

Hmong-Americans in the Mainstream Newspapers of the Twin Cities

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mainstream newspapers in the Twin Cities**

Table of contents

1.	Executive Summary.....	1
2.	Processes.....	2
3.	Categories.....	2
4.	Findings: Reasons to mention race.....	3
5.	Findings: Race marking.....	7
6.	Findings: Consistencies in writing.....	8
7.	Findings: Hmong in a negative light.....	9
8.	Themes from journalists.....	11
9.	Recommendations.....	12
10.	Conclusion.....	15

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past three decades, there were many news worthy stories that took place in the Twin Cities involving Hmong-Americans. This presented the topic of how the mainstream media, in particular the two large newspapers in the Twin Cities, were covering Hmong-Americans. In order to do this, analysis of articles, interviews with community members and journalists took place.

The research determined that the majority of the time, when a Hmong-American is written about, his or her race was mentioned. There were many reasons why mentioning race is valid. Reasons include the article relating to the Hmong-American community; a profile; the person or people's actions or activities were relating to the Hmong-American community; or because the article was about the person or people being Hmong-American. The research also showed that newspapers do race mark, mention race when it is not applicable to the article. But all of this depended on the writer, since there seemed to be no format when writing about the Hmong-American community.

Journalists believed that though they don't cover enough on minority groups in general, when they do, they cover minorities, including Hmong-Americans, fairly. The majority of the journalists interviewed said they new almost nothing about Hmong-American community before writing an article. They believed that more input, letters and relationships with the Hmong-American community would make their coverage better.

Hmong-Americans in the mainstream newspapers of the Twin Cities

With the growing population of Hmong-Americans in the United States, their activities have often graced the pages of mainstream newspapers. Increased coverage of this community has sparked concern about fair reporting.

Over the past three decades, there were many news worthy stories that took place in the Twin Cities involving Hmong-Americans. This presented the topic of how the mainstream media, in particular the two large newspapers in the Twin Cities, were covering Hmong-Americans. In order to analyze this, extensive research on articles was done. Through the resources available at the Minnesota History Museum and the Hmong Cultural Center, nearly hundred articles from the *Pioneer Press* and the *Star Tribune* dating as far back as 1989 were collected.

The process involved an analysis of the articles, finding common language and writing styles. Once complete, the findings were taken to the Hmong-American and journalism communities. This was done in order to get the perspective of the Hmong-American community as well as the point of views of the people who were actually writing on them. Finally, the interviews were analyzed, looking for common themes.

For the researched articles, the categories were: refugees, events (including the soccer tournament and Hmong New Year), politics, features, misc/other (including food, farming and reviews) and crime. The majority of the articles fell into the crimes and features categories.

For the most part, articles in the crime category were a series of articles on a single crime or scandal. These crimes and scandals included long series covering the Chai Soua Vang Case, the Vang Pao Foundation Scandal, the Sia Lo Scandal and the Tou Mo Cha Case. Two sub-categories were gang relations, family disputes/murder-suicides and others.

When it came to crime, location was key. Though both papers claim to be papers of the Twin Cities and not to a particular city, the *Star Tribune* focused its stories more in Minneapolis, where the paper is based. Many times, the *Star Tribune* did not have articles on a crime that took place in St. Paul. The *Pioneer Press*, similarly, focused its articles in St. Paul, where it is based. Though these two newspapers are located in different cities, and obviously focus their paper

around that area, both are in competition with each other for main leadership throughout the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

Feature stories included profiles, education, Hmong-American businesses and art, among others. The *Pioneer Press* had more articles on the Hmong-Americans in a feature setting, including a series on the 30-year anniversary of the end of the secret war, than the *Star Tribune*. This could be due to the fact there is 24,389¹ Hmong-Americans living in St. Paul compared to the 9,595² Hmong-Americans residing in Minneapolis, not reflecting the 2004 arrival of Hmong immigrants from the Wat Tham Krabok refugee camp in Thailand.

It could also be due to the fact that the *Pioneer Press* had a reporter, Todd Nelson, whose beat was Immigrants and Immigration Issues. Nelson, according to other reporters at the *Pioneer Press* and members of the Hmong-American community, made strong relationships with community members, while there was no single reporter at the *Star Tribune* that was assigned to cover minority issues or one that created relationships in the community. Since Nelson's departure from the *Pioneer Press* in 2005, no one had been assigned to his beat. And with the current battle over the *Pioneer Press's* ownership, this is only one of the many questions concerning the paper's future.

Over the past couple of years, there had been some stories in the media that grabbed the attention of people inside and outside the Hmong-American community. Many of these people had questions and concerns about when it was appropriate to talk of a person's race in a news article. Some people felt that newspapers often race marked, meaning that the race of a person or group of people was included when it did not pertain to the story.

According to the research done, race was almost always mentioned when a Hmong-American was a part of a news story. But this could be because most of these articles were relating to the Hmong-American community. On the other hand, for the most part, if the article was not relating to the Hmong-American community, race was not mentioned at all. This can be seen in the article about the Hmong-American family whose house was burnt in Woodbury on September 30, 2005, three of the four family members died, making this a news headline for days. But their race was not mentioned in the breaking of the story in the *Pioneer Press*.

¹ 2000 Census Beau

² 2000 Census Beau

“The Yangs moved into the house about a year and a half ago. Police and fire crews had never been called to their house before Friday. Neighbors described the Yangs as a nice family; Holly and Khoua are known for biking around neighborhood streets.”³

Over 20 community members were interviewed, which included high school students, college students, professionals and educators, and more than three dozen were surveyed for this research. Another concern was that certain things were a “Hmong thing.” This included suicide-murders. Community members felt that each time there was a suicide-murder in the Hmong-American community, the person’s race was always included in the story. They felt that this was race marking and because each time there was a suicide-murder, the case was highly covered by the newspapers and it became a stereotype. Community members felt that this was unfair because people who were not familiar with the Hmong-American community may come to believe that it is typical or acceptable in the Hmong-American community to commit murder-suicides.

Mark Pfeifer at the Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul gave a tour to a group of people who lived outside of the Twin Cities and who had not had much exposure to the Hmong-American culture, except for what they read in the newspapers. One of the women asked Mark if it was a cultural thing for mothers to kill their children. This question came after a high profile case of a Hmong mother killing her six children in 1998. Though the woman went to the right person to ask this question, it became a concern for many members in and associated with the Hmong-American community that people began to believe certain crimes would become known as a “Hmong thing.”

A high number of people interviewed and surveyed said that the *Pioneer Press* and the *Star Tribune* only wrote stories on the Hmong-American community or people in it when it was a crime. They observed that reporters most often race marked in crime articles.

Because of the negative publicity, the community felt that they were only being portrayed as violent criminals. One story that took the nation by storm, and hit the Hmong-American community hard was that of the Chai Soua Vang Case. The day after the incident where Vang shot 8 hunters, killing 6, the story, as would be expected, covered the front pages of both *Star Tribune* and *Pioneer Press*. The *Pioneer Press* took the story one step further by printing an

³ Boldt, Megan. “Arson feared in fatal fire.” *Pioneer Press* 1 October 2005

article about conflicts between Hmong-American hunters and Caucasian hunters.⁴ This piece ran along side the breaking of the Vang story, before there was any clarification from Vang, the victims or the police of racial tensions in the woods that night. The Hmong-American community felt the effects of it by experiencing racism in the community. Community members felt that by doing this, the *Pioneer Press* blamed Vang's racial background for his actions, labeling him the "Hmong man", which other newspapers and media outlets quickly picked up.

With only a few exceptions, research show that when crimes were reported on in the past decade relating to the Hmong-American community, race was mentioned when it pertained to the crime. In the case of Tou Mo Cha, a police officer in St. Paul who loaned his gun out and it was subsequently used in a drive by shooting, the crime directly related to his being Hmong-American. Cha's claim was that pressure from the Hmong-American community took his loyalty away from his police work.

"Three weeks later, Tou Mo Cha told investigators he had faced intense pressure to align with a violent and powerful Hmong political faction capable of bribing City Hall."⁵

Only a few people said that they didn't believe that the papers only cover the Hmong-American community when there was a crime. These people were correct. Though there were a high number of articles that are categorized as crimes, there were at least two times as many articles that were categorized as features and events.

A possible reason for the mention of race when writing about a Hmong-American person could be because of the tightness of the community. Article research show that many times, when a person's race was mentioned, whether in a crime-news piece or a feature, it was because the person's actions or activities were related to the Hmong-American community.

In a piece about frauds in daycare money, a woman, Zhia Vang, was the focus of the story. The article was extremely long because it was an investigative piece. But, Vang's race was mentioned only once, in the latter third of the article.

"Kathy Wilken, executive director, said the agency paid Vang to teach other Hmong day care providers how to fill out forms and comply with regulations. Her status as a leader among Hmong day care providers has added to the buzz around her case. At GMDCA, Associate

⁴ Friedrich, Alex & Nelson, Todd. "Collision of cultures." *Pioneer Press* 22 November 2004

⁵ Prather, Shannon. "Officer's defense will claim duress." *Pioneer Press* 5 February 2005

Director Laurie Possin said Vang was known as someone who took time to get other Hmong day care providers started.”⁶

Another reason for the use of race when writing about a Hmong-American person was because the focus of the article or story was the person being Hmong. In an article about interpreters, the focus of the story was that there were now two Hmong-American interpreters in the Minnesota court system. In this article, the fact that they were Hmong-Americans was the story.

“[Kazoua Yang] Xiong, 29, is now supervisor of interpreter services for Ramsey County District Court. She and Mee Moua Vang became the nation’s first certified Hmong court interpreters in June.”⁷

Other examples of focuses or secondary focuses aren’t always easily found because the word “Hmong” is not always in the headline. In an article entitled “Flavors of the land: Raspberries” journalist Rick Nelson profiles the Yang Family of St. Paul. Two times does he mention their race because it pertained to the profiling of the family.

“...the Yangs are among many enterprising Hmong farmers...The Yangs, who immigrated to the United States 15 years ago from their native Laos.”⁸ Half of the article was spent on the Yang family and the other half was focused on raspberries and dishes.

Then there are times when race doesn’t seem to be an important factor to the article at all, just facts about the person. In these situations, it seems to be race marking. During the 2005 Chai Soua Vang case, a group of volunteers out of the Twin Cities decided to monitor the trial.

“A mostly Hmong-American volunteer coalition that monitored the September trial of Chai Soua Vang said a host of factors – including the selection of an all-white jury and what the group perceived as tilted media coverage – diminished the St. Paul man’s chances of receiving a fair trial in the killings of six Wisconsin deer hunters.”⁹

The group, Coalition for Community Relations (CCR), was made up of volunteers of different races; the majority of them were Hmong-American. But members of the group emphasized that they were not all Hmong-American in order to show that the group was not biased toward the Hmong in the evaluation of the trial. Journalist Laura Yuen’s mention of the

⁶ Kennedy, Paul & McEnroe, Paul. “Frauds find fortune in daycare.” Star Tribune 15 June 2003

⁷ Quinlivan, Lucy. “Interpreters break ground in U.S. Justice.” Pioneer Press 18 April 2000

⁸ Nelson, Rick. “Flavors of the land: Raspberries.” Star Tribune 10 July 2003

⁹ Yuen, Laura. “Group report questions Vang trial.” Pioneer Press 3 November 2005

race of some of the volunteers implied that the group decided the case was unfair because they sided with Vang as Hmong-Americans.

The coverage of the Chai Soua Vang Case could be noted as one of the most racial stories within the past few years. Many people, inside and outside the Hmong-American community, felt that the news media took advantage of the racial aspect. In many articles, Vang was identified as “a 37-year-old Hmong immigrant and truck driver.”¹⁰ Though some reporters only used the term when speaking of the racial aspect of the case, others used the term more widely, and it labeled him for readers.

Race marking in other articles are also prominent, though not as high profile as the Chai Soua Vang Case. In an article to warn consumers about college-aid scams, journalist H.J. Cummins focuses the first third of the article on Bao Yang, who was scammed by a college financial aid group.

“Yang, a Hmong widow in Minneapolis with seven children, was talked into a \$900 contract with College Financial Aid Services, Inc, after a seminar the New York Company sponsored at a local hotel two years ago.”¹¹ The fact that Yang had seven children was relevant to the story, portraying that because of her large family and because she was a single parent meant sending her children to college would be financially difficult for her. But, in this case, the fact that Bao Yang was Hmong-American was not relevant to story except to imply that it was because she was Hmong-American that she could not afford to send her children to college.

Another cause for concern was what seemed to be confusion between Hmong and Laotians for journalists. In 1994, the *Pioneer Press* ran an article about Representative Bruce Vento’s push for a U.S. Citizenship waiver for Laotians. The first three paragraphs talk about Laotians fighting in the war along side Americans. The rest of the article talks about Hmong people but never differentiates between the two groups of people.¹²

Since then, the problem occurred several more times. “[Ellina] Xiong is the first AP student to be admitted to Macalester as an early admission student. The daughter of Laotian immigrants, she was encouraged by her divorced parents to pursue higher education.”¹³ Xiong is spoken of as one of the many Hmong students enrolled in the AP program, but here, later in the article, is

¹⁰ Burcum, Jill & Meryhew, Richard. “Vang gets life terms, no chance of parole.” *Star Tribune* 9 November 2005

¹¹ Cummins, H.J. “Beware of college-aid schemes, consumer experts warn.” *Star Tribune* 9 June 2003

¹² Bonner, Brian. “Welfare law changes bring Vento effort on U.S. citizenship waiver for Laotians.” *Pioneer Press* 18 March 1994

¹³ Smetanka, Mary Jane. “Program opens college door to more.” *Star Tribune* 9 May 2005

referred to as a child of Laotian immigrants. This shows that the writer was uninformed of Hmong origins. Journalists Mary Jane Smetanka may have believed Xiong's parents were Laotian because they emigrated from Laos.

Of course, all of these reasons and examples for the mention of race also depend on the writer. There doesn't seem to be one format, wording, or general guidelines on writing on Hmong-Americans. The writer at the *Star Tribune* decided that race was worth mentioning when breaking the story of the Woodbury fire (see *Pioneer Press's* breaking story above at footnote number 3). "The Yang family had been attending a church in Woodbury, where they moved almost two years ago. But they had recently returned to St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church in St. Paul, where some services are delivered in Hmong, Johnson said."¹⁴ Though this is the only time race is mentioned in the series following the event, the writer may have felt it was necessary to identify the race of the family because it came from their Pastor (Johnson), even though it had nothing to do with the case or the story. The idea that the family was religious was obviously prominent for both papers, but the *Star Tribune's* article would have been just as strong without the mention of the Hmong sermons.

The person who wrote the breaking-news article for the *Pioneer Press* did not write the follow up article that was printed six months later, after the investigation into the cause of the fire was completed and made public, this writer decided that race was important. The opening line to the article talks of the time that the Woodbury couple had spent in refugee camps: "In the eyes of relatives, Chao Yang and Nancy Her Yang spent too many years in refugee camps, too many years working toward their dreams and too many years building a happy family for the two to have ended it all in flames on Sept. 30."¹⁵ The article goes on to talk of Chao Yang's journey from Laos, to Thailand, to California, meeting his refugee wife Nancy and making their life in Minnesota. The reasoning behind the use of Chao Yang and Nancy Her Yang's refugee past could possibly be because the finding of the six-month investigation into the fire was that one of the parents had intentionally set the fire. The writer of this follow up article probably thought it was appropriate to talk about Chao Yang and Nancy Her Yang's refugee past and immigrant status because police believe one of the two committed a murder-suicide. This refers back to the

¹⁴ Adams, Jim. "12-year-old survivor of Woodbury fire is recovering." *Star Tribune* 5 October 2005

¹⁵ Friedrich, Alex. "Parent set fatal fire, Woodbury police say." *Pioneer Press* 30 March 2006

idea of newspapers reiterating the stereotype that Hmong-Americans often make headlines when committing murder-suicides.

When the investigation was complete, *Star Tribune* writer Myron Medcalf decided not to mention the race of the family at all though the writer of the *Star Tribune* who broke the story six months earlier did. “Holly Yang and her parents, Nancy Her Yang, 45, and Chao Yang, 38, were killed in the Sept. 30 fire. Khoua Yang suffered severe burns but escaped from the home. Police said there was no evidence that an intruder or one of the children set the fire, but there was insufficient evidence to determine which parent might have set it.”¹⁶

One of the most prominent themes from the Hmong-American community members who were interviewed were that peoples either in or connected with the Hmong-American community felt the newspapers was unfair in their reporting. People felt that when articles were being written on the Hmong-American community or about a Hmong-American, that person’s race was always mentioned. Though people were identified by their race, when the person was white they were not. Community members also believed this to be true for other races, that if the person being spoken of was not white their race was mentioned.

The biggest concern for community members, almost on a unanimous basis, was that the Hmong-American community was only featured in the mainstream newspaper in a negative light. They felt that it was unfair to the Hmong-American community because they also do a lot of good for society. The most recent was the series featured in the *Star Tribune* entitled “Shamed into Silence.”¹⁷ The series was about young Hmong-American girls running away from home because they had been gang raped. The girls felt that they would be considered damaged goods if their parents knew about the rape. Many people in the Hmong-American community felt that the writers had not spent enough time researching the tradition of the Hmong-American community to know that the origins of Hmong gangs came while in America, not in Laos and that the series suggested being raped was ok in the culture. They also felt that the series made gang rapes a Hmong problem, when in reality, it occurs in many other racial, social and economic groups as well.

¹⁶ Medcalf, Myron. “Parent set fatal fire in Woodbury, police say.” *Star Tribune* 30 March 2006

¹⁷ Browning, Dan & Louwagie, Pam. “Shamed into silence.” *Star Tribune* 9 October 2005; “One girl’s ordeal of terror.” 9 October 2005; “In this world, there are no easy cases.” 10 October 2005; “Experts battle Hmong crisis.” 11 October 2005; “Documenting a hidden crisis, case by case.” 11 October 2005

The story came out of an FBI report that listed Minneapolis as one of the top 13 cities most notorious for teenage prostitution. Writers Pam Louwagie and Dan Browning couldn't find enough real numbers to substantiate that this was true. But, in the process, they spoke with county worker Doua Her, who told them of the issue within the Hmong-American community. Since the story of prostitution was old, the writers took the new focus and spent three months researching and interviewing people, such as "police, medicals and Hmong-Americans who dealt with the problem."¹⁸ There wasn't a lot of data behind this story and they knew that, so they depended on their interviews and the stories they were told.

Browning said that when people knew who they were or what they were writing about, they did not want to participate or be interviewed. In the end, the writers were confident in their piece and the research they had done. The series was put on hold because the *Star Tribune* felt that they shouldn't print too many stories on the Hmong-American community in a negative light in a short time span (this occurring while the General Vang Pao Foundation was being investigated, the scandal involving Sia Lo just broke, and the Chai Soua Vang was making headlines across the nation). Just before printing, the writers brought their series to the eyes of the *Star Tribune's* only Hmong-American writer, Chao Xiong, who found many things he said were incorrect, offensive or wrong. Most of his suggestions were not used. The writers also met with Senator Mee Moua and Representative Cy Thao, neither of whom were in favor of printing the series.

Included with the series was a section about how the story was reported. "Reporters Dan Browning and Pam Louwagie reviewed hundreds of police and medical records, attended trials, read court transcripts and interviewed dozens of sources, including six Hmong girls who were victims of sex crimes."¹⁹ Though informative, many community members still felt that the articles portrayed the Hmong-American community as one that allowed them. Many community members believed that interactions with a more diverse group of Hmong-Americans would have made the piece more neutral and showed that the community did not tolerate gang rapes.

The discussions with journalists who have covered the Hmong-American community also had themes. All of the journalists felt that their paper, whether it was the *Star Tribune* or the *Pioneer Press*, needed more coverage of minority communities in general. They agreed that their papers were not covering all of the communities they serve.

¹⁸ Browning, Dan. Personal Interview. 16 February 2006

¹⁹ Project Staff. "How this story was reported." *Star Tribune*. 9 October 2005

With this understanding, the journalists felt that though they have covered a great deal on the Hmong-American community, their coverage could be better. This was because many of the journalists did not know anything about the Hmong people before covering a story, topic or event. This ultimately led to lack of understanding in their writing, and led to the Hmong-American community questioning their objectives in writing the story. Because journalists move across the country, working for many different papers during their career, a large number of journalists that come into the Twin Cities have no knowledge of the Hmong people.

The journalists interviewed also felt that, all in all, their papers covered Hmong-Americans fairly and that they did not race mark or only cover crime stories. Many journalists said that when they reported a person's race, it was because it was a fact that had been collected and therefore printed. In printing the person's race, they did not feel that they were race-marking, being racist, or implying that it was because of the person's race that a crime was committed. They agreed that when race was mentioned, it usually had to do with the story. But this is a topic that has been and continues to be debated from both ends of the spectrum.

The fact collected and therefore printed theory is not always used, especially when covering other races. It is possible that because of the Hmong-American community's status, history, tightness and place in American society makes it worth mentioning an article. The Hmong-American community in the Twin Cities is known for its culture and tradition, as well as its emerging businesses, students, professionals and integration into the American life and society. Because of its high profile, it is often an eyebrow-raising event when one learns of people, events and crimes involving Hmong-Americans.

The journalists interviewed believed that the newspapers did not have stable enough relationships with the Hmong-American community to be able to get full understanding of the culture. Because of deadlines and competition, educating a reporter on aspects of the extremely complex culture would take longer than necessary to break a story. And though both papers try to cover the Hmong-American community, and though both papers agree that their coverage could be better, they also agree that having more input, letters and recommendations from the Hmong-American community could help their coverage.

Recommendations

In order to change the way the media covers the Hmong-American community, there are things that both sides should consider. It is evident that neither side is very clear on each other's role in the communities across the Twin Cities and the state of Minnesota.

Many of the journalists interviewed said they knew virtually nothing to very little before writing on the Hmong-American community. Some had the opportunity to research, talk with community members or ask other reporters about their experience. Others had no time to do so.

Many of the Hmong-American community members thought they had a good grasp about what a journalist's job was, but really didn't. Many people believed that journalists shouldn't cover negative issues. Some felt that Hmong-American journalists should keep certain things a community issue and not bring it into the public realm. Others believed that it was the non-Hmong-American journalists who write most accurately because they don't experience pressure from the community. The duty of a journalist is to report information to the public as is, with no personal opinions. It is also the journalist's responsibility to report both sides of a story through facts.

Often times, Hmong-Americans and other people of color see the media as the enemy. This could be due to the idea that journalists are unfair or uninformed when writing about people of color. This causes problems for journalists when looking for sources. When journalists find sources that are cooperative, it is more likely they will use the source a second, third or many more times. It's important for the Hmong-American community to make themselves available to the media.

The Hmong-American community should make the effort to gain a full understanding of journalism and journalistic ethics. By doing this, they can be attentive readers and judge reasons for the indication of race in a news piece. By doing this, they can be assured that when a journalist is race marking, that writer can and should be called out on it. By learning about journalistic ethics they can also understand when it is ok and necessary to mention a person's race in a news article. It is also important for readers to not only read articles about Hmong-Americans, but to also be critical in reading about other races. This will not only broaden their reading experiences, it will allow them to compare the coverage.

Being an attentive reader does not mean reading each article in detail and searching for race marking or racist wording. To be an attentive reader, one should stay up to date with the

news stories, read the articles critically and inform the writers and editors of problems in their writing. If wording is not consistent, facts are wrong or there are other problems within an article that may be false or used negatively when unnecessary, it is the responsibility of the community to write, call or email the writers and editors. Though many community members felt that certain writers continue to write with their opinions in the articles, they did nothing about it. It allows that writer to believe that including his or her own opinions and views in a news piece (and not an editorial piece) is going on unnoticed.

For example, the Chai Soua Vang Case was very emotional for both readers and writers due to the complex issues involved. Some reporters did an exceptional job when writing about the case by hiding their personal feelings toward Vang. Others did not nor did they attempt to hide their personal opinions and feelings. Writer Jill Burcum, who has more than 15 years of journalism experience, covered the sentencing of the Vang case and wrote that Vang “delivered a bizarre, rambling statement calling for racial harmony.”²⁰ When confronted about the choice of words, Burcum said, “It was bizarre to hear him call for racial harmony when his own explosive temper and intolerance led to all of us being in that courtroom. He also urged the victims' families to be proud of the role their loved ones' deaths in bringing about better racial relations. Bizarre doesn't even begin to cover it.”²¹ Burcum’s co-writer Richard Meryhew also made responses to the questions that followed the printing of the story, stating that he stood by the story. Burcum and Meryhew were not the main reporters assigned to cover the Vang case, though Burcum did occasionally co-write with Larry Oakes.

While this answer and the chosen words for the article made it obvious that Burcum had very strong feelings toward Vang and the case, Burcum stood by the article stating that she knew it wasn't perfect coverage of the case. Since then, the story was pulled off of the *Star Tribune*'s official web page. This shows that a small email, letter or phone call may not change what the reporter wrote in the past, but could shape what is written in the future.

A common thing that was found through interviews was that many people heard of stories through word of mouth. After hearing about something from a friend, co-worker or family member, those people would look up the articles. This can explain why so many community members felt that newspapers only wrote about negative things – because they only heard about

²⁰ Burcum, Jill & Meryhew, Richard. “Vang gets life terms, no chance of parole.” *Star Tribune* 9 November 2005

²¹ Burcum, Jill. “Re: Disappointed in your article.” Email to Hlee Lee. 9 November 2005

the negative issues from their friends, co-workers and family members and it is natural for people to only remember and talk about negative things. Though word of mouth can be good because it sparks conversation and action, it can also be bad because it is informant and often includes personal views.

Journalists should take advantage of the large Hmong-American community in the Twin Cities. The community's multiple organizations, clubs and groups allow for a wide range of sources. Editors should make relationships or connections within the community that can be used as sources for articles. There are the "usual suspects" for sources (i.e. Senator Mee Moua, Representative Cy Thao, Lee Pao Xiong), but these sources don't always know the details of each event. It may take a more effort to make these sources than usual, but it comes with many benefits (i.e. a more diverse group of sources comes with a wider range of information and views in a story). By editors making the relationships, they can give writers with no knowledge of the Hmong people more of an overview of the culture and can refer them to the right sources. Editors would also be able to identify and check the facts within the articles relating to the Hmong-American community.

Editors should also take into consideration the many Hmong-American and non-Hmong-American writers in the Twin Cities who have an interest in the community. Many times, these writers submit one-time articles, letters or other inquiries with the hope of being printed. These writers don't always receive a response, and aren't always printed. Jay Clark, a community organizer who has done extensive work with the Hmong-American community in the Twin Cities, wrote an article for the 30th year anniversary of the first wave of Hmong refugees.²² Clark submitted the article to both the *Star Tribune* and the *Pioneer Press* with the hopes that his article would shed light on the Hmong's past for those who were not familiar with it. Neither paper printed the article or made a response to Clark. (In the end, community newspaper *Hmong Times* printed the article, but Clark and other writers/community members felt it was preaching to the choir.) The *Pioneer Press* did an in-depth series on the anniversary, but the *Star Tribune* printed no recognition of it. Editors should see these submissions as an opportunity to print something from the community about the community.

Though it can be hard, it is important that journalists know more about the Hmong-American community and history before writing a piece. This can come as easily as a paper-wide

²² Clark, Jay. "Ghosts of the Vietnam War, Reflected in a Child's Eyes." *Hmong Times* 1 May 2005

training, lecture from a Hmong-American organization or pamphlet including important facts and sources. Doing their homework is essential for a journalist before going into the community. When a reporter has not done their homework, it can become offensive to the community. Though it may not be obvious for people who do not know much about the Hmong-American community, for those in it, it is evident when a reporter has not done their homework and it can become a wedge between the two communities. When journalists don't do their homework beforehand, to the Hmong-American community, it shows them that the journalists are being disrespectful and that they're not putting all their efforts into writing the piece.

At the 2006 Hmong National Conference, which was held in Minneapolis, the reporter from the *Star Tribune* approached Cha Lee, executive director of Hmong National Development, with questions for an article. The reporter Jean Hopfensperger asked Cha if the conference was aimed at finding a new leader to replace General Vang Pao. This came as a surprise because though the conference's theme was "Leaders of Tomorrow," it was by no means in relation to General Vang Pao. This showed to Cha and other members of the community that Jean Hopfensperger did not do any research into the presenters of the conference, the underlining reason for the theme or what the theme meant at all. When the article did run on March 17, 2006, the story was based around one presentation at the conference that highlighted the help needed to aid the Hmong refugees.²³ The article was misleading, since it was only about one presentation topic and did not mention any of the other topics. It showed that the reporter probably attended one presentation, didn't do any other interviews or find other sources for feedback on the conference.

Through partnerships, connections and relationships between the Hmong-American community (and organizations) and the journalism community, writing on Hmong-Americans in the Twin Cities can greatly improve. Understanding is key for both sides to be able to show the communities in a fair and just manner. This process can come from simple community meetings or other outlets available and convenient for both sides. This issue is by no means a journalism versus Hmong-American community problem, though it is often viewed that way by some people in both parties. It is a misunderstanding between two uninformed parties. But there are people in both parties that have the knowledge, relationships and resources available to them to

²³ Hopfensperger, Jean. "Some tough going for recent Hmong immigrants." *Star Tribune* 17 March 2006

bring this partnership about. It is important for both sides to take responsibility for what they say and what they write.