

Klub Hanoi – Online Journal about Vietnamese Culture and a space for communication

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Abstract in English

Although they are the third largest migrant community with a long tradition of immigration into Czech Republic, the knowledge amongst most of the population concerning Vietnam and people from Vietnam is reportedly very low. On the other hand the Vietnamese community itself is often considered to be very closed and separated. Klub Hanoi challenges this unsatisfying situation mainly through an internet project; there exists an online-journal which provides a variety of information about Vietnamese culture and other topics for experts and the general public. Furthermore, it also serves as a forum or portal where (interested) people can become involved in intercultural discourse. Besides the internet activities, Klub Hanoi initiates additional different one-off projects such as exhibitions and movie nights.

Abstract in italiano

Sebbene siano la comunità vietnamita sia il terzo più grande gruppo immigrato, con una lunga tradizione di immigrazione nella Repubblica Ceca, la conoscenza della maggior parte della popolazione riguardo al Vietnam ed ai vietnamiti è molto bassa. D'altro lato, la comunità vietnamita stessa è spesso considerata molto chiusa e separata dal resto della popolazione. **Klub Hanoi** cerca di superare questa situazione insoddisfacente, principalmente attraverso un progetto Internet: un giornale on-line che fornisce molteplici informazioni sulla cultura vietnamita, diretto a esperti e ad un pubblico generico. Inoltre, mette a disposizione un forum, dove le persone interessate possono partecipare a un discorso interculturale.

Area

Media

Kind-category of project

Homepage, Website

Kind-category of actor

NGO, registered association

Country

Czech Republic

Year

2003

5 key-words

online magazine, information, cultural exchange, interaction, grass root journalism

THE PROJECT

ACTOR

Klub Hanoi

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www.klubhanoi.cz

Basic objectives

(according to Eva Pechova, a founding member of the organisation)

- making Vietnamese culture more popular among the majority Czech population;
- improving relations/communication between the Vietnamese community and the majority population in Czech Republic;
- improving knowledge about, and relations with, Vietnam;
- contributing to better integration of Vietnamese people in Czech Society;
- supporting the preservation of Vietnamese ethnic identity for those living in Czech Republic.

Central activity – the website

In order to achieve these aims, the website of Klub Hanoi plays a crucial role. It serves as a platform for spreading information and enabling an exchange of ideas. This function is fulfilled mainly by presenting a large amount of articles on different issues which are on the same time open for reader's comments.

A short, but incomplete, overview of categories shows the wide range of themes:

- Vietnam's politics, economy and history;
- Vietnamese people in Czech Republic;
- Vietnamese culture in general;
- Travelling across Vietnam;
- A special category, called "literary window", provides book reviews of literature about Vietnam or Vietnamese writings translated into Czech.

Examples of articles:

- "First Meeting of Czech-Vietnamese: A Scientific Study"
- "Another Great Range of Vietnamese Pop for Czech Vietnamese People"
- "Days of Vietnamese Culture in Slaný 2006"
- "Vietnamese Literature at the Turn of the Millennium"
- "Agent Orange – Dioxin in the Ecological System of Southern Vietnam"
- "Thesis papers of Vietnamese Studies Students"

Besides the articles, there can be found further features on the website:

a gallery of photos from Vietnam, the online catalogue of Klub Hanoi's library, short news from Vietnam and Vietnamese events in Czech Republic, a guest book (that serves as an open forum for users) and ongoing online-surveys.

Other activities

Although the website is the most important element of the Klub Hanoi, the organisation also tries to realise other activities in order to achieve its aims.

For example:

- the library (mainly for expert use)
- lectures
- exhibitions
- cultural nights
- movie nights
- arrangement of contacts with people living in Vietnam
- support for travellers to Vietnam
- translation services
- lessons in Vietnamese language
- an edition of Vietnamese tales
- organisation of a Czech Vietnamese studies scientists' meeting
- publishing the magazine of the Klub Hanoi – Bulletin Klub Hanoi

Results

According Klub Hanoi member Eva Pechova, the website is visited a lot, with an average of 150 hits a day. This is in contrast with the average of ten in the beginning. The interest of the users is also shown by the comments attached to the articles, which sometimes can take on the character of an involved discussion. Moreover, often calls and questions of interested people, such as journalists, can also show the success of the organisation.

Perspectives

Contemporary, Klub Hanoi plans to enlarge the section referring to Vietnamese people in Czech Republic and also tries to enhance the, until now, rare contributions in Vietnamese. This part constitutes the institutionalised element of the website in order to reach regular Vietnamese readers.

When and how long: structure and steps of the project

The Klub Hanoi was founded in 2003 by a group of Vietnamese studies students in Prague. The idea emerged from the wish to share their expert knowledge with a broader public in Czech Republic. Eva Pechova describes the background situation as follows: “People here [in Czech Republic] know only what they see about Vietnam: the stalls on the street, the closed community, Vietnamese people who only talk with other Vietnamese people ... and we as Vietnamese studies scientists know more!” In order to reduce this discrepancy and to spread information, they developed the idea to found Klub Hanoi.

In the meantime, the organisation began to extend its network of contacts and its popularity among internet users successfully (see also 1.1 Results).

Apart from the starting aim, to enlighten Czech majority population, Klub Hanoi now also tries harder to reach the Vietnamese community and to support their openness and integration into Czech society (see also 1.1 Perspectives).

Place and context

The Vietnamese Community in Czech Republic, at nearly 13000, is the third largest foreign community (behind the Ukrainian and Slovakian) in the country (see www.mvcr.cz).

The Vietnamese are said to be very segregated from the rest of society. “Uzavřenost” is the most often used term when describing the Vietnamese community in Czech Republic, which means (in this context) ‘a closed or separated group’. But following the statements of the Sociologist Jiří Kocourek, this term wouldn’t describe the situation satisfactorily. Because, besides the facts that Asian culture has strong and closed social structures, and besides the fact that many Vietnamese people in Czech Republic don’t plan a long stay for a long time, there isn’t a problem with a closed community but rather a lack of mutual knowledge. Such a lack of knowledge would produce, for example, illegal practices amongst Vietnamese entrepreneurs, not deliberately but because of misunderstandings. However for majority this might look like as if they don’t care about rules and laws of Czech society.

Such a view is confirmed in a statement that Klub Hanoi gives in its bulletin. Here one can read that the “Vietnamese community here are described as self-satisfied, diligent and unobtrusive, but their cultural dimension so far hasn’t been emphasised and explored. Vietnamese tradition remains a secret for most people; they don’t know anything about Vietnamese literature or about the difficult Vietnamese history and they aren’t aware of the beautiful side of Vietnam.”

Some people might suggest that the job of providing information and knowledge about each other is the job of the media. In some cases the picture that the media draws about the Vietnamese can be important. According to Kocourek, in the nineties there was a rather negative or uninformed view which corresponded with the existing stereotypes. To some extent this was also due to a lack of information. Some findings regarding foreigners in general have shown that the Czech media is:

- talking about them but not with them
 - considering foreign communities as one homogenous group
 - writing in a way which shows that foreigners are mostly connected with problems or seen as a problem
 - neglecting contexts
 - producing a us and them mentality (both as homogenous groups)
- (see the study of Petra Klvačová, Tomáš Bitrich, "How Foreigners Are (Not) Written about", in: *Hard to Make Out Foreigners. How Foreigners Are (Not) Written about in the Czech Press*, Prague 2003, S. 54-72).

Now, argues Kocourek, in recent years the situation has been changing and journalists have contributed to a more positive image of Vietnamese people and have supported a more open discourse, where journalists would try to become better informed about the topic they are writing about. Direct participation and involving of Vietnamese people in Czech mainstream media however still doesn’t exist at all.

There is also a lack of information regarding the Vietnamese use of media. According to Eva Pechova they have their own journals and watch Vietnamese television but rarely read Czech newspapers. On Vietnamese satellite television there is nothing reported about situation in Czech Republic. At least the Vietnamese weeklies which are published in Czech Republic, provide more and more information for and about the community in Czech Republic.

Another aspect is the question of identity of the Vietnamese youth in Czech Republic. According to Jiří Kocourek the young (usually second) generation often forget how to speak in Vietnamese but are capable to speak Czech as their mother tongue. This is due to a totally different world and way of life compared to their parents. At best they would know Vietnamese from their holidays. This leads to a loss of (Vietnamese) identity.

Each of these different background aspects shows that a lack of mutual information seems to be crucial in creating or deconstructing a problem. This is why delivering information is the main focus of Klub Hanoi.

Target

The original target group was the mainstream Czech population. But then, according to Eva Pechova, the organisation found out that there are a lot of Vietnamese users too. Thus they changed their orientation a little. Today both sections of society are seen as target groups (see 1.1 Perspectives).

Because of the type of media, the website seems to draw the attention of younger people. In the opinion of Eva Pechova this also fits very well with Klub Hanoi's aim to attract younger Vietnamese people in order to preserve Vietnamese identity amongst them.

Methodology

Some interesting methodological aspects include:

- the inclusion of general interest topics to garner the interest of readers; for example articles about Vietnamese food or the online-feature about Vietnamese time and tradition following calendar, which is explicitly explained
- interactive elements; beside the online surveys, the option to react to an article is often used. Here one can see a lot of different points of view, including the participation of the authors of the articles in these discussions
- electronic media as a substitute for traditional printed media - which are not so popular with the youth

Authors, Funding and Networks

Authors

The main authors are the founding members of Klub Hanoi. But otherwise everybody who is interested in can send an article to Klub Hanoi. Sometimes academic experts

write and other times you can find personal travelling reports. Decisions regarding publishing are based on the criteria of quality of writing, not on content.

Funding

In general Klub Hanoi works without a regular financing. Authors of articles write without payment.

In the past the organisation could realise several grants for single projects like the publishing of a book about Vietnamese children at Czech schools. Otherwise Klub Hanoi is still searching for sponsors.

Networks

Klub Hanoi is a member of the Continents' Society. Moreover they cooperate with other organisations working on oriental countries – thus exchange of information and mutual hints of events and activities.

Klub Hanoi also stays in contact with the Vietnamese association in Czech Republic and the Association of Vietnamese entrepreneurs.

Strengths and Critical Points

I don't want to assess the design of the website, but rather the content. In doing so I would agree with Eva Pechova who says critically: "We can merely contribute a very small part in order to open up Czech society and to start communication between cultures." It is true that the website of Klub Hanoi cannot be a substitute of a printed newspaper or other mass-media publications which reach the masses. But on the other hand the website delivers a perfect possibility to overcome structural problems encountered by the classic forms of media. Mainly the problem of participation. Even though the main articles are still controlled by Klub Hanoi, the postings are open to everybody. And participation on the rise according to Eva Pechova, especially the participation of Vietnamese users.

One could wonder if discussions about food or Vietnamese pop music contributes to good intercultural practise. Because of the monitoring work of the Klub Hanoi members there is a good mixture between themes and styles of writing. But in every case communication finds a place and that's what we need. The web makes it easier to meet people and talk to someone, with whom you would otherwise have never got in contact.

Even if members of Klub Hanoi complain about an indifference among Vietnamese people regarding the organisation's efforts, the growing Vietnamese membership and the new direction towards articles aimed at Vietnamese people from the Klub Hanoi's side shows the project's capacities regarding real intercultural practise; this is especially true when considering the fact that the interculture map (which you are now reading) data base defines best practice as involvement of migrants.

In short, Klub Hanoi provides Czech society with the urgently needed information about modern life and the origins of a considerable part of their society. But moreover it already delivers, or at least shows a future way of realising, intercultural exchange

and communication on the low-hierarchic level of electronic media, unlike the classic and majority population dominated media.

Whether this development means a new possibility to influence the whole of society remains to be seen and is an exciting question. In any case the web with its short and easy channels of access might reflect (not only) ethnic diversity much better than the media landscape of television stations and newspapers. Sure, it would be welcome to see more Vietnamese contributions, not only as postings after the main articles, but also as authors of longer articles as well. Then Klub Hanoi would be facilitating intercultural communication to an even greater extent than it currently does.

<http://www.klubhanoi.cz/>