

## **Media tip seen through the eyes of media practitioners**

Author: Nguyen NGUYEN

Reporter based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Email: [nguyennth.vn@gmail.com](mailto:nguyennth.vn@gmail.com)

It was May, 2012, when I was still in my junior year of college, I saw a news story shared on Facebook about a beauty pageant contest for journalism students in Hanoi. Out of curiosity, I clicked on the link and started reading. The contestant who was later crowned was cheered on and loudly applauded by the crowd for her “smart and straightforward answer”, as reported in the story, to the question: “What is your view on journalists accepting envelopes when doing their job?”

The envelope here refers to a white envelope containing an amount of cash that is handed out to journalists. In Vietnam, one of the most popular types of envelope journalists receive is press conference envelope. In this case, the envelope is sometimes called media tip or allowance and is referred to as a thank you note or compensation from the organizers of the press conference to journalists who have spent their time and effort attending the event and write a story about it.

Miss Press Beauty 2012 who was a student of the Academy of Journalism and Communication in Hanoi gave her answer in a very calm and confident manner. She said that if journalists had worked hard to produce a newsworthy story, it was not totally wrong to accept envelopes as long as they did not distort the truth. I could not recall my exact feelings about the answer or if I gave it much thought because at that time I did not know that I would become a reporter one day. Little did I know, three years later, the question came back to me as I learned that the envelopes distributed at news events, seminars and workshops are nothing alien to media practitioners in Vietnam. Instead, it has been around for a while and has become a common practice. To understand why this practice is widely accepted by journalists in Vietnam, I have conducted an online survey and some in-depth interviews with the subjects.

The focus of my survey and interview is to find out how media practitioners perceive press conference envelopes or the so-called media tip and what factors affect their decision to accept or refuse these envelopes. For primary data used for analysis, I have interviewed seven reporters and journalists with at least three years of journalistic experience and for supplement data, I have conducted an anonymous survey. Considering the topic of envelope or money in general is perceived as sensitive in Vietnam, the number

of respondents was very small with only 12 people, including four media practitioners who participated in the in-depth interviews. Though the sample size is small, it includes media practitioners working in different platforms: print, magazine, online, television and radio. Most of them are based in Ho Chi Minh City and only two of them are working in another region of Vietnam but they have either received journalism training or practiced journalism in the city. It is also necessary to note that news events, seminar and workshops are held in Ho Chi Minh City on a daily basis and the city is home to a great number of news organizations' headquarters or representative offices. As such, the focus on media practitioners in the city can paint a more comprehensive picture about the media tip practice in Vietnam.

The findings showed that the leading reason for media practitioners to accept media tip at press conference is because they see many other journalists do the same. The number two reason is that media tip is not only given to the journalists who will write news story but also to their colleagues, especially broadcast journalists who work closely with camera operators and video editors. The other two reasons that were agreed among more than 40 percent of the respondents are because they see media tip as a way the event organizers show their hospitality and appreciation toward journalists for their time and effort and because since media tip is put inside a press kit or press release, it would be inappropriate to return it after the event as journalists have already "accidentally" accepted in at the check-in table earlier. Another reason is low salary which makes journalists deem media tip as extra income. Two respondents reckoned media tip to be "coffee or tea money" and three said they had never thought of a reason for not taking media tip at a press conference.

To better understand the reasons given by the respondents, it is worth taking a look at how the media tip practice has come around in the first place. There are two explanations provided by media practitioners for this practice. A senior reporter quoted veteran journalists who started their career in the 70s as saying it might come from the practice of giving coupons or food stamps for attendants of meetings during the *Bao cap* or State-subsidy economic period (1975-1986). During this period, almost everything from food, goods to services was purchased with food stamps issued by the government. Journalists usually had to travel a long way to the meeting venue and the envelope with food stamps inside handed out to them was meant to buy food. After Vietnam launched a political and economic renewal campaign named *Doi moi* or Renewal period in 1986, this old tradition lived on but instead of food stamps which were then abolished, journalists

received a small amount of money which was interpreted as “coffee or tea money” (*Tien ca phe, tra nuoc*).

A senior managing editor gave another explanation which is attributed to the changes of Vietnamese media landscape with the development of PR industry. For PR practitioners, giving gifts including a small amount of cash is a mean to build a good network with journalists. Media tip is a way to express their hospitality or to say thank you to journalists, and not the payment for media coverage. Data from the survey seems to support this explanation since most respondents revealed if an event is hosted by a private company, there is a higher chance for the media tip practice to get involved. In Vietnam, many companies usually hire a PR agency to organize press conference on their behalf. The main role of a PR agency is to invite reporters to the event and to ensure media coverage target is met. PR agency usually gives gifts, sometimes envelopes, to journalists as previously agreed with the host company to make them feel welcomed at the event.

The two explanations support journalists’ reasons for accepting media tip because they think it is coffee money or it is a token of appreciation. In that sense, media practitioners do not see media tip at press conference, seminar and workshop as a bribe.

A senior reporter remarked that even though a reporter accepts an envelope at a news event, it does not mean this action will affect the way the news story is reported, saying that the envelope recipient can write a news story however she/he wants without being interfered by the giver. However, this also depends on “how strong-willed the reporter is” to not being wavered by the fact that she/he has accepted the envelope to remain objective.

Four respondents admitted envelopes have an influence on them. For example, they include the name of the sponsor or the organizer of the event in the story although such information does not enhance the news value of the story. Another indicated that for seminars and workshops with very little to no news value, reporters who have received media tip must work harder to produce a newsworthy story for publication. This implies that reporters are more comfortable turning down events with little to no news value when there is no media tip involved but once they take an envelope, there will be some pressure on producing a news story.

The survey shows that seven or 58.3% of the respondents have refused media tip at a press conference before. While the majority of media practitioners rejecting media tip said it did not result in any problems, one respondent said she/he has been distanced by the envelope giver; another said she/he has lost a professional relationship and another said

she/he has experienced all of these situations. The reasons for rejection include the event either offering no news value or involving sensitive topics, envelope recipient being offended by the giver, the envelope containing an abnormally large sum of money, and for the sake of remaining objective. One question occurs here is how much money is acceptable for media tip? Depending on the scale and the significance of news value and the organizer of the news event, the envelope will contain a different amount of money. Half of the respondents revealed they usually receive from VND300,000 to less than VND500,000 (HKD100-166) at an event. Three revealed that they received from VND1,000,000 to VND2,000,000 (HKD333-666), which is the highest amount among all respondents. There is no standards for an “acceptable” envelope at a press conference, except for the journalists’ own judgment.

Another issue that should also be pointed out is the matter of objectivity as one respondent who has accepted envelopes said she/he has also refused envelopes in some cases to stay objective. It is fair to question how objectivity is always guaranteed once there is an envelope involved? In which case or to what extent a reporter is seen as not upholding objectivity?

While the majority of respondents said there has been so far no consequences for not publishing a news story despite the fact that they have been to an event (usually one with low or no news value) and taken an envelope. Two respondents said they have been called via phone by the event organizers to ask about the story and sometimes they are no longer invited to future events from the same organizers. An interviewee said there is usually an understanding between envelope givers and recipients at an event, that is, if a reporter for some reason cannot get the story published, it is merely unexpected and not because the reporter does that on purpose. One respondent also noted that if a company organizing an event expects reporters who have accepted media tip to write favorable news for it or insists reporters on publishing a news story, it is then bribery.

Five respondents (45.5%) revealed they had written a negative news story about the organizer of an event despite having accepted media tip. Two of them said there were no consequences of their action. However, two other said they no longer receive any invitations from the event organizer and there is a case where the organizer told the media and PR practitioners that the reporter “was unfriendly”. One said the event organizer made a phone call to persuade her/him to “soften” the tone in the negative news story. In such cases, if the event organizer offers media tip in exchange for media coverage, or positive

media coverage specifically, then the interpretation of media tip in this context is no longer purely a thank-you gift or compensation for reporters' time and effort as mentioned above.

Another noteworthy finding is that the respondents are split on the question whether or not the media tip practice is necessary although they believe it is acceptable at press conferences. Four respondents gave a neutral answer which means they will not bother if there is media tip at a press conference and they will accept it if it is given to them voluntarily. Other three respondents said it is necessary for being both a motivation to produce newsworthy story and an extra source of income for reporters. The rest said it is not necessary to distribute media tip at a press conference, stating three main reasons: the first is that a journalist's job is to cover the event; the second is that this practice will do more harms than good as it can impact editorial decisions; the last one is that this practice can tarnish the reputation of media practitioners.

Findings from the survey and interview data suggest that media practitioners seem to have mixed feelings about media tip being given voluntarily to them at press conferences, seminars or workshops. Although they think of it as simply a gift or compensation, the media tip still has an influence on them. An interviewee who graduated from a journalism school recalled the words of her lecturer - a veteran journalist:

“Once you accept a penny from anyone even if it is given to you unconditionally, it will have an impact on you, not necessarily at that moment but eventually in the future. Whenever you take out your pen, you will remember the gift they have given to you before and you will not be able to write truly from your heart.”

Regarding media practitioners who argue that they can remain objective despite taking media tip, there needs to be a research on content of news stories involving the envelope giver written by these reporters to determine if this claim is true.

Media tip has always been a controversial and sensitive topic to be discussed among media practitioners in Vietnam. Only two respondents mentioned that their news organization has an unofficial instruction on handling media tip but it is on how to divide media tip fairly among the staff who have made their contribution to the story. Four respondents said they have discussed the practice within their news organization and the main focus is on how to divide the envelope and not to let it affect editorial decisions. This suggests that media organization managers either turn a blind eye on this practice or publicly allow it.

Due to limitations of discussion on the topic, together with the lack of official guidelines or codes of ethics for gift receiving at news organizations, media tip practice in

Vietnam can be interpreted in different ways from different perspectives. While this essay cannot be generalized because a small sample does not represent the majority of media practitioners population, it offers a rough idea of why this practice is still accepted by the majority of journalists in Vietnam and to what extent it will have an impact on them. These findings can be served as topics for more in-depth studies in the future to delve into greater details on the possible impacts of media tip practice on media practitioners professionally and on the general public who consume the news and what it will mean for the society. Only when these questions are addressed, there will be more opportunities to initiate public discussions on the topic to solicit opinions to tackle it effectively.

*This essay only looks at how media practitioners, here means reporters, journalists and news editors who are mostly based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, perceive envelope distributed to them at a news event, a seminar or a workshop by the event organizer. Media tip here only refers to envelope handed out at news events, seminars and workshops for all attending media practitioners. Other types of envelope given to media practitioners on other occasions are not covered in this essay. The essay is written as a personal study project by the author during her two-month fellowship spent at the Hong Kong Baptist University in Hong Kong from September 17 to November 15, 2018.*