

Taking to the Waves: Vietnamese society around the radio in the 1930s

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Abstract

Compared with other public media, the colonial state showed a relative lack of interest in radio broadcasting, which developed in Vietnam in the 1930s under the aegis of two organizations based in Hanoi and Saigon, the Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord and Radio Saigon. These two groups were largely responsible for the new technology's expansion and for determining the content of broadcasting. The groups actively consulted the growing radio public, and that vocal audience played a role in determining not just what was heard but also in the social life of radio in late-colonial Vietnam. The content of radio was limited to a non-political domain and this fact, along with the particular position that many radios took in the social geography of towns and cities, lent itself to the easy entry of the radio into day-to-day life. Indeed, the early history of radio in Vietnam is remarkable for how rapidly it became commonplace, even banal.

Introduction

The outbreak of war in 1939 and the fall of France in June 1940 constituted a turning point in the history of radio in colonial Vietnam. Since the beginning of radio broadcasting in the French colony¹ in 1927, efforts to develop the fledgling medium had been undertaken largely by aficionados, firms, and private clubs set up by those interested in this most modern of technologies. Unlike its imperial rivals in Southeast Asia, the French colonial state had shown limited

¹ For the sake of expediency I have used the word 'colony' to refer to the three majority-Vietnamese (*kinh*) regions of French Indochina. In reality the three regions were administered as separate parts of French Indochina, with Nam kỳ (Cochinchina) directly administered as a colony and the other two regions, Trung kỳ (Annam) and Bắc kỳ (Tonkin), governed as protectorates.

interest in developing and organizing broadcasting. This was not entirely due to a lack of understanding of the importance of the new medium; it was at least partly the result of financial constraints. Within the colonial state, however, there was only equivocal support for funding and controlling radio.

This lack of initiative on the part of the colonial administration was more than made up for by the ambition and work of private individuals and groups in Vietnam. Indeed, it was private initiative that animated a robust arena of public broadcasting centred in the two principal cities of French Indochina—Hanoi and Saigon—and whose programming reached an ever-increasing proportion of the colony throughout the 1930s thanks to the existing telegraphy network. Significant technological limits imposed themselves on this most expansive of technologies. Not least among them was the availability of electricity, which limited radio transmission and reception. Battery power certainly allowed for amateur radio broadcasting and for programming to reach into the countryside, but batteries remained costly, temperamental, and short-lived. Even within these practical bounds, radio did expand in scale and scope until the end of the interwar period.

With the outbreak of war precipitating tightening supplies of goods from European manufacturers, dictating more diligent control of resources, and fostering new political exigencies in Vichy-controlled Indochina, radio broadcasting came to the fore in the policy-making of the colonial state and its enemies. The ardour and diversity of interests and organization found in radio broadcasting in Vietnam in the 1930s was transformed by these new political-economic realities, partly constraining it but also partly realizing its potential as a powerful means for forming imperial and, later, national opinion. Yet, in many ways, the technology had already found a variety of local uses: although confounded by the nature of political repression in the French colonial state, it ingeniously made use of those very confines. Users—that is, those producing as well as those consuming the radio and its broadcasts—took advantage of relatively lax regulations regarding radio as a means to foster bonds, to create new communities of the air both locally and nationally, and to imagine new differences. What is more, by the time the colonial state and its rivals in Indochina began efforts to exploit the technology, it had in many ways already become an everyday feature of many, especially urban, Vietnamese lives. In fact, one remarkable feature of the radio in this period is the ease with which it became unremarkable, becoming a

taken-for-granted, even banal, feature of the lived environment. In contrast to the development of radio elsewhere in Southeast Asia (and even elsewhere in Vietnam), as an instrument for fostering individuals' and groups' attachments to national and international cosmopolitan communities, the radio was more mundane than distinctive.² While ownership of radio receivers or participation in radio broadcasting did signal an individual's status—for equipment remained prohibitively expensive—the apparent nature of the technology, the inability of its sounds to be contained within a household, for example, meant that whole communities could participate in radio broadcasting, even if they could not afford to possess the technology.

Establishing radio's terrain

As in other arenas of economic life profoundly affected by new 'everyday technologies', such as tourism and travel, broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s slowly but surely developed on the margins of official interest. There was acknowledgement of the potential political and, to a lesser extent, commercial importance of the new medium but, as with businesses such as coach services and the bicycle and automobile trades, concerted efforts to oversee the market's development were lacking.³ Witnessing the growth of public radio in Western Europe and North America, the Ministry of Colonies in Paris certainly understood the potential power of the medium. In keeping with imperial fiscal orthodoxy, however, the Rue Oudinot was unwilling to fund the development of broadcasting facilities within the empire. In marked contrast to the Dutch or the British, the French were willing—and perhaps only able—to erect a shortwave network under the name 'Radio Colonial', transmitting programming empire-wide through a limited relay network from a station in Lyon from 1931 onwards.⁴

² See also the paper by Chua Ai Lin in this volume on the radio's cosmopolitanism in colonial Singapore.

³ Erich DeWald, 'The Development of Tourism in French Colonial Vietnam, 1918–1940', in Janet Cochrane (ed.), *Asian Tourism: Growth and Change* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008), pp. 221–32; David Arnold and Erich DeWald, 'Cycles of Empowerment: The Bicycle and Everyday Technology in Colonial India and Vietnam', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 53 (4), 2011, pp. 971–96.

⁴ Jane Robbins, *Tokyo Calling: Japanese Overseas Radio Broadcasting, 1937–1945* (Florence: European Press Academic Publishing, 2001), pp. 13–18; Jacques Marsellin, *La Merveilleuse Radio* (Paris: Jacob, 1938), pp. 134–46. For the early years of radio in

From the early 1930s the Ministry encouraged local colonial administrations to develop radio, again under the proviso that no monies were to come from Paris in the foreseeable future. Given the limited financial means of Indochina's colonial state, the development of radio took the form of facilitating expanding private interests in the sphere of radio broadcasting rather than directly undertaking any public broadcasting.⁵ With the explicit approval of Paris, the colonial administration in Hanoi had begun granting licences for shortwave broadcasting from 1927. Different offices of the administration had also, without sanction from Paris, dispensed subventions to the two largest groups involved in radio broadcasting in these early years, Radio Saigon and the Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord.⁶ It was these groups, a limited company and a club respectively, both discussed in detail below, which advanced the cause of radio in the first years of broadcasting in Vietnam and which constructed the technology as an important cultural forum for Vietnamese enthusiasts, public figures, and a growing and active listening public.

Despite the exiguous concern shown towards radio by the colonial state, officials were adamant on two matters: programming and importation.⁷ In the 1930s those participating in radio—understood to be all those involved on both the supply and demand side of the medium—constructed radio as a technology whose primary role was cultural and social, rather than political or economic. This determination of radio as a cultural medium, ostensibly removed from politics and the market, arose to no small extent from the presence of the colonial administration in these two domains of programming and importation.⁸ In order to secure a licence to

the British empire in Asia and in India in particular, see G. C. Awasthy, *Broadcasting in India* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1965), pp. 1–13.

⁵ Dépêche Ministérielle, 3 July 1933, 'Au sujet du service de la radio en Indochine', Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer (hereafter ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, AgenceFOM, carton (c) 235, dossier (d) 292. Also see the 'official' history of radio in Indochina in 'Le service radioélectrique', *Indochine. Hebdomadaire illustrée*, 127, 4 February 1943.

⁶ 'L'essor de la radio en Indochine', *Le Courrier d'Haiphong*, 18 June 1935; 'Radio-Saigon s'entraîne', *Le Courrier Saïgonnais*, 30 May 1931. See also Eugène Teston and Maurice Percheron, *L'Indochine moderne: encyclopédie administrative, touristique, artistique et économique* (Paris: Librairie de France, 1931), pp. 361–64.

⁷ Letter, Minister of the Colonies to Governor General of Indochina, 23 September 1929, ANOM, AgenceFOM, c235, d292.

⁸ For a compelling study of the possibilities of a technology such as radio and the lively and fortuitous 'social construction' of the technology (as well as a clear statement of the notion of the technological systems), see Steven Wutzler, 'AT&T Invents Public Access Broadcasting in 1923: A Foreclosed Model for American Radio', in Susan

broadcast shortwave transmissions, applicants needed to affirm their intention to retransmit Radio Colonial broadcasts from receiving stations in Hanoi and Saigon. It was also necessary to aver that broadcasts would be of a cultural and apolitical nature; broadcasts could be in many languages so long as they were removed from the world of politics.⁹ (In this the French differed from their European imperial neighbours who insisted on British- and Dutch-language broadcasting with more allowance for explicitly, though heavily censored, political programming.¹⁰) In many ways this regulation delimited a narrow terrain for radio's social influence during the years before the Second World War. As discussed below, it also precipitated the vibrancy and diversity of broadcasting within the ever-permeable cultural boundaries of the medium. This was evinced by broadcasting's languages, its subjects, its meanings, and its publics. It arguably played a role in fostering the pedestrian nature of the radio: its programming was unexceptional and squared with everyday social routines rather than standing out as exciting and phenomenal. Of course, official attempts to set the medium outside 'the political' and firmly within the realm of 'the cultural' only encouraged the reformulation of culture as politics, which was already well under way in the raucous social world of colonial Vietnam. While few users misapprehended the political import of cultural programming, the technology nonetheless quickly became a commonplace feature of everyday existence.

Perhaps a more serious constraint on radio throughout the entire late-colonial period was the regulation of imports of radio equipment. No local facilities existed for the manufacture of broadcasting or receiving equipment. Furthermore, the Dutch and American firms, Philips and RCA Victor, had a strong hold on the global market in radio hardware. No real French competitors existed with the capacity to supply the entire French market, much less the colonial markets. Added to this was the ubiquitous notion, disseminated in the press as well as in the private remarks of colonial officials, that French brands were 'deplorably less adapted to the tropical climate'.¹¹

M. Squier (ed.), *Communities of the Air: Radio Century, Radio Culture* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 39–62.

⁹ 'Au sujet d'une demande d'émissions présentée par le Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord', 1930, Vietnam National Archives Center I (hereafter VNA-I), Hanoi, Fonds du Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine (hereafter GGI), d4681.

¹⁰ Robbins, *Tokyo Calling*, pp. 15–16.

¹¹ The same phrase is found word-for-word in 'Type tropical de poste de radiodiffusion', advertisement, *Courrier Saigonnais*, Radio Saigon supplement, 17 July

Philips and Victor had both succeeded in marketing goods that could 'withstand the calamitous natural forces that make our country so much less favoured to this new technology than the [climatically] calmer countries of the West'.¹²

This received wisdom both described and perpetuated Dutch and American domination of the market for radios, creating what former director of the Sûreté and then current Director of the important Economic Services office of the Gouvernement Général, Louis Marty, privately described as a 'baneful vicious cycle' that excluded French firms from the market.¹³ Be that as it may, the tariff regime on extra-imperial trade was not lifted. Preferential treatment was given to Philips, with a greater share of the yearly quota in import licences going to the Dutch firm. The products of both the American and the Dutch companies, and other extra-imperial foreign rivals, were still subject to the standard 125 per cent ad valorem tariff, making radio an expensive hobby and a punishing trade.¹⁴

Customs policies and licensing regulations created the boundaries, in many ways quite constrained, within which radio expanded in these years. But expand it did. Even with these regulations, radio broadcasting proved increasingly popular. Clearly the price of radio-sets was high, but not onerously so. In the final years of the 1930s annual applications for private licences to install radio-sets in Cochinchina and southern Annam averaged 1,160.¹⁵ The number of applications would have been greater in the more prosperous south of Vietnam, but a significant market for private radio-sets in the north of the country is imputable from the evidence. Mr Siler, the Director of Radio Saigon, pushed the point to the edge of credulity in a letter to Marty in April 1940 pleading for a relaxation on import restrictions: 'These last ten years have seen the native take to this new necessity in the same way radio has progressively taken hold everywhere in

1930; 'La radio s'améliore', *L'Echo Annamite*, 7 October 1931; Letter, Directeur des Services Economiques to the Directeur de la Société Radio-Saigon, 15 April 1940, VNA-I, d4685.

¹² 'Un vrai engouement pour la radiodiffusion', *Bulletin Officiel du Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord* (hereafter *BORCIN*), April 1935, p. 4.

¹³ Note postale, Directeur des Services Economiques to the Gouverneur General, 12 June 1940, ANOM, GGI, d66582.

¹⁴ Letter, Directeur des Services Economiques to the Président of the Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord, 1936, VNA-I, GGI, d4697.

¹⁵ 'Au sujet des demandes des autorisations de l'installation de poste récepteur particulier en Indochine du Sud', 18 February 1940, VNA-I, Fonds de la Résidence Supérieure du Tonkin (hereafter *RST*), d4892.

the world. Everyone now needs to have a radio-set.¹⁶ Swollen and self-serving though it was, Siler's description of the 'radio craze' in Vietnam did paint an accurate picture of the scope, if not the scale, of radio's growth in the 1930s.

For well-off or even moderately well-off French residents, radio-sets were, like the bicycle, the motorcar, the gramophone, and the domestic refrigerator before it, a conspicuous and comforting sign of their affluence, setting them apart from their Asian neighbours. With the radio the link to home was made real through regular broadcasts from the metropole.¹⁷ Although owning a radio-set was an unrealizable aspiration for most Vietnamese households, its modernity was beyond question. Those who could purchase a set did so and exhibited it prominently, whether they shared it or not, but they certainly made sure that both neighbours and strangers could hear—and sometimes see—the sets in order to demonstrate their own social and cultural arrival. Such ostentatious displays permitted a wider engagement with radio technology among Vietnamese than European usage allowed. By placing radios prominently near windows and turning the volume up for all to hear, in contrast to the European tendency to conceal the radio within the house and to keep the noise to a minimum, radios owned by Vietnamese were social technologies used—or experienced—by more people than their owners and their intimates alone. Broadcasts reached more people, creating a wider listening public and more engagement and re-engagement with the medium and its messages. This pattern was strongest and widest in the south, in Saigon, in provincial centres, and on the estates of larger landowners, but it also occurred in Hanoi and Hải Phòng.¹⁸

¹⁶ Letter, Directeur of Radio-Saigon to the Directeur des Services Economiques, 27 March 1940, VNA-I, GGI, d4685.

¹⁷ See, for example, the article on radio as a palliative, if not a cure, for 'colonial blues': 'Contre l'anomie coloniale', *La Dépêche Coloniale*, 22 July 1935.

¹⁸ This is most aptly demonstrated in the inventories and surveys of comfortable, modest, and poor households conducted by the Commission Guernut in every province of Indochina in 1937–38. Of particular relevance are the comments made by those who owned radio-sets on why they nearly always placed the sets near windows, looking out onto alleys or roads. This is also attested to by detailed drawings of homes which show the locations of all sorts of household goods but especially of rice-mills, bicycles, sewing-machines, and radio-sets. Those interviewed often said it was to allow others to benefit or, more brazenly, they said that they wanted to 'show off'. This as-yet largely unexploited archival resource is to be found in six cartons entitled 'Habitation et alimentation en Indochine', ANOM, Guernut, c87–90, 92–93. See also the weekly cartoons depicting the dreams of capricious youngsters surrounded by modern goods

Radio had thus grown and a not-insignificant number of people had access to broadcasting. It was not long before questions began to be raised. How many people used radios and to what end? How were people using the radio and how should they be using it? Siler himself emphasized this point in the same letter he wrote about the Vietnamese 'radio craze', and it was a point often made in public and in private. 'We cannot know,' Siler said, 'how many people are listening to the radio because radios are not privately held among the natives. They are shared among whole urban quarters and entire villages in the countryside.'¹⁹ The radio had become an important medium with a wide reach, whose uses varied according to race. The 'communal instincts of the native', Siler believed, almost presupposed this collective ownership, and that pattern, frustratingly for him, made it difficult to determine the scale of the demand and the marketing potential of the technology. The current and future size of the market and its profitability were not of primary concern to many other observers. For them, current use of the technology was only a mere fraction of its potential, not so much in terms of numbers of listeners but rather in terms of the message to be broadcast. That more and more people would be drawn into the medium's web was axiomatic. What was less evident was what this great multitude would do once they began listening.

'Radio could unite our whole people, our whole country,' opined one anonymous writer in the Huế-based newspaper *Tràng An báo*, 'letting everyone everywhere know new ways of doing things but also teaching those in urban areas about their lost traditions.' Given the many changes sweeping society, the writer went on, 'radio needs to be used wisely because it, like all the other new inventions recklessly sweeping the old aside to make way for the new could lead to our loss of our sense of who we are as a people.' This danger aside, Vietnamese needed to exploit the medium 'to come together and to strengthen ourselves'. The article implored those transmitting radio broadcasts to be cautious in order to ensure that 'the right programmes reach out

beginning with 'Giấc mơ người ăn chơi' ('Playboy's Dreams'), *Tràng An báo* [*Tràng An Newspaper*], 17 March 1935.

¹⁹ Letter, Directeur of Radio-Saigon to the Directeur des Services Economiques, 27 March 1940. See also 'Au sujet des demandes des autorisations de l'installation de poste récepteur particulier en Indochine du Sud', 18 February 1940, VNA-I, RST, d 4892; 'La radio se trouve partout en Indochine', *L'Echo Annamite*, 12 July 1939; 'Một máy thu thanh ở mỗi làng Trung kỳ' ['A radio receiver in every central Vietnamese village'], *Tiếng Dân* [*The Voice of the People*], 2 October 1938.

to every alleyway and every village in the country'. In this it echoed similar articles appearing elsewhere in the local press at the time.²⁰

Getting the message across

Spreading and popularizing radio was the express aim of the two radio interests which, by the end of the 1930s, had extended their signals—power supply permitting—over all of lowland and some of highland Vietnam. (Similar groups existed in Phnom Penh and Vientiane as Radio Phnom Penh and Radio Laos respectively.) Both organizations set to the task in different ways but both maintained a strong public commitment to the expansion of ostensibly non-political 'local interest' radio broadcasting.²¹ The decade was a pivotal one for these social organizations and the networks and ties they created for all radio users.²² It was also a formative period in which the social life of the radio in Vietnam took shape, partly as the result of the choice of programming of these groups. In generally adhering to the dictates of the colonial administration concerning the cultural orientation of programmes, these broadcasters encouraged the rapid settling of radio into listeners' everyday experience. Lively discussions about the contents of radio broadcasts arose, but many of these discussions were of an ordinary kind concerning the day-to-day activities, pastimes, and concerns of radio's participants. That said, the Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord was more restrained in its aspirations, and its operations more modest, than its Saigon-based peer.

Like many private companies operating in trades that were of some interest to the colonial state, the Compagnie Franco-Indochinoise de Radiophonie, of whose business Radio Saigon was but one segment, was able to rely from its inception on favourable treatment from the local administration. Backed by substantial capital from metropolitan

²⁰ 'Quảng bá sóng vô tuyến ở nước ta' ['Wireless broadcasting in our country'], *Tràng An báo*, 6 January 1939. See also 'Một máy thu thanh'.

²¹ 'Statuts du Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord' (Hanoi: Phat-Minh, 1931); 'L'importance social de la radio', *Courrier Saigonnais*, Radio Saigon supplement, 17 July 1930; 'Le but du Radio-Club', *BORCIN*, May 1935.

²² Here I owe much to Alexander Woodside's classic account of social organizations in late-colonial Vietnam. See Alexander Woodside, 'The Development of Social Organisations in Vietnamese Cities in the Late Colonial Period', *Pacific Affairs*, 44 (1), 1971, pp. 39–64.

and colonial sources, the company was founded in 1928 with a sizeable investment by the local government (both the Gouvernement de la Cochinchine and the Saigon municipal administration).²³ Without this support the radio company would not have been founded and would surely have been unable to continue transmitting. This was a reality attested to by the media furore when Radio Saigon stopped broadcasting for several brief periods in the early 1930s due to its inability to pay its creditors.²⁴ The final period of signal silence marked the insolvency of the Compagnie Franco-Indochinoise. Radio Saigon returned under new and local ownership as the Société Indochinoise de Radiodiffusion.²⁵

The continued operating difficulties faced by Radio Saigon in its different incarnations were not dissimilar to those faced by the main radio operator in the north, the Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord. Using the fees paid by its members and substantial public subsidy, the newly formed club purchased its first, 50-watt transmitter in 1931 and its second, 150-watt station the following year.²⁶ Within three years the club had joined forces with a sister society, the Radio-Club de l'Indochine, based in Hải Phòng. This latter society's 50-watt station augmented the club's modest broadcasting capabilities.²⁷ Unlike its southern peer, though, the club managed to avoid broadcasting

²³ The company also owned Indochine Films and was a licensed operator of the state telegraphy monopoly. 'Statuts de la Compagnie Franco-Indochinoise de la Radiophone' (Paris: Imprimerie Chaix, 1928).

²⁴ The initial outlay for buying and installing its transmitters comprised at least half the public monies it received. The company was never able to repay the administration for the loan which had allowed the purchase. Upon the sale of Radio Saigon the debt was cancelled and the equipment was owned by the new company. See Report, 'Etats des stations de radiodiffusion de l'Indochine', 1 April 1939, Direction des Affaires Economiques, ANOM, AgenceFOM, c235, d292; 'Où en est la radio en Cochinchine?', *Ondes coloniales*, 12 August–September 1936; Charles Debierre, 'La radioélectricité coloniale', *Les Annales Coloniales*, 21 February 1931; Yves Dandoy, 'L'équipement radiophonique de l'empire français', *Les Annales Coloniales*, 8 May 1939; 'La radio d'outre-mer en Indochine', *France Outre-Mer*, 17 June 1930.

²⁵ 'La nouvelle "Radio-Saigon"', *Courrier Saigonnais*, 3 April 1936; Report, 'L'organisation de la station de radiodiffusion "Radio-Saigon"', 25 January 1940, Direction des Affaires Politiques, ANOM, AgenceFOM c235, d292.

²⁶ 'La radio s'achève au Tonkin', *Dépêche Coloniale*, 18 December 1932; Letter, Président of the Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord to the Gouverneur-Général de l'Indochine, 27 January 1937, VNA-I, RST, d3286.

²⁷ In its first years the club received nearly \$1,000 from the Gouvernement Général, the Résidence Supérieure du Tonkin, and the Mairie de Hanoi. Letter, Président of the Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord to the Gouverneur-Général de l'Indochine, 27 January 1937, VNA-I, RST, d3286.

silence brought on by financial difficulties. While Radio Saigon sought constantly to extend its coverage and market by purchasing new equipment, the Radio-Club was content to rely on its three transmitters alone.²⁸ The club's more prudent strategy saw it avoid insolvency.

The club arrived at its business strategy through lively and often contentious discussion among its members. Decision-taking at Radio Saigon was predominantly driven, especially in its early years, by the interests of metropolitan and colonial French capital. Membership of the Radio-Club was much more diverse and its operating strategies reflected this. By 1935 it had an active (that is, fee-paying) membership of 675, of whom less than two-thirds were Europeans. By the late 1930s Vietnamese membership had grown to comprise nearly half of the total.²⁹ Not all these members played an active role in the club, but a great many did, as a remarkably candid article in the club's official organ in 1936 made clear. The long-serving president of the group, Henri Virgitti, argued that the club should seek greater assistance from the colonial administration but vociferous dissent spearheaded by three Vietnamese members—Hồ Văn Hùng, Phan Dũng, and Nguyễn Văn Nhật—led the club to continue its economical and, compared with Radio Saigon, relatively more independent approach.³⁰

Transmitting 'local interest' programming

Lively discussion was not limited to the subject of the Radio-Club's finances, nor was animated debate concerning radio in north Vietnam confined to the club's meeting-room. In addition to the question of finances, debates about the Radio-Club centred on radio's real and potential audiences, and the programming best suited to these audiences. These discussions about the club's—and radio's—social responsibilities were part and parcel of more general, Vietnam-wide discussions of the new medium's role in society. No matter the forum,

²⁸ Note postale, Gouverneur-Général to the Résident Supérieur du Tonkin, 27 April 1937, Vietnam National Archives Center II (hereafter VNA-II), Hồ Chí Minh City, Fonds du Gouvernement de la Cochinchine, VIA.8/272 (25).

²⁹ 'Nos membres', *BORCIN*, June 1935; Report, Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord, March 1936, ANOM, RST, d66762; Report, Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord, April 1939, VNA-I, RST, d66790.

³⁰ 'Aux séances du Radio-Club', *BORCIN*, February 1936.

conversations were both particular and general. They comprised often finely detailed reviews that described, dissected, and critically examined what was to be heard and what had been heard on the waves. That is, debates within the clubs and within the press were as much concerned with the content carried on the waves as with the world immediately surrounding the waves, the radio's social setting, and the typically ebullient goings-on around radio-sets.

Promoters, listeners, and commentators alike all affirmed radio's obvious ability to excite people. Many went further and suggested that radio ought to be harnessed to stimulate individuals to cultivate themselves and to encourage the development of a sense of community.³¹ Indeed, many who reported on how people actually used the radio attested to the fact that it had already become a feature of daily social interaction and individuals' routines. Commentators, though, continued to proclaim the still-unharnessed potential of radio to improve self and community even further.

The time devoted in meetings and in the pages of the press to discussing radio was overwhelmingly weighted towards the matter of programming. What was broadcast and when, whom it would appeal to, the post-transmission summation and appraisal of programmes, their quality and their reception are evinced through listings, reviews, opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and no doubt often-fictitious 'man in the street' reportage of radio broadcasts. They provide an invaluable glimpse into the wide arc of radio's expansion, even if they do not necessarily enable a clear insight into the everyday conversations radio actually instigated. The regularity with which the radio public took part in the meetings of the radio clubs and in the press discussions of the radio—and the frequency with which members of the radio clubs engaged in the public world of print surrounding radio as representatives of the radio clubs—similarly suggest the role these organizations played in giving birth to radio's Vietnamese existence.

The clubs responded by providing something for nearly everyone. This *modus operandi* was perhaps the result of the diverse interests of

³¹ Radio thus played a part in then-current concerns about self-cultivation and the burgeoning public sphere. For discussions of these two topics, see Mark Philip Bradley, 'Becoming *van minh*: Civilizational Discourse and Visions of the Self in Twentieth-Century Vietnam', *Journal of World History*, 15 (1), 2004, pp. 65–83, especially pp. 72–78; Shawn McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 3–38.

its users and its petitioners for time-slots. It was also surely brought about by the demands of the wider public. As a result, by the late 1930s in both the north and south of the country listeners could tune in to programming on an enormous range of topics. Radio mirrored print in its wide-ranging expansiveness on topics of interest to the colonial public.

The languages of the transmissions were varied. French and 'standard' Hanoi and 'standard' Saigon Vietnamese were the most common, but there was also occasional programming in Chinese as well as English lessons conducted for native Vietnamese speakers. (The Esperanto clubs of Saigon and Hanoi both lobbied unsuccessfully for time-slots.) In all these primary languages of broadcast could be heard radio plays, often re-broadcasts of gramophone recordings, but occasionally live studio dramatizations. Some of these were accompanied by music. In a purely musical vein, there were a great number of programmes from the metropole, featuring both Western classical and contemporary popular music. Jazz was a particularly popular programming option, whose consumption was conspicuously modern: the writers of Hanoi's *Phong Hoa* [*Customs*] demonstrated their avant-garde status by referring to the jazz they had heard playing on the radio. Certainly less brazenly modern but no less popular was Vietnamese musical theatre (*hát tuồng*). *Cải lương* ('reformed theatre'), blossoming at this time, was also a popular fixture, judging from listeners' requests and press reports. Indeed, radio, along with the gramophone, played no small part in the popularization of *cải lương* during the 1930s in the south. These programmes elicited much comment and interest; their modernity was just as conspicuous as that of jazz from France.³²

While much radio time was given over to music and musical theatre, it by no means had the lion's share of time-slots. Instructional programming was another popular format. Despite the failure of the Esperanto clubs' bids, other groups succeeded in gaining airtime for language lessons in English and, nearer the end of the decade, in Japanese. French language instruction was a far more regular feature, however. In his role as head of his group Afima (Association pour la formation intellectuelle et morale des Annamites), Phạm Quỳnh himself offered language and morality instruction on the Radio-Club's

³² Listings can be found in the bulletins of the radio clubs as well as in the broadsheets, *inter alia*, *La Tribune Indochinoise*, *L'Avenir du Tonkin* and *France-Annam*, as well as in the Saigon-based *Indoradio*, published from 1937 to 1940.

waves. His concurrent series teaching French in the magazine *France–Annam* informed readers that they should encourage their children to tune in so as ‘to learn how to speak and to act like the upright young men and women our country needs’.³³

Language lessons were only one small part of this didactic programming whose goal was to improve the nation and lead to individuals’ professional and social success. Intermittent and one-off broadcasts concerned topics as diverse as ‘Western’ business and social customs, table manners, and French cookery, as well as descriptions on what to expect and how to behave on the voyage to France.³⁴ The time devoted to such programmes paled, though, in comparison with that given over to sport and leisure. Along with music and theatre, sport and leisure commanded the attention of the radio public. Such programming took many forms and spanned a great range of pastimes. In addition to instructional programming with, for example, ‘Indochina’s number one chess star’ and serial broadcasts on card games—which drew considerable comment from certain quarters for their encouragement of gambling and other licentious behaviour—a listener could hear a great many live events with commentary, interviews, and post-match analyses of the whole gamut of sports popular in colonial society.³⁵ Of particular interest were football, cycling, racing, tennis, and that already ubiquitous sport, ping pong.³⁶ Live coverage from the modest sporting arenas of Saigon, Hanoi, and even Hué drew many listeners, especially when the competition was between the great regional teams or ‘civilian-versus-military’ line-ups. The sides in such matches were sometimes made up of both Europeans and Vietnamese and sometimes not. Judging from the muted but explicit discussions of such ‘fights between the races’, these matches were avidly listened to and provided for much comment on the ‘advances’ made or still to be made by the Vietnamese or, in quite a number of cases, the injustice occasioned by a ‘punishing tropical climate to which French athletes are ill-adapted’.³⁷

³³ ‘La formation de notre jeunesse’, *France–Annam*, 13 October 1934.

³⁴ ‘Notre horaire’, *BORCIN*, May 1936.

³⁵ ‘Aux écoutes du roi d’échecs’, *La Tribune Indochinoise*, 21 September 1938; ‘Scandale des ondes’, *Indoradio*, 16 May 1937.

³⁶ On ping pong’s popularity, see Erich DeWald ‘Vietnamese Tourism in Late-Colonial Central Vietnam, 1917–1945’, Unpublished PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2011, Chapter 5.

³⁷ ‘La coupe Indochinoise’, *Indosport*, 8 March 1938, among numerous others.

Such was the tone of the reviews of the performance of Vietnam's two great tennis stars of the 1930s, Chim and Giao, whose play in the Bảo Đại cup at the annual 'Huế Olympics' and at the Paris Open in 1937 and 1938 were reported in print on several occasions as 'play by play' transcripts from the radio broadcast.³⁸ Tennis coverage was accompanied by reportage of football and racing that mirrored this play-by-play style then being developed in radio broadcasting. Such lengthy publication of the minutiae of sporting events such as tennis, ping pong, football, and racing evinces something more than lazy editors desperate to fill column inches. Not only does it suggest public interest in these events but, more than that, it intimates an expansion of and a familiarity with the forms of radio broadcasting.

Far from exhaustive, this catalogue of sport, entertainment, and educational broadcasts gives some sense of what listeners could and did hear. But how did these listeners take in this great variety of transmissions? Selectively, according to a 'Võ Thanh' in the Huế-based *Tràng An báo*. This commentator was very critical of radio in colonial Vietnam because, for him, its limited content robbed it of its potential. Everything to be heard was about fun and frivolity. Radio could be so much more, he said; it could have a much greater relevance for 'making all our lives better'. As it was only about 'making people happy and forgetting their lives'; however, many people had no interest in the medium. As long as radio could not contain political programming, he went on, it would never become what it was in other countries: an important pedagogical and didactic tool that allowed people to 'decide what they think about what is important to them and to our society'.³⁹

At the Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord, many members voiced similar complaints about the deleterious effect of licensing agreements on the power of radio. Ngô-Minh-Quang, in an opinion shared by many, bemoaned the fact that people only listened to the radio if they wanted diversion from daily life. 'People should tune into the radio when they want to take part in society not when they want to get away from it,' he complained. Another member went so far as to wonder if radio and the Radio-Club had a future if its remit were not expanded to be 'relevant to more than just old women and young

³⁸ 'La Coupe Bảo Đại', *La Gazette de Huế*, 13 April 1936; 'Chim và Giao ở Huế', *Tràng An báo*, 28 March 1937; 'Chim et Giao encore à Paris', *Indosport*, 1 July 1938.

³⁹ Võ-Thanh, 'Giá-trị phát-thanh radio' ['The value of radio broadcasting'], *Tràng An báo*, 26 October 1935. See also 'Quảng bá vô tuyến ở nước Annam' ['Popularizing wireless in Annam'], *Thắng Tiến* [*Forward March*], 20 December 1935.

Annamites'.⁴⁰ This despairing reflection reiterated similar remarks made by broadcasters at Radio Saigon.⁴¹

All these commentators, though, seemed little concerned with the fact that the listening public appeared to take considerable delight in such programmes or that, even in the face of the constraints on radio broadcasting, listeners were forming an interested public. They were, in fact, telling the radio clubs about their listening habits, and the radio clubs were listening. One letter from a listener, published in the club's *Bulletin*, intimated as much in her declaration that she appreciated programmes on French, on sewing, and on opera as they permitted her to 'listen in as my neighbour has her radio on and I can go about my daily routines while learning about things that make me better and make me happy'.⁴²

Like other listeners, this anonymous writer responded to broadcasters' solicitations for listeners' comments on the programmes they heard.⁴³ In these letters can be found information not just on what the public wanted to hear but on how they were doing so. There was much complaint concerning specific programming—its length, regularity, and propriety—but this was matched by praise and support for the breadth of the coverage.⁴⁴ Many letter writers also described how the circumstances of their listening affected their choices. In many instances, listeners' choices were constrained by their milieu. Some listeners had complete control over their sets and, as one unabashedly asserted, 'I just turn it off when I am done no matter how loud the howls of complaints from my family and the neighbours crowded around the window'.⁴⁵ On the opposite side of a similar interaction was another woman who had only to 'tune in whenever the old man next door turns his new set up on high for everyone to hear boring old opera or his awful attempts to speak French. He never will [learn French], that crazy old man'.⁴⁶ Yet others described a different scene, one in

⁴⁰ 'Aux séances du Club', *BORCIN*, August 1935.

⁴¹ 'Un conflit à propos du poste de radiodiffusion coloniale en Indochine', *Courrier Saïgonnais*, Radio Saigon supplement, 18 September 1930.

⁴² 'Lettres de nos auditeurs', *BORCIN*, February 1937.

⁴³ That both clubs sought the views of their public was clear from the beginning: 'Les auditeurs, les auditrices', *BORCIN*, March 1934; and 'Aux écoutes du Radio-Saïgon', *Courrier Saïgonnais*, supplement, 25 June 1931.

⁴⁴ Representative are the 'Lettres d'auditeurs', *BORCIN*, July 1935, October 1935, January 1936, and February 1936; 'De la rue aux ondes', *Radio Saigon*, July 1937, September 1937, and December 1937.

⁴⁵ 'Aux séances', *BORCIN*, February 1936.

⁴⁶ 'Comment écoutons-nous tous la radio', *Radio Saigon*, January 1938.

which the owner of a set was more responsive to others' wishes, either willingly or through coercion. 'At first,' reported another listener,

when the family two doors down got their radio-set a few months back they turned it up loud and we all had to listen to it from dawn to dusk, with everyone in their family young and old taking turns sitting at their window making sure we all saw them, listening to whatever they wanted. But they got tired of that after a while and we all got used to it. Now it is not on all the time and if enough of us ask or moan the youngsters or the mother of the house will switch it on so we can hear the ping pong. Or the theatre. Those are my sisters' and my favourites.⁴⁷

A considerable number of letters describe scenes like this: an ostentatious display of a radio-set and of the ability to control it, followed by some degree of it blending into the household and into a normal pattern of neighbourly interaction, sometimes amicable and sometimes not so amiably oriented towards sharing the waves. Those writing in to voice their opinions were expressing their interest in what they sometimes chose—and sometimes were obliged—to listen to. In this context, listening to the radio was less about the physical action of switching a radio-set on or off as about developing a new mental technique of tuning in or out the sounds of modern life.

This skill was one which did not fail to attract the attention of a number of commentators on the new technology's peculiar habit of encroaching. 'Learning how to ignore the radio,' an opinionated author in the short-lived Hanoi newspaper *Nghe Thấy* (*Seen and Heard*) declared, was really about learning how to do two things. Sometimes, listeners needed to pretend they could not hear anything at all, as when 'some out-of-work playboy is listening at full volume to that dreary tennis'. At other times, though, 'such as when you are listening to the news or even to music, you have to think about how some far-away story is really like your own life. It is no different to reading poetry. You just have to think about it and use your wits.'⁴⁸

An article in the popular Saigon periodical, *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (*Women's News*), agreed. 'There are times when you have to stop listening because otherwise you will sing along all day and never get anything done. But other times,' the article continued,

you just cannot stop listening and at those times things that you did not even expect to care about start sounding like maybe you can learn something from

⁴⁷ 'Lettres de nos auditeurs', *BORCIN*, November 1936.

⁴⁸ 'Lại về vấn-đề phát-thanh vô-tuyến' ['Again the problem of wireless broadcasting'], *Nghe Thấy* [*Seen and Heard*], 16 November 1935.

them, like when I recently heard a programme about chess—when would I ever play chess?—and I really thought what I heard about being patient and thinking slowly and calmly about all the possible moves was useful for me maybe in other ways in life.⁴⁹

For the editor of one of Vietnam's many specialist science and technology periodicals of the period, the Hanoi-based *Kỹ thuật phổ biến* (*Popular Technology*), radio was indeed giving rise to a new way of interacting with the world. 'This modern technology,' the editorial suggested,

brings the whole, diverse world into our homes. It is one of the marvels of science. Because it is everywhere we are all learning how to decide quickly what different programmes are really about and to tune them out if they do not interest us. It is not so different from not paying attention but it is often so loud and gets into every crevice that you have to pretend it is not there. That is hard but I think we are all learning how to do it.⁵⁰

Not everyone cared for all they heard on the radio, and the new medium was encouraging a new ability to disengage—and to choose. Whether they delighted or annoyed, radio broadcasts were insidiously forcing everyone to acquire a new ability and even a new sensibility of selective engagement and choice.

Broadcasters affirmed this reality in their programming. It was diverse, catering to their not-entirely-imagined public. Decision-taking on programming matters accepted that different groups wanted to hear different types of programmes and that the public could and would switch off either physically or mentally if they had no interest in the scheduled broadcast, a broadcasting stratagem clearly revealed in the published restatement of the Radio-Club's goals in 1937.⁵¹ Indeed, this was precisely what the term 'local interest transmissions' meant for the club: transmissions of many kinds, of interest to the different segments of colonial society: a capricious and fragmented yet savvy set of listeners.

Commentaries on the radio listings in *La Patrie Annamite* suggested that 'many programmes will appeal to many readers, but some will only be of interest to specific groups'.⁵² Similarly, the Radio-Club

⁴⁹ Bãng-Tâm, 'Khoa-học thường-thức' ['Science basics'], *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* [*Women's News*], 16 March 1933.

⁵⁰ Nguyễn-Bình, 'Thế-giới vô-tuyến' ['Wireless world'], *Kỹ thuật phổ biến*, April 1937.

⁵¹ 'Encore les buts du Radio-Club', *BORCIN*, January 1937.

⁵² 'Comment écoutons-nous la radio', *La Patrie Annamite*, 22 January 1938.

told its listeners that it tried ‘to include something each day that different kinds of people will want to tune in to’.⁵³ Broadcasters and the press conceived of members of the radio public as belonging to different groups, with wide and overlapping interests to be sure, but nevertheless as members of discernibly discrete social groups. Just as a diverse schedule of political programming might have appealed differently to those of particular persuasions, so too did an eclectic range of cultural programmes appeal variously to those of different tastes. While colonial repression did not lead to the development of radio as an eclectic, liberal political medium, how that repression worked in practice pushed radio to function as an everyday device used to signal an individual’s interests and even aspirations. In choosing what to listen to—a choice made quite public by the nature of listening in 1930s Vietnam—people often declared their social status.

‘Humdrum existence’

A ‘humdrum existence’: this was precisely what was distressing about the radio as it existed in Vietnam, at least from the perspective of some commentators such as the writer in the *Tràng An báo*.^{54,55} It was an opinion shared by some members of the Radio-Club, who thought the ‘inanity’ of much of the programming was a ‘dispiriting testament to the humdrum existence of our countrymen’.⁵⁶ For these critics of radio, the way in which the technology was used abroad ought to have acted as a guide to its use in their country. Indeed, as the editors of *Indoradio* magazine insisted in one of their first editions, the ‘great inventions of Messrs Edison and Marconi were intended to surmount barriers and to connect people in ways that were not possible fifty, one hundred years ago’.⁵⁷ In connecting with others in this way, the radio could hasten the economic, political, and social advance of the country and its people. Not using radio in this cosmopolitan manner was ‘contrary to the very nature of the technology’.⁵⁸ To the ‘avid and well-travelled man of modern science,’ observed *La Patrie Annamite*, ‘the trivial pleasures so

⁵³ ‘Vous, nos auditeurs’, *BORCIN*, November 1937.

⁵⁴ ‘Aux séances’, *BORCIN*, November 1938.

⁵⁵ ‘Quảng bá’, *Tràng An báo*.

⁵⁶ ‘Aux séances’, *BORCIN*, November 1938.

⁵⁷ ‘Le service radio-diffusion en Indochine’, *Indoradio*, September 1937.

⁵⁸ ‘Việc truyền thanh đối với sự tiến tới nước ta’ [‘Radio broadcasting and the progress of our country’], *Khoa Học tạp chí* [*Science Magazine*], October 1936.

many in Annam derive from radio demonstrates how much progress we still have to make to take advantage of modern technologies'.⁵⁹

For these critics, it was not the limits placed on radio broadcasting by the colonial state that were the greatest hindrance to realizing radio's full capacity, it was the shortcomings of Vietnamese society. Its members' 'petty concerns' stood in the way of the technology becoming an 'exceptional tool of social advance'.⁶⁰ Others, though, did hold the colonial administration responsible both for the 'backwardness of small-minded elements in society' as well as for the 'inability of our countrymen to use modern technologies, radio among them, to progress like many other countries in the world'.⁶¹ In another writer's estimation, the colonial system paradoxically allowed for 'the development of modern aspirations among certain elements of society but at the same time refuse anything other than the most inane and ephemeral social opportunities for these elements'. The nature of radio, though, 'gives people no matter where they are the ability to know what is going on all over the world', and so 'limits on radio are necessary if the imperialists want to keep our people ignorant of the progress radio makes possible elsewhere'.⁶²

While differing in their aims, these critics of radio broadcasting as it existed in Vietnam nonetheless shared a view of this particular technology as inherently cosmopolitan and exceptional. The fact of its ostensibly innate ability to transcend borders meant that radio, by its very nature, facilitated the creation of national and international communion. The radio's easy integration into daily life, its ready adaptation to everyday routines, and its swift appropriation as a tool for affecting status and standing—that is, the radio as it had come to exist in Vietnam—were antithetical to its design. This implicit acceptance of the technology's universal and immutable form and function had explicit, local political applications.

⁵⁹ 'Les technologies modernes et le progrès social des Annamites', *La Patrie Annamite*, 14 May 1936.

⁶⁰ Viễn Chí, 'Sao thời đại máy móc chưa đến nước Annam' ['Why the machine age has not yet come to Vietnam'], *Tiến Bộ* [*Progress*], 3 November 1938.

⁶¹ Nguyễn Hữu Hùng, 'Vấn đề khuếch trương kỹ thuật theo quan điểm «bảo hộ»' ['The problem of technological development from the perspective of "the protectorate"'], *Ánh Sáng* [*Light*], 18 June 1935.

⁶² From a pamphlet entitled 'Thực tưởng xã hội dưới chế độ thực dân' ['The true condition of society under colonialism'] confiscated from an entrant to the Huế fair in 1936, VNA-I, d. 5756.

Other, less righteously minded observers drew attention to the ‘foibles’ of those who, ‘in the name of lofty ideals learned from foreign books’, dismissed the way their compatriots were ‘actually using new gadgets like the radio to live modern lives’.⁶³ It was, in fact, ‘utter hypocrisy’ for ‘the unemployed, educated young set to complain about the quiet habits of so many hard-working listeners of radio programmes’.⁶⁴ Listeners, it was true, were not ‘bringing about great reform in our society but many do listen in to learn to speak better, to have better manners, to understand our customs better or even to improve their knowledge of technology or crafts such as repairing bicycles’. Such mundane activities were not fatuous; they could even be considered ‘evidence of the slow, quiet reform of our society made possible by great modern inventions’.⁶⁵ Abstaining from any discussion of more widespread social reform, this commentator in *Tiếng Dân* instead emphasized how radio—along with other comparable machines such as the bicycle and the typewriter—permitted small changes in everyday existence. The radio in particular, as a Sói Sâm asserted in the scouting magazine *Thắng Tiến* (*Forward March*), was ‘like every household having tutors come to teach French, sewing, singing and manners individually to every member of the family’.⁶⁶

Writing in the Hanoi magazine *Nghề Mới* (*New Professions*), Trung Ngọc described the radio’s presence in the city as ‘having musicians, athletes or teachers stand in the alley-way and speak to all the residents of the alley at once’. Describing the arrival in the alley where he lived of a young man from the countryside come to take up an apprenticeship as a mechanic, the journalist saw him ‘grimace the first time old man Tuyết turned on his radio’. It took ‘only a day or two before the apprentice Lâm let the radio drift into the background with the sounds of hawkers and bicycle bells. Now he is like everyone else and listens only when he wants’.⁶⁷ The skill this young man developed

⁶³ ‘Từ trong quán cà phê’ [‘From inside the café’], *Cười* [*Laughter*], 26 February 1939.

⁶⁴ Bùi Văn Dạng, ‘Về vấn đề trí thức thất nghiệp’ [‘On the problem of unemployed intellectuals’], *Nghe Thấy*, 9 November 1935.

⁶⁵ Tý Mưng, ‘Một số dấu hiệu cho thấy cái cách xã hội ta’ [‘Some signs of our social reform’], *Tiếng Dân*, 29 June 1935.

⁶⁶ Sói-Sâm, ‘Thế giới si-cút là thế giới ra-đi-o’ [‘The scouting world is the radio world’], *Thắng Tiến*, 5 July 1936.

⁶⁷ Trung Ngọc, ‘Anh Lâm, thợ máy’ [‘Mr Lâm the mechanic’], *Nghề Mới* [*New Trades*], 10 December 1936.

was one that ‘everyone in the city now has’ because ‘radio is like that, it is loud and everywhere even if there is just one receiver in an area’. But just as its sound was inescapable, radio’s advantages were manifest: ‘only fools would not listen to it sometimes and ignore it otherwise’.⁶⁸

Those commentators who decried the technology as an agent of piecemeal social change looked upon it as uncommon; for them it was a conspicuous instrument of transformation and reform. Yet for the majority of observers and members of the radio public the radio stood out even more for not standing out, for so quickly disappearing into the expected background of life. It lent its noise to the cacophony of communal existence, and adapting to its presence appeared to be an almost natural process. It was so intrinsic a part of contemporary life, in fact, that Ngọc was not alone in comparing adapting to the radio’s presence in your surroundings to learning to ride a bike.⁶⁹

Conclusion

The beginning of the Second World War and the establishment of the Vichy regime in Indochina in 1940 under Jean Decoux brought an end to the formal exclusion of the radio from local politics. It did not usher in an era of political tolerance but rather of greater censorship of any programming that diverged from colonial state ideology. The political power of radio was realized by the Vichy regime and later by the Viet Minh who jealously guarded the radio after first seizing control of it in 1945. It was a powerful instrument for propaganda, yet one for which its Vietnamese audience had developed a tolerance in the first ten years of its use in the country. Controlling the content of radio programming became of paramount concern for the colonial state after 1940; that content, though, reached listeners who had grown accustomed to the sounds of this machine and had developed a common aptitude for listening—and for ignoring.

This technique for listeners participating in radio broadcasting had developed in the first decade of the technology’s expansion in Vietnam, when the policies of the colonial state had seen radio

⁶⁸ ‘La vie en ville et notre évolution sociale’, *La Patrie Annamite*, 23 June 1937.

⁶⁹ Ngọc, ‘Anh Lâm’. Also see Bùi Huy Tín, ‘Huế mới’ [‘New Huế’], *Tràng An báo*, 18 April 1939; Đỗ Đức Thu, *Nhà bên kia* [*The House Across the Way*] (Hanoi: Nhà In Công Lực, 1938), p. 39; Nguyễn Lâm, *Cậu bé nhà que* [*The Young Yokel*] (Hanoi: Imprimerie Thanh Niên, n.d. [circa 1940]), p. 27.

grow under the auspices of two private, partly subsidized groups, the Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord and Radio-Saïgon. Limited in scale and constrained in terms of programming, these two organizations' broadcasts nevertheless succeeded in reaching an ever-larger number of listeners in the decade before the Second World War. Regulations demanded that programming be limited to non-political subjects, and broadcasts during this first decade covered an extensive cultural gamut. Broadcasters encouraged listeners' contributions to discussions about programming, a fact which was likely to have aided in keeping programming quite broad in its cultural coverage.

In addition to lively participation in the fora of the broadcasters' meeting rooms and publications, radio listeners actively took part in wider public debate about radio and its current and potential usage. This public discussion reveals much not only about popular views of the technology and new technologies in general, but also about the social life of the radio, that is, the world as it existed around radio receivers. The desire of many Vietnamese radio owners to display their machines conspicuously and to flaunt them meant that everyone in the area listened to broadcasts. This precipitated the development of specific listening skills but it also facilitated radio's disappearance into the expected and normal social setting.

While some rebuked officials and the general public for the missed opportunity to use radio for greater purposes, the radio stands out not for the incomplete realization of its perceived potential, but rather for how singularly unremarkable it became. It seemed to lend itself to rapid integration into everyday life. Had the medium been used to a more provocatively political effect, it would surely have acquired a less banal air. Similarly, if ownership of the machine had been more contentious and less ostentatiously displayed to those within hearing distance, it might well have blended less easily into the social background. As it was, many Vietnamese owners of radio receivers wanted their neighbours to hear their possession and to recognize the standing its ownership granted them. This meant that neighbours and passers-by had no choice but to accommodate the machine's noise. Thus it became a normal, unexceptional part of everyday life. Beginning in 1940, the radio became an instrument for political education and propaganda. These programmes, though, emanated from a machine that was as easily ignored as the rest of the sounds of communal life.