

The Evolving Role of the Press in Contemporary Vietnam

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The aim of this article is to examine the new developments of the mass media in Vietnam in the first decade of the 21st century and how they should be responded by the Vietnamese government. Over two decades of rapid economic growth has brought about a different face to the Vietnamese economy, presenting a new socio-political environment for the operation of the press. How the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and the Vietnamese Government respond to the emerging role of the press will not only define the future of the Vietnamese journalism but also reveal the future projection of the VCP.

Keywords: Vietnam, journalism, renovation, the press, communications

1. Introduction

The history of the Vietnamese press dated back to April 15, 1965 when the first issue of *Gia Định báo* (Gia Dinh newspaper) was published in Vietnamese language (Huynh, 2000). But the era of *báo chí cách mạng*, or the Vietnamese revolutionary press, which denotes the era that the press is under control of the VCP and serves the struggle of the VCP for national independence and development, only began in June 21, 1925 when Ho Chi Minh found the first issue of *Thanh Niên* newspaper (Nguyen, 1985). Since then, the most outstanding and invariable feature of the revolutionary press in Vietnam is that it is controlled by the VCP, who consider newspapers as communication instruments to transmit the VCP's ideology and policies to the people, encouraging them follow the course of revolution and development led by the VCP.

When the *doi moi* (renovation) process was introduced in Vietnam in 1986, the leadership of the VCP over the press changed significantly. In a meeting with the journalists and writers in Hanoi in October 1987, VCP's General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh encouraged writers and journalists not to "bend the pen" and urged them to commit to debates about social and political issues (Dong chi Tong Bi thu, 1987). The term "bend the pen" (*uon cong ngoi bút*) refers to the situation in which journalists or writers do not write about what they think, especially when discussing socio-political problems, because they are afraid that their opinion may not be approved by government authorities and they will be punished. This period, dubbed *coi trói*, or untying the mass media, was endorsed by the VCP and the press had been empowered to have more freedom to strengthen the democracy and promote the renovation process.

The collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in late 1980s and early 1990s, however, had vital impacts on the development of the press in Vietnam. The VCP and the Vietnamese government no longer allowed criticism of government policies and the questions of the government credibility and the legitimacy of the Vietnamese political system for fear that these criticisms would generate social movements, similar to what happened in other former socialist countries. Many famous writers and journalists found it hard living in the country and they fled to settle new life in other countries.

Approximately two decades later, from 2006, Vietnamese press has again gained remarkable development, becoming more assertive in addressing sensitive socio-political issues, such as high-ranking corruptions and the failure of government policy in tackling major social problems. In the runway to the 10th Congress of the VCP, held in April 2006 in Hanoi, in the front pages of many prestige newspapers appeared a heated debate with ironical comments between the Minister of Transportation and his Deputy about their responsibilities in the corruption in the Project Management Unit 18 (PMU18), which is under direct control of the Ministry of Transportation, in charge of managing the implementation of Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects in Vietnam. While Minister Dao Dinh Binh was under great public pressure and was forced to retire, Deputy Minister Nguyen Viet Tien was discovered abusing power for personal purposes. He was then accused of committing with several crimes; and was, together with some of his inferiors and accomplices, jailed for 18 months. This was among the first and biggest campaign against high-ranking corruption by the Vietnamese press in the last decade.

Earlier, journalists actively contributed to bring Luong Quoc Dung, Deputy Head of the Central Committee for Sport to trial for his corruption and committing sexual relations with an under-teenager girl. Corruptions in many major state-owned corporations such as Vietnam Airlines, the Vietnam National Coal-Mineral Holding Corp., and Vietnam Machinery Assembling Corporation (Lilama Corporation) have been disclosed. The press also conducts independent investigation on the corruptions of local leaders through land transformation and land sales in many areas including Phu Quoc district of Kien Giang province, and Do Son and Tien Lang districts of Hai Phong city.

On the other hand, there are signs demonstrating that, during this period, the press is more tightly monitored by the government. The Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC) was established in August 2007 to help Vietnamese government to better coordinate in managing the press. MIC Minister Le Doan Hop asserted that, in order to manage the press, "editorial directors of all newspapers will be installed by the MIC" (Minh, 2007). In 2008 only, at least six press agencies were warned about their ways of carrying news, seven journalists' license were revoked. Among these seven pressmen are Vice Editorial Directors of *Thanh Nien* and *Tuoi Tre*, Secretary General of the editorial board of *Thanh Nien*, and Head Representative of *Tuoi Tre* in Hanoi. Two other prestigious reporters from *Thanh Nien* and *Tuoi Tre* were brought into trial and one of them were jailed. Most of journalists lost licence or were jailed for violating the 1990 Law on Media and revealing national secrets when they wrote against corruption (Cuc Bao chi, 2008).

The contradictory images of the press in Vietnam reflects a continual evolution of the mass media and the VCP's attitude towards this industry in the process of renovation and international integration of Vietnam. How the press struggles to gain more freedom to fight against social devils, and how the VCP and Vietnamese government see the role of the mass media will have significant implications on the development of the whole society.

2. The New Context for the Press Development in Vietnam

The development of the press in Vietnam is strongly influenced by the achievements of Vietnamese economic and socio-political transformations. Twenty five years since the initiation of *doi moi* in 1986, Vietnam has been witnessing remarkable changes in four major areas, bringing about significant implications to the development and changing the face of the press in Vietnam.

First, the development of high technology, especially in the field of informatics and data-communications, has changed the way of disseminating and sharing information in Vietnamese society. The internet, first introduced in Vietnam in December 1997, is one of the most important factors shaping the new face of the Vietnamese society. In the initial stage, Vietnamese government, concerned about the negative impacts of the internet on the social and political stability and regime legitimacy, issued a number of regulations to ban people from accessing to "black websites" on internet.

The term "black websites", often used interchangeably with "harmful websites", or "reactionary websites", refers to web pages that cover incorrect information or information disliked by the VCP and the Vietnamese government because they may challenge their credibility and legitimacy. In some other cases, "black websites" also refers to pornographic web pages that are alien to Vietnamese traditions and their existence may undermine traditional social values.

Among the most outstanding laws and decrees regulating the usage of internet are the 2007 Joint Circular Letter on Internet Control of four ministries namely Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, Ministry of Culture and Information, Ministry of Public Security, and Ministry of Planning and Investment; and the Decree 97/2008/ND-CP of the government. Article 6 of the Decree 97/2008 strictly bans the use of internet for the purpose of "opposing the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; undermining national security, social order and safety" (Nghị định, 2008).

Although the internet brings about concerns about national and social security to the Vietnamese government, it generates great economic and social gains, serving Hanoi's aim to lead Vietnam to an industrialized country in an increasingly inter-dependent world. This encouraged Hanoi to expand popular access to the internet. Article 4 of the Decree 97/2008 pointed out four major guidelines in developing the internet in Vietnam: (1) encouraging the application of internet to the social and economic activities to enhance the productivities and the life quality of people, (2) fostering the use of internet in government agencies and other institutions and expanding internet access to remote areas, (3) creating favorable conditions for businesses and individuals to provide and use internet services, and (4) developing high quality internet services with reasonable price in order to meet the demands of the process of national industrialization and modernization (Nghị định, 2008).

The policy guidelines have been successfully implemented in the expansion of internet usage in Vietnam. In 2005, only 12.90% of the Vietnamese population had frequent access to the global network. This figure increased by more than twice in only six years, to 34.94% in October 2011 (VNNIC, 2011). Two third of internet users in Vietnam access to internet daily as they can connect to the global network at home or easily find an internet café in every corner of towns.

About 40-45% of Vietnamese internet users have personal accounts in forums, blogs, and social network sites (Cimigo, 2010). Internet has become an indispensable part of many young people in big cities.

The global internet flourishing makes it impossible for any government to rely on administrative and technological tools to control the flow of online information, unless all internet connection to the country is shut down. Hanoi may understand that it is not pragmatic to try blocking all "black websites", or even censor online information. For that reason, apart from using firewall to intercept certain websites, it pursues a two-dimensional approach. One is to foster registered websites to provide people with official information about the policies and instruction for administrative services. The other dimension is to trace the owners of websites that carry information prejudicial to the political system. According to the Reporters without Borders, in 2011 alone, 17 netizens, including some famous bloggers, were arrested (Reporters without Borders, 2011). Rumors also spread that the Vietnamese authorities used virus and other technological tactics to attack harmful websites (BBC, 2010; Reporters without Borders, 2011), but Vietnam officially rejected that accusation (Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010).

Second, the shift from a central-planned economy to a market oriented one and Vietnam's remarkable economic performance for over two decades have created a new social environment that contributes to change readers' reading interests as well as the fundamental way in which the press runs in Vietnam. The market economy in Vietnam has widened social gaps, inequity, and created more social evils, which has subsequently brought about social disputes and conflicts. At the same time, higher living standards of ordinary people have led to their higher demands for entertainment and more concerns over social issues.

The economic development has spilled over to the mass media, bringing about a flourishing of this industry. Hundreds of printed and online newspaper editorial offices have been newly established since 1986. Statistics from Vietnamese Ministry of Information and Communications showed that, by June 2012, Vietnam has 748 printed news agencies, 62 online newspapers, and 1024 licensed news websites (Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications, 2012). Besides, several pay-television stations have been established. In April 2003, Vietnam introduced the first ever cable television station, Vietnam Cable Television (VCTV), of which subscribers must pay a monthly fee to have access to the cabled channels. VCTV was then competed by other cable television stations such as HCTV and SCTV. Other forms of pay-TV such as satellite TV and digital TV are also introduced in Vietnam.

The market economy has also had substantial impacts on the way the news agencies run business in Vietnam. The press, still controlled by the government, is forced to generate their own income through advertisement sales and, for printed newspapers, high circulation. This means that newspapers now operate in a very much higher competitive environment in which they have to win the readers. This task is only achieved through breaking renovation in both the design and the content of the press. More interactive tools such as feedbacks and readers' opinions have been introduced in modern designs of printed newspapers such as *Tien Phong*, *Lao Dong*, *Thanh Nien*, and *Tuoi Tre*. Regarding the issues carried by the press, social problems, comments on government's policies, and the struggles against corruptions, which are of the readers' main interests, more frequently appeared in the press.

Third, Vietnam is increasingly integrated into the world in all aspects and the country is increasingly exposed to international customs, laws, and practices. Vietnamese government and the whole society are learning, absorbing, and accommodating to the new rules and values from the international community. Hanoi opened its foreign relations with the world since early 1990s with the diplomatic normalization with China in 1991. After that, Vietnam's foreign relations have quickly been broadened. In 1995, the country made diplomatic breakthroughs with the accession to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the diplomatic normalization with the United States and the European Union. Since then, Hanoi has been very proactive in its foreign policy as it enters various bilateral and multilateral negotiations in political and economic issues. Vietnam accessed to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2006 and became a non-permanent member of the United Nation's Security Council for the two year rotation in 2008 and 2009.

Today, Vietnamese economy is strongly connected with the global partners. The country's economic growth is strongly assisted by foreign investment and trade. By 2011, Vietnam had registered approximately USD 198 billion from over 13,600 foreign direct investment (FDI) projects, "outweighing the growth rates of other developing country recipients of FDI" (UNIDO&MPI, 2012). Vietnamese foreign trade in 2011 reached USD 108.1 billion, equating to 160% of Vietnamese GDP (HSBC, 2012; Tinh, 2012).

Economic and diplomatic integrations to the world have led to the introduction of international customs and practices to Vietnam. Foreign television programs, movies, business links, international laws, personal contacts, etc., have changed the habit and thinking of Vietnamese people. Western style entertainment complexes have been built in big cities, big corporations have been listing in the stock markets. By 2011, the number of foreign tourists coming to Vietnam reached over 6 billion, equal to around 7.5% Vietnamese population (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, 2011). Vietnamese pay-TV packages include all major world's famous channels such as BBC, CNN, ABC, Discovery, Star Movies, HBO, Star Sport, and ESPN. Both governmental dialogues and people to people relations help to

introduce relatively new concepts and perceptions such as intellectual property rights, human security, and civil society into Vietnam. They have gradually made impacts on individuals' minds and contributed to shape the way the society operate in the new era.

Lastly, a growing number of western-educated Vietnamese intellectuals are contributing to thinking and habitual changes of both the society and the government. Each year, hundreds of Vietnamese students are sent to high quality education systems such as those in the US, European countries, Australia, and Singapore, to study under the government scholarship programs. Foreign governments such as those of Australia, Japan, China, and New Zealand also provide totally some hundreds of scholarships annually for Vietnamese students, most of whom are from governmental sectors. Besides, each year, thousands of Vietnamese students pays for themselves to study abroad.

This helps increase the total number of Vietnamese students studying overseas. For example, according to the Institute of International Education (IIE), in the 2010-11 academic years, nearly 15,000 Vietnamese students registered to US educational institutions, making Vietnam the 8th among countries sending students to the US (IIE, 2012). The number of Vietnamese students in Australia in the same year was over 23,000 (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.). Many foreign-educated students have come back to work in Vietnam in different sectors such as government officers, university lecturers, journalists, and businessmen. They contribute to change the face of the society and the press through contribution to the policy making process, teaching, or working in the mass media industry.

3. A new role for the Press in Vietnam

The VCP has always considered newspapers a tool to better manage the country because it serves as a channel to explain the government and party's policies and to enable ordinary people to have a saying in national affairs. Officials' perceptions towards the press, however, are diverse. Some see the opening of the press is good, while others are concerned that if the press is not controlled, they will be disoriented and will not serve the course of national development. Against this backdrop, the willingness of the VCP and Vietnamese government to empower the press to address socio-political problems will significantly determine its role in the society.

In the most basic explanation of a country's politics, there are three broad types of politics. Official politics deals with government duties, including the making and implementation of policies. People's politics refers to the influence of ordinary people to politics through the way they live and behavior. Advocacy politics involves direct efforts to support, criticize, or oppose authorities, programs, policies, or the entire way the resources are produced and distributed (Kerkvliet, 2005). Placing the press into this category division, it often functions as a part of the advocacy group.

In the Vietnamese political system, however, the press is under control of the VCP and government. Article 6 of the Law on Media of Vietnam noted that the media has the responsibility "to disseminate, publicize and contribute to the establishment and protection of the strategies and policies of the Party....; to establish and develop socialist democracy; ... to strengthen and protect the Socialist Vietnam Fatherland" (Law on Media, 1990). The VCP also stated it clearly, considering newspapers as communication instruments to transmit the VCP's ideology and policies to the people, encouraging them follow the course of revolution and development led by the VCP (Van kien, 1982).

Although the press is under control of the VCP and the Vietnamese government, it in fact is granted a certain level of independence as a power check of the making and implementation of the government's policies. This new openness in this time, however, differs from the one in 1988-1989 in two aspects.

First, in 1988-1989, the openness of the press was for a small group of intellectuals, who advocated for a freedom of expression and speech to tackle social and public issues. The openness policy towards the press was influenced by liberal Party leaders and the intellectuals in a domestic context of extreme social, economic, and political difficulties. The current re-emerging role of the press in Vietnam occurred in the context of high national economic growth and the living standards of people are increased. The mass media currently imparts the aspiration and reaction of ordinary people to the government's policies and implementations as well as to changes which affect their daily lives.

Examples are abundant. In recent years, general meetings of the National Assembly have always been broadcasted live in national television channels so that people can easily follow discussions and Q&A sessions between members of the National Assembly and Ministers of the government. In the same pattern, general meetings of the People's Council at provincial level in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam's two biggest cities, also have live coverage in local televisions. The press also reflected people's expectations and criticized many poor quality policies and regulations, thus putting pressure on government authorities to remove them. For example, the policy of stopping vehicle registration as a means to reduce traffic jam in Hanoi in September 2003 was strongly criticized by the press. Many newspapers, such as *Tuoi Tre* and *Tien Phong* commented that this policy violated the right of ownership written in the Constitution. This policy hence was removed in 2006. In another case, the national electricity corporation of Vietnam (EVN), which *de facto* enjoys a monopoly status in providing electricity in Vietnam, has always been challenged by the press when it

attempts to increase electricity price. Social spirit is reflected in the press, resulting in the government's decision to open the electricity market for competition from July 2012.

Second, the opening of the press in this time is a gradual process, focusing more on the struggle against the socio-political problems, including corruption, in an established political system. It is different from the period of 1988-89 when the intellectuals demanded immediate and radical changes at doctrinal level. A common explanation for the sudden death of the openness in the period of 1988-89 was that it occurred in a high speed and broad scale so that the VCP feel that the revolution would undermine its legitimacy.

In addition, comparing with the social and political context in late 1980s, the VCP now enjoys higher level of credibility and legitimacy thanks to the country's lasting economic growth in the last two decades, so it has more confidence in allowing criticisms from the intellectuals. The current development of mass media in Vietnam is, therefore, expected to be a stable process.

It would be a critical shortcoming, however, if we conclude that the press in Vietnam today is playing a role of an independent group at advocacy politics level. The VCP has always asserted its control over the press explicitly and implicitly. Editors in Chief of newspapers must be members of the VCP, and they gather frequently to hear direction for their jobs from the Department for Propaganda and Ideology of the VCP. The evolution towards a more freedom from government of the mass media in Vietnam, therefore, will possibly experience some fluctuations. But as the Vietnamese domestic context has changed, in the long run, this trend is unlikely to be reversed.

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