Representation of autism

in Vietnamese online news media between 2006 and 2016

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Abstract

Being a parent advocate of the rights of children with autism, I have witnessed how the Vietnamese news media perpetuate misrepresentation, misinformation and disinformation about autism. As the first media study of its kind in Vietnam, this thesis set out to describe, interpret and explain the issue of misrepresentation, misinformation and disinformation about autism in the Vietnamese online news media between 2006 and 2016.

The literature review in chapter 1 showed that existing studies of media representation of autism elsewhere in the world mostly used manual content and framing analysis. These revealed that autism was often represented as a medical, family or social problem, mediated by damaging stereotypes and stigmas. However, the existing literature lacked explanatory depth in illuminating the macro, meso and micro contexts that shaped the media representation. This thesis drew on the combination of cultural political economy, corpus framing analysis and critical discourse analysis to understand and explain how and why Vietnamese media and news sources shaped the meanings about autism in media discourse. This mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches demonstrated its relevance in examining complex issues, which required multiple political, economic, social and cultural reasonings. Theoretically, the synergy of cultural political economy and critical discourse analysis was also resourceful in problematising and explaining the constitutive relationship between discursive structures and social reality, as discussed in chapter 2.

The cultural political economy analysis of Vietnam's state, economy and society, including its media industry, in chapters 3 and 4 contextualised the empirical analysis of media texts in later chapters. The computerized corpus framing analysis in chapter 5 provided a broad thematic overview of the media discourse, as well as captures the voice and visibility of different actors in the corpus of media coverage about autism by the 11 most popular Vietnamese online news media outlets from 2006 to 2016. The critical discourse analysis of chapters 6, 7 and 8 then examined the ideological implications and power relations of three important frames which represented autism as, variously, a social policy issue, a medical problem or family story.

The thesis found that Vietnamese online news media rarely framed autism as a social policy issue in a deliberate way, even though people with autism accounted for approximately 1 to 2% of the population and autism-related matters touch millions of family members and social actors. State officials were strikingly absent from the media coverage, indicating that the media did not hold institutional stakeholders accountable, even though different Vietnamese laws have stipulated the need for universal education, integration and facilitation of individuals with disabilities in social setting. This was a Vietnam-specific perspective which contributed to the diverse global media literature on autism representation.

This study showed autism was predominantly represented in the medical model as a disease that needed to be cured, rather than as a life-long disability that needed social facilitation. Doctors and service providers had the most prominent voices in the media discourse. When professionals acted as the major media sources, the critical discourse analysis demonstrated how they abused their power and access to the media by making misleading claims, sometimes overstating the efficacy of their treatment methods for their own commercial interests.

In family stories, this study showed that individuals on the autism spectrum were stereotyped with troubling behaviours that caused terror, pain and even family breakup, but they rarely had the chance to speak for themselves. Media representations of family narratives were also ridden with a medicalized language about intervention and normalization efforts by “heroic” warrior mothers. The pressure to fit in with social norms was so great that parents, especially mothers, set out to fight against autism and normalize individuals on the autism spectrum, rather than accept their life-long challenges and embrace their diversity. This finding was unique to Vietnam, given its collective culture, centred on conformity, belonging and submission of the minority to the majority’s expectations.

This thesis contributes to both the scholarly body of knowledge in media and communication studies about autism representation and to the generally under-developed field of media and journalism research in Vietnam. It also suggests what solutions are available to address current problems in media representation about autism in Vietnam.

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List of abbreviations

AusAID:	Australian Agency for International Development
CDA:	Critical discourse analysis
CPE:	Cultural political economy
CFA:	Corpus framing analysis
MOET:	[Vietnamese] Ministry of Education and Training
MOLISA:	[Vietnamese] Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs
NGO:	Non-governmental organisation
UNDP:	United Nations Development Programme
VAN:	Vietnam Autism Network
WHO:	World Health Organisation
CDC:	[American] Center for Disease Control and Prevention
UNICEF:	United Nations Children's Fund
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USAID:	United States Agency for International Development

1. Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Research problem, objectives and significance

Misinformation, disinformation and misrepresentation about autism are observable problems in the Vietnamese online news media. This research aims to describe, interpret and explain the representation of autism in Vietnamese online news media from 2006 till 2016 in order to shed light on how and why ideologies and power relations were constructed around individuals on the autism spectrum and their families. Ultimately, the study sets out to explain the ways in which policy makers were not held accountable, various professionals were abusing their power and media were creating misrepresentation about autism.

Online news media are part of the diverse channels of communication that reflect and shape popular culture. In the discursive construction of autism, many people first hear about autism through the media without having had any personal contact with individuals with autism (A. E. Holton, Farrell, & Fudge, 2014). Given the wide range of autism challenges and experiences, and the unknown causes of autism, the ways media represent autism are simultaneously diverse, stereotyped and controversial (Murray, 2008; Nadesan, 2005; Osteen, 2008). Public health, psychology, communication and multidisciplinary studies have confirmed that global media significantly influence people's perceptions of and behaviors toward a health issue, sometimes in the negative form of stereotypes, stigma and discrimination (Patrick W Corrigan, 2000; Patrick W Corrigan, Bink, Fokuo, & Schmidt, 2015; V. A. Miller, Schreck, Mulick, & Butter, 2012, p. 15; Kimberly A Schreck & Ramirez, 2016). For parents and people living with autism and other developmental or mental health issues, how the media represent this condition can affect their decisions and well-being (Eaton, Ohan, Stritzke, & Corrigan, 2016).

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a public health and a social phenomenon that affects an estimated 70 million people on earth (Autism Speaks, 2017). Autism affects a larger segment of the world's children than childhood cancer, diabetes and AIDS combined (United Nations, 2009). Vietnam does not have any autism prevalence data yet, but if the prevalence of autism in Vietnam is ranging from 1% to 2% of the population, like the global prevalence announced by the American Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2018), Vietnam is estimated to have approximately one to two million people with autism. The lives of people on the autism spectrum are interconnected with a larger network of millions of family members, teachers, schoolmates and other social stakeholders. Many hundreds of thousands of students with autism need support to go to schools; similarly, many hundreds of thousands of adults with autism need support to find work and live independently. But the capacity of the Vietnamese service providers in all areas, from education, to healthcare and social work, is marked by acute shortage (Takeuchi et al., 2010; Van Cong & Weiss, 2018; Van Cong et al., 2015; Xuan Hai, 2016; Yến & Hương, 2013). Importantly, autism was not recognized as a disability in

Vietnam until January 2019, when it was officially mentioned in Circular 01/2019/TT-BLĐTBXH by the Vietnam Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (2019). Therefore, individuals with autism before January 2019 were not consistently eligible for support under the policy for people with disabilities. I endorse the recognition of autism as a disability, instead of a disease, because autism is inborn and cannot be cured at the current stage of science development. Intervention can address some challenges and improve the quality of life of people with autism significantly, but, for most of them, differing levels of challenges in communication and social interaction endure at different levels throughout a lifetime.

Regardless of awareness-building efforts, every year advocates and parents in Vietnam have to deal with ongoing misinformation, disinformation and misrepresentation regarding autism from various media outlets. This is a pressing problem that needs to be understood and addressed so that the stigma and discrimination toward people living with autism can be minimized. Hence, it is important to first investigate how and why the media were perpetuating misinformation, disinformation and misrepresentations about autism and the implications behind these discursive practices.

1.2. Research motivation

I am a mother of a 13-year-old son with autism. The representation of autism in the media directly affected the approach I took in my early days of learning about this condition 12 years ago. The first news articles I read about autism in 2007 were extracted from the memoir of Lê Thị Phương Nga (Nga, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d), which were published as a series of articles on *VnExpress.net*. Nga is the mother of a child with autism, who made herself a therapist, a trainer and a service provider. Autism was described through the terrified and anguished experience of her family, coping with the severe autistic behaviours of her son. The articles left a profound impact on me, particularly the heroic actions of the mother traveling back and forth between Vietnam and the United States to learn autism therapies and putting much financial, emotional and labour investment into her son's treatment. Due to its significance in the Vietnamese news media representation of autism, the article series will be analysed in chapter 8 of this thesis. My then mother-in-law also bought me Nga's original memoir to read, suggesting I could reference what she did. I respected Nga's heroic super-mum spirit, but at the same time I was resistant to her sensational tone of voice.

I had been wondering if my son had some developmental delay before and after his first birthday. Reading about the signs of autism in the media, I continued searching frantically and read whatever I found in the news, websites and on parents' forums. I bumped into information suggesting, for instance, that autism was caused by mercury in vaccines, or that autism was caused by too much television watching or neglectful parenting. I took my son to the hospital in Ho Chi Minh City at 16 months old, and the psychologist there confirmed that he had autistic traits after only 15 minutes of observing him and asking me some questions about his development milestones and behaviours.

The psychologist advised me to spend more time playing with him at home and taking him out for social interaction more often, as if more interaction and socialisation would address his autistic issues.

With what I read in the news and such advice from a medical professional, I brought my son home and felt profoundly guilty, grieved and anxious. What I read and watched in the media made me blame myself for months, if not years, even after I had read more authoritative studies about autism. One of the first autism books I read was *Louder Than Words: a Mother's Journey in Healing Autism* by Jenny McCathy (2007), which was recommended and shipped to me from the United States. Jenny McCathy, an American actor, explicitly voiced her distrust in medical practitioners and turned to her intuitive motherhood and Google to research ways to heal her son, Evan. Like other parents, she was indebted to the internet and proclaimed her "doctorate in Google research" (p. 8). I later watched her anti-vaccination campaign and biomedical treatment promotion on Oprah Winfrey's, Ellen's and Larry King's talk shows, as well as in other American media. Prominent in her media talks was the message that a mother's efforts could cure autism and save a child's life, regardless of how the medical community might turn their backs on her and her child.

I quickly found the Ha Noi Club of Families of Individuals on the Autism Spectrum and teamed up with them. I involved myself in both evidence-based and non-evidence-based autism therapies and treatments. I could not wait for science to confirm some treatment approaches that were positively reported in the news media, parents' forums and mailing lists. The urgency of early intervention in the child's first six years was a strong message I was obsessed about. Phương Nga and Jenny McCathy's stories in the media were in the back of my mind in the search for autism therapies and treatments. Through the club, I connected with a circle of parents and we jointly invited experts, doctors and therapists from Singapore, Hong Kong and the United States to provide training, assessments, biomedical treatments and different methods of intervention for the kids in Vietnam. The most expensive supplements recommended by the Defeat Autism Now biomedical protocol for autism were sourced from America and parents bought them by the kilogram. Some parents even dared to try some dangerous treatments like heavy metal chelation without on-site monitoring of a doctor. On the other extreme, some parents hid their children's autism because of shame. Confusing information from the mainstream media and internet as well as the accompanying social and moral pressures were profoundly influencing parents' decisions about healthcare, especially when there were few reliable resources to refer to in Vietnam.

I joined parents' groups to build awareness for autism through mainstream and social media, as well as through community activities. Together with some other parents and volunteers, I developed the Facebook fan page *Vòng tay Tự kỷ [Embrace Autism]*, which has over 8,000 followers. The media campaigns we ran were covered by multiple media outlets. We provided factual information to the media, but we could not control the frames and messages they choose to represent autism.

Throughout the process, I have witnessed the gradual changes in public understanding for the better, but I also feel disappointment, frustration and resentment when witnessing the media's ongoing perpetuation of stereotypes and prejudice. I have also realized the lack of government policy and social engagement, as well as advocates' limited resources and capability to bring about changes via awareness-raising and policy advocacy efforts. The problems of misinformation, disinformation and misrepresentation about autism in the media urged me to investigate further. Thus, this study is motivated by personal experiences and concerns, which I acknowledge when they are especially pertinent in later chapters.

1.3. Research scope

Between the years 2006 and 2016, autism became more talked about in the Vietnamese news media and some of the misconceptions seemed to be solidified. As stated, this study aims to understand the representation of autism in online news media and the structural political, economic, social and cultural contexts that enabled those representations. Ultimately, I seek to describe, interpret and explain how and why autism was represented as it was in this country's media culture. As this is the first study of news media representations of autism in Vietnam, I have chosen to focus on an analysis of the media texts and the contexts in which they were embedded. The understanding of media production and distribution processes will be drawn from existing literature, and audience consumption of media texts is not part of this study.

The thesis focuses on the most popular online news media outlets, which are registered as "báo điện tử" [electronic newspapers] and "trang thông tin điện tử tổng hợp" [news aggregation websites]. The difference between these two categories is that the former mostly produce content written by their own journalists, while the latter mainly republish news and articles from other news media.

I choose to focus on online news media, not other internet content, because the news media are in principle regulated by the Vietnamese Press Law, with prescribed journalism ethics and responsibilities. This research will not examine other channels of mass media and communication such as television, radio, print newspapers, magazines, social media, films, music, literature, books, etc, even though it could be reasonably hypothesized that the discourses highlighted in this thesis have a wider foothold in Vietnamese media culture.

According to *Internetworldstats.com*, by the end of 2016 Vietnam had about 50 million internet users, and by the end of 2017 Vietnam had 64 million internet users, equivalent to 67% of the population, making Vietnam rank 12th in the world by the number of internet users (as cited in Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications, 2017). The market research company Nielson Vietnam (2016) reports that nine out of ten consumers in Vietnam (91%) have smart phones, which has transformed their media habits and consumption practices. According to Nielson's report, Vietnamese consumers

spend on average 24 hours and 7 minutes online every week, and they are driven to source online content of different genres which used to be the domain of traditional news media suppliers. Therefore, online news media play a significant role in shaping audiences' exposure to and knowledge of a certain topic.

1.4. Outline of thesis

This introductory chapter has so far discussed the research problem, significance and motivation. The remaining part of chapter 1 will present a literature review to understand what is known about autism representation in global media. I will point out the gaps in the literature, then formulate my own research questions. In chapter 2, I will discuss the theoretical framework and operational methodology for this research, based on a combination of corpus framing analysis (CFA), cultural political economy (CPE) and critical discourse analysis (CDA). I will explain why this mix of approaches enables a comprehensive analysis of media texts and the contexts in which they are produced. The discussion of the Vietnamese political economy, healthcare, education and cultural contexts in chapter 3 will lay the foundation for understanding why autism was not recognized as a disability in the legal system till January 2019. Chapter 4 discusses media policy, state control, media commercialisation and journalistic professionalism, to understand the forces that impact media and journalistic practice in Vietnam. That discussion points out how authoritarian forms of state control, commercialisation of the media market, and a constrained vision of journalistic professionalism impact the ways media operate and represent autism. Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 are four empirical chapters. The analysis of media texts in these chapters will integrate relevant political economy, social and cultural contexts for rigorous interpretation and explanation. In chapter 5, I explain how data was collected from online news outlets and compiled into a corpus, then present the quantitative findings from a computer-assisted CFA. This provides a broad overview of the linguistic patterns revealing who was visible, who had a voice and what frames were used in the media coverage. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 then employ CDA, enhanced by CPE, to qualitatively examine a smaller sample of articles to reveal the ideology and power relations permeating the media texts. Chapter 9 sums up key findings and discusses the policy and political implications. This concluding chapter will also clarify the contribution and limitations of the present research and suggest future research directions.

1.5. Frames, sources and misrepresentation of autism in international media

1.5.1. Autism diagnosis criteria in the scientific and medical model

To be clear about the condition this project is talking about, the standardized criteria to diagnose autism are presented below. These criteria are published in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 5th edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and widely used by medical and health professional in many countries:

A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive;):

A1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.

A2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.

A3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):

B1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).

B2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).

B3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).

B4. Hyper or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g. apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).

C. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).

D. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.

E. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay. Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level.

Note: Individuals with a well-established DSM-IV diagnosis of autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, or pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDDNOS) should be given the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

These globally recognized and popularized diagnosis criteria use negative medicalized phrases such as *persistent deficits, abnormality, failure, restricted, stereotyped, inflexible, ritualized, extreme distress, rigid, highly restricted, fixated, hyper or hypo-reactivity, adverse response, excessive, clinically significant impairment* and *disturbances*. Through these standardized diagnostic criteria, autism is framed totally as an individual medical problem, self-contained in the person. Academics, practitioners, autistic individuals and autism advocates still argue about the medicalization model used to identify autism, and debates continue about whether autism is a biogenetic, neurological difference, disorder, or disability (Baron-Cohen, 2010; Howlin, 2010; Nadesan, 2005). Nadesan (2005) suggests it is important to investigate "how various institutional relationships, expert authorities, and bodies of knowledge have sought to represent, divide, understand, and act on biologically based, but socially shaped and expressed differences such as autism" (p. 79).

1.5.2. Causes of autism

Researchers are still investigating what really causes autism. The debates around the causes of autism significantly influence media representations as well as the public perception of and reaction toward autism. Generally, multiple studies point to genetic disorders, toxic environments and the interaction between genetic problems with environmental toxicity as triggers of autism (Kapp, Gillespie-Lynch, Sherman, & Hutman, 2013; Landrigan, 2010). However, scientists do not know yet the exact causation mechanism or the diverse manifestations of autism in different individuals.

Early misunderstandings have left a deeply rooted legacy that shapes today's representations of autism in popular media and culture. The notion of blaming the "refrigerator mother" for causing

autism is the most troubling. Osteen (2008) has undertaken a chronological review of autism representation and argued that the theory that autism was caused by cold or neglectful parents has been "thoroughly discredited, nevertheless, parent blaming [has] endured throughout contemporary autism literature (as well as in autistic people's actual families)" (p. 11). Osteen (2008) reports that in 1943, Leo Kanner at John Hopkins University in the United States published "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact", and it was, for a long time, seen as a groundbreaking article, identifying a new condition called autism. Kanner blamed the parents for causing autism in their children with his psychoanalytical theory and was the first to use the phrase *refrigerator mother*. According to Kanner (1943), all the children in his survey came from highly intelligent parents, with all but three of the families cited in Who's Who in America or featured in American Men of Science. Osteen (2008) quotes Kanner as particularly noting the parents, like their children, also had less interest in connecting with other people. Kanner (1943) at the same time concluded that these autistic children did not have the innate ability to form normal affective contact with people. Kanner's notion about intelligent but emotionally cold parents causing autism was promoted aggressively by Bruno Bettelheim (Osteen, 2008). Bettelheim's book *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* published in 1967, had ineluctable consequences for the world's view of autism, while he was working at the University of Chicago's Orthogenic School for Disturbed Children, applying psychoanalytic theory and milieu therapy. Bettelheim's conception that how the "refrigerator mother" maintained the relationship with her infant caused autism, became popular in some professional arenas (Osteen, 2008).

The ghosts of Leo Kanner and Bruno Bettelheim still haunt autism representation in both public discourse and clinical practice (Osteen, 2008). Autism as a medical discipline had an error-ridden start, so, unsurprisingly, it still has a problematic representation in the media and among the wider public. Perceptions about the causes of autism differ between cultures: for example, the lay population in the United States and United Kingdom increasingly believe in biological causes, while French health professionals still believe that autism originates from family relationships (Grinker et al., as cited in Yudell, Tabor, Dawson, Rossi, & Newschaffer, 2013, p. 714). Therefore, some 70% of French psychiatrists still treat autism and depression with psychoanalytic methods (Stevenson, Harp, & Gernsbacher, 2011). Lay populations in Asia are more likely to perceive that autism has a parental etiology than people in the West (Qi, Zaroff, & Bernardo, 2016), with more than 50% of survey respondents moderately or strongly agreeing with a parental etiology (p. 679). In China, autistic behaviors are often framed as "defiance and personality issues", not as a developmental disorder, and these categorizations could presumably link to parenting skills, consequently leading to blame being directed at parents (Huang et al., and Ho et al., as cited in Qi et al., 2016, p. 680). If parents are blamed for causing autism in their children, it may follow that the community is less likely to sympathize or help. Only when they know autism is caused by objective biological factors, out of parents' or individuals' control, will members of the public be more likely to offer support and less likely to exhibit stigma or discrimination. The above generalisation assertion is derived from the

investigation by Patrick W Corrigan (2000) of mental illness representation. Though autism is not a mental illness at its onset, it may be subject to similar mechanisms of stigma and discrimination. People with autism are more likely to face mental health issues in their teenage years and adulthood than average (Bradley, Summers, Wood, & Bryson, 2004; Morgan, Roy, & Chance, 2003; Russell et al., 2016; Tsakanikos, Sturmey, Costello, Holt, & Bouras, 2007), hence, they may face double stigma and discrimination for their combined health issues.

1.5.3. Research on autism representation in Vietnamese media

I have conducted a literature review in international peer reviewed journals and databases, but no research on autism representation in the media in Vietnam has been found in the scholarly literature in English. When a search is done in Vietnamese, one Master's thesis is found, discussing information about autism on the internet (Thuỳ Linh, 2012). However, this research scanned all internet sources including news media, organisation websites, blogs, forums and other social media. The breadth of the surveyed data was too broad in the relatively limited scope of a master thesis. Its quantitative methodology was also not rigorously explained. Research on autism from media studies, cultural studies, public health, sociology, special education, autism intervention, or other disciplines is still in its infancy stage in the country. As already noted, there are no official statistics on autism prevalence in the country; there are also no government initiatives to build awareness and directly support people living with autism (Ha et al., 2014; Van Cong et al., 2015).

1.5.4. Thematic issues about autism in international media

Representation of autism in news and entertainment media has been researched in the United States (Clarke, 2012; Conn & Bhugra, 2012; Kang, 2013; J. E. j. w. e. Kelley, Cardon, & Algeo-Nichols, 2015; McKeever, 2012; Kimberly A. Schreck, Russell, & Vargas, 2013), United Kingdom (Huws & Jones, 2010; Wilkinson & McGill, 2009), Australia (Ellis, 2010; Jones & Harwood, 2009), and China (Bie & Tang, 2015; Cockain, 2016; Tang & Bie, 2016). Certain studies investigate representations of autism together with other mental health or intellectual disabilities (Wilkinson & McGill, 2009), expanding across national borders (Belcher & Maich, 2014; Garner, Jones, & Harwood, 2015; A. Holton, Weberling, Clarke, & Smith, 2012), or using a comparative approach (A. E. Holton et al., 2014). These existing studies mainly use conventional manual content and framing analysis. They often look at what issues have been covered in the autism topic; what news frames are utilized; who are the sources of news; how the identities of people with autism are portrayed or stereotyped; signs of stigmatisation; and how media coverage influences people's decision-making in autism intervention and vaccination in particular countries. Some other publications use qualitative and discourse analysis, though they often expand their scope beyond the representation of autism in the media to general representations of autism in social life and popular culture (Baron-Cohen, 2010; Bracher,

2012; Grinker, 2008; McCabe, 2007, 2010; Murray, 2008; Nadesan, 2005; Osteen, 2008; Schreibman, 2005; Stevenson et al., 2011).

A few studies sum up the major issues that have been raised in media coverage of autism. Jones and Harwood (2009) in their content analysis of 1,225 news articles in Australian print media between 2002 and 2005 find that these articles mainly discuss the following issues: facilities and funding for autism; schools and education for children with autism; fundraising and donation; scientific research; the link between vaccines and autism diagnosis; the impact of autism on families; criminal cases related to individuals with autism; and finally community support stories. Bie and Tang (2015), in an effort to conduct a content analysis of the media coverage of leading Chinese newspapers, categorize autism-related content into the following topics: the availability or unavailability of infrastructure and educational/intervention resources for autistic people; fund-raising, donation, and community-based volunteering events for autistic individuals; scientific advancements in autism-related research about autism risks, diagnosis, causes, and treatments; art and cultural activities; family stories; announcements or surreptitious advertisements; autistic people as the perpetrator or victim of a crime; celebrity stories; vaccine controversy; and misuse of the word *autism*.

1.5.5. News frames about autism in international media

A news frame is a central organising thread that shapes the meaning of a series of events, forging a connection between them (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997). The media exercise framing practice through their focus on particular "issues, information sources, causes, solutions, and types of discourses" (Bie & Tang, 2015, p. 886). Media scholars have pointed out how coverage of health issues often mobilizes gain vs loss frames and episodic vs thematic frames (A. E. Holton et al., 2014; Kang, 2013; McKeever, 2012). Gain frames put the emphasis on the health benefits when individuals take or avoid certain actions, while loss frames focus on the risks or disadvantages of avoiding or partaking in certain behaviours (A. E. Holton et al., 2014). Conversely, episodic or thematic frames are created with the focus on either the individual or societal factors and actors. In the book *Is Anyone Responsible?: How Television Frames Political Issues*, Iyengar (1991) argues that the public have the tendency to simplify political issues by assigning responsibility to particular actors. He suggests that when the media present an issue as an individual story, or within the episodic frame, instead of presenting an issue as a social matter, the media are less likely to hold government officials and institutions accountable for dealing with the problems. As such, news framing can affect the public's perception about who should solve social problems, and how they should do so.

According to Kang (2013), episodic and thematic framings are two ways of attributing responsibility to individuals and social institutions. When journalists frame an issue as a matter of individual responsibility, they focus on individual behaviors, characters, or lifestyles as the cause of, or solution to, the issue, but if they frame the issue within the social responsibility sphere, the focus is on the

people and institutions who have the power to control the problem at the social level. Medical or scientific stories within the episodic frame focus on matters of individual responsibility and biology such as genetic disorder, mothers' and fathers' age, sperm problems, toxic exposure, personal immune system, and parents' emotional stress as a result of a child's autism. Thematic stories, in contrast, highlight social responsibilities such as the government's funding of autism research, community awareness building efforts, anti-discrimination agenda, helplines, and reinforcement of inclusion for children with autism (p. 255).

Kang's study of United States' television news about autism from four television news networks (*ABC, CBS, NBC,* and *CNN*) between 1990 and 2010 finds autism is more frequently framed as an episodic rather than a thematic issue (Kang, 2013). Similarly, the most popular frames in news stories of autism published in *the New York Times* and *the Washington Post* from 1996 to 2006 are predominantly the human interest frame (63% or 189 articles), followed by the policy frame (47% or 143 articles), and the science frame (44% or 132 articles) (McKeever, 2012). More than one frame may operate in any one article. In the study of autism representation by A. E. Holton et al. (2014) in print media in the United States and United Kingdom from 1998 to 2012, researchers find that even though thematic frames are used in multiple articles, their use is minor in comparison to the use of episodic frames, and more than half of the analysed articles used the loss frame (p. 200). Research by Bie and Tang (2015) on representation of autism in leading Chinese newspapers between 2003 and 2012 finds that the media often privatize autism as the problem of individual families, which makes the public even less likely to see the need to support people living with autism by means of social policy (p. 892). Other studies do not explicitly research the framing of media coverage, but also find autism is mainly described in the media as an individual and family problem (Clarke, 2012; Huws & Jones, 2010).

A. E. Holton et al. (2014) argue that when autism is associated with loss frames, journalists might be reinforcing the perception that autism is potentially harmful for society. Such news coverage may unnecessarily sensationalise and potentially stigmatise autism, creating a threatening space for individuals with autism (p. 202). A. E. Holton et al. (2014) also argue that gain frames describe positive outcomes of therapies or support for individuals with autism. They point out while these improvements for individuals with autism certainly embody positive news coverage, the media will often focus on treatments rather than inclusion. The dominant media message is that despite their social, communicative and behavioral limitations, individuals with autism might be expected to overcome these challenges to achieve some gains (p. 201). Summing up various other studies, the research by A. E. Holton et al. (2014) suggests that those with disabilities have often been portrayed as "heroic" figures, overcoming the challenges of their diagnoses against all odds. But this conception might create more social isolation by suggesting that only with super efforts, and through extraordinary gains, can people with disabilities like autism make meaningful contributions to society (p. 201).

Clarke (2012) finds that magazines with a general audience in the United States tend to look at autism as a scientific issue, while magazines for women are inclined to frame their coverage of autism as the struggles of heroic mothers. McKeever (2012) finds around half (48%) of the coverage of autism in *the New York Times* and *the Washington Post* looks for solutions to autism. He argues that media coverage of autism by these media outlets tends to pay attention to solutions rather than causes, possibly because the causes of autism have so far been controversial.

But some authors also argue that no matter how journalists frame health issues as episodic or thematic, readers tend to keep blaming individuals for their health problems (A. Holton, Lee, & Coleman, 2014, p. 825). This is because framing effects are not totally dependent on what new information is provided. Instead, "frames operate by activating information *already at the recipients' disposal,* stored in long-term memory" (emphasis in the original) (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 225). It may take decades for a new frame to be internalized in people's minds (A. Holton et al., 2014, p. 826). This also indicates that changing the media's and public's perception about a health issue is not a straightforward pathway to be achieved simply by encouraging the use of more social or thematic framing.

1.5.6. The sources of news about autism in international media

Bie and Tang (2015) argue that the media can frame a topic by giving voices to certain sources and silencing others. When selecting who to interview in stories about autism, journalists turn mainly to a third-person point of view, citing doctors, researchers, family members, representatives from the government authorities, and NGO workers, while they usually silence and render invisible the first-person perspective of autistic individuals (Bie & Tang, 2015; Huws & Jones, 2010; Kang, 2013; Wilkinson & McGill, 2009).

In particular, a study by Huws and Jones (2010, p. 101) finds that British newspapers between 1999 and 2008 mostly silence autistic people. British news stories generally present the voices of parents, academics, health professionals and journalists, rather than those of individuals on the autism spectrum. Moreover, the study finds adults with an autism diagnosis rarely appear in the media, and as a consequence, autism is often infantilized (p. 101). Similarly, Clarke (2012) observes that the perspectives of individuals with autism are underrepresented in American magazines. Kang (2013) finds out in another study that doctors, family members, and autistic individuals are presented as information sources in American television news with respectively 32.7%, 26.9%, and 16.9% of the coverage in American television news. In *the New York Times* and *the Washington Post*, McKeever (2012) points out medical/scientific professionals, government officials, family members, and nonprofit organisations are the sources most often drawn on, while the perspectives of individuals with autism appear in 14% of the news stories. This 14% in McKeever's findings is not too far from the 16.9% in Kang's study, suggesting that even though individuals with autism are acting as news

sources less frequently than professionals and family members, their voice is relatively more vocal in the United States media than elsewhere.

There are an estimated 14 million Chinese people on the autism spectrum; however, Bie and Tang (2015) observe autistic people are mostly silenced in Chinese media representations if they are not depicted as savants with special gifts. Even when journalists use an episodic frame in their stories, they might not always present the viewpoints of individuals on the autism spectrum (A. E. Holton et al., 2014). In *Autism and Representation*, Murray (2008) suggests that in an effort to build awareness, broadcasters often tell the stories of individuals with autism and raise public concern, guilt, shame or pity, without giving the individuals on the spectrum a real chance to speak for themselves. People with autism are not presented as primary sources to share views, correct or confirm issues, but; rather, used as exemplars to support generalized third-person claims (Huws & Jones, 2010, p. 102).

In contrast to the media elsewhere, Chinese newspapers cite family members more frequently than doctors in their report of autism, which might suggest that autism is framed in China primarily as a family matter, not a medical or societal issue (Bie & Tang, 2015). As such, the report conveys the message that the responsibility to support individuals with autism lies with the family (p. 891). Bie and Tang (2015) argue that government officials should be used as an institutional source to promote public health policy, while nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) can share information as a form of community support for this public health issue. A noticeable difference in news source patterns between the Chinese and Western news media is that government officials appear in Chinese newspapers' coverage of autism only occasionally. Only 9% of the news coverage on autism in leading newspapers in China cites government officials (Bie & Tang, 2015, p. 891), compared to 41% in *the New York Times* and *the Washington Post* (McKeever, 2012). In addition, observers also note that nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and other community supporters in China offer limited information and perspectives on autism, despite their huge potential role in health promotion and awareness building (Bie & Tang, 2015). Practically, the absence of governmental and NGO voices in Chinese news coverage not only points to the lack of governmental and societal support for individuals with autism and their families, but also suggests that the Chinese media do not hold government officials accountable to assist this "marginalized population", instead locating the challenges of autism care and teaching back to the privatized domain of families (Bie & Tang, 2015, p. 891). It is evident that Chinese newspapers are not championing the advocacy role, and from a health education perspective, it is a long journey to improve awareness and push forward advocacy efforts for autism in Chinese society (p. 891).

1.5.7. Autism stereotypes and stigmas in international media

In the global landscape, journalists associate autism with disruptive behaviours, violence, insecurity, helplessness, shame, burden and isolation (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008; A. E. Holton et al., 2014;

Waltz, 2008, 2012). Jones and Harwood (2009) find autism is described in Australian print media as dangerous, tragic, debilitating, and a heart-breaking, irresolvable "problem" for parents/caregivers. Alternatively, individuals with autism are portrayed as "unhappy and often unloved and poorly treated (both by the system and by their own families)" (p. 15). Two thirds of news coverage of autism in the study by A. E. Holton et al. (2014) use "stigmatising cues" to catch the attention of the audience with such words as *loner, violent, dismal, abnormal, different, shy, destructive* and *disruptive* (p. 200). These terms create a negative perception of autistic behaviours. The authors suggest that these stigmatisation signs might convey more sensational value to the audience and might be worsened within certain news frames (p. 200). Various researchers suggest that the current portrayals of autism might be more harmful than helpful to individuals on the autism spectrum.

Autism is frequently described as a family tragedy that breaks up and devastates its individual members (Jones & Harwood, 2009; Sarrett, 2011). Autism can even influence the future marital prospects of siblings (Jones & Harwood, 2009, p. 12). Jones and Harwood (2009) find that Australian media coverage conveys a consistent message that the ongoing struggles for parents, families and caregivers will be part of their life. They are generally described as coping stoically but also "traumatized" by the experience, or rendered as incapable and indifferent parents (p. 15).

Regardless of what etiology is used, medical professionals believe that people and children with autism are psychologically and biologically broken or incomplete due to their disorder, and the media perpetuate this perception further (Sarrett, 2011, p. 146). These negative images are seen both in mass media and scientific reports, while biographies by individuals on the spectrum are trying to counterbalance it (p. 152). The disability of people with autism is generally highlighted and represented first or alone in the media, instead of their "personhood" (Wilkinson & McGill, 2009). According to Huws and Jones (2010), there is a dominant connotation that people suffer as victims of the condition and that to care for individuals with autism requires great strength and effort.

On the other extreme, the media sometimes tend to describe people with autism as "savants" with unusual gifts (Draaisma, 2009; Jones & Harwood, 2009; Murray, 2008; Nadesan, 2005; Osteen, 2008; Schreibman, 2005). The abilities of children with autism are often portrayed as extraordinary, despite or because of autism (Huws & Jones, 2010, p. 102). In Holton et al's (2014) research of media portrayals of autism, 60% of the time people with autism are presented as those with special gifts, in the roles of scientists, musicians or athletes. This stereotype creates unrealistic expectations for autistic individuals, and when such expectations are not met, it leads to further disappointment for other people in everyday interaction (Osteen, 2008; Murray, 2008; Draaisma, 2009). Murray, the father of an autistic son, points out that savantism is usually translated into the "worth" of autistic characters. Without savant skills, a social life for people with autism seems not to exist (Murray, 2008). Nadesan (2005) points out that depicting autism is challenging because of the complicated and

varying degrees of cognitive, communicative, behavioral, and emotional signs, in addition to the ever-changing diagnostic criteria. Beyond the biomedical complexity, the ideologies mobilized to socially construct the media stories also contribute significantly to what messages or meanings will be delivered to the audience. Instead of seeing autism as only a medical problem, there are other ways to view autism as a personal challenge, a family problem or a social matter that needs policy support.

1.5.8. Influence of media representations on people living with autism

The media act as the main social sources in producing stigmas around autism (Tang & Bie, 2016, p. 447). The media's negative portrayals of autism can lead the public to focus on autism otherness and differences, rather than seeking solutions to support and engage individuals on the spectrum (Stuart, Arboleda-Florez, & Sartorius, 2011). In fact, negative stereotypes of people with autism as potentially aggressive and violent, or in need of pity, can reduce people's willingness to engage with and support them in school and social settings (Jones & Harwood, 2009; Robertson, 2009). People with disabilities are often marginalized and discriminated against because of their perceived imperfections and oddities (A. E. Holton et al., 2014; Stuart et al., 2011). Hence, they often fail to benefit from state policy and access to healthcare and employment (Wilkinson & McGill, 2009, p. 74).

Due to social and cultural beliefs about disability within Chinese families, having a child with a disability is often accompanied by shame (Wang et al., 2013, p. 580). Many parents in China either keep the child with autism at home or send him or her to the countryside to live with grandparents or other relatives (McCabe, 2007, p. 44). For those who are keen to send their children to schools, the biggest hurdle is finding a school that is willing to admit their children (McCabe, 2007, p. 45).

Because the exact causes of autism are not known, there is no cure for autism at the moment. Intervention and treatment are based on developmental, behavioural, educational, neurological and biomedical sciences. However, controversy about autism intervention methods is commonly reported. Kimberly A. Schreck et al. (2013) examine the five newspapers and magazines with top readership in the United States between 2000 and 2010 and discover that the main source of misinformation in autism stories is about intervention and support methods. Over 75% of treatments for autism reported in print media are non-scientifically supported (p. 316). Dillenburger (2011) compares the confusion and myths about autism intervention to "the Emperor's new clothes". V. A. Miller et al. (2012) document the impact of media on parents' decisions about intervention and treatments for their children with autism. Kimberly A. Schreck et al. (2013) warn that professionals, celebrities, and media usually refer to treatment options for autism, some of which are "novel, untested interventions", and even "potentially ineffective or harmful treatments" (p. 299). In turn, the psychological wellbeing of families living with autism is conceivably influenced by the media representation.

1.6. Gaps to be filled and research questions

I started this research with a concern about the problematic representation of autism in Vietnamese online news media. No rigorous study on autism representation in news media in Vietnam has been published. Hence, my research is the first from Vietnam to contribute to the global scholarly literature on autism representation in the news media. It is anticipated that Vietnam, with its unique political, economic, social and cultural contexts, will add a different perspective to the Western-centric scholarly literature.

The literature review reveals that existing studies in peer reviewed journals mostly employ manual and quantitative content and framing analysis. They examine the representation of autism in traditional media, including print and television, mainly in the period between 2000 and 2010, but none focuses solely on online news media. The content analysis findings are at the descriptive level of autism representation - about what may be found right there in the texts. The descriptive character is not unique to content analysis of media coverage about autism. Matthes (2009) generalizes that descriptiveness is the characteristic of most content analysis studies. Researchers sometimes collect media coverage for 5 or 10 years, with thousands of articles or television scripts. Content analysts usually identify content themes from a small sample of texts, then categorize the content of the big corpus into codes, and manually input the contents of the large sample into a code book or computer software so as to quantify them and observe the frequency of themes, signs of stigmatisation, news frames and news sources. Finally, the researchers use the statistical values from the data units to conduct data synthesis and generalization. Content analysis can present a descriptive picture of patterns in autism coverage, but, as typically practiced in the literature, it does not zoom in with in-depth analysis and interpretation of specific texts or contextualize the factors that constitute and shape those patterns. However, there are benefits in grasping a quantitative overview of media content patterns to know what themes or frames are predominantly used in the discourse. Therefore, I will use computational CFA in chapter 5. Because the existing content analysis studies of autism representation do not address the questions *how* and *why* thoroughly, my study will use CPE and CDA to situate the analysis of media texts in wider political, economic, social and cultural contexts. I will discuss these theoretical and methodological choices in detail in chapter 2.

When individuals with autism are talked about but not given a chance to speak, there is an implication about their agency. By firstly inquiring into who was referred to and who was quoted the most in Vietnamese media coverage, this research will establish who had more voice or agency in the discourse. Thus, I ask the following question:

> **RQ1:** What individual and institutional stakeholders were talked about and/or given an opportunity to talk as news sources in the Vietnamese online news media between 2006 and 2016?

Framing is a powerful tool in media practice, and it shapes how people view different issues and attribute responsibilities to different social actors (Iyengar, 1991). When journalists use a certain set of key words more regularly than others, and when they contextualize autism with particular word choices and combinations, there are implications for how they orient the audience toward certain meanings and messages. The second research question concerns framing practice:

> **RQ2:** What frames were dominant or absent in the Vietnamese online news media discourse about autism from 2006 to 2016?

When discussing frames in the media coverage, the existing literature talks about the implications of assigning responsibilities to different institutional and individual stakeholders. But this research will go further by elaborating on how and why the political structure and other economic, social, and cultural factors impacted the attribution and non-attribution of responsibility. Therefore, the third research question looks in depth into the contexts that reflected and shaped the ideology, power relations and representation of autism in the Vietnamese online news media:

> **RQ3:** How was autism represented and why were certain ideologies and power relations operated in the Vietnamese online news media between 2006 and 2016?

Whether representation of autism in Vietnamese online news media was similar to or different from those published elsewhere, I will seek to understand the local underlying reasons. My research questions share common ground with existing studies, but my central focus is on how and why ideology and power relations were articulated within the media discourse, in contrast to studies that only tend to explore what issues are and who is represented at a quantitative level.

1.7. Conclusion

Given that the existing body of knowledge in media representation of autism is quite Western-centric, the Vietnamese perspective on autism representation in my study will add to the global understanding of the diverse media representation of this complex health and social phenomena. The existing literature lacks interpretative and explanatory depth. To address this shortcoming, I employ a unique combination of CFA with CPE and CDA, to enable a dialectical understanding of contexts and texts. Examining the way ideology and power relations were fostered in the media will promote further understanding about their potential impact on those who were dominated and disadvantaged in this Communist-ruled society. Even though the focus of the thesis is not on policy making, public health, disability studies, sociology, anthropology or cultural studies, it touches upon and contributes insights to those related fields.

2. Chapter 2: Theoretical and methodological framework

2.1. Introduction

To address the research questions of this thesis, I draw on the theoretical resources of critical realism and social constructionism at different analytical levels. I will mobilize a methodological framework that combines corpus framing analysis (CFA), cultural political economy (CPE), and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the interplay of political and economic structures, as well as cultural and social forces, in the discursive representation of autism in Vietnamese online news media. This combination of approaches makes it possible for the study to formulate a dialectical understanding of the relationship between discursive (meaning-making) practices and other social practices (Fairclough, 1995, 2009). I will aim to construct a dialectical account by explaining the "interactions between discourse and other components" of reality and proposing what solutions to change existing reality, as suggested by Fairclough (2017, p. 13). The ultimate goal of dialectical reasoning is to advocate to "change the existing state of affairs for the better" (Fairclough, 2017, p. 16). After this general introduction and the presentation of key theoretical concepts, I will discuss each of the methodological approaches and how they are operationalized and integrated in this particular study.

2.2. Merging critical realism and social constructionism

This thesis spans a theoretical bridge between a realist approach and a social constructionism framework. As the founder of critical realism, Bhaskar (2008) proposes that reality should be examined in three major ''domains'', upon which the structural relations between objects are built (p. 39). The overarching domain is the ''domain of the real'', which contains ''generative mechanisms'' with the potential to generate how events happen (p. 46). Bhaskar suggests that reality should also be seen as being made up of the events which actually happen – what he calls the ''domain of the actual''. But because not all events which actually happen are known to human minds, Bhaskar goes on to establish that researchers at the same time need to pay due attention to the most directly accessible layer of reality or ''domain of the empirical'', which is comprised of events as perceived or experienced by humans (p. 47).

Bhaskar (2011) asserts that "the empirical is only a subset of the actual, which is itself a subset of the real" (p. 148). Bhaskar (2011) points out that only if we understand the structures that generate events or discourses, can we understand and change social reality. Similarly, Danermark, Ekstrom, and Jakobsen (2005) state that critical realism acknowledges the necessity of observation of events or phenomena, but due to the implications of the complex generative mechanisms that constitute social reality, science cannot be "reduced to observation of phenomena at the empirical level" (p. 22). They insist that to create usable knowledge, it is essential that we bring to light the mechanisms that generate empirical events, even though these are often not readily observable (p. 22). Bhaskar formulates his critical realism approach as a counter point to social constructionism. However,

Bhaskar points out that social structures are not controlling people unilaterally: they need to mobilize and negotiate with agents' conceptions to reach a common sense compromise (Cruickshank, 2012, p. 80). This is where human agency comes into play in the mobilization of the ontology and epistemology of social reality.

As such, Bhaskar (2011) suggests the generative mechanisms need to be unveiled through the conceptualization and practical process of the social sciences (p. 2). Realists seek to understand "the relationship between social structures and human agency," which can be transformational (p. 3). In that dynamic, "society provides the means, media, rules and resources for everything we do," and in turn, the social world is reproduced or transformed along the way (p. 3). When agents reproduce or transform structures in their social activity, they at the same time potentially regenerate "structures of power which may involve alienation, domination and oppression" (p. 5). Therefore, critical realists seek to pursue emancipation as "a process of structural transformation—as a transformation in structures rather than a marginal adjustment of states of affairs and as a transformation to other (needed, wanted and empowering) structures rather than to a realm which magically escapes determination" (p. 145). This emphasis on social structures and their transformation will have major implications in this thesis in the process of pointing out social wrongs, explaining them and proposing solutions.

This thesis draws on Fairclough's (2005) theory that locates the critical analysis of discourse within an "analytically dualist epistemology" with its focus on both structure and human agency (p. 916). Fairclough, Jessop, and Sayer (2004) state "[critical] realism maintains that reality *exists* independently of our knowledge of it" (p. 27). According to their arguments, "[b]ecause texts are both socially structuring and socially-structured", analysts have to unveil not only how texts construct meanings and thereby contribute to constructing social structure but also how "the production of meaning is itself constrained by emergent, non-semiotic features of social structure" (p. 27). In that respect, these authors argue that actors, language, texts, social relations, and practical contexts have the nature of "dialectical internal relations" (p. 27).

Clarifying the nature of social constructionism, Glesne (2016) holds that people's beliefs about the world are social inventions, and that the reality of the world is socially constructed, complex and ever changing (p.9). Burr (2015) argues our ways of understanding the world are shaped by other people around us, because since birth, human beings are exposed to a world where concepts, attitudes and behaviours have been formulated by their surrounding culture. Burr (2015) suggests that social constructionism invites us to be critical of what has been considered common sense and taken for granted, and to challenge the view that "conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world" (p. 2). When knowledge and reality has been historically and culturally constructed by human beings, all ways of understanding are historically and culturally relative (p. 4).

Understanding and knowledge are “specific to particular cultures and periods of history, […] dependent upon the particular social and economic arrangements prevailing in that culture at that time” (p. 4). But if all perspectives to view reality are “equally valid, then we appear deprived of defensible grounds for our moral choices and political allegiances” (p .27). Through everyday social interactions, conversations and texts, our versions of knowledge become “potentially” fabricated (p. 4). Therefore, social constructionists pay great attention to social interaction, especially language and its role in the construction of knowledge and power relations (p. 5).

Burr acknowledges the relativism of social constructionism and asks the question: “Do individuals have the agency to construct the world through their discourse, or are we all the products of social structures beyond our control?” (p. 119). Burr then concedes that some social constructionists accept a form of realism known as critical realism, that recognizes the material world and the impact of materiality on people’s life (p. 9). Burr (2015) endorses Foucault’s conception that “where there is knowledge, there is power”; they go as a pair (p. 91). Burr (2015) acknowledges that power is not the possession of any individual or group but is something that in principle anyone can exercise through discourse. The implication is that some discursive power is available to each and every one of us, and we can exercise this power “in our struggle to change ourselves and our lives”, because according to Foucault, power and contestation always go together (p. 91). Thus, social constructionism may unveil the working of ideologies and power relations so as to explain stereotypes, stigma, injustice and inequality and other aspects in the dominant social discourse.

I acknowledge the capacity of social constructionism to explain how people differently construct and interpret meanings in social life, and I use critical realism to counter its potential relativism. In the case of autism, individuals with autism have various forms of challenges in their neurological and sensory system, as well as seizure, movement, immune and digestion co-occurring conditions (Christensen et al., 2014; Close, Lee, Kaufmann, & Zimmerman, 2012; Levy et al., 2010; Peacock, Amendah, Ouyang, & Grosse, 2012). Regardless of how other human beings define autism, autistic challenges undeniably impact the daily life of individuals on the autism spectrum and their families, in both the private space of their homes and in social settings. Psychologists and social scientists have argued that behaviour is subject to both biological and cultural influences (Franks & Turner, 2013). According to K. Wright (2011), “it seems as morally obscene […] to reduce the reality of human suffering to social constructions, as it is intellectually irresponsible to ignore the social constructions which prompt, enable, and perpetuate the existence of such suffering” (p. 160). Social constructionism can alter the social meanings of things, but it cannot change the nature of the physical world or problems.

In line with Fairclough’s (2005) articulation of a critical realist position with a moderate social constructionism (p. 916), Cruickshank (2012) suggests that critical realism and social constructionism

can be complementary because a critical realism approach moves beyond the relativism of social constructionism. He holds that “micro-social constructionism is correct to argue that intersubjective meanings are an important part of social reality” (p. 80). Cruickshank (2012) argues that critical realism maintains its criticism on the basis of how objective processes operate (p. 80). Indeed K. Wright (2011) also agrees that critical realism charts a middle ground between “acknowledging the independent existence of objective reality, but [also] asserting the constructedness of human knowledge about the nature of that reality” (p. 159).

Wright (2011) argues that critical realism is critical of other theories when they produce an inadequate representation of social reality and, at the same time, is critical of social structures and practices that constitute inequality by perpetuating falsehoods or misrepresentations of reality. Within a critical realism framework, news media are understood as operating under external constraining factors, such as government regulations, economic and logistical practice, media ownership, as well as internal factors such as journalists’ ideologies and professionalism (Lau, as cited in K. Wright, 2011, p. 161). Similarly, the Glasgow University Media Group has been “concerned with the way in which [the news] may distort, misrepresent and select or affect reality” (Beharrell & Hoggart, 1976, p. 20) and aims to demystify the media’s claim of “objective”, “impartial” or “neutral” professional standards (Glasgow University Media Group, 1985). Critical realism allows researchers “to articulate notions of reality, truth, and knowledge” in media practice in ways which recognize the essential contribution of social constructionism, whilst also avoiding “moral relativism” (p. 167). It also affirms the need for researchers to critically and politically push for media practitioners’ ethical accountability and for the professional adequacy of their representations (p. 167). K. Wright (2011) asserts that critical realism acknowledges the centrality of both journalistic agency as well as the real material and social structures within which journalists’ textual representations shape and are shaped. Consequently, analysts establish the “recursive links between structure and agency, subjectivity and reality” (p. 167).

Thus, I draw on the importance and articulation of the political economy structures as well as the cultural implications to explain the reality of autism representation in the media discourse, as CPE analysts with a critical realism ontology usually do. I also use medical research findings on autism as the scientific baseline from which to critique the media texts, especially in case of misinformation and disinformation. Concurrently, I stand in the epistemological shoes of social constructionism to examine how individual and institutional agents construct autism in the online news media discourse of Vietnam. In short, this thesis deploys critical realism when distinguishing between knowledge and reality and at the same time acknowledges how social structures and human agency impact discursive practice.

2.3. Ideologies, power relations and hegemony

Ideologies are given critical importance in this thesis because of their capacity to constitute societal power relations. The thesis draws on the tradition of media and communication research where the study of ideologies is seen as a "master signifier of critique" (Phelan, 2016, p. 274). Crossley (2004) has drawn on Althusser to describe ideologies as constructions of reality which are driven by the purpose of production, reproduction and potential transformation of domination. As such, the interaction between ideologies and power is integral and inseparable. In Althusser's problematization, ideologies construct an "obviousness *as* obviousness", while at the same time ideologies lead to "the necessary *misrecognition* of social reality, as the production of obviousness and normality covers over the ultimate contingency of social existence" (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 118).

Burr (2015) endorses Althusser's emphasis that "ideology is 'lived experience', bringing a phenomenological dimension to the concept" (p. 98). Ideology is present in every human activity, in "not only what we think, but what we think about, what we feel, how we behave, and the pattern of all our social relationships" and in many ways, people are manipulated and controlled by ideology (p. 98). Because discourses are "systems of meaning, ways of representing ourselves and our social world, which constitute not only what we think and say, but what we feel and desire and what we do", discourses can be viewed as the ground for ideology to be deployed, "in the service of power and in the interests of the relatively powerful groups in society" (p. 100).

Understandably, power is a vital keyword in the study of media representation because it embodies agents' capability to control society and its members. Conflicts and power struggles are inevitable in social life because agents are constantly trying to establish "whose concepts will be valid and who will consequently have the power to define reality" (Danermark et al., 2005, p. 29). Matheson (2008) argues "[d]iscourse analysts should not […] look at texts as the marks of power but instead at the political contestation for meaning as a process of making power" (p. 21). The popular saying "History is written by the victor" well illustrates the above. Crossley (2004) quotes Max Weber to suggest power can be demonstrated in the way that certain social actors have the ability to act upon their own will, regardless of the resistance from others in the same social settings.

Crossley (2004) summarizes Foucault's contrasting of sovereign power with disciplinary power, or what might be conceptualised as coercion versus consent. Sovereign power is mobilized by the state to punish and coerce people at varying levels, while disciplinary power is exercised to make sure people abide by the rule of laws via self-control, or spontaneously align with common sense and the will of assumed experts. According to Foucault, disciplinary power is much more efficient than sovereign power in its controlling capacity.

According to van Dijk (2008), dominance is a form of social power abuse, through legal or moral articulation, which leads to social inequality: “Power is based on privileged access to valued social resources, such as wealth, jobs, status, or indeed, preferential access to public discourse and communication” (p. 66). Both “power and dominance are often institutionalised, [to enable] effective control and routine forms of power reproduction” (p. 66). In the same argument, Crossley (2004) points out that real social power resides in the positions that individuals hold thanks to their institutional decision-making authority and perceived expertise. Importantly, privileged access to public discourse and media enables those in powerful positions to promulgate ideologies in favour of their interests, and again consolidate their domination (Hall, Clarke, Critcher, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1978).

Similarly, hegemony is a fundamental concept in the interpretation and explanation of ideologies and power relations in the CDA tradition. Gramsci’s conceptualization of hegemony is his most significant theoretical contribution. Hegemony in Hall’s interpretation is “accomplished, not without the due measure of legal and legitimate compulsion, but principally by means of winning the active consent of those classes and groups who were subordinated within it” (Hall, 2005, p. 138). Hegemony, in the view of Crossley (2004), needs to be earned and maintained by the dominant. According to Matheson (2005), hegemony is about the contestation over whose way of meaning making and persuasion gains primacy as a tenet of social life. As such, language and other semiotic forms act as tools for enacting power struggles in society (p. 6).

To secure domination, Gramsci argues the ruling class has to exercise its intellectual and moral leadership by winning “the hearts and minds of the people” and making them believe that the status quo is natural, obvious, justifiable and beneficial for all (Crossley, 2004, p. 94). In other words, ruling elites must connect with “already existing organic cultural configurations to create a sense of naturalness and inevitability to (historical and contingent) situations of domination” (p. 95). Even though power is not always a bad thing, van Dijk (2008) asserts that power is often enacted and naturalized to the extent that it is not questioned.

In chapters 3 and 4, I will elaborate on how the ruling class do not actually win the hearts and minds of the media and lay people in Vietnam. Hegemony in Vietnam is an ambivalent and somehow forced compliance, whether in media discourse or in any other public sphere. In the scope of this research, I am interested in finding out how state officials, media practitioners, service providers, parents and advocates consciously or unconsciously adopt the ideologies that disadvantage individuals with autism in their media comments about autism. In this way, these stakeholders compromise with the status quo of social injustice toward the ones who are discriminated against and marginalized. I am interested in understanding and explaining the social power relations in a country single-handedly ruled by a Communist Party with severely constrained democratic rights and freedoms. I will examine

if understanding the interplay of ideologies and power relations in Vietnam could suggest ways to advocate for social changes and activism as envisioned by CDA scholars.

2.4. Operationalizing cultural political economy analysis

This study draws on the key principles of critical political economy while recognizing the essential importance of the cultural elements that constitute and reproduce discourse. Therefore, the term cultural political economy (CPE) is used as a shorthand for critical political economy with a cultural turn. Political economy is defined as the study of the production, distribution, exchange and consumption of economic values; as well as of the production, distribution, exchange, and exercise of political power; and, how synchronically and diachronically these aspects of social relations and social life are set up and lived out (Graham & Luke, 2011). This thesis will first examine the CPE of Vietnam as a country. In the definition of Australia International Development Agency (AusAID), "[p]olitical economy analysis involves looking at the dynamic interaction between structures, institutions and actors (stakeholders), to understand how decisions are made" (AusAID, 2016, p. 2). In this framework, structures are the enduring elements that change slowly, such as political and economic frameworks, historical legacies, social-cultural context and technological advancement. Analysis reveals how these elements operate, and in whose interests. The rules of the game manifest in the local laws, conventions, traditions and incentives that shape human behaviours. Whereas actors can be either individuals, organisations or civil society groups, analysis should pay attention to how formal and informal institutions connect and the overriding rules of the game. It is important to find out who are the key players in the game, whose behaviour is articulated as "the games within the rules" (AusAID, 2016, pp. 3, 7). This particular study seeks to find out who were visible and vocal in the media discourse and importantly who were assigned the responsibility to address the issues relating to autism.

Similarly, common inquiries into the political economy of the media ask: "How do media relate to power sources in society? Whose interests are represented? Who is represented in media? Who has access to communication resources – and what can they do with them?" (J. Hardy, 2014, p. 14). These inquiries connect to the questions of this study. Hardy's approach is particularly concerned with how communication articulations impact "social justice and emancipation" (p. 3). It investigates how the political and economic structure of media industries impacts the production and distribution of meanings, and "the distribution of symbolic and material resources that enable people to understand, communicate and act in the world" (p. 9). In Hardy's view, political economists should pay due attention to the mechanisms of ownership, finance and revenue generation (including advertising) in media practice, and how the policies and actions of institutional stakeholders influence media behaviour and content (p. 9). Hardy (2014) proposes that critical political economy in media studies should look into the following:

> Communications regulation and the policy process, organisation [or ownership] of media services; financing of media services; organisation and social relations of labour in media and communications; content and outcomes; holistic and integrated concerns on global capitalism, technology, power relations and social movements. (J. Hardy, 2014, pp. 70-71)

In this specific research, I will examine how the interests of individual and institutional stakeholders motivate portrayals of autism, assigning responsibilities, and attributing accountability in the media discourse. After identifying the issues in the media discourse about autism, I will attempt to analyse the political economy drivers behind the issues as well as the social and cultural settings that contribute. The analysis will look closely at relevant structural factors that shape "stakeholder positions"; existing "institutional dysfunctions" that motivate certain behaviours and transitions; and, finally, "stakeholder interests and constellations" as suggested in the political economy framework developed for the World Bank (Fritz, Levy, & Ort, 2014, p. 4).

Going further than traditional political economy, Sum and Jessop (2013) envision the importance of the cultural turn, in which, thematically, the study of cultural phenomena redirects the attention of researchers to areas that political economists have historically not given due importance. The implication is the semiotic and discursive manifestations of the cultural turn provide another way to explain social reality and generate new insights into the social world (p. 73). CPE emphasizes the constitutive "semiotic nature of social relations" (Jessop, 2008, p. 4). Sum and Jessop (2013) propose to "put culture in its place" in political economy, without reducing culture to the status of a supplementary component, in order to understand and explain social reality and political economic phenomena (p. 1). CPE pays attention to the lifeworld aspects, including identities, discourses, work cultures, and the social and cultural embedding of economic processes, instead of being mainly concerned with overall systems like conventional political economy (Sayer, 2001, p. 688).

Sum and Jessop (2013) argue that, ontologically, sense- and meaning-making or semiosis are foundational to society: without semiosis, there is no society. CPE considers not only how texts produce meaning and thereby contribute to the generation of social structure, but also how this meaning-creation is "constrained by emergent, non-semiotic features of social structure as well as by inherently semiotic factors" (p. 154). Or, as Fairclough (2013) explains, "social relations, power, institutions and cultural practices are in part semiotic, they internalize semiosis without being reducible to it" (p. 179). In other words, there is an interdependence between sense- and meaning-making with social practices and social structures.

In short, this study is interested in combining insights from both critical political economy and cultural political economy (CPE). Throughout the thesis, I will discuss how structural settings or the rules of game, as well as cultural legacies, shape the issues and their interaction with other social factors in specific media texts.

2.5. Operationalizing corpus framing analysis

The primary focus of this thesis is the analysis of the representation of autism in the Vietnamese online news media at the qualitative, interpretive and explanatory level. However, the quantitative dimension gives the analysis a useful starting point. Therefore, I will use CFA to quantitatively provide an exploratory overview of the language patterns and broad frames of the media texts, laying the groundwork for the later in-depth CDA.

A corpus was compiled for this corpus framing analysis. A corpus is a large collection of computerized texts, which are collected from real communicative sources (Stubbs, 2001, p. 305). In this case, the corpus is the collection of online news media coverage on the topic of autism in Vietnam from 2006 to 2016. Chapter 5 will discuss how data was collected to make up the corpus for this research and subsequently analyse what emerges from the corpus. Analysis of the corpus is assisted by the computer software WordSmith, to identify the frequency of linguistic occurrences as a proxy for what frames are in use (P. Baker, 2006, pp. 1, 2). Computer-assisted framing analysis based on the operational method of corpus linguistics analysis, text mining or lexicometric analysis has been used and validated by a number of authors (Ghaziani & Ventresca, 2005; Matthes, 2009; M. M. Miller, 1997; M. M. Miller, Andsager, & Riechert, 1998; H. T. Vu, Liu, & Tran, 2019; Wiedemann, 2013). These methods use different software tools to identify the lexical frequency or the themes of texts (P. Baker, 2006) to assist the researchers with different research agendas.

Framing is important in the study of discourse because, conceptually, it offers "a central organising idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events", which directs the dimension of the arguments and illuminates the core of the issue (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 143). In practice, communicators often use news frames either "consciously or unconsciously" to construct and send a message to the audience (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing is defined as the way the media:

> define a problem – determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; diagnose causes – identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgments – evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies – offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

Entman (1993) argues: "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). He underlines the importance of framing "in the exertion of political power" by highlighting the identity of agents or interests that seek to dominate the texts (p. 55); in other words by outlining how frames influence people's perception of the matters at hand. In health and social issues, the media assume the power

to shape how the public view the issues via framing, while at the same time offering possible causes and solutions, therefore contributing to agenda setting for policymakers and the community (Kim & Anne Willis, 2007; Kim, Carvalho, & Davis, 2010). Iyengar (1991) argues that people simplify the events or issues around them to the question of "who is responsible", so as to make sense of them. According to Scheufele (2000), the bottom line of framing is the attribution of responsibilities.

Framing takes place when some aspect of information is made "salient" or more "noticeable, meaningful or memorable to the audience" (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Frames manifest by the presence or absence of certain keywords that "appear consistently in the text to convey thematically consonate meanings across media and time" (Entman as cited in M. M. Miller, 1997, p. 368). Most frames are made up of what they include and also what they omit (Entman, 1993, p. 54). Similarly, Gajevic (2012, p. 146) argues that journalists use a selection of keywords to represent the correlation between the socio-cultural context and the specific topic by putting them together in particular frames and meanings for public judgment. Keywords, concordances and collocations, which may be identified via computer-assisted CFA, can direct the researchers to important themes in a text that may point to the presence of (embedded) discourses or ideologies, laying the ground for more sophisticated analyses of linguistic phenomena (P. Baker, 2004, pp. 347, 348).

In the same vein, Touri and Koteyko (2014) also suggest that with WordSmith software, "the central ideas or emphasis words [may] be extracted empirically rather than personally or experientially, removing some of the subjectivity that human judgment entails" (p. 605). They argue that keyword collection enables the analyst to systematically and efficiently identify the central thematic contents in the text; while at the same time, the concordance function allows the researchers to collect the texts where the frame and equivalent ideology is more likely to be embedded (pp. 601, 605). Touri and Koteyko believe that the software facilitates "a more reliable and valid combination of quantitative and qualitative [investigation]" (p. 605). Because major semantic frequencies are identified inductively in the digital corpus (Wiedemann, 2013, p. 346), the information extraction approaches enable the researchers to bridge the gap between quantitative and qualitative text analysis (p. 332).

CFA has pragmatic advantages over manual content and framing analysis. First, the computation of data into corpus analysis software enables the researcher to form a quick objective overview of the linguistic patterns and content themes in the data set. The researcher does not have to manually break the data into units and code them into a codebook like conventional content and framing analysis. This CFA will ultimately lead to a broad understanding of what frames are dominant or minor. However, it is not able to quantify definitely how many articles use certain frames. Touri and Koteyko (2014) argue that while quantitative analyses like this cannot count the frequency of each frame, but they enable the researcher to estimate the prominent frames based on the frequency and distribution of the keywords' collection, collocations and concordances (p. 611).

As the literature review has pointed out, four common generic framing strategies in public health issues are: (1) episodic frames, also known as personal stories; (2) medical or science frames; (3) thematic, also known as social policy frames; and (4) gain vs loss frames, which suggests the benefits individuals will get if they abide by healthy habits, and the negative consequences if they follow a certain lifestyle (A. E. Holton et al., 2014; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984, 2013; Kang, 2013). The episodic, medical or gain vs loss frames may focus on personal lifestyles to lead to individual solutions, while the social policy or thematic frames seek to draw connections between the particular issue and the wider structure and community, demanding accountability from state institutions and the society on a public health problem (Iyengar, 1996; Kang, 2013; Kang, Gearhart, & Bae, 2010).

Some authors comment that there exists no agreed operational approach to framing analysis (Entman, 1993; Matthes, 2009; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). But others argue that there should not be a consistent framing methodology because researchers articulate various theories with their own pragmatic research objective, to illuminate the multifarious operations between frames and framing effects. Thus, this "paradigmatic diversity has led to a comprehensive view of the framing process, not fragmented findings in isolated research agendas" (D'Angelo, 2002, p. 871). The combination of different theories and methodologies creates a new analytical framework. Or as Glynos and Howarth (2007) put it "social science explanation involves the articulation of different theoretical concepts in a [specific] empirical context" so as to critically explain a problematized phenomenon (p. 180). This study combines CFA with CPE and CDA, satisfying the need for both an overview of data patterns and in-depth qualitative and interpretive analysis.

Various authors have also validated the potential methodological affinities between corpus analysis and interpretive approaches like CDA. P. Baker et al. (2008) suggest, with its objectivity, corpus linguistics approaches can supplement CDA research and offer "a useful methodological synergy" (p. 273). Statistical studies can enable the analyst to detect syntactical patterns of texts which can lead to semantical interpretation (Stubbs, 1994, p. 218). However, P. Baker (2006) also points out how "a concordance analysis is [only] as good as its analysts" because the researchers have to explain why linguistic patterns exist (p. 89).

Current studies of media framing present a gap in the connection between the macro contextual factors shaping a country's culture with the more particular ways the national media frame certain issues. This has been pointed out in a study of media framing of climate change in 45 countries and territories (H. T. Vu et al., 2019). When structural factors are incorporated into framing analysis, researchers are able to explain the framing strategy of the media better (p. 7).

Given the resource and space limitation of the thesis, I have chosen to prioritize the deployment of CDA in analysing the discursive construction of autism within the power relations and ideological atmosphere of Vietnamese online news media. Therefore, I choose this approach of quantitative and

automated CFA, to set the ground for CDA. Partington's metaphor is relevant in this case: it is difficult to require a telescope to provide both panoramic views and micro close-up pictures (as cited in P. Baker, 2006, p. 7). The approach allows me to work with a big volume of data in CFA and still get a close-up review of linguistic details in CDA, the "best of both worlds' scenario" as suggested by Wiedemann (2013, p. 347). This exploratory analysis satisfies the research needs.

2.6. Operationalizing critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been championed by Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk and Ruth Wodak, although CDA analysts admit there is no unified version of CDA (Billig, 2003; Machin & Mayr, 2012). CDA often analyses news texts, speeches, advertisements, school books, etc, to interpret textual strategies that look normal or neutral in the first instance, but which may have ideological implications that attempt to construct the representation of events or persons for different purposes (Machin & Mayr, 2012). With its dialectical relations and understanding of the relationship between discourse and society, CDA puts practical solutions at the centre of its focus, when critique, problematization and explanations of the current state of affairs logically lead to the question about what can be done to change things for the better (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2018, p. 180).

The term *discourse* is both "vogue and vague" (Widdowson, as cited in Meyer, 2001, p. 17) as it is used differently by different authors. This thesis adopts Fairclough's approach in discourse and CDA. According to Fairclough (2013), *discourse* is used in various ways including (1) "meaning making, [or semiosis], as an element of the social process", (2) the language used in a particular social arena or practice, and (3) "a way of construing aspects of the world associated with a particular social perspective" (p. 179). Fairclough (2003) sees discourses as "ways of representing aspects of the world, [both] the processes, relations and structures of the material world, [and] the mental world of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and so forth" (p. 124). Different discourses offer "different perspectives on the world, and they are associated with the different relations people have to the world" (p. 124).

CDA analysts tend to agree that meaning is socially constructed, fluid, and can be posited through the use of interpretive techniques (C. Hardy, Harley, & Phillips, 2004). Generally, CDA tries to examine the way that reality is produced (C. Hardy et al., 2004), with its qualitative and inductive approaches (Neuendorf, 2004). CDA aims to reach beyond the goal of describing linguistic features in detail, by also focusing on how and why these linguistic features are produced and for what ideological ends (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 5).

According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), CDA analysts seek to better capture the interrelationship between language, power and ideology, and especially to draw out and describe the practices in and behind texts that reveal political and ideological intentions (p. 258). Machin and Mayr (2012) suggest

that CDA does not focus on language use in itself, but on the interactive impact of language and wider social, political and cultural process (p. 4).

Stuart Hall (1997) shares the view that meanings contribute to regulating our actions and practices, and therefore formulate the rules, norms and conventions of the social life. For this reason, those who wish to control the mind and behaviours of others attempt to shape meanings (p. 4). Here CDA builds on the insight of cultural studies to explain the politics of social practices and relations. In Hall's argument, representation involves the active labour of *making things mean*, which he also conceptualises as a "signifying practice" where the media are signifying agents, defining what qualifies as real (Hall, 2005, p. 119). Hall suggests the key critical question is: which meanings are systematically and frequently constructed around the particular social phenomenon? Because meaning is constructed, the same event can generate different kinds of meanings. Thus, so as to gain acceptability and social currency, a meaning has to gain some sort of "credibility, legitimacy or taken-for-grantedness for itself", which in turn contributes to "marginalizing, down-grading or de-legitimating alternative constructions" (p. 122). But the "struggle over meaning" is not only about which ideological position is signified but also about who has access to the very means of signification, and whose statements have the power of representativeness and authority to set the scene for an argument (p. 134). Informed by this understanding of media discourse, my three research questions will work toward interpreting and explaining this struggle for meaning-making and power relations.

Similarly, Philo (2007) is interested in how language is connected to wider social processes and how communications between individuals maintain the cause and effect relationship with social conflicts and divisions. In that dynamic, language and definitions are deployed in a battle between competing groups; "a contested space [where] not all of those in the contest are of equal power" (p. 181). He also points out the limitations of narrow text-based analysis:

> In essence, I have suggested that discourse analysis which remains text-based encounters a series of problems specifically in its ability to show: (1) the origins of competing discourses and how they relate to different social interests; (2) the diversity of social accounts compared to what is present (and absent) in a specific text; (3) the impact of external factors such as professional ideologies on the manner in which the discourses are represented; and (4) what the text actually means to different parts of the audience. (Philo, 2007, p. 185)

Indeed, the deployment of textual and contextual analysis helps analysts to see things beyond the texts and explain the underlying implications. Similarly, Fairclough (1995) points out how analysis of the language of media texts can address three sets of inquiries about media output:

> How is the world (events, relationships, etc.) represented?; what identities are set up for those involved in the programme or story (reporters, audiences, third parties referred to or

> interviewed)?; and what relationships are set up between those involved (e.g. reporter-audience, expert-audience or politician-audience relationships)? (Fairclough, 1995, p. 5)

In Fairclough's opinion (1995), representations, identities and relationships suggest particular ways of representing the social event or phenomena, portrayals of social identities (for example, how scientific experts are asserting their voices and opinions to shape social reality in the media), and particular constructions of social relations (like the relations between state officials and citizens or between journalists and their audience) (p. 12). When analysing the media discourse in a country like Vietnam in which media is considered as the "mouthpiece" of the ruling Communist Party, I anticipate that the impact of ideologies on media discourse might be even more dominant and sweeping.

The "tensions and contradictions" in representation are demonstrated in the "heterogeneity of textual meanings" and forms (Fairclough, 1995, p. 15). Analysis of texts can illuminate the particular mechanisms through which social conflicts form and are lived out and discursively articulated (p. 15). Locke (2004) emphasizes that analysis needs to centre on the potential social effects of the meanings of a text. Analysts attempt to connect the micro-level dimensions of a particular text with the macro political, economic and sociocultural contexts. They seek to map the interdiscursive and intertextual relations of one text with others. In this study, I will point out the dynamics of intertextuality, or how certain texts have a long-lasting impact on subsequent texts in terms of the ideologies and framing that they adopt. As Matheson (2005) explains, all meanings will fulfill their mission "by the way they draw intertextually on what others have said before them" (p. 46). To analyse intertextuality is to inquire into how we can draw on other texts to understand a text in front of us, and "what the social and cultural power of those texts is and how they are articulated with the text we are studying" (p. 47). In this thesis, I will also be concerned with interdiscursivity (the links between different discourses and discursive forms), or how different genres of texts such as legal documents, official discourse and media coverage exhibit synergies or disparities in their social processes and practices, as suggested by Fairclough (2005, p. 920).

According to Fairclough (1995), CDA tends to analyse a relatively small number of texts in detail, and this has certain advantages in comparison with other analytical approaches. The close analysis of texts potentially covers vocabulary choice and semantics, the grammar of sentences and the cohesion of text. Fairclough (1995) suggests "the authors [of a text] can select amongst available language forms, from the lexical and grammatical options: one word instead of another, or one grammatical structure rather than another" (p. 18). These choices formulate meaning options; representation of a specific event or situation, how to relate to the audience, and what identities to project. Fairclough (1995) suggests that such a perspective on texts urges analysts to go beyond what is explicitly presented, and to look for implicit meanings or absences from the texts - including the choices that are not made.

At the same time, Fairclough (1995) emphasizes that the primary focus of CDA should be on how wider society and culture reflect and manifest their changes in media discourse practices. He holds that "texts are socio-culturally shaped, but they also constitute society and culture, in ways which may be transformative as well as reproductive" (pp. 33, 34). The advantages of combining political economy with CDA have been endorsed by various authors (Fairclough, 2017; Graham & Luke, 2011; Phelan, 2017; Philo, 2007). This approach aligns with the suggestion by Graham and Luke (2011) that critical discourse studies and the political economy of communication can effectively complement each other to unpack the dynamics of political economic relations, their historical makeup, and their implications. So far, I have discussed the different theoretical and methodological approaches that this thesis mobilizes. I sum up the analytical structure of this thesis in the diagram in Figure 1.

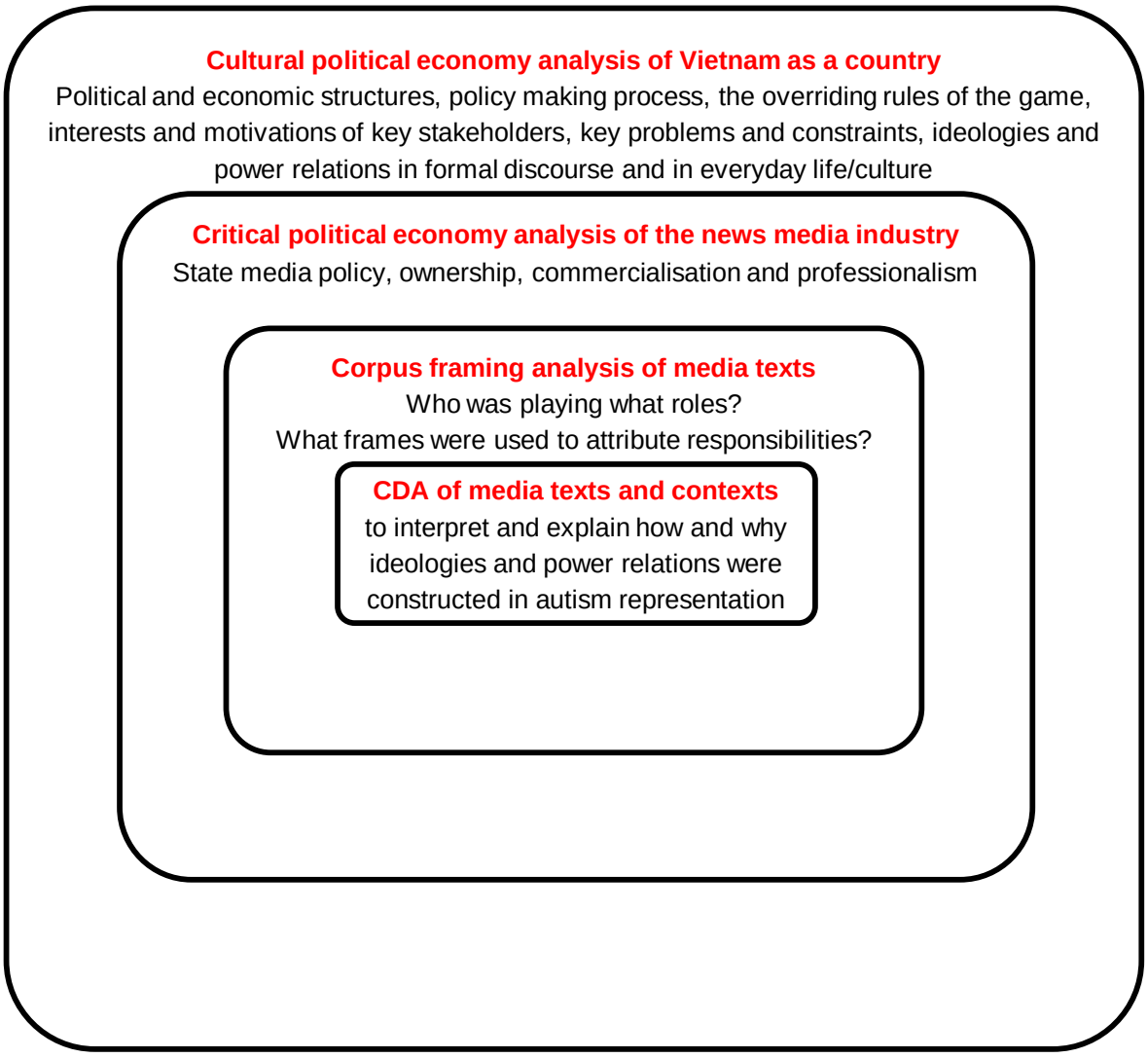

Figure 1: The research theoretical and methodological framework, adapted from Fairclough (1995, p. 58) with reference to Sum and Jessop (2013), AusAID (2016) and Hardy (2014)

The diagram visually demonstrates how the different contexts and texts are analysed. This framework is adapted from Fairclough (1995, p. 58) with references to Sum and Jessop (2013), AusAID (2016) and Hardy (2014). I add to Fairclough's framework (1995) an additional layer of corpus framing analysis before the close-up text analysis. Accordingly, the thesis will proceed from analysing the macro level of the political economy of Vietnam as a country and its cultural settings, to analysing the critical political economy of the media industry, which necessitates the discussion in chapters 3 and 4. The thesis will then analyse media texts in their professional media practice and macro contexts, which will correspond to chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8. When the ideologies and power relations discernible in media discourses are conceptualised though this complex context-text dynamic, their implications can be interpreted and explained more thoroughly and insightfully.

2.7. Objectivity or advocacy?

Critics often criticize CDA for its subjectivity. Meyer (2001) acknowledges that absolute objectivity is not achievable by means of CDA when it aims to unpack "the discursive aspects of societal disparities and inequalities" (p. 30). CDA analysts most of the time take the side of the underprivileged and try to unveil the linguistic means that the privileged use to justify or worsen inequalities (p. 30). Similarly, Teun van Dijk (2001) claims that CDA is critical scholarship which stands up for the best interests of dominated groups and endorses their contestation of inequality. CDA scholars work in "solidarity with the oppressed with an attitude of opposition and dissent against those who abuse text and talk in order to establish, confirm or legitimize their abuse of power" (p. 96). Teun van Dijk (1997) argues that critical discourse analysts may try to abide by objectivity rules, as required by the norms of good scholarship. However, he states: "critical scholars make their social and political position explicit; they actively participate in order to uncover, demystify or otherwise challenge dominance with their discourse analyses" (p. 22). Critical discourse analysts do not only present the connection between discourse and societal structures, but also aim to be *"agents of change"* for those who are marginalized the most when "the ultimate goal of analysis is not only scientific but also social and political, namely *change"* (p. 23).

Notably, Fairclough and Fairclough (2018) hold that CDA ethical critique often emphasizes political values, including "justice, equality and liberty" (p. 169). They agree that once CDA is concerned about the "wrongs" in social political life, such as "injustice, unfairness, discrimination, domination", CDA steer toward advocacy (it aims to right certain "wrongs" in social life) and it is partisan (it endorses a better position for people who are disadvantaged the most from such "wrongs" (p. 169). Fairclough and Fairclough (2018) argue that CDA aims to "speak truth to power", and be genuinely critical and open-minded (p. 170).

Fairclough (2017) emphasizes the objective of CDA is not only to critique problems and to explain the roots of those problems, but also to change "for the better". Academic normative critique alone

cannot change reality, but it can contribute to understanding and knowledge about the current state of affairs and explain their causes (p. 13). As such, CDA practical argumentation moves from problems to solutions (p. 16), because the problematization of the social reality and explanation of their causes can suggest ways to correct the wrongs.

Fairclough's "integration of critique, explanation and action" with the argumentative turn is a relatively recent academic development (Fairclough, 2017, p. 19). The argumentative turn in CDA is a response to criticism that CDA only attempts to justify its conclusions and solutions in line with the analysts' political "biases" (p. 19). By explicitly highlighting its own argumentative logic, "CDA makes it clear that its objectives are critical, explanatory and transformative but not justificatory", and also how its proposals for actions can be critically evaluated in the light of their potential impact (p. 19).

With CDA's orientation to advocacy of political changes and social solutions and its turn to argumentation, I acknowledge that my personal circumstances, professional connections and community engagement with autism issues inform my approach in this project. At the same time, my own personal entanglement in the issue of autism does not renounce my need to analyse the topic in a way that adheres to the conventions of good scholarship.

2.8. Conclusion

This thesis merges critical realism and social constructionism in an effort to build on a realist position that illuminates the working of structures, and at the same time to draw on a constructionist standpoint that acknowledges agency, activism and social engagement. Accordingly, the three main methodological approaches of CFA, CPE and CDA build upon each other to construct the balanced account of research. By combining CFA and CDA, I can take advantage of quantitative and qualitative methods, while combining CPE and CDA allows me to grasp the context-text dialectic. These three synergized methodological approaches also match structural insights with textual meanings to reveal ideologies, power relations and their discursive implications. They will help me grasp the interplay between the contexts of the media practice and illuminate what was manifested in media texts.

3. Chapter 3: Vietnam's political economy and cultural perception on disability

3.1. Introduction

As mentioned in chapter 1, autism was not visible in any legal document in Vietnam (Ha, Whittaker, Whittaker, & Rodger, 2014, p. 484; Van Cong et al., 2015) until January 2019. Advocacy groups have been working over the last decade to have autism recognized as a disability so that people with autism can benefit from integration policies and universal rights, as stiputated in the Law of Persons with Disability 2010 (Vietnam National Assembly, 2010) and other related laws.

Hence, to understand the context of autism's media representation, this chapter will unpack the structural problems and constraints or the overriding rules of the game in the country that contextually impact how the media have internalized and reproduced the mainstream and everyday ideological representation of disabilities. This chapter explains how the history of the country shapes the political and economic structures and power relations, how the public is engaged in policy making and monitoring, and how the key stakeholders in the country pursue their interests within the rules of the game (AusAID, 2016; UNDP, 2012). At the level of disability discourse, the chapter aims to identify the dynamic between policy and enforcement as well as how different interest groups seek to influence policy, and the result of their endeavours (Booth et al., 2009).

3.2. Overview of the political economy of Vietnam

In the late 19th and the first three-quarters of the 20th century, Vietnam underwent three major continuous wars with French colonization, Japanese occupation and American intervention, not to mention Vietnam's military involvement in Cambodia and the war against China's invasion of Vietnam's northern border in the late 1970s. After re-unifying the country by military means in 1975, the Vietnamese Communist Party has been single-handedly ruling the nation ever since. It first adopted a centrally planned economy in a one party political regime, which tolerated "no dissent, monopolizing all political power and decision making" (Abuza, 2001, p. 1). Though its members comprise only 3% of the population, the Communist Party proclaims that it alone represents the interest of all Vietnamese people. The 1980 Socialist Republic of Vietnam Constitution made the Vietnamese Communist Party "the sole force leading the state and society" (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1981, pp. 19-20). It is the Party that sets major lines and policies, appoints its members as personnel of the state organs, imposes ideological teaching on the public and leads them to carry out party resolutions (Porter, 1993, p. 65). The Party in a way "colonize[s] the machinery of government" (Shanks, Luttrell, Conway, Loi, & Ladinsky, 2004, p. 23), where Marxism-Leninism dogma is just "feudalism in disguise" (Ha Si Phu, as cited in Abuza, 2001, p. 114). Elections at different levels select those who have been prescreened and selected by the Communist Party (Kerkvliet, 2001; E. J. Malesky, 2014; Shanks et al., 2004). According to Hoàng Minh Chính, at times, approximately 93% to 97% of the National Assembly members are Communist Party members, so the National Assembly

itself belongs to the Party, and does not represent the people (Abuza, 2001, p. 97; Vasavakul, 2014). Members of the National Assembly generally do not experience any strong pressure to stand up for citizens' benefits or public interests so that they can be re-elected by voters. The small number of independent candidates running for the National Assembly cannot politically contest Party orthodoxy or raise major political debates to challenge the Party's structures and lines; hence, their performance in representing voters' interest is limited and symbolic rather than substantive (Rodan & Hughes, 2014, p. 100). Thus the National Assembly remains mostly a "rubber stamp" for the Communist Party's decisions (Abuza, 2001, p. 2; Porter, 1993, p. 73; Shanks et al., 2004). The top levels of the Party-State usually predetermine who will be appointed to the heads of local administrations, and elections at the local levels are just symbolic events to officially approve the upper authorities' personnel decisions (Koh, 2001a; Vasavakul, 2014). The Party-State's resistance to significant political and economic liberalization in the late 1970s and early 1980s led to ineffective policymaking on many issues, and an inability to respond administratively to popular needs (Porter, 1993, p. 64). The conservation of the centrally planned economy also led to corruption, abuse of power, authoritarianism, and economic mismanagement by a stagnant, self-sustaining political apparatus (Abuza, 2001, p. 5). The legacy of the centrally planned economy of the 1970s and early 1980s has a profound impact on not only the political and economic realms but also the social and cultural aspects of life in the country.

In 1986, in an attempt to regain its legitimacy after the economic crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Vietnam Communist Party launched Đổi Mới or Reform to lead the country into the "socialist-oriented market economy", even though it refused to make any significant political reshuffle (Abuza, 2001; Dixon, 2003; Porter, 1993; Shanks et al., 2004). Reform, also known as Renovation, is often written with a capital letter, using a generic noun as a title for a specific political project. The intention of the Vietnamese Communist Party, like its role model in China, was and is to embed capitalist rationality in an authoritarian political structure, where the Communist Party still holds on to its dominant monopoly and the State maintains ownership of critical means of production and infrastructure (Dixon, 2003; Fahey, 1997).

The Vietnamese Communist Party survived through the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. B. Kerkvliet, Chan, and Unger (1998) suggest Communism persists in Vietnam and China because, critically, the economies of these two countries were at a different stage of development. Only a minority of the population were working in the state-owned organisations in the cities and covered by the state regime, while farmers in the rural areas were still relatively self-reliant. The rural family economies in Vietnam and China could still get by with labour-intensive manual farming, and farmers' lives were not as tightly bound to the "command economy" as the majority of citizens in European Communist countries (p. 4). Importantly, the two Asian countries are heavily influenced by Confucianism, which shares common autocratic and authoritarian values with

Communism. In addition, these two Asian countries did not have any "historical legacy of political democracy" like Central and Eastern Europe countries before Communism (p. 5). So, these Asian socialist countries have travelled with their own trajectory in the economic transition after Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe. The relationship of the Party, Government, National Assembly and local administrations continues to evolve (Shanks et al., 2004), but the Communist Party remains pervasive, supreme and central in the policymaking process (Kerkvliet, 2001).

In 1994, the U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam was lifted. From the 1990s onwards, international organisations like the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank, World Health Organisation as well as other bilateral donors, international non-governmental organisations and multinational corporations started to set up offices and operations in Vietnam. Vietnam was admitted to the World Trade Organisation in 2007. Despite extensive engagement with 50 international organisations, the Party-State in Vietnam persists in its "underlying political philosophy and many of its practices" (Gainsborough, 2010, p. 476). Nevertheless, the Party-State of Vietnam has been executing deregulation, decentralization, privatization and marketization, which indicates a move toward neoliberalization (Schwenkel & Leshkowich, 2012; Thiem, 2015). However, these processes are formally termed as the transition toward "socialist-oriented market economy" and administrative governance reform, rather than neoliberalization. Vietnamese scholars have not even agreed how to translate the term *neoliberalism,* and it is not a recognized concept among the public (Harms, 2012*),* even though such terms as *market economy* or *capitalism* are popular.

Speaking of the Western context, Phelan and Dawes (2018) define neoliberalism as "a particular regime of liberalism, capitalism, and democracy that has been globalized since the 1970s" (p. 1). Neoliberalism is associated with the "active state promotion of market and competition principles" that are seen as "antithetical to democracy" in critics' views (p. 1). Neoliberalism is also criticised "for subordinating public life to market forces and for displacing the welfare state commitments" (p. 2). Instead of having the state plan "against the market", neoliberalism institutionalizes a state order "that supports market norms, practices and subjectivities" (Phelan and Dawes, 2018, p. 11). Since the goal to favour *the market* becomes paramount, the role of the state is to act as the market's "enabler" (p. 13). Critics point out that neoliberalism is a political project for rethinking the state and that it is reductionist to describe neoliberalism through a simple "market/state dichotomy" (Phelan, 2017). Even in 1978, Foucault theorized that neoliberals are motivated by the expectation to make the state "an agent of market rationality, in contrast to a philosophy of laissez-faire liberalism" (Phelan, 2017). Even though neoliberalism is often represented as a monolithic ideology, Phelan and Dawes (2018) stress the heterogeneous nature of neoliberalism. It signifies "a cultural formation and ideology that escapes easy definition," because it will adjust in accordance with the political context and fit in with other political ideologies and discourses (p. 13).

Given its heterogeneity, neoliberalism makes its way into the Vietnamese political and economic life in a uniquely localized way. However, various authors have refrained from associating Vietnam's political economic transition with neoliberalization (Masina, 2012; Painter, 2005; Schwenkel & Leshkowich, 2012). Painter (2005) shares the view that Vietnam's development strategies are basically structured by selective adoption of particular neoliberal reforms, which must be contextualized with the intention of the Party-State to consolidate its authority while growing state-business alliances and responding to the pressures from overseas development donors (p. 263). Similarly, Rodan and Hughes (2014) make the point that decentralization in Vietnam is an alternative to socialist control and principles of democratic centralism. In principle, decentralization should come with enhanced accountability (p. 100), but in the context of Vietnam, this so-called accountability is limited to a narrow range of issues (p. 104). Indeed, redistributing functions to promote greater responsiveness is viewed as a recipe for restoring discipline and centralized direction, rather than undermining it (p. 97). Decentralization in Vietnam is motivated by the Party's interests and self-legitimizing efforts, rather than by public interests. With the views presented above, scholars seem to make a distinction between the Vietnam Communist Party's ambition to maintain control of both politics and economy in contrast to the "invisible hand" or "laissez-faire" philosophy (A. Smith, 2010a, 2010b), rather than in contrast to "neoliberalism" as such.

Thiem (2015) argues that the Reform project, based on selective adoption of neoliberal logics in Vietnam, has been "uneven, exceptional, novel and problematic" (p. 99). The state of Vietnam does not show willingness to shift to a complete new political vision but maintains its orthodox doctrine in "novel recombinations and rearrangements" (p. 99). Like other observers who state that Vietnam's Reform project is gradualist (E. Malesky & London, 2014; Pip Nicholson & Gillespie, 2005), Thiem (2015) maintains that "the emergent mode of governmentality in Vietnam involves evolutional continuity more than revolutionary change" (p. 99). Lay people in Vietnam often express this idea with the proverb "bình mới, rượu cũ" [new jar, old wine].

Vietnam has made considerable progress in economic development over the last 30 years, transforming from one of the world's poorest nations to a lower middle-income country (World Bank, 2017). The GDP per capita growth in the 1990s and 2000s was among the fastest in the world, averaging 6.4% a year in the 2000s, and poverty reduction programs helped 40 million people escape poverty over the course of two decades, bringing the poverty percentage down from 60% of the population in 1993 to 13.5% in 2014 (World Bank, 2017). Various authors have pointed out that market mechanisms and free trade have enabled Vietnamese citizens and the business community to make economic gains, even if, the discourses of privatization have contributed to the moralization of efficiency and self-regulation as civilized personhood (Schwenkel & Leshkowich, 2012, p. 382). This concept of self-regulation will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

In its national economic and political transition, the government's budget for education and training accounted for 20% and health accounted for 8.1% of national expenditure in 2013 (Ministry of Finance, as cited in Save the Children, 2014, p. 36). Even though the Government of Vietnam maintains a considerable portion of the national expenditure for education and healthcare and a system of health insurance is in place for some sections of the population, citizens are expected to be responsible for their own health, education and well-being. Public schools are still subsidized, but autism services are mostly provided by private centres and clinics. Therefore, users have to pay for the service out of their own pockets, without being able to claim for insurance.

The attribution of responsibility to citizens for their own education, healthcare and wellbeing in Vietnam can connect to the concept of responsibilization in capitalist societies, where Brown (2016) suggests citizens are positioned as "responsibilized human capital", to contribute to the health of a firm or nation (p. 9). Responsibilization defines human capacities and autonomy for adaptation or accountability as nominal signs of individual sovereignty. Those who cannot catch up are left behind as losers. They will be blamed for their own weakness, disadvantage or un-competitiveness.

The story of Vietnam over the past few decades provides another perspective on "a unique mode of governmentality" that has challenged "the binary dichotomy between socialism and neoliberalism" (Thiem, 2015, p. 80). Vietnam is comparable in many ways to its role model China, where Harvey (2007) suggests "neoliberalism in the economy was not to be accompanied by any progress in the fields of human, civil or democratic rights" (p. 123). Capitalist rationality is articulated selectively for Vietnam's economic development, which in turn reinforce the Communist Party's legitimacy, but according to Pip Nicholson and Gillespie (2005), the core precepts of socialist authoritarianism remain, including Party sole leadership, state economic management and democratic centralism. Because imported reforms with a foreign logic are not compatible with the underlying social process when the existing political ideology persists, they create a hybrid model, rather than alter socialist precepts (p. 4). Thiem (2015) argues the authoritarian surveillance state still exercises an intimidating practice to circumvent the […] logic of transparency and accountability (p. 96). The economic transformation of Vietnam over the past few decades is significantly down to "a developmental structure", driven by the state (p. 91). But this kind of developmental structure has caused "detrimental effects on the long-term wellbeing of its people" when it is anchored exclusively in economic growth and material achievements "at the expense of social justice" (p. 91). The developmental-state model justifies the state's role as the commander-in-chief of the economy (Masina, 2012). In Thiem's line of argument, as the socialist ideological dogmas cannot sustain the elites' loyalty to the Party, the Party-State has made itself the powerful distributor of all privileges and opportunities, so as to retain opportunistic elites' attachment with its doctrine. In many ways, Vietnamese capitalism marks a clear break from a Westernized coupling of capitalist rationality and liberal democracy, even within the democratic limits of a neoliberal order.

3.3. The merely symbolic participation of civil societies

It is necessary to know the policymaking process in Vietnam to understand why autism has been mostly ignored in the legislative process, and in turn, how that legislative lacuna impacts on media framing and advocates' awareness-building efforts. Various authors suggest that policymaking in Vietnam is mostly a top-down process (Koh, 2001b; Pip Nicholson & Gillespie, 2005). Through its resolutions and directives, the Communist Party sets the policy agenda for all aspects of national life, while the relevant ministries are responsible for drafting legal documents and then submitting them to the National Assembly for approval (Nguyen Ha et al., 2010). Citizens have a chance to be symbolically consulted at the end of the policymaking process, and consultation is often carried out through mass organisations, which are by nature social-political groups, supported and funded by the State (Koh, 2001a; Shanks et al., 2004, p. 26). Koh (2001a) points out this public "consultation process" sets a clear political boundary: that the feedback and inputs from citizens are only taken into account when they are not against the Party-State's orthodox ideologies and interests.

World Bank (2016) ranks regulatory quality in Vietnam at 35.10/100, rule of law at 57.21/100 and voice and accountability extremely low at less than 9.85/100. Masina (2012) holds that the concept of the rule of law as standing above the rule of politics has not been internalized by stakeholders in Vietnam (p. 205). United Nations (2004) describes the rule of law as a principle of governance in which "all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the state itself, are accountable to laws […] which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards" (p. 4). The rule of law requires such principles as "supremacy of law, equality before the law, accountability to the law, fairness in the application of the law, separation of powers, participation in decision-making, legal certainty, avoidance of arbitrariness and procedural and legal transparency" (p. 4). But these principles are not upheld in Vietnam, where laws are not enforced, and equality, accountability, fairness, participation and transparency are all low. Laws exist as instruments of the Party-State to control the citizens, rather than lay the ground for autonomous social interaction, and as such, policy is still used to interpret laws (Pip Nicholson, 2005). Thiem (2014) argues that the endeavour to build a socialist law-based state has reflected dualist thinking by the Communist Party on how to organise state powers. The Party continues to cling to the doctrine of "unity of powers" or concentration of powers, and repudiates the theory of a "check and balance" system (Thiem, 2014).

Civil society organisations often represent civic collective wills in social issues and public interests. In Vietnam, news media outlets are not formally categorized as civil society organisations. There has been a swift emergence of all three distinctive categories of social entities in the country, namely (1) mass organisations, which are state-funded; (2) civil society organisations, which are sometimes partially state funded and managed; and (3) local non-governmental organisations, which are not typically state funded but also closely controlled (Hoang, 2013; Nørlund, 2007). The number of these organisations has increased significantly over the years (VUSTA; Scott & Tran, as cited in Hoang,

2013), however, the growth in the number of social or civil society groups does not necessarily demonstrate their more meaningful role in the policymaking process and social movements.

The mass organisations are often described as the extended arms by which the Communist Party and State reach out and impose supervision and control into different social spheres, to consolidate its power at the grassroots, and to pre-empt any contestations from comparatively autonomous civil society groups (Koh, 2001a). Such organisations exist as "instruments of top-down control, despite paying lip service to be representative of group interests" (Shanks et al., 2004, p. 37). Even though these mass organisations have a large number of members, they are not pursuing a political and social agenda independent of the Party-State's directives.

Civil society organisations in Vietnam often develop from self-help and support groups with some form of advocacy activities. Scholars argue that state-society relations in Vietnam can be better interpreted through the lens of state corporatism theory, rather than with a state-civil society concept in the Western definition (Unger & Chan, as cited in Wells-Dang, 2012). In state corporatism, the state creates a mechanism for various groups to represent their interests and recognizes or licenses only one association per constituency (Wells-Dang, 2012), but "only within strictly prescribed limits" (Shanks et al., 2004, p. 35). In Vietnam, this state corporatism has recently forged a movement toward "xã hội hóa" [socialization] of various aspects of society (Wells-Dang, 2012, p. 6). The state may assign some roles to social constituencies while maintaining overall control over the national agenda (Kerkvliet, 2011, p. 180; Wells-Dang, 2012, p. 5). Therefore, to maintain their registration, civil societies have to work within the administrative lines and power structures drawn by the Party-State.

Hoang (2013) finds that Vietnamese civil society organisations in healthcare focus almost exclusively on providing information and services, including care and treatment, in line with a state-sanctioned "implementer" role (p. S92). Hoang argues that these organisations, therefore, cannot take advantage of the opportunity to act as autonomous "agents for change" by influencing policymaking (p. S92). Wells-Dang (2012) also indicates that civil society organisations in Vietnam have been successful in disseminating health care information, offering services and support, but they have a low profile in advocating on other issues like illness-prevention activities, health insurance and drug quality. In literature examining this issue by other authors, low policy impact is reported in rigid policy environments. Wells-Dang argues, from the Vietnamese civil society side, there is a shortage of skills, capacity, representation and transparency in formulating organisational missions and visions, as well executing action plans in all aspects of their existing and potential activities. From the state authority side, there is a resistance to and lack of recognition of civil society organisations. Advocacy is even considered a potential threat to state power. Nørlund (2007) suggests that, overall, civil society organisations have a low impact in terms of holding the Vietnamese state accountable.

With a top-down policymaking process and largely symbolic engagement of social groups, the interests of different stakeholders cannot be properly upheld. The mechanisms for grassroots level citizens to make their voice heard are constrained. And, importantly, even if they raise their voice, whether the ruling apparatus listens or not is another matter.

3.4. Policy advocacy for autism

In this policy and civil society environment, the Hanoi Club of Families Living with Autism and the Vietnam Autism Network have been advocating for recognition of autism as a disability, so that individuals with autism can be entitled to the support stipulated in the official policies for people with disabilities. In 2002, the first informal autism support group was set up as Hanoi Club of Families Living with Autism (the Hanoi Club for short), in partnership with some special education professionals and doctors at the Special Education Department of the National University of Education, and the Psychiatric Department of the National Pediatrics Hospital (Hanoi Club of Families Living with Autism, 2007). Eleven years later, in 2013, a workshop was convened to formalize the establishment of Vietnam Autism Network (VAN) as a national autism advocacy organisation. VAN does not stand alone as an independent organisation, but is incorporated into the Vietnam Federation on Disability (VFD), under the management of the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (Asia-Pacific Development Center on Disability, 2013). VAN is mostly a self-funded community organisation (Vietnam Autism Network, 2013), while VFD is a state-supported civil society.

Significant to VAN's mission, as specified in its constitution, is "to contribute to the development and implementation of the government and the Communist Party's policies towards persons with autism" (Asia-Pacific Development Center on Disability, 2013). The Hanoi Club and VAN have organised various seminars to raise awareness of the inclusion needs of individuals with autism. After over a decade of advocacy by the Hanoi Club, and then by VAN, autism was finally recognized as a disability in January 2019 (Vietnam Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs, 2019). VAN is proactive in initiating awareness-building events, policy and media advocacy efforts. However, it is a challenge for VAN to deal with journalists who are often heavily prejudiced. VAN once organised a workshop for journalists about communication on autism, but such workshops may need to run on a more regular basis, otherwise, they will not reach many reporters who write about autism without proper information or knowledge and perspective.

VAN's board members are mostly parents of individuals with autism, working mainly on a volunteer and part-time basis. Hence, VAN's policy advocacy efforts face major capacity and commitment challenges. In a context where the policymaking process is not designed to empower civil society organisations or citizens to have a strong voice in matters of concern, this could explain why policy advocacy for autism has been moving slowly.

3.5. Ideologies and power relations in the formal disability discourse

There are several models of disability that profoundly impact formal policy, media representation as well as lay people's attitude toward people with disabilities. According to Harris and Enfield (2003), the charity model views persons with disabilities as victims of their impairment who need to be pitied and supported. The medical model considers disability to be a personal problem that needs to be cured. Conversely, the social model looks at disability from a totally different perspective, claiming the way society is organised may hinder the livelihood of persons with disabilities (p. 169). The shortcomings of the social structure create discrimination and barriers to inclusion for people with disabilities. The social model builds on the rights-based rationale that focuses on the importance of realizing human rights, including equal opportunities and participation in all aspects of society. The social model argues that the true nature of disability is not wholly due to the individual's functionality, nor his or her impairment, but how the physical and social environments respond to the needs of the individuals and his or her impairment (p. 169). Ultimately, and how the government views disability affects the way the government approaches disability in their social policy development and management (p. 169).

So far, very few authors have investigated the role of ideology and power relations in the disability and healthcare discourse in Vietnam. Xuan Thuy Nguyen and Tine Gammeltoft provide the most systematic discourse analysis in their various publications through the years. Historically, during the French colonial period in Vietnam, the French fostered the view of disability as "a form of deviance" and "a clash with the colonial ideology of civilization" (X. T. Nguyen, 2015, p. 36). Special education was introduced in 1886, establishing the French ideology of humanitarianism, leveraging education as a pathway to civilize the indigenous people (Osbonne, as cited in X. T. Nguyen, 2015, p. 65). X. T. Nguyen (2015) reports that during the Vietnam War, which lasted from 1955 to 1975, many Vietnamese people were exposed to Agent Orange or wounded and disabled by the war; hence, people with disabilities in this period were treated as war victims (p. 38). State authorities in both the North and the South of Vietnam imposed surveillance regime and institutionalized people with disabilities as a means of controlling diseases, while social welfare programs for disabled people aimed at cure, treatment and life skills (p. 38). Disabled people were treated as a source of contamination, especially those with hansen (leprosy), and special camps were created outside of the community to separate people with hansen from people living outside (Ministry of Health, as cited in X. T. Nguyen, 2015). After the war, the Communist government was concerned that cases of trauma, crimes and suicides by psychiatric patients would pose a serious threat to social order; "people with 'mental illness' were seen as 'trouble-makers' and 'social evils' who created 'social problems' in the early stage of the socialist regime" (X. T. Nguyen, 2015, p. 40). X. T. Nguyen laments that people with mental illness were subject to institutionalization because they were viewed as objects of disorder or a dilemma to be erased.

Even though the language of “rights” was formalized in the very first Constitution of the Socialist Republic State in 1948, assessment of individual abilities have been used to restrict Vietnamese citizens’ rights to equality and justify who would be excluded (as cited in X. T. Nguyen, 2015). This statement in the 1948 Constitution is an example: “All Vietnamese citizens are equal before the law and are able to participate in the government and in national construction, depending on their own abilities and virtues” (as cited in X. T. Nguyen, 2015). X. T. Nguyen (2015) argues that by using the conditional phrase “depending on their own abilities and virtues”, the Constitution limits who has the right to participate in politics and social life.

At the dawn of market-based Reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the government made use of the normalization of disabled adults and children as a new managerial mechanism, putting scientific knowledge and neo-eugenic ideology into play (Gammeltoft, 2014; X. T. Nguyen, 2015). One government document stated “congenital defect still threatens severely the lives of the next generation” (Gammeltoft, 2008b, p. 574). By the mid-1990s, Vietnam had one of the highest rates of abortion in the world, due to sex-selection, unplanned pregnancy, and identification of disabilities with pregnancy screening technologies (Gammeltoft, 2014, p. 13). X. T. Nguyen (2015) points out the state authorities consequently justify eugenic discourse as a new technology of government. Medical workers are entitled to advise parents to keep or abort disabled fetuses, using reproductive technologies and biological knowledge for the sake of exclusion. Nationalism promotes a national identity where disability is categorized as the Other in the developmental big picture, with the degenerated, disabled, and abnormal cast as a national shame (p. 46). In her award-winning book *Haunting Images: A Cultural Account of Selective Reproduction in Vietnam,* Gammeltoft (2014) asserts that in an authoritarian country like Vietnam, the state still plays a “biopolitical role” of controlling its citizen bodies in modern forms of governance (p. 41). Official rhetoric suggests that giving birth to and bringing up healthy children are the responsibility of patriotic citizens, because official discourse often reiterates “children are the future of the country” (p. 44).

Views on disability have evolved over the past few decades in many new legal documents and policies in Vietnam: from “being treated as objects of charity, medical services and welfare”, people with disabilities are now generally accepted as citizens with legal rights (USAID, 2013, p. 9). Vietnam has recently passed laws that protect the rights of people with disabilities. The protection is incorporated in the 1989 Law on Protection of People’s Health, the 1991 Law on Universalization of Primary Education, the 2004 Law on Protection, Care and Education of Children, the 2005 Education Law, the 2006 Law on Vocational Training, the 2006 Law on Information Technology, the 2006 Law on Sports and Physical Education, the 2008 Law on In-land Transportation, and the 2010 Law on Persons with Disabilities (G. Phan, 2017, p. 170; Rosenthal, 2009, p. 18).

The Law on Persons with Disabilities (Vietnam National Assembly, 2010) is the major law that is directly related to people with autism, when autism is recognized as a disability. “The Law mandates equal participation in society for people with disabilities through policy facilitation and access to health care, rehabilitation, education, employment, vocational training, cultural services, sports, entertainment, transportation, public places and information technology” (USAID, 2013, p. 9). However, the gap between official policy commitments and reality in the state-market-citizen relationship demonstrates otherwise. “Make the right real” is a call by United Nations (2012) for countries in Asia and the Pacific that recognizes these disconnects. The call connotes the common problem faced by countries like Vietnam: the gap between law and practice can be oceans apart.

It is reported in the Vietnam Household Living and Standards Survey (General Statistics Office, 2006, p. 28) that 15.3% of the Vietnamese population have some form of disability, which is the most recent reliable data available. In the World Report on Disability (World Health Organisation, 2011, p. 7), the average disability prevalence rate globally was 15%. A study jointly conducted in Vietnam by United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in 2013 reveals that out of a total of more than 14 million students under 14 years old, 80% of children with disabilities either never go to school or drop out of school (UNICEF, UNESCO, & MOET, 2013). The “out of school rate” among Vietnamese children with disabilities is 91.4% in the 11-14 years old group. This report concludes that the high rate of children with disabilities out of school is due to many factors, including the lack of teachers with relevant skills, incentives for teachers, inclusion policy, facilities and supportive environments.

For adults with disabilities, a report on disability and housing in Vietnam (United Nations Population Fund, 2009, p. 9) finds that only 76.3% of disabled adults in Vietnam are literate, while the literacy rate among the general population is 95.2%. Another report by Vietnam’s Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (2010) states that most people with disability lack practical skills and only around 21% of them can work, with: only 62% of those 21% generating income from economic activities. 80% of people with disabilities in urban areas and 70% in rural areas live with the support of their families or social allowance. Only 11% of those with disabilities can live independently. Clearly, the statistics reveal the inequality experienced by people with disabilities regarding access to education, employment and income.

X. T. Nguyen (2015, p. 78) points out that tensions between inclusion and exclusion are still evident in the policies and programmes for poverty alleviation, in which some disabled people cannot participate. For example, the poverty alleviation programme aims to support 80% of disabled children by school fees reductions or exemptions, and to offer schooling in different ways to 45% of all disabled children (X. T. Nguyen, 2015, p. 78). X.T. Nguyen suggests this implies that the programme denies

education access to the remaining 55% of disabled children, which means that exclusion is justified and normalized for some particular groups of children.

United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2013) points out the key challenges in the enforcement of the Law on Persons with Disabilities include: a "lack of awareness and dissemination of the policies and the related requirements"; limited multi-sectoral coordination; and "limited capacity of the disability service support system"; as well as the fact that implementation is not monitored or evaluated systematically (p. 10). Shanks et al. (2004) suggest that because all major policy decisions passed at the national level are further adapted at provincial/city level with local implementation guidelines, "there are significant regional contextual variations in many sectors that strongly influence policy interpretations and outcomes at the provincial level and below" (pp. vii, ix). Koh (2001a) also acknowledges that, while the Party-State may hold the upper hand in critical issues, the local administration and people often find ways to evade the laws in others (p. 282).

X. T. Nguyen (2015) asserts that inclusion for people with disability in Vietnam has been structured mainly by a social development agenda, where facilitation of individuals with disabilities is offered as a means for them to participate in the labour market (p. 111). According to X. T. Nguyen (2015), there is an illusion that Vietnam is already inclusive, even though local authorities and professionals often use their power to re-constitute "silent exclusion" (p. 169). Given that integration policies are officially supported at central government level, resistance at the local level is real (Villa et al., 2003). This exclusion is even more serious for individuals with autism.

In principle, healthcare, education, employment, welfare and other aspects of life of individuals with autism should be subject to the Law on Persons with Disabilities and related laws, from the day they became effective. However, the absence of autism from legal documents has meant that institutional stakeholders and the media do not have a clear baseline with which to associate autism with. Instead, they stumble between different identities and ideologies, old and new, to define autism.

3.6. Ideologies on disability and autism in everyday life and culture

As discussed in the previous section, policies play a big role in forming ideologies and exercising power toward individuals with disabilities, which translates into everyday cultural attitudes and social behaviours and vice versa. The line between official ideologies and cultural perception is thin as they emerge and dialectically build upon each other. Cultural perceptions of disability in general, and autism in particular, is formed from the dynamic multi-directional interaction between all major stakeholders in the society. This section highlights the general stigma and discrimination toward disabilities in Vietnam and explains why stigma and discrimination take the form they do, by highlighting deep-rooted cultural perspectives.

Duong, Hong, and Vinh (2008) conducted research on disability and cultural perception for the

Vietnam Institute for Social Development Studies. The study surveyed 4,826 households living with disabilities and 3,242 households without members with disabilities, in Thai Binh, Quang Nam-Da Nang and Dong Nai provinces, located in three different regions of Vietnam. They observe that most people, including those in public administration, tend to hold the view that people with disabilities do not have the capacity to significantly take part in and contribute to the social and economic mainstream. Duong et al. (2008) cite the government as recognizing the importance of addressing stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities. The authors argue that stigma is the direct cause of the marginalization of people with disabilities by excluding them from communal political, economic, social and cultural activities, leading to widespread unemployment and low education among this group. However, it is not at all easy to convert long-held perceptions and attitudes in a society without commitment and efforts from all sectors, institutions and actors.

Duong et al. (2008) find 56% to 65% of the community respondents in different provinces believe that disability is a destined "fate". Similarly, 15% to 21% respondents in Duong et al.'s study even think that people with disabilities are "paying the 'price' for 'bad things' they or their family members did in their 'previous life'" (p. 83). People with mental disabilities are subject to the strongest stigma because, under the understanding of the localized version of Buddhism, they are believed to be connected to evil spirits (Hunt, as cited in Duong et al., 2008). Between 54% and 63% of respondents in the survey by Duong et al. (2008) do not think that people with mental health issues should take part in social activities since they do not have the mental capacity to meaningfully contribute.

Ha et al. (2014) observe that in Vietnam autism is often confused with schizophrenia, madness, and linked with such stereotypes as "eating dirty food, transgressing social norms, and institutionalization" (p. 281). Given the distinctive challenges of autism compared with other disabilities, parents of children with autism report additional difficulties in approaching both public and private schools to enrol their children, with such reasons given by the schools as "the school time schedule does not fit with the child's needs", "the school does not have sufficient teachers", or "there are already enough students in the classroom", and sometimes bribes are expected to accept children (Ha et al., 2014, p. 281). The same report by Ha et al. (2014) points out even if they are present at school, children with autism are not fully included in school activities because public schools are often overloaded with 40 to 60 students per class. It is evident that lack of capacity has been used as an excuse for exclusion. In the school environment, 57% of parents whose children with autism go to school in Ha et al.'s survey report that their child is being bullied in school. The most common forms of bullying are being intentionally "left out of activities (85%), being teased or made fun of (47%), being called bad names (34%), having rumours or lies spread about them (36%), having things stolen by others (36%) and being pushed or shoved (34%)" (p. 282).

Foucault points out how the constitution of the self is not something spontaneously invented by the individual, but self- perception is instead formed by what is modelled or imposed upon the individual by culture and society as well as the social group that he/she belongs to (Gammeltoft, 2014, p. 41). Matheson (2005) also points to Foucault's idea that discourse puts people into "subject positions", where their "modes of thought", "senses of self" and "subjectivities" emerge and present themselves under the norms of discursive power (p. 61). In Matheson's interpretation of Marx' concept, "consciousness does not determine social being, but quite the reverse"; people develop their "senses of self" in accord with how the dominant social actors want them to see themselves, in what Marx calls "false consciousness" (p. 58).

In Vietnam, stigma from the outside world is internalized by the family and individuals with disabilities themselves. Duong et al. (2008) find that half of the people with disabilities in Thai Binh have self-stigma, while the rate in Quang Nam-Da Nang is around 20% and Dong Nai is around 30%. Many of them do not think they have equal rights with others in education, social participation, employment, marriage and childbearing. Among people with disability, 60% to 77% did not even know about the existing legal documents defining their rights, let alone requesting for those rights to be materialized.

There are many cultural underpinnings behind the stigma and discrimination directed at people with disabilities in general and individuals with autism in particular. The Vietnamese version of Buddhist concepts is often used to explain the perception. Buddhism teaches people to live a kind and nice life because that has a consequence in the current and next life as karma. Those who do wrongs or commit sins will suffer afterwards or their offspring have to suffer an illness, disability or bad luck as a punishment (Duong et al., 2008). The intimate connections between the lives of children and the "moral habitus" of their parents are expressed in such proverbs as those quoted by Gammeltoft (2008a, p. 834): "Đời cha ăn mặn, đời con khát nước, đời cháu phải tội" [If the father eats salty foods in his lifetime, his children will be subject to thirst, and his grandchildren will suffer bad luck] or "phúc đức tại mẫu" [Luck, happiness and virtue depend on the mother]. Gammeltoft (2008a) recounts parents' feeling that their child's disorder throws into doubt their entire family's moral standing (p. 834). In Ha et al. (2014) study, though a number of parents of children with autism do not believe in karma, many have experienced discrimination due to others' belief in karma.

In addition to Buddhist concepts, Confucian values play a significant role in the cultural conception of disability. The Confucianism ideology which flowed in from China has been practised for centuries in Vietnam and is also hierarchical in its conception of social relations (Huy, 1998; McHale, 2004; Porter, 1993; Slote & De Vos, 1998; Woodside, 1998). Absolute loyalty and submission are paid to the king or authority, be it teachers, doctors or older people in the family and society. In contemporary Vietnamese political and cultural life, the influence of Confucian ideals reinforces a particular set of hegemonic power relations between policymakers, professionals, journalists and lay people. Those

with state authority assume authoritarian power because of a convergence of Confucian teaching and Communism ideology in matters vital to their existence and legitimacy. Those with professional expertise hold power over the people who are dependent on their knowledge and service. Various authors have suggested Confucianism places a big emphasis on “hiếu” [filial piety] (Canda, 2013; Hofstede & Bond, 1988; L. C. Kelley, 2006), in which children uphold the family name, carry on the family tree and build further reputation by means of their success, which is judged by their achievements in education and social life. Offspring are also supposed to care for their parents when they get old, conduct worship for their past ancestors and raise healthy and well-mannered children to continue the family line. When individuals with disabilities cannot fulfil these virtues of filial piety, they are even more stigmatised.

The United Nation Development Program (UNDP, 2015b) in its country report states that Vietnam has achieved universal primary education in its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the country is moving towards universal lower secondary education. According to the MDGs’ report (UNDP, 2015b), one of the big issues that the country needs to deal with nowadays is unequal access to, and disparity in, the quality of education. Educational achievement is limited among the disadvantaged groups, including persons with disabilities. Even though state policies have changed on paper, much more needs to be done to challenge the ideological consequences of these long-held cultural perceptions for different social actors.

3.7. Conclusion

The CPE analysis of Vietnam as a country has revealed that the major rules of the game is still the monopolistic reign of the Communist Party over all the political apparatus, from the Government to the National Assembly and lower administration levels. Political structures from the central to the grass-root levels do not give meaningful space for civil society groups to carry out effective policy advocacy. The top-down policymaking process does not take into serious consideration the people’s voices. Hence, advocacy groups for autism face structural constraints and other practical challenges. Because Vietnam adopts marketization in essential public services, citizens have to take responsibility for their own healthcare, education and wellbeing. While there are public and private schools in the education system, the services for autism are mostly provided by private centres. In that context, professional expertise in autism identification and support in the country is limited.

Ideologies on disability in Vietnamese formal policy structures and popular culture reflect and constitute each other in the past and at present. While legislative policies have been officially embracing more progressive international trends, policy implementation and everyday attitudes have not kept up. This might be because even though various laws have been introduced by means of pressure from international organisations, as expressed in calls for an inclusive approach to individuals with disabilities, those who implement the resulting policies at national and local levels are

not abiding by their overall spirit. Evidence shows that the gap between policy and reality is usually big (X. T. Nguyen, 2015). X. T. Nguyen (2015, pp. 140-141) observes how disability continues to be conceptualized in Vietnam as “a disaster, an accident, a loss of normal function, a malfunction, and an individual struggle to adapt itself back to the ‘normal’ world” (pp. 140, 141). Many of the old traditional ideologies which have been discarded in official policy discourses remain active in everyday life. The cultural political economy analysis in this chapter contextualizes the general discursive construction of autism in Vietnamese policy and everyday life and sets the ground for understanding the manifestation of autism representations in the media.

4. Chapter 4: A critical political economy analysis of Vietnamese news media

4.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the critical political economy of the media industry in Vietnam, informed by the framework developed by J. Hardy (2014). I find it necessary to begin the discussion of media practice and context with state-media relations because the relations shape the nature and development of the media market and profession in the country. In the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, state control comes first, while a commercial media market has only slowly emerged since the 1986 Reforms. In the first half of the chapter, I will look into the Press Law (Vietnam National Assembly, 1989, 1999, 2016) and related media policies, including ownership of the media, to understand why the Vietnamese media favour Party-State interests over the wider public interest. This discussion will highlight the coercive power the state exercises over the media and the arbitrary accountability of the media toward their audience. In the second half of the chapter, I will examine the commercialisation of media, advertising revenue generation and its impact on media practice, the working ethics of media practitioners, as well as the contribution of training and staffing programmes to practical journalistic skills and ethics.

As discussed in chapter 3, to understand the power relations between the Party-State and the media in Vietnam, it is important to examine the concept of hegemony. Gramsci makes a clear distinction between “hegemonic” and “coercive” forms of power: hegemony is earned when one group gains supremacy over others with their consent (Zhang, 2011). Hegemony is the dynamic balance of coercion, bargaining and reciprocity, and Gramsci believes that compared with coercion, bargaining and reciprocity are often more effective forms of domination (p. 18). In the case of Vietnam, observers hold the view that coercion dominates in hardcore taboo issues, while negotiation and reciprocity are allowed in relation to topics that are unlikely to threaten the Party-State legitimacy (Abuza, 2015a; Công Khế, 2014; Elmqvist & Luwarso, 2006; Heng, 2001; Sanko, 2016). Vietnamese authorities give space for the media to raise issues that their audience are concerned about only when they consider it safe to do so. Hence, there is not authentic and consistent negotiation between the media and the State in all the issues that are raised by the media.

The Press Law was amended and approved in 2016, after previous revisions in 1989 and 1999. The previous revisions happened in the context of the newly launched Reform program in 1986 and the demands of the booming economic development of the 1990s. Abuza (2015b) views the Press Law amendment in 2016 as a weapon of a conservative faction of the Communist Party to retain power, against the growing influence of the technocrats in the Party-State apparatus. Technocrats are often known as reformists who favour knowledge, technology and expertise in economic development and governance over the Communist Party’s orthodoxy. Conservatives in 2014 raised the concern that too much decision making in the government apparatus had been taken over by technocrats, away

from the Party's control (Abuza, 2015b). In 2015, the Ministry of Information and Communication announced an intervention with a "media restructuring plan until 2025", in which all print media have to be put under the direct supervision of the Party at the central or provincial level, as a way to recentralize control. The sweeping overhaul would lead to the downsizing of media and the loss of some 10,000 jobs (Abuza, 2015b) out of the existing 35,000 jobs in the market (Doanh Nhan Sai Gon, 2015). Abuza (2015b) argues that this plan is meant to tighten surveillance, as the Party is more and more incapable of maintaining control over the current sheer number of media outlets.

Media outlets are on the one hand still politically controlled, but on the other hand increasingly commercialised with reduced or zero financial subsidy from the state (McKinley, 2008). Online media now have to compete for viewership; hence, sensationalism and tabloid language are used to catch the audience's attention. The simultaneous concert between political censorship and commodification of the media discourages the exercise of journalistic accountability, instead motivating media practitioners to seek dramas to appeal to their audience.

It should be acknowledged that not all people working to produce journalistic content in Vietnam are officially recognized as journalists. They are only formally licensed as journalists if they have a press card issued by the Ministry of Information and Communication. Reporters have to have at least 2 continuous years of experience at a media outlet, without making any violation in their media practice to be considered for a press card. As such, in this thesis, I variably use the terms reporters, media practitioners, media staff or writers to identify authors of news articles.

4.2. State media policy

The Vietnamese media are defined first and foremost as the mouthpiece of Party and State agencies in the Press Law of 1989, 1999 and 2016 (Vietnam National Assembly, 1989, 1999, 2016). Article 6 of the Press Law 1999 (Vietnam National Assembly, 1999) and Article 4 of the Press Law 2016 (Vietnam National Assembly, 2016) state that the media serve to propagandize, disseminate, and contribute to the formulation and protection of the line and policies of the Party, policies and laws of the State, and achievements of the country and the world. The ideological role of the Vietnamese media originated in the long historical struggle for national liberation and independence (Hang Dinh, 2004a). Hồ Chí Minh, the founder of the Vietnam Communist Party and also the founder of the "revolutionary media", identifies journalists as "the press cadres", or "revolutionaries whose pens and papers are their sharp weapons" (Ta Ngoc Tan, as cited in Hang Dinh, 2004a, p. 79). By founding Thanh Niên, the first revolutionary newspaper, on 21 June 1925, Hồ Chí Minh called for journalists to unite the people in the struggle against colonial imperialism and feudalism. The press and other publications have been utilized in Vietnam to serve as "sharp weapons of ideology and culture" in the struggle against foreign occupation, as well as in the movement towards liberation, reunification and socialism (Huu Tho, as cited in Hang Dinh, 2004a). The media are tasked to inform and educate

citizens but also “to inundate them with official positions and to mobilize people to do what government, party, and mass organisation leaders require” (Kerkvliet, 2001, p. 252). The media are also expected to “reflect and guide public opinion; to act as a forum for the People to exercise their right to freedom of speech”, but this has to be “in line with the interests of the country and People” as stipulated in both Article 6 of the Press Law 1999 (Vietnam National Assembly, 1999) and Article 4 of the Press Law 2016 (Vietnam National Assembly, 2016). This strategic articulation of “freedom of speech” in a discourse that is athoritarian leaves room for the Party-State’s intervention and coercion when it is perceived necessary.

It is commonly and implicitly understood that “the interest of the country” in Vietnam translates - under the hegemonic ideology - as the interest of the Communist Party and State. That the interests of the ruling class dominate media definitions of the public interest has been concluded by numerous scholars in liberal democratic contexts (Hall et al., 1978; Keller, 1991; McQuail, 1997). In the view of Thiem (2014), the Party-State in Vietnam has been focusing on and articulating top-down sovereign rights; what is tactically termed as “national interests”, over human rights and individual needs. When individual rights are arbitrarily deemed secondary to political stability, and when they are often vaguely and loosely defined, they can easily be manipulated and violated by powerful interest groups (p. 83). There is a general perception that the rights and interests of the minority have to be sacrificed for the dominant majority.

The construction of the national and public interest in Vietnamese media is not exceptional in Asia. Zhao (2012, p. 151) argues that whether in a Communist state or a developmental state of the democratic or authoritarian type, the media in Asia are assigned a major role in the task of national development. McQuail further elaborates that in the developmental model of journalism, the media’s responsibilities to contribute to the national economic development are placed above their journalistic rights and freedom (Zhao, 2012). In other words, appeals to the “public interest” assume a hollow symbolic aura in social life and in the media, when the concept is articulated with the utmost goal to protect the Party-State’s power and political stability (Thiem, 2014), while the individual’s rights are not upheld.

Vietnam currently has about 1,100 media publications (Abuza, 2015b; P. H. Minh, 2017), most of which are state-owned, state-affiliated and strictly controlled (Abuza, 2015a; Heng, 2001; Mares, 2000; McKinley, 2008; Sanko, 2016; Thiem, 2016). Article 14 of the Press Law 2016 specifies the entities permitted to establish press agencies, including party agencies, state agencies and state-controlled socio-politico-professional organisations (Vietnam National Assembly, 2016). State-owned press agencies may partner with other entities in the process of media production, but the Press Law 2016 emphasizes “the head of a press agency shall take responsibility for all associated press activities” as specified in Article 37 (Vietnam National Assembly, 2016). This article formalizes the

partnership between the state organisations and the private sector in media production that has been going on for 20 years in the country (Pham Chi Dung, as cited in Thuy My, 2016). Overall, the latest amendment disappoints many private media practitioners and owners because there has not been a significant change to the media ownership model. Private media companies are left with no other choice of participating in the media market but to stay under the umbrella of a state organisation. Thus, private media exist, but under the guardianship of state-owned or state-affiliated agencies to ensure the publication does not step outside of acceptable political boundaries. This ownership policy is an obvious form of state intervention in the media market, whereas the Party-State uses ownership as a mechanism to control the media.

Ownership and control shape media power dynamics (Arsenault & Castells, 2008; McChesney & Schiller, 2003; Winseck, 2008). According to Couldry and Curran (2003), whoever has the media production facilities and power to "represent the reality of others" is the one who rules the media battle (p. 6). The media's representational power is one of society's main forms of power in its own right (Melucci and Curran as cited in Couldry & Curran, 2003). Other scholars hold that media is just an intermediate mechanism that other powerful forces use to wage their battles (Couldry & Curran, 2003, pp. 3, 4). In the case of Vietnam, the media generally assumes the role of the "mouthpiece" of the Party and political elites in their ideological promulgation of a political agenda, with limited capacity for journalistic independence.

The Ministry of Information and Communications administratively manages all media outlets and publishers in Vietnam (Abuza, 2015a). But the most powerful Party organ that operates strict control over the media is the Central Ideology and Propaganda Department (Abuza, 2015a; McKinley, 2008). This Department appoints or approves the appointment of Editors-in-Chief and key personnel at all media outlets. Editors and senior managers have to attend regular "compulsory meetings" run by the Ministry of Information and Communications and the Central Ideology and Propaganda Department to review past content and be briefed about how to communicate on topics of upcoming current affairs (Abuza, 2015a; Heng, 2001; McKinley, 2008), with the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Public Security also chiming in at varying levels.

The Press Law 2016 states in Clause 3 of Article 13 that "the press shall not be censored before being printed, transmitted and broadcast" (Vietnam National Assembly, 2016). This statement is not new. Article 2 of the Press Law 1989 already declares a commitment to stopping censorship (Vietnam National Assembly, 1989). Similarly, article 69 of the Constitution 1992 guarantees the freedom of the press in theory, but journalists still take risks in reporting on hard news stories (Heng, 2001, p. 217). Manipulation and punishment by state authorities have usually followed reporting of taboo topics, such as political pluralism, human rights and religious issues (Elmqvist & Luwarso, 2006, pp. 31, 35); critical reflection on the past, which could delegitimize the power of the Party (Sanko, 2016,

p. 19); bureaucratic incompetence in preventing corruption at top levels (Heng, 2001, p. 215); freedom of speech and freedom to assemble (Gillespie, 2014); land rights controversy (Abuza, 2015a, p. 46) and the relationship with China (Công Khế, 2014). Manipulation can take varying forms, including verbal orders to stop covering the topic, or requests to frame the content in a particular way. Punishments can range from job loss, press card withdrawal, the arrest of journalists, or in the most serious scenario, the freezing of operations or the shut-down of a media outlet.

It is obviously contradictory that the Press Law assigns the media the functions of providing a "forum for the people" and being "the mouthpiece of the Party", giving journalists "dual and conflicting responsibilities" (McKinley, 2008). Cain (2014) explains that Vietnamese politicians see the media as tools of economic development and, when desired, corruption investigation. One editor in McKinley's study (2008) said coverage of corruption is ceilinged at the ministerial level. Journalists are not to fight the top officials because they are deemed to represent the Party; instead scapegoats must be found. Cain (2014) calls the media status quo in Vietnam "repressive tolerance" (p. 90). This term acknowledges the potential agency of the media, where they comply with restrictions around taboo topics due to the threat of arrest or suspension, and at the same time push the boundaries in others (p. 91). Vietnam is often placed near the bottom of the international rankings in term of press freedom, near China, Iran, and North Korea (Cain, 2014). Once media is considered the ideological weapon of the Communist Party, it is primarily guarded not to be used against the Party itself.

In addition to manipulating mainstream news media, technology is also used to control social media and internet users. Two of the three Internet Service Providers (ISPs), representing 78 percent of the internet market, are government owned (Freedom House, as cited in Abuza, 2015a). Generally, the state filters information that is considered to be threatening to the regime or national security (Deibert, 2012, p. 385). Backlash to dissident bloggers happens when they gain popular influence.

The earlier discussion about state repression of the press and freedom of speech suggests that hard news topics affecting large number of the population and Party-State's interests are subject to censorship. A large part of political life is considered untouchable, as topics of potential media controversy. Thus, the media turn to benign and soft content to appeal to their audience, making sure that topics and frames are not crossing the line, even though Abuza (2015a) argues that the line of permissible content is dynamic, in accordance with the political winds and priority of the winning faction in the Party-State apparatus.

4.3. Media accountability

International literature generally refers to four frameworks of media accountability, including (1) political/legal accountability, which makes use of formal law and regulation instruments; (2) market accountability, or the market forces of supply and demand; (3) public accountability, or audience

participation and feedback mechanisms; and (4) professional accountability, which is a culture of self-regulation and monitoring, with ethical codes and performance standards set by professional associations (Bertrand, 2000; Eberwein, Fengler, Lauk, & Leppik-Bork, 2011; McQuail, 1997).

There are clauses in the Vietnamese Press Laws of 1989, 1999 and 2016 which are meant to hold the media accountable, in order to protect individuals and social entities from media misinformation and abuse. Article 9 of the Press Law 1999 states:

> If the press conveys untrue or distorted information, slanders or infringes upon the prestige of organisations, the honor or dignity of individuals, it shall have to issue or broadcast a correction or apology of its own or of the press work's author. In cases where there is a conclusion of the competent State agency about the issue, the concerned press body shall have to publish or broadcast such a conclusion. (Vietnam National Assembly, 1999)

In the latest amendment, Clause 1 of Article 42 of the Press Law 2016 adds that:

> For online media, in addition to publishing or broadcasting a correction and an apology, the untruthful information already published or broadcast shall be immediately removed but the content of such information shall be retained in the server to serve inspection and examination activities. (Vietnam National Assembly, 2016)

Article 9 of the Press Law 1999 makes it clear: organisations and individuals shall have the right to disagree in writing with the information in the press if they have grounds to believe that "the press has given untrue or distorted information, slandered or infringed upon them" (Vietnam National Assembly, 1999). Similarly, Article 39 of the Press Law 2016 stipulates that "an agency or an organisation or a citizen has the right to request a press agency to respond to a matter that it has reported". This means other entities can theoretically question and challenge what the media report, but it is ambiguous as to whether, and in what ways, the media are to respond to or assume responsibility for their problematic coverage. In regard to feedback from the audience, Clause 2 of Article 43 regulates:

> After three times of publishing or broadcasting the feedback of an agency, organization or individuals, if the two parties cannot reach agreement, the press agency may stop the publishing or broadcasting; and a competent state management agency may request the press agency to stop publishing or broadcasting information of the concerned parties.

This clause again gives the media an upper hand in dealing with feedback on its content from the concerned audience. There will be no follow through if the press can choose to stop halfway in addressing the issues raised by its audience. Commenting on similar provisions in a previous version of the Press Law, Elmqvist and Luwarso (2006) point out the clause on corrections and apologies is

a somewhat loose rule which could be arbitrarily applied. There is in fact no enforcement mechanism and it is up to the will of the media to deal with the audience's comments and feedback, as well as corrections and apologies. Given the above legal command, it should be acknowledged that a correction and apology, if they are offered at all, are hardly effective. Once wrong information is widely circulated, its negative impact is difficult to remedy because the articles have been read, copied and shared via the internet. Exacerbated by the poor copyright regime in Vietnam and the cloning mechanisms of 1,525 aggregated websites (which basically copy and aggregate all the trending articles from the mainstream media), the original media coverage may be corrected, but no one can guarantee the clones will do the same.

The media are expected to stay away from "disseminating information that advocates bad practices and superstition; providing information about mysteries causing bewilderment in society, adversely affecting social order, safety and community well-being", as specified in Clause 6, Article 9 of the Press Law 2016 (Vietnam National Assembly, 2016). Nevertheless, it could be said that the authorities only take action against media civic violations if the public pressure is big enough or the cases are brought to court. Similarly, the media is banned from "providing information that affects the normal physical and spiritual development of children", as stated in Clause 9, Article 9 of the Press Law 2016 (Vietnam National Assembly, 2016). However, in cases of child mistreatment or abuse, the sensational media are at times do more harm than help (as I analyse in chapter 6).

In Vietnam, the Press Law, with its different amendments over the years, has been more cautionary than prescriptive in the realm of accountability (Heng, 2001). Besides, a Code of Conduct was issued by the Association of Journalists, though many reporters are seemingly unaware of its existence and do not know its contents (McKinley, 2008). This professional body does not seem willing to enforce better standards (Marr, 2003, p. 282). The media are held accountable to the state, but they are not held accountable to their audience and other stakeholders per se (Matthews, 2016). Vasavakul (2019) argues that accountability mechanisms in Vietnam have not been constructed to articulate "a full-fledged system of institutional checks and balances", but mainly to respond to public criticism of state ineffectiveness and misuse of power (p. 46).

Nowadays, Vietnamese media houses open up a space for audience comment and feedback directly under some articles, but they often censor the comments to avoid humiliating the Party-State. Sometimes those critical comments are still articulated in different forms. Lay people do not just rely on mainstream media, they often write about their concerns on their Facebook accounts and other social media platforms. Talking about citizen journalism and the nation state, A. Nguyen (2009) points out that in Vietnam, sometimes the issues raised by citizens on social media create public pressure and lead to responsive coverage from the mainstream media, but the mainstream media will only attend to the issues if they are not in the politically forbidden territories. Thus, the impact of most

citizen journalism would depend on the agenda of the mainstream media (p. 161). To some extent, Vietnamese netizens have been able to make some positive contributions to the media landscape.

It would be fair to say media practitioners have attempted to pursue a circumscribed form of contestation that has sometimes led to tension with the Party-State. The pursuit of independent reports on controversial topics in a search for justice is partly driven by "profit and egalitarian motives" (Cain, 2014, p. 5) and partly by a "responsiveness to [media] readership" (Coe, 2015, p. 620). There has not been any systematic study of media contestation in Vietnam. Evidence is scattered in various case studies, where media coverage about policy controversies, injustices or corruption charges has actually led to the state authorities' responses that seek to remedy the problems. Nevertheless, a report by the Centre for Media in Educating Community sponsored by the British Embassy in Ha Noi (Phan Lợi, Minh Lộc, Văn Bá, & Nghĩa Nhân, 2013) finds that only 25% of the requests, criticism and allegations that have been raised by the media are responded to in a timely manner by the relevant state organisations, and furthermore most of the responses are generic and do not really address the issues. In terms of the state agencies, they are not exhibiting enthusiasm for a culture of accountability in their responses to the issues that the media raise.

The media can in fact criticize the weakness of education and healthcare systems. As education and healthcare are central in citizens' life and interests, the problems in these fields are too obvious to pretend they do not exist. Even though the media criticism and public complaints about these vital aspects of life can challenge the Party-State's legitimacy to some extent, the media and citizens are still given a comparatively open space to express their discontent, as long as authorities believe that this will be managed and not lead to widespread political protests or riots on the streets. In this context, the media are largely unconstrained in discussing the autism topic and the lack of policy provisions in the area. The critical point is which frames are chosen to represent autism, or whether the media just want to churn out dramatic stories to catch the audience's attention and viewership.

In Vietnam, lay citizens generally do not strongly believe in the power of media advocacy. Public distrust of media in Vietnam corelates with the findings of a large-scale study undertaken in 15 countries across 5 continents: that people in countries with limited press freedom and less developed economies are less affected by the news, either because of low access to the media or because state censorship erodes the public's trust in the news (H. T. Vu, Jiang, et al., 2018). The analysis of media legislation and related structural issues above highlight the role that power, ideology and media accountability play in Vietnam from a formal legal framework perspective. But, as we will see, how they are exercised in practice needs to be examined further in the later empirical chapters.

4.4. Media commercialisation

Most Vietnamese media outlets in the last few decades have been subject to commercialisation pressures to survive. Commercialisation drives some Vietnamese media outlets to pay attention to relevant human-interest topics, while many outlets choose to attract their audience with sensational, sex-oriented and slushy stories (Abuza, 2015b). The pursuit of commercial profits shapes communication content and behaviour (J. Hardy, 2014). Tabloidization is hardly unique to Vietnamese media, but because the media outlets here generally have to avoid politically constrained topics, the focus on spectacle and soft news drives their day to day practice even more.

Now that internet users' online behaviour, data, social networks, interests, and demographics can be easily tracked by online media, J. Hardy (2014) argues that global audience time on the internet has become a commodity (pp. 140, 142). Consequently, ad-financed media respond to rating figures, readers' tastes, or marketers' demands; they do not create public affairs content for some civic conception of the public interest, but rather what is profitable to provide (p. 144). Nielsen (2016) points out online news media outlets also have to compete with other entertainment and social media platforms for consumers' time and advertisers' money. J. Hardy (2014) argues strongly that the dependence of media on advertising revenue tends to influence the media at various levels, from corporate-strategic to operational and editorial decisions. A. Nguyen (2013) warns that the uncritical use of web metrics or "click-thinking" data to judge what is newsworthy might lead to "self-destruction" for the news media industry (p. 154) and "disaster" for public affairs and public interest journalism (p. 147). A. Nguyen (2012) argues that the dominance of infotainment and "the marginalisation and trivialisation of public affairs" in the news is a chronic problem that can threaten societies in the world, both in advanced democracies and authoritarian nations like Vietnam and China (p. 706).

Commercialisation has transformed Vietnamese media into a competitive market and changed the way journalists practice their profession. Media practitioners are now rushing to "hunt" news, and competing to break stories, which can lead to sensationalism, partiality and inaccuracy due to the pressure of time, and a lack of professional skills among media staff (Hang Dinh, 2004a). The line between journalism, public relations (PR) and advertorials is blurry. More than half of the journalists interviewed by A. Nguyen (2008) view public relations as a form of journalism or at least an "intimate friend" of journalism (p. 125). Online media outlets, print newspapers, television and radio networks alike publicly sell advertorial space with a commercial rate card, but it is not always apparent to readers which contents is advertorial and which is editorial. To some extent, the media industry in Vietnam aligns with trends in the global media landscape. In the first survey of its kind titled *The State of Technology in Global Newsroom* covering 130 countries in 2017, 70% of newsrooms rely on advertising as their main revenue stream, while 44% of newsrooms generate revenue from advertorials or sponsored content, making sponsored content the second most important revenue sources for newsrooms (International Center for Journalists, 2017).

However, the Vietnamese media face particular ethical challenges. It is a common and unquestioned practice that many press conferences and event organisers in Vietnam openly offer journalists an envelope of allowances in their press kits. A. Nguyen (2008) calls this “white bribery” or “coffee money” (p. 126). In a study by Doan and Bilowol (2014), Vietnamese public relations practitioners consider the practice of giving envelopes to journalists to be a given (a “thank you gift”), while others think “journalists need to be paid for what they do”; “you cannot do PR in Vietnam without it”; and it is a “pay-for-play” game (p. 488). In turn, the media practitioners view public relations as an informational and income source, and due to the envelope culture, they often neglect to verify the (self-serving) information provided by the business sector when they write articles. Positive media coverage is considered a commodity that can be paid for and controlled by public relations practitioners (Doan & Bilowol, 2014). Companies or individuals in Vietnam offer overseas trips, luxury resort holidays and even high-value real estate to journalists for them to write or not write about particular topics. This taken for granted money-for-comment phenomenon is a widespread ethical problem in the country’s media culture.

Another problematic practice among Vietnamese journalists is their dual role in reporting and selling advertisements, as observed by practitioners in the industry (Dương Xuân Nam, 2014; Lê Quốc Vinh, 2017). When journalists write about a company, many of them either politely or forcefully ask the companies to book some advertisements, so that journalists can get advertising commission from their own employers, in addition to their regular journalist salaries. A few journalists go further, by blackmailing companies with threats of bad publicity (Marr, 2003, p. 282).

Not only do they often write PR articles for money in the mainstream media outlets, journalists nowadays openly write PR stories for various brands on their personal Facebook accounts. They view themselves as commercial key opinion leaders (KOLs), and some even have different rate cards, depending on the profile of their social media accounts, the number and demographics of their social media followers and the topics they often write about.

Vietnam’s media commercialisation and culture of compromised professionalism share similar characteristics with international media, but the “pay-for-play” game has underlying materialist reasons. There is no formal data on journalists’ incomes in Vietnam. But there is a popular saying that often applies to employees at state-owned organisations “chân ngoài dài hơn chân trong” [informal income is bigger than formal salary]. Koh (2001a) argues this income vs salary phenomena reflects a context where living costs are often triple the formal salary one earns in state-owned companies or government agencies. Koh (2001a) asserts that unofficial incomes often come from people’s official positions and capacities, in the form of corruption or personally contracted work. Low formal salary is just one of the reasons that corruption happens in the Vietnamese media industry. High power distance (Segon & Booth, 2010), low ethics and the gift-giving norm or bribery culture

(Dang, 2016; Quah, 2016) in both governmental institutions and the private business environment are the main preconditions for corruption. Corruption happens more often when people have the power and opportunities to do so while the risk of being detected or punished is low (Quah, 2016). Petty corruption in Vietnam is mostly ignored. In the media industry, gift-giving or bribery are normalized to the extent that they are not considered corrupt.

Media partisanship in Vietnam shares some commonality with media cultures elsewhere. In the view of McCargo (2012), partisanship is an Asian (or even global) norm. McCargo suggests that news and comments go hand in hand in the Asian context, where partisanship is dominant. Partisanship is not defined in narrow terms such as party loyalty; rather it means that journalists are expected to push forward their own opinions. McCargo suggests that "the comment-rich, fact-poor, and analysis-thin form of blog journalism" now emerging in developed democracies is somewhat similar to the main mode of journalism in many developing countries (p. 212). In *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, Hallin and Mancini (2011) admit that when the main goal of the news agencies is to support particular politicians, factions, parties, or organisations, media houses may need skilled PR practitioners or media producers, but not impartial journalists (p. 290). Nielsen (2016) argues current media market realities push journalists to meet commercial demands more, rather than pursue their professional ideals or work for the public interest.

Media commercialisation has changed the relationship between the media and other stakeholders in Vietnam, with many service providers and professionals regarding the media as a tool to promote themselves. The weak ethical ground of the national journalism culture becomes more apparent. The low autonomy of the Vietnamese journalistic profession conceivably makes Vietnamese journalists even more vulnerable to commercial pressures than their Western counterparts.

4.5. Journalism training, personnel and professional development

Journalism training, or the limitations thereof, is partly responsible for the media quality and ethical standards in Vietnam. Dozens of studies on Vietnamese media over the years have focused on media censorship and the lack of press freedom, while few have examined the dynamics of media commercialisation, professional development and practice (Hang Dinh, 2004a, 2004b; A. Nguyen, 2006b, 2008, 2009; Thu Ha, 2011; H. T. Vu, Lee, Duong, & Barnett, 2018).

Formal journalism training only started in Vietnam in the early 1990s and three state-owned universities are currently offering journalism degrees, under the strict prescription of the state (Hang Dinh, 2004b). With its control over the whole media system, the Communist Party also strictly imposes its line on journalism schools (Hang Dinh, 2004b; A. Nguyen, 2006b). According to A. Nguyen (2006b), a loyal political commitment to protect the Communist Party is one of the major journalism graduate outcomes. The three university programmes offer heavy and outdated political courses on

doctrinaire Leninism and Marxism (p. 46). The Marxist teachings have been distorted to fit with the Party-State's agenda and interests in Vietnam, which makes them rather different from a critical application of Marxist theories in the wider global academy. A. Nguyen (2006b) concludes that journalism schools are stuffing their students with too much dogmatic theory and equipping them with little practical skill. The country's journalism programmes graduate hundreds of inept degree holders each year (p. 41). "Of journalism graduates, only about 20% can advance well in their career," said Associate Prof. Nguyen Van Dzung – former deputy head of Print Journalism Department at the Institute of Journalism and Communication (as cited in A. Nguyen, 2006b).

Apart from a heavy and impractical programme, the qualifications and experience of the teaching faculty are questionable. A. Nguyen (2006b) reports that only 1 out of the 35 internal journalism faculty members at a particular institution has ever worked as a full-time journalist. To bridge the theory-practice gap, the particular university has invited 15 part-time lecturers from industry. While these lecturers bring with them some "fresh air from the real world", they lack pedagogical skills as well as a theoretical foundation to their teaching (p. 51).

Consequently, graduates' practical knowledge of politics and economics is limited, and they often lack the skills to build contacts, face ethical issues, or search for news stories (McKinley, 2008). In the view of A. Nguyen (2006b), the outcome of the training approach is not just a whole generation of graduates whose professional skills are insufficient for quality journalistic practice. They also have little or no respect for ethical standards, and they are willing to act like "pseudo-journalists". In an interview with A. Nguyen (2006b), Tran Xuan Sum, former Deputy Training Manager, *HCMC Television*, said that many of his television students pay a fee to commercial video services to compile assignments for them, hence, some complete the television course without knowing where to press the shutter button. Le Van Nuoi, former Editor-in-Chief of *Tuổi trẻ Newspaper* in Ho Chi Minh City, points out that due to a lack of knowledge, skills and ethics, some young journalists "abuse the profession" by creating stories without leaving their office, investigating the event, doing research or checking facts (as cited in Dinh Hang, 2014b, p. 188). Thus, the integrity of these future journalists is questioned, with low responsibility for their professional selves, let alone their sense of responsibility for the greater public interest (Tran Xuan Sum, as cited in A. Nguyen, 2006b).

Hang Dinh (2004b) points to the fact that most Vietnamese senior media executives are not journalism graduates. Rather, they have climbed up the career ladder to the senior positions by self-training efforts. Their backgrounds have clearly shaped their views on staff recruitment. According to them, an economics or business graduate could be better trained than a journalism graduate to write business news (Hang Dinh, 2004b). In the Vietnamese journalism industry, 75% of those journalists with an official press card never go through any journalistic training (Huynh Dung Nhan, as cited in A. Nguyen, 2006a, p. 12), while most of the rest only take short courses.

In A. Nguyen's research (2006b), the flaws of Vietnamese journalism culture are summed up in the following comment by Vu Trong Thanh, Editor-in-Chief of *Thế Giới Mới:* "They [journalists] do not have good news sense and sufficient skills to find news, to gather information and to handle information. Their English-language level is too low. Even the use of their mother tongue is disappointing." Some newsrooms have to set up their own training systems for young staff from scratch (p. 44). However, so-called on-the-job training systems in many newsrooms lack a systemic approach; they function more like "informal experience-sharing" rather than "formal approaches to professionalism" (an anonymous interviewee, as cited in A. Nguyen, 2006b, p. 45). In a media industry whose practitioners do their work mostly with "ad-hoc learning" with no systematic standard for professionalism, "Vietnamese journalism has proved to be potentially destructive for society in some respects" (A. Nguyen, 2008, p. 125). Thus, media outlets are juggling different challenges, among them heavy-handed political control, market pressures as well as the lack of skills and ethical codes from within their own newsrooms. Hang Dinh (2004b) recommends that journalism education be grounded in professional norms and skills, rather than just follow the Party's line and ideology. A. Nguyen (2008) emphasizes that the key drivers for change must come from the responsibility of journalism educators. There is no up-to-date and thorough study of the correlation between journalism training and journalism quality in Vietnam over the past decade, but if the same political constraints, infrastructure, human resources and methodology persist, there may be no significant changes in the journalism training and professional development landscape.

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the power relations and ideological dynamics between media, journalism and the Party-State in Vietnam, as well as the media's relationships with other stakeholders. The authorities repress media coverage of sensitive topics but generally do not bother to monitor journalistic rigour and accountability in relation to other public interest topics. As a result, the power dynamic is imbalanced, with the media primarily "accountable" to the Party-State (Matthews, 2016), but not to the reading audience or other stakeholders. Journalists are either not trained or are poorly trained, and hence both their journalistic skills and ethics are often questionable (Hang Dinh, 2004b; A. Nguyen, 2006b). Overshadowed by Communist propaganda culture, the news media in Vietnam have never been grounded upon the vital principles of integrity, transparency and accountability that Fenton (2011) holds to be strongly correlative with democratic values. Due to commercialisation or what Fenton (2011) calls the ruthless logic of a neoliberalized economic system that constantly pushes for profits, journalists are driven to seek out sensational news and viewership, rather than working with a strong normative sense of the public interest. Media coverage in Vietnam can be paid for by PR practitioners or service providers, enabling those who have the access and resources to reach out to the media to dominate the representation of any given topic. This media market lays the ground for a normalization of misinformation, misrepresentation and unethical practice.

5. Chapter 5: Visibility, voice and media frames of autism: a corpus framing analysis

5.1. Introduction

This chapter uses a combination of corpus analysis and framing analysis, which is called corpus framing analysis (CFA) to identify language patterns that shape the representation of autism in Vietnamese online news media between 2006 and 2016. This chapter will identify which characters are the most talked about and which actors are the most quoted as news sources in the media discourse. It also seeks to find out what frames the media use, based on the keywords, clusters, concordance and collocations in the corpus. The process of addressing these questions will provide a quantitative and thematic overview of media content to enable more in-depth examination of the third research question about how and why the online news media construct the representation of autism the way they do in chapters 6, 7 and 8.

In Vietnamese, *tự kỷ* has traditionally been a part of the phrase *tự kỷ ám thị* to describe a self-induced hypnotic state or idiohypnotism. In the four Vietnamese dictionaries consulted for this study, one dictionary does not have an entry for *tự kỷ*, but only *tự kỷ ám thị*, with the meaning: to make oneself passively accept a certain idea or thought (Ban biên soạn chuyên từ điển, 2018). Two other dictionaries only have the same short definition of *tự kỷ [to act or decide by oneself]* (Hoàng Phê, 2018; Viện ngôn ngữ, 2012). The most detailed and scientifically viable entry for *tự kỷ* is in *Từ điển Tiếng Việt [Vietnamese Dictionary]* 8th edition by Đà Nẵng Publisher (Hoàng Phê, 2017). It explains autism as:

> chứng rối loạn hệ thần kinh, gây ảnh hưởng đến hoạt động của não bộ, biểu hiện trong những khiếm khuyết về tương tác xã hội, khó khăn về giao tiếp và có hành vi, sở thích, hoạt động mang tính hạn hẹp và lặp đi lặp lại. (Hoàng Phê, 2017, p. 1417)
>
> the neurological disorder that impacts the brain functioning, manifesting in social interaction deficiency, communication difficulty, with narrow and repeated behavior, interests and activities.

Nowadays, *tự kỷ* is used in Vietnam mainly with the meaning of autism, either as a noun or an adjective. Apart from its autism meaning, both journalists and the public use the word *tự kỷ* colloquially in their articles or on social media and daily conversations to indicate a moody state of being depressed, lonely or weird. They often use the word *tự kỷ* to ridicule themselves or others. No dictionary or research has rigorously reported this language phenomenon, but this usage has been a trend for over a decade.

The most popular news websites in Vietnam were selected to construct the corpus for this study, based on the global website ranking up until 31 December 2016 on Alexa.com (Alexa, 2016). An

advanced Google search on each of these top popular news websites was conducted with the keyword *tự kỷ [autism/autistic]* to select 11 news websites with the most Google search results for *tự kỷ [autism/autistic]* up to 31 December 2016. The selected media outlets are listed in Table 1 below. Among them, *VnExpress.net, Vietnamnet.vn, Dantri.vn* and *News.zing.vn* are online-only electronic newspapers while *Thanhnien.vn, Tuoitre.vn* and *Nld.com.vn* started as print newspapers and expand into electronic publications in the late 1990s. Even though the print newspapers have a longer legacy and higher reputation in terms of journalistic quality, their online publications' traffic and viewership are not as strong as the online-only news outlets.

These electronic newspapers target a large general audience that is not clearly segmented. *Thanhnien.vn, Tuoitre.vn* and *VnExpress.net* are known as quality publications because they pay attention to hard news and broader social issues. *Thannien.vn* and *Tuoitre.vn* started their legacy as the leading print newspapers in Ho Chi Minh City. Both *Thanhnien.vn* and *Tuoitre.vn* print and online publications expanded nationwide in the market economy period. *Vietnamnet.vn, Dantri.vn* and *Nld.com.vn* are in the next tier of journalistic reputation. *News.zing.vn* is the youngest outlet among the electronic newspapers and it also has a younger target audience. It focuses on entertainment content, even though in recent years it is venturing into more serious social issues. *24h.com.vn, Afamily.vn, Eva.vn* and *Kenh14.vn* are news aggregation websites and sit on the tabloid end of the spectrum. *24h.com.vn* targets a broad audience, while *Afamily.vn* and *Eva.vn* target women, and *Kenh14.vn* targets teenagers and young readers. As discussed in chapter 4, tabloid newspapers in Vietnam resemble the features of tabloid coverage in other countries. They focus on showbiz, entertainment, celebrities, sex, crimes, drama, scandals, gossips, and affairs. The Vietnamese public associate tabloid media and their coverage with "sốc - sex" [shock and sex] or "cướp - giết - hiếp" [robbing, killing and raping]. Indeed, tabloid news are not exclusively covered by news aggregation websites alone; other more reputable electronic newspapers also tend to publish more and more tabloid content due to commercialization pressures.

All online news media outlets in Vietnam provide their content free, so most of them rely on advertisements to finance their operations. No scholarly research with rigorous evidence has examined the correlation between the publishing of hard or soft news and revenue generation in the Vietnamese media industry, though there have been anecdotal suggestions from practitioners that sensational news get more views and reporters are paid based on page views. Vietnamese media, with its history of state-driven propaganda, low journalistic professionalism and ethics, responds to these new media challenges in an even more profit-driven way. Taken together, these different media outlets fairly represent the Vietnamese online media landscape.

Table 1: Top 11 news websites with the most search results for "tự kỷ" [autism] in Vietnam

News websites	Number of Google search results with "tự kỷ" keyword
vnexpress.net	6,140
24h.com.vn	5,530
news.zing.vn	4,790
thanhnien.vn	3,530
dantri.com.vn	3,280
vietnamnet.vn	3,000
afamily.vn	2,580
tuoitre.vn	2,080
nld.com.vn	2,020
eva.vn	1,380
kenh14.vn	1,270

As mentioned in chapter 1, electronic newspapers mostly produce their own content, while news aggregation websites manually collect news and articles from both domestically and internationally and republish them on their sites to generate viewership advertising revenue. Only electronic newspapers, under the license of state-owned agencies, are recognized as mainstream news agencies; thus, they can produce their own journalistic content and their editorial staff are licensed as journalists in Vietnam. In contrast, news aggregation websites are mostly owned by private companies. They are subject to the terms and conditions of the Press Law, but they are neither licensed to operate as journalistic entities nor produce their own content because the Party-State would not have the capacity to scruitinize all their content and operation. However, the regulation that news aggregation websites should not produce their content is not strictly followed, and the authorities do not care as long as these news aggregation websites do not produce or touch upon taboo topics. To make sure that they have enough content to appeal to their audience, these news aggregation websites do employ writers to produce articles. They work in an agreement with electronic newspapers to label the original materials as produced by the electronic newspapers, then they can republish the articles on their own sites (T. T. T. Nguyen, 2013). The surveillance upon them is quite relaxed.

However, it is hard for the public to tell the difference between electronic newspapers or news agregation websites because they look quite the same. The general audience may notice the stronger tabloid tendency of news aggregation websites and only media literate audiences will know the differences in the ownership and operation of these two categories of media outlets.

5.2. Data collection

To collect data for this study, first, I conducted a Google advanced search on each of the above websites, with date parameters between 1 January 2006 and 31 December 2016, with the keyword *"tự kỷ"*. I picked up articles from the first 200 search entries on each website, while excluding repeated

entries. I limit the search to the first 200 search entries because beyond that the entries show almost entirely repeated or irrelevant results. To make sure that articles in the earlier years were not missed out, another Google advanced search was done for each year in each website. A systematic cross-check was done by tracking if the articles in the yearly set were also present in each of the outlet sets. It was noticeable that many similar articles were aggregated by different websites. These aggregated and separately published articles presented different exposure points; therefore, similar articles were still collected as distinct items when they were republished by different websites. It should be noted that due to the long span of the period under investigation and the data storage capacity of different outlets, not all articles in the whole period were available online. So the corpus might not include all the articles published in this whole period.

The corpus contains the relevant articles published in 11 outlets, over 11 years, comprising a total of over 580,000 words. This is a big enough data set for corpus framing analysis, when this thesis examines a very targeted discourse. P. Baker (2006) suggests if research is focusing on a particular genre of language, it is not necessary to construct a corpus of a million words or more (p. 28). G. Kennedy (2014) concurs that when the study examines many syntactic processes and high-frequency vocabulary, generally a corpus of between half a million and one million words is desirable (p. 68).

As discussed in chapter 2, the collection of the most frequent words, clusters and collocates was extracted using WordSmith 7 software (M. Scott, 2017) and the referral to individual and institutional stakeholders, as well as the semantics of keywords, can suggest what frames are dominant in the corpus. It is worth mentioning that in Vietnamese, sometimes two or more single words stand together to make one meaning, and therefore, many entries in the cluster frequency list are actually compound words. Collocates or collocations are phrases or words that stand near each other. This study uses WordSmith to render a list of 5 words that stand on the left and 5 words on the right of a certain word or cluster. The collocations suggest how words stand near each other to make up larger meanings. Meanwhile, concordances are extracts showing how a word appears in its syntactic and semantic context. The researcher can extract lists of long or short concordances, from one line to full paragraphs or more, based on their interpretative needs. As units of meanings, the words, clusters, collocations and concordances help reveal the themes that the articles are focusing on and point to broad frames when some words or phrases are used instead of others, with certain semantic preferences, frequency and combinations signifying some and ignoring other perspectives. As Edelman (1993) states, “the character, causes, and consequences of any phenomenon become radically different as changes are made in what is prominently displayed, what is repressed and especially in how observations are classified” (p. 232). In the case of the media discourse about autism in Vietnam, how the media engage stakeholders, describe autism and the life experience of those living with the condition manifests internalized media ideologies and the power relations between different social actors.

In the convention of corpus analysis, analysts often compare the corpus in their particular study with general corpora of millions of words to point out the different levels of "keyness", defined as the comparatively higher or lower frequency of different words (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008), between different languages, countries, periods, genres, social classes and genders of language users (McEnery, 2004; McEnery & Gabrielatos, 2006; O'Keeffe & McCarthy, 2010). But there exists no such general reference corpus in Vietnam; thus, the significance of a keyword is determined in this study by its own ordering in the word or cluster frequency lists. Furthermore, this study is interested in finding out the features of language use within the specialized corpus which have been specifically selected, not in comparison with other corpora. In English, the threshold for keyness is set at an extremely low value of a probability of one in a hundred trillion words, and such threshold of statistical significance often renders over 1,500 keywords in a certain corpus (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008, p. 10). This thesis mostly examines words or clusters which stand from the 1st to the 200th in the word and cluster frequency lists, with a frequency threshold higher than one in ten thousand. Lower frequency suggests lower significance of the semantic meaning of the words or clusters in the corpus. However, a collection of low frequency words and clusters with semantic proximity will still contribute to certain meanings in a significantly collective way. Thus, some low frequency words and clusters will still be analysed collectively. The word frequency list also comprises both keywords and other grammatical words such as infinitive, definite articles, prepositions, conjunctions, etc. Those grammatical words are excluded from the data analysis because they do not directly contribute to semantics at the corpus level.

The research will first use inductive analysis. Based on the data, I point out language patterns and frames. However, to locate what key actors or major frames may be missing, I have to make reference to the frames that have been established by existing literature. Thus, the reverse, deductive approach of framing analysis is also utilized (P. Baker, 2006, p. 16). For example, in the actual practice of analysing the Vietnamese online news media corpus, not many words or collocations related to the social policy frame are seen at the top of the word and cluster frequency lists, while the social policy frame is identified as an important frame in the literature. Thus, I have to deductively look up for words that might potentially relate to this frame, such as *chính sách [policy], quyền [right], bình đẳng [equity], công bằng [equal/equality/fair/fairness/justice],* etc. Based on the keyword frequency and collocations that WordSmith renders, I can determine and evaluate if the social policy is a major or minor frame in the Vietnamese media discourse.

It is worth highlighting that in the process of translating the texts, I have made the best effort to keep the English translation equivalent and loyal to the original Vietnamese media coverage in both syntactic and semantic aspects. However, there are no absolute equivalent translations between two languages, and thus I acknowledge some asymmetry between the Vietnamese and English versions of the media texts. In some cases, sentence structures are maintained, even if they are not correct in

grammar. I will use annotation when needed to make the translation readable to the thesis reader, even though the Vietnamese original is not meeting the good Vietnamese writing standards.

5.3. Who was talked about and who was talking in the corpus

When the media mention or quote someone, they are highlighting their visibility and voice in the discourse. It is evident in the word frequency list in Table 2 that Vietnamese online news media related autism primarily to children. The word *trẻ [child]* appeared 7,430 times as the 4th most frequent word. *Con [child/offspring]* was seen 6,278 times as the 8th most frequent word, as well as other words for children such as *bé [child], em [child/younger person]* and *cháu [child].* In total, 19,760 single words for children appeared in the corpus, accounting for 3.39% of the text, making children collectively the most frequently talked about identity in the corpus, as demonstrated in Figure 2.

Table 2: Reference to children in the word frequency list

N	Word	Translation	Freq.	%
3	TỰ	au[tism]	8175	1.40
4	TRẺ	child	7430	1.27
5	KỶ	[au]tism	7110	1.22
8	CON	child	6278	1.08
17	NGƯỜI	person/people	4262	0.73
19	HỌC	learning	3637	0.62
21	MẸ	mother	3329	0.57
22	BỆNH	disease	3316	0.57
26	ĐẾN	come/arrive/go	2796	0.48
27	BÉ	child	2787	0.48
34	BIẾT	know/aware	2402	0.41
35	BỊ	suffering/subject to	2388	0.41

While it was not necessarily surprising that autism and childhood were frequently discussed together, the relative dearth of mentions of adults with autism is an interesting finding. With a deductive search, the words *người lớn [adult], người trưởng thành [grown-up],* and *thanh niên [youth/youngster]* with autism were mentioned only 32, 12, 11 times respectively, in the entire corpus. Figure 2 represented mentions of children, adults with autism, parents and family members in three different groups to demonstrate the distinctive level of their visibility in the corpus, in comparison to other groups.

To narrow down the quoting sample and examine who was quoted the most often in the corpus, I examine the concordance list of popular quoting verbs, namely, *nói [say/talk/speak]* and c*ho biết [state/say/reveal]*. There were 605 instances of *cho biết [state/say/reveal].* In Vietnamese, *cho biết [state]* as a verb is totally different from *nhà nước [state]* as a noun indicating governmental authority. There were actually 2,185 instances of *nói [say/talk/speak]* in the corpus, but most of them referred to speech disorder such as *chậm nói [delayed speech], nói lắp [stuttering], nói lặp lại/nói nhại [echoing]* and other acts of speaking. Only 358 instances of *nói [say/talk/speak]* were used to quote

someone directly or indirectly. The combination of these two quoting verbs made up a sample of 963 instances of quoting someone. All the instances of *nói [say/talk/speak]* and *cho biết [state/say/reveal]* were categorized into six groups, including quotes by parents, professionals, individuals with autism, civil society groups, government officers, and others. This categorization process was similar to a conventional media content analysis, but was simplified with the concordance list.

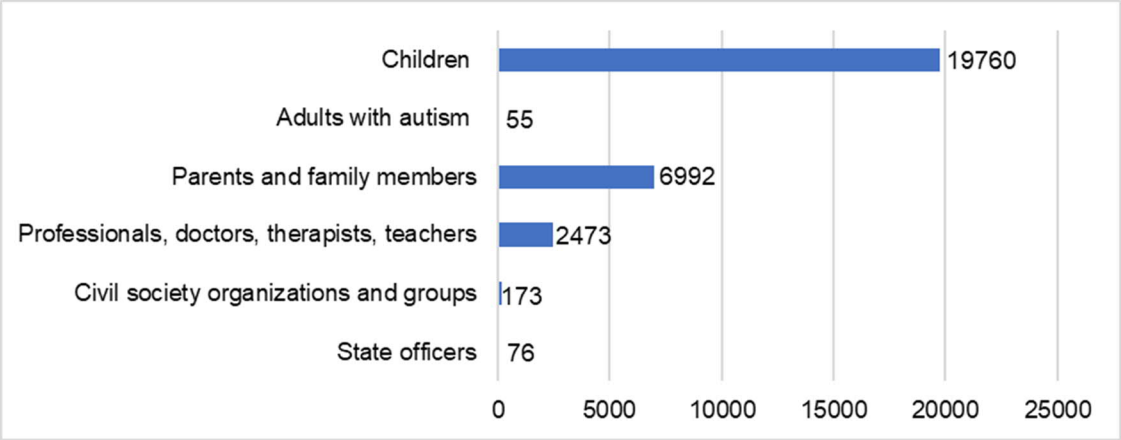

Figure 2: Who was talked about in the corpus

Despite the frequency with which children with autism were mentioned, the voice of both children and adults with autism was hardly heard in Vietnamese media accounts, which was similar to the situation in China and United Kingdom (Bie & Tang, 2015; Huws & Jones, 2010). In this corpus, out of 605 instances of *cho biết [state/say/reveal]*, individuals with autism were not quoted at all. Between these two quoting verbs, *nói [say/talk/speak]* was a neutral quoting verb, while *cho biết [state/say/reveal]* was often used for mature speakers, with a more authoritative connotation. Individuals with autism were never quoted with *cho biết [state/say/reveal]*, possibly because what they say was not considered as having any authoritative basis. But out of 358 instances of *nói [say/talk/speak],* individuals with autism were quoted 28 times, mostly with basic utterances. Overall, out of the whole 963 instances of quotings with both *nói [say/talk/speak]* and *cho biết [state/say/reveal],* individuals with autism had their voice reported in just under 3% of the full sample of voices/sources as demonstrated in Figure 3. When individuals with autism were only occasionally asked to talk or reported as talking in the media stories, their voice was seldom heard, and they were portrayed more like passive objects than active agents.

The prominence of parents as actors in the media discourse was also evident. *Mẹ [mother]* appeared 3,329 times, as the 21st most frequent word in the corpus, while *cha/ba/bố [father]* appeared 1,877 times, either as standing alone, but mostly in the combined word *cha mẹ/ba mẹ/bố mẹ [father and mother/parents]*. The comparative reference to mothers and fathers in the word and cluster frequency

indicated the disparity in the reporting of child caring roles in the families, with mothers reported more prominently than fathers.

The frequency of references to all professional identities like experts, researchers, doctors, therapists, teachers and other support staff (2,473 times) was much less than the frequency of reference to parents and families (6,992 times), as demonstrated in Figure 2. However, professionals were quoted in over 55% of instances (or 532 times) of direct and indirect quotings, while parents and families were quoted in only 23% (or 224 times) of the same sample, as demonstrated in Figure 3.

References to self-help and advocacy groups were not often seen in the corpus. There were only 103 mentions of *câu lạc bộ [club]* and *CLB [club]* of families living with autism or community groups supporting autism, 43 entries of *dự án [project]* relate to autism or disability, and 27 entries of *Mạng lưới Người tự kỷ Việt Nam [Vietnam Autism Network].* Only 1.5% of all the quoting instances quoted someone from those civil society groups, as demonstrated in Figure 3.

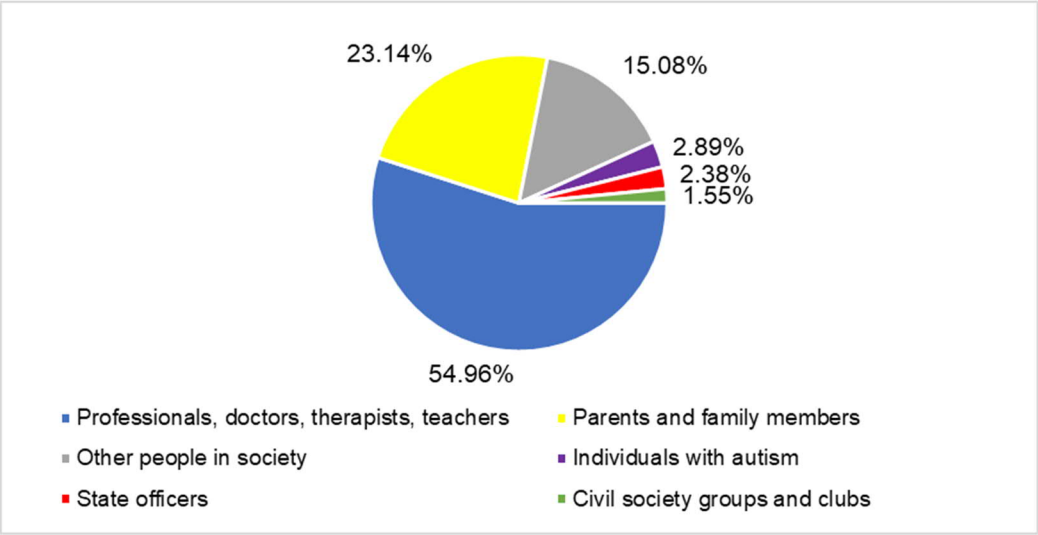

Figure 3: Who was talking in the media corpus

State bodies and their officers at national, ministerial and local levels, generally called state authorities, appeared only 76 times in the corpus. Most of the mentions of authorities were invocations on the part of parents/professionals calling for policy responses. They were also mentioned in relation to the incident of child abuse at an autism centre in Ho Chi Minh City in 2014. State officers spoke in 2.4% of the quoting instances. This suggested that the media did not interview state officers and attempt to hold them accountable with regard to framing autism as a public health and social issue. I will analyse this social policy frame in depth in chapter 6.

To sum up, it was apparent that children were the most frequently talked about in the corpus, but their voices were largely omitted. Adults with autism were barely talked about or given little chance to talk. Mothers, and to a lesser degree, fathers were collectively the next most frequently talked about persons, but professionals were the most quoted news sources. References to and quotes from state authorities were low in the Vietnamese online media discourse about autism. Civil society groups did occasionally speak up, but the frequency of their reported voice was low.

5.4. Autism framed as a medical problem

Autism was usually framed as a medical problem in Vietnamese online news media, because many words high up in the word and cluster frequency lists were medical terms. In the list of the most frequent clusters (compound words) in Table 3, clusters related to the medical frame were highlighted in blue. They were mainly psychiatric symptoms, medical processes, treatments and scientific terms which were used to describe a health condition in the medical frame. Some random clusters without a clear referential meaning have been removed for reasons of space efficiency and clarity.

Table 3: The most frequent clusters in the corpus, with medical and scientific terms highlighted

N	Cluster	Translation	Freq.	%
1	TỰ KỶ	autism/autistic	6999	1.20
3	TRẺ TỰ KỶ	autistic children	2038	0.35
4	CÓ THỂ	can/may/able/possible	1860	0.32
6	BỆNH TỰ KỶ	autism disease	1102	0.19
7	NGHIÊN CỨU	research	1054	0.18
8	GIA ĐÌNH	families	1051	0.18
9	PHÁT TRIỂN	development	1041	0.18
11	CHỨNG TỰ KỶ	autism disorder/syndrome	939	0.16
12	CHA MẸ	parents	852	0.15
13	ĐIỀU TRỊ	treatment	812	0.14
15	PHỤ HUYNH	parents	740	0.13
16	BÁC SĨ	doctors	711	0.12
17	GIAO TIẾP	interpersonal communication	704	0.12
18	BÌNH THƯỜNG	normal	697	0.12
19	ĐẶC BIỆT	special	671	0.12
20	CHO TRẺ	for children	653	0.11
21	XÃ HỘI	society/social	651	0.11
22	CHO CON	for children	643	0.11
23	TÂM LÝ	psychology/psychological	643	0.11
24	KHẢ NĂNG	ability/capacity	638	0.11
25	PHÁT HIỆN	discover/find out/identify	623	0.11
26	CHO BIẾT	reveal/say	605	0.10
28	THỜI GIAN	time	592	0.10
29	RỐI LOẠN	disorder	587	0.10
30	BỊ TỰ KỶ	suffering autism	584	0.10
31	GIÁO DỤC	education	581	0.10
32	KHÔNG CÓ	not have/without	579	0.10
33	CAN THIỆP	intervention	556	0.10

N	Cluster	Translation	Freq.	%
34	TRẺ EM	children	544	0.09
35	ĐỨA TRẺ	the child	535	0.09
37	CHIA SẺ	share/say	521	0.09
39	MẮC BỆNH	acquired disease	499	0.09
41	HÒA NHẬP	integrate/integration/inclusion/inclusive	495	0.08
42	HÀNH VI	behaviour	492	0.08
43	KHÓ KHĂN	difficulties/challenges	492	0.08
44	TRUNG TÂM	centre	480	0.08
47	CHĂM SÓC	care	455	0.08
49	THẾ GIỚI	world	453	0.08
50	GIÁO VIÊN	teacher	452	0.08
52	BỆNH VIỆN	hospital	446	0.08
54	CON TRAI	son	441	0.08
55	KHÔNG THỂ	not possible/can't	441	0.08
56	BIỂU HIỆN	sign/symptom	433	0.07
57	PHƯƠNG PHÁP	method	433	0.07
58	CẬU BÉ	little boy	432	0.07
60	CÔ GIÁO	female teacher	417	0.07
61	BỐ MẸ	parents	411	0.07
64	NGÔN NGỮ	language	401	0.07
66	KHÔNG BIẾT	not know	398	0.07
67	VẤN ĐỀ	problem	398	0.07
68	KHOA HỌC	science	397	0.07
70	NGUY CƠ	risk	381	0.07
72	DẤU HIỆU	sign/symptom	374	0.06
75	HỘI CHỨNG	syndrom/disorder	367	0.06
76	MẮC CHỨNG TỰ KỶ	acquired autism	360	0.06
77	CUỘC SỐNG	life	356	0.06
78	HÀ NỘI	Hà Nội	356	0.06
82	KỸ NĂNG	skill	338	0.06
84	CHẨN ĐOÁN	diagnosis	335	0.06
88	HỌC SINH	student/pupil	328	0.06
89	NGƯỜI MẸ	mother	328	0.06
90	VIỆT NAM	Việt Nam	328	0.06
91	MẮC BỆNH TỰ KỶ	acquired autism disease	327	0.06
93	CỘNG ĐỒNG	community	322	0.06
94	CHƯƠNG TRÌNH	program/project	322	0.06
95	HOẠT ĐỘNG	activity	312	0.05
96	NGUYÊN NHÂN	cause/reason	311	0.05
97	CHUYÊN GIA	expert	310	0.05
98	QUAN TÂM	attention/pay attention/care	310	0.05
100	TRƯỜNG HỢP	case	305	0.05
106	ẢNH HƯỞNG	affect/impact/influence	292	0.05
108	BẮT ĐẦU	start/begin/onset	288	0.05
109	KHUYẾT TẬT	disability	288	0.05
110	CĂN BỆNH	disease	285	0.05
113	DẠY TRẺ	teaching children	283	0.05
114	TÂM THẦN	psytriatry/mental	283	0.05
122	HỖ TRỢ	assist/support	272	0.05
123	LIÊN QUAN	relate to/in connection with	272	0.05
125	ĐI HỌC	go to school/schooling	271	0.05
128	CẢM XÚC	emotion/feeling	264	0.05
129	CHUYÊN BIỆT	specialized	264	0.05

Obviously, *tự kỷ [autism]* was the number one frequent cluster in the corpus with 6,999 entries, at 1.02% frequency, which meant *tự kỷ [autism]* was mentioned more than once in every 100 words in the corpus. Similarly, *trẻ tự kỷ [autistic child]* and *bệnh tự kỷ [autism disease]* stood as the third and sixth most frequent clusters.

In addition to compound words in the cluster frequency list, I have presented the most frequently appearing single words in the word frequency list in Table 2 in the previous section. In that list, *bệnh [disease]* was the 22nd most frequent word in the corpus, appearing 3,316 times, accounting for 0.57% of the whole text. Similarly, there were 2,388 instances of *bị [subject to/suffering]*, and it stood 35th in the word frequency list. The word *bị* can either be a component of a negative and forceful passive voice like *subject to,* or it can mean *suffering.* These semantic nuances suggested that autism was portrayed as a bad health problem in the Vietnamese media.

Although Vietnam did not have any autism medical research lab, and the number of international peer-reviewed publications on autism in Vietnam (to the end of 2016) could be counted on one hand, the media corpus mentioned or quoted *nghiên cứu [research]* 1,054 times, and *nghiên cứu [research]* stood as the 7th most frequent cluster. This was because the Vietnamese media often translated and quoted studies reported in international news media, not directly from international peer-reviewed journals. In the same light, medical terms such as *dấu hiệu [sign/symptom], biểu hiện [sign/symptom], nguy cơ [risk], chẩn đoán [diagnosis], hội chứng [syndrome], rối loạn [disorder], can thiệp [intervention]* and *điều trị [treat/treatment]* were amongst the most frequent clusters. The high frequency and distribution of medical terms in the corpus suggested that the media coverage highlighted the medical characteristics and processes in relation to autism.

When identifying a person with autism, Vietnamese language mostly used *tự kỷ [autistic]* as an adjective, for example *trẻ tự kỷ/người tự kỷ/con tự kỷ/bạn tự kỷ [autistic child/autistic person/autistic offspring/autistic friend],* as if *tự kỷ [autistic]* was the only defining character of that person. Even though in the Vietnamese language, the adjective always stands after the noun that it modifies, the Vietnamese linguistic convention makes the adjective an integral part of the noun that it modifies, shaping the inseparable identity of the individuals. Some advocacy groups try to use the term *người có tự kỷ/người sống cùng tự kỷ [a person having autism/a person living with autism]* but those terms are long and do not always sound natural in the Vietnamese language.

“Person first” or “disability first” language is a subject of debate internationally among academics, advocates and individuals with autism. Proponents of “person first” language argue that it is preferable to avoid using the diagnosis to label and identify a person (Blaska, 1993; Dunn & Andrews, 2015; Titchkosky, 2001). For example, “a person with autism” or “a person living with autism” indicates autism is just part of that individual’s identity, not the sole defining characteristic. Most advocacy organisations in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia favour this language as a way to

emphasize “people’s humanity” (Fernald as cited in Wilkinson & McGill, 2009). However, those who prefer to use “autistic person/individual”, including people on the spectrum, hold that it is not necessary to separate autism from the person as if autism is a bad thing (Sinclair, 2013). Additionally, there is a middle ground position that suggests language use should depend on the context and that it is up to communication participants to decide to use person-first or disability first language (Kenny et al., 2016). The matter is not widely discussed in Vietnam. While the word *tự kỷ [autism/autistic]* is still used to ridicule lonely, weird or depressing behaviours of anyone in the population, the subtleties of the debates about person first or disability first taking place elsewhere is not likely to clearly register in the Vietnamese context.

Autism was also often associated with behaviour challenges in the media discourse. 492 incidences of *hành vi [behaviour]* and 492 incidences of *khó khăn [difficulty/challenge]* were seen in the corpus, ranking respectively 42nd and 43rd in the cluster frequency list and each accounting for 0.08% of the text. Unsurprisingly, *hành vi [behaviour]* often appeared in negative semantic buddles such as *rối loạn hành vi [behaviour disorder]* or *hành vi lặp đi lặp lại/rập khuôn [repetitive/rigid behaviour]. Khó khăn [difficulty/challenge]* was often seen together with *học tập [learning]* and *giao tiếp [interpersonal communication].*

The stereotyping of individuals with autism and their families was exacerbated with such words as *một mình [on one’s own/alone]* (222 times), *bất thường [unusual]* (199 times), *hạn chế [limited]* (132 times), *la [scream]* (126 times), *hét [scream]* (92 times), *giận [angry]* (79 times), *thờ ơ [indifferent]* (62 times), *không quan tâm [does not care/does not pay attention]* (58 times), *cô độc [lonely/alone]* (51 times), *thu mình [withdraw]* (40 times), *cáu [angry]* (32 times), and *hung hăng [violent]* (14 times). When the media described individuals with autism with this stereotyping language, the stereotyped people were viewed through “their category and not as individuals” (Smart & Smart, 2006, p. 30), with “their disability (first or alone) rather than their personhood” (Wilkinson & McGill, 2009, p. 74).

Those individuals with autism who got the most attention in the Vietnamese online news media were the ones who also had special abilities, which reconfirmed what has been observed elsewhere in the world about the frequency with which the media report on the correlation between autism and savantism (Bie & Tang, 2015; Murray, 2008; Osteen, 2008). *Đặc biệt [special]* stood as the 19th most frequent cluster in Table 3, with 671 appearances in the corpus. In Table 4, it is evident that the word *đặc biệt [special]* most often collocated with special education, care and needs, or with talents, gifts, abilities and skills. Table 4 has been compressed for space efficiency, and those phrases most obviously referring to talents, gifts, abilities and skills are highlighted in blue:

Table 4: Cluster list of đặc biệt [special]

N	Cluster	Translation	Freq.
1	GIÁO DỤC ĐẶC BIỆT	special education	86
2	KHẢ NĂNG ĐẶC BIỆT	special ability	34
5	LỚP HỌC ĐẶC BIỆT	special class	12
6	GIÁO VIÊN ĐẶC BIỆT	special teacher	12
8	ĐIỀU ĐẶC BIỆT LÀ	the special thing is	12
10	CÓ KHẢ NĂNG ĐẶC BIỆT	have a special ability	11
12	CHĂM SÓC ĐẶC BIỆT	special care	10
14	NHỮNG KHẢ NĂNG ĐẶC BIỆT	special abilities	9
16	NĂNG KHIẾU ĐẶC BIỆT	special talent	9
17	NHU CẦU ĐẶC BIỆT	special needs	8
22	NHỮNG ĐỨA TRẺ ĐẶC BIỆT	special children	7
26	NGÀNH GIÁO DỤC ĐẶC BIỆT	special education discipline	7
27	ĐẶC BIỆT LÀ TRONG	especially in	7
28	ĐẶC BIỆT NHỮNG TRƯỜNG HỢP	specially in the cases	7
31	ĐẶC BIỆT VỀ ÂM NHẠC	special on music	6
32	CÓ NĂNG KHIẾU ĐẶC BIỆT	have a special talent	6
43	HỌC TRÒ ĐẶC BIỆT	special student	5
44	KỸ NĂNG ĐẶC BIỆT	special skill	5
50	TRÍ NHỚ ĐẶC BIỆT	special memory	5
51	TÀI NĂNG ĐẶC BIỆT	special gift	5
54	THẾ GIỚI ĐẶC BIỆT	special world	5

In summary, the findings in this section have illustrated that the medical frame in the Vietnamese media positioned autism as a disease, a disorder or an acquired form of suffering, which needed to be fixed with intervention and treatment. When a medical frame was deployed, people on the autism spectrum were regularly associated with either abnormal behaviours or special talents.

5.5. Autism framed as family stories

As discussed in section 5.2, children, mothers, fathers, parents and families were talked about the most frequently in the corpus. Table 2 in section 5.2 already presented words such as *trẻ/con/bé [child]* and *mẹ [mother]* in the top list of single words. Table 5 sorted from the cluster frequency list words that were highly related to family life. The frequent references to all family members and their roles suggested that autism stories were regularly framed as family stories.

The concordance lists of *mẹ [mother], bố/ba/cha [father], bố mẹ/ba mẹ/cha mẹ [parents]* and *gia đình [family]* revealed that when they were talked about, family members were usually mentioned in relation to their roles, hopes and challenges in caring for their children with autism. In the existing scholarly literature, the family frame is related to the personal stories or episodic frames that prior studies have identified as common in discourse about autism (Bie & Tang, 2015; A. E. Holton et al., 2014; Kang, 2013; McKeever, 2012).

Table 5: The family theme in the cluster frequency list

N	Cluster	Translation	Freq.	%
8	GIA ĐÌNH	families	1051	0.18
12	CHA MẸ	parents	852	0.15
15	PHỤ HUYNH	parents	740	0.13
22	CHO CON	for children	643	0.11
34	TRẺ EM	children	544	0.09
35	ĐỨA TRẺ	the child	535	0.09
54	CON TRAI	son	441	0.08
58	CẬU BÉ	little boy	432	0.07
61	BỐ MẸ	parents	411	0.07
89	NGƯỜI MẸ	mother	328	0.06

Family life with autism was related to *nước mắt [tears]* (179 times), *lo lắng [worry/anxiety]* (167 times), *căng thẳng [stress]* (109 times), *áp lực [pressure]* (80 times), *sợ hãi [fear]* (69 times), *hoang mang [puzzling/confusion]* (42 times), *tuyệt vọng [despair]* (32 times) and *bi kịch [tragedy]* (12 times). Parents' care for and support of childen with autism were described with war-like terms such as *cuộc chiến [battles]* (24 times), *chiến đấu [to fight against]* (27 times), *đối mặt [to confront]* (58 times) and *chống lại [to combat]* (19 times). While some of these words appeared with relative low frequency, collectively, autism was often described with negative stereotypes, making family life with autism a fearful prospect.

5.6. Autism framed as a social policy matter

Even though social policy is recognized as one of the frames in existing literature about autism representation (A. E. Holton et al., 2014; Kang, 2013; McKeever, 2012), it appeared insignificant in the Vietnamese media corpus. Thus, both inductive and deductive procedures were undertaken to look for patterns in the word and cluster frequency lists and at the same time to search for words hypothetically used to construct the particular frame.

In the top cluster frequency list, there appeared such words as *hoà nhập [integrate/integration/integrative], xã hội [society]* and *cộng đồng [community],* but to determine whether or not they construct the social policy frame, their own connotations and collocations must be examined. There were 495 incidents of *hòa nhập [integrate/integration/integrative]*, making it the 41st most common cluster in the corpus. *Hoà nhập* is a compound word in Vietnamese, where *hoà* literally means *to mix* and *nhập* means *to fit in/enter/merge/integrate*. The Vietnamese language does not really have an equivalence for *inclusion*, even though official documents sometimes use *hoà nhập* interchangeably to indicate both *integration* and *inclusion*. Linguistically, the words *include, inclusive* and *inclusion* in English put more focus on the institutional agency and environment, where a school, community and society play active agented roles in offering inclusive and enabling conditions for everyone, taking into account individuals' diverse needs. The word *hoà nhập*

[integrate/integrative/integration] in Vietnamese puts more focus on the individuals' capacity to fit in, making individuals the active agents of integration.

The words in Table 6 were those which stood within 5 words to the left and 5 words to the right of *hòa nhập [integrate/integrative/integration]*. *Hòa nhập [integrate/integrative/integration]* most frequently collocated with *trẻ [child]*, in a total of 158 instances, as demonstrated in Table 6. Of these 158 instances, *trẻ [child] stood on the left of hoà nhập [integrate/integrative/integration] in 110 instances, which meant that trẻ [child] acted as the agented subject in the sentences. Similarly, hoà nhập [integrate/integrative/integration]* collocated with *cộng đồng [community], xã hội [society], trường học [schoo] and giáo dục [education]* in a total of 303 instances. In those collocations, *cộng đồng [community]* and *xã hội [society] stood mostly on the right of hoà nhập [integrate],* which suggested that *hoà nhập [integrate]* was used as a verb, with the connotation that individuals had to make efforts to fit in with the community, not the other way around.

Table 6: Collocation list of hoà nhập [integrate/integrative/integration]

N	Word	Translation	Total	Total Left	Total Right
1	HÒA NHẬP	integrate/integrative/integration	491	0	0
2	TRẺ	child	158	110	48
3	VỚI	with/into	136	8	128
4	ĐỒNG	[com]munity	108	1	107
5	CỘNG	com[munity]	106	1	105
6	TỰ	au[tism]	104	81	23
7	KỶ	[au]tism	102	87	15
8	HỘI	[so[ciety]]	96	34	62
9	CÓ	has/have	95	78	17
11	HỌC	learn	77	60	17
12	TRƯỜNG	school	74	39	35
13	ĐƯỢC	are subject to/entitled to	69	32	37
14	XÃ	so[ciety]	67	4	63
15	GIÁO	edu[cation]	65	57	8
16	GIÚP	help	63	62	1
19	DỤC	[edu]cation	56	50	6
28	SỐNG	live/life	36	2	34

Importantly, the words in Table 6 did not indicate if policy played a role in the practice of integration. Hence, a deductive search was conducted with such keywords as *chính sách [policy], quyền [right], bình đẳng [equity]* and *công bằng [equal/equality/fair/fairness/justice].* There were only 40 entries of *chính sách [policy]* in the corpus, of which 25 entries talked about the absence of policy, or call for a policy for people living and working with individuals on the autism spectrum, and the rest discussed policies in other countries. The frequency of *chính sách [policy]* was less than 0.01% of the text, so insignificant that WordSmith did not even register its frequency. Similarly, *quyền [right]* in relation to people living with autism only appeared 21 times out of 88 entries of *quyền*. There were only 15 instances of *bình đẳng [equity]* and 15 instances of *công bằng [equal/equality/fair/fairness/justice]* in the whole corpus of 11 years' media coverage. As observed in section 5.2, authorities were not

significantly referred to in the corpus, which suggested that the media did not hold them accountable for autism issues. Both the presence and absence of certain semantic elements significantly suggested the influence of popular ideologies in the corpus. So autism was represented in terms of the social policy frame in so far as the above keywords and collocations suggested, but whether autism was actually constructed as a social policy matter that needs institutional attention and solution in such instances requires a close CDA to confirm.

5.7. Visibility vs voice in the media discourse about autism

After analysing the corpus, it has been found that children with autism were the most frequently talked about; however, they were rarely given the opportunity to speak for themselves. This demonstrated their high visibility but minimal voice in the corpus. It is common that children are silenced in Vietnamese culture. Traditionally, within the Confucian hierarchical structuring of family and social relationships, children are expected to obey adults and not to take part in their talk. Some of the old moral virtues in the forms of proverbs or popular phrases leave their legacy in today's dynamics between Vietnamese adults and children such as "gọi dạ, bảo vâng" [called and reply, told and obey] or "cha mẹ đặt đâu con ngồi đấy" [if your parents seat you somewhere, sit there] and "trẻ con biết gì chuyện người lớn, không được nói leo" [children do not understand adults' talk, so do not chime in]. Children are not always treated with the belief that they have important opinions in matters relating to themselves. The fact that many children with autism cannot talk and have an intellectual disability may make their opinions and voices even more ignored. The practice of formulating child-related policies and laws from an adult perspective originates from traditional and deep-rooted moral values in Vietnam (Pham and Jones, as cited in Phelps, Nhung, Graham, & Geeves, 2012). Holdsworth (2000) suggests that the exercise of children's voice is partly dependent on how willingly social agents listen to children's voices and if their voices are translated into meaningful civic action or agency. Phelps, Graham, Tuyet, and Geeves (2014) hold that voice should be interpreted as "activities that encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue and action" (p. 34). Three necessary factors for civic participation include space (or the opportunity to convey one's view), audience and influence (Lundy, 2007), but in Vietnam, the very first factor, the opportunity for children and individuals with autism to raise their voice in the media, is missing.

Building on the insight gained during my doctoral research, I informally posted a short note on a Facebook group, whose members are Vietnamese parents and professionals interested in the autism topic. I suggested that the voices of individuals with autism need to be heard more often in mainstream media and elsewhere. Some parents endorsed the proposal, but others, including advocates, responded that individuals with autism did not know how to respond appropriately to the media, and some were not able to speak or had nothing to say. These parents' concerns might have originated from the pressure of social norms, which could pose a stumbling block to their own advocacy efforts.

Another clear finding from the corpus analysis was that mothers were the second most frequently talked about actors in the corpus, and predictably fathers' role in caring and supporting children with autism was less frequently reported, which reinforced the perception that it was mainly the responsibility of mothers to care for and support their children. Literature shows that Vietnamese women take more responsibility for domestic labour, especially in childcare (Jayakody & Phuong, 2013; Teerawichitchainan, Knodel, Loi, & Huy, 2010). Mothers are also blamed more often for their children's disabilities (Duong et al., 2008), even when the disabilities are congenital.

Collectively, parents were talked about much more frequently than were professionals in healthcare, education and social affairs in the Vietnamese media coverage about autism; however, professionals' voices were quoted much more often in the corpus. This was similar to media coverage in the United States, as reported by Kang (2013) and McKeever (2012), which shows professionals are the most quoted sources in the media discourse about autism. The Vietnamese media assigned the responsibility of caring and supporting individuals with autism mainly to the families, but the media often sought professionals' opinions when they needed to draw on medical or scientific expertise. I will talk about the implication of the dominance of professionals' voice in chapter 7, when I analyse articles in the medical frame. The context illuminated in specific articles will provide more nuance than this chapter's panoramic view of data.

Apart from reporters' preference for quoting professionals, some professionals had a strong motivation to promote their services or expertise, while parents in Vietnam were often reluctant to talk in the media about their experience with autism. In my own media advocacy work, it has proved challenging to find families willing to share their stories with journalists. Not many parents were ready to come out in the mass media. Therefore, the media tended to interview some out-spoken parents time and again even though their stories, problems and opinions were not necessarily representative of the wider community living with autism. Some parents pointed out that reporters often manipulated what they said to fit with their predetermined agendas and messages, and these parents worried that the audience would misjudge their opinions and stories when they were distorted by the media. Some parents did not believe that talking to the media would take the stories anywhere or have any particular impact on their own child, so they would rather keep matters private. Many parents of individuals with autism chose to mute their own voice, let alone the voice of the individuals with autism, because of concerns around face-keeping, privacy, and distrust in the media. Chinese parents shared the same concerns about face-keeping and shame (McCabe, 2007). So, in the Confucian-Communist cultures of Vietnam and China, many family members self-silenced because of social pressure, or low awareness, or due to the disbelief that their voices would have any impact in the context of these Communist-ruled countries.

5.8. Conclusion

When framed as exhibiting a medical disease, individuals with autism in Vietnam were regularly stereotyped with abnormality, behavioural problems and challenges; they needed special care and treatment, but they were also reported as exhibiting special talents. It is important to note that in Vietnamese culture, a disease is commonly perceived as a health problem that needs medical treatment with the hope of a cure. When Vietnamese people use the word *bệnh [disease]*, they do not see the condition as a disability or an aspect of human diversity. This also suggests that stigma was at work in the autism discourse, which was similar to what has been found by other studies of the broad disabilities discourse in Vietnam (Gammeltoft, 2008a, 2008b, 2014; X. T. Nguyen, 2015). When too much focus was put on problematic behaviours and challenges, the media constructed an ideology that exclusion was natural and justifiable.

When children, parents and families were the most frequently talked about, and the family situation was described with sensational language, the media reports framed autism as a family problem, rather than a social policy matter. Various studies (Bie & Tang, 2015; Kang, 2013; Kang et al., 2010) have pointed out that if autism or an illness is articulated as a family or personal problem within the episodic frame, this makes the public less likely to hold government agencies or public officials accountable for the improvement of problems, thereby lowering the expectation that the public can take part in the political process of determining solutions and outcomes. The analysis in this chapter has strikingly revealed that Vietnamese authorities rarely appeared in the corpus. If they were mentioned at all, the authorities were more passive objects than active agents. Autism was not defined as a disability in the Vietnamese legal system until January 2019, and professional development in autism treatment and support in the country was still in its infancy, as reported by several studies (Ha, Whittaker, & Rodger, 2017; Ha et al., 2014; Van Cong et al., 2015). Vietnamese media were similar to their Chinese colleagues in terms of not holding the authorities accountable for building and realizing an inclusion policy for people with autism (Bie & Tang, 2015).

The use of particular language, namely the use of *hòa nhập* with the connotation *of integrate/integrative/integration*, rather than *include/inclusive/inclusion*, constructed and reflected the ideology that individuals had to be normalized to fit in and be accepted in social life, rather than expecting the community to facilitate those individuals' citizenship rights in relation to legally guaranteed access to education, healthcare and other social engagements. Thus, the ideology of integration in Vietnamese media was not yet in step with what inclusion means in other countries.

This chapter has used corpus framing analysis to provide an objective and broad overview of the representation of autism in Vietnamese online news media between 2006 and 2016. To thoroughly understand the representation of autism in the media, an in-depth CDA will need to be conducted, to see the matter in more focused political, economic, social, cultural and textual contexts. This corpus

framing analysis served the exploratory research purpose well by identifying objective patterns in the media discourse to shape and facilitate a closer CDA of the topic.

6. Chapter 6: Voice, policy advocacy in the media for people living with autism

6.1. Introduction

Parents of individuals with autism in Vietnam do call for state authorities to develop a policy to include and support their children in education, healthcare and other social engagements. Generally, Vietnamese people do speak up about problems directly affecting their lives in the media and other public spheres. Given that the mechanisms for accountability are weak in the country (Thiem, 2015; Vasavakul, 2014), raising one's voice is one thing; holding those in power accountable is another. The consistent low index of voice and accountability in Vietnam (World Bank, 2016) reflects and affects how the media and other stakeholders perceive the capacity of their voices to make an impact in holding state authorities and other social players accountable. In everyday life, lay people often sarcastically say: "No worries, everything will be taken care of by the Party and Government". This cliché originated in the centrally planned economy period governed by state welfare and paternalism, but today it is used to mean the opposite: that you have to take care of your own wellbeing, as no state authorities will do so for you.

This chapter will examine the mediation of parents and advocates' efforts to communicate their "hopes" about an integration policy for people with autism, and how state officials responded or did not respond to citizens' calls. The way media outlets reported integration and justice issues for individuals with autism reflected and reinforced the popular ideology on social facilitation. Essentially, with in-depth critical discourse analysis, the chapter illuminates whether the social policy frame was articulated in the articles that talked about integration and justice for children with autism.

This chapter will build on the findings from the corpus framing analysis in chapter 5 to conduct a CDA of a small sample of articles that discussed the admission and integration of students with autism into the mainstream education system. The chapter will also look into coverage of a specific child abuse incident at an autism centre, where state officers were most quoted in the whole corpus. At the first glance, these news articles looked like they were advocating for a more inclusive, fair and safe schooling opportunity for children with autism, but the CDA reveals a more complex picture. Because parents and families were mainly concerned about education for their school-age children with autism, this chapter focuses on the integration of individuals with autism in educational more than in other social settings.

The analysis of the articles mainly explores three sub-themes in the media coverage, namely (1) how and why parents and advocates for autism were positioned in the media coverage as asking for privilege, rather than as demanding for universal human rights to be realized; (2) how and why the media and state officers naturalized exclusion and self-exclusion of individuals with autism and their

families; and (3) how and why state officers turned toward “the blame game narrative” to avoid responsibility in a particular child abuse incident, instead of being accountable.

Titles and leads in each article will be analysed closely, as they set the scene for the whole text. Most of the time, the entirety of articles will be scrutinized, but sometimes, to save space, only selected paragraphs will be examined. Some photos will be discussed when they played an integral role in conveying the messages of the articles, although the space available in the chapter is not sufficient for analysing all accompanying visuals. After the empirical data is presented and analysed, discussion of social-cultural values, political economy and professional media practice in Vietnam will be mobilized to explain why the media in Vietnam constructed integration for students with autism in the way they did. Even though social policy was a minor frame in the corpus as observed in chapter 5, this frame is examined first because in Vietnam, the power of the authoritarian state is strong, and the relative importance or indifference they give to a certain matter will profoundly impact media and social attitudes. Understanding whether or not the social policy frame was presented in these articles will lay the foundation for understanding other discursive contents better.

As explained in the theoretical discussion in chapter 2, the CDA approach will be used to unpack ideology and power relations in the media discourse about autism in Vietnam. It will trace the links between specific textual representations and wider political, economic, social and cultural contexts. The identities of different actors as well as the relations between them (Fairclough, 1995, p. 12) will be revealed through the analysis. The objects of analysis here are the positions, identities and voices of different actors in the media discourse because these reflected the social construction of autism phenomenon from different perspectives. Media practice certainly played a role in what was presented in the text, but media editorial staff were not the only actors who decide how autism was represented; they worked with other news sources to articulate the social construction of autism in this public space. As such, how these social actors presented themselves and were presented with the embedded ideologies is critical to the understanding of the media narratives.

6.2. Integration policy on paper and in practice

To contextualize the CDA of articles in this section, it is necessary to mention that Vietnam’s Education Law makes it clear in Article 11 that primary and secondary education is universal, the state is to ensure the conditions for universal education nationwide (Vietnam National Assembly, 2005). Vietnam’s Law on Persons with Disabilities stipulates in Article 28 that the state enables persons with disabilities to participate in integrative education (Vietnam National Assembly, 2010). The same law also stipulates in Article 29 that “teachers and education administrators participating in the education of persons with disabilities and personnel supporting the education of persons with disabilities shall be trained and updated in professional skills to meet the requirements of education of persons with disabilities” (Vietnam National Assembly, 2010). Furthermore, Article 30 formalizes

the responsibilities of the educational institutions "[t]o ensure teaching and learning conditions suitable to persons with disabilities, [and] to be disallowed to refuse admission of persons with disabilities in contravention of law". So, in terms of the legal framework, Vietnamese laws promise every citizen in the school age the right to access universal and integrative education.

The concept of inclusive education has been globally and officially endorsed by UNESCO and member countries since 1994 in the Salamanca Statement, which asserts that regular schools with an inclusive approach are "the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (UNESCO, 1994, p. iv). X. T. Nguyen (2015) observes that in response to UNESCO's call for institutionalizing the Salamanca Statement, policymakers in Vietnam seem to incorporate a more supportive approach to students with special needs. Vietnam is also a signatory to the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006), which stipulates the required socio-political conditions for achieving autonomy, participation, equality, non-discrimination and inclusion of people with disabilities in society. The emphasis of the Convention is on the full participation of persons with disabilities in all tenets of life, as well as the required attitudinal and legal conditions to realize such participation (Buntinx & Schalock, 2010, p. 284). Rosenthal (2009, p. 13) suggests by signing the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, Vietnam has demonstrated its intention to adapt society to the needs of individuals with disabilities. As discussed in chapter 3, the social model of disability argues the way society is organised may hinder the livelihood of persons with disabilities, creating barriers to their inclusion, so the state and social entities should enable people with disabilities to realize their citizenship rights by structural policy changes and social facilitation (Harris & Enfield, 2003, p. 169).

However, the shift to inclusive education in Vietnam is described as an improperly executed practice that has caused challenges to schools and students because children with disabilities are placed in classrooms with general educators who lack training about special and inclusive education (Le, Lopez, & Ta, 2000). X. T. Nguyen points out that "inclusive education in Vietnam is in tension with a one-size-fits-all approach of the 'education for all' movement, creating a challenge for meaningful inclusion" (p. 95). Rydstrom (2010) argues inclusive education can only be implemented in a proper way by a team of educators who are trained to facilitate students with special needs.

Van Cong et al. (2015) lament that in order to organise any effective training for professionals in autism diagnosis and intervention, institutions often have to invite foreign experts to Vietnam, which is challenging logistically and financially. Xuan Hai (2016) at Vietnam National Education University estimates that the country would need one million teachers for special and inclusive education for kindergartens, primary and secondary schools only, with the assumption that the schools would be facilitated to employ one special education teacher to support students with all types of special needs. However, after over 10 years of training, there have been only 3,000 teachers of special and inclusive

education nationwide (Xuan Hai, 2016). For this reason, it could take hundreds of years to produce enough teachers and professionals to meet this need, if there is no radical breakthrough in the field. The market responds to the demand by simply employing unqualified staff at private autism centres.

By law, a child with a disability certificate should have an individualized education programme in integrative schools, which sets customized expectations in terms of academic performance or participation in school activities, as well as necessary support. But this individualized education programme is barely existent in practice. Schools sometimes informally waive certain academic expectations for the students. And, importantly, if the students with disabilities perform academically lower than the school's average, that will not count against the performance of the teachers, the class and the school. The reduced pressure might be the most important benefit of the disability certificate that many parents hope for. Nevertheless, while that piece of paper reduces institutional and individual performance pressures, it does not often lay the groundwork for individuals with autism to be supported in any other meaningful ways in school settings or in other social environments.

As discussed in chapter 3, the emergence of the social model in disability policy in Vietnam has often been due to the pressure from international development assistance donors, but the substantive commitments of the social model are not actualized in real life. While Vietnamese laws may assert a progressive approach in line with international conventions, their de facto enforcement is not typically monitored and upheld. Autism was not officially recognized as a disability and included in any policy regarding education, healthcare or social affairs until January 2019. And even when autism is categorized as a disability, how people with autism are facilitated in their education and other social engagement is in question.

There are high economic costs in excluding people with disabilities from the global and national development agenda. Furthermore, the exclusion of people with disabilities affects their whole families, in terms of the time and money required to provide care and support for them (p. 63). When the state and institutional stakeholders do not facilitate people with disabilities to fully participate in social life, they are both violating their human rights and hampering productivity.

This section will start with a CDA analysis of the article *Trẻ tự kỷ lận đận con đường hòa nhập: Nước mắt của người mẹ [Autistic children hopelessly/unsuccessfully struggle on the integration path: tears of a mother]* (Bạch Dương, 2015). There were ideological implications embedded right in the title of the article. Autistic children and their families were portrayed in a miserable position that needed pity and mercy. The headline used the adverb *lận đận [hopelessly/helplessly/unsuccessfully]*. Despite best efforts, the English translation was not fully equivalent to the connotations of the Vietnamese version. In its original Vietnamese, *lận đận* suggested that someone was struggling to do something time and again without success due to bad luck, difficulties and/or a disadvantaged background. So, the use of this phrase indicated access to educational opportunities was not considered to be an

entitlement of a citizen, when they had to struggle time and again to get it. Tears were highlighted in the title, making this mother an object of pity rather than legitimate right holder.

The news article was republished at *24h.com.vn* on April 4, 2015, from its original on *Infonet.vn*. *24h.com.vn* is a media aggregation website that mostly republishes articles from other outlets. As such, the website tends to pick up articles with a sensational, gossipy tone to grab readers' attention. The article was nearly 800 words long and started with this lead:

> Đã có không ít phụ huynh phải ngậm ngùi đưa con trở lại trường chuyên biệt vì bé không thể hòa nhập được với các bạn trong trường bình thường. (Bạch Dương, 2015)
>
> Many parents have to pitifully take their children back to specialized schools because the children cannot integrate with other friends at normal schools.

When the article stated that parents had to pitifully withdraw their children because the children could not integrate, this lead presupposed concept that children with autism were fully assigned with the task of adapting to the school environment, in a way that obscured the responsibilities of other agents. What was not mentioned in the above lead was the possible pressure that the school put on parents to make them "pitifully take their children back to specialized schools".

Right under the lead, the article continued with the sub-headline *Không để cho các bạn yên [Not leaving other friends alone],* and five paragraphs talking about the problems that autistic children made for the classroom teachers and their classmates, as well as the discrimination they faced. The sub-headline itself set out to blame the child with autism as troublemaker. This was the first paragraph under the sub-headline:

> Một giáo viên tiểu học tại quận Bình Thạnh đề nghị giấu tên than phiền: "Tôi dạy lớp 1, trong lớp có một bé tự kỷ, giờ học thì đứng lên đi loạn trong lớp, giờ ngủ trưa thì la hét, đập phá, không để cho các bạn yên. Dỗ thế nào cũng không được, tôi đành phải bảo mẹ bé đến trưa đón bé về cho các bạn khác được ngủ". (Bạch Dương, 2015)
>
> A teacher at a primary school in Bình Thạnh district, who requested anonymity, complains: "I teach grade 1, in my class there is an autistic child, in the class time, he/she stands up and wanders disruptively in the classroom, at nap time, he/she screams, destroys things, does not let other friends sleep. Coaxing him/her is to no avail, I give up and tell his/her Mum to take him/her home to let other friends sleep".

When the behavioural problem of an autistic child was highlighted this early in the article, it created an impression that the faults here belonged solely to the child. Noticeably, the problem was presented as a complaint, not a neutral observation, by an authoritative figure, the teacher. The article used the

verb *than phiền [complain]* to quote the teacher in the first paragraph, implicitly justifying the negative comment by an institutional representative. The focus of the teacher's complaint was that the student's behaviours caused disruption and challenges for the teacher and other classmates. There was no suggestion that the school was required by law to have a system to support and accommodate students with diverse needs to ensure their right to universal education. The article did not mention any individualized approach and pedagogical effort by the teacher and school to help the student to manage the challenges; the responsibility was simply pushed back on to the family. It was assumed that if the child faced difficulties in fitting in, he/she had to go home and the family had to deal with it, not the teacher nor the school. This exclusionary practice was mostly taken for granted in the Vietnamese education system. Accommodation for students with special needs was still a new idea that had not made its way out of legal documents into real life yet.

The second paragraph generalized that the above scenario was just one of many real situations faced by autistic children attending integrative schooling. And a mother was described as not able to hide her tears when she said:

> Vì áp lực xã hội, hiệu trưởng buộc phải nhận con tôi bị tự kỷ vào trường. Thế nhưng, khi đi tham quan thì con tôi buộc phải ở nhà với lý do cháu sẽ làm xấu hình ảnh của trường. Rồi những buổi đồng diễn thể dục dưới sân trường, tất cả đều được xuống sân trường, chỉ duy nhất con mình buộc phải ở trên lớp. Có ai muốn sinh con ra bị khuyết tật đâu, cái bọn trẻ cần là sự sẻ chia, đồng cảm chứ không phải những khẩu hiệu hay túi quà (an anonymous mother, as cited in Bạch Dương, 2015).
>
> Because of the social pressure, the principal has to unwillingly admit my autistic child to the school. But when there is a school trip, my child is forced to stay at home with the excuse that he will spoil the image of the school. Then at school aerobic demonstrations in the schoolyard, all students will perform in the yard; only my son alone will be forced to stay upstairs in the classroom. No one wants to give birth to a disabled child. The thing that the children need is the [social] sharing and empathy, not a slogan or a bag of gifts.

This mother mentioned the principal in the first sentence because of his/her reluctant admission of her son. She acknowledged the "social pressure" that the principal was subject to, which indicated that in her understanding, the school's leader was aware - to some extent - of the need to include children with autism. However, in the second and third sentences that signified clear acts of discrimination against her son, no specific actors were mentioned. Both sentences used the passive voice. There was no direct attribution of responsibilities to the class teachers nor the school principal for these acts of exclusion. This is not unusual in Vietnam, where parents often avoid attributing responsibility directly to the school. It could be explained by imbalanced power relations, where

parents feel powerless and helpless, fearing that if they raise their voice or criticize teachers in a more direct way, their children would likely be more excluded and discriminated against or even expelled.

This avoidance of responsibility attribution is also the legacy of a Confucian morality of paying full respect to teachers, regardless of their actions or inaction. What cements the Confucian order is the "deferential and unquestioning behavior toward those in authority" (Neher, 1994, p. 954). The legacy of the centrally planned economy still exists in the public service sector, which also positions those who are responsible for distributing products and delivering services as holding power towards consumers. Even though Vietnam has been moving toward a hypothetically more customer-oriented market economy, this attitude has not changed much, especially within state-owned schools, public hospitals and public service providers. As Neher (1994) generalizes about Asian societies, when a person has the authority to distribute resources, he or she holds power over those who want to get access to them (p. 950). This "superior-subordinate relationship" applies in Vietnam as the dominant pattern of exchange, with unequal resources and imbalanced responsibilities (p. 950), especially acute in education and healthcare services. In the Vietnamese public education and healthcare system, demand is always higher than supply; hence, providers are not under pressure to provide high-quality service with a customer-oriented service attitude. Instead, they position themselves as giving favour to users. These kinds of power relations is also seen in Vietnamese popular proverbs such as "Muốn con hay chữ thì yêu lấy thầy" [If you want your child to excel academically, love the teachers] or "Qua sông phải luỵ đò" [To cross the river, you have to fawn upon the ferryman].

At the end of the above quoted paragraph, the mother was said: "No one wants to give birth to a disabled child, the thing that the children need is the [social] sharing and empathy, not a slogan or a bag of gifts." In Vietnamese culture, it is not uncommon to hear a mother say no one wants to give birth to a disabled child, attesting to the deep influence of the eugenic ideology perpetuated in prior formal policies and popular culture, as discussed in chapter 3. It is also a common practice in Vietnam that people with disabilities or disadvantaged living conditions will be given "a bag of gifts" on celebratory occasions by local authorities or other social entities. The media will feature this PR act with some loud spoken slogans and stories. It is a very symbolic and artificial act of showing how the Party-State and society care. By invoking the phrase, the mother's message in this article was that her child did not need propaganda or charity; her child just needed to be practically accepted and included. The article highlighted another issue:

> Không ít trẻ tự kỷ bị chính giáo viên của mình kỳ thị, đó là còn chưa kể trong trường, trong lớp không có ai chơi cùng, bị bạn bè bắt nạt. Thực tế cho thấy, có rất ít trẻ tự kỷ có thể học đến hết THPT. Đã có không ít phụ huynh phải ngậm ngùi đưa con trở lại trường chuyên biệt vì bé không thể hòa nhập được với các bạn trong trường bình thường. (Bạch Dương, 2015)

> Many autistic children are discriminated against by their own teachers, not to say in the school and in the class. They have no friends to play with or are bullied by their peers… The reality reveals that only few autistic children can go through high schools. Many parents have to pitifully take their children back to specialized schools because the children could not integrate with other friends at normal schools.

In the above paragraph, the writer called out what the mother did not explicitly term as "discrimination". Notably, the reporter openly named the exclusionary and discriminatory situation with a critical label. This showed the willingness of a media writer to challenge the status quo in this particular text. At the same time, the sensational word *ngậm ngùi [pitifully]* was again used to describe the act of parents moving their autistic children out of "normal" schools. Though there were some connotations of painfulness and bitterness, *ngậm ngùi [pitifully]* did not convey any sense of contestation; instead, it was a submissive act. Withdrawing the child out of school seemed to be the only choice. There seemed to be no alternative or solution when the act was modified with *ngậm ngùi [pitifully].* According to the assumptions implicitly underlying the above narrative, children with autism could not integrate first and foremost because of their own behavioural problems and lack of integration capability.

The writer then asked the question: "What pathway for children with autism?" and indirectly quoted the teachers once again about the challenges they faced:

> Rất nhiều giáo viên dạy trẻ tự kỷ học hòa nhập cho biết, họ gặp rất nhiều khó khăn vì gần như không được đào tạo để dạy những trẻ này. Với sĩ số trên 40 học sinh/lớp, cô giáo không thể dành quá nhiều thời gian cho học sinh bị tự kỷ. (Bạch Dương, 2015)

> Many teachers teaching autistic children at integrative education schools said they face many difficulties because they are mostly not trained to teach these children. With over 40 students per class, the female teachers cannot spend too much time with the students suffering autism.

Clearly, the writer noted the lack of support for both teachers and students here. However, even when the reporter touched upon the issue of teachers' training and capability, she did not clearly spell out that by law it was the responsibility of the education system to train the teachers and accommodate students with special needs. Furthermore, over-crowded classrooms are a common problem in the Vietnamese education system. In big cities, there are regularly over 40 students, sometimes even over 60 students in one classroom. By mentioning this phenomenon, the article explained the specific problem of exclusion by pointing to the general problem of overcrowded classrooms. Apparently, even an average student struggles in such a system, let alone students with special needs. In this way, the article implicitly justified the fact that teachers could not personalize their teaching approach to the learning needs of students with autism. The article did not seek a solution from different social

stakeholders, such as the schools or the education administration at city and ministerial levels. Instead, it went as far as stating the needs of children with autism:

> Giáo dục hòa nhập không chỉ là đưa trẻ tự kỷ tới trường để học. Trẻ tự kỷ rất cần được hòa nhập trong giao tiếp xã hội như hiểu được ngôn ngữ hình thể, biết vượt qua mâu thuẫn trong quan hệ bạn bè, linh hoạt trong nhiều tình huống khác nhau… Nếu không có sự hỗ trợ từ nhà chuyên môn, nếu các thầy cô không được hướng dẫn rất cụ thể, trẻ tự kỷ sẽ không thể nào kết bạn, duy trì quan hệ bạn bè, khi đó "hòa nhập" chỉ còn mang tính hình thức. (Bạch Dương, 2015)

> Integrative education does not only mean taking the autistic children to schools to learn. Autistic children need to be integrated in social interactions such as to understand body language, to overcome conflicts in friendship and to be flexible in many different situations... Without support from professionals, and if the teachers are not guided specifically, autistic children will not be able to make friends, maintain friendship, and "integration" is only superficial.

The article acknowledged the need for integrative education and what it meant to be integrated. So, this reporter identified the key social policy issue, but she did not pursue the question of how to build capacity for professionals and teachers to facilitate children with autism in inclusive educational settings. The bigger fundamental policy issue, that schools need to employ qualified specialists to assist teachers and support students with diverse needs, was not clarified in this article.

The article ended with the following paragraph, which briefly touched upon the policy provisions for adults with autism, but it read as a cursory add-on, without any elaboration:

> Thêm vào đó, hòa nhập, dạy nghề cho trẻ lớn bị tự kỷ cũng đang gặp rất nhiều khó khăn do chưa có một trung tâm nào chuyên về vấn đề này. Nhà nước cũng chưa có chính sách hỗ trợ nào đối với trẻ khuyết tật, đặc biệt là trẻ tự kỷ ở độ tuổi lớn được hòa nhập làm việc theo những mô hình đặc biệt. Chính vì thế, công tác "tiếp nối" trong điều trị, hòa nhập cho trẻ tự kỷ gặp rất nhiều khó khăn. (Bạch Dương, 2015)

> In addition, integration [and] vocational training for autistic young adults faces lots of difficulties because there is not any centre specialized in this matter. The state has not issued any policy supporting disabled individuals, especially grown-ups, to integrate and work in specialized models. Therefore, the "continuity" factor in the treatment [and] integration of autistic people faces many difficulties.

This article was one of the few texts in the corpus touching on the issue of integration for grown-ups with autism. While limited, the article did point out the state was not acting on the policy arena in response to the needs of its grown-up citizens with autism.

Overall, the article mostly discussed specific personal cases at a micro-level. No policymaker or state officer was interviewed in the article. The article identified the state as an agent that should be accountable but did not follow through by doing the concrete "accountability work" of journalism. Generally, with the bureaucracy and administrative hierarchies in Vietnam, it often takes a long time for a reporter to approach a state officer. With its high power distance in the administrative hierarchy, in many cases, officers at different levels will pass interview requests around to different departments or administration levels, or will simply keep silent. In the absence of any mention of state officers, the article did not press for how the issue of integration or inclusion for children and adults with autism might be addressed as a social demand or a rightful need. With the dominant emphasis on personal problems and brief mention of the state authority, the media report reinforced the perceptions that the problems of integration in the school system needed to be resolved by individuals, rather than to be addressed by state policy, schools and community.

In the same vein, the article *Nhiều trường công lập từ chối trẻ tự kỷ [Many public schools refuse to admit autistic children]* was published on 8 January 2010 on *News.zing.vn* (2010). The *Zing* brand name belongs to the private company Vinagame (VNG), which is known for its various websites and applications for music, games, social media, e-commerce and electronic payments. *News.zing.vn* was founded in 2008 and has become the most popular news website in Vietnam in multiple years in Alexa.com's ranking (Alexa, 2016). In recent years, it has been investing more into developing its own journalistic news content and continues to republish trending articles from other media houses. The news article dedicated two thirds of its space to reporting individual cases in which public schools rejected admission to autistic students, with sensational language. Only in the ninth paragraph, the article quoted the Vice Director of Hà Nội Department of Education and Training as followed:

> Với những học sinh tự kỷ nhẹ, nhà trường không được quyền từ chối. Đó là khẳng định của bà Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Bích, Phó Giám đốc Sở Giáo dục và Đào tạo Hà Nội. Bà Bích cho biết, Hà Nội hiện có trường công lập chuyên biệt cho trẻ câm điếc, trẻ bị khiếm thị và thiểu năng trí tuệ nhưng chưa có trường công lập dành riêng cho trẻ tự kỷ. Mô hình này có lẽ phải chờ xã hội hoá. Về việc nhiều trẻ tự kỷ bị các trường công lập từ chối, bà Bích khẳng định, nếu các cháu mắc bệnh ở thể nhẹ, có thể tiếp thu được bài thì nhà trường không được từ chối quyền được đến trường của các cháu. Như thế là sai chủ trương và không công bằng. (News.zing.vn, 2010)
>
> To the mild autistic students, schools do not have the right to reject their admission. That is confirmed by Ms. Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Bích, Vice Director of Hà Nội Department of Education and Training. Ms. Bích said, Hà Nội has public specialized schools for deaf and mute children, and children suffering blindness or vision impairment and intellectual impairment, but not a public school for autistic children. This model will possibly have to wait for socialization. [Responding

> to the matter] about many autistic children being rejected by public schools, Ms. Bích confirmed: if the children have the disease at a mild level, and can learn, then the school cannot reject their right to go to school. That is deviating from the direction and not fair.

At the surface level, the article seemed to quote the state official as protecting the education rights of autistic students, but underlying her words was the exclusion of those who were considered not "able to learn" or having more than "mild autism". This was exclusion based on the level of disability or disablism. When not admitted to public integrative schools, children with more than mild autism have to turn to private special education or just stay at home. Private special education centres are expensive for most families (Rydstrom, 2010), and importantly, the quality and ethics in those centres are not closely monitored with strict standards and a credential system (Ha et al. 2014). Further, specialized autism centres are categorized as segregated, not integrative or inclusive education choices, which are not considered optimal for children's development and an inclusive society, as envisioned by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994).

Ms. Bích also suggested that a specialized school for autistic children would "possibly have to wait for socialization". This state official used the hedging word "possibly" to modify the "wait", with both words indicating no commitment or certainty. Generally, the concept of socialization seeks, on the one hand, to diversify funding sources, from private or not-for-profit organisations, to provide educational options and support to meet the diverse needs of citizens, or as London (2010) terms it a self-financed school, founded by private stakeholders (p. 370). On the other hand, it can put financial pressure on the community to provide its own services, and widens the gap in education equality (World Bank as cited in Hirosato & Kitamura, 2009). Socialization (or socially financed education) is a strategy in which the state withdraws from its responsibility to provide universal education to its citizens. The state lets the "invisible hand" of the market mobilize financial and technical resources from private sectors to provide those public services. Socialization in Vietnam can imply an opposite meaning from what is popularly understood elsewhere in the world (London, 2006, 2010). In the context of this news article, the state official of the capital city education sector turned to the concept of socialization to obscure the lack of public education services for students with autism.

Nevertheless, the article attempted to point out that there need to be solutions to the problem of exclusion. The end of the article inserted a box highlighting the draft ordinance on integrative education:

> Theo dự thảo lần thứ 8 Thông tư giáo dục hòa nhập của Bộ GD&ĐT cho trẻ em có hoàn cảnh khó khăn (trong đó có trẻ tự kỷ) mà Bộ đang trưng cầu ý kiến, thì các em được học tập bình đẳng trong các cơ sở giáo dục quốc dân. Các em có quyền nhập học kể cả khi thiếu giấy khai sinh, hộ khẩu hoặc các giấy tờ khác; tuổi đi học của các em có thể cao hơn tuổi của người học

khác theo quy định của Bộ GD&ĐT. Các em được tôn trọng và đối xử bình đẳng trong học tập. Các em được xét miễn học phí và các khoản đóng góp như được cấp SGK, học phẩm, học bổng theo quy định của Bộ GD&ĐT. (News.zing.vn, 2010)

According to the 8th draft of Ministry of Education and Training's ordinance on inclusive education for disadvantaged children (including autistic children) which the Ministry is collecting inputs on, children are entitled to equal schooling at public education institutions. They have the right to learn, even if they do not have a birth certificate, permanent residence registration book or other papers; they can start school later than the standard age as stipulated by the Ministry of Education and Training. The students are respected and treated equally in education. Their tuition and other fees can be considered for exemption, and they are provided with textbooks, stationery and scholarship, as regulated by Ministry of Education and Training.

The summary points about the draft ordinance were not the most relevant points about the needs, requirements and challenges of including children with autism in public integrative education. If the article had raised the point about customizing the curriculum and learning objectives into an individualized education programme with appropriate accommodation to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities, as included in the draft ordinance, it might have been more relevant to the common concern about how students with disabilities can learn in mainstream schools. The article did not present the essence of what was key in inclusive education. Nevertheless, by referring to this draft ordinance, the article attempted to frame the matter of inclusion as a social policy matter. Thus, the article vacillated between the state official's justification of exclusion of students with more than mild disabilities and the writer's attempt to point out what was stipulated in a formal legal document about inclusive education.

6.3. Advocating or asking for a privilege?

With the same concern of advocating for social policy for children with autism, the article *Lận đận đi xin xác nhận khuyết tật cho trẻ tự kỷ [Helplessly/unsuccessfully applying for disability certificate for autistic children]* was published on March 31, 2012, on *News.zing.vn* (Thuỷ Nguyên, 2012). The particular article was republished from an article by Thuỷ Nguyên on *Infonet.vn*.

The article was a long piece of report, containing over 2,000 words. Its title once again used the word *lận đận [helplessly/hopelessly/unsuccessfully]* to modify the act of *xin [applying].* In Vietnamese, *xin* usually has the connotation of someone from an inferior background asking for a favour from a superior, not an act of rightfully applying for something. The article used a personal story in its lead and structures the content with two sub-headlines and two boxes. The article's content was not very cohesive because it tried to cover many themes. The three major themes in the article were: autism

was mistaken for a disease and not recognized as a disability; recognition of advocacy efforts by parents; and lessons about policy advocacy from foreign countries.

The article started with the concern voiced by Lâm Tường Vũ, a father, and Chairman of the Hanoi Club of Families Living with Autism. Vũ stated that: “They are misunderstanding that our children have schizophrenia or other mental types. We cannot do anything but cooperate to help each other and support our children to develop”. This quote did not exactly reflect the spirit of advocacy in the whole article. With this quote, the father seemed to accept that the only choice for families living with autism was mutual self-help. Lâm Tường Vũ was the Chairman and one of the few fathers in a club whose members were mostly mothers. He was often the one who represented and spoke on the Club’s behalf, even though he might not necessarily be among the most active members in the Club’s activities.

The article featured another mother, Ms. Thảo, who perceived herself as *tốt đen, tốt đỏ [black pawn, red pawn].* Chess pawns were used as metaphors here. The pawn is the character with the lowest power in the game, whose function is to protect or sacrifice for the King, the Queen and other more powerful characters in the game. In the case of this mother, when she applied for her child to be eligible for a disability certificate, she felt she was treated like a pawn to be pushed around by the government officers. In the article, Thảo viewed herself as a powerless victim of the bureaucracy. The mother was quoted as saying:

> Khi tôi đi làm hồ sơ khuyết tật ở quận Đống Đa thì người ta nói thẳng rằng “tự kỷ là bệnh”, tôi nói rằng “tự kỷ không phải bệnh mà là một dạng khuyết tật” thì họ tiếp tục khẳng định tự kỷ là bệnh và chữa được. Ngay ở quận Hoàn Kiếm cũng vậy, người ta từ chối luôn khi có ai đó xin làm hồ sơ khuyết tật cho con tự kỷ”. (Thao, a mother, as cited in Thuỷ Nguyên, 2012)
>
> Và thế là, con chị cũng như hàng ngàn trẻ tự kỷ khác ở Việt Nam, hiện không có sự hỗ trợ nào về các chính sách xã hội. (Thuỷ Nguyên, 2012)
>
> When I filed the application for the disability certificate at Đống Đa district, they said bluntly to me that ‘autism is a disease’, and I replied, ‘autism is not a disease, it is a form of disability’. Then they continued to affirm that autism is a disease and can be cured. It is the same in Hoàn Kiếm district; they refused right away when someone asked to prepare an application for disability certificate for their autistic children.
>
> Therefore, her child, like thousands of other autistic children in Vietnam, currently does not have any support from any social policy.

When the government officers insisted that “autism is a disease and can be cured”, what they did not explicitly communicate was the sub-text if children could not get rid of autism, it was the fault of the

parents for not trying their best to find the cure. Because autism was not formally recognized as a disability until January 2019, the process of applying for a disability certificate for children with autism was and continues to be subject to the interpretation of the officers in charge. Thus, many children with autism were not entitled to the support that other people with disabilities were eligible for. The bureaucratic process sometimes discouraged parents from attempting to apply at all. Indeed, the perception that "autism is a disease and can be cured" is also a popular belief among lay people and parents of individuals with autism. Due to this perception, many parents try different treatments for their children, at any cost, without knowing the efficacy and safety.

After discussing the problem of how autism was still being confused with a neurotic disorder and not being identified in legal documents, the article turned to call for facilitating children with autism with the following sub-headline: "In need of support from the government and the community". It reported the awareness building activities that parents' groups had been working on over the years since 2008 and 2011. Figure 4 showed the photo used in the middle of this section to illustrate the parents' awareness building and advocacy activities.

Figure 4: The walk campaign to act for autistic children in Mỹ Đình, Hà Nội (Thuỷ Nguyên, 2012)

The people in the photos were mostly in blue uniforms attending an autism awareness building event. They were smiling and walking behind a navy-blue banner which read "Sympathize [and] share with autistic children". Recognizable in the front were three celebrities, including musician Giáng Son, singer Hà Linh and singer Ngọc Minh, who acted as ambassadors for the autistic children. Overall, the photo exhibited a positive spirit, which contrasted with the helpless tone in the article headline. Below the photo, the article read:

> Năm nay, các thành viên trong CLB Gia đình trẻ tự kỷ và Hội khuyết tật Hà Nội đã tổ chức một chuỗi các sự kiện, với mục tiêu có tính vĩ mô hơn, đó là không chỉ thay đổi nhận thức của cộng đồng về chứng tự kỷ mà còn vận động để nhà nước, các cơ quan ban ngành có chính sách

> thiết thực về y tế, giáo dục… đối với trẻ tự kỷ. Tuy nhiên, đó mới chỉ là những hoạt động chưa dẫn tới sự thay đổi có tính chất pháp lý đối với trẻ tự kỷ. Các em vẫn chưa có sự ưu tiên nào về giáo dục, bảo hiểm, y tế…., việc hòa nhập vào cộng đồng vẫn còn khó khăn, trường học lẫn giáo viên chuyên biệt chưa đạt yêu cầu… (Thuỷ Nguyên, 2012)
>
> This year members of the Hanoi Club of Families Living with Autism organised a series of activities, with more macro goals: not only to change the perception of the community on autism, but also to advocate to the state and state institutions to issue practical policy on healthcare, [and] education… for autistic children. However, those activities have not led to legislative changes toward autistic children. These children are still not subject to any privileged policy in education, insurance, healthcare…, their integration in the community still faces difficulties, both schools and special teachers have not met the needs… [the translation is trying to be loyal to the tone and structure of the original Vietnamese version].

The article highlighted the efforts of the Hanoi Club of Families Living with Autism but also the challenges they faced. It was worth pointing out from the above paragraph that in Vietnam, advocates tried to make policy gains in a social context where any policy to facilitate people with diverse needs were perceived by many as a privileged policy, rather than a legitimate necessity or a right. In the above paragraph, the integration policy for children with autism was categorized as a *privilege*. This *privilege policy* connotation has deep roots in legal, policy, public, and media discourses in Vietnam regarding measures to facilitate equity for people living with disabilities, poverty and other disadvantages. Most policy studies related to autism or other disadvantages (Thủy, 2016; Tuấn Nam & Hải Vân, 2015) generally do not question the semantic nuance of the word *privilege*. Therefore, people use the term in a naturalized way without realizing its ideological implication: a privilege is conditional and to be granted, not universal.

The long article spent the second half quoting Dr. Andy Shih, Vice President of Autism Speaks, the largest American NGO in autism advocacy and research. This advocacy and government relations expert was invited to Vietnam thanks to the efforts of parent advocates and the financial support of the United States embassy in Vietnam. He suggested ways to build the community and engage influential people to support policy advocacy efforts. The article also referenced American, British and Chinese policy developments for autism.

In term of structure and cohesion, the article tried to draw together many themes, some of which affirmed the specific activities of autism advocacy groups, but the core structural problem that hindered policy advocacy in Vietnam was not clearly pointed out. The interlinked difficulties that challenged advocacy work were the citizens' lack of power and voice in policymaking and monitoring, the lack of responsibility and mechanisms for ensuring the accountability of state institutions in the provision of public services, the lack of training and professional credentials, and the restricted role

of the media as a watchdog in politics and social justice, as discussed in chapter 3 and 4. The victim-oriented title of the article *Helplessly/unsuccessfully applying for disability certificate for autistic children* did not reflect the tone of positive advocacy in the main text. Arguably, the reporter/editor used the sensational title and the emotional first paragraph to catch attention, even though the perspective in the rest of the article had a very different dimension.

6.4. The blame game in a child abuse scandal

In moments of conflict like a child abuse scandal, power relations between state officers, service providers, lay citizens and the role of media could manifest more explicitly. The concerning lack of accountability of different institutional stakeholders revealed itself more clearly. On July 21, 2014 in Hồ Chí Minh City, *Thanhnien.vn* broke the story of teachers and nannies with no proper qualifications and accreditations at Anh Vương Autism centre beating autistic students with metal rods and big sticks in an intimidating video report titled: *Dạy trẻ tự kỷ bằng… khúc cây [Teaching autistic children with… logs]* (Lam Ngọc, 2014). *Thanhnien.vn* is one of the most progressive media houses in Vietnam, with both print and electronic versions. It is known for investigations into social problems, injustice, business misconduct and corruption. The video was recorded by a Thanh Niên undercover contributor who had acted as an employee at the centre, presumably with a hidden camera. In 2 minutes and 38 seconds, the video showed multiple sequences of violence by different staff members, with times and dates. The video had screaming and shrieking sounds in the background and a male voice-over. The written article embedded with the video described the acts of abuse. It had seven photos which were taken from the video screen shots to illustrate the violence. I will analyse four of the most intimidating photos in Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8.

Figure 5: Phi Bằng was beaten by Ms. Trâm with a hardplastic stick (Lam Ngọc, 2014)

Figure 6: Ms. Trúc held a rod to beat Minh Sang (Lam Ngọc, 2014)

Figure 7: Ms. Lam slapped on the face of Minh Sang (Lam Ngọc, 2014)

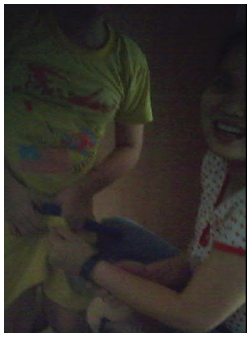

Figure 8: Phi Bằng was "penis-crushed" by Ms. Trúc (Lam Ngọc, 2014)

All photos were taken with a lack of light, from a top down angle. In three out of the four photos, the adults were standing at a dominant and taller position than the children. In Figure 5, the child looked as tall as a teenager, but was bending with bowed shoulders while the adult was holding a big stick high to beat the child. In Figures 6 and 7, the abused children were either sitting or standing but they kept their arms to their backs when violence was being perpetrated against them, as if they had been trained into obedience and discipline. But the most intimidating photo might be the last one where one staff member, Ms. Trúc, in a sitting position, smiled and crushed the penis of a boy. Trúc was not looking at the boy but presumably looking at other people, with a very comfortable broad laugh, as if she was showing the other people how much fun she was having by casually torturing the child. The two hands of the child were trying to hold his private parts helplessly, without a clear attempt to push Trúc's hands away or resist. In the video, Trúc's laugh could be heard out loud, together with others' laughter. This showed that other people were cheering Trúc's abusive action. Trúc was reported to be a final year student working at this centre without any proper credentials. And in other scenes, she was seen wrestling another student to the floor and sitting on him/her to control his/her behaviour.

The video recorded multiple incidents from 5 July till 13 July 2014, but it was only published on 21 July 2014. As an undercover reporter, the author throughout her video did not express any reaction to the staff and the violence she witnessed. She sounded simply like a quiet observer, presumably so that she could record more violent scenes without being found out for her reporter status. After publication on *Thanhnien.vn*, the video and the incident attracted wide media coverage. A Google search of "*Anh Vương" [the school name], "tự kỷ" [autism]* and *đánh [beat]* in January 2018 produced 6,910 related entries. Most of the major media houses covered the story, and many ran multiple updates. But the articles mainly framed the case as one of unethical business practices, or personal drama, while the social policy frame highlighting the loophole in accrediting and monitoring autism centres was minor. Local officers and police were called upon when the story broke. This was the time the state authorities were most prominently reported in relation to an autism story in the whole eleven-year study period. The state officers did acknowledge the violations of the centre and what

measures were to be taken against this boarding school for children with autism. However, because the incident was framed as a business ethics violation, the state officers' statements in most of the media coverage related to particular business administration issues more than long term and thorough policy resolutions. Below I will examine extracts from those articles which questioned the responsibility of the authorities in monitoring an education and childcare centre.

To contextualize the implications of the media texts that I analyze below, the structures of the Vietnamese administration and education system must be explained. The Central Government and the People's Committees at the city/province, district, ward or commune levels are responsible for general administration. Then in the education sector, the Ministry of Education and Training is in charge of the vertical education and training policy, macro management, important licensing functions and budget allocation at the central level. At the city or provincial level, the Departments of Education and Training report vertically to the Ministry and at the same time horizontally to the city/provincial People's Committee. Below the Department of Education and Training, at the district level, there are Divisions of Education and Training, which directly monitor and supervise the schools in their geographical locality. A common problem in Vietnamese public administration is that institutional stakeholders hold different levels of authoritative power, but their responsibilities and accountabilities overlap and are not clearly defined in the overall central and local government structure.

After its first video report, *Thanhnien.vn* published 15 other updates about the incident. Most of its coverage was run intensively from 21 to 27 July 2014, and its last reference to the incident was on 12 August 2014. It was also clear that the articles on *Thanhnien.vn* repeated the phrase *Teaching autistic children with… logs* throughout most of their titles, technically to cue that the articles were following up the same story, but also to responded to the Google search engine algorithm and enhanced the virality of the stories for more traffic and viewership.

In the report *Teaching autistic children with… logs: no sign of abuse (!?)* (Đình Phú, Lam Ngọc, & Đức Tiến, 2014) on 23 July 2014, *Thanhnien.vn* reported that the signage of the centre had been taken down. Many parents came to the centre to take their children home and expressed their concerns when watching the video where the children were abused. The article continued:

> Cũng trong sáng 22.7, sau rất nhiều lần gọi điện và nhắn tin, PVThanh Niên mới gặp được Chủ tịch UBND P.15 Trần Văn Tâm (ảnh), để hỏi về trách nhiệm quản lý của chính quyền địa phương. Khi xem những hình ảnh giáo viên, bảo mẫu đánh đập trẻ tự kỷ đăng trên Báo Thanh Niên do PV chuyển, ông Tâm thừa nhận: "Đúng là bức xúc và rất đau lòng". Tuy nhiên, ông Tâm cho rằng phường không hoàn toàn chịu trách nhiệm về những sai phạm, hậu quả xảy ra tại Trường Anh Vương. (Đình Phú et al., 2014)

> Also, on the morning of 22 July, after many phone calls and messages, Thanh Niên reporter managed to meet the Chairman of the People's Committee in Ward 15, Mr. Trần Văn Tâm, to ask about the management responsibilities of the local authorities. After viewing the images of teachers and nannies beating autistic children on *Thanh Niên*, shown by the reporter, Mr. Tâm admitted that he was "really concerned and pained". However, Mr. Tâm said that the Ward authorities were not totally responsible for these offenses and the consequences at Anh Vương school.

It was only after "many phone calls and messages" that the state officer at the local ward could be reached by the reporter. This suggested that the officers at the lowest level of the administration did not make themselves accessible to comment on an education crisis in the location of their responsibility. Even though acknowledging concern about the violent scenes in the video, this officer denied the formal responsibility of his Ward's authority for the incident. In the next paragraph this officer used the bureaucratic system to explain why his office should not be responsible for the offences at the centre:

> Ông Tâm cho biết phường đã có kiểm tra Trường Anh Vương 2 lần, phát hiện trường bị chủ tịch UBND quận thu hồi giấy phép hoạt động trường học ở địa bàn P.12, Q. Tân Bình, còn ở địa chỉ 86 Cống Lở, P.15 "chỉ là chi nhánh thôi", "hoàn toàn không có điều gì bất thường, không thấy có bạo hành". Theo ông Tâm, đối với trường học thì trách nhiệm quản lý là của Phòng GD-ĐT nên "khi phường đi kiểm tra chỉ ghi nhận về các thứ" vì chuyên môn của phường có giới hạn, cán bộ của phường không nắm hết, không phải chuyên biệt về vấn đề này... (Đình Phú et al., 2014)

> Mr. Tâm said that the Ward authorities have inspected Anh Vương centre twice and found out the school's license was withdrawn by the Chairman of the District People's Committee in the area of Ward 12, Tân Bình District, while the school at 86 Cống Lở, Ward 15 "is just a branch"; "absolutely there was no unusual thing, no abuse was found". According to Mr. Tâm, the responsibility to manage the school belongs to the Division of Education and Training, therefore, "when the Ward do inspection, we just try to record things" because the Ward expertise is limited, the Ward officers cannot cover it all, [because they do not have] specialization on this matter…

Talking about two inspections before this incident, Mr. Tâm, the Head of the Ward People's Committee said "absolutely there was no unusual thing, no abuse was found" (Trần Văn Tâm, as cited in Đình Phú et al., 2014), while another media report quoted Ms. Trần Thị Kim Thanh, Vice Director of Department of Education of Hồ Chí Minh City, as saying that the school was licensed as a care centre for disabled old people, not childcare (Thơ Trịnh, Đức Vượng, & Nguyễn My, 2014). Mr. Tâm denied that it was within his Ward's professional expertise to ensure education and childcare

services were delivered appropriately. According to Mr. Tâm, responsibility for managing the school belonged to the Division of Education and Training, even though the school was physically based in his Ward location. According to clause 2 of Article 36 in the Law on Organising the Local Government (Vietnam National Assembly, 2015), the Head of the Ward People's Committee is in charge of ensuring the execution of the constitution, laws and orders of higher state administration levels, as well as protecting the safety, livelihood, freedom, dignity, possession, legitimate rights and interests of the citizens in the location of their administration. Therefore, it was not justifiable when the Head of the Ward People's Committee denied responsibility and pushed all the blame for the incident onto the District Division of Education and Training when serious abuses happened in his administrative domain. As explained, the authorization mechanism in Vietnam operates both vertically and horizontally, but the system allows different state authorities to evade responsibility. London (2014a) points out that "local state agencies are doubly accountable (or subordinate)" when they are subject to two reporting lines (p. 7), which escalates accountability issues.

The last paragraph of the article turned to another officer, Trần Khắc Huy, Head of Tân Bình District Division of Education and Training, who suggested that it was the time to solve the immediate problem, not the time to argue who was responsible. Certainly, the main responsibility to monitor schools belonged to this officer's level; hence, he diverted the focus to another angle. This state officer did not look straight into the problem. When the District People's Committee ordered the school to shut down, the District People's Committee, Division of Education and Training as well as the Ward should have undertaken serious monitoring to make sure that all the school's branches stopped their business and operation. After all, the *Thanhnien.vn* article reflected the lack of accountability from various authorities to this incident. Only in the scenario of serious child abuse were the state officers approached that directly and intensively in the media discourse about autism. This suggested that the media outlets viewed the child abuse as a serious issue and the social pressure was high enough for the state officers at various levels to have to respond to media requests for interviews.

Another media outlet chose a different focal point when reporting on the same incident. The article *Bàng hoàng những bảo mẫu dạy trẻ tự kỷ bằng bạo lực [Stunned by nannies teaching autistic children with violence]* (Thơ Trịnh et al., 2014) was republished on *Eva.vn* on 28 July 2014, from the original on *Doisongphapluat.com*. *Eva.vn* is a news aggregation website which targets primarily women with a sensational approach. The media outlet picked up this report and dramatized it with sensational language. The article started with this lead:

> Đau xót khi những người làm cha mẹ "đem trứng gửi cho ác" khiến những đứa trẻ đáng thương vì bệnh tật lại phải chịu những trận đòn roi của những "bảo mẫu" cạn tình người. Thiếu trường chuyên biệt cho trẻ tự kỷ nên không ít bậc phụ huynh đành phải phó thác con

> em mình vào những cơ sở dạy trẻ không có giấy phép, không có chuyên môn. (Thơ Trịnh et al., 2014)
>
> [It is] an anguish when parents “send eggs to the crows”, making the miserable children bounded with diseases suffer tolls of violence by inhumane nannies. [Because of the] lack of specialized schools for autistic children, many parents resign themselves to commend their children to childcare centres without licenses or credentials.

The article started out by blaming parents, using the metaphor “send eggs to the crows” to describe how parents consigned their powerless children to nasty people, when they should know that their children would surely be harmed. The word *phó thác* was translated as *[leave/commend],* but the translation did not fully convey the connotation of giving total responsibility and power to someone for important tasks, without checks and balances. In this case, it projected negative connotation onto the parents who had no choice but to send their children to this childcare and boarding centre. After blaming parents of the victims, the article reported the emotional reactions of the parents using words such as *startled, anguished, angry* and *blank looking*. The article summarized what happened at the centre where the teachers used such “tricks” as grabbing the children’s necks, dragging them to the dining tables, and using wood or iron rods and plastic sticks to beat and threaten them so that the children would follow their instructions in every meal. Only in paragraph 9 of the article was the Vice Deputy Director of Ho Chi Minh City Department of Education and Training quoted. Here below were the paragraphs presenting her point of view about the incident:

> Liên quan đến những sai phạm của cơ sở Anh Vương, sáng 21/7, PV đã có cuộc trao đổi với bà Trần Thị Kim Thanh, Phó Giám đốc sở Giáo dục & Đào tạo TP.HCM. Bà Thanh khẳng định: "Anh Vương không phải là trường dạy trẻ tự kỷ mà chỉ là một công ty TNHH MTV. Trong giấy phép của mình, đơn vị này đăng ký nhận nuôi dưỡng người già neo đơn, khuyết tật chứ không hề có chức năng dạy trẻ tự kỷ. […] Chính vì vậy, Sở đã lập biên bản yêu cầu cơ sở này phải tháo gỡ bảng hiệu và giải thể ngay lập tức. Đồng thời, giao cho chính quyền địa phương bảo vệ quyền lợi của trẻ, đảm bảo tuyệt đối an toàn cho các trẻ đang tham gia học ở đây. Sau đó, Sở sẽ phối hợp với các cơ quan liên quan tiến hành phân loại trẻ tự kỷ ở đây để có biện pháp đưa 27 trẻ tự kỷ vào các trường chuyên biệt công lập".
>
> Bà Thanh nói thêm: "Đối với các cơ sở dạy trẻ tự kỷ trá hình như Anh Vương thì trách nhiệm của chính quyền địa phương là rất quan trọng. Chính quyền địa phương cần phải giám sát nghiêm nhằm lật tẩy các cơ sở kinh doanh đội lốt trường dạy trẻ tự kỷ để ngăn chặn những hậu quả đáng tiếc xảy ra. Chính vì vậy, tôi hy vọng rằng sau sự việc này, các địa phương cần phải rút kinh nghiệm để có biện pháp xử lý kịp thời những cơ sở trá hình như Anh Vương". (Thơ Trịnh et al., 2014)

> Regarding the offenses by Anh Vương centre, on the morning of 21 July, the reporter had a discussion with Ms. Trần Thị Kim Thanh, Vice Director of Department of Education in Hồ Chí Minh City. Ms. Thanh confirmed "Anh Vương is not an autism school, but a limited company. In its license, this entity is registered to care for the elderly with disabilities, it does not have the function to care for autistic children. […] Therefore, the Department has filed an inspection report and requested this centre be closed down immediately. At the same time, [we] assign the local authorities [responsibility] to protect the rights of the children, to ensure the safety of all the children at this centre. Afterwards, the Department will coordinate with other relevant organisations to categorize the children to come up with solutions so as to send 27 autistic children to special public schools".
>
> Ms Thanh added: "To the disguised centre for autistic children like Anh Vương, the responsibilities of the local authorities are very important. The local authorities have to strictly monitor in order to unmask the businesses that disguise themselves as autism centres so as to prevent bad consequences. Therefore, I hope after this incident, the local authorities learn the lessons in order to have timely measurements to handle disguised centres like Anh Vương".

When the Vice Director of Hồ Chí Minh City Department of Education and Training, Ms. Thanh, stated that Anh Vương was not registered as an autism school, but a company to care for the elderly with disabilities, she implied that it was not in the professional territory of her education administration. This was a way to deny the responsibilities of the education administration for the incident at a business that was not officially registered as an education and childcare centre in the territory of her supervision, regardless of its actual operation and services.

When Thanh mentioned the measures that her office would take toward the violating centre, the authoritative power was held by her Department, but the responsibility was then pushed to the lower level Division. And the lessons were for the grassroots authorities to learn, not for her Department level to take (Thanh, as cited in Thơ Trịnh et al., 2014). Thanh confirmed her Department would work with other entities to "categorize the children" to know where to send them afterwards. This language of categorization has been lamented by multiple international scholars and advocates because it views individuals as stigmatised objects that may be easily grouped into boxes (X. T. Nguyen, 2015).

In a reporters' blog page, which often publishes reporters' or external contributors' blog posts, *Thanhnien.vn* published a commentary titled *Nuôi con tự kỷ, phải tìm thông tin từ cộng đồng [Raising autistic children, you have to look for information from the community]* on 23 July 2014 written by Ami Nguyễn (2014), a resident and contributor in Hồ Chí Minh City. The writer questioned the neglect of the People's Committee of Ward 15, People's Committee of Tân Bình district, and the Division of

Education and Training. But then, paradoxically, this writer turned to suggest that parents should not rely on state management, but they should “save” themselves:

> Thôi thì, khi sự nghiêm minh quản lý của chính quyền và ngành giáo dục có hạn, các bậc cha mẹ có con chậm phát triển hoặc bị tự kỷ hãy “tự cứu lấy mình” trước, giống như “người tiêu dùng phải thông minh (bằng cách tự học cách làm lấy mọi thứ) trong thị trường ngày càng mất an toàn về thực phẩm. (Ami Nguyễn, 2014)

> [If] the strict and clear management of the state authority and the education system is limited, the parents ò children with delayed development or autism should “save yourself” first, like “consumers have to be smart (by learning to do everything on your own) in the market that is less and less safe”.

The article viewed education and childcare as a market, so if you did not “save yourself” by being intelligent consumers, you would not be protected by the state apparatus. It was not justifiable to assign all the responsibilities to the “consumers”, without holding the authorities accountable to maintain the rule of law to ensure an ethical business environment. The conceptions of self-regulation and responsibilization were paradoxically naturalized in an article published by one of the most progressive media outlets.

The key message that the author set out to deliver was captured here in the following paragraph:

> Nếu xem kỹ hết các bài báo thì sẽ thấy các bậc phụ huynh gửi con, cháu vào Trường Anh Vương gần như “khoán trắng” việc nuôi dạy trẻ cho nhà trường vì phải lo việc mưu sinh. Mặt khác, họ không có thông tin hoặc cũng không có thời gian dành cho trẻ. Một số trẻ lại thiếu hẳn tình thương từ cha mẹ, phải sống với ông bà hoặc chỉ sống với cha trong hoàn cảnh gia đình bị chia cắt. (Ami Nguyễn, 2014)

> If reading the articles thoroughly, it can be seen that parents who send their children to Anh Vương school almost “totally contract” the care of the children to the school because they have to worry about making a living. On the other hand, they do not have information or time for the children. Some children lack love from the parents, either living with grandparents or with the father in the condition the family is separated.

Like the previous article, the author of this opinion-oriented commentary also turned to blame the parents when the staff of a childcare centre abused their children. The parents were accused of contracting their children to a bad service provider, and implicitly, as consumers, they had to bear the consequences of their bad choice. With this blaming tone in the media and the heightened social pressure, it was understandable when parents only complained about the bad ethics and business practice of the centre, without explicitly requesting for justice and compensation for their children in

the media coverage. The author did not look at the issue from the angle that the parents' lack of information about what was going on behind the door of the Anh Vương centre reflected a problem in the state administration structures and policy. It was not within the parents' capacity to effectively evaluate if a childcare service provider was meeting professional and ethical standards. Rather, it was the job of the licensing body to make sure professional credentials were in place for such a childcare and boarding centre. The article concluded by blaming the parents again, with a lecturing tone:

> Xu hướng rời bỏ, tránh né, chối bỏ con khi con bị khuyết tật, chậm phát triển hay bị tự kỷ… là một thực tế đáng buồn của không ít gia đình Việt. Nếu yêu con hết lòng, các bậc cha mẹ sẽ phải tìm kiếm mọi nguồn thông tin để có thể giúp đỡ con mình nhiều nhất có thể. Hãy cứu con mình, đừng chờ đến khi ngành giáo dục và chính quyền có hệ thống quản lý tốt hơn, các ba, các mẹ nhé! (Ami Nguyễn, 2014)
>
> The trend to separate, avoid, reject the children when they suffer disabilities, delayed development or autism… is a sad reality in not just a few Vietnamese families. If loving your children with all your hearts, parents should seek all information to help them the most. Save your children, do not wait until the education system and the authorities have a better management mechanism, Dads and Mums out there!

The above paragraph talked about a generalized trend of neglecting children with disabilities among Vietnamese families, without any evidence. Then it turned to talk of parents seeking ways to help their children, without relying on the education system or state authorities. It is a pragmatic coping strategy for citizens to take care of their own families and children's wellbeing, given the poor system of governmental accountability, professional credentials and service quality management in Vietnam. However, by accepting this status quo, the commentary contributed to lowering citizens' expectations about the state's accountability in ensuring an ethical market environment. Because of this mentality of only minding their own business, believing that their voices are powerless, the lay citizens in Vietnam do not push strongly for the Party-State to maintain the rule of law for public interest and justice. Without a strong rule of law and a mechanism of credential-based governance, there will be more child abuse incidents like the one at Anh Vương autism centre. The absence of a strong rule of law plays a role in the chaotic economic and social dynamic of autism services. Even though *Thanhnien.vn* put a disclaimer at the end of the article, that the writing style and perspective in the article was that of the contributor, *Thanhnien.vn's* publication of the article belied its endeavor to question the authorities' responsibilities and seek for a better policy for autism in some few other articles.

The child abuse story broke on 21 July 2014, and after a short span of intensive public attention and virality, both on mainstream and social media, the story died out quickly. A Google search conducted

with the same keywords *"Anh Vương" [the school name], "tự kỷ" [autism]* and *đánh [beat/hit],* from 1 August 2014 on, found only a few pieces of media coverage referring to the incident as an example of the general child abuse problem, but with no story update or follow up to the original report. So, the media were mainly interested in the sensational story as well as the immediate reaction of the parents and the public. Despite all the efforts that *Thanhnien.vn* demonstrated in reporting this particular child abuse story intensively in its 16 articles, it did not report if any specific compensation was to be provided for the affected children. After all, the blame game in this incident was just a matter of verbal blaming, because no consequences for the individual officers were reported by the media. Even though the abusive actions of each teacher and nanny were clear and serious in the video, it was not reported if any of them or the owner of the centre were subject to any legal consequences, except that the centre was ordered to close down again. No parent was reported as suing the centre, which was a manifestation of the popular saying "dĩ hòa vi quý" [a bad compromise is better than a good lawsuit]. It was striking that neither the owner of the centre nor the abusers were interviewed or reportedly attempted to be interviewed in these articles. They did not have to face the media, and that was quite unusual, even in the Vietnamese context. Certainly, *Thannien.vn* and others did not follow through their coverage of a serious child abuse incident for the sake of child protection and justice. If that was the case, they would have been obliged by journalism best practice to report how satisfactorily the case was redressed by the state authorities in the months afterwards.

Vietnamese netizens often call this phenomenon "chìm xuồng" [the sinking boat], where a serious problem is at times discussed openly and feverishly, but then is quickly and silently ignored by the state institutions, related stakeholders, media and society. "The sinking boat" as a metaphor often hints that the problem is permitted to sink because the offenders might have bribed state officers and police to avoid legal consequences; or they may have powerful connections to shield them from media investigations and pressure; or simply there are too many problems in the country, so the authorities simply ignore and the public quickly forget an incident when others arise.

Agenda setting is one vital mission of the media. The media can play a critical role in "shaping political reality" by dedicating space, time and information volume to attach importance to an issue (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176). How the media frame an issue while making it salient can set the agenda for the audience about "what to think about" and "how to think about it" (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, p. 63). In the case of this child abuse scandal, the media certainly made their stories salient. But they only occasionally framed it as a social policy matter without following through with examination of a thorough and long-term solution. So, no social policy agenda was seriously pursued in the name of public interest in this case.

6.5. Why social policy was a minor frame in the media discourse about autism?

This chapter argues that the media did not strongly frame autism as a social policy issue, but instead as a personal problem and struggle, even in those articles talking about integration for students with autism in the school setting. The point I want to emphasize is even though the articles reported on exclusionary practices at the school level, the articles did not present a strong call for accountability and forms of redress from policymakers and schools. The articles pointed to discursive openings, but those openings were not pursued in a thorough way, through basic journalistic work like interviewing various sources and institutional actors responsible for policymaking and implementation. Lack of expertise and training in schools was acknowledged, but without a thematic emphasis on the need for solutions. When state officers were occasionally mentioned in these articles, they either pushed the responsibilities back to the families and community or even fail to recognize autism as a disability.

Exclusion and stigma have been naturalized in the long history of Vietnam. Most people in Vietnam, including those in public administration, tend to hold the view that people with disabilities do not have the capacity to significantly take part in and contribute to the social and economic mainstream (Duong et al., 2008). Information, awareness and understanding about inclusion are severely limited in policymakers, state officers, professionals, media and the public. The low level of awareness and capacity is the greatest barrier to an inclusive approach to disability in Vietnam (USAID, as quoted in Duong et al., 2008). Even though there is a national communication strategy on disability issues, the long-lasting stigma against disability in the past is still deeply embedded in the public's mind. Further, there is no such national communication campaign initiated by the state institutions for autism. Instead, civil society groups such as Hanoi Club of Families Living with Autism and Vietnam Autism Network have organised policy advocacy conferences and invited state officials as guests, seldom the other way around.

Integration for children with autism was seen as a privilege. When children exhibited challenges, the behaviours were framed as their fault, hence, teachers could justifiably send them home or exclude them from the school activities. The power to admit or dismiss a student with autism was exercised by the school without facing any reported significant resistance from the families. The dismissal of students with autism from school violated Article 30 of the Law on Persons with Disabilities (Vietnam National Assembly, 2010), which stipulates that educational institutions are not allowed to refuse the education access of individuals with disabilities. It was also against the Education Law (Vietnam National Assembly, 2005), which stipulates in Article 11 that all citizens of school age are entitled to pursue universal education. But none of the media coverage explicitly spelt that out.

Children and individuals with autism were talked about and acted upon as objects of discrimination by the schools and institutional actors in the above articles, but they never had a chance to talk for themselves. They were objectified, as if they did not have any personal agency to represent

themselves and act with their own capability. So, generally, even though the articles discussed the question of integration for children with autism at a surface level, the advocates and sources they cited did not clearly demand that integration must be implemented as a social policy requirement and imperative, or push for a concrete solution.

Various factors in the political economy, the history of disability policy, the cultural setting and the media market characteristics in Vietnam contributed to the non-recognition of autism as a disability and how autism was represented in the media. As a collective culture (Hofstede, n.d.), Vietnamese society values loyalty, unity, harmony and conformity (Neher, 1994; Nghia, 2005; Truong, Hallinger, & Sanga, 2017). Due to the Confucian social hierarchy and high power distance culture (Hofstede, n.d.), what people in a higher power position say or do is not often officially questioned or challenged by people lower down in this country. This social order translates into a hegemonic set of power relations between policymakers, professionals, journalists and people living with autism. This situation has begun slowly changing in recent years, but not to the extent of media and citizens strongly pressing the authorities to be accountable. Lay people often choose to accede to the status quo, rather than contesting the actions and non-actions of power holders.

When parents and advocates voiced their hope for greater social inclusion of children with autism, they positioned themselves as asking for a privilege, rather than demanding for their rights to be realized because this conception of privilege had been historically articulated in official discourse, legal documents, media and public spheres. When parents and advocates called for a better policy for individuals with autism, the call was not articulated as holding those in the institutional authorities accountable. It was similar with the media; even though they saw the injustice in the exclusion of students with autism from the school setting, they tended to describe the exclusion as personal problems, not a social policy issue. The state and other institutional actors exercised their power in the inaction and silence they showed toward the call for better inclusion for individuals with autism.

Within Vietnam's collectivist culture, the interest of the majority is maintained over individual rights, so individuals in the minority have to submit to the norms and domination of the majority. Faced with a history of continuous wars with Chinese aggressors for thousands of years, then feudalism, colonialism, Communism and regular natural disasters, the majority of people in the country have learned to live with a coping strategy and subordinate their individual needs and interests to the family, village and country's interests. In turn, according to Thiem (2014), the Communist Party in Vietnam has focused on what it calls the upholding of national interests or sovereign rights, which is code for a top-down agenda articulated by the Communist Party, which displaces human rights and individual needs (p. 83), as discussed in chapter 3. It follows in an educational setting that the interests of individuals with autism are considered minor; hence, their right to universal education can be sacrificed if the schools are not willing to accommodate their needs.

Importantly, the political economy of Vietnam played a critical role in how autism was represented in the media. As discussed in chapter 3, in its transition to a socialist-oriented market economy, the state authorities in Vietnam selectively make use of neoliberal ideologies on economic management and social policy. The budget for state funded education, healthcare and a social safety net is especially constrained in a system of low capacity and overloaded demands. London (2014b) reports both education and healthcare are commodified with out of pocket fees, as the state "has actively sought to shift financial responsibility on to households […] under the euphemist guise of 'socialisation'", (p. 99). As a consequence of "the commodification of education and the marketization of education governance", inequality in education in Vietnam has escalated (London, 2010).

V. T. H. Minh and Löfgren (2016) argue that in Vietnam, decentralization is implemented without an established set of rationales, values and mechanisms compatible with enforcing market transactions, rule of law and performance-driven credential systems (p. 17). The idea of autonomization and deregulation in the Vietnamese context leads to corrupt and rent-seeking behaviours where accountability is weak (pp. 19, 20). Reforms aligned with a market logic only produce desirable impacts - if at all - when they are based on "formal, rule-based, honest and fair systems" (p. 19).

Badly designed decentralization has proven to heighten "ambiguity in responsibilities and premature delegation of functions" and accountability, leading to "deteriorating service quality" (Lieberman, Capuno, & Van Minh, 2005, p. 156). In the political economy of Vietnam, healthcare and education have been going through deregulation and commercialisation. When the demand is far higher than the supply, and ethics and professionalism are low, a possible outcome is abuse of power on the part of state officers and service providers. The chaos of autism centres like the one discussed in the child abuse incident is not so exceptional. The problems in autism service provision in Vietnam are partly due to low regulatory quality. The state maintains a system of complicated laws and rules for business registration, licensing and operation, but enforcement is ineffective due to the shortage of capacity and accountability on the part of different state regulatory authorities. As such, service providers are mostly free to operate without abiding by the laws. This phenomenon places the burden of evaluating service quality on consumers. There is no professional association or credential system to uphold standards or to monitor the service providers' quality and ethics. The poor state governance of education and healthcare in general and autism services in particular in Vietnam has gone too far, to the extent of letting critical human services operate in a lawless sphere.

The child abuse case analysed in this chapter was just one of many incidents of abuses, exclusion, discrimination and maltreatment by education or healthcare service providers in the country (Horton, Kvist Lindholm, & Nguyen, 2015; Tran, Alink, Van Berkel, & Van Ijzendoorn, 2017). However, affected people do not often bring these incidents to public attention and deal with them within the rule of law, because, as Penelope Nicholson (2001) generalizes, citizens in Vietnam do not trust the grievance

resolution and court system. Government agencies across different constituencies have not redressed popular grievances effectively as it is not often clearly assigned who is responsible for the issue's resolution (Shanks et al., 2004, p. xiii). Even though Vietnam claims to be a "law-governed state" (Thayer & Marr, 1993, p. 108), there is not a common practice of bringing issues to the court; hence, law violators do not tend to see infringements as serious. Affected people do not want to undergo the bureaucratic pain of lawsuits. The time and resource costs for defendants might be higher than the potential consequences for the violators. Worse still, rather than protecting their clients' legal rights, private lawyers at times have to compromise their clients' interests under political pressure (Pip Nicholson & Gillespie, 2005).

As quoted earlier, Worldwide Governance Indicators produced by the World Bank in 2016 ranked Voice and Accountability in Vietnam low at less than 9.85/100, Regulatory Quality at 35.10/100 and Rule of Law at 57.21/100 (World Bank, 2016). It was noticeable that Voice and Accountability in Vietnam was ranked the lowest among all the governance indicators, and improvement through the years has also been slow. Voice and accountability represent the way the authorities, citizens, media and other social actors maintain participatory and dialogical mechanism to address matters of public concern. The low ranking suggests that Vietnamese citizens and media are not enabled to demand that rulers and other social entities respond and take action to address social issues and public concerns. Generally citizens are still "forced to operate within a set of ideological, institutional, and material constraints that undermines citizens' power" (Rodan & Hughes, 2014, p. 103). Such values as fairness, equality, social cohesion, universal service and safety as the result of accountability cannot be publicly upheld when electorate has little influence on its elected political representatives and other administrative bodies and the courts.

According to the Justice index of Vietnam (UNDP, 2015a), confidence in state institutions was low: between 33% and 55% of the respondents to the UNDP survey said that they would not refer to state agencies for assistance in civic disputes, because they thought state officials lacked integrity (p. 25). In the same survey, 20% of respondents said that complainants were harassed in their work and life (p.33). When people feel voiceless about the injustices that they see, they often bitterly joke: "In Vietnam, Justice is a comedian". As such, the majority of the population have accepted and internalized the notion that their voice is powerless.

The literature on accountability often distinguishes between upward, horizontal and downward accountability. Accountability works to ensure "juridical values of fairness, rationality and legality", "economic values (including financial probity and value for money); social and procedural values (such as fairness, equality, and legality); and continuity/security values (such as social cohesion, universal service, and safety)" (C. Scott, 2000, p. 42). The embryonic development of accountability norms in Vietnam construes "the reconfiguration of authoritarianism in a bold and not-unproblematic

process of administrative decentralization" (Vasavakul, 2014, p. 42), but it has not demonstrated a clear orientation toward democratic norms and practices.

Given the severe shortage of autism expertise, as well as other rampant problems in the country, equality, fairness and participation for people with autism is not prioritized either in the public agenda, the media agenda, or the policy agenda. Other problems are pressing in the country, when the healthcare system is severely overloaded (Vuong & Nguyen, 2015), and hospital corruption, maltreatment and food safety are a daily concern (Samapundo, Thanh, Xhaferi, & Devlieghere, 2016; Wertheim-Heck & Spaargaren, 2016). People are devastated with escalating cancer prevalence and the increasing threats posed by environment pollution (Luong, Phung, Sly, Morawska, & Thai, 2017; Phung et al., 2016). It can be considered unrealistic to expect the state and institutional actors to take decisive and holistic actions to promptly fill the gap in integrative education. Lack of capacity, policy and facilities have been used as an excuse for exclusion (Ha et al., 2014; UNICEF et al., 2013). Such an internalization of helplessness minimizes the state's responsibilites in dealing with this social and public health problem. As discussed in chapter 4, media do not really act as a watchdog to the Party State. After decades of working without a belief in their role as a fourth estate, the media lack motivation to persistently stand on the side of the citizens, especially the disadvantaged, because they have internalized the conception about their own minimized voice, impact and accountability in state-media-citizen relations.

Last but not least, commercialisation has transformed the Vietnamese media into a competitive market and changed the way journalists practice their profession. With the ultimate goal of achieving virality for media coverage rather than of promoting accountability, media outlets practise tabloid journalism. They amplify their stories with sensational headlines that try to "game" the algorithms used by search engines like Google. In the media discourse about autism, media houses do not follow through or go the extra mile to pursue concrete solutions or improved policy for individuals with autism. In the case of Vietnam, policy advocacy is always challenging, given the Communist political structure, and the advocates' resource and capacity shortages. The evidence in this chapter suggested the Vietnamese media tended to accept the status quo when it came to matters regarding a social policy for autism.

6.6. Conclusion

The critical discourse analysis in this chapter has demonstrated that the media occasionally attempted to frame autism as a social policy issue, but usually viewed it as a personal problem and struggle. The burden of fitting in to schools or other social settings was assigned to the individuals with autism, without the articulation of a clear expectation of social accommodation. This helped explain why the media and institutional actors still accepted that not all children with autism were entitled to a universal education and other forms of social inclusion. The media reported exclusion

without strongly challenging the practice. The media houses compromised with the status quo and were not motivated to stand on the side of the not-so-small minority living with autism to push for better policy, public funding, research, training and social facilitation.

7. Chapter 7: Medicalization and cure promises for autism in the news

7.1. Introduction

Over the last decade, Vietnamese online news media have published stories with titles like *Khi chính cha mẹ gieo rắc cho con căn bệnh tự kỷ [When parents sow the seed of autism in their children]* (Kim Chi, 2010) or *Chữa dứt điểm bại não, tự kỷ nhờ ứng dụng ghép tế bào gốc [To cure completely cerebral palsy and autism thanks to stem cell transplant]* (Tiểu Nguyễn, 2016). This kind of misinformation and misrepresentation still happened in Vietnam, even though the infamous "refrigerator mother" theory constructed by Kanner (1943) and promoted by Bettelheim (1967) has been discredited for many decades in the global community, and so far no reliable research in the world can absolutely claim autism is curable.

This chapter will use CDA to examine problematic media coverage which propagated misinformation, disinformation and misrepresentation about autism. The articles analysed in this chapter were framed with the medical model, even though the distinction between the medical frame and the family frame was sometimes blurred. In many cases, both frames operated in the same articles. Through CDA, I problematised the interplay of knowledge authority, power and commercial motives in representing autism causes, signs and treatments.

Globally, the medical model of disability, also known as the biomedical or scientific model, is the most popular way of conceptualizing health and disablement (Smart & Smart, 2006). Medicalization happens when powerful discourses of medicine penetrate and claim relevance in more and more domains of life, by which formerly non-medical issues become defined and treated as medical illnesses or disorders (Conrad, 1992; Conrad, Mackie, & Mehrotra, 2010; Sawchuk & Clarke, 2015). Importantly, the medical model considers disability a personal problem, which exclusively belongs to the individuals and needs to be cured (Harris & Enfield, 2003, p. 169). When media organisations frame autism within the medical model, they make use of what Smart and Smart (2006) call "the power and prestige of the well-established medical profession" (p. 30). The advantage of the medical model comes from its power to explain, with assumed scientific credibility, in a way that "far exceeds the explanatory power of other models" (p. 30).

Underlying the medical model of disablement is the belief that disability is due to "a defect, deficiency, dysfunction, abnormality, failing, or medical 'problem' that is located in an individual" (Smart & Smart, 2006, p. 30). Medicalization can put power in the hands of the medical practitioners and elites to shape what it means to be normal, and, in some cases, it can result in the violation of civil liberties (Davis, 2010, p. 211). This understanding of the medical model serves as the foundation for discussing the ways media institutions define autism in this chapter and chapter 8.

7.2. Low professional competency in autism training, diagnosis and intervention

In Vietnam, the competency and ethics of service providers for autism have direct impact on the quality of autism intervention and on statements made in the media. The quality of autism intervention will be discussed in this section, while the issue of medical claims in the media will be examined in later sections. The promise to successfully treat a child with autism can come from accredited doctors, para-professional therapists and teachers, or it can be offered by someone with no medical or relevant training. Some desperate parents are willing to pay any cost and take any risk in finding a cure for their children with autism. Others cannot rely on or afford service providers, so they undertake training and mix various methods to remedy their own child's challenges (Ha et al., 2014). Service providers approach and sometimes exploit parents with cure promises (p. 284).

Autism started to be known and diagnosed in Vietnam only in the early 2000s and the training and capacity building process for autism treatment, intervention and support is still in its infant stage in the country (Ha & Whittaker, 2016). On average, there were 0.91 psychiatrists, 0.09 psychologists, 2.92 nurses and 7.14 other medical workers working in the Vietnamese mental health sector per 100,000 heads of population (World Health Organisation, 2014b). Comparatively, the rate in the United States was 12.4 psychiatrists, 29.62 psychologists, 4.25 nurses, 59.83 social workers and 77.50 other medical workers per 100,000 heads of population (World Health Organisation, 2014a). The limited number of medical professionals in mental health in Vietnam cannot meet the general needs of popular mental health demands, hence, the country is a long way off having enough qualified professionals to support people with the complex bio-neurological condition of autism. Commercial competition, combined with the lack of professional capacity, credentials, standards, ethics and self-policing mechanisms, has led to problematic developments among the service providers for autism (Ha et al., 2017; Ha et al., 2014; Van Cong et al., 2015). Service providers with limited training in autism may still provide an affirmative autism diagnosis (Ha et al., 2017), which is far beyond international best practice. Most importantly, Van Cong et al. (2015) are concerned that there is not enough scientific evidence in autism intervention and treatment services, nor an official governmental policy that specifies how to support children with autism. As summarised by Van Cong and Weiss (2018), basically any individual or company in Vietnam can offer whatever intervention services they want, without any regulatory or professional monitoring.

Medical Doctor Giang Phan (2018) exclaimed on his Facebook page on 29 November 2018 in a post titled *Sự dốt nát và lộn chuồng lên ngôi [Ignorance and irrelevance now reign]*, which referred to the situation when service providers with irrelevant expertise made big claims in the media. Giang is known in the community working and living with autism in Vietnam as he lectures at a speech pathology programme and diagnoses autism as a physician at a private clinic. He expanded his point in his Facebook post as follows:

> Tiến sỹ giáo dục đi chẩn đoán về bại não về loạn thần, chuyên viên tâm lý xã hội đi cho lời khuyên về thuốc và điều trị động kinh, giáo viên chuyên biệt đi chẩn đoán tự kỷ, đi khuyên phụ huynh về dừng thuốc chống động kinh, thuốc hướng thần kinh. Xã hội ai cũng làm thầy bà, láo nháo! Chỉ tội những sinh viên trẻ tuổi ngơ ngác được học các mớ kiến thức bòng bong rồi ra trường làm việc rối như bòng bong, tội cho những phụ huynh và các trẻ đặc biệt được định hướng can thiệp sai lệch, cũng rối lên như bòng bong. Giang Phan (2018)

> Education doctorates provide diagnosis on cerebral palsy and psychosis; social psychology officers offer advice on medication and treatment for epilepsy; special education teachers diagnose autism and advise parents to stop epilepsy medicine. In this society, everyone can be doctors and teachers, everything is mixed up! It is just a pity for young naïve trainees who learn a bunch of mixed up knowledge, then graduate and mess things up, disorient the parents and children with special needs into erroneous intervention plan and confuse everyone.

Doctor Giang was concerned about the situation where Vietnamese service providers with irrelevant credentials provide poor advice to parents with children on the autism spectrum and speak loudly in the news media. This is a widespread problem in Vietnamese society, not just in the field of autism diagnosis and treatment.

However, it was sometimes hard to distinguish which content was misinformation without misleading intentions, and which content was disinformation with false information purposely circulated. Even doctors might have wrong perceptions and provided incorrect information by mistake. However, some of the articles be analysed in this chapter seemed to be evidently driven by commercial motives.

The knowledge, skills, capability, capacity and ethics of service providers pose a concern as these factors directly impact on the quality of autism intervention and support. Service providers may make irrelevant statements and misrepresentations of autism treatments in the media and to the public. There is no professional association to provide quality assurance for practitioners' practice, ethics and statements. Doctors and therapists may make claims without worrying about any legal consequences. In this professional context, it is questionable on how the media select who to interview to ensure scientific credibility.

7.3. Misinformation and disinformation about the causes of autism

The CDA in this chapter starts with misinformation and disinformation related to the causes of autism because, according to Patrick W Corrigan (2000), the debate about the causes of health issues significantly shapes media representation as well as the public perception of those health conditions. If people understand that the causes of autism cannot be controlled by individuals, the individuals with autism and their families are less stigmatised.

Scanning of all the articles containing the words *nguyên nhân [cause]* and *nguy cơ [risk]* in the corpus located 24 stories with obvious misinformation on the causes of autism, such as blaming electronic device overuse, vaccination or bad parenting. Along with misconceptions about the causes of autism, these articles also confused autism with depression and emotional distress. The scanning was narrowed to articles with the words *nguyên nhân [cause]* and *nguy cơ [risk]* to make it a more manageable task to select some articles for CDA. However, these 24 articles with misinformation were not an exhaustive account of all the misinformation instances in the corpus. When news articles talked about the causes or risks of autism, they were trying to use so-called scientific reasoning to explain a health condition, even when that reasoning assumed forms that had no scientific basis.

Multiple medical studies point to factors including genetic disorders, toxic environments, and prenatal parents' health as possible triggers of autism, but the exact causes and manifestation mechanisms have not been established (Deth, Muratore, Benzecry, Power-Charnitsky, & Waly, 2008; Kinney, Barch, Chayka, Napoleon, & Munir, 2010; Landrigan, 2010; Ozonoff et al., 2011). Below, several news articles are analysed to highlight the wrong information they perpetuated.

The first example was a short news story on *Thanhnien.vn* on 22 October 2006, which claimed watching television from early infancy caused autism. The title *Truyền hình - một nguyên nhân gây chứng tự kỷ? [Television – a cause of autism?]* (T.Hà, 2006) raised the question, and the content of the news confirmed the claim:

> Theo một tài liệu của ĐH Cornell (Mỹ), chứng tự kỷ có thể có nguồn gốc từ việc trẻ em tiếp xúc với truyền hình từ khi còn quá nhỏ tuổi [...]. Tại Mỹ, khoảng 30 năm trước đây chỉ có khoảng 1/2.500 người mắc hội chứng này, ngày nay con số đã tăng lên 1/166. [...] Các nhà nghiên cứu cho rằng việc cho trẻ tiếp xúc quá sớm với truyền hình tại Mỹ có thể là một phần nguyên nhân dẫn đến hiện tượng trẻ mắc chứng tự kỷ lan rộng như hiện nay. (The Independent) (T.Hà, 2006)
>
> According to a document by Cornell University (United States), autism syndrome might originate from children watching television from too young an age. [...] In the United States, about 30 years ago, only 1/2,500 people have this syndrome. Nowadays, the number has risen to 1/166. [...] Researchers claim that letting the children watch television too early in the United States might cause part of the phenomena where the number of autistic children is increasing like today [Edited from The Independent].

The myth of watching too much television as the cause of autism is one of the most popular misconceptions in Vietnam. The above news article used a fallacy to correlate children's watching television from an early age with the rise of autism. Known as a reputable media outlet in Vietnam, *Thanhnien.vn* also published misinformation by quoting an unknown document from the prestigious

Cornell University, without citing the author or date. This news story was sourced from *The Independent* in the United Kingdom, but neither the name of the writer nor date were provided. Therefore, tracing the original source was impossible. Vietnamese media are not exceptional in their reliance on foreign sources. In a meta-analysis of literature on science journalism, A. Nguyen and Tran (2019) have found that science reports in developing countries share such traits as “heavy dependence on foreign sources; [...] uncritical science reporting [and]; ineffective relationships between science and journalism" (p. 5). In the case of this news piece, the practice of translating international news, without appropriate reference and verification created a journalistic dilemma. The short piece of news just threw the information out and left it to the audience to process, without due dilligence of verifying and explaining the claim’s validity or expanding on its social implications.

In addition, there were also news articles in the Vietnamese online news media about the overuse of phones and other electronic devices as the cause of autism. It has been scientifically proven that too much television watching or electronic device usage can negatively affect children’s speech and emotional development (D. R. Anderson & Pempek, 2005; J. C. Wright et al., 2001; Zimmerman & Christakis, 2005). Even though autism has similar signs with delayed speech or social skill issues, autism is a congenital biogenetic, neurological condition whose signs are only manifesting in the first three years of life (Abrahams & Geschwind, 2008; Bauman & Kemper, 2005; Kumar & Christian, 2009; Miles, 2011); therefore the usage of these electronic devices is not reported as a cause of autism by most autism etiology studies (Deth et al., 2008; Folstein, Bisson, Santangelo, & Piven, 1998; Garber, 2007; Kinney et al., 2010; Landrigan, 2010; Wing, 1997).

Interestingly, among the 24 articles containing misinformation about the cause of autism, *Afamily.vn* contributed four stories. As a tabloid news aggregation website, *Afamily.vn* collected articles on family topics from all over the internet and recycled them on its own pages to attract viewership and ad revenues. *Afamily.vn* is not an automated news aggregation website, but rather news pieces are manually collected by staff members. So, if some particular staff member in charge of this topic area had a misperception about autism, the same kind of misinformation might be aggregated and republished.

One such story was the article *Lại chuyện con nghiện iPhone, Ipad [Once again the story of iPhone and Ipad addicts]* (Thanh Hằng, 2013) on 10 July 2013. Using such a stigmatising word as *addicts* to label those who overused electronic devices, the opinion-oriented article spent five paragraphs talking about the phenomenon of children spending too much time with iPhones and Ipads before coming to the following observation:

> Cho đến một ngày chị giật mình khi chị nhận thấy bé Tít hoàn toàn thu mình, khép kín, ít nói, cứ thấy người lạ là khóc, Tít sẽ nóng nảy hung hăng vô cùng nếu Iphone, Ipad hết pin. Đi tới thăm khám tại bệnh viện Nhi, chị xót xa khi biết con mình bị chứng tự kỷ thể nhẹ, các bác sĩ

> khẳng định Tít bị tự kỷ là do lạm dụng đồ chơi công nghệ khi còn quá sớm. (Thanh Hằng, 2013)
>
> One day, she is startled to realize Tít totally withdraws, closes up, talks little, and cries whenever seeing a stranger, Tít will be extremely angry and reckless if the Iphone and Ipad run out of battery. Going for examination at the Paediatrics Hospital, she feels anguish to know her child suffers autism at a mild level. Doctors confirm Tít suffers autism because of the technology toy overuse too early [in his life].

The child's attachment to the electronic devices and consequent behaviour were medicalized as a symptom of "autism at a mild level". Then, the article cited a medical doctor with a Ph.D., who held the position of Head of Paediatrics Department at Bạch Mai, a big hospital in the capital city Hanoi, as making a faulty claim about the too early use of [electronic] toys as the cause of autism and other developmental disorders. The writer might be incorrectly attributing this view, or the doctor might be making this erroneous statement; either way, the media report was spreading misinformation:

> Tiến sĩ, bác sĩ Nguyễn Tiến Dũng – Trưởng khoa Nhi – bệnh viện Bạch Mai cho rằng rất nhiều trẻ em bị tự kỷ, chậm nói, ít nói là do cha mẹ tạo điều kiện cho con chơi những trò chơi này từ khi quá sớm. (Thanh Hằng, 2013)
>
> Doctor Nguyễn Tiến Dũng, PhD – Head of Paediatrics Department - Bạch Mai Hospital said that lots of children suffer autism, delayed speech, or limited language due to parents letting them play with these toys from too early an age.

It is a common misconception in Vietnam when people confuse autism with a speech disorder. Children with autism often have delayed speech or regress in speech development, but speech disorder is not autism (Levy et al., 2010; Peacock et al., 2012; Wing, 1981). By quoting the Head of the Paediatrics Department at such a big public hospital like Bạch Mai, the article once again reinforced the misconception about the etiology of autism due to electronic device overuse. Even though the above examples of misinformation did not blame the parents directly, they suggested that parents did not manage television time, electronic toys or other enviroment factors well. Electronic device management has proven a popular parenting concern, not only in Vietnam (Kabali et al., 2015; Livingstone, Mascheroni, Dreier, Chaudron, & Lagae, 2015). This news article highlighted a common social problem to associate the medicalized frame of electronic devices overuse with autism. It implicitly called for moral responsibility from parents; if they were to practice responsible parenting, they would have to manage their children' access to electronic devices to avoid autism.

The most stigmatising misinformation on *Afamily.vn* appeared in the commentary *Khi chính cha mẹ gieo rắc cho con căn bệnh tự kỷ [When parents are the ones who sow the seeds of autism in their children]* (Kim Chi, 2010). The article on 7 March 2010 started with a strong lead:

> Nhiều bậc cha mẹ không biết rằng, chính mình đã làm tổn thương con cái và vô tình "gieo rắc" cho con căn bệnh tự kỷ. (Kim Chi, 2010)
>
> Many parents do not know that they themselves have hurt their children and unconsciously “sown" the seed of the autism disease to their children.

Gieo rắc [to sow the seed of] is a metaphor with a very negative connotation in Vietnamese; it is often used in collocation with terror, fear, distrust, crime, disease, toxins and death. By using this metaphor, this article directly pointed the finger and harshly condemned the parents for hurting their children.

The article was published in 2010, when the stock market bubble had just exploded in Vietnam. Many families lost large amounts of money because of uninformed investments into newly listed companies in the stock market. The article used the family context to explain the medical condition, without referring to established science. So this article used one stone to aim at two birds, condemning both the ignorant greed of many people in the stock market and their neglectful parenting at home. It spent five paragraphs talking about the fight between a couple over their losses in the stock market bubble before it mentioned the child. The article published a photo (sourced from gettyimages) with two parents sitting on two couches quarreling, while the child was sitting on the floor in between, with both hands on his/her ears to block the noise from the argument. As a staged photo from a commercial photo stock provider, this visual vividly illustrated the message: *Do not let the "fight" between parents become the pain of the children*. Visually, the child was depicted in a disadvantaged physical position and in a vulnerable emotional state in the family conflict. The parents’ quarelling also contrasted with the happy photos in the background.

Figure 9: Do not let the "fight" between parents become the pain of the children (Kim Chi, 2010)

> Mỗi lần bố mẹ cãi nhau, đứa con gái lên 3 của anh chị lại mất hồn vía, vì xưa nay, bé chưa bao giờ phải đối mặt với một thực trạng kinh khủng như vậy. [...] Xinh xắn, ngoan ngoãn, bụ bẫm, bé giờ xanh xao, lúc nào cũng thẫn thờ, gương mặt đầy sợ hãi, nhẫn nhịn. Ai đến nhà chị cũng phải thốt lên kinh ngạc vì sự thay đổi trông thấy rõ ràng ở bé. Điều đặc biệt lo ngại là bé hầu như không nói năng gì, âm thầm lặng lẽ một mình, cứ về nhà là mân mê con gấu bông cũ của mình. Có nhu cầu gì, bé chỉ lí nhí vào tai mẹ. Ai đến chơi, bé cũng sợ, chui tọt vào góc của mình. Hôm nào bố về muộn, người hơi có mùi men, bé đứng nép góc nhà len lén nhìn, lo lắng chờ đợi một cơn cãi vã sắp tới. Hôm nào mẹ hơi to tiếng, bé hốt hoảng cắm mặt xuống giường (Kim Chi, 2010).
>
> Each time the parents argue, their 3-year-old daughter turns insane because so far, she has not faced this terrible situation. […] Once nice looking, well behaving and chubby, the girl now becomes pale, lost, frightened and restrained. Anyone who comes to visit has to utter an exclamation of surprise because of the striking change in the girl. Especially worrisome is that the child does not utter a word, keeps quiet and silent to her own; once she comes home, she only clings to her old teddy bear. […] When the father comes home drunk, she crouches at a corner, looks out sneakily, anxious about an upcoming fight. When her mother speaks loudly, she frantically puts her face on the bed.

The child was described as regressing from a nice looking, well-behaved girl to a pale, lost, frightened and restrained person, due to the parents' arguments. In this way, autism was understood as deriving from her troubled home environment, due to bad parenting, not as a congenital condition that manifests gradually in early childhood. All the signs described in the above paragraph suggested the child might have an emotional disturbance, but they were different from the signs of autism defined in the DSM-IV or DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

> Tại bệnh viện, anh chị tê tái khi được trả lời, cô con gái xinh xắn của mình đã bị tự kỷ, một căn bệnh không hề dễ chữa, gây ra bởi một số nguyên nhân, trong đó nguyên nhân chính là tình trạng lục đục, xích mích, giận dữ xẩy ra thường xuyên trong gia đình suốt một thời gian dài! (Kim Chi, 2010)
>
> At the hospital, the couple are pained when they are informed that their beautiful daughter is suffering autism – a disease not easily treatable, which is caused by a number of reasons, of which the main reason is the quarrels and anger that happen so often in their family over a long time!

The article was using a cause and effect logic that made sense in some respects, that parental conflict affected the child's emotional wellbeing. But the writer was confusing the fright and quietness of the

stressed child due to psychological disturbance with the challenges in social interaction and speech regression in autism that were caused by biological and neurological differences in the brain.

The second part of the article repeated the same fallacy, reciting the story of a family breakdown as the cause of autism. In this case, the husband was disappointed after his wife gave birth to a second daughter, while he was hoping for a son. So he had extra-marital affairs, then soon left the family. The wife was angry, so she poured all the anger into the two children with bitter words. She left the children to the nanny to throw herself into endless parties. And the consequence was:

> Hai đứa con thơ không hiểu điều gì, tự nhiên mất bố, mẹ thì biến thành một người nanh nọc, xa lạ. Chúng trở nên sợ hãi, cô lập, hễ nhìn thấy mẹ là trốn biệt. Đứa con gái đầu mới lên 6, ngày thì đi học, tối về u buồn, cứ nghe nhắc đến bố là òa lên khóc. Khi cô bồ anh Công sinh hạ cậu con trai cũng là lúc đứa con gái thứ hai của anh được 3 tuổi. Bé hầu như không nói gì, chậm chạp, ít biểu lộ cảm xúc. Trường mẫu giáo từ chối nhận bé vào học, vì cho rằng bé bị thiểu năng, sợ không theo kịp bạn bè. Vợ anh hốt hoảng đưa con đi khám thì biết, bé đã bị tự kỷ, căn bệnh bé bị gieo rắc bởi chính cha mẹ mình. (Kim Chi, 2010)
>
> The two naïve children do not understand what happens, suddenly they lost the father and the mother has become an evil stranger. They become frightened and lonely; whenever they see the mother, they run and hide. The older child at 6 years old bursts into tears whenever she hears about her father. When Công's [the father's] mistress gave birth to a son, his second daughter was 3 years old. She never speaks a word, is slow, and barely expresses any emotion. The kindergarten refuses to admit her because they believe that she is impaired and cannot catch up with other friends. The wife is terrified and takes her daughter to get an examination to realize she suffers from autism, the disease sowed by her own parents.

Once again, the article confused children's emotional problems in a troubled family with autism, without any reference to reliable sources on the possible causes of autism. The article equated psychological disturbance with a neuro-biological disorder, which had a totally different etiology. Additionally, the parents were portrayed as not only neglectful, but also sexist, abusive and ignorant to make the claim that they caused autism more believable.

As its name suggests, *Afamily.vn* focuses its content around family matters. In the above articles, the writer seemed to champion family values in order to protect children and the nuclear cell of society, but with a misleading approach. The implication is if bad parenting causes autism, then parents have to correct themselves so as to solve their own children's problems. Social acceptance for autism will face more challenges if autistic behaviours are viewed as the consequences of a bad upbringing. In contrast to other cultures where it is believed that "it takes a village to raise a child", Vietnamese culture for many generations has emphasised the nurturing responsibility of individual families,

especially mothers and grandmothers, as illustrated in the popular saying: “con hư tại mẹ, cháu hư tại bà” [If the child is bad mannered, the mother is to be blamed; if the grandchild is bad mannered, the grandmother is to be blamed]. In recent years, there has been an increased moralizing concern about Vietnamese families not doing their part in managing their children’s behaviours (Mestechkina, Son, & Shin, 2014), as a way to largely blame families for children’s misbehaviours. Autism, mental health or behaviour issues, when framed as originating from family problems, become targets for stigmatisation.

The above article sounded like a “salon journalism” product, which could have been entirely made up. No real people were quoted in this whole article; names could be fictitious, and photos were sourced from a stock image library. Marr (2003, p. 282) observes that many Vietnamese media staff often “fudge the line between fact and fiction”. The above story provided an example where media staff in Vietnam were producing sensationalised misinformation by lecturing on bad parenting practice.

Vietnam has also contributed to the global media phenomenon of misrepresentation about the link between vaccination and autism. Different variants of the word *vaccines* appeared 114 times, in 17 articles of the media corpus. Five out of 17 articles provided ambiguous and confusing information about the theory that vaccine had a causal connection with autism. All the articles with ambiguous information or misrepresentation about the link between vaccination and autism only made the claims in one short paragraph, without elaborating on or supporting the claims with specific references. In contrast, 12 other articles that negated the connection between vaccines and autism did elaborate on the stories and explain the specific grounds for the negation.

Ambiguous information about the link between vaccines and autism was seen in the article *Bệnh tự kỷ ở trẻ [Autistic disease in children]* on *Tuoitre.vn* on 22 March 2006 by Tường Vy (2006). The article, written in a science journalism mode, started with identifying the signs of autism, then continued with speculating about the causes of autism, and ended with the diagnosis of autism. Vaccines were only mentioned in this paragraph:

> Một số người tin thimerisol (một thành phần của vaccine) và vaccine, đặc biệt vaccine sởi, quai bị và rubella, có thể liên quan đến bệnh tự kỷ do đã có nhiều trẻ cùng lứa tuổi được tiêm các vaccine này được chẩn đoán mắc bệnh tự kỷ. Tuy nhiên cũng chưa có bằng chứng khoa học nào về mối liên quan này. (Tường Vy, 2006)
>
> Some people believe that thimerosal (an element in vaccines) and vaccines, especially the vaccines for measles, mumps, and rubella, might have the connection with the autistic disease because there have been many children at the same age injected with these vaccines

> diagnosed as having acquired autism. However, there has not been scientific evidence about this correlation.

This paragraph ambiguously used *some people* as unidentified subjects for a serious medical proposition/belief that vaccines might have a connection with autism. The writer elaborated on the above point, with emphasis on the vaccines for measles, mumps and rubella. The author also described the sequence of vaccines injection then diagnosis of having acquired autism. The claim about the connection was asserted without any specific source. Afterward, the article precariously hedged the speculative claim that there had not been scientific evidence about the correlation between vaccines and autism. The article did not show the basic principles of journalism rigour.

Meanwhile, a global report conducted by Gallup, revealed that only 71% of respondents in Vietnam believed that vaccines are safe (Gallup, 2019). A severe measles outbreak in Hanoi in 2014 killed at least 133 children (Phan Anh, 2019). Media reports linked the measles outbreak with low vaccination rates. Parents were scared of vaccines and skipped the scheduled shots after the incident involving the deaths of 10 babies who had been given the Dutch-made Quinvaxem vaccine between November 2012 and October 2013 (Phan Anh, 2019). Generally, how the media report on vaccines' complications may have escalated the anxiety about vaccination in Vietnam.

Media outlets in Vietnam did make limited efforts to correct misinformation about autism. There were 11 entries of *hiểu nhầm [misunderstanding]*, 8 entries of *hiểu sai [misunderstanding]*, 9 entries of *định kiến [prejudice]*, 3 entries of *thông tin sai [misinformation]*, 4 entries of *nhận thức sai [misconception],* 6 entries of *thay đổi nhận thức [change the conception]* and 10 entries of *hiểu đúng [correct understanding]* in the corpus. The articles containing these words deliberately tried to explain the misunderstanding or misinformation about autism and correct them. However, the numbers of articles with an intention to correct misinformation and misperception was relatively low.

In summary, it was observable through the above analysis that misinformation of different kinds was published throughout the 11-year period sample in the study, by both leading media outlets and tabloid electronic newspapers. The analysis of misinformation examples in this section suggested not only that autism representation was constructed with mixed family and medical frames but also through a distorted medical lens, rather than deploying evidence-based science and rigorous media practice. The articles lacked authoritative medical and scientific sources, which led to deficits in the media coverage. The type of misinformation spread by media in Vietnam differed in some ways from the rest of the world. Most of the existing international scholarly literature focused exclusively on misinformation about vaccines causing autism (Bode & Vraga, 2015; Gross, 2009; Pluviano, Watt, & Della Sala, 2017; Ruiz & Bell, 2014; White, 2014). Academic research in the past decade has barely reported on such obvious misinformation about other causes of autism in Western news media like

the overuse of television and electronic devices or bad parenting, as was observed in the Vietnamese coverage.

Misinformation is dangerous and difficult to correct. According to Jerit and Barabas (2012), the prevalence and persistence of misinformation is due to “partisan motivated reasoning”, a mechanism by which media and individuals retain their pre-existing attitudes (pp. 3-4). In other words, people seek information that matches with their beliefs because it is considered to be more credible. Generally, once an issue is framed in a certain way, public perceptions become persistent (Nisbet, Brossard, & Kroepsch, 2003).

“Fake news” and misinformation clickbait have been a concern globally, and they spread faster and wider because of the novelty and the emotional reactions they initiate such as surprise, fear or disgust (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Misinformation incidents in the Vietnamese online news media seemed to operate via the same mechanisms. The more strikingly the misinformation was presented, the more it was shared on the social media and the more views and reactions it got. Tabloid media outlets intentionally made their news articles controversial to attract views and traffic. Parents and advocates sometimes raised their voice to counter autism misinformation incidents, but they have been more reactive than proactive, given their own limited resources. When parent advocates found out some misinformation, they contacted the media outlets to ask them to correct, case by case. Sometimes the media outlets corrected their content, but sometimes they did not. Despite parents’ awareness building activities, media houses kept spreading misinformation. Other state bodies or Vietnam Journalist Association did not bother to whistle and monitor this bad media practice.

7.4. Treatment and magical cures driven by commercial motives

The media in Vietnam were eager to seek a cure or recovery pathway, to the extent they reported various therapies which had not been scientically proven to be effective. In the corpus of this study, there were references to different therapies which had not been listed as effective for autism (Odom, Collet-Klingenberg, Rogers, & Hatton, 2010; Rogers & Vismara, 2008; Wong et al., 2015). Such therapies were acupuncture (86 entries), catgut-embedding (34 entries), acupressure (7 entries) and massage (17 entries). In the articles which mentioned the above therapies, doctors and experts were quoted as speaking of the effectiveness of the treatment on individuals with autism. But none of the media reports were based on reliable research with verifiable methodologies and validity. Claims about the reduction of autistic symptoms were mostly offerred as anecdotes. Outside of this corpus, other media outlets also reported on other “methods” such as biomedical supplements, hyperbaric oxygen chamber and scraping on the skin with a silver coin. Self-claimed specialists or non-specialists were quoted to justify the story lines.

The article *Những điều cần biết về trẻ tự kỷ [What you need to know about autistic children]* (Việt Tùng, 2006), on *Vietnamnet.vn* on 19 March 2006, was one of the articles that overstated the effectiveness of unproven treatment. It started by identifying the following signs of autism:

> Có trẻ suốt ngày chỉ xem ti vi, có trẻ thì chỉ thích chơi một mình, một loại đồ chơi... Có trẻ thì chỉ nói những tiếng "xì xà xì xồ" mà lại không nói được tiếng Việt. Cũng có những trẻ chỉ chơi một loại đồ chơi, mà lại chỉ chơi một kiểu mà không bao giờ nghĩ ra kiểu chơi khác. Có những đứa trẻ không bao giờ chia sẻ buồn vui với bố mẹ và người thân, chân tay lúc nào cũng "vân vê" một cách vô thức... Tất cả những hiện tượng trên là dấu hiệu của trẻ mắc "hội chứng tự kỷ". Đây là một căn "bệnh" mới xuất hiện ở Việt Nam khoảng 10 năm trở lại đây và ngày càng bùng phát mạnh mẽ. (Việt Tùng, 2006)

> There are kids who watch TV all day long, or only like to play alone, with one kind of toy… There are kids who are only uttering “foreign sounds” without being able to speak Vietnamese. There are also kids who play with only one type of toy, and only play in one way without thinking of a variety of ways to play. There are kids who never share joy or sadness with parents and loved ones, their hands are constantly “fidgeting” unconsciously… All the above signs are symptoms of children (with?) acquired “autism syndrome”. This is a “disease” newly appeared in Vietnam in the past 10 years and is day to day booming at a strong pace.

The above paragraph used stereotyping language to describe autism signs, so as to relate easily to the lay audience. But it also created a poorly generalized idea about autism signs. In this particular article, autism was even called a disease newly appeared in Vietnam. This was scientifically incorrect. Autism has existed throughout human history, even if it only started to be recognized or defined in the past few decades. When a disorder was described as “bùng phát” [booming at a strong pace], this wording created an impression that it was spreading like an infectious disease.

The article continued by indirectly quoting Dr. Trần Thị Thu Hà, Vice Head of the Rehabilitation Department of the National Paediatrics Hospital, suggesting that there had not been any research in Vietnam about autistic children because autism was still a new issue. It was explained that:

> Từ năm 2000 trở lại đây, trẻ tự kỷ xuất hiện ngày càng đông, năm sau cao gấp 2, 3 lần năm trước. Điều đó không có nghĩa số lượng trẻ tự kỷ ở Việt Nam tăng lên gấp đôi gấp ba, mà nó có nghĩa sự thay đổi lớn về mô hình tàn tật. Tại Mỹ, người ta nghiên cứu ở bang Califonia thấy rằng trẻ tự kỷ năm sau cao gấp 240 lần năm trước, một tỷ lệ được coi là kinh khủng. Có người gọi là bệnh tự kỷ, nhưng thật ra phải gọi là "Hội chứng tự kỷ" mới chính xác. "Hội chứng tự kỷ" là một trong những Hội chứng rối loạn phát triển ở trẻ em. Trong phân loại của tổ chức y tế thế giới trước đây thì người ta xếp nó vào loại bệnh tâm thần, nhưng ngày nay nó được tách ra như là một Hội chứng rối loạn phát triển. (Việt Tùng, 2006)

> From 2000 up to now, the number of autistic children is increasing, this year is 2 or 3 times higher than the previous year. That does not mean that the number of autistic children in Vietnam has doubled or tripled, it only means that there is a new change in the disability model. In the United States, studies in California reveal that the number of autistic children this year is 240 times higher than the previous year, a conceivably terrible rate. Some call it autism disease, but it should be called “autism syndrome”. Autism syndrome is one of the childhood developmental disorders. In the World Health Organisation categorization, it was previously defined as a mental disease, but now it is identified as a developmental disorder syndrome.

If the first paragraph simplified the language to relate to a lay audience, this paragraph used medical terms that did not necessarily make sense to the average reader. For example, when the article claimed that the number of autistic children increased because “there is a new change in the disability model” without expanding on the idea, it was not clear what was meant. Similarly, to an average Vietnamese, the difference between *bệnh [disease]* and *hội chứng [syndrome]* is not always clear. People generally cannot tell the difference between those two terms, both in linguistic meaning and as medical terminologies, if they are not explained. Furthermore, the numbers quoted in the paragraph had no source to support their credibility. I have been unable to source any research in the United States that reports the prevalence of autism in California grew 240 times in just a year.

Even though Dr. Trần Thị Thu Hà was quoted as suggesting that no research about autism had been done in Vietnam, the article asserted this claim:

> Một đứa trẻ tự kỷ nếu được phát hiện và can thiệp sớm thì 30% có cơ hội khỏi hoàn toàn, 70% còn lại phát triển nói chung là tốt, có thể có trẻ giao tiếp được bằng lời nói hoặc không thể giao tiếp bằng lời nói, nhưng ý thức được hành vi và độc lập được cuộc sống. Còn trẻ tự kỷ không được phát hiện sớm, hoặc phát hiện sớm nhưng gia đình không chấp nhận can thiệp và rơi vào tình trạng nặng, kèm theo chậm phát triển trí tuệ thì sau này sẽ dẫn đến tình trạng rối loạn tâm thần. Xét về bảng phân loại bệnh tật của Tổ chức y tế thế giới rất có thể sau này, trẻ tự kỷ sẽ trở thành bệnh nhân tâm thần. (Việt Tùng, 2006)

> If autistic children are identified and get early intervention, they have 30% opportunity to recover completely. The remaining 70% generally can develop well, even if the children can communicate verbally or not, but can regulate their behaviours and live an independent life. If not identified early, or even if identified early but the families do not accept the fact and do not take the child to intervention, autism can become severe, which goes together with an intellectual retardation, and can lead to mental disorder. Based on the World Health Organisation’s classification, it is a high possibility that later on autistic children can become mentally ill patients.

The writer claimed that 30% of autistic children recovered completely without any supporting reference, while nowhere in the world researchers could claim such a ratio of “complete recovery”. This figure did not appear by accident in the article. It raised hope for parents and care givers. If 30% of autistic children had the opportunity to recover completely, parents and caregivers should find out where and how to realize that hope. The article went on to claim that if they were not properly treated, “autistic children can become mentally ill patients”. In a single paragraph, the author used both hope and fear appeals to persuade the readers of the impact of early intervention.

The below paragraph showed that the article was driven by a commercial motive to call for parents to check out the autism intervention facilities which can offer advanced treatment. Under the sub-headline *Tự kỷ: Đã có cách chữa [Autism: there’s already a treatment],* the article claimed:

> Tại VN, Khoa phục hồi chức năng viện Nhi Trung ương đã thiết kế ra một mô hình can thiệp sớm toàn diện, bao gồm giáo dục đặc biệt và trị liệu cá nhân. Trong trị liệu cá nhân thì có sử dụng chương trình can thiệp hành vi của Mỹ (ABA). Chương trình này được thiết kế đặc biệt cho trẻ có hành vi bất thường, đó là trẻ tự kỷ. Các nhà chuyên môn sẽ can thiệp trị liệu cho trẻ về vấn đề ngôn ngữ, huấn luyện kỹ năng sinh hoạt hàng ngày. Đồng thời, kết hợp với sử dụng một số thuốc nôm na gọi là thuốc bổ não, kích thích về độ tập trung, về mặt ngôn ngữ, giao tiếp. Hiện tại, Khoa phục hồi chức năng viện Nhi Trung ương điều trị rất nhiều trẻ tự kỷ cũng như các trẻ tàn tật khác. Ngoài ra, Hội cứu trợ trẻ em TP Hà Nội thành lập Trung tâm hy vọng số 1 (nhà 35, ngõ 84 Trần Quang Diệu, Đống Đa, Hà Nội) và phòng khám nhi ABCD (29 - Giang Văn Minh - Kim Mã - Ba Đình - Hà Nội). Trên đây là ba địa điểm ở Việt Nam dùng phác đồ điều trị hiện đại nhất của Mỹ. Các trung tâm này gần như hoạt động từ thiện bởi chi phí khám và điều trị là rất nhỏ. (Việt Tùng, 2006)
>
> In Vietnam, the Physiological Rehabilitation Department at the [public] National Paediatrics Hospital has designed a comprehensive early intervention regimen, including special education and one-on-one intervention. The one on one intervention will use the Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) program of America. This program is specifically designed for children with abnormal behaviours – autistic children. The professionals will conduct therapies for the children in language and everyday skills. Concurrently, some medicine, eloquently called brain boost medicine, is used to stimulate attention, language and communication. At the moment, the Physiological Rehabilitation Department are treating a lot of autistic children as well as other disabilities. In addition, the Ha Noi Association of Relief for Handicapped Children established the Hope Centre No. 1 (at 35/84 Trần Quang Diệu, Đống Đa, Hà Nội) and ABCD Paediatrics Clinic (29 - Giang Văn Minh - Kim Mã - Ba Đình - Hà Nội), The above are three places in Vietnam that use the most modern American regimen. These centres operate like charities because the fee for examination and treatment is very low.

The promotional motive was evident in the provision of specific addresses for locations which offered "best treatment" for autism: one of them was the public National Paediatrics Hospital and two others were privately owned. By juxtaposing the National Paediatrics Hospital with the private clinic and autism centre, the article implicitly put them into one tier, using the reputation of the former to promote the latter. The claim that the three locations used the most advanced intervention regimen from the United States lacked evidence. By sequencing the information about the autism recovery rate of 30% in the prior paragraph and then the introduction of the three institutions with the most modern autism intervention regime, the article created a fantasy that if parents wanted their children to be in the 30% that completely recovers, they should take action and buy the service at the best service providers endorsed in the article.

Based on the experience of parents over the years and their comments on social media about ABCD Paediatrics Clinics and Hope Centre No.1, the assertion that these places operated almost like charities was not true (Sotaychame.com, 2016; Webtretho.com, 2009). Dr. Hà was quoted in the earlier part of the article, but it was not stated that Dr. Hà was the owner of both ABCD Paediatrics Clinic and the Hope Centre No. 1 clinic. The omission of the crucial information about Dr. Hà's ownership of the two private service centres made the statement that these locations offered the most advanced intervention regimen sound more neutral, obscuring that it was a promotional article.

Dual practice at both public hospitals and private clinics is common among half of the doctors in the Vietnamese public health sector, as found in the survey by Do and Do (2018). The income disparity is substantial between public and private practice, but these dual medical practitioners choose to remain in the poorly-paid public sector for the professional status, network benefits, and training opportunities as well as the opportunities for referring public patients to private treatment (pp. 898, 902). This understanding about dual practice illuminates how Dr. Hà used her powerful position at the public National Paediatrics Hospital and her access to the media to over-exaggerate the efficacy of her private services. These two private centres were infamous in the parents' community for their abusive handling of both parents and children, but they were among the few autism centres promoted in the media in the 2000s when autism centres were not mushrooming yet. In this article, commercial interest overrode medical and journalism ethics, where recovery was presented as what Esposito and Perez (2014) call a commercial appeal.

7.5. Promotion of health technology and abuse of power

Stem cell has been promoted as an advanced autism treatment, especially in the Global South. Stem cell therapies in general are still categorized as experimental and unproven in scientific research; in other words, they are still considered "unsafe, inefficacious and thus unethical when clinically used" (Datta, 2018, p. 352). Among the few stem cell therapies that are established with reliable scientific data (Caulfield & McGuire, 2012), none are for autism treatment. Datta (2018) notes that stem cell

treatment is not available to the Euro-American public through public healthcare providers like the UK NHS and US Medicare. Sharpe, Di Pietro, and Illes (2016) argue that due to the high vulnerability of children with neurodevelopmental disorder and their families, "[t]he hope, hype, and promise" of stem cell treatment for neurodevelopmental issues require that journalists and stem cell scientists must work closely with each other to ensure balanced and accurate communication (p. 1).

In this global context, stem cell treatment was promoted with big claims in Vietnam. Journalists and professionals alike used the magic word "cure" to lure parents into high hopes. The following article, titled *Chữa dứt điểm bại não, tự kỷ nhờ ứng dụng ghép tế bào gốc [To cure completely cerebral palsy and autism thanks to stem cell transplant]* (Tiểu Nguyễn, 2016) was published on *Afamily.vn* on 15 November 2016. A number of other news media outlets reported this claim after a seminar was organised by the private Vinmec International Hospital in Hanoi.

Vinmec International Hospital is an expensive private hospital, owned by the richest billionaire in Vietnam under the private Vingroup corporation. Vingroup's services encompass the most vital aspects of Vietnamese life, from real estates, to food, education, healthcare, retailing, entertainment, technology and transportation, targeting the middle and upper-middle-class population. J. Reed (2019) in an article in *Financial Times* quoted Lê Thị Thu Thủy, Vice Chairwoman of this conglomerate as saying Vingroup is a "cradle-to-grave" supplier of products and services, while lay people now term Vingroup's business as Vin-everything and Vietnam as a Vin-country. This conglomerate is either admired or hated by Vietnamese people (Voice of America, 2017).

The article about stem cell therapy and the seminar organised by Vinmec International Hospital started with this lead:

> Sự phát triển của những ứng dụng công nghệ tế bào gốc trong chữa bại não, tự kỷ một lần nữa khiến chúng ta có niềm tin trong một tương lai không xa, tất cả những loại bệnh đều có thể chữa khỏi. (Tiểu Nguyễn, 2016)
>
> The development of stem cell transplants in treating cerebral palsy and autism once again makes us hope in a not distant future where all kinds of diseases can be cured.

The article sent out a strong message that reliable doctors in the world could not acclaim. Stem cell technology was boasted as not only a stand-alone treatment but as also having the magic potential to cure all kinds of medical problems. This was an obvious overstatement, which an ethical medical doctor would not make when the prospect was not scientifically proven.

Tiểu Nguyễn (2016) quoted Alok Sharma, a professor from India's NeuroGen Brain and Spine Institute who presented at the seminar:

> Hiện nay, y học nói chung đang tập trung chữa trị bệnh tự kỷ, bại não về mặt triệu chứng, chứ không phải được điều trị từ nguyên nhân gây nên căn bệnh", GS Alok Sharma khẳng định. Điều đó có nghĩa là người bệnh sẽ không được điều trị tận gốc, triệt để căn bệnh mà chỉ là một phương pháp cứu chữa tạm thời. GS ALok Sharma khẳng định ghép tế bào gốc có thể trị tận gốc tự kỷ, bại não tận gốc.
>
> "Nowadays, medical industry generally focuses their treatment efforts on autism disease and cerebral palsy at the symptom level, but not on the cause of the disease", Professor Alok Sharma confirmed. This means the patients will not be treated at the root, to eradicate the disease, but just to provide a temporary treatment method. Professor Alok Sharma confirmed stem cell transplant can treat at the root of autism and cerebral palsy. (Tiểu Nguyễn, 2016)

The above statement highlighted the medical advancement of stem cell transplant treatment and strongly differentiated it from existing therapies. While concern about the safety of stem cell therapy was still voiced by the Food and Drug Administration in the United States in 16 November 2017 (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2017, p. 1403), the article quoted Alok Sharma in 2016 as claiming that the stem cell therapy could treat autism at its root. In this media coverage, the medical professional was not only practising medicine but also doing a marketer's task, promoting his therapy for commercial interests.

The article went on to quote Professor, Dr. Nguyễn Thanh Liêm, Director of Vinmec International Hospital, the host of the seminar, as stating his Vinmec International Hospital "had conducted stem cell transplant in many cases of children suffering cerebral palsy and autism and achieved wonderful outcomes" (Nguyễn Thanh Liêm, as cited in Tiểu Nguyễn, 2016). This was an overstatement of the medical advancement. Stem cell transplant for cerebral palsy was mainly researched by Prof. Liêm and his team in 2016 (Thanh Liem, Hoang Phuong, & Trung Kien, 2018). Two journal articles from Vinmec research were published on open access, open peer-reviewed general medical journals but both of them were about stem cell transplant for cerebral palsy patients (L. T. Nguyen, Nguyen, Vu, Ngo, & Bui, 2017; Thanh Liem et al., 2018). According to the news article (Tiểu Nguyễn, 2016) and the journal article (Thanh Liem et al., 2018), the pilot research and clinical application of stem cell transplant were conducted and reported in parallel, which was against international best practice of medical research and deployment process (Dominguez, Jawara, Martino, Sinaii, & Grady, 2012; Grady, 2005). Strikingly, Prof. Liêm and his Vinmec team published one article about autism and stem cells (Liem, Phuong, Anh, Vu, & Anh, 2018) on a predatory journal, which based in a Nail Spa in California. The Vinmec's article has quite the same title and largely similar content with an article by the Indian team which Vinmec partners with (Sharma et al., 2013).

It should be noted that for a medical treatment with such major health implications like stem cell transplant, a rigorous approval process must be done before the treatment is licensed to be used in

Vietnam. And to be approved, the research must demonstrate the efficacy and safety of the particular treatment. If pilot research was still underway, the methodology was not clearly explained, and the results were not proven; the media were too fast to endorse the notion that stem cell transplant could cure completely cerebral palsy and autism. Vinmec's medical process called into question whether they were abiding by legal regulations on new medical treatment developments.

If Vinmec International Hospital had been using stem cell transplant to treat cerebral palsy and autism in *the pilot study period*, the media should have made that clear. Throughout the media articles about stem cell treatment at Vinmec International Hospital, no questions were raised about its safety; only one article quoted Prof. Liêm as saying the side effects were minor, without specifying what they were, how and why. If the media were well aware of ethical medical research and clinical process, they should have raised the issue that patients who participate in medical pilot research need to be paid for their participation, to be informed and to consent to the risks, as per international best practice for clinical trials (Dominguez et al., 2012; Grady, 2005). Customers should not pay big money out of their own pockets to be the objects of experiments.

Both Vinmec's corporate website content and the news media often connect cerebral palsy with autism when they talk about stem cell treatments for these two conditions, regardless of their different etiology and manifestations, and the necessarily different treatment methods. Arguably, Vinmec and their media cheer teams mention the two conditions together to take advantage of the claimed improvement of cerebral palsy with regard to stem cell treatments, and associate that with autism.

Reported elsewhere in the medical literature, it often takes from 10 to 14 years for experimental health services and products to move from research to market approval, and additional time is required for them to be assessed and integrated into health care systems and insurance policies (Benjaminy, Lo, & Illes, 2016; Glassman & Sun, 2004). The high optimism and the promised breakthrough in the global media coverage about stem cell treatment might be fostering unrealistic expectations about clinical translation speed and creating a global market for unproven stem cell treatments (Kamenova & Caulfield, 2015, p. 26; Master & Resnik, 2013), which may then find commercial expression in medical tourism packages in the Global South. This is specifically dangerous in relation to stem cell research where lay people are impatient and desperate to use stem cell therapies as "miracle cures" (T. Bubela et al., 2009, p. 516). In many cases, "intentionally hyping claim is at minimum inaccurate, deceptive, and potentially dishonest and defies many of the ethical and professional responsibilities scientists and other professionals are expected to uphold" (Master & Resnik, 2013, p. 324).

Outside of this corpus, Prof. Liêm and his PR team also conflated his expertise in endoscopy surgery with stem cell transplant in various PR articles (Hà Quyên, 2018; Minh Huỳnh, 2018; Minh Tuấn, 2018). Intertextually, Prof. Liêm was portrayed by the media as the avant-garde pathfinder at the frontier of medicine (Lan Anh, 2018), who dared to shock others (Hà Lê, 2018), by doing things other

doctors have not tried, willing to face criticism or even attacks (Liên Châu, 2018) because of his "pioneering" ideas. Not by accident, the above articles were published quite close to each other in March, April and June 2018, chiming in with the topicality of World Autism Awareness Day on April 2. The promotion of Prof. Liêm in in-depth interviews and personality driven news genres implicitly aimed to counter the criticism he faced from other professionals and parents who highlighted that stem cell treatment for autism was still not an evidence-based therapy.

Because of the reaction from other professionals, well informed parents and past customers toward his overstatement of stem cell treatment, Prof. Liêm recently admitted in a book targeting parents that stem cell treatment was still being researched. However, what he admitted was ambiguous and counter-productive:

> Điều trị bằng ghép tế bào gốc
>
> Đây là phương pháp điều trị đang được quan tâm tuy nhiên hiện nay vẫn đang trong giai đoạn nghiên cứu. Ghép tế bào gốc có thể thay đổi được một số rối loạn trong não giúp trẻ nhận thức và tiếp thu tốt hơn nhưng chỉ nên được xem là phương pháp điều trị phối hợp với can thiệp giáo dục chuyên biệt nói một cách khác trẻ sẽ không đạt được tiến bộ nếu chỉ ghép tế bào gốc mà không phối hợp với giáo dục đặc biệt. Khi nào nên ghép tế bào gốc vẫn là những vấn đề đang được tiếp tục nghiên cứu nhưng cũng như bất cứ phương pháp điều trị nào, ghép tế bào gốc chỉ có kết quả khi ghép sớm, ghép càng muộn kết quả càng hạn chế. (Liêm, 2018, p. 33)
>
> Treatment by stem cell transplant
>
> This treatment method is paid much attention to [by many people] at the moment, however, it is still under the research process. Stem cell transplant helps to change some disorder in the brain, enabling the child to learn and develop cognition better, but it should be considered as a supplementary treatment, in combination with special education, in other words, the child cannot make improvement with stem cell transplant alone, without special education. When to undergo stem cell transplant continues to be an issue to be researched, but like any other treatment, stem cell transplant only leads to [good] result when conducted early, the more delayed, the more limited the result will be.

The claim that stem cell transplant was the focus of much interest was a groundless assumption. While admitting that stem cell transplant still needed further research, Liêm asserted that it benefited the child in cognition if conducted early. The acknowledgement of the need for further research was subtle, while the urge for early transplant was strong. Even if hedging that stem cell transplant must be accompanied with special education, Liêm assumed that stem cell therapy had efficacy. Liêm affiliated with other professionals and the Vietnam Autism Network in publishing and distributing the

above mentioned book, sometimes free to less well off families. This was another PR tactic to gain parents' trust and support. Vinmec also sponsored some of Vietnam Autism Network's activities. It is worth highlighting that Vietnam Autism Network and other advocacy groups need to be wary when they receive financial sponsorship from service providers like Vinmec International Hospital. Such sponsorship and affiliation may influence their neutrality when they communicate to parents, members and the media.

On his Facebook account, Liêm still promotes the therapy openly to parents and his followers. With Liêm's lobby on behalf of Vinmec, in 2019, Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc assigned Ministry of Health to consider his recommendations on how to address issues related to autism. The Department of Health Examination and Treatment Management, under Ministry of Health, then announced in an official document on 26 November 2019 that it assigned Vinmec International Hospital to submit a specific proposal on the research of stem cell therapy as a treatment for autism (Ministry of Health, 2019). Prof. Liêm posted this official document on his Facebook account, implicitly as a way to fend off criticism of Vinmec's stem cell treatment. So, in addition to using the news media and social media as publicity channels, Prof. Liêm also mobilised official governmental discourse to endorse his stem cell project. The interdiscursivity at work showed that once driven by commercial motives, a healthcare practitioner and his company would put into full play an integrated communication strategy, where news media was used as one of the channels to bolster their service promotion.

Because of the general prestige of the medical profession in Vietnam, doctors are highly respected and viewed as credible sources. Vinmec International Hospital Director, Prof., Dr. Nguyễn Thanh Liêm, used to be the Director of the National Paediatrics Hospital, the best-known public hospital for children in the whole of Vietnam. He was also one of the few doctors at a public hospital who actively promoted his expertise in surgery. Thus, his name and speciality are well known. Furthermore, stem cell transplant is a treatment that suggests technology and advancement, and thus resonates with an ideology of modernization. Evidence suggests parents are more lured by claims of quick, effortless, and easy health interventions, even if they are expensive and not evidence-based (McDonald, Pace, Blue, & Schwartz, 2012, p. 300). The article about stem cell therapy above demonstrated the tendency of media to amplify what was likely to grab the audience's attention, especially when it was talking about a fashionable health technology from one of the biggest conglomerates with strong media relations and influence in the country.

This stem cell hype in Vietnam resonates with the sensational news representation of stem cell therapy in other parts of the world, which overstate benefits and understate risks, despite the lack of scientific evidence of safety and efficacy (T. M. Bubela & Caulfield, 2004, p. 1399; Lau et al., 2008; Regenberg, Hutchinson, Schanker, & Mathews, 2009; Sharpe et al., 2016). The media reports about autism treatments in Vietnam relate to Kenedy's (2010) observation that journalists and the public

may not always realize that all scientific knowledge is provisional. It may be challenging to "establish a strict boundary between genuine scientific knowledge and popularized representations" (Kamenova, 2017, p. 205). With Vingroup's media relations and lobbying power, it was no wonder that when Vinmec International Hospital wanted to promote the fashionable stem cell therapy, media houses in Vietnam were giving up their questioning role and simply acting as publicists for their service. In many cases of customers' complaints or crises, Vingroup manages to shut up mainstream media and social media complainants (J. Reed, 2019) by means of technical, financial and police power. J. Reed (2019) warns that without checks and balances mechanisms, conglomerates like Vingroup may gain too much power, lobbying for big land areas, projects and policies, and even operate above/against the law. In many ways, favourable media coverage about Vinmec's stem cell transplant service contributed to their abuse of power for commercial benefits.

7.6. Knowledge authority and media access

The CDA of the above articles suggested that knowledge authority and media access had significant implications in the media representation of autism, when doctors dominated the articles in the medical frame. As international media studies have found, powerful sources such as scientists, doctors, lawyers and celebrities are more likely to exert influence in setting the public agenda and framing issues (Nisbet et al., 2003, p. 42). In their seminal article, Hall et al. (1978) argue that impartiality, balance and objectivity as journalists' professional rules promote the practice of reporters endeavouring to seek statements from "accredited" sources (p. 254). In this process, experts guided by the presumedly disinterested pursuit of knowledge are expected to confer "objectivity" and "authority" on news stories. But the authors also point out that ironically, the very principles invoked to uphold the impartiality and neutrality of the media, by relying on experts' perspectives, also give accredited sources the power to define social reality. This, in turn, leads to "a systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions", making them the primary definers of topics (p. 254). The media now act as the transmitters of the ideology of the ruling class, or those who have privileged access as "accredited sources" (Hall et al., 1978, p. 255). Similarly, Couldry and Curran (2003) suggest that elites and intellectuals seek to use the media to transform reality. Accredited sources set the scene to frame what the problem is, who are responsible and what the solutions might be. Reality in the news is shaped by questions, quotes and comments, which are collected, selected, edited, presented and talked into being by the media staff and key opinion leaders (Nylund, 2003).

These power relations manifest themselves in Vietnam in a unique way, especially in the media discourse about autism. Given the low level of expertise, capacity, practice and research in autism, those who were often interviewed by Vietnamese media were not independent scientists, but service providers who had some related qualification in healthcare, psychology, education or social work. Their access and voice in the media put them in the position to shape the representation of autism,

its prevalence, causes, symptoms and treatments from their service providers' perspectives and interests. This aligns with what Conrad (2005) observes: "medicalization is now more driven by commercial and market interests than by professional claims-makers" (p. 3).

This chapter has already analysed several critical stories in which power was abused by doctors holding top positions at big hospitals. Dr. Dũng at Bạch Mai Hospital was quoted as claiming electronic toys caused autism. Dr. Hà at National Pediatrics Hospital was associated with the claim that the services by her public hospital and private businesses offered the most advanced intervention regime for autism, which linked to the misleading overstatement that 30% of autistic children could completely recover from autism. Media coverage about Prof. Liêm and Vinmec International Hospital's stem cell transplants overstated the impact of stem cell transplant on autism, when there has not been rigorous and peer reviewed recognition of the treatment efficacy and safety from international medical science literature.

There was absolutely no evidence in the articles analysed in this chapter that reporters did a reference check to verify what was stated by doctors and service providers. Apart from low journalism skills and ethics, the English competency of reporters in Vietnam is also low (Vu Trong Thanh, as cited in A. Nguyen, 2006a), and therefore, their access to reliable scientific sources in English language is limited. Reporters on health issues are usually generalists, not specialists with medical or life science training. They just simply interview the "experts" as if the so-called experts' one-sided opinions are self-evidently true.

In all of the above articles, the parents and their children with autism were talked about and had claims imposed on them. News media have not made use of the public participation/engagement model of science communication, which is believed to have more advantages than the one way science literacy model (Brossard & Lewenstein, 2010; Trench, 2008). The participation model of science communication is three-way and multidirectional, composed of back and forth exchanges between experts, publics and the media, in which the voices of the public help to set the agenda for communication and science (Trench, 2008). In this way, expert knowledge and lay people's insight may be mobilized for the instrumental purpose of advocacy and social movement organizing (Orsini & Smith, 2010, p. 53), with a focus on policy issues, citizen engagement and democratization of science communication (Brossard & Lewenstein, 2010). This approach to communication encourages negotiation of meanings, openness and reflexivity (Trench, 2008), by bridging scientific and cultural spheres for pluralistic and active debate (Secko, Amend, & Friday, 2013). Accordingly, A. Nguyen and McIlwaine (2011) suggest news media is in the best position to engage lay people with "discursive opportunities" in science communication (p. 210). But in reality, when the basic science literacy model is not implemented properly by Vietnamese media practitioners with factually scientific information, there are basic hurdles to engaging citizens with science reporting in a

constructive way. I concur with Yudell et al. (2013) that scientists and service providers also need training in how to communicate with the media to deliver correct facts, validated research and ethical suggestions about autism (p. 712).

7.7. Conclusion

The articles analysed in this chapter have revealed that Vietnamese online news media framed autism with the medical model, but without rigorous evidence-based science and journalistic balance. This chapter provides a Vietnamese perspective on the media medicalization of autism, where misinformation long discarded by Western media was still produced. Vietnamese reporters usually used professional sources without verification or balanced information, leading to overstatement of treatment efficacy or understatement of risks. Careless media coverage enabled abuse of knowledge and power by those who were considered experts. The reporters set aside scientific evidence and journalism rigour in an attempt to tell catchy stories, even though in a serious topic like healthcare. This suggests that health communication in Vietnam needs prescribed rules outlining/enforcing the legal and ethical responsibilities of the service providers, claim makers and media practitioners, so as to minimize the harm that misinformation, misrepresentation or overstatement could potentially cause to lay people.

Instead of blanket criticism of the medical model, especially its normalization ideology, I subscribe to the notion that individuals with autism benefit greatly from early diagnosis as well as medical and educational intervention to mediate their autistic challenges, so that they can have a better quality of life (Dawson & Osterling, 1997; Dawson et al., 2010; McConachie & Diggle, 2007; Rogers, 1996; T. Smith, 1999). Various studies quoted by Buntinx and Schalock (2010) have suggested that the successful integration of people with disabilities in their environment is correlated to "both person-specific behavioral capabilities and setting-specific performance requirements" (p. 288). If a scientifically rigorous medical frame is combined with the social policy frame in the media coverage, the advantages of each frame will pragmatically bring about social and medical benefits for individuals with autism. In that best scenario, the media play its role in protecting the rights of individuals with autism by demanding they get the personal medical treatment and educational intervention they need to minimize their personal challenges, while, at the same time, giving them access to social accommodation and support to realize their citizens' rights.

8. Chapter 8: Fears, sacrifice, stereotypes and normalization in autism family stories

8.1. Introduction

As discussed in chapter 5, autism was represented predominantly within the medical and the family frames in Vietnamese online news media. These two frames were interlinked and were often used together. Therefore, in this chapter, I will analyse articles that told family stories in which the medical frame was still significant because family members talked about symptoms, signs and intervention efforts in the hope for a normalization.

Through CDA, the chapter identifies what ideological assumptions, stereotypes and stigmas were in play, regarding individuals' identities, family life, kinship and responsibilities when they lived with autism. From there, I interpret and explain how and why autism was constructed as an individualized issue at the family level, based on media use of different rhetorical and persuasive devices, including fear, sacrifice, stereotyping and normalization. International media literature suggests that when issues are framed as personal or family stories (A. Holton et al., 2014; Iyengar, 1996; Kang, 2013; Nelson et al., 1997), the contents become appealing to the audience because they touch the audience at an emotional level (Aarøe, 2011; Clarke, 2012; A. E. Holton et al., 2014). As pointed out in chapters 1, 2 and 6, with this framing, the responsibility to solve the problem is attributed to individuals and families, without holding the government and institutional stakeholders accountable (Bie & Tang, 2015; Iyengar, 1991).

There are diverse understandings about the medical model. In this chapter, I focus on representations of the medicalized view that autistic challenges belong to the individuals and they must be fixed and normalized, mainly through the family's efforts, even though the methods of normalization may not be strictly medical treatments. This medical model ignores the role of social policy and political economic structure in accommodating the challenges of people with disabilities, as well as the cultural setting that may hinder individuals' capacity from engaging in social life and realising their civic rights. As discussed in chapter 3, at the dawn of Reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Vietnamese government mobilized scientific knowledge and neo-eugenic ideology ostensibly for the sake of industrialization and modernization, in the name of patriotism and nationalism; this eugenic ideology calls into question "the socially shared and cosmologically inflected notions of personhood, humanity, morality, and responsibility" (Gammeltoft, 2014, p. 103). Within that ideology, people with disabilities are seen as having low economic productivity and contributive capability; thus, the normalization of disabled adults and children becomes a new managerial mechanism of this segment of the population (X. T. Nguyen, 2015). The lay people in Vietnam have somewhat internalized the concept of autonomous citizens, in what Foucault calls a modern biopolitical power relation where citizens keep themselves healthy and productive as a social duty and as a technology of the self (Nye, 2003). Couldry (2010) holds that, when market functioning is considered the ideal reference point for all social operations, its principles rule out commitments to any other ethical or normative values, which

in turn weaken citizens' voice. This privileging of market rationality "overrides other political principles, whether of social welfare, non-market ('public') provision of goods, services or resources, or non-market modes of bureaucratic organisation" (p. 23).

In addition to the matter of normalization, stereotypes and stigmas are inter-related and will be elaborated on in this chapter. In ancient Greece, stigmas were visual signs, hot stamped or cut into someone's body, announcing that an individual was a slave, a traitor or a criminal (Goffman, 1963). As such, stigma was used to assign the moral status of individuals as being polluted, and to determine who should be avoided, especially in public spaces (p. 1). In today's world, stigmas might not be visible signals, but just the same they contribute to lower self-esteem, treatment avoidance, challenges in finding accommodation and employment, and limited access to medical care for people with mental illness (P. W. Corrigan & Bink, 2016)

Universally, stereotyping is a natural process that human beings absolutely need to survive (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2015). The stereotyping shortcut gives a cognitive structure to help human beings understand the world with minimal cognitive effort, to make efficient shorthand decisions and survive in the big and complicated universe (Link & Phelan, 2001; Martin et al., 2014), but often with "a negative evaluative component" (Patrick W Corrigan, 2016, p. 67). As such, people form stereotypes and pigeonhole others into categories to decide what attitudes and behaviours to display in social interactions. Members of stereotyped out-groups are overgeneralized as homogeneous (Ben-Zeev, Young, & Corrigan, 2010, p. 321). And, over time, these processes of "groupness, homogeneity, and stability may exacerbate stigma" (Ben-Zeev et al., 2010, p. 320).

Gorham (1999) argues family upbringing, schooling and working environments are important in forming people's stereotypes, however, the media, with their reach to a wide audience, can convey various myths so repeatedly and consistently that they play an important role in stereotype propagation (p. 238). While people learn basic science knowledge at schools, they update their knowledge mostly via the media throughout their lifetime (A. A. Anderson, Scheufele, Brossard, & Corley, 2011, p. 227), especially with regard to such specific topics as autism. Given the news media's mass audience, its intertextuality and interdiscursivity, once published, stereotypes become persistent. The impact of media representation can be so powerful that sometimes what people hear or read from the media overrides their own personal experience with individuals they meet in real life (Philo, 1997; Philo et al., 1994). Meta-analysis of media studies on stereotypes by Appel and Weber (2017) confirms that "negative stereotypes and devaluing content in the media impair members of negatively stereotyped groups" (p. 1).

The correlation between stigma signals, stereotypes and discrimination has been explained by various studies (Patrick W Corrigan et al., 2015; Patrick W Corrigan & Wassel, 2008; Philo et al., 1994; Tang & Bie, 2016). Stereotypes offer a consistent information recall bias: people remember

information that is consistent with their pre-existing conceptions (Biernat & Dovidio, 2000). Moreover, stereotypes lay the ground for how people perceive and feel about others, which in turn, forms their attitudes and prejudices, and shapes how they behave toward other individuals. Because of the inherent bias, stereotypes create the potential for discriminating behaviours (Biernat & Dovidio, 2000). Stereotypes and stigmas often lead people to discriminate against individuals and limit their access to rightful opportunities (Bie & Tang, 2015; Draaisma, 2009; A. E. Holton et al., 2014). Similarly, CDA analysts, concerned about racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination, often describe stereotyping as being part of the mechanism in which media discourse exacerbates prejudice or stigma, or consolidates the ideology and power of dominant groups (Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2003; van Dijk, 1992, 2015).

Stereotypes and social stigmas affect the way parents view their children with disability and their parental roles. Gammeltoft (2008a) in an investigation of parents' moral responsibilities in Vietnam finds that many parents of children with disabilities explicitly "question the integrity and personhood of their children, seeing them as inferior to others and doubting whether they would ever grow up to become 'proper persons'" (p. 825). While love is prominent in their caretaking, most parents also depict their children as "đáng thương" [being pitied and of less value than others], "thiệt thòi", [being at a disadvantage/having lost out], "yếu ớt" [weak and in need of constant support and assistance] (p. 832). Most parents view both their children's lives and their own as "khổ" [miserable], describing how they have lived in profound sadness, great pain and powerlessness since the birth of the children (p. 832). Shin et al. (2006) find that children's level of intellectual functioning and social behaviour might affect Vietnamese parents' stress directly and indirectly.

Many parents do all they can to find a cure for their children with disabilities, even resorting to spiritual or religious healing (Gammeltoft, 2008a). "Parents' efforts to find treatment for their children may be seen as not only medical but also moral acts; as ways in which parents do all they can to heal their children's [disabilities]", or to make up for the unwanted birth of a child who is considered unlikely to contribute reasonably to the family and society (p. 837). Gammeltoft (2008a) suggests that "living within a social environment of blame, and seeking to gain acceptance and recognition from others, parents [tend to] emphasize the sacrifices [they make]" and the hard work that the care for the child entails (p. 838). The parents' search for treatment is also motivated my moral judgements by parents with children on the autism spectrum, especially when they face the popular misperception that because parents do not spend time or care for their children, they become autistic.

8.2. Fear appeals maximized in family stories

Fear appeals have been regularly used in health communication (Peters, Ruiter, & Kok, 2013; Ruiter, Kessels, Peters, & Kok, 2014; Witte & Allen, 2000). Fear arousal is "triggered by the perception of threatening stimuli", which can lead to "physiological arousal as well as cognitive, affective and

behavioral responses directed toward reduction or elimination of fear" (Ruiter et al., 2014, p. 65). Meta-analysis of fear appeals in health communication reveals that strong fear appeals are only effective in changing attitude, intention, and behaviour when presented with equally strong efficacy messages. In other words, the audience has to believe it can acquire the skills to avert, or can afford the cost of averting the health threat (Peters et al., 2013; Ruiter et al., 2014; Witte & Allen, 2000, p. 606). If fear appeals are used without a feasible and affordable solution, they can backfire (Witte & Allen, 2000, p. 607), because, when people perceive that they cannot solve their problems, they react defensively. These negative reactions can include "risk denial, biased information processing and allocating less attention to the health promotion messages" (Ruiter et al., 2014, p. 64). In any case, "a focus on efficacy is a better bet" (Peters et al., 2013, p. S24).

Fear has been deployed in communication about other health issues such as HIV-AIDS, tuberculosis and bird flu in Vietnam (Guénel & Klingberg, 2016; Long, Johansson, Diwan, & Winkvist, 2001; Nguyen Ha et al., 2010; T. Vu, 2009). This section will examine if fear appeals are used in the media coverage about autism in Vietnam, how they are used, and if solutions are also offered or if the focus is only on the threatening and sensational purposes.

In this section, I focus on the stories written by or about Lê Thị Phương Nga, a mother and a service provider who appeared intensively in media coverage in 2007, when she promoted her training and consultation service for autism nationally. In the corpus, she was mentioned 41 times with the name *Phương Nga* and *chị Nga* [Ms. Nga]. Nga's memoir was extracted and published in *Sài Gòn Tiếp Thị [Sài Gòn Marketing]* magazine and republished in multiple news outlets. The media articles were not full chapters from her book, and while there was a lot of selecting and cutting in between paragraphs and sentences, the wording remained substantially the same as in the memoir. In some coverage, media outlets added their introduction as the lead. Nga's story revealed fear-based appeals were dominant in her media depiction, and autism was consistently framed as a problem that the family alone had to deal with. Driven by fears, she and her family made constant efforts to learn and implement interventions for her child with autism, with the hope of normalization.

Nga's story emerged and was circulated when online media was gaining popularity among city dwellers in Vietnam. In 2007, websites, forums, blogs, Yahoo Messenger and mail groups were favoured. So, trending articles in the media were often shared on various forums, but mainstream electronic news media still dominated without having to compete so much with a pervasive and personalized social media network like Facebook. Some articles went viral organically on the internet through both mainstream media republication and social media sharing.

To understand Nga's prominence in the autism topic, I conducted a Google search of *"Phương Nga"* in combination with *"tự kỷ" [autism]* in August 2019, which yielded 110,000 entries, while a search of *"tự kỷ" [autism]* alone produced 3,130,000 entries. That suggested the entries talking about Phương

Nga in the autism topic was equal to 3.5% of all the entries about autism on the internet in Vietnamese. The relative numbers suggested *Phương Nga* was a prominent keyword in the internet content about autism. There were 369 entries of the title of the memoir extracts *"Cuộc chiến giúp con chống bệnh tự kỷ" [The battle to help [my] child fight against autism disease]* in the Google search. By August 2019, eleven online newspapers retained the autobiography series in their searchable archives. It is not known exactly how many published the extracts in 2007, because sometimes media outlets do not retain all records due to their capacity to store data for long periods of time.

Autism intervention as a service had existed for a few years before 2007, but Phương Nga was the first to promote it intensively via the media. She appeared across different media channels multiple times in 2007, on television, print newspapers and online media. The intensity of presence of Nga's saga in the media in a short period of time suggested Nga was supported by a well-planned PR campaign with a commercial purpose. The memoir itself and the publication of its extracts promoted the training services that Nga provided. Given the poor adherence to copyright in Vietnam (Phùng Nguyên, 2018), there were multiple copies of Nga's scanned memoirs on the internet, not too long after its launch. As Nga herself put it in the preface in her memoir:

> Nếu qua những lời chia sẻ của tôi giúp thêm một bé tự kỷ, chậm phát triển - dù chỉ một bé nữa thôi - có được cuộc sống dễ chịu hơn, thì đó sẽ là những niềm hạnh phúc cho bản thân tôi và gia đình, bên cạnh niềm hạnh phúc không gì sánh được là ngày ngày nhìn thấy bé Cún Nicky đang dần trở lại với cuộc sống bình thường như bao trẻ khác. (Nga, 2008)
>
> If my sharing helps any autistic or retarded child – even if it is only one more child – to have a better life, then it will be the happiness for myself and my family, in addition to the valuable happiness to see Cún Nicky's gradually coming back to the normal life like other children.

In the above paragraph, Nga positioned her memoir and services as a benevolent act of helping other people. The mission of the memoir was beyond sharing family experience, but to produce other success stories of autistic children "coming back to the *normal* life" like her son.

Her son's nickname Cún [Puppy] was used most of the time, while his other name Nicky was used interchangeably in some occasions in the memoir extracts. Vietnamese families often use colloquial nicknames for their children at home and in informal social interactions. Some children are barely called by their formal names until they start school. When the nickname was regularly used, it indicated Nga was telling an intimate story, within the family sphere.

The autobiographical series republished in the news media mostly used the title *Cuộc chiến giúp con chống bệnh tự kỷ [The battle to help [my] child fight against autism disease].* Because *Sài Gòn Tiếp Thị [Saigon Marketing]* was closed down in 2014, its online publications in 2007 no longer exist, I will

analyse the republished autobiographical series on the leading *VnExpress.net*. The title itself represented autism through the metaphor of a battle. This word choice set the war-ridden tone of voice for the whole narrative. The article started with this introduction, added by the media outlet:

> Chị Nga lạnh xương sống khi thấy bé Cún, dù đói xanh cả mặt vì đã nhịn một bữa, vẫn la hét mà không tự xúc lấy ăn. Linh tính mách bảo con chị đang bị một điều gì kinh khủng lắm (Nga, 2007c).
>
> Ms. Nga felt a cold thrill in her backbone when seeing Cún, even though hungry and pale because he had already skipped a meal but still screamed without taking the food by himself. Intuition told her that her son was suffering something very terrible.

Lạnh xương sống [a cold thrill in her backbone] is a dramatized rhetoric which is often used when people face extreme terror. In this case, it was used to capture the intuitive terrified feeling of a mother seeing unusual signs in her child. The article continued to with sensational language:

> Trong khoảng thời gian 6 tháng ấy, bé Cún ngày càng trở nên kỳ quái. […] Cún tựa như không sống chung trong một thế giới với mọi người mà đang phiêu du trong một thế giới riêng, tự giam mình trong một xà lim kín không ai có thể thâm nhập được, kể cả tôi là mẹ. Cuộc sống và nếp sinh hoạt của cả nhà ngày càng ngột ngạt, căng thẳng và đầy hãi hùng chẳng khác nào địa ngục. (Nga, 2007b)
>
> In those 6 months, Cún had become more and more monstrous. […] Cún seemed not to live in the same world with everyone else, but travelled in his own world, prisoned [by] himself in a closed prison cell, no one can enter, including me as his mother. The life and routines of my whole family became more and more stifling, stressful and frightening - no less than a hell.

When the child with autism was described as “more and more monstrous” and living in his own world, autism was alienated as an abnormality to fear. The autobiography also used popular spatial metaphors that stereotype people with autism were living in an isolated prison cell, not in the same world with everyone else. These metaphors are also often used elsewhere in the world to suggest that individuals with autism either separate themselves, or are separated from, normal life (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008, p. 465). As discussed in chapter 1, Bettelheim’s infamous work on autism *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (Bettelheim, 1967) blamed cold and neglectful parents for causing autism and making the child withdraw into their “empty fortress”. He used a potent metaphor that connoted “the essential emptiness, otherness, or non-humanness of people with autism; the idea of a “real” self that is hiding, missing, estranged, or asleep in people with autism” (Waltz, 2003, p. 2). *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* seemed to assert this “spatial metaphor of separateness” and placed “the blame implicitly on the closest possible

culprit for motivating such a withdrawal: the parents" (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008, p. 466). If individuals with autism are imprisoned within a cell or walls, they must escape to the outside world if they are ever to live a normal life. Nga's story sensationalised autistic challenges and distanced the individuals as the Other or the Outlier. The cause and effect logic, or the loss and gain correlation, started to reveal itself - that autism could become a problem causing tension in the family.

When Nga recalled the process of treating her son, she described the journey with such sensational keywords as *stifling, stressful, frightening, terror, terrible, horribly, suffering, ordeal, nightmare,* etc.

> Còn tôi, lần đầu tiên nghe từ "autism", tôi chưa hình dung được hết sự kinh khủng của nó. Chỉ đến giờ phút này, sau khi đã cùng con tôi vượt qua hầu hết các "ải" kinh khủng của cơn ác mộng ấy, tôi có thể mô tả nôm na là: Nếu khuôn mặt một người bị tạt axít sẽ biến dạng một cách khủng khiếp thì trẻ bị tự kỷ giống như một người bị tạt axít vào khả năng tư duy vậy. Khả năng tư duy của bé bị biến dạng đến ghê rợn. Giờ đây nhớ lại, tôi thấm thía và thương cho những bà mẹ cùng cảnh ngộ". (Nga, 2007b)
>
> And me, the first time I heard the word "autism", I did not imagine its whole terror. Only until now, after accompanying my son to overcome most of the terrible "ordeals" of that nightmare, I could simply say: If the face of someone who was splashed with acid would deform, the child suffering autism was similar as if his cognitive ability was splashed with acid. His cognitive ability was deformed horribly. Now, recalling all these, I fully understand and feel pity for mothers in the same boat.

Here, the autobiographical series in the news media were making use of negative news values, emphasizing the bizarre, tragic, dramatic and odd elements to catch the audience's attention. The sensational story might frighten those who do not have direct experience of persons with autism, and also those who have just found out about their child's autism. As mentioned in chapter 1, Nga's autobiographical series were among the first media articles I picked up when I was wondering if my son had a developmental issue at 14 months old. When I read the first article, it put me in a state of such despair with all of its fearful images of a life with autism, and it would be reasonable to assume this effect was typical of the effect on other readers dealing with similar experiences.

The second article in the autobiographical series was presented in three parts on *VnExpress.net* on 5 July 2007, with the subheadlines *Tối, thời khắc kinh hãi [Evening: the terrifying moment],* then *Tầm sư học cách chữa cho con [Finding mentors to learn the way to treat my son]* and *Kết quả ban đầu [The initial outcome]* (Nga, 2007c). If the first article started with Nga's terrified reaction when witnessing the first signs of her son's difference, then the second article's description of the diagnosis also repeated the terror, with an even more horrifying tone to highlight the motivation she sought for training and intervention. The article started with this lead:

> Mỗi buổi tối khi bé vào giường ngủ là thời khắc kinh hãi nhất trong ngày của tôi: Bé bắt mẹ nằm xuống ở một tư thế duy nhất rất kỳ cục, rồi bắt đầu đạp mẹ, cấu xé, la hét... Tôi luôn có cảm giác mình đang ở trong phòng tra tấn của một nhà tù nào đó. (Nga, 2007c)
>
> Each evening bedtime was the most terrifying moments in my day: my son forced me to lie down in a weird posture, and he started to kick me, to claw and tear me, to scream… I always felt like I was in the torture room of a prison.

If drama was what the media houses looked for, then this was it. Whether or not it was an exceptional case, the media were just interested in presenting and circulating a drama, where outsiders could peek into the bedroom of other human beings to witness their violent and devastating turmoil. Generally speaking, "drama-philia" or the preference for drama (Iyengar, 1991) as well as marketized media imperatives lead to *soft* journalism, focusing on crisis, conflicts and clashes of personalities (Nisbet et al., 2003, p. 43). In other words, the issues that attract the media's attention the most are those that can be pitched into the form of a personalized and dramatized narrative (Nisbet et al., 2003). That type of narrative helps the audience respond to the stimuli of fear and meets their curiosity need from a safe and private distance. *VnExpress.net* and other Vietnamese online media outlets exemplified these tendencies in their attention to Nga's story and the eagerness to popularize her case. The fact that at least 11 media outlets republished Nga's narratives suggested that her autobiography conveniently fed the media's hunger for sensation.

After spending two paragraphs exemplifying Cún's physical and behavioural problems, the article continued with the following evening scene:

> Nếu tôi không canh chừng cẩn thận thì bất cứ lúc nào bé cũng bất thần lao đầu vào tường. Cứ thế, mỗi tối từ 8 rưỡi, khi đưa con vào phòng ngủ cho đến khoảng 11 rưỡi-12 giờ khuya, tôi luôn có cảm giác mình đang ở trong phòng tra tấn của một nhà tù nào đó. Đôi lúc, chồng cũng vào nằm với bé để "thay ca" cho tôi nhưng chỉ chịu được khoảng 20 phút là phải đi ra vì những hành vi quá điên rồ của Cún. Tối nào cũng vậy, suốt một năm rưỡi (Nga, 2007c).
>
> If I did not watch out, at any time he could bang his head against the wall. It is like that, each evening from 8:30, when I took him to the bedroom, till 11:30 or 12:00 midnight, I always had the feeling I was in the torture room of a prison. Sometimes, my husband went in and lay down with my son to "take over the shift" for me, but he could only survive for about 20 minutes before he exited because of the crazy behaviours of Cún. Every evening was like that, for one and a half years long.

From Nga's description, Cún's autism was extremely severe with the co-occurring sensory disorder, which made him bang his head against the wall. The identity of her son was dehumanized and

associated with crazy, violent, and dangerous behaviours, which did not necessarily represent the majority of individuals on the autism spectrum. But when an extreme example was presented in the media with such sensational language, it could be viewed as depicting a typical autism scenario. Nguyen-Phuong-Mai (2015) suggests some extreme behaviours can unfairly become generalized cues to describe all othered members of a group, and when exceptions are turned into norms, stereotypes are reproduced and amplified. Thus, the "particular" story assumes the status of a "universal" representation, which is an important dimension of the media's representational power.

To sum up all the suffering that her family and she herself had to go through, Nga lamented:

> Lắm lúc tôi nghĩ: "Con ơi, con như thế này mà lỡ mẹ chết thì ai có thể chấp nhận con được. Hay là hai mẹ con mình cùng chết cho đỡ khổ". Cứ như vậy, không biết bao nhiêu lần. Sau này, khi cùng chia sẻ với những bà mẹ khác, hoá ra ý nghĩ đó không phải chỉ mình tôi có. (Nga, 2007c)
>
> I often thought: "Son, if you are like this and I happen to die, who can accept you? Or we should die together to end this suffering?". It is like that, countless times. Later, when I shared this feeling with other mothers, it turned out that it is not only me having that thought.

Talking about the thought of death in the media or in public is a sensitive act. Autism Speaks, the biggest advocacy organisation in the United States, was seriously criticized when streaming a video of a mother talking about the thought of driving her car off a bridge with her own child on the autism spectrum (Wilson, 2013). New Zealand even bans reports of suicides in the media (Gould, 2001; Hollings, 2013). But in this article, the suicidal thought was reported as something common. The author and media houses showed no concern about how individuals with autism might feel if they happened to read that, because of their autism, their parents wanted to commit murder-suicide to escape the situation. The self-worth of individuals could be damaged by this kind of narrative. This narrative also created a public stigma that families living with autism were experiencing chaotic tragedies and nightmares, which might arouse pity more than understanding. No counter-perspective to the autobiography appeared in the media coverage at the time, even when reporters wrote about Nga's story in their own words.

After the diagnosis of her son, Nga recalled facing mother-blaming stigmatisation from medical professionals when she sought their support:

> Còn tôi thì hỏi tất cả những khả năng có thể có ở Việt Nam từ tây đến đông y, đi hầu hết các cơ sở cho trẻ khuyết tật… để cầu may. Nhưng đến đâu, tôi cũng bị mắng, đại loại như: "Con chị thế này mà cho là bệnh à?" hay "Bé bị bệnh là tại chị cưng quá nên nó bướng!", hoặc khá hơn thì "Bé bị autism thì chỉ cần chăm sóc tốt và gần gũi bé là được rồi vì bệnh này không

> chữa được". Đáng nói nhất là ý kiến của bác sĩ người Pháp gốc Việt tên Bích, người sáng lập khoa tâm lý Bệnh viện Nhi đồng 2 bây giờ. Bác sĩ Bích đề nghị tôi không nên quấn quýt bé nhiều nữa mà hãy để cho con có điều kiện sống độc lập hơn để có thể bật ra tiếng nói. Ví dụ: khi nào bé nói từ ăn thì hãy cho ăn... (Nga, 2007c).
>
> And I asked for all the possibilities in Vietnam, from Western medicine to traditional healings, and visited all the centres for disabled children… to look for luck. But wherever I went, I was scolded with things like: "How come your son has a disease?". Or "He has the disease because you spoil him too much and he becomes stubborn". Or "If the child suffers autism, there needs to be good care and attachment and that's because this disease is incurable". Worth mentioning is the opinion of a Vietnamese French doctor named Bích, the founder of the Psychology Department at the Paediatric Hospital No. 2. Doctor Bích asked me not to hang out with my son too often but let him live more independently so he would utter speech. For example: only when the child said the word "eat", then let him eat…

In the above paragraph, Nga recalled the experience of being blamed for causing her son's disease, and being told he was simply stubborn. The advice from a doctor about not to attach to the child too often was confusing and questionable. Nga's narrative revealed some of the general low awareness and serious stigma held by medical professionals, and the desperation of parents in Vietnam, who could not find any good service or support after an autism diagnosis. Stigma happens in the forms of "labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination" when power is exercised and access to social, economic and political rights are affected (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367). In this case, the stigma was reproduced in the correlation between a mother's parenting and her son's problems, as well as in the attitude of healthcare professionals when the mother sought their support.

Nga had no luck when reaching out to medical professionals in Vietnam, so she travelled all the way to the United States to learn autism therapies. It is worth noting that Nga's family could be considered an upper-middle-class family in Vietnam. Nga could stay at home to invest full time into intervention for her child and employ several tutors to work with her at home. Not many mothers of children with autism could afford to do so. Going to the United States to learn about autism interventions is possible only for a minority of Vietnamese parents. So, in many ways, Nga's family was exceptional and did not really offer a feasible exemplar for other families living with autism in the country.

The last article in the series detailed how Nga learned the therapies, how she and her husband applied what they learned to their son, and then described her motivation to help other families. Significantly, the participation of Nga's husband in the search for information and interventions for their child was not common in Vietnamese families. Still, the story was predominantly the mother's saga. The father's involvement was a supplementary part of the narrative.

VnExpress.net used the same title *Cuộc chiến giúp con chống bệnh tự kỷ [The battle to help [my] child fight against autism disease]* throughout the series of three autobiographical extracts, but *Dantri.vn* in its republication on 7 July 2007 added an emphasis with *Trở thành bác sĩ không bằng cấp [Becoming a doctor without a [relevant] degree]* (Nga, 2007a).

Acting as a doctor without a relevant degree is a common practice in Vietnam. Medicasters practice all kinds of quack medicine everywhere without much regulatory constraint. Lay people buy antibiotics and medications over the counter, without a prescription, even though by regulation some require prescriptions (Do Thi et al., 2014; Hoa, Öhman, Lundborg, & Chuc, 2007; Khe et al., 2002). By running the title *Becoming a doctor without a [relevant] degree*, *Dantri.vn* naturalized the ethos of self-help healthcare, right in the headline as well as in the article's content. *Dantri.vn*'s endorsement of self-help healthcare echoed the reality that parents generally had no choice but to act as therapists to their own children, without waiting for hard-to-find qualified professionals or social policy and support. It also resonated with the popular saying "có bệnh thì vái tứ phương" [when you are sick, you kowtow and pray everywhere]. Basically, this saying suggests that when you are sick, you try whatever it takes, at any cost, and regardless of risk, to find a cure.

The lead in *Dantri.vn* emphasized the transformation that the child made:

> Giờ đây, bé Cún đã hoà nhập được với các thành viên trong gia đình, đã có thể biết nói, biết viết, chơi game trên máy tính, đi xe đạp, chạy xe gắn máy. Sự kiên trì và lòng yêu thương của người mẹ đã giành giật bé ra khỏi móng vuốt của căn bệnh tự kỷ. (Nga, 2007a)
>
> Now, Cún has integrated with other members in the family, he can speak, write, play computer games, ride a bike or motorbike. The patience and love of the mother have scrambled him from the claws of the autism disease.

Cún's progress so as to speak, write, play computer games, ride a bike or motorbike was enormous from his baseline, even though these skills were not the markers of core challenges or improvements in autism. However, by highlighting Cún's progress in the lead as if he had been taken back "from the claws of autism", the article created an impression that autism was a thing to be saved from. The metaphor "claws of autism" again depicted autism as a monster. As such, the mother had to fight against the monster to "scramble" the child out of its clutches. The intervention or normalization process pursued by the mother as the de facto family "doctor" brought about initial outcomes. To get the progress highlighted above, the labour of the mother and father was emphasized:

> Ba Cún chỉ ghế và gọi: "Nicky tới đây, ngồi xuống". Tất nhiên là bé không hề phản ứng. Ba Cún ôm Cún đem tới ghế ấn Cún ngồi xuống. Cún la hét, chuồi xuống đất, cắn ba, cào cấu mình, đập đầu xuống đất… Cứ mỗi lần như vậy thì ba bé lại xốc bé lên ấn xuống ghế, khi bé

phản ứng yếu đi vì mệt thì cho một miếng chuối vào miệng bé và khen: “Giỏi! Ngồi xuống, giỏi lắm!”, mỗi lần khoảng 45 phút, khoảng 3 lần/ngày. Sau mỗi lần như vậy, ba Cún mướt mồ hôi và trông hốc hác. Một tuần lễ sau, khi nghe ba gọi: “Nicky! Tới đây! Ngồi xuống!” Bé chạy tới và ngồi yên trên ghế. Vợ chồng tôi rơi nước mắt. Chúng tôi hiểu rằng bé có thể học được một việc, nghĩa là bé có thể học được những việc khác. (Nga, 2007a)

Cún’s father pointed to the chair and called: “Nicky, come here, sit down”. Of course, the boy did not react at all. Cún’s father held Cún and brought him to the chair and pushed him to sit down. Cún screamed, glided down to the floor, bit his father, scratched himself and banged his head on the ground… Each time like that, his father pulled him up, and pushed him down on the chair. When he reacted weakly because of getting tired, he was fed with a piece of banana into his mouth and praised: “Good! Sit down, well done!”. Each time this lasted about 45 minutes, three times a day. After each session, Cún’s father was sweating and gaunt. A week later, after father’s request “Nicky! Come here! Sit down!”, he would run to and sit quietly on the chair. We as husband and wife dropped our tears. We knew that if the child can learn to do one thing, that means he can learn other tasks.

The short paragraph about autism intervention in Nga’s story above revealed a scene in the autism treatment process of a family, but the too swift depiction provided a fragmented picture. Nga’s autism intervention was known as involving the combination of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) and Glenn Doman methods. Through her narratives, it required not only adults’ labour, sweat and tears, but also forceful acts and manipulation, like repeatedly pushing the child to the chair or rewarding him with food whenever he performed a request. Opponents to this old ABA method says it is like teaching an animal. As the first person who imported and popularized ABA in Vietnam as a commercial service, Nga promulgated a discursive account of what autism therapy looked like, but she did not seem to depart from the criticism about old ABA’s rigidity and forcefulness which has been reversed through its development (Kirkham, 2017).

The outcomes of Nga and her husband’s patient and heroic efforts were explicated below:

Từ một con người chỉ mới sống bằng phần CON chứ chưa có phần NGƯỜI, bé đã từ từ học lại từng chức năng một để trở thành một con người như vốn được sinh ra, khả năng tư duy từng bước được khôi phục. […] Tình thương mà các cô và gia đình truyền cho bé đã dạy bé… cảm thụ được những trạng thái tình cảm khác nhau vốn là một điều hết sức trừu tượng đối với trẻ tự kỷ. Cuối cùng bé Cún đã tự MỞ CỬA ra với thế giới bên ngoài. Chúng tôi đã kéo được bé ra khỏi cái xà lim “tự kỷ” tăm tối khốn khổ. (Nga, 2007a)

From the creature who only lived with his ANIMAL part, without the HUMAN part, he started to learn each function step by step to become a human being as he was born to be, his cognitive

> ability was step by step recovered. […] The love that teachers and family gave him already taught him to feel the different states of emotions which were abstract to autistic children. Finally, Cún by himself OPENED the door to the outside world. We have pulled him out of the dark miserable "autism" prison cell.

So, in this mother's language, all her son's autistic behaviours made him live like an ANIMAL; only when he left those behind could he become a HUMAN BEING (these terms were written with capital letters in the media coverage). Metaphors of animalization are not rare in the global history of autism narratives, which construct the individual with autism as "less than human" (Waltz, 2003, p. 4). This depiction separates the child with autism from other human beings and takes away his/her human status, which Link and Phelan (2001) conceptualize as separation and status loss. Dominant in Nga's narratives was a sense that her son, Cún, did not seem to have his own agency or subjectivity. It was all about what was done to him or for him, without presenting him as a subject with an ability to think, feel or act with conscious autonomy. Only through the agency of others, including tutors and family, could the child have feelings and open the door to the outside world. The published title of the series was *The battle to help [my] son fight against autism disease,* but arguably it portrayed the family's battle to *fight the son's autism*, because the dominant discourse was about the mother and father as well as the private tutors acting upon the child. The will and agency of the family members was significant, while the son was passive.

At the end of these climactic articles, Nga revealed why she decided to provide services to others:

> Cuối năm 2001, do tình cờ, chồng tôi đem về nhà một gia đình có bé cũng bị bệnh như Cún, yêu cầu tôi giúp họ. Sau đó, miệng truyền miệng, tôi nhận thêm 1-2 bé nữa. Theo lời các gia đình ấy thì họ đã bế con đi khắp nơi mà vẫn chưa thu được kết quả gì, càng đi càng thấy bế tắc. Tôi tổ chức cho mỗi gia đình một khoá học về phương pháp phục hồi và đối với mỗi bé cứ sau vài tháng là bắt đầu nhận được hồi đáp từ cha mẹ: các bé mau chóng khá hơn, làm được những điều mà cha mẹ chưa bao giờ dám nghĩ tới. (Nga, 2007a)

> By chance, at the end of 2001, my husband brought home a family with a child suffering the disease like Cún and asked me to help them. Afterward, through word of mouth, I admitted 1, then 2 other children. Those families said that they had taken their children everywhere without any progress; the more they reached out, the more stuck they felt. I organised for each family a training program on the rehabilitation method and, after a few months, the child started to respond to the parents: the children quickly got better and could perform the tasks that parents never ever dared to think of.

It is worth noting Nga made it clear in the above paragraph that her husband brought another family with a child with autism to her "by chance". That implied Nga did not proactively look for them as

customers. And then “word of mouth” brought more families to her. The phrase typically signified the mechanisms of organic referral and genuine endorsement between satisfied users of a product or service and other people in their social circles. The families who came to her had already taken their children to different places for treatment without success, but only when they learned from Nga, did their children make quick strides. In other words, Nga’s training was positioned as superior to others. And from the initial progress of the families, she developed an intention to help more people:

> Tôi nhận ra rằng, số kiến thức mà ơn trời tôi có được, nếu chỉ dùng để chữa cho một mình bé Cún thì phí phạm quá. Còn rất nhiều bà mẹ, nhiều gia đình khác đang tuyệt vọng và đau xót như tôi từng trải. Thế là tôi thử bắt đầu con đường mới của mình. Tôi nhận thêm vài bé nữa và thực sự tìm được niềm vui khi nhìn thấy các bé đang cùng với bé Cún của tôi dần dần phục hồi, giảm bớt nỗi lo và nỗi đau cho gia đình các bé. (Nga, 2007a)
>
> I realized if the volume of knowledge that blessedly I have gained was used to treat Cún alone it would be a waste. There are many other mothers and families who are as desperate and painful as I have been. Therefore, I started to embark on my new journey. I accepted several more kids and really found joy when seeing these kids and my Cún gradually recover, reducing the worry and pain for their families.

The benefits to other families were communicated as the motivator for Nga’s move into service provision. The phrase *ơn trời [blessedly/thanks goodness]* is often uttered by Vietnamese people as gratitude to some supernatural force, even if they do not practice any specific religion. Nga highlighted that her acquisition of knowledge was a blessing. So, she communicated her wish to share that goodness with others as akin to a spiritual act. From the limited training and narrow experience of intervening for her own child, now the mother offered training and consultation to interventionists and parents of other children on the broad and complex spectrum of autism. By publishing the memoir and memoir extracts, both the book publisher and media houses legitimized her “benevolent” act of expanding the service to others. Parent-to-parent support when children have a disability is a common practice that benefits both the helpers and the beneficiaries (Banach, Iudice, Conway, & Couse, 2010; McCabe, 2007, 2008; Shu & Lung, 2005). But to train and consult others as a service provider should require a specific level of certification. For example, to offer ABA training to others, according to the North American standard, service providers have to meet the requirements of graduate-degree formal training and thousands of hours working under supervision (Behaviour Analyst Certification Board, 2018). The line between parent-to-parent support and professional training service should have been drawn by the media. There is a chance of harm if training and intervention is not delivered appropriately.

However, *Dantri.vn* article’s title and elaboration of Nga’s therapy and service championed the quasi-medical practices of “a doctor without a [relevant] degree”. There were other families’ stories in the

media discourse about autism earlier than Nga's, but Nga was the first Vietnamese mother who had been so widely and intensively applauded for her self-help approach by different media outlets. Her story created a precedent for later self-help stories in the media. At the end of the last autobiographical extract in *Dantri.vn* series, while acknowledging that her son had only made one third of the intervention pathway he needed to undertake, Nga concluded that their journey ahead was still long but they had been reassured and seen the light at the end of the tunnel.

In addition to republishing Nga's autobiographical series, multiple media outlets, including print, television and online newspapers, produced their own sensational content about her heroic journey. Right after the memoir series, *VnExpress.net* ran another article, written by a reporter about Nga's service on 17 July 2007, titled: *Trị bệnh tự kỷ phải chấp nhận tốn kém [To treat autism is to accept expensive fee]* (Thiên Chương, 2007). At the very beginning of the article, the lead set the mercantile tone by quoting Nga talking about her service fees:

> "Phương pháp chữa tự kỷ của tôi không dành cho người nghèo. Nếu gia đình không có đủ tiền, việc chữa trị sẽ không hiệu quả", chị Lê Thị Phương Nga, tác giả bài viết "Cuộc chiến giúp con chống bệnh tự kỷ", cho biết… (Thiên Chương, 2007).
>
> "My method of autism treatment is not for poor people. If the families do not have enough money, the treatment will not be effective", said Lê Thị Phương Nga, author of the article "The battle to help [my] child fight against autism disease".

The article on VnExpress.net on 17 Jul 2007 clearly identified Nga's target demographic, with a presupposition that money was a determinant in autism therapy effectiveness. The article continued to justify the expensive fees:

> Nói về việc thu mức phí như trên, chị Nga nói "Ban đầu tôi chỉ thu 600 USD, nhưng thấy phụ huynh không quyết tâm chữa trị nên tôi quyết định tăng lên 1.500 USD để buộc cha mẹ tiếc tiền mà theo đuổi việc dạy dỗ đến cùng. Tuy nhiên nếu phụ huynh thực sự không có điều kiện, tôi sẽ giới thiệu cho họ những trung tâm khác". (Thiên Chương, 2007)
>
> About collecting the fees as above, Nga said, "At first, I only charge USD600, but seeing that parents are not determined to treat their children, I decide to raise the fee to USD1,500 to force the parents to feel painful about the money and pursue the treatment to the end. However, if the parents cannot afford it, I'll introduce them to other centres".

The fee Nga charged of USD1,500 for 40 hours of family training in 2007 was equal to half a year of income for many parents. Certainly, only middle-class families could afford to take the training. She justified that she made the expensive fees not for her financial gain, but to make the parents more determined to follow through the therapy. In Vietnam, only when people work for multinational

corporations or international organisations are their remunerations or fees referred to in USD. By charging her fees in USD, instead of Vietnam Dongs, there was an implication that Nga's service was imported and should be expensive because of its imported values. Nga also implied that there were other choices in the market, so parents should either take it or leave it with regard to her service. The commodification and marketization of autism services was evident in this passage. The decision of parents was now reduced to whether or not they were willing to buy a service at a steep price. After the virality of Nga's memoir, two conceptions emerged from other media contents: one suggested that children in rich families in the cities had higher risks of autism, and the other suggested that only rich families could afford to provide treatment to their children with autism. The former was misinformation that stigmatised rich families, while the latter reflected a reality in the market that autism intervention services were too expensive for many families.

The stories above demonstrated - with their terrifying language - how autism affected Nga's family life. Fear appeals were exaggerated and applied intensively throughout Nga's memoir and articles, emphasising the message that parents should do all they can to find a way to rescue their children from autism, otherwise the devastating impact would drive their family life to hell. In Nga's story, the cause and effect or gain vs loss logic was mobilized to warn people of the potential danger if they do nothing, and to underline the benefit of attending training and undertaking intervention. But unfortunately, the fears that such accounts raised did not come with an affordable solution for many families. So, fears might backfire on some parents (Peters et al., 2013; Ruiter et al., 2014; Witte & Allen, 2000, p. 606), when there was a perception that autism therapies were only affordable by rich families, and that people without money had to accept their lot.

The fact that many popular online media outlets republished these autobiographical extracts, and wrote other dramatized articles about Nga's experience, once again raised the question of sensational journalism that did not operate within rigorous journalistic standards. If the reporters and editors had undertaken diligent verification, they could have found out that Nga's approach with Glenn Doman's controversial theory, were not backed by rigorous empirical studies (Odom et al., 2010; P. Reed, 2015; Rogers & Vismara, 2008; von Tetzchner et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2015). In publishing the extracts, the media outlets did not reference any scientific sources or check if the institutions where Nga learned her therapies were reliable, they just acted as a PR tool for Nga's service. Whether deliberately or inadvertently, they published the story without fully considering the veracity of any of Nga's claims.

8.3. Normalization driven by sacrifice and heroism

Another mother-therapist-service-provider who also emerged in Vietnamese media coverage as a hero between 2014 and 2016 was Đào Hải Ninh. She was mentioned with her name *Hải Ninh* or as *chị Ninh [Ms. Ninh]* 41 times in the corpus. Ninh acknowledged she took Nga's training. She actually

followed Nga's steps in publishing a memoir *Con về [[My] child returns]* (Ninh, 2014) and promoted her own autism intervention service intensively in media channels. Similar to Nga, Ninh's diary became the springboard for a series of five autobiography episodes, titled *10 năm "vượt sóng" cùng con [10 years of "overcoming the waves" together with [my] child]* on *Tuoitre.vn*, starting on 12 November 2014 (Ninh & Tâm Lụa, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2014e). The memoir itself was authored by Hải Ninh, but the memoir extract series on *Tuoitre.vn* was edited by Tâm Lụa, so their names appeared together in the authorship of the media series. Instead of analysing all the content of those episodes in detail, I will focus on their use of certain rhetorical devices and ideologically laden statements. Ninh's appearance on television, print and online news media stirred up a different kind of hope and controversy because her story was promoted as an autism recovery case, which was and still is uncommon globally and nationally. The language in her story was less sensational than Nga's, but the dramatization of sacrifice, personal strife, heroism, normalization and victory was evident. Ninh's memoir extracts did not go viral like Nga's. Only *Eva.vn* and other non-journalistic websites republished them. But 13 other online news media outlets wrote their own news articles about Ninh's story and explicitly mentioned her memoir, after a press conference to launch the memoir.

Ninh's first reactions after her daughter's autism diagnosis were desperation and helplessness, and she also thought of murder-suicide. The article described her reaction with such rhetoric as "illusorily cling[ing] to unrealistic belief, div[ing] in the panic and mess, without any way out" (Ninh & Tâm Lụa, 2014a). Ninh's reaction was not unusual. Various studies have reported parents' reactions after the autism diagnosis of their children as combining shock, guilt, anger, sadness, anxiety, depression, disagreement, grief, loss and self-blame (Banach et al., 2010; Howlin & Moore, 1997; Siklos & Kerns, 2007). Nevertheless, Ninh's focus in the series was on the endeavours and sacrifices she made to "save" her daughter. She did not want to pay attention to her own appearance, so she cut her hair short. She worked a full-time job and slept only 4 hours per day because she had to review the video records of her daughter's lessons and prepare the new lesson plan and materials for other private tutors to teach her child. She did not dare to get tired, as if being tired was the sign of physical and mental weakness. She quit her high-level job to take a lower position so as to have more time for the child. Having a child with autism, she prioritised her role as a mother over the role of a social or "career" woman. She even cut her hand to teach the child about pain. Consciously or unconsciously, Ninh aligned herself with the mediated and stereotyped role of a mother warrior. Tuchman (1978) suggests stereotyping of gender roles in the media encourages their audiences to conform to "set portrayals of sex-appropriate appearance, interests, skills, behaviours and self-perceptions" (pp. 5, 30).

Like Nga's and those of other heroic mothers, Ninh's stories again reinforced a message that has been reproduced in the Vietnamese media for years: mothers should be the best teacher to the child.

By writing: “from now on, only Mom has the right to grade you and give you the proper grading” (Ninh & Tâm Lụa, 2014e), Ninh claimed knowledge and authority over her child in areas that were conventionally the territory of professional teachers. Ninh expressed her discontent with and disregard for the un-trustable service providers who applied a brutal approach in autism intervention centres and clinics, as she mentioned in one of the articles. Ninh employed private tutors to teach her child at home, but the lesson plan and teaching techniques were led by her. She was the one who set up learning objectives and reviewed the lessons to guide the tutors. In this way, Ninh was establishing her power and agency to control her life and her child’s situations in a dysfunctional healthcare, education and social service system.

Ninh’s marriage was broken and after splitting the possessions, her divorced husband quickly left her alone with two children. But when her child with autism got better a couple of years later, Ninh seemed to make excuses for his earlier departure: “I am not in the position to blame him, anyone wants to come home to find peace, if the child is like that, how can there be peace” (Ninh & Tâm Lụa, 2014e). This statement reflected the ideological assumption that the husband and father was entitled to see the family and home only as a place for peace of mind, not love and responsibilities, thus he could have an excuse to leave when things get tough. The article did not mention other human relational factors that may have led to the family’s breakdown. Autism was possibly only the last straw that collapsed already fragile marriages. But Ninh’s words implied that the child’s autism was the main cause of her family breakup.

Ninh and her daughter’s autism journey was described with such metaphors as overcoming the waves, fighting and winning the child back, and claiming victory. In an article written by a reporter on *VnExpress.net*, the winning spirit was affirmed:

> "Đến nay sau 4 năm con học tiểu học và năm nào cũng xứng đáng nhận danh hiệu học sinh giỏi, hai mẹ con có thể tự khẳng định: Chúng mình đã chiến thắng 99% rồi", chị Ninh chia sẻ. Để có được thành quả như ngày hôm nay, chị đã trải qua bao đắng cay, vất vả và phải đánh đổi cả hạnh phúc riêng. Dù vậy, chị vẫn phải theo sát con từng ngày, thường xuyên củng cố những kỹ năng con đã học được. Giờ đây chị hồi hộp và lo lắng đón chờ giai đoạn con bước vào tuổi dậy thì. "Mình biết sẽ phải luôn cùng con vượt qua mọi vấn đề. Nếu với tuổi dậy thì, khi mọi trẻ đều có biến đổi lớn mà con mình cũng vượt qua được… thì nghĩa là con hoàn toàn bình thường", chị Ninh chia sẻ. (Vương Linh, 2014)

> “Until now, after 4 years at primary school, every year she [the daughter!] was awarded Excellent Student Recognition, Mum and daughter can confirm: we win 99% already”, Ninh shared. In order to achieve what she has today, she has gone through so much bitterness, hard work and also the trade-off of her marital happiness. Nevertheless, she still has to follow her child every day to reinforce the learned skills. Now she is nervous and anxiously waiting

> for her child's puberty. "I know I have to overcome all problems together with my child. In the puberty period, every child witnesses the big transformation, and if my child can overcome it… that means she is totally normal", Ninh explained.

Ninh was portrayed as a supermum who helped her child to achieve academic success and win over autism with 99% normality. Implicit in the story was her daughter's ability to fit into the school environment and meet the requirements of schoolwork. It is common that parents use academic performance as the benchmark for their child's normalization even though individuals with autism do not always have an intellectual or learning disability. Academic achievement is measurable and comparable; it is an important, if not the most important indicator of a child's success in the Vietnamese culture.

In a Confucian-oriented society, like Vietnam and China, where enormous emphasis is put on children's academic records, children's achievements are considered as markers of parents' success (McCabe, 2007). Vietnamese parents rank second in the world in the time they spend tutoring their children in academic homework (Varkey Foundation as cited in The Economist, 2018), which is not necessarily a positive indicator of a good education system. They are either willing to or have to invest a big part of families' incomes in children's education, with education accounting for 35% of total family expenditure (Linh Hương, 2015), or even 47% of the household expenditure, according to a Nielsen's survey quoted by Linh Lan (2017). Academic success is expected to translate into career success. The future economic value of a qualification is highly appreciated. This helps explain why Ninh used her daughter's academic performance as a benchmark for her normalcy.

The story of Ninh and her daughter consolidated the conception that autism was to be fought against, erased and defeated. Ninh's success in remediating her daughter was placed in a context of suffering: "[i]n order to achieve what she has today, she has gone through so much bitterness, arduous work and traded-off her marital happiness". Sacrifice was an emphatic theme in Ninh's story. Parents' sacrifice for children is viewed as a virtue in Vietnam, especially among mothers (Pettus, 2004; T. Phan, 2006; Shohet, 2010, 2013). Parents' sacrifice is reflected in such proverbs as "hi sinh đời bố, củng cố đời con" [to sacrifice in the father's life so as to enrich the child's destiny] or "con cái là món nợ đồng lần" [children are circular/intergenerational debt]. Making a heroic sacrifice to win over autism in Ninh's case was thus presented not only as a normalization effort, but also as a moral endeavour of establishing her good mother identity in the Vietnamese political, social and cultural context. There were intertextual affinities between Nga and Ninh's stories. Ninh considered that her successful remedy for her child was a blessing, and she wanted to share it with others. The narrative that only the mother could grade her child, her choice of sensational language, as well as the theme of her fighting and overcoming spirit all resonated with Nga's account.

The sensational and stereotyping language of tragic suffering and fighting in the media is also used by other parents in their social media and daily life when they talk about autism, even among advocates who call for the society to accept their children's autism. Recently, when I informally shared a short post on *Vòng tay Tự kỷ [Embrace Autism]* Facebook community page suggesting that autism should not be portrayed as a personal disaster, a family tragedy nor an on-going fight, there were disagreements, even from the most educated parents and proactive advocates. This suggests that if a future study looks at the impact of news media discourse on everyday discourse and life, it may reveal insightful findings.

8.4. Rare examples of the acceptance theme

Articles in the Vietnamese online news media occasionally described family members as proactively finding ways to fight autism, then turning to accept autism when they understood that not all autistic challenges could be normalized. This section will highlight an article where autism acceptance was significant. The article *Truân chuyên nuôi con tự kỷ [The ups and downs of raising a child with autism]* (Phan Dương, 2012) was published on VnExpress.net on 3 April 2012. It was reported after an exhibition in Hanoi of photos, taken by children with autism, and an essay writing contest for parents with the theme *The blue paper cranes for autistic children*. The origami cranes are the symbols of hope and blue is the colour used by many advocacy organisations as the colour to represent autism. The contest was organised for the purpose of awareness-building by the Hanoi Club of Families Living with Autism. The first half of the article talked about the problems that children with autism and their parents had to face and the second half of the article contained extracts from two parents' essays, where a father and a mother (not related to each other) used the letter genre to tell their stories. This was also one of the few articles featuring a father. I will only analyse the second half of the article because the discourse about autism problems in the first half was similar to other articles.

Vietnamese fathers and mothers often address themselves as Dad and Mum in everyday interaction with their children, between themselves, or in their conversations about their children. It is a linguistic and a cultural characteristic that Vietnamese individuals address themselves and others through their familial and social roles. The neutral pronouns such as *tôi [I], chúng tôi [we]* and *quý vị [you]* are often used in formal situations and between strangers. Interpersonal communication has to be established by first clarifying how to address the other based on age and relation. Thus, personal identities are not separable from roles in the familial and social hierarchy in most interaction or communication. The above point helps to explain the way the father and mother addressed themselves in the article under discussion. The article led to the personal writings of the father and mother:

> Kiên nhẫn, tâm huyết và một tình yêu vô hạn với đứa con bị tự kỷ đã giúp nhiều cha mẹ nhận ra được giá trị của cuộc sống. Người cha trong bài viết "Cha lớn lên theo mỗi bước con đi", giờ đây có thể tự hào là một người đàn ông đúng nghĩa: (Phan Dương, 2012)

> Patience, devotion and a limitless love for the children suffering autism help many parents realize their life values. The father in his essay “Dad is growing up alongside each step you take” could now be proud that he was a man in the full sense.

Instead of focusing on normalizing the child, the father realized the benefit to himself from the process of raising a child with autism. There were not only sacrifices, but also gains to him as a man:

> “Trước khi có con, cha không thể ngờ rằng đối với con người việc học cách nhai lại khó khăn đến thế. Cha nghĩ đó là bản năng không cần học, không cần rèn luyện, không phải đầu tư công sức, tâm trí. Vậy mà cha mẹ đã phải rất vất vả cho con học nhai. Cha phải học cách băm thức ăn cho con với độ thô tăng dần. Cha cho con ngồi đối diện với mình, kéo sự thu hút của con về phía miệng cha. Để dạy con cách nhai, chính cha phải học nhai lại từ đầu một cách bài bản nhất. Và lúc đó, cha mới thấy chỉ riêng việc dạy cách nhai thôi đã mang lại cho mình bao nhiêu cảm xúc…” (an anonymous father, as cited in Phan Dương, 2012).

> “Before you were born, Dad could not imagine that learning how to chew would be difficult for a human being. Dad thought that that was an intuition without learning: no need to practice, no need to invest labour and efforts of the heart and mind. It turned out that we parents had to work hard to teach you to chew. Dad had to learn to mince the food small, then gradually with the bigger sizes. Dad sat opposite you, focusing your attention on Dad’s mouth. In order to teach you how to chew, Dad had to learn how to chew from the beginning, in the best methodical way. And in that time Dad found out that teaching you to chew alone brought me so much emotion…”.

In the effort to teach his child basic skills, this father emphasized a positive note and the learning he gained himself. The process of teaching his child seemed to be a self-discovery for him; even when accompanied by hard labour, sweat and tears, it was not construed as a fight against autism. He considered parenting and teaching his child made him a full man. He offered support to his child, but not with an either win-or-lose spirit:

> “Nếu ai đến nhà mình lúc đó sẽ thấy buồn cười vì cha chẳng khác một chú hề. Vừa nhảy, vừa hát vừa hò hét khích lệ con. Chỉ một động tác nhảy hay nhảy lò cò mà cha phải mướt mồ hôi đến hàng tháng. Đến khi con có thể phối hợp chân, tay, mắt một cách nhịp nhàng thì cha cũng đau nhừ, bải hoải. Cha hiểu rằng không có ông bụt, bà tiên nào tìm đến đặt hạnh phúc vào tay cha. Hạnh phúc của mình thấm đượm biết bao mồ hôi, nước mắt. […] Con yêu, nếu không có con cha vẫn là đứa trẻ nhỏ trong cơ thể lớn. Nhờ có con, nhờ luôn theo sát những bước chân của con mà cha đã lớn lên, đã trưởng thành.” (a father, as cited in Phan Dương, 2012).

> “If someone came to our house, they would have found it funny because Dad was like a clown, dancing, singing, cheering to encourage you. Only [to teach you] the hopscotch gesture, Dad had to sweat my labour in months. When you could coordinate your legs, hands and eyes harmoniously, Dad also felt pained and limp with weariness. Dad understood that no genie or fairy would look for happiness and put it into my hands. Our happiness was imbued with so much sweat and tears. […] My beloved son, without you, Dad would still be a child in a big body. Thanks to you, thanks to following each of your steps, Dad has grown up and become mature”.

The touching depiction of the father and his child’s interaction in the essay was exceptional in this media discourse. In everyday life, more fathers in Vietnam are taking on a fuller childcare role, but it is still not a popular phenomenon in a culture which is predominantly patriarchal. In his essay, this father ignored patriarchally stereotyped masculinity to do childlike, funny things to connect with his child. He positioned himself as the one to teach his son these basic skills, without referring to any other professional or social support. He considered hoping for any external support unrealistic, like wishing for a genie or a fairy to help. Living in a country where good public services were scarce and citizens had internalized the idea that they must take care of their own wellbeing, this father was also living the idea of self-reliance, driven by the father’s love, kinship and care.

In the same vein, the article reported a mother’s acceptance of her child. After recalling all the good things the child could do, she confessed the child did not need to be similar to other peers; instead she embraced what made the child happy. This was a big leap from other more widely reported story lines. In her description, the child enjoyed simple happiness, so autism was not that terrible. This mother’s language had a totally different tone from the earlier stories of the “mother-warriors”:

> “Giờ đây mẹ không còn mơ những giấc mơ xa vời: bỗng nhiên con không còn tự kỷ, bỗng nhiên con nói năng lưu loát, con lí luận sắc xảo hay chẩn đoán tự kỷ của con chỉ là nhầm lẫn. Mẹ bằng lòng với đứa con ngoan ngoãn, trong sáng, ngây thơ của mẹ. Và đêm đêm, nhớ lại những tiến bộ nhỏ nhoi con dần dần đạt được, mẹ cũng có thể mỉm cười với hạnh phúc giản đơn ấy…” (a mother, as cited in Phan Dương, 2012)

> “Now Mum does not dream the far-off dream anymore: that suddenly you will not be autistic anymore, that suddenly you can talk fluently, you can have a sharp discussion, that your autism diagnosis is a mistake. I’m satisfied with my well-behaving, pure and naïve child. Every night, when I recall the small progress you can achieve, I can smile with that simple happiness…”

The mother realized that the expectation to normalize her child was not achievable, and therefore, her attitude transformed. She now focused on what the child could do and celebrated incremental progress. This attitude might be the practical scenario for many families living with autism, but it was

rarely reported by the Vietnamese online news media because the lack of drama or miracle-themed storylines did not accord with popular news values. The fact that these writings originated from a self-organised activity by parents, and were not prompted by a pre-determined journalistic influence, might explain the prominence of this acceptance spirit. The above writings were also more positive because they responded to the positive theme of the writing competition. So, both internal and external factors explained the acceptance attitude in the article.

8.5. Acceptance of autism challenged by normalization ideology

This section will discuss the implications of the media discourse centred around family stories. The key finding in this chapter is that even though autism was framed as a problem that families alone had to deal with, the family stories themselves were profoundly medicalized. Autism signs, challenges and intervention struggles in the family sphere were mediated by personal emotions, values and a sensational tone. The discussion here will draw on Vietnam's ideologies of nationalism, responsibilization and normalization to explain how family stories were represented in the Vietnamese online news media discourse.

In a study of mothers' memoirs in Western countries, Sousa (2011) finds that mothers' acceptance of children with disabilities does not mean "giving up" on therapies and treatments; instead, it demonstrates an internalized transformation of mother-children kinships. Mothers understand that their children are not going to meet the expectations of "normal" child development, but they can reassure themselves of the "good mother" role by offering unconditional love and self-sacrifice (p. 230). They shift "from problem-oriented coping (such as seeking fixes and cures) toward emotion-based coping (such as appreciating their child's strengths)" (Stevenson et al., 2011, p. 3).

The family stories about autism in Vietnam are similar and different in several ways to family stories elsewhere in the world. They are similar in the expectation of parents, and primarily mothers, waging war against autism and sacrificing for their children. They are different in the way caregivers elsewhere often turn to accept and embrace disabilities in their children later on in their journey (Sousa, 2011, p. 230), whereas mothers in the Vietnamese online news media were mostly described as continuously fighting autism battles. There must be many acceptance stories in real life, but their potential diversity was hardly featured in the media discourse.

In both Nga and Ninh's stories, as well as many other Vietnamese family stories, the warrior-hero spirit was evident, but not acceptance of the child's possible life-long challenges. Nga believed that if she stopped the therapy, she would lose her son forever. Ninh believed that both sides of her family had no abnormality, and she prepared well for the birth of her daughter, so there was no reason she should surrender and accept she had to raise a disabled child (Tuệ Linh, 2015). Ninh was trying to protect her family line's healthiness, and at the same time projected herself as a responsible mother

with careful pregnancy and child rearing. The expectation of normalization so regularly presented in the media and in daily life limited the acceptance of families and society toward individuals with autism. Furthermore, the prospect of heroically overcoming autism provided a spectacle that matched the media's news values. If families and individuals did not make extraordinary moves to conquer autism, there seemed to be not enough drama to make the stories newsworthy. Remarking on this overcoming spirit in autism discourse elsewhere, Murray (2008) is critical that this discourse regularly suggests there is a path "between autistic otherness and full neuro-behavioural normality", and the journey towards the erasure of autism is made compelling to the audience because of the process of unfolding the unknown (p. xvi). The tension exists between telling a story that catches the audience's attention and keeping a balanced representation of autism. Additionally, putting all efforts in to defeat autism further stigmatises those on the spectrum as undesirable.

There were 134 entries of *chấp nhận [accept/embrace/admit/agree/acknowledge]* in the Vietnamese online news media corpus, but the word connected to the theme of accepting and embracing the challenges of autism in only two articles; the rest of the time, the word only meant admitting, acknowledging and agreeing about autism diagnoses, or admitting children with autism to schools. Indeed, c*hấp nhận [accept/embrace/admit/agree/acknowledge]* collocated with *không [no/not]* to make the negative form 62 times, or nearly half of the incidences. Parents either denied and did not want to accept that their children had autism or set out to fight against it. The former showed an obvious resistance. But the latter also demonstrated a lack of acceptance. On the one hand, parents were occasionally presented as calling for society to accept their children with autism and include them in all social engagements in the media, as discussed in chapter 6. Yet, on the other hand, parents also joined the media in describing autism as scary, tragic, suffering and needing to be defeated or overcome, as discussed in this chapter. Parents showed love for their children, but at the same time, they expressed antipathy for their children's autism.

The lack of acceptance of autism or other disabilities in Vietnamese everyday life and in online news media originated from social pressure. Gammeltoft (2008a) reports that Vietnamese disabled adults who are still living at home with their parents are sometimes described as "báo cô" [parasites], and people pity the parents who have struggled to bring up a child without an expected return of care in their old age as "nuôi không" [bring up a child for nothing]. Similarly, service providers reportedly describe children with autism to parents with such phrases as "có cũng như không" [good for nothing], or "chỉ để làm cảnh" [for decoration only] (Ha et al., 2014). An adult child who cannot return grace to his or her parents is considered as not fulfilling one of the most fundamental values of piety in Vietnamese society: the obligation of children to return to their parents the love and labour that has been expended on them (Jamieson, as cited in Gammeltoft, 2008a). Facing this social dilemma, the ambition to defeat autism or any disability is entangled with other social expectations. So, the idea of Nga investing in expensive overseas trainings and Ninh trading off her own career, appearance and

time, even hurting herself to do the best for the child, met the general expectations of parent-child relationships.

The official discourse in Vietnam often emphasizes the Party-State's expectation of citizens to be capable and healthy as an indicator of their patriotism and responsibility (Gammeltoft, 2014). Underlying the desire for normalcy is the need to belong to the social configuration of nationalism. Gammeltoft (2014) suggests, "[t]o comprehend how individuals come to project their labour and love in specific directions, forming communities, making sacrifices, and enduring pain, we must place striving for belonging at the centre of analysis" (p. 126).

The way the media represented family stories through a pronounced medical frame was also influenced by a long-standing and widely circulated eugenic ideology, as discussed in chapter 3. Vietnamese official discourse sends out a clear message to citizens that "responsible parenthood demands attention to children's *quality*, to their wholesomeness and bodily completeness," so as to contribute to Vietnam's position in the global economic arena (Gammeltoft, 2014, p. 125). In the words of the national cult and leader Hồ Chí Minh (1946): "Each weak citizen causes the country to be weak; each healthy and strong citizen makes the entire country healthy and strong". This official narrative has been repeated until recently and impacted the way citizens see themselves and others, with pressure to optimize individual capabilities to fit in with the expectation of the national economy and society. X. T. Nguyen (2015) argues that ''the relationships between the nation, its ideal population, and disabled bodies, are marked in a hierarchical order, [where] disability is represented as a national problem that should be eliminated through methods of control, intervention, and management'' (p. 46). Therefore, in the media discourse about autism, parents were represented with pressure to normalize their children to help them gain a normative identity and belonging in this social context. Some of the parents in my circle confess that whenever there are autism recovery stories in the news, their friends and relatives often call them or send weblinks to urge them to try the therapies out. Good intentions become additional pressures that these parents have to sort out and navigate.

Globally, many contemporary psychiatric interventions are complicit with neoliberal ideology, when the focus is put on the individuals with the health problem while the problem inherent in the larger society is mostly ignored (Esposito & Perez, 2014, p. 417). In other words, within the medical model, the root of the problem is considered to belong to the disabled person, rather than due to "the social system that constructs forms of disablement" (X. T. Nguyen, 2015, p. 60). Normalized individuals are opposed to disabled subjects in an effort to classify abilities, where lower functionality is associated with a lower order of humanity (X. T. Nguyen, 2015). According to Brownlow (2010), within the logic of the medical model, once a person with autism has been identified as ''not normal,'' treatment and therapy should be used to address the ''fault'' and modify an individual's behaviour so as to turn him

or her into being more ‘‘normal’’ or “less autistic” (p. 17). This polarizes the conceptualization of ‘‘normality’’ and ‘‘abnormality’’ (p. 17).

In the view of Esposito and Perez (2014), neoliberalism increasingly shapes the medical field according to “the logic of the market’’, accordingly, people are encouraged to “adjust their attitudes, habits, and behaviours to fit market demands” (p. 416). Stibbe (2004) observes when social accommodation and acceptance are not ready yet, individuals with disabilities are expected to adapt in order to get a normal life: namely to be cured; to stoically stand up regardless of the disadvantages; to fight and overcome barriers; to adapt psychologically to their condition; or to rely on the care of a non-disabled person.

Nguyen-Phuong-Mai (2019) points out Thomas Malthus’s concept of Social Darwinism and Herbert Spencer’s concept of “survival of the fittest”, together with the concept of laissez-faire policies since the 18th and 19th century, have been used to justify eugenics and exploitation through the industrial revolution, capitalism and neoliberalism (p. 2). Brown (2016) argues in the contexts of neoliberal societies, “[i]nstead of being secured or protected, the responsibilized citizen tolerates insecurity and deprivation” (p. 10). “Individuals are doubly responsibilized: they are expected to fend for themselves (and blamed for their failure to thrive)” and contribute to their company and national economy (p. 10). “Citizenship is stripped of substantive political engagement and voice”, and civic virtue is reduced to contributions to national economic development (p. 10). Entitlements or dependency are both put in a negative light (p.10). Layton (2010) argues that when governments turn to “free market fundamentalism” (p. 303), the states of individual vulnerability, dependence and fears are shamed by both the government and the media (p. 311). The social safety net switches its place with personal responsibility (Harvey, 2007).

Vietnamese citizens have no choice but to accept being self-sustained or responsibilized individuals, because of the absence of the relevant public services and welfare system. In the context of Vietnam, respect for diversity is still a new idea, in all its heterogenous forms, not just in the realm of neurodiversity. Families are represented as focusing more on curing autism because social acceptance and accommodation of all differences are low. They are driven by the normalization ideology within the medical model in the hope their children can conform to the social norms of a marketized world.

The media certainly sent out a one-dimensional message of hope and determination through Nga’s and Ninh’s efforts. This message resonates with the concept of “cruel optimism” initiated by Berlant (2011), in which human-beings set up and are driven by a desired state of affairs. This desired prospect enables individuals to endure their current circumstances, but the prospect itself is so vulnerable that its failing can threaten the wellbeing of those who are attached to it (pp. 20-21). “Cruel optimism” is not only promoted in the tenet of life with autism, it is interestingly a popular phenomenon

in Vietnam. In recent years, Vietnamese media widely and uncritically report Vietnam is ranked the 5th in the Happy Planet Index, based on life expectancy, wellbeing, equality and ecological footprint in 2016 and 2018 (New Economics Foundation, 2018). The mainstream media promote “cruel optimism” among the lay citizens to reconcile them with the current state of affairs, while many netizens see the Happy Planet Index as a sarcastic joke. Citizens are forced to accept the status quo in the national life because they do not believe they can advocate for or make radical structural changes.

The articles analysed in this chapter once again reflected that the media mostly represented women as the ones to take more responsibility in caring for children with autism. This reflected the social reality of gender roles, kinships and motherhood in Vietnam. Research commissioned by Oxfam finds that journalists in Vietnam hold stereotypical perceptions of gender roles and reproduce these perceptions in their reports (H. T. Vu, Lee, et al., 2018). Gammeltoft (2018) points out “official discourse [in Vietnam] defines self-sacrifice, endurance, gentleness, and submissiveness as primary female virtues and as preconditions for morally proper womanhood” (pp. 83-84). According to another Oxfam report, females account for 48.4 percent of the country’s workforce, making Vietnam one of the countries with the highest rate of women in the labour force (Vietnam Law and Legal Forum, 2018), but housework and childcare is still considered the job of women. Thu Ha (2011) argues that the relatively equal number of women in the workforce in Vietnam is not motivated by feminist ideology. There have been multiple women’s movements since the war time against French colonialism and American intervention, but there has been no feminist advancement in the country because the underlying motives of those women’s movements are not to advance women’s rights and equity (p. 198). Women have been praised for being “giỏi việc nước, đảm việc nhà” [good at national works, and good at domestic tasks], which is basically premised on maintaining nationalism and economic development (p. 198, 205). The tradition of women’s heroism is propagated to engage women to contribute in the public sphere, but Confucian patriarchal expectations, norms and conventions preserve men’s privilege (p. 199) at both work and home. As such, in domestic life, women are still expected to sacrifice their personal needs and selves to be “devoted home makers, good teachers for children, good daughters-in-law and submissive dependent wives” (p. 206). This analysis finds that by featuring mostly women in the caretaking role for children with autism, the media reinforced the imbalanced gender roles assigned to familial and social life.

The heroic stories of mothers analysed in this chapter evoked a familiar ideological figure of “good mothers” who sacrificed their own wants and needs to save their children from autism. This discursive process is relevant to Matheson’s (2005) argument that people’s identities formulate in the political, economic, social and cultural context around them, in their relationship with others (p. 58). In the case of Vietnamese mothers, war metaphors such as fighting, battling, overcoming and victory in both Nga and Ninh’s stories suggested that the mothers positioned their endeavours and identities in a cultural

context that valued maternal heroism. They internalized the concepts of self-sacrifice and heroism that is closely tied to nationalism in both formal and everyday discourse. Nevertheless, like warrior mothers elsewhere, they had to endure social, emotional, and financial costs that might not be affordable to even upper-middle-class families (Sousa, 2011, p. 238). For mothers with more constrained resources, these warrior-hero mother ideals are far-reaching and may set many up for failure, self-blaming and suffering (Sousa, 2011, p. 238), because very few mothers could consistently live up to the ideal (Courcy & des Rivières, 2017, p. 245).

Globally, mothers of children with general mental health problems profess feeling and/or being blamed for creating, exacerbating, or not doing enough to remedy their child's problem, possibly because they witness different magnitudes of stigma that question their feeling of competence and adequacy (Eaton et al., 2016). Indeed, various studies have demonstrated that "mothers of children with autism are particularly at risk of mental and physical health problems such as depression, psychological distress, sleep problems and burnout" (Courcy & des Rivières, 2017, p. 245). So, celebrating mothers as supermums is perversely presenting them in a social role that is not healthy to their well-being.

The good mother ideal is closely connected with the medicalized mother concept, in a time in which mothering is expected to be a skilled occupation (Clarke, 2012), with the proliferation of Dr. Google and online lay expertise. Through their battles against the realities of the medical system, mothers are presented in the global media as challenging conventional medical expertise and claiming knowledge authority over their children's health and wellbeing (Sousa, 2011, p. 229). I strongly believe that parents should proactively conduct home-based intervention for their children with autism, with guidance and training anchored on science. I emphasize the need for participation of lay stakeholders in science and communication. However, I do not support the conception that lay experiential knowledge and instinct should supersede "medical expertise" in autism treatment and intervention. The mothers' autobiography series and other media coverage in Vietnam do not make it clear that expectations of intervention mastery and autism recovery should be properly managed, especially for a complex condition like autism. Even proven methods of autism intervention conducted by qualified therapists yield different outcomes in different individuals (Eldevik et al., 2009; Howlin, Magiati, & Charman, 2009; Spreckley & Boyd, 2009). Successful cases of individual mothers' intervention for their own children could not be generalized, and positive outcomes could not be guaranteed at a larger scale, particularly when mothers themselves - as dubious proxies for medical professionals - decided to provide training and intervention services without sufficient credentials.

The exemplar of mother-doctors shifted the focus from blaming mothers for causing disabilities to positioning them as responsible for curing them (Courcy & des Rivières, 2017; Sousa, 2011, p. 220). In Vietnam, this trend and its representation in the media was an inevitable reaction to the lack of

accountability and expertise of both state institutions and professional service providers. The mother-as-hero and self-sufficient ideal depicted in this chapter may be a practical solution in the short term at an individual level, but it demotivated the urgency of advocating for better healthcare policy and elided the structural role of policymakers, medical and educational professionals in Vietnam.

8.6. Conclusion

The articles in this chapter framed autism as a family problem that parents and mostly mothers had to deal with. The experience of living with autism was associated with fears, terrors, sacrifice and heroism. The identity of individuals with autism was described through sensational language that stereotyped their behavioural problems. Most parts of the narratives were invested into talking about the family hardship and heroic struggle to fix autistic challenges. The CDA undertaken in this chapter showed that the goal of families was represented as wanting to remedy or erase autistic symptoms so as to normalize the individuals. In Vietnamese news media, the message of acceptance of autism was not strong because conformity was and is a significant cultural value. Proper social facilitation of individuals with autism will not be available anytime soon; therefore, parents would rather aim for normalization so that their children could fit in with society. The endeavour in autism normalization was driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of love, morality and social virtue. The finding about the lack of acceptance by families of individuals with autism in the online news media coverage contributed a unique Vietnamese feature to the academic knowledge and practical promotion of social diversity for individuals with autism. It suggested that to work toward a tolerant and inclusive society in Vietnam, structural, cultural and ideological obstacles have to be cleared in the media discourse, as well as in the lay population and even among insiders of disadvantaged groups. Because autism was represented as an issue that families alone had to deal with, this obscured the urgent need for a social policy for those on the autism spectrum.

9. Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1. Introduction

This thesis started with a concern about misinformation, disinformation and misrepresentation of autism in the Vietnamese online news media. The research has acted as an advocacy endeavour to contest the inequality and exclusion of people with autism that have been regularly reinforced by the media. Through the deployment of cultural political economy (CPE), corpus framing analysis (CFA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the thesis has addressed three major questions and uncovered important findings, some of which are unique to Vietnam. The CPE of Vietnam as a country and of its media industry set the scene for understanding the media discourse. The corpus framing analysis revealed who was talked about; who had a voice; and what frames were favoured by media practitioners. The CDA of a small sample of articles illustrated and explained how autism was represented and particularly why certain ideologies were articulated in the representation of autism in the Vietnamese online news media. My normative critiques in this research have problematized the structural and institutional constraints the news media were operating under, the political and economic interests they served, the ideologies the media were articulating to sustain hegemonic power relations in society, and how the cultural context contributed to existing social norms and the rules of the game. After the problematisation of social issues and explanation of their causal mechanisms undertaken in the previous chapters, this conclusion will work out proposals for practical solutions, in line with the framework of CDA, as suggested by Fairclough and Fairclough (2018).

Below, I first summarise key findings and discuss the challenge of translating insights from scholarly research into recommendations for policy making and pragmatic communication practice. Then I will discuss the contribution of this study to the scholarly literature on news media representation of autism in the world. The limitations of the research will be acknowledged. The chapter will end with recommendations for future academic research.

9.2. Findings and implications

In this section, I will review the findings in the whole thesis, draw them together, and discuss their significance and implications. I will clarify why these findings matter and who should know and care about them. I will also point out possible solutions and the challenges inherent in any attempt to execute those solutions, given the current state of affairs.

The CPE analysis of Vietnam as a country and of its media industry has provided an understanding of the contexts in which online news media work. Politically, policymaking in Vietnam is a top down process, in which citizens and civil society groups have only symbolic participation in the political process. Consequently, despite policy advocacy efforts from parents for over a decade, autism was not recognized as a disability in any legal document until January 2019. While the Press Law throughout its amendments in 1989, 1999, 2016 and other related legal frameworks require journalists

to be accountable to the Party-State, the mechanism for them to be accountable to the public and other stakeholders is arbitrary, through response, correction and apology, on an entirely voluntary basis. Economically, most media outlets are still owned by state agencies, but they are commercialized with little or no public financial subsidy; therefore, they are driven by market mechanisms to maintain their operations. Professionally, media have been playing the role of "mouthpiece" of the Party-State for decades, mainly serving a propaganda function. Journalism students are often poorly educated with a curriculum burdened with ideological teaching and little practical training; the majority of journalists are not formally trained in journalism at degree levels (A. Nguyen, 2006b). Media practitioners are driven by a media practice of biased, opinion-oriented and commercialized journalism, with low levels of ethics and professionalism. Media workers regularly choose to sensationalise content to compete for viewership in the digital media market, and the topic of autism is certainly an easy target for sensationalisation. Culturally, people with disabilities have been viewed as a burden to the family and a hurdle to national development, hence, the expectation or desire for their normalization is strong, from both their families and the wider society. Autism is no exception.

The corpus framing analysis has inductively and deductively identified language patterns that suggested children with autism and their family members were most frequently talked about, but adults with autism were underrepresented in the media discourse. Professionals in healthcare and education were quoted more than twice as often as family members. And individuals with autism were quoted directly or indirectly with basic utterances in only 3% of the quoting sample, so their voices were scarcely heard in a meaningful way. In a culture that accords high respect to doctors, teachers and figures of authority, these findings are not surprising. Autism advocacy groups were not prominent in the media discourse, even though they have been active in Vietnam for over a decade. But a particularly notable finding was the rare appearance of state officials in the media discourse about autism. Media did not often interview state officials or hold them accountable regarding issues of inclusion and equality for individuals with autism. This suggested that autism was not framed as a social policy matter by the media. Those rare state officials' statements suggested that integration of children with autism in mainstream schools was based on the students' ability to learn and level of disability, without emphasising on the institutional facilitation. This suggested that access to education was not regarded as a universal right in practice. State officials only appeared intensively in the reporting of a child abuse incident, but in that case, they generally deflected responsibility for addressing the incident, evading accountability for the poor management of a boarding centre for children with autism under their local supervision. In 2019, autism was officially recognized as a disability in Vietnam under the Law on Persons with Disability, which requires institutional stakeholders to facilitate people with disabilities in schools and other social settings. But when the structural mechanisms for enforcing accountability are not effective, laws are for face value more than practical enforcement.

Adults with autism and their issues were extremely under-represented in the Vietnamese media. Media practitioners often paid attention to the urgency of identifying and treating children with autism in early childhood, but the adults' needs for jobs, independent housing, relationship development, wellbeing and other social engagements were barely given any attention in the media coverage. This can only be changed when the media, advocates, families and individuals with autism shift to a mindset that recognises children and adults on the autism spectrum have important things to say about what matters to them. It is essential that the media communicate the importance of engaging social stakeholders in supporting individuals with autism into their adulthood, not just in terms of early intervention and education opportunities in childhood. This is certainly a far-reaching expectation, which might be perceived as costly to the social safety net system.

In fact, according to some measures, the exclusion of individuals with autism and other disabilities causes greater economic loss to the economy and to households than the cost of including them. As quoted in chapter 6, the World Bank estimates that the global annual gross domestic product loss due to the exclusion of people with disabilities from the labour market is between US$1.37 and 1.94 trillion (X. T. Nguyen, 2015). If individuals with autism are educated, go to work and live independently, the cost of caring for them can also be reduced, which benefits society at large. Only with awareness and understanding can subsequent actions to support adults on the autism spectrum be undertaken.

The frequency lists of words and clusters in the corpus suggested that autism was prominently framed as a medical problem by Vietnamese online news media. Such words as *symptoms, diseases, diagnosis, disorder* and *treatment* were found at the top of these lists. The CDA of articles in the medical frame suggested that misinformation about the cause of autism was perpetuated by both reputable and tabloid news media outlets. Media workers regularly confused autism with other health conditions and perpetuated misinformation of different types when they did not reference reliable sources. Doctors often abused their power and access to the media to make overstatements about the efficacy of their treatment methods, and understatements of risks.

Although many other international studies challenge the medical model (Conrad, 2005; Nye, 2003; Smart & Smart, 2006), I argue that the dominance of the medical frame was unavoidable in the media discourse of autism in the context of Vietnam. If the scientific side of autism were better understood in the country, it would reduce the practice of blaming parents for causing autism, a position still perpetuated in the Vietnamese media. If families and individuals with autism were well informed, listened to and had access to evidence-based treatments and therapies, they would have fewer impediments to coping with their challenges.

Autism was predominantly framed as a family story. The implication was that the responsibility to care for and support individuals with autism at home and in social settings was assigned solely to family

members without questioning the responsibility and accountability of policymakers, institutional actors and wider society. Care and intervention for individuals with autism was reported with reference to mothers more often than fathers, which reflected and reinforced the imbalance of gender roles in the families and society. If the media and the publishing industry keep focusing mainly on mothers' stories, they will continue to naturalize and consolidate the impression that mothers are the only ones responsible for caring for children with autism. Other international studies have shown how this inequality in gender roles can lead to other domestic issues that can disadvantage both the individuals with autism and family members through stress, depression, self-stigma, conflicts or increased rate of family break-ups (Banach et al., 2010; Courcy & des Rivières, 2017; Howlin & Moore, 1997; Siklos & Kerns, 2007). If Vietnamese news media were to report more fathers engaging with their children on the autism spectrum, it might motivate other fathers to see their meaningful place in the family happiness and take action in relation to their child's development and wellbeing.

Generally, the spirit of sacrificing and fighting against autism with a normalization goal was dominant in the family stories. Interestingly, the normalization ideology of the medical model was intensive in the family stories when the writers tried to describe the autistic problems that families had to face and the endeavours to eradicate them. Normalization seemed to be the biggest concern of heroic mothers who went far and wide to learn interventions to minimize or erase their children's autism. Acceptance of the differences and challenges of autism was not regularly described, in either the family or social settings.

This study has revealed a high degree of problematic misinformation and misrepresentation in media practice. Such misrepresentations originated from the prejudices associated with existing ideologies in society, low journalistic ethics and skills, as well as sensational motives in the marketized media landscape. When misinformation is accepted by a population, it becomes persistent (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012; Southwell & Thorson, 2015), especially when people take it from the media and naturalize it in daily life. People's worldview, or personal ideology, plays a key role in the persistence of misinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). It is recommended that media workers always make an attempt to verify information and reference reputable and diverse sources, when they write about such a vital issue as health and wellbeing.

I subscribe to the normative position of an integrated model of disability, recommended by the World Health Organization, that combines both medical and social policy models. It identifies individuals' needs in healthcare, other social services and requires institutional actors to adapt the physical and social environment to facilitate the challenges associated with disabilities (Kenny et al., 2016; Leatherland & Chown, 2015). I share with Llewellyn and Hogan (2000, p. 163) the belief that the social model could only work on a wide scale if socio-political structures and institutions are well prepared to provide services and facilitation to those with disabilities. It takes structural change in the

political system as a precondition for enabling the media's shift from seeing autism purely as a medical, personal and family problem into framing it as a social matter that needs policy accommodation.

The above findings and discussion have shown that the online news media in Vietnam often justified and thus exacerbated exclusion, injustice and stigmatisation of individuals with autism and their families even in the articles which seemed at first glance to work for their interests. To address the communication problems highlighted in this thesis, there needs to be a national communication strategy and action plan for autism, with the engagement of the government, institutional stakeholders, doctors, teachers, other professionals, parents and individuals with autism. That communication strategy needs to be based on solid analysis of communication problems, a radical message, and holistic and integrated tactics to influence the various audiences. Vietnam Autism Network and advocacy group have been connecting with universities, credentialed service providers and other institutions. If these connections are mobilized for an integrated communication plan, using different communication channels and touchpoints to reach out to the audience, useful and informative messages have the potential to gain prominence in the media.

However, the call for a concerted communication strategy and effort is challenging, because it requires structural and institutional changes in the political regime, policy making, law enforcement and monitoring, media culture, mechanisms for accountability, national budget allocation, and raising the bar in professional credentials and ethical practices. If the social model of disability is still a utopian ideal that developed countries have to work on (D. L. Baker, 2011; Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000; Ne'eman, 2010), it is even more far reaching in a political economic system with a widespread crisis of healthcare, education and social services like Vietnam.

In addition, advocates and individuals with autism also need to be trained to be aware of the ideologies that can be advantageous or disadvantageous to those who they are advocating for. Awareness building activities now need to expand beyond the realm of autism early identification and intervention, to consider accommodation and inclusion of individuals with autism in schools, workplaces and social settings. Advocates, parents and individuals with autism need to know the implications of what standpoints and messages they should use in advocacy activities to benefit those on the autism spectrum. Only then, when parents and individuals with autism are approached by the media, will they choose a talking angle that respects facts and benefits people with autism and their families.

Advocates ultimately need to work in alliance with the media, not against them. Advocates should seek to correct specific misrepresentations and at the same time recognize good practice in media representation of autism. It takes more than piecemeal training or awareness building to change the way journalists frame matters relating to autism, and how they present other stakeholders' points of

view about autism. Both media literacy training for the audience and improvement in media content on the media production side can contribute to reducing stereotypes (Gorham, 1999; Kawakami, Dovidio, Moll, Hermsen, & Russin, 2000; Ramasubramanian, 2007). In addition, Patrick W Corrigan (2016) points out that in-person contacts and engagements improve understanding and reduce stigma *per se,* even more so than education and awareness. Therefore, advocacy groups, families and individuals with autism themselves could create more opportunities for journalists to have quality interaction, conversation with and observation of families living with autism, so that understanding about autism will not be limited to perpetuating bias and prejudice. However, personal contacts can only engage a limited number of media practitioners at a time, so it is not a tactic for a wide reach. In addition, it is essential that many parents and individuals with autism with diverse points of view and circumstances are encouraged to talk to the media, so that the stage is not left to just a few out-spoken individuals, who do not necessarily represent all walks of life and perspectives on the autism spectrum. In short, I want to emphasise the need to maintain an engaging, multidirectional relationship between policy makers, institutional stakeholders, media practitioners, professionals, advocates, parents and individuals with autism. They should jointly work toward the construction of beneficial media frames, reliable information sources and exemplary best practice, as suggested in the participation model in science communication, endorsed by various authors (Brossard & Lewenstein, 2010; Secko et al., 2013; Trench, 2008).

Tactically, it will be helpful for advocacy groups, individuals with autism, professional alliances, and media practitioners themselves to jointly build an up-to-date communication guide on autism. This guide should mobilize insights from various stakeholders to provide fundamental facts and updates as well as recommendations on best practice in communication about autism. This particular study and multiple other academic studies as well as practical toolkits produced in different parts of the world can be used as a reference for the Vietnamese guide. Such a guide should be constructed with the participation of insiders and with reference to reputable, evidence-based and peer-reviewed information sources. The guide would need to be promoted and made easily accessible to reporters, editors, opinion leaders, professionals, parents, and individuals with autism whenever they talk or write about the topic. Additionally, well-structured interactive websites, regular newsletters, as well as engaging and interactive social media platforms, are some of the tools that advocates can deploy to build reliable sources of information and proactively construct mutually beneficial relationship with the media. Reliable and accessible content will gradually counterbalance the misrepresentation of autism in the media. Nevertheless, I emphasise that there needs to be a radical change in the political system and a radical realignment of the relationship between the state and the news media if other professional and tactical recommendations are to make a real impact.

9.3. Contribution of this thesis to interdisciplinary theory and practice

Methodologically, this thesis is the first to draw on a combination of cultural political economy, corpus framing analysis and critical discourse analysis in a study on media representation of autism. Building on the strength of these methodological approaches, the thesis has gone beyond the reporting of quantitative descriptive findings to interpret in depth and explain the underlying structural, ideological and cultural factors that shape country-specific power relations toward individuals with autism and their families. In combining quantitative corpus framing analysis and qualitative CDA, I have been able to put into full play the power of computer-assisted corpus analysis to provide this study with a panoramic view of the broad media frames and, at the same time, I have been able to zoom in to look closely at a small sample of texts for in-depth interpretation. Similarly, by combining CPE with CDA, I have looked at the political, economic, social and cultural contexts that regulated the exercise of ideology, power relations and discursive practice in media texts.

This conceptual framework could be used for future research, especially in projects on the media representation of other stigmatised groups. It is worth highlighting that this thesis has provided interdisciplinary insights that stretch beyond media, journalism and communication studies (itself an inherently interdisciplinary field of research), to expand to policy making, public health, disability studies and development of professional expertise in autism intervention, education and facilitation in Vietnam.

Communication and media scholars believe that insights from local cultures can challenge “Western notions of communication for they are embedded in different conceptions about knowledge, humanity, identity, individualism, and community” (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014, p. 366). As such, phenomena similar to those appearing in Western media coverage have been interpreted here through a different set of explanatory frameworks, given the unique political, economic, social and cultural contexts of Vietnam. As the first academic study on news media representation of autism in Vietnam, it has shed light on the local context and at the same time offers a Vietnamese perspective on a Western-centric body of knowledge on media representation of autism. Employing Western theoretical frameworks and references, my line of argument has been enriched by Vietnamese cultural insights and discursive evidence. Posing a similar set of questions to existing studies from elsewhere in the world, this thesis has confirmed some of the features of autism representation in the global media, but it has also invoked different local evidence, views and arguments. My research has yielded some different findings compared with the existing literature, namely: that Vietnamese media still propagated outdated incorrect information expounding that autism was caused by bad parenting or electronic device overuse; state officials were largely absent from the media discourse about autism; fathers were not as visible as mothers; and acceptance of individuals with autism was still low, even within the families of individuals with autism. My explanatory critiques have been informed by recognition of the importance of the ideologies and belief systems of Buddhism, Confucianism and Communism. I

have put into perspective the collectivistic and high power distance of family and social relations in the context of the persistence of the orthodox authoritarianism regime, the legacy of the centrally planned economy, and the new wave of neoliberally inclined marketization in Vietnam.

This thesis has stood distinct from the existing global literature in autism representation with its argument that to balance and combine both the medical model and the social policy in media representation about autism is more realistic than insisting that medicalisation is bad. Given the local circumstances of low public awareness and poor professional knowledge about autism, as well as the adverse political, economic and cultural environment, it is illusionary in both a cognitive and practical sense to insist that autism must be framed only as a social policy issue. The Western concepts of embracing diversity and equity are new to the Vietnamese culture, and they need more time to make their ways into everyday life and media culture. Vietnam is still at an awareness building stage in its grasp of autism, hence, describing autism in an accurate scientific and medical sense is still essential, alongside an emphasis on the importance of the social policy dimension.

As seen in chapters 5 to 8, doctors, professionals and parents described signs of autism in over-simplified, over-generalized, over-personalized, over-polarized and over-dramatized language that suggested stereotyping was at work. Like other stereotyped groups, individuals with autism were depicted in the media with a set of symptoms. To communicate in the media about the signs and symptoms of autism to a wider public is to generalize and simplify them to some core understandable manifestations. Parents and caregivers need to identify the early signs and have their child examined. Only with a diagnosis can individuals with autism get the help they need. If it is important for people to accept and include individuals with autism; they must understand autistic behaviours as a manifestation of autistic neurological challenges and not judge individuals with autism as stubborn, bad-tempered, ill-mannered, or bizarre. This captures the conceptual shift “from badness to sickness” with medicalized implications as suggested by Conrad and Schneider (as cited in Davis, 2010, p. 222). The medical diagnosis of autism, if understood in its scientific sense, offers the initial premise to lift blame from the individuals and their families (Davis, 2010, p. 223).

Existing studies of autism representation in the global media often invoke a politically correct lament that autism is portrayed negatively with stereotypes. However, they do not suggest specifically how to describe autism differently or how to reduce stereotypes. As distinct from a common condemnation of all stereotypes, this thesis has argued that a certain level of generalization is needed, given that it is essential to simplify the signs and symptoms of this complex condition in order to communicate it to the wider public. Notwithstanding, I call for the media and other stakeholders to use neutral non-value laden language to describe autism with an emphasis on the diversity of autism, rather than the kind of stigmatising or sensational language illustrated in chapters 5 to 8.

Autism is known as a “spectrum” disorder because there is a wide variation in its manifestations, experiences, challenges and strengths; not all people with autism will show all autistic behaviours, but most will show several (Autism Speaks Canada, 2018). Aside from reporting generalized signs and symptoms of autism, media workers often wrote personal stories that featured specific autism experiences. But when extreme cases were described intensively in the media, as demonstrated in Nga’s and Ninh’s series, those special cases may be interpreted as representing typical scenarios of autism. It is important journalists make it clear that signs and symptoms do not define the individuals with autism. Each individual on the autism spectrum is unique with a personal identity, not just the sum of their symptoms.

The challenges of autism need to be faced without sugar-coating, demeaning stereotypes, or stigma, but to help others understand the problems and look for solutions at both the family and societal levels. If media outlets only emphasise the dramatized hell of autism, society may experience pity more than empathy. I agree with Patrick W Corrigan (2016) that anti-stigma communication needs to cultivate “empathy that leads to parity”, not alienation nor pity (p. 70). A strengths-based communication may not only afford autistic individuals the respect and dignity they deserve, but may also help family members better understand and support their loved ones (Nicolaidis, 2012, p. 505). Balancing the communication between both the strengths and challenges of autism will contribute to a message that individuals with autism have the potential to thrive if they are provided with relevant support.

Gorham (1999) is optimistic that critical and active media consumption can be fostered among media consumers, and at the same time stereotyping can be minimized in media content production (p. 245). Similarly, Ramasubramanian (2007) suggests media literacy training helps audiences read news stories critically so that they can question what they watch, listen to or read in the media (p. 252). Concurrently, counter-stereotypical exemplars could be presented in the media messages to make an impact on stereotype reduction (p. 253). Kawakami et al. (2000) affirms stereotyping is automatic, but it is not necessarily uncontrollable. All these recommendations to combat stereotypes become more important in an age of internet-based media consumption and social media content generation.

In short, this thesis has advanced an in-depth understanding of autism representation with a new combination of methodological tools and perspectives in comparison with the existing literature. The Vietnam-specific media texts and contexts have contributed unique perspectives to the global scholarly knowledge of the role of ideologies and power relations in structuring media discourse about autism. In the meantime, I join other media scholars in recommending that media literacy advancement for the audience and media content improvement will help to keep stereotyping under control.

9.4. Limitations and recommendations for further research

A challenge in this thesis was the process of translating the articles from Vietnamese into English. Given their linguistic and cultural differences, the connotations of meanings might not be maintained entirely. In addition, data and research about Vietnamese media, journalism and autism is limited in all aspects. This thesis had to work within the challenges of such resource scarcity.

As a primarily qualitative approach which used a relatively small number of articles for in-depth analysis, the CDA in this thesis has uncovered key problems in the media representation of autism in Vietnam, but the space and time limits of the thesis has prevented uncovering all the problems of autism representation in Vietnamese media discourse. Nonetheless, it has unveiled in a close-up manner the ideological implications and power relations of the media representations. The study has focused on the analysis of texts and the political, economic and social, cultural dimensions that shape them, without investigating the reception of the texts from the audience's points of view. Thus, the analysis has presented interpretations of the texts, and discussed how the social context contributed to the ideology and power relations demonstrated in the text, but it could not determine how the audience actually decoded the texts.

The insights gained in this thesis can serve as a springboard for future research into the media discourse about autism in the specific context of Vietnam. Future research could explore how audiences and relevant stakeholders interpret what the news media present to them. Some of the articles have audience's comments, which future research could look at. Surveying and interviewing the stakeholders on their media consumption will add more insight into the topic. This will lead to better understanding of the impact that the media coverage has on different social stakeholders with regard to autism representation. The insight of such a future study may highlight the demand to further correct misrepresentations about autism more pressingly.

Future research could interview journalists who regularly write about the autism topic, to advance understanding about their point of views and practice. In addition, ethnographic interviews and observation of news sources would enrich insights into how different stakeholders' views and identities are featured in the media. The empirical analysis of media texts and the contextual approach of this study lay the ground for such future investigations.

This thesis has examined representation of autism in Vietnamese online news media only. To some extent, this thesis has encompassed print media because some of the media outlets in the sample published in both print and online versions. However, research into how autism is represented on television might provide new insights, especially when television has its own audio and visual appeals, the genres and styles of contents on television are more diverse, and television is still an important channel of communication to Vietnamese people. In addition, research into how autism is represented

in social media platforms will be interesting and important in a digital age where everyone can produce and circulate content. By and large, research into the formal discourse and popular culture, in such genres as speech, legal documents, textbooks, movies, soap operas and fictional books will provide a more holistic view of the issues of autism representation in the country.

9.5. Personal reflection and the concluding statement

I have first hand experience of how media coverage about autism had an effect on me, as a mother of a child with autism, at an emotional, cognitive and behavioural level. In the early months after the autism diagnosis, I could not tell what was right and what was wrong in the overwhelming whirlwind of information about autism causes and treatments on the internet. Later on, driven by the need of my son to be understood, accepted and supported by teachers, other parents and children in Vietnam, I have collaborated with other parents to work on communication campaigns to build awareness for autism on social media, at community events and in collaboration with corporate partners and the media. Despite providing the media with facts and a carefully crafted message, we have not been able to control the frames and content the media practitioners use to construct the representation of autism.

Doing this research has changed my perception of, and approach to, communication and advocacy. I have realized the problems in my prior communication work. I did try to send out the message that everyone is different with their own challenges, so please embrace autism as a form of human diversity. But this message could be easily translated as everyone in one way or another has some autistic traits, which is not helpful in highlighting the real challenges that individuals with autism face. I tried to adopt the concept of embracing differences and celebrating diversity, though I intuitively knew it was still too much of a new ideal in the cultural, political, social and professional context of Vietnam.

When analysing the data and writing this thesis, I often had to try to keep my computer screen away from my son. Personally, I did not want him to read the dehumanizing content in the media sample I collected and worked on. I explained some misperceptions about autism to him but hope that he will not look up Vietnamese media coverage about autism to read. I contest the portrayal of autism as tragic or as a dead end, with all the associated sensational language. To some extent, I share the stress that the families in this study had to go through, though I do not agree with the ways the media, publishers and parents dramatized the sufferings. There is no denying that autism is a challenge for everyone involved, sometimes a substantial challenge. Witnessing and knowing in person hundreds of families living with autism and being critical of their sensational stories pain me.

I still believe that parents need inspirational stories to work and hope for the best for their children, but I also think the stories should not convey “cruel optimism” or send out the message that individuals

can only live a fruitful life when they recover from autism. Eventually, acceptance must come from families before society can adopt it. Autism should be viewed as a lifelong disability and some of the challenges cannot be fixed, but people with autism can still live well and bring out their own strengths and potentials with family and social facilitation.

Even though I have questioned the way Nga and Ninh described their lives with autism and marketed themselves as doctors-therapists-trainers, I acknowledge that they inspired me, and many parents, to take action and do good for our children at the family level. I met Ninh once in my early days learning about autism in 2008, before she appeared in the media. Out of good will, she spent an evening sharing with me her journey, her approach and gave me a copy of a thick collection of the daily lessons she developed for her daughter. To this day, I feel grateful for her advice, encouragement, and suggestions. I know dozens of families who attended Nga's training. Some still said that they respect her motto that parents should be the best interventionists for their children. This is undeniably a practical mindset for Vietnamese parents.

Because I admire the mothers' sacrifice and heroic endeavours, I still keep questioning myself if I have done enough to help my son reduce the challenges and to offer him the best environment to develop. I could not distance myself from the self-stigma or the personal expectation that I can always do better like other moms. In many ways, I am still deeply influenced by the ideology prevalent in the society I live in. I still hold on to a "Try Harder Syndrome" (Smart & Smart, 2006, p. 37) with an internalized anxiety about how to help my son fit in. Seeing the ideological perplexity in an academic argument is one thing but contesting it and living it take enormous travail.

Writing this thesis, I have to face a paradoxical dilemma. As an insider, I am concerned that once the problems have been analysed and explained, whatever solutions I recommend will be too far-reaching. As I have discussed above, it takes not only journalistic or tactical changes but also political restructuring, and social, educational and medical advancement to address the media misrepresentation issues in Vietnam. With this research, I have alerted the media and related stakeholders about how they contribute to a problematic representation of autism in the media. The findings, implications and recommendations of this research will need to be translated into everyday language with a dissemination effort so as to reach media practitioners, families living with autism, advocates, professionals, institutional stakeholders and policy makers.

This thesis has challenged the ideologies and the implications embedded in media texts that even news media practitioners, advocates, parents and other news sources might not be fully conscious of. I have questioned the current power relations that the media reproduced between the state, media, professionals and lay people. I call for the media to play its role in framing autism stories in a combined medical and social policy model and holding state officials accountable for ensuring an inclusive environment for people with autism and their families, as stipulated by the law. The way ideology and

power relations manifested in the media around the particular topic of autism illuminated their significance in meaning-making and social life, especially their potential impact on those who are dominated and disadvantaged in Vietnam's Communist-ruled society. The study has taken a first important step to critically analyse the problems, provide grounded explanation and propose deliberate solutions. This research contributes to the scholarly body of knowledge in media representation of autism in Vietnam and the world. The findings and recommendations proposed above can be used to develop the communication strategy to benefit media, journalism, advocacy practice and policymaking in Vietnam.

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