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DEVELOPMENT DISSERTATION BRIEF

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MEDIA DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE: WHAT SWEDISH AID ACHIEVED IN VIETNAM



Media development in practice:
What Swedish aid achieved in Vietnam

Andreas Mattsson

Development Dissertation Brief, 2026:07

to

The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA)

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Sammanfattning

Denna Development Dissertation Brief sammanfattar en avhandling om Sveriges mediebistånd till Vietnam mellan 1993 och 2007. Avhandlingen undersöker hur journalistiska färdigheter, normer och arbetssätt introducerades, överfördes och omformades i ett auktoritärt mediasystem. Med utgångspunkt i projektdokumentation och intervjuer med svenska journalister och radiotekniker som arbetade som fortbildare i projekten analyserar avhandlingen hur teknologiska innovationer, programmets design samt språkliga och kulturella skillnader påverkade utvecklingen av vietnamesisk journalistik under en period av snabb ekonomisk och digital förändring.

Studien visar att mediebistånd fungerade som en arena för dialog snarare än en överföring av journalistiska ideal från svenska redaktioner. Teknologisk kapacitetsutveckling såsom direktsändningar och principer för presentation av journalistik gav de mest varaktiga effekterna, medan normativa inslag som rörde medieetik och redaktionell autonomi mötte motstånd kopplat till politisk styrning, incitamentsstrukturer och sociala normer.

Studien identifierar även fortbildare och tolkar som centrala aktörer som formade hur journalistiska idéer tolkades och anpassades i lokala kontexter.

Min forskning argumenterar för att bistånd för medieutveckling är som mest effektiv när insatser utformas i nära samklang med lokala förutsättningar, prioriterar kontextspecifikt lärande och erkänner betydelsen av relationella och kulturella processer för kunskapsförmedling. Dessa insikter bidrar till pågående diskussioner om framtidens mediebistånd och ger vägledning i att utforma ett hållbart stöd till journalistik i miljöer som präglas av restriktioner och utveckling.

Abstract

This Development Dissertation Brief summarises a study of Sweden's long-term media aid engagement in Vietnam from 1993 to 2007, examining how journalistic skills, norms and practices were introduced, translated and reshaped within an authoritarian media system. Drawing on project documentation and interviews with Swedish journalism trainers and radio technicians, the dissertation analyses how technological innovations, pedagogical encounters and linguistic and cultural differences influenced the development of Vietnamese journalism during a period of rapid economic and digital change.

The research shows that media aid functioned as an arena for negotiations rather than a transfer of journalistic ideals from Sweden. Technological capacity building, such as live broadcasting and principles for presenting news, generated the most durable impact, while normative components related to ethics or autonomy encountered structural resistance tied to political oversight, incentive systems and social norms. The study also identifies trainers and interpreters as key mediators who shaped how journalistic ideas were understood and adapted in local settings.

The Brief argues that foreign aid for media development is most effective when interventions align with local conditions, prioritise context-specific learning and recognise the central role of relational and cultural brokerage. These insights contribute to ongoing debates on the future of media development and media assistance efforts. It offers guidance for designing sustainable support to journalism in transitional and restrictive environments.

1 Background

When the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) launched its journalism training programme in Vietnam in 1993, it did so at a moment of profound transformation in the country. Vietnam, one of the world's poorest nations in the 1980s, had entered a period of accelerated economic reform following the introduction of the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) policy in 1986, which marked a shift from a centrally planned economy toward a more market-oriented system while retaining one-party political rule (Glewwe et al., 2002; Ljunggren, 2024). Diplomatic relations deepened, markets opened, and by the mid-1990s state leaders from around the world (including Sweden) sought renewed political and economic cooperation with Vietnam. The country's integration into global systems was further symbolised by early milestones such as the first official email exchange between Swedish and Vietnamese leaders in 1994, and the establishment of Vietnam's first internet connection in 1997 (Pham, 2017).

Despite these openings, Vietnam's media system remained firmly under the control of the Communist Party of Vietnam (Marr, 1998), a political reality that continues today. The country consistently ranks near the bottom of global press freedom indexes, while Sweden remains among the highest-ranked countries. Against this backdrop, Sida's decision to support journalism training was both ambitious and politically sensitive, as it sought to contribute to democratic development by promoting professional practices rooted in Swedish journalistic ideals within a media system where political pluralism and press autonomy were tightly constrained.

Swedish media aid has its origins in the broader evolution of Swedish development cooperation. Since the 1960s, Sida had engaged in communication-related projects, initially aligned with information efforts and partnerships with popular movements. During the 1970s, Swedish aid took on a more ideological char-

acter, focusing on countries considered aligned with egalitarian and socially progressive goals. Aid increasingly exported Swedish welfare-state solutions—from schools and hospitals to infrastructure—and fostered long-term professional exchanges between Swedish experts and counterparts abroad (Diurlin, 2019).

Within this trajectory, media aid emerged as a distinct policy area. A governmental inquiry in 1982 explicitly examined the role Sweden could play in supporting media systems in developing countries, promoting what was described as the “Swedish model for media governance.” The inquiry also recognised the political dilemmas inherent in assisting countries where the state exerted strong control over the media, dilemmas that would become central in Vietnam (Michanek & Lidström, 1983). Sweden’s longstanding political relationship with Vietnam, shaped by the government’s outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War and its major development projects such as the construction of Bai Bang paper mill outside of Hanoi, created a foundation of trust that later facilitated cooperation in more ideologically sensitive areas, including media (Blower et al., 1999).

It was within this historical and diplomatic context that Swedish Radio (SR) and Fojo Media Institute became key implementers of Sida-funded journalism training in Vietnam. For SR, the Local Radio Project represented one of its first major international capacity-building initiatives, later formalised through the establishment of the SR Media Development Office. Fojo, which had begun developing international training programmes in the early 1990s, launched its first training activities in Vietnam in 1998. These early experiences became formative for Fojo’s later expansion across Asia and beyond (Wadbring, 2022).

Previous research on foreign aid for media development highlights recurring tensions between donor aspirations and local realities. Lugo-Ocando (2018, 2020) shows that media assistance often promotes Western journalistic ideals

that do not easily align with political and cultural conditions in recipient countries. Schiffrin (2010) similarly finds that training programmes frequently fall short when structural constraints such as low salaries, political pressure and limited institutional capacity remain unaddressed. Skjerdal (2011) underscores how ethical guidelines introduced by donors often clash with the everyday coping practices of journalists working within hierarchical and resource-constrained environments. Dutta and Williamson (2016) further argue that foreign aid rarely produces substantial gains in press freedom, noting that interventions are more effective when adapted to local conditions rather than imposed as universal models. Together, this literature demonstrates that foreign aid for media development is most successful when grounded in contextual understanding and when expectations of normative change are tempered by the structural realities of the media systems receiving support. As Benequista et al. (2022) argue, the future of media development depends on moving beyond narrow training models toward approaches that strengthen entire information ecosystems and support locally driven forms of resilience and accountability.

2 Research aim and questions

The aim of the dissertation was to analyse the Swedish media aid programme in Vietnam (1993–2007) and to critically examine the forms of journalistic transition it sought to promote. By approaching the programme from the perspective of the donor country, Sweden, the study offers insights into how journalistic ideals were transferred, negotiated, and adapted within the context of foreign aid.

The overarching research question guiding the dissertation was:

How did the Swedish media aid projects influence the development of Vietnamese journalism?

To address this question, the dissertation was structured around three sub-questions, each examined in a separate article:

- How did the Swedish media aid projects intervene in the development of Vietnamese journalism?
- What role did the trainers play in negotiating journalistic practices during the two Swedish media aid projects in Vietnam, and what were the implications of their involvement?
- How did the assigned role of interpreters influence the implementation and outcomes of the training projects, particularly in brokering journalistic ideals and professional norms?

Together, these questions allowed the dissertation to investigate not only the formal structures and intentions of the aid programme but also the interpersonal, pedagogical, and cultural processes through which journalism is reshaped within the interventions.

2.1 The research design

This dissertation examines how Swedish media aid interventions shaped journalistic practice, ideology, and professional training in Vietnam between 1993 and 2007. The research design combines a multi-method qualitative strategy with a theoretical framework drawing from comparative media systems, journalism culture, global media ethics, development studies, and translation studies. Together, these approaches allow for a systematic analysis of how journalistic ideals travel across media systems, and how they are negotiated within an authoritarian political context.

The empirical material consists of two main datasets:

- Project documentation from Sida, the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and Fojo Media Institute, collected between May and July 2020. These documents include course plans, reports, evaluations, field notes, correspondence, and financial documentation from the interventions.
- Semi-structured interviews with Swedish journalists and radio technicians who worked as trainers in Vietnam during the media aid projects. Interviews were conducted between November 2020 and April 2021 and provided insights into pedagogical choices, cultural encounters, and perceptions of professional norms. The interviews also captured the trainers' memories of their experiences, which provided reflective insights into how they interpreted their roles

The theoretical framework draws on Hallin & Mancini's comparative media systems (2004), journalism culture (Hanitzsch, 2007), journalism ideology (Deuze, 2005), and global media ethics (Ward, 2013), enabling a structured analysis of how norms and practices were exported, translated, and contested. Concepts from translation studies are applied to understand the role of interpreters and cultural brokers in the training context, and how journalistic ideals

were mediated linguistically and culturally. In addition, notions from development studies support an examination of how aid interventions operate within broader political and diplomatic goals. Taken together, these concepts are well suited to this study because they clarify how journalism ideology and journalism culture travel across media systems and why their reception depends on structural, cultural and social conditions.

Methodologically, the dissertation applies qualitative document analysis to project documentation and a semi-structured interview study following guidelines and advices from Coffey (2014), Rapley (2007), Altheide (2000) and Brinkman & Kvale (2018). The two datasets are analysed separately and then integrated to identify points of convergence and divergence between official project aims and on-the-ground experiences. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of how ideas about journalism were operationalised, challenged, or transformed through aid-funded capacity building.

The dissertation is structured as a compilation thesis consisting of three peer-reviewed articles published in *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, *Journalism Studies*, and *Australian Journalism Review*. Together, the articles provide a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms through which media aid attempts to influence journalism practice, and the complex social, cultural, and political constraints that shape these outcomes.

Full methodological descriptions and the complete results from each study are presented in the dissertation and the individual articles (See Appendix).

3 Results and discussion

The study identifies several key findings that illustrate how Swedish media aid interventions unfolded under significant political, organisational, and cultural constraints shaping journalistic practice in Vietnam. From 1993 until 2003, the Local Radio Project, carried out by Swedish Radio, aimed to assist the Voice of Vietnam network across Vietnam by upgrading the local radio station's abilities to produce news. Starting in 1998, Fojo Media Institute, carried out journalism training courses for Vietnamese journalists across Vietnam. The dissertation explores these initiatives during the intensive years until 2007 when Sida began phasing out its development cooperation with Vietnam.

- Swedish media aid supported a technological transition in Vietnamese journalism through new production methods, live broadcasting practices, and updated newsroom routines. Training on ethics and management encountered significant challenges rooted in censorship, political controls, and local professional norms.
- Swedish attempts to introduce newsroom leadership styles, professional standards, and editorial principles met structural resistance, as Vietnamese media organisations operated within social, political, and economic conditions that limited the applicability of these ideals.
- Interactions between trainers, interpreters, and Vietnamese journalists were central to the outcomes of the projects; pedagogical exchanges shaped how journalistic knowledge was conveyed, interpreted, and adapted in practice.
- Interpreters functioned as cultural and professional brokers whose work extended beyond translation by mediating terminology, advising on training design, and navigating politically sensitive content, thereby influencing how Swedish journalistic ideas were received.

- The strongest and most lasting impacts of the projects related to practical skills and technological development, while changes tied to journalistic autonomy, ethical norms, or democratic values remained modest due to deep-rooted structural and political constraints.

The key findings are discussed in more detail below.

3.1 Technological transfer and professional skills development

The technological transfer achieved through the Swedish media aid programme represented the most structurally transformative component of the interventions. Attempts to influence journalistic norms and ethical reasoning often met resistance rooted in political controls and established newsroom cultures. The introduction of new tools, production methods and professional techniques aligned more closely with ongoing changes in Vietnam's media environment. This alignment created conditions for improvements in journalistic practice that were both observable and relatively durable (Mattsson, 2022b, 2022a).

The Local Radio Project illustrates how technology functioned as a politically feasible entry point for changing journalistic routines within Vietnam's constrained media system. Prior to the intervention, radio production relied predominantly on pre-recorded and centrally approved content. Through the provision of broadcasting equipment and on-the-job training, Swedish Radio trainers introduced live broadcasting practices that required faster coordination, real-time decision-making and limited audience interaction (Mattsson, 2022a, 2022b). Drawing on their own professional experience from Swedish public service broadcasting, the trainers acted as carriers of specific production logics and pedagogical assumptions. Phone-in programmes and audience surveys altered the organisation and pace of everyday newsroom work by encouraging responsiveness to listeners, even as political oversight remained intact.

At the same time, the project exposed the boundaries of technological change as a driver of professional transformation. While live broadcasting could be integrated without challenging state authority, the trainers' attempts to introduce newsroom management models and ethical standards met resistance rooted in hierarchical decision-making structures, performance-based incentive systems and entrenched social norms. As the analysis shows, the trainers gradually became aware that their professional ideals were filtered through organisational and political constraints that limited their institutionalisation, resulting in selective adoption of skills rather than broader transformation of journalistic autonomy (Mattsson, 2022b, 2022a).

Audience surveys, a central part of the Local Radio project, represented another important innovation. These surveys encouraged editors and journalists to consider audience preferences as inputs to editorial strategy, and this approach contrasted with the more hierarchical and state-oriented communication model that had dominated Vietnamese broadcasting (Mattsson, 2022b). Even within a politically managed media system, these feedback mechanisms introduced ideas about responsiveness, relevance and public engagement that supported a more contemporary understanding of journalism's societal function.

In parallel with Swedish Radio, Fojo took its first steps toward establishing a long-term media support programme in 1998 through a pilot project, which was later followed by two phases of journalism training between 2000 and 2007. Fojo's training programmes reinforced the ongoing technological and professional transition by addressing multiple sectors of the Vietnamese media landscape. Training modules focused on modern layout design, visual storytelling, photojournalism, interviewing techniques and the use of digital tools for print and television production. Many activities took place inside newsrooms, which meant that Swedish trainers could observe and work within existing editorial structures (Mattsson, 2022a). This setup made it possible to adapt methods

from Sweden to local routines and provided Vietnamese journalists with concrete examples of alternative working practices. The exposure to new technologies and tools, combined with hands-on pedagogy, contributed to noticeable improvements in news presentation, production efficiency and the technical quality of reporting.

A central component of Fojo's approach was the Training of Trainers model, which aimed to cultivate a group of Vietnamese professionals who could sustain and expand the capacity-building efforts once Swedish involvement ended. This initiative promoted local ownership, strengthened institutional memory and increased the likelihood that technological and professional skills would continue to develop after the projects had concluded. Several participants later moved into leadership positions or into journalism education, which further amplified the long-term effects of the interventions (Mattsson, 2022b).

The introduction of updated production tools and workflows also coincided with Vietnam's broader digital transition. From the late 1990s onward, the media landscape evolved rapidly with the expansion of online journalism, new digital platforms and changing audience expectations. Many of the journalists trained in the Swedish-led programmes subsequently played important roles in this emerging digital ecosystem. Their experience with live formats, visual design, digital tools and audience-centred practices provided them with a foundation for adapting to new technological environments.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that technological transfer and professional skills development formed the most resilient and widely adopted aspects of the Swedish media aid programme. These elements were less dependent on ideological alignment and could be integrated into newsroom practice without directly challenging political authority. As a result, they produced changes that were more sustainable and scalable than efforts focused on ethics or managerial reform.

3.2 Negotiating journalism culture and ideology

The Swedish media aid programme sought not only to introduce new techniques and tools but also to convey a set of journalistic ideals grounded in the Swedish media system (Mattsson, 2022b). These ideals were associated with autonomy in relation to political actors, professional integrity, critical scrutiny of power and an understanding of journalism as a civic institution. When these principles entered the Vietnamese media environment, they encountered a system shaped by state-defined priorities, collective norms of workplace behaviour and deeply rooted patterns of political communication. The efforts to negotiate journalistic culture therefore unfolded within a constellation of structural conditions that constrained the translation of Swedish ideals into everyday newsroom practice (Mattsson, 2022a).

The Vietnamese media system operated within a one-party framework in which journalism was formally defined as an instrument for disseminating state policy and maintaining social harmony. This meant that Swedish trainers entered a setting where the core functions of journalism differed substantially from the principles that guided their own professional identities. The training encouraged Vietnamese participants to experiment with genres, question official information and engage audiences more directly, yet these activities were ultimately filtered through party expectations and editorial hierarchies. Trainers frequently observed that discussions about autonomy or critical inquiry could not be separated from the political and institutional constraints that shaped the work of Vietnamese journalists. Even when participants expressed interest in the ideals presented during training, they also noted the limits imposed by regulations and by internal newsroom structures.

In this study, journalism ideology refers to the normative ideas and professional values associated with journalism, such as autonomy, public service, and ethical responsibility (Deuze, 2005), while journalism culture denotes how these ideals

are interpreted and enacted in everyday newsroom practices shaped by institutional, political, and social contexts (Hanitzsch, 2007).

Social norms within news organisations further shaped how journalistic culture was negotiated. Kinship relations, hierarchical obligations and the economic importance of supplementary income created conditions in which certain newsroom practices could not easily be altered. Bonus systems rewarded individual output and reduced incentives for collaboration, which made it difficult to introduce Swedish models of collective editorial planning. Practices such as accepting money or gifts at press conferences were embedded in broader societal expectations about reciprocity and professional survival (Mattsson, 2022a, 2022b). These routines did not necessarily reflect individual ethical preferences but rather the social and economic logic of the workplace. Swedish trainers often viewed these norms as violations of professional ethics, whereas many Vietnamese participants understood them as pragmatic ways of navigating structural constraints. Across both the Local Radio Project and the Fojo-led Further Training of Journalists programme, approximately 60 Swedish journalists and radio technicians were recruited to serve as trainers.

The pedagogical encounters that unfolded within the training programmes highlight how journalism culture is negotiated through dialogue rather than simple transmission. Trainers aimed to model journalistic behaviour by drawing on their own experiences, but they also learned that the reception of these ideals depended on the participants' ability to reconcile them with local practices, organisational expectations and political regulations. Several trainers gradually recognised that the introduction of new values required more than demonstrations of method. It required an understanding of how Vietnamese journalists were positioned within networks of obligation, authority and social expectation (Mattsson, 2022a).

At times, the training revealed points of convergence, particularly around professional pride, audience engagement and the aspiration to improve the quality of information. Participants often welcomed discussions on interviewing techniques, story structure and visual presentation because these elements did not directly challenge political authority. However, when ideals of independence, neutrality or adversarial reporting were introduced, they collided with the dual role of Vietnamese journalism, which combined state communication with selective responsiveness to public concerns. This duality allowed for certain kinds of critical journalism but only within boundaries defined by the political system (Mattsson, 2025b).

In summary, the negotiation of journalism culture and ideology within the Swedish media aid programme reveals how professional norms are reshaped when they move across media systems. Ideals associated with Swedish journalistic practice could inspire, provoke reflection and generate discussion, but they could not be adopted at full-scale in the Vietnamese context. Instead, they interacted with existing structures in ways that highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity, political awareness and realistic expectations in media development efforts.

3.3 Interpreters as brokers of journalism ideology

Although interpreters were central to the Swedish media aid programme in Vietnam, their role is commonly underacknowledged in the planning and implementation of comparable media development initiatives. Their responsibilities extended far beyond the literal act of language translation and became intertwined with the deeper pedagogical, cultural and institutional dimensions of the training (Mattsson, 2025a). Because Swedish trainers did not speak Vietnamese, communication with participants relied on interpreters, which positioned them as crucial actors who mediated not only words but also journalistic concepts, professional expectations and culturally sensitive content (Mattsson,

2022a). In this capacity, they operated as development brokers of journalistic culture.

The broker function was most visible in situations where technical terminology or abstract professional norms lacked direct equivalents in Vietnamese. Concepts such as independence from political actors, critical scrutiny of public authorities or the notion of press autonomy required more than literal translation. Interpreters were forced to decide how to frame these ideas in ways that would be meaningful within the Vietnamese media system. These interpretive choices influenced how participants understood the intentions behind the training, and they affected the possibility of transferring Swedish ideals into newsrooms characterised by state control, hierarchical relations and norms tied to kinship and income structures. Trainers often recalled moments of uncertainty regarding how key ideas were conveyed, which illustrates that interpreters co-produced meaning rather than simply transmitting information (Mattsson, 2022a, 2025a).

Interpreters also acted as cultural mediators who provided contextual knowledge that shaped the pedagogical process. They prepared training sessions together with Swedish trainers, explained local newsroom hierarchies, advised on appropriate communication strategies and clarified which topics required caution due to political sensitivities. This guidance helped trainers adapt their methods and avoid misunderstandings that could arise from differences in workplace culture or social expectations. Their ability to frame Swedish practices in relation to Vietnamese realities was essential for making the training relevant and operational within the constraints of state-monitored journalism (Mattsson, 2025a).

The relationship between trainers and interpreters developed over time and included extensive informal interaction beyond the classroom. Shared meals, travel and off-duty conversations created familiarity and trust, which in turn improved the precision and fluidity of communication during training. Trainers

described how repeated collaboration allowed interpreters to anticipate instructional needs, suggest modifications to exercises and help identify examples from local news coverage that could illustrate abstract concepts. Such continuity strengthened the pedagogical impact of the projects and highlights how journalistic knowledge transfer depended on sustained interpersonal relations.

Interpreters contributed actively to course design as well. They offered feedback on the structure of lessons, recommended how to sequence complex material and warned against potential points of cultural friction. In several cases they proposed adjustments that made it easier for participants to integrate new methods into their daily work. These contributions demonstrate that interpreters functioned as advisors who mediated both learning content and learning conditions. This role aligns with the concept of development brokers observed in international aid settings, where individuals positioned between donor and recipient organisations help translate external models into locally intelligible forms (Mattsson, 2022a, 2025a).

There were also challenges and limitations. Not all interpreters had a journalism background, and some were assigned through government channels, which occasionally created uncertainty about loyalties and communication boundaries. Differences in participants' English proficiency meant that some could engage directly with trainers while others relied entirely on interpreters, which introduced asymmetries in group dynamics and restricted discussion of sensitive issues to smaller, more linguistically advantaged circles. These patterns underscore that language barriers are not merely technical obstacles but part of the process through which journalistic norms are contested and reconfigured (Mattsson, 2022a, 2025a).

Viewed through the lens of development studies, interpreters occupied a strategic position within networks of actors who shaped the outcomes of media aid interventions. his understanding aligns with insights from Salemink (2006) who shows how interpreters in development processes mediate meanings, ne-

gotiate expectations and bridge structurally distinct institutional worlds. In the media aid context, interpreters connected resources, ideas and people across two contrasting media systems and exerted considerable influence over how Swedish journalistic ideals were reframed in local settings. Their work helps explain why certain components of the training, especially those related to practical skills and technologies, were more readily absorbed, while normative elements concerning ethics or professional autonomy encountered greater friction (Mattsson, 2025a).

3.4 Policy implications

The research indicates that media development policies are most effective when grounded in the practical realities of the recipient media system. The strongest results emerged from interventions that focused on technological capacity building and hands-on skills. Live broadcasting, updated newsroom routines and improved production tools were successfully integrated in Vietnamese journalism, which shows that policy measures centred on practical competencies can generate sustainable outcomes even within restrictive political environments.

However, the limited uptake of normative components highlights the need for policy makers to adjust expectations regarding the transfer of journalistic values. Ideals associated with autonomy, critical inquiry or Western models of ethics cannot be assumed to translate directly into contexts shaped by state authority, kinship-based newsroom dynamics and income-related incentives. Policies should therefore prioritise context analysis and promote locally informed adaptations rather than universal templates for journalism reform.

The findings also show that interpreters play a strategic role in shaping knowledge transfer during media aid. Their function as cultural and professional mediators suggests that policies should recognise language and media-

tion expertise as core components of programme design. Strengthening recruitment, training and continuity among interpreters can improve the effectiveness of future interventions.

Overall, foreign aid for media development benefits from approaches that combine technical development with sensitivity to local structures, incentives and communication practices.

4 Conclusions

My dissertation, as described in this brief, has examined Sweden's long-term media aid engagement in Vietnam to understand how journalism changes when professional ideas, technologies and practices move across political and cultural contexts. The study shows that media aid is neither a technical add-on nor a simple transfer of norms. Instead, it is shaped by the interaction of political structures, organisational conditions, social expectations and the relationships between those involved. Recognising this complexity provides a more grounded understanding of what media support can realistically achieve.

A central contribution is the demonstration that journalism cannot be transferred between media systems without being adapted to the local context. In Vietnam, journalism operates within a political system that defines its primary role in relation to state communication. At the same time, newsroom practices reflect kinship expectations, bonus structures and other social logics that influence how journalists work. External interventions must therefore compete with established routines and institutional priorities. This highlights the need for development actors to view journalism as part of a wider ecosystem rather than an independent professional domain.

The study also shows that media systems are not static. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Vietnam experienced major economic and technological shifts that opened space for new journalistic tools and practices. Swedish media aid aligned with these ongoing transitions by introducing skills, technologies and production routines that participants could integrate into their work. This suggests that media development is most effective when interventions complement local change processes rather than attempt to initiate political reform from the outside.

Another key insight concerns the individuals who mediate development work. The experiences of Swedish trainers illustrate how personal assumptions, professional identities and pedagogical choices shape the direction and outcomes of media aid. Their encounters with Vietnamese newsroom realities underline the importance of flexibility, contextual awareness and mutual learning. The dissertation further highlights the vital but often invisible role of interpreters. By mediating language, concepts and cultural expectations, interpreters significantly influenced how journalistic ideas were understood and adapted. Recognising them as development brokers expands how we conceptualise knowledge transfer in media aid and signals that language mediation should be integrated into programme design.

Taken together, the findings show that media aid tends to produce its most meaningful effects through changes that are gradual, practical and locally grounded. The introduction of live broadcasting, audience feedback tools and new production routines did not transform Vietnam's media politics, yet these interventions influenced working practices, professional expectations and the skills available within newsrooms.

Situating the Vietnamese case within broader debates on media development, the dissertation argues for a more nuanced understanding of what development cooperation can achieve. Media support can strengthen professional competence even where political liberalisation is unlikely, but initiatives that ignore local constraints risk becoming symbolic rather than impactful. Effective media development recognises that journalism evolves in response to local needs, technological shifts and institutional realities, and depends on continuous dialogue between donors, trainers, journalists and mediating actors.

Methodologically, the dissertation demonstrates the value of combining archival project documentation with retrospective interviews. This approach reveals aspects of media aid that are often missing from evaluations, including everyday negotiations, unexpected tensions and the lived experiences of those

implementing the projects. Such insights underscore the importance of preserving and studying aid documentation to improve institutional learning.

Finally, the study points to several areas for future research. These include examining how journalists trained in the Swedish programmes navigated later digitalisation, comparing different national cases of media aid to identify broader patterns, and analysing the role of interpreters and other mediating actors in shaping learning within development contexts.

In sum, the dissertation shows that foreign aid for media development is most effective when it is adapted to local conditions, attentive to structural constraints and open to reciprocal learning. Journalism does not simply move unchanged across borders. It is interpreted, adapted and reshaped through ongoing interactions among people, institutions and ideas. Recognising this helps build a more realistic and constructive foundation for future media support efforts

4.1 Policy recommendations

To strengthen the effectiveness of future media for development initiatives, several practical recommendations emerge from this study:

1. Ground programme design in contextual knowledge.

Media for development efforts should be informed by a thorough understanding of local political constraints, newsroom hierarchies and social norms. Tailoring interventions to these conditions increases their relevance and feasibility.

2. Support organisational capacity rather than only individual training.

Initiatives should address workflow routines, financial incentives and institutional structures that influence how journalists can apply new skills. Strengthening organisations helps ensure that professional development is sustained beyond project cycles.

3. Integrate interpreters as central members of the project team.

Because interpreters play a decisive role in how journalistic ideas are understood and adapted, they should be recruited strategically and consciously, selected for both linguistic competence and contextual knowledge. Maintaining continuity throughout project phases helps secure coherence and improves the quality of learning.

4. Promote reciprocal and co-created learning processes.

Training should not rely on one-directional transfer. Collaborative approaches that allow trainers and local journalists to adapt methods together support stronger ownership and improve the long-term applicability of development interventions. Integrating participatory design principles can further strengthen this process by ensuring that training content, methods and expectations are shaped jointly with local stakeholders, so that interventions reflect local needs and become more sustainable in practice.

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Appendix

This Development Dissertation Brief provides an overview of the compilation dissertation *Remaking the Newsmakers: Exploring Swedish Media Aid Interventions in Vietnamese Journalism* (University of Helsinki, 2025). The dissertation consists of three peer-reviewed articles that together form its empirical and analytical foundation and examine different dimensions of Swedish media aid to Vietnam between 1993 and 2007. The articles are listed below in the order in which they appear in the dissertation.

- Mattsson, A. (2022). Transforming journalism in Vietnam: An exploration of two Swedish media aid projects. *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, 11(2), 227–247. https://doi.org/10.1386/ajms_00092_1
- Mattsson, A. (2022). Exporting journalism culture to Vietnam: The role of the trainer in two Swedish media aid projects. *Journalism Studies*, 23(13), 1669–1686. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2022.2098169>
- Mattsson, A. (2025). Brokers of journalism: Exploring the assigned role of interpreters in media training in Vietnam. *Australian Journalism Review*, 47(2), 243–261. https://doi.org/10.1386/ajr_00191_7

Introduction (Kappa)

- Mattsson, A. (2025). *Remaking the Newsmakers: Exploring Swedish Media Aid Interventions in Vietnamese Journalism*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki. <http://hdl.handle.net/10138/596491>

This brief examines Sweden's media aid to Vietnam between 1993 and 2007, showing how journalistic practices were introduced and reshaped within an authoritarian system. It finds that the most durable impacts came from technological and practical training, while normative ideals, such as efforts to promote media ethics and professional autonomy, encountered resistance. These findings underline the importance of tailoring media development initiatives to local political and institutional contexts.

Denna rapport belyser Sveriges mediebidrag till Vietnam mellan 1993 och 2007 och visar hur journalistiska arbetssätt introducerades och omformades i ett auktoritärt system. Studien visar att de mest varaktiga effekterna kom från teknologisk och praktisk kapacitetsuppbyggnad, medan normativa ideal, såsom främjandet av medieetik och journalistisk autonomi, mötte motstånd. Resultaten understryker vikten av att anpassa mediestöd till lokala politiska och institutionella förutsättningar.

This is a Development Dissertation Brief (DDB), where EBA gives recent PhDs the opportunity to summarise their dissertation, focusing on its relevance for Swedish development cooperation. If you are interested in writing a DDB, please contact us: ud.eba@gov.se



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