoretical foundations as well as prior studies on cultural memory and commemorative journalism as one form of public memory in general and for the Vietnam case in particular. After explicating the empirical methods (content analysis and expert interviews) employed for the case study, the final sections of the article present results against the background of the previously outlined theoretical groundwork.

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<sup>2</sup> It needs to be noted that a variety of migration outflows and motifs led people to flee from South and also North Vietnam, and that the diversity of emigrants is greater than the general term “boat people” suggests (for an historical overview on Vietnamese migration flows to West Germany, see Su & Sanko (2017, forthcoming).

## State of research: cultural memory and journalism studies

The multi- and interdisciplinary field of memory research generated a vast variety of theoretical concepts of memory.<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this study, I theoretically draw from Astrid Erll's works, in which collective memory is understood as a theoretical construct that can hardly be observed empirically whereas cultural memory denotes the actual research object. In her definition, collective memory serves as a "generic term for all processes of organic, mediated and institutional nature that have a meaning for the reciprocal influence of past and present in socio-cultural contexts" (Erll, 2011, p. 6; translation by author). Cultural memory on the other hand materializes in historically and culturally diverse specifications of the theoretical concept (Erll, 2003, p. 176). Setting this theoretical foundation, the article specifically examines institutionalized communication processes within the field of journalism that contribute to the construction of representations of the past in different media outlets in present contexts.

The research of the complex relations of history, memory and media is a relatively recent concern in communication and media studies (Garde-Hansen, 2011, p. 1) and theoretical contributions from the discipline have long been missing (Zierold, 2006, p. 5; Donk & Herbers, 2010, p. 195), although scholars from other disciplines such as cultural anthropology (see e.g. Assmann & Assmann, 1994) have pointed out media's significance as a forum for public reminiscence (see also Edy, 1999, p. 83) and as memory objects (Kitch, 2002, p. 45 in reference to Davis, 1979). Irene Neverla and Judith Lohner (2012) refer to a double function of media content for cultural memory in this sense: as arena for a commemorative ritual (see also Meyers, Zandberg & Neiger, 2009, p. 472) in which information on knowledge on mnemonic practices is distributed, and a space in which these are discussed and memories in their own right are constructed (Neverla & Lohner, 2012, p. 287). Part of the pioneer work embracing communication and memory studies originates in American research and can largely be credited to journalism researcher Barbie Zelizer (1992, 1995, 2008). Although the relationship of memory and journalism might appear paradox at first glance due to temporal proximity being one defining feature particularly for news journalism, Barbie Zelizer and Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2014, p. 2) point out that journalism does not only serve as a "primary recorder of a shared past," but also "as a primary repository of collective memory in every society" and "engages in shaping our vision of the past". Thus journalism's memory work (Zelizer, 2008) allows for *documenting* events in the historical process, including media events that can become part of public memory (Volkmer, 2006), for *archiving* the produced material linked to it (e.g. press photographs) and if available *retrieving* and *republishing* the collected information at any other given moment in time (Neverla & Lohner, 2012, p. 286; Zierold, 2006, p. 196). In this way, journalistic products can become memory objects themselves. Jan Reinhardt and Michael Jäckel (2005, p. 96) have summarized

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview on the diverging concepts of collective, cultural and social memory that cannot be discussed here in length. See Olick & Robbins (1998) or Erll (2011).

these dimensions as memory through, in and on media. Besides these functional mnemonic aspects of journalism, the ways narratives are employed in reporting to construct and create links to the past is at the core of the question addressing the relationship of journalism and memory. They can also be traced empirically and therefore serve as an analytical object of the study.

Journalism research brought about various typologies to explore the relations of journalism and memory at content level. By identifying different uses of the past in the reporting, the mechanisms of memory construction in journalistic content surface. Since there are many overlaps, the following paragraph blends and summarizes different typologies. One use of past references in news writing is as “convenient dividers” (Lang & Lang, 1989, p. 127) to demarcate time periods, e.g. World War II, and thus a “memory span” (ibid.) for the people addressed. Such markers are sole reference points without providing further historical knowledge. Another form of use are historical analogies which represent references to past events in order to compare and make sense of a current issue that is reported on by stressing their similarity (Edy, 1999, p. 77, p. 80; see also Lang & Lang, 1989; Neverla & Lohner, 2012). Once such analogies exceed references to personalities or events, they can serve as “short-hand explanations” (Lang & Lang, 1989, p. 127). In another comparative way works the application of references to the past as a “yardstick” that place present events in a longitudinal time frame, choosing a reference point in the past to measure the magnitude of contemporary events (ibid.; see also Neiger, Zandberg & Meyers, 2014, pp. 116-117). Similarly, historical contexts as another type provide relevant information on the past that resulted in the present situation discussed. In other words, it “explains 'how we got there.'” (Edy, 1999, p. 80; Neverla & Lohner, 2012). The past as a “curriculum” (Neiger et al., 2014, p. 116) is also contextual in nature, but represents a less obvious link to the past as the type of historical context (Edy, 1999). It serves as covert background of current affairs coverage based on former news and thus can be regarded as an implicit context of prior knowledge. In their study on the Holocaust Remembrance Day, Motti Neiger and his colleagues (2014) also suggest a type called “reversed memory”. The authors regard it as a story-telling technique focusing on the “here and now” with an “omnipresent commemorative background” (ibid., p. 117). In this way, it is similar to their category of past as a curriculum with the exception that the context is a purely commemorative one. The past as the actual focus and foreground of coverage deals primarily with past events whereas present and future provide the background (Neiger et al., 2014, pp. 116-117). The latter resembles Edy's (1999) category of event-oriented commemoration stories, both including forms such as anniversary journalism, a type of reminiscent journalism that is described in more detail in the following section.

Mapping these uses of the past in previous journalism studies serves the purposes of sharpening the view for multiple linkages to the past in news content beyond the obvious and interpreting their functions for the construction of cultural memory.

## **Journalistic accounts of commemorated historical events: Anniversary journalism as public memory**

Of the previously identified main uses of the past in journalism, commemorative journalism and its functions for potentially negotiating the past (Edy, 1999, p. 83) and ascribing meaning to present events and a future agenda (Lang & Lang, 1989) is the form of most concern for the study.

Ilona Amman (2010, pp. 162-163) defines anniversary journalism as “[...] an important form of cultural memory” based on journalistic topicality that “selects current commemorative events, mediates them to the public and thus enables the synchronization and self-observation of society [...]” (translation by author). From a media production point of view, anniversaries are convenient to integrate into the news agenda, as their dates are fixed and reoccur in regular time intervals (ibid.). Round anniversaries are of particular significance and create an occasion for institutions and organizations to stage related events, but are also picked up by media on their own behalf (Hömberg, 2010, p. 17). Often anniversary stories are marked by a local angle (ibid.) and refer to recent contemporary history (Neverla & Lohner, 2012, p. 290). The regular repetition of reporting on events in specific time intervals shows the cyclic nature of this type of journalism, which differentiates it from history journalism (Amman, 2010, p. 153).

The recurrent character of anniversaries and their journalistic coverage to commemorate certain historical events has also social implications: anniversaries as such prompt various social actors and institutions to create cultural meaning that can contribute to identity-generating processes, e.g. for a common national identity, and political (de-)legitimization processes (Amman, 2010, pp. 162-163; Neverla & Lohner, 2012, p. 285; Assmann & Assmann, 1994, pp. 124-126). For social groups in particular, anniversaries constitute a social ritual serving to strengthen a community’s identity and values through repeated commemoration (Kitch, 2002, p. 48). In this case study the significance of the anniversary is even further heightened by its institutionalized status as a national public holiday. It serves people as orientation, engagement and negotiation of their place in present social contexts and the historical process (Amman, 2010, pp. 162-163; Neverla & Lohner, 2012, p. 285).

In this sense, Carolyn Kitch (2002, p. 47) describes anniversary journalism as a dialogic construction of collective memory by journalists and audiences that reshape and contextualize the past within the present and vice versa. The construction of the past through journalism is therefore not only a matter of the journalistic reproduction of past events by media professionals, but also of the perception and appropriation of historical knowledge by audiences as well as their mutual interrelationship. Yet, it has to be acknowledged that journalism constitutes only one field contributing to the construction of cultural memory besides e.g. other public institutions such as museums or schools, and therefore needs to be regarded as one

form of public memory in a wider memoryscape. Accordingly, Kitch (2008, p. 317) called for the recognition of “the intertextuality of memory [that] also requires us to theoretically situate journalism within culture, not apart from it [...]”

It has to be noted, however, that these presented theoretical lines of thought are mainly based on Western models and democratic media systems. To what extent these theoretical implications hold true for state-controlled media systems in Asian contexts such as in Vietnam still has to be investigated.

### **Cultural memory in restrictive media systems: the Vietnam case**

The media system and thus journalism in the one-party state of Vietnam is currently still marked by strong state-control. While exceptions of privatization occurred, all official news media outlets are state-owned or affiliated to a state organization (McKinley, 2011, p. 96). Although media regulation and control mechanisms exercised by the state eased to some extent after liberating economic reforms (*Doi Moi*), media organizations commercialized and became more audience-oriented (Tran, 2002, p. 238), self-censorship, weekly press briefings by the Ministry of Information and Communications and the oppression of non-compliant journalists or bloggers are still common routines (McKinley, 2011, p. 89; FIDH/VCHR, 2013). Governmental actions towards the media and the press in Vietnam are often arbitrary and ambivalent (Cain, 2014, p. 87).

In similar fashion, historians and anthropologists marked the period of economic reforms and its aftermath as a turning point for cultural memory in Vietnam, where official historiography is largely state-dominated with a unidimensional focus on military successes and the Communist Party's history (Giebel, 2004, p. xviii). Gradually altering, liberalizing and contesting narratives were already found in the tourism sector (Schwenkel, 2013) as well as in arts, literature, film and online (Tai, 2001; Großheim, 2008, 2010), showing a variation and plurality of mnemonic narratives also within Vietnam. In this way, “official history and public memory [...] are as likely to coexist in symbiotic fashion as to be in tension with each another” (Tai, 2001a, p. 7, see also Schwenkel, 2013). Recurring narratives with reference to the (wartime) past are on the one hand official state (mainly North Vietnamese) narratives as stated in most public reflections on the war, e.g. heroic and patriotic narratives or narratives of the national struggle for liberation, sovereignty and unity (Margara, 2012, pp. 25-28; Mensel, 2013, p. 127). According to Martin Großheim (2010, p. 155), narrative elements describing the conflict in Vietnam as a “holy” and “just war” also belong to the “orthodox master narrative” that is usually embedded within a larger narrative framework of a continuous national “struggle against foreign aggressors”. Official Vietnamese history-writing also refers to the conflict as a fight against imperialism, but excludes Cold War and civil war discourses (Schwenkel, 2009, p. 6).

These prominent public narratives in Vietnam are particularly challenged and negotiated at private and transnational level. The waiting wife, war trauma and restless souls, for example, are narrative elements of private individual memory concerning the war in Vietnam (Margara, 2012, pp. 79-93). Great discrepancies and contestations of official Vietnamese historiography, including the events surrounding April 30th, exist in Vietnamese exile communities abroad. In some of these diaspora communities strong anti-communist and nostalgic narratives on the past in the former Republic of Vietnam (henceforth, South Vietnam) prevail (Großheim, 2010, p. 167).

Dynamic processes such as transnationalization as well as marketization (Schwenkel, 2006, 2008) then create spaces of tension and/or negotiation, for example in online forums (Großheim, 2010, p. 165). These can also lead to changes of narratives in Vietnam over time as shown by variations in wording towards more moderate tones, for example when a Vietnamese TV-show refers to the former political leadership in South Vietnam as “government” instead of “puppet government” (Großheim, 2008).

For the field of journalism and memory in Vietnam empirical research is lacking, particularly for anniversary journalism on the occasion of commemorative events. The only journalism study focusing on the anniversary of April 30th takes an US-American perspective (Le Espiritu, 2006). This article therefore sheds light on the Vietnamese perspective against the background of transnationally diverging cultural memories and seeks to situate anniversary journalism in the broader field of memory construction in Vietnam as outlined above. It traces the complexities and dynamics of contentious memories in news reporting at individual (journalists), organizational (professional routines) and societal (memory politics, transnational relations) level as they materialize in media content and statements on anniversary coverage and audiences by media professionals in Vietnam.

## **Methods**

In order to explore communication processes involved in journalism's memory work (Zelizer, 2008) on contested pasts in a post-conflict society, the empirical study takes a twofold methodological approach: a) Qualitative content analysis was applied to the collection of news to elicit constructions of the past in the form of recurring representations, topics and narratives in the anniversary coverage. b) Expert interviews with professionals employed in the media and publishing sector served to detect working routines, personal and professional perceptions on the anniversary topic itself, the produced journalistic output and the role of the audiences. This twofold approach does not only allow for analyzing final journalistic products, but also the processes of construction preceding them. The latter is particularly relevant in state-controlled media systems, as negotiation processes of what can and cannot be said largely take place behind the scenes. The following

subsections provide an overview on each method and the research material used.

### *a) Qualitative content analysis*

In order to learn how anniversary journalism actually materializes in content and to identify recurring narratives and representations, a content analysis of press publications released in and outside of Vietnam was conducted. Since there was little preliminary research on the subject matter, a qualitative approach was chosen that is suitable for explorative endeavors. Content analysis serves as a systematic methodological procedure to structure, summarize and categorize texts or images (Fürst, Jecker & Schönhagen, 2016; Mayring, 2010; Nawratil & Schönhagen, 2009).

I looked at the coverage of two state publications with international focus one month ahead and one month after April 30th, 2015.<sup>4</sup> The publications are the major English daily “Vietnam News” and the French weekly “Le Courrier du Vietnam”. Both publications are published by the “Vietnam News Agency” (VNA), a major national news distributor in Vietnam, and also address Vietnamese diasporic communities worldwide. The main reason for their selection was due to their designated inter- and transnational orientation, as their contents cater amongst others to Vietnamese audiences abroad and thus represent potential forums for negotiating the past. The contents were saved in their original layout as pdf-files via the “PressDisplay” subscription service. The majority of the publications' content stems from the pool of articles distributed by VNA, which means that to a large extent the content is translated from Vietnamese-language stories with only slight variations (interview #1, 10.4.2015) and thus leaves only little room for editorial creativity (interview #6, 23.4.2015). The latter also ties in with general restrictions on editorial freedoms and freedom of speech in Vietnam's media system (McCain, 2014; Le, 2013). Although the analysis is limited to VNA publications and future research needs to include further local and Vietnamese-language publications for a more comprehensive picture of journalism and cultural memory in Vietnam, it is yet the first study to investigate anniversary journalism from a Vietnamese perspective, particularly in a research field where constraints in access and language barriers are quite high (Müller, 2008, p. 242). For the particular research material, the question arises how state-control on the one hand and audience-orientation on the other hand play out regarding representations and narratives about the past in the wake of marketization, transnationalization and international cooperations.

Preliminary research in other disciplines such as history, anthropology and international relations already identified public narratives on the past that serve as deductive categories in the analysis. These include narratives of heroism, struggle for

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<sup>4</sup> The research material encompassed “Vietnam News” daily issues from April 1st until May 31st, 2015 and “Le Courrier du Vietnam” weekly issues from April 3rd until May 29th, 2015.

liberation, patriotism, revolution, national sovereignty and unity (Margara, 2012, pp. 25-28; Mensel, 2013, p. 127). The dimension of the Vietnam War as a civil war and South Vietnamese perspectives are largely neglected or delegitimized (Margara, 2012, p. 28; Großheim, 2010, p. 160). The analysis also examines the uses of the past in the specific research material as it was described in the theoretical section for Western contexts. Further inductive categories were developed from the media texts by reducing their content to essential narratives on the past and order them according to common characteristics across the research material by applying Mayring's (2010) suggested techniques of summarizing and structuring respectively.

#### *b) Expert interviews*

Expert interviews can be regarded as guideline-oriented conversations with specialists in a particular social field (Blöbaum, Nölleke & Scheu, 2016, p. 176), in this case the field of journalism. This specific kind of interview used as a qualitative research tool in this study is theoretically suitable to analyze meso and macro processes of communication (ibid., p. 188). This way, these processes refer to the relation of journalism and memory at the organizational and societal level. Yet, I argue that these layers of analysis cannot be completely separated from the micro level of the individual journalist, as their insights on which meanings of the past are inscribed into the reporting of a critical event is also related to personal beliefs and the self-perception as a journalist.

During a fieldtrip to Vietnam from January until April 2015, nine expert interviews were conducted in the capital city of Hanoi, where many of the main branches of Vietnamese news outlets are located.<sup>5</sup> The interviews were carried out between April 10th and 26th, 2015, with respondents at different stages of their career who work for various state media, the publishing industry or an independent blog. That means interviewees qualified as experts because of their professional occupation and insight knowledge of the media organization they are employed with and the journalism sector at large. Their specific backgrounds, functions and positions within the media sector varied from publisher and head of a media company to editor-in-chief, reporter and blogger. Thus, the respondents also represent a wider range of media outlets in Vietnam and compensate to some extent limitations of the previously described content analysis (see a) by adding views beyond VNA publications.

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<sup>5</sup> The recruitment procedure largely followed a snowball mechanism that relied strongly on personal recommendations by other professionals and contact persons in the field. Reaching journalists via e-mail addresses displayed on official websites of the media outlets mostly failed. For privacy and security reasons all interview respondents and the media companies they work for remain anonymous.

Since the meetings took place shortly ahead of the 40th anniversary, it was a present topic in the working contexts of almost all respondents.<sup>6</sup> The aim of the interviews was to capture general information on working environment, routines and professional self- and audience perception, and finally on the very specific topic of anniversary reporting to generate knowledge on journalists as memory agents and explicate findings of the previous analysis of media contents. The recorded interview material was transcribed and afterwards analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis. Some professional routines, functions and audience implications in regard to anniversary journalism can be deduced from prior studies in Western contexts. Yet, this part of the study followed mainly the methodological steps for inductive category formation (Mayring 2010; see a) along the lines of broad structuring criteria (references to the role of the state, audiences, the anniversary as a subject in reporting) in order to maintain openness and sensibility for the local perspective.

## Findings

While Barbie Zelizer (2008, p. 385) took a rather macro perspective when describing institutionalized journalism as “a key agent for memory work”, this study centres on the actual actors that mold media products and organizations through their everyday professional practices. Thus the empirical findings presented in the following two sub-sections refer to the micro and meso level (actors and contents) and will be embedded in a meso-macro context by summarizing and comparing the results of the different research material and cases. While the first part discusses topics and narratives of the anniversary reporting found in the VNA publications, the second sub-section provides broader background information on the production processes and conditions of media contents from the journalists' perspective that also serve to interpret and contextualize the previous findings.

### *Topics and narratives of the anniversary coverage in Vietnam*

In total 165 commemorative stories were found during this two-month period in the English daily “Vietnam News” and the French weekly “Le Courrier du Vietnam”. Such articles either had a reference to the actual date of April 30th or a reference to a related event or figure of the past. That includes also happenings and developments during the Vietnam War as well as key personalities of that time period. Naturally, because of different publication cycles, the number of commemorative articles is higher in the daily than in the weekly paper with 132 reminiscent stories found in “Vietnam News” and 33 in “Le Courrier du Vietnam”.

Looking at the temporal distribution of these stories in “Vietnam News”, a rather irregular trend of many ups and downs becomes visible, which shows that there is

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<sup>6</sup> All interviews were conducted outside of the newsroom or the personal office (if they had one). Context information based on observation can therefore not be included. Except for three cases, when an interpreter was present, all interviews were carried out in English language.

no gradual increase or decrease in the number of commemorative stories over time, but rather a change in number on a daily basis. Yet, two peak points can be identified for May 4th and 19th, with seven articles related to the past in each issue. The reason for the second peak is actually another anniversary that fell into the sampling period: the 125th birthday of Ho Chi Minh, who is widely celebrated as a national hero leading Vietnam's struggle for independence.<sup>7</sup> The previous peak on May 4th actually carried coverage more directly related to the anniversary of the end of the war. Same holds true for the 26th of April, when "Vietnam News" published a Sunday double issue with high gloss front and back page ahead of the anniversary event. For the French weekly "Le Courrier du Vietnam", the trends and peaks can be clearly identified. The highest number of commemorative stories was found in the 24th of April issue ahead of the anniversary event. The stories therefore seem to prepare the audience and promote the public holiday rather than reflecting the anniversary in the aftermath. Articles published subsequently to the four-day holiday period on May 4th in "Vietnam News" were to a substantial part on traffic and travel conditions during the days off, not about the festivities that took place in Ho Chi Minh City and gained more coverage in advance for example (VN, 27.4.2015, p. 23).

After a first overview on amounts, distribution and peak points of commemorative stories, the qualitative content analysis centred on a) topical characteristics and b) narrative patterns in the anniversary reporting.

a) In both papers, reminiscent pieces were distributed across almost all newspaper sections, from domestic news to features, even two articles in the business section with a report on how the national carrier Vietnam Airlines adds flights to cope with a high demand of travelers during the public holiday season (VN, 10.4.2015, p. 14) that surrounded the 40th anniversary of the end of the war and the following Labour Day on May 1st.

The main topics these analyzed stories dealt with are commemorative cultural events such as music shows, exhibitions, workshops; revisits of historical episodes or events and media products as memory objects that are related to the reunification and the wartime period. Music shows and parades as an integral part of the festivities gain much attention in the coverage prior to the holiday, including for example a report on army singer Thanh Thuy's decision to sing revolutionary music although she had a choice of any other genre for her performance during the anniversary program (VN, 25.5.2015, p. 23). The headline stresses freedom of choice very overtly and thus emphasizes a supposedly genuine self-authority as well as a sentiment of patriotism and national pride by the artist. This way the singer serves as a popular representative for revolutionary values during the commemorative event.

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<sup>7</sup> As potent historical figure and inspirational leader for the so called Ho Chi Minh-Campaign that ended with the "Fall" or "liberation" of Saigon (April 30th), those stories commemorating him and his work were counted into the sample.

In some cases, media products themselves and their commemorative function become subjects of reporting. For example, a report on an article written by young Vo Nguyen Giap, one of the most famous generals in the Indochina wars (LCVN, 1.5.2015, p. 23-24) or the news on a newly released film on the “Anti-American War in South Vietnam” for marking the anniversary and honouring “liberation soldiers” (soldiers of the People’s Army of North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front) that was partially financed by the military (VN, 15.4.2015, p. 20). The choice of wording in the latter already hints at the neglect of the civil war dimension of the conflict by stressing “America” as the opponent and “South Vietnam” as geographical location (without referring to the former state as a conflict party). It is also notable that both newspapers carry extensive articles on the development and progress of Ho Chi Minh City, using the 40 years of the anniversary as the reference point. Many stories surrounding the event of April 30th also carry eyewitness accounts and are concerned with veterans’ memories to create a present link to the past.

The vast development of media technologies in the urban centres of Vietnam has also provided wider ground for transnational communication, e.g. with and among Vietnamese diaspora communities who also represent potential audiences for the publications under investigation. “Le Courrier du Vietnam” even devotes a specific small section, usually with one story of two pages’ length, to the diaspora. In total, however, both publications carry only few diaspora stories: e.g. how Ho Chi Minh’s birthday is celebrated by Vietnamese communities in France and worldwide (LCVN, 22.5.2015, pp. 24-25). This example illustrates how only those members of the Vietnamese diaspora are represented, who are – given the reported act of celebrating – seemingly non-critical of Ho Chi Minh as a historical figure and communist leader, and thus also excludes those members of the diaspora contesting him and the Communist Party. Another article covers the Vietnamese diaspora in France in general, and mentions the emigration waves after the war, but does not explain the actual circumstances of people leaving their homeland (LCVN, 17.4.2015, pp. 22-23). In a Sunday issue of “Vietnam News” that generally differs in layout from other issues and carries longer feature stories for example, a piece on an adopted ‘Amerasian’ returning to look for her family presents a diaspora link (VN, 26.4.2015, p. 13).<sup>8</sup> It is noticeable that in this historical context, April 30th is referred to as “Fall of Saigon” as it is more common for the U.S. or boat people’s perspective. However, “Operation Babylift”, a U.S.-led rescue program for infants, is still criticized in the story. The article, however, also addresses the fears of residents in former South Vietnam that the victorious soldiers would kill Amerasians. These fears are mitigated, however, by referring to them as being based on “rumours”. Otherwise Vietnamese refugees’ views on the past or tensions between and with communities abroad on historical events such as April 30th are mostly omitted or not explicated in detail.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Amerasian’ denotes mixed children of American soldiers and Vietnamese.

b) This section discusses beyond general topics of anniversary journalism in Vietnam recurring narrative elements in the reporting. Which narratives did VNA journalists use in these commemorative stories in times of an opening-up Vietnam?

In most cases, the anniversary event or public holiday is referred to as “Liberation” or “Reunification Day”, and not as in the example of a diaspora story above as “Fall of Saigon”. The use of the denominations of “Liberation” and “Reunification Day” often occur beside each other and underscore more general narratives of the “liberation of the South” or the “reunification of one people” that are usually connected to the anniversary. Whereas both notions carry positive meanings and therefore provide legitimization for a “just war” (Großheim, 2010), their potential for creating links to present contexts differs. National unity is contrary to liberation still a leading motif in Vietnamese politics today (Mensel, 2013, p. 150). The term reunifications thus can easier be related to current issues of national identity and nation-building in a globally connected Vietnam. It can also be interpreted as a more inclusive term with regard to Vietnamese diasporic communities worldwide in a way that “reunification” usually implies action on two or more sides while “being liberated” describes one-sided action and passiveness on the other part.

The narratives differ in their nature and message. They can be differentiated in a more polarizing voice and a more harmonizing or reconciliatory approach. The first set of narratives then stresses the positive achievements of the winning side in the conflict without critical stance towards their own actions in the past or the acknowledgement of the diversity of views on history. This set includes historiographically established narratives on heroism and soldier praise, patriotism and sacrifice on the winning side, victory, liberation, revolutionary efforts and party achievements as well as David against Goliath and anti-imperialism narratives that still persist in the anniversary coverage and stand against a reconciliatory approach towards those Vietnamese in exile. An excerpt that illustrates the combination of several of these is the following one from a story on a seminar held in Vietnam on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the end of the war:

“The people’s unity under the leadership of the Viet Nam Communist Party was a key component in the war against the US [...] The seminar titled Great Victory in Spring 1975 [...] to mark the 40th anniversary of the victory of the country’s reunification. [...] revolutionary tradition paved the way [...] the seminar would help explain how Vietnam, a small country, defeated two world powers [...]” (VN, 4.4.2015, p. 1).

The combination of different narrative elements in this small extract illustrates how the commemorative event is generally positively framed as a success story that follows a tradition of revolutionary efforts as well as victories against foreign powers, and thus creates temporal continuity between past and present. The same holds true for the acknowledged achievements of the Communist Party that is still in power in Vietnam today and is therefore represented as a legitimate, stable and successful political institution. The last line illustrates the commonly used David

vs. Goliath narrative that even upgrades the success due to inequalities of the war parties. Furthermore, it shows again the lack of detailed differentiation, when referring to the conflict parties as “Vietnam” and the “United States”, which omits and delegitimizes the Republic of South Vietnam (including its army) as conflict party and a state.

The second set of narrative patterns represents a more open and less confronting approach in the anniversary coverage. These include the narratives of reunification and unity, international cooperation, inclusion of plural perspectives, progress and development, acknowledging post-war hardships and the anniversary as a general holiday and leisure time. An example for the emphasis on the unity of Vietnamese, embracing various groups and plural perspectives is the following report on a new war documentary:

“[...] [documentary] celebrating the nation's unification [...] reflects on [...] the fates of people on all sides who witnessed that historic day [...] also brought in the opinions of politicians, historians and overseas Vietnamese [...] both sides wanted to reunify the people [...] 'our people are a single body' [...]” (VN, 14.4.2015, p. 21).

Despite the fact that this formulation would most probably still be contested by some diasporic groups, it could be regarded as reconciliatory approach in the way it acknowledges good intentions on both sides (as long as it does not only refer to communist allies in South Vietnam and abroad) and actually seems to respect voices from other sides in the war and beyond.

### ***Memory agents at work – journalists' views on anniversary journalism***

So what are production processes and conditions behind the previously discussed media contents and how do journalists of different media outlets in Vietnam, including VNA, actually deal with the anniversary topic? Their responses revolve around three main themes that can be regarded as thematic sites of negotiating the contentious past in and for the public: a) state interventions b) audiences and c) contents and narratives of anniversary journalism. All three main themes and the journalists' views on them shape decision-making and journalistic practices in the professional environment to some extent. Whereas the latter creates a direct link to the content analysis of commemorative news, the first two aspects provide important context information for the interpretation of its results.

a) The majority of journalists mentioned the state instructions that the coverage of anniversary activities comes along with. Such directions are mostly communicated to editors-in-chief on a regular basis and independently from anniversary occasions in a weekly press briefing held by the Ministry of Information and Communications. Since this is a common procedure in Vietnam's largely state-controlled media system the evaluation of such measures by journalism experts varies depending on their own political beliefs and network, degree of financial independence

and the professional environment. Thus a publisher and former journalist openly stated: “[...] you know all kinds of anniversary like that, the government has a policy, a propaganda policy to promote historical events, historical milestones, e.g. the coming victory April the 30th. So they always use the media as tools, [...]” (interview #5, 21.4.2015). It has to be noted, however, that the term “propaganda” in socialist contexts is not necessarily negatively connoted as in Western democratic systems (Bussemer, 2005, p. 26).<sup>9</sup> An even more critical stance took another respondent despite being employed with a major state media outlet:

“Newspapers abroad can report the truth 100 per cent. In the days before big events we always have the direction to avoid or to not report on anything negative, on weaknesses or limitations. That is the disadvantage of journalism under communism. You can report some of it, but only superficially, and only after the event. Otherwise everything must be fine and pretty” (interview #8, 24.4.2015).

The critical openness of the interviewee can be explained by a courageous personality, but also a high-ranking position as well as a protective network of influential contacts. Another journalist employed with a state publication described journalism-state relations on anniversary occasions much more moderately:

“The news are often related to politics. Every year there is always an agenda for the next year, particularly in politics. Many ministries inform us about big events [...] [Anniversaries] are big events. And [...] for [these] we receive information in advance” (interview #7, 24.4.2015).

These statements on state instructions serve as explanation for several findings from the content analysis of the two VNA publications: First, the previously set media agenda by ministries for promoting historical events explains in part why a lot of the coverage was published ahead of the anniversary with a focus on commemorative events. Second, this kind of promotion goes in hand with a positive framing of the historical date that lacks a critical reflection of history as represented in narratives of heroism, victory and patriotism.

Contrary to most of the journalists, the blogger ascribes the least meaning to anniversary journalism for his/her daily work and regards this form of commemorative reporting or events as a state responsibility (interview #2, 16.4.2015). One reason of explanatory value lies in a lot of Vietnamese bloggers' role as social activists, voicing views alternative to mainstream media and critical towards state politics. These statements show that in the case of Vietnam, anniversary journalism on historical events does not necessarily constitute a routine largely habitualized by media professionals as it is easy to integrate in their work schedule (Ammann, 2010), but is, except for the autonomous blog, predetermined by the political agenda.

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<sup>9</sup> In socialist terminology the notion of propaganda equates with enlightenment and theoretical education (Bussemer, 2005, p. 26).

b) Despite the ministerial guidelines, however, the perceived needs of the audiences were frequently mentioned as a crucial concern of some journalists during their work, even in the anniversary context. The journalists' perception of audience interests is strongly interrelated to the way content about the past is embedded in the anniversary reporting (see also Kitch, 2002). That is not only for the audiences' own sake, but also corresponds with a professional mission in some cases as the following example shows:

“We [are] talking about the younger generation after 40 years. Maybe they don't know much about the history [...], so we try to make things closer to the young people. But at the same time, we have to remind them of history. They shouldn't forget the history, they should always remember, but even though, we try to make things easier” (interview #3, 18.4.2015).

The quote refers to the young population of Vietnam that does not have first-hand experience with the historical events connected to the anniversary. Since the journalist is convinced of an education role of journalism when it comes to the past, content will be adjusted in a way that is closer to the youth's lifeworlds in order to attract them as one audience segment. Another respondent's media organization also caters to Vietnamese audiences living abroad whose interests and feedback are said to be crucial for the production of content:

“Actually we know that Vietnamese overseas still (consume our media products) a lot. That's the only channel they connect with Vietnam and people in the country. [...] How to attract them? [...] we just think about the topic of what they want to know. For example, they want to know how Ho Chi Minh City changes now” (interview #9, 26.4.2015).

This statement also corresponds with findings of the VNA publications study that showed a thematic focus on the current state of former South Vietnam's capital combined with narratives of development and progress. Audience-orientation could therefore be one explanatory factor as in the quote above, but showing positive development in the South since reunification in the anniversary coverage could also be politically motivated in order to demonstrate the success of major restructuring processes initiated by the communist government since 1975.

With regard to audiences, most respondents were actually aware of criticism or different perceptions from abroad, including those from Vietnamese exile communities. The extracts of the interviews therefore illustrate that state and audience interests coexist and need to be negotiated by the journalists for their journalistic output. This circumstance can serve as one explanation for the co-existence of more polarizing and more liberal narratives at content level, sometimes even in one article. It reveals the tensions between diverging memory agents: the state and its agenda of memory politics and journalism with its news agenda and professional objectives e.g., reaching their audiences. How strong audiences' needs weigh highly depends on the interviewed journalist, the quality of their journalism training and the degree of (in-)dependence on state institutions.

c) As previously shown, state instructions and audience-orientations appear to be determiners of anniversary journalism content. But how do journalists describe the characteristics of commemorative reporting regarding April 30th?

Some consider it as a challenge because of the monotony of topics that are put on the agenda. Usually in a cycle of every five and ten years they have to come up with new angles to report on the same historical event – “new wine in an old bottle” – as one of the respondents metaphorically expressed (interview #8, 24.4.2015). These new angles partly stem from an approach that is audience-oriented and includes elements such as eye-witness accounts, human interest or even investigative pieces to create commemorative narratives. A localized perspective was prominently mentioned and materialized for example in stories on the present developments of Ho Chi Minh City with a comparative perspective to its state 40 years before. An investigative story even led one freelance journalist travel to the neighboring and nearby countries such as Cambodia and Thailand in order to reveal further facets of the final stage of the war.

It has to be noted, however, that few of these different angles still underscore persisting and state-guided narratives of victory and positive or nostalgic implications of (post-) war times: “For example, we talking about a General, [...] who took good care of their soldier after the war [...] We talking about the love of this people in the wartime” (interview #3, 18.4.2015).

A number of journalists reported not only from a change of angle towards the same historical events celebrated on the anniversary days, but also a change in the tone of commemorative coverage from a more polarizing narrative towards a narrative of unity, which supports the findings in the VNA publications. It also explains further existing variations at media content level, ranging from those narratives corresponding with “orthodox master narratives” (Großheim, 2010, p. 155) in Vietnamese historiography to those taking a slightly more open and critical stance. Such a change towards more reconciliatory tones was mentioned particularly in regard to boat people communities of the diaspora:

“They [newspapers] raise the pain, the wound. Because we have a lot of Vietnamese in America, around the world and we must write something that’s not for the communism side but write for everyone. [...] Now you cannot tell people the old voice [...] every year we receive about 10 or 15 billion USD from the Vietnamese abroad and no one wants to hurt them again” (interview #4, 18.4.2015).

Thus the change in tone and narrative does not only seem to be the result of more liberal memory politics in the country, but also a consequence of economic interests.

## Discussion and conclusion

Anniversary journalism provides a very overt and obvious linkage to the past in reporting (Amman, 2010; Kitch, 2002). The Vietnam case showed that the subject of commemorative journalism can be troubled and contested versions of the past, not only among witnesses and their descendants, but also between institutionalized memory agents like news media and the state. Such tensions can shape the anniversary coverage, as journalists are required to negotiate state policies, audience interests and personal accounts on the past in the wake of rapid media and socio-economic changes. Accordingly, the article identified various sites of negotiation of reporting on the contentious anniversary that contribute to determine the construction of public memory on April 30th in Vietnam. The example of anniversary news coverage in Vietnam thus serves for further theorizing “journalism's memory work” (Zelizer, 2008; also see Neiger et al., 2014) in post-conflict and non-Western societies.

A first concluding remark is therefore, even though anniversary journalism follows regular or fixed publication cycles, its contents and narratives are subject to *change* over time, particularly if there is no overall consent on a dominant meaning and a critical reflection of history has not taken place yet.

Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001) and Andreas Margara (2012) noted liberalization tendencies in dealing with the past in Vietnam, particularly in the fields of arts and film after economic renovation was initiated in 1986. This study illustrated that such liberation tendencies, e.g. in the form of critical historical reflections or references to counter narratives from the Vietnamese diaspora, are still subtle for anniversary journalism in the researched Vietnamese media outlets and publications due to persisting state-domination in that field and the media system in general. Whereas some changes are in line with more liberal memory politics by the state, others are rooted in the economic pressure or professional ambition to reach audiences. Taking the audience into account and assuming anniversary journalism to be a dialogic construction (Kitch, 2002) the social appropriation of the public holiday into everyday life in a depoliticized manner (e.g. as travel occasion) may be another factor of relevance for changing narratives over time.

Changing policies by the leadership were articulated by journalists who are supposed to stress the reunification aspect of the commemorated historical date. Some reporters thus noticed an ease of confrontative and polarizing narratives towards more peaceful, reconciliatory and uniting tones. This goes in line with a less polarizing and more inclusive approach in public accounts of the war in television (Großheim, 2008) or at war sites in former South Vietnam, where for example former ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) soldiers subtly include their views as tourist guides (Schwenkel, 2009, p. 71). In the study, such slight liberalization tendencies particularly occurred in regard to economic interests and international integration or cooperation, including relations to Vietnamese overseas.

International collaboration is not only represented at content level, but also at the organizational level, for example in the form of journalism trainings.

The commercialization of media and partly a younger and more cosmopolitan generation of journalists are other factors that contribute to changes in public commemoration of April 30th. Some of the interviewees have been trained abroad or participated in seminars by international experts. Many of the respondents also sought to cater to their audiences in anniversary journalism, sometimes by breaking with conservative patterns. Slight liberalization tendencies therefore materialize in some reporters' awareness, sometimes even acknowledgement, of other and different perspectives on the historical event and the trial to include these in the reporting.

When it comes to the dynamics of memory politics in Vietnam, it further has to be taken into account that the Communist Party does not represent a homogeneous body, but is also made up of factions of varying interests (Mensel, 2013, p. 151), which may also lead to differences in instructions. Although, this did not materialize in this empirical study, it remains to be seen how memory politics is shaped in the future by the state leadership and the National Assembly that was newly constituted in 2016.

A second concluding aspect is that anniversary journalism in the case study is characterized by the *coexistence* of long established narratives that are part of a historiographic tradition and more contemporary or alternative ones. As Lang & Lang (1989, p. 125) stated “[...] events will only be remembered as refashioned and made meaningful in a contemporary context”. In different constellations this shows a variety of mnemonic narratives, but also contributes to ambiguities in the meaning of commemorative journalism in the researched cases.

As previously mentioned Giebel (2004, p. xviii) described official history-writing in Vietnam as unidimensional with a focus on military successes and often paralleling with party history. This observation can be supported only in parts for anniversary journalism in Vietnam with some articles containing narratives of victory, revolution and party achievements. This way of telling or commemorating the past in the present evokes a sense of continuity, political stability and national identity, during times of rapid change in Vietnam. Many interview statements also affirmed the state and ministries' directions that are in line with this official take on memory politics.

On the other hand, narratives of plurality, post-war hardships or leisure support the impression of less politically ideologized representations of the past in the reporting. Yet, critical reflection of the past, which would be a precondition for reconciliation of former conflict parties, and politically sensitive issues that could delegitimize the power of the party are omitted. Although some of the interviewed journalists uttered alternative views and also regard themselves as oppositional voice as in the case of the blogger, the content of the two investigated VNA publications with international orientation contained few explicated alternative views. Although plurality of perspectives (e.g. on the war) is mentioned, it often remains an

abstract concept that does not explain of which views such a multi-dimensional approach consists of. Same holds true for the reference to emigration waves or reeducation camps that apparently are not denied, but their circumstances and conditions are not described either. Thus increasing openness or liberation tendencies are suggested, but they remain at such a general and vague level that leaves much room for interpretation. Therefore, online media remain the more alternate spaces for discussions and negotiations over the past (Großheim, 2008, 2010).

Third summarizing remark argues that anniversary journalism in this case study cannot be characterized as a single form of using the past in reporting, but overlaps with or even encompasses *several strategies of using the past* in journalism.

Reminiscent journalism in Vietnam made use of the past in different ways that Zelizer (2014) and Neiger et al. (2014) have theoretically described. Most of the stories researched in the qualitative content analysis showed a present angle and were event-oriented (Edy, 1999, pp. 74-75; Amman, 2010) for example by reporting on current commemorative activities or portraying war veterans today and their reflection of the past. Neiger and colleagues (2014) named this kind of narrative in anniversary journalism “reversed memory”. Findings also included commemorative pieces that used the 40-years time span as a “yardstick” (ibid., p. 116) to trace developments as for example in the case of covering the current state of Ho Chi Minh City. The fact that all these uses of the past occurred in the research material questions Neiger et al.'s (2014) categorization of the uses of the past with anniversary journalism being characterized by a clear focus on the past only. Based on these research results it needs to be noted that also the reporting in the anniversary context can apply various story-telling techniques that interlink different time dimensions of past, present and future. The study also found a few articles that explicitly stressed the repository function (Zelizer, 2014) of commemorative journalism: These represented the self-reflection of journalism's and reporters' contribution to history (Kitch, 2002).

Finally, anniversary journalism in the researched context does not constitute a *transnational forum* for coming to terms with the past and exchange between people in Vietnam and those in diasporic communities.

The rather small amount of diaspora stories in the researched publications with international orientation speak for an information policy that is determined to inform about domestic and international topics from a more national rather than transnational point of view. The reporting largely lacks the critical voices of members of the Vietnamese diaspora, boat people in particular. In this respect, the publications do not provide a transnational forum for negotiating the past among different Vietnamese communities worldwide. From a transnational perspective, the case study therefore cannot underscore Edy's (1999, p. 83) suggestion that “[...] journalism may provide a critical forum for the negotiation of shared meanings when a hegemonic understanding of the past has yet to emerge.” So despite the slight liberalization tendencies found that contribute to a variation of mnemonic

narratives among journalists and in news writing, dominant and largely uncritical meanings of the past persist in the commemorative reporting. Therefore, parties with contesting views of the past are excluded in the representations and are not provided options to discuss meanings. Thus memories of the end of the war, at least in anniversary journalism in Vietnam, remain to be separate memories of liberation and reunification that stand against those of loss and mourning. This discrepancy contributes to the persistence of different social rituals of commemoration or what Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001b, p. 228) called the “duality of commemoration”.

## Acknowledgements

I thank the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for enabling the field research. Furthermore, all of the respondents and my interpreter deserve my deepest gratitude for taking the time and sometimes risk to meet me for an interview. I am also grateful for the critical feedback and recommendations for improvement by Stefanie Averbek-Lietz, Rebecca Venema, Nazli Köksal and the reviewers.

## Research Material

“Vietnam News”, daily issues from April 1st until May 31st, 2015

“Le Courier du Vietnam”, weekly issues from April 3rd until May 29th, 2015

interview #1 sub-editors/translators, 10.4.2015

interview #2 blogger, 16.4.2015

interview #3 editor-in-chief, 18.4.2015

interview #4 freelancer, 18.4.2015

interview #5 publisher, 21.4.2015

interview #6 reporter, 23.4.2015

interview #7 journalist, 24.4.2015

interview #8 journalist and news anchor, 24.4.2015

interview #9 reporter, 26.4.2015

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