

Vietnam's news media and journalists in the internet age

Mai Duong

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Technology Sydney**

2016

Certificate of authorship

I certify that the work presented in this dissertation has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged in the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of student: _____

25th July 2016

This research is supported by Australia Awards–Endeavour Scholarships.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Australian Government for supporting international students, in particular for their support for my doctoral research through an Endeavour Scholarship. My Endeavour award progressed very smoothly thanks to the devoted staff at Scope Global Pty Ltd.

I would like to thank my principal supervisor, Dr Catriona Bonfiglioli, whose superb attention to detail has helped equip me with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed as a PhD student.

I would like to thank my mentors, who have supported me with more than their academic expertise. Professor Wendy Bacon connected me with UTS. Professor Philip Bell first inspired me to work towards an academic career. Dr Jonathon Hassid helped transform theoretical complexity into more accessible practical issues.

I would like to thank the professional staff at the University of Technology Sydney for their guidance and support, especially librarian David Litting and IT technicians. I also wish to thank the UTS Graduate Research School and the research office at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, especially Juleigh Slater who always tried to give me a comfortable research desk.

I am indebted to my academic colleagues Amina Singh, Benjamin Hanckle, Cale Bain, Jahnnabi Das and John Roberts for interesting discussions and to Mr Derrill De Heer for his generous support. I also thank my Vietnamese friends, Cuong Duong, Thu Mach, Thuy Nguyen, Phuong Vu and Linh Binh, who were on hand anytime I need help.

I would like to thank my employers and colleagues at Vietnam Television for easing the difficulties associated with my study.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family — the foundation of my whole life: my grandparents who have been longing for my return; my parents who always trust me with their unconditional love; my younger sisters who have been taking care of family affairs on my behalf; my three wonderful children who always cheer me up every day; and my sweet husband who has been with me through all the ups and downs. ■

Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
List of figures and tables	vii
Abstract	8
Chapter 1 The Vietnamese press in the age of the internet: context and background	10
1.1 Vietnam in the internet age	12
1.1.1 A decade of delay in internet delivery (1997–2007)	14
1.1.2 Fear of losing control	16
1.1.3 Money is important.....	18
1.1.4 Beyond economic benefits	20
1.2 The Vietnamese press from the economic reform to the internet age	22
1.2.1 The press after the economic reform	22
1.2.2 The Vietnamese press in the age of the internet.....	25
1.3 Research questions	34
1.3.1 Investigating Vietnam’s news media and journalists in the internet age	35
1.4 Thesis overview	35
Chapter 2 Theoretical foundations for the study of the Vietnamese press in the digital age	40
2.1 The outdated Soviet communist theory of the press and the relevance of the propaganda model	40
2.1.1 Revisiting Soviet communist theory	40
2.1.2 The relevance of the propaganda model	45
2.2 The applicability of the propaganda model to Vietnam.....	48
2.3 The internet as the Fifth Estate	52
2.4 Network society and social movements	54
2.5 Towards cyber democracy: online freedom, tabloidisation, active audiences and the journalists’ profession.....	57
2.5.1 Online freedom of expression for future cyber democracy	57
2.5.2 Active online audiences	61
2.5.3 The global scale of tabloidisation.....	62
2.6 Conclusion	64
Chapter 3 Methodology: a three-way approach and thematic analysis	66
3.1 The three-way approach.....	67
3.1.1 Media discussion.....	68
3.1.2 Semi-structured interviews	69
3.1.3 Case studies.....	78
3.2 The risks of researching the media in Vietnam.....	79
3.3 Thematic analysis	82
3.3.1 The six steps of analysis	83
3.3.2 Thematic analysis and NVivo	90

3.4. Over-arching themes emerging from NVivo analysis	91
3.4.1 Theme 1: Commercialised press	94
3.4.2 Theme 2: Ascending electronic press	95
3.4.3 Theme 3: Blogs, Facebook and online community	97
3.4.4 Theme 4: Internet and journalists	98
3.4.5 Theme 5: State control & prospects of Vietnam's press.....	99
3.5 Conclusion: the challenges and limits of methodology	100
Chapter 4 Market forces and their failure in Vietnam's news media — a propaganda model approach.....	102
4.1 Testing the five filters of the propaganda model on the Vietnamese state press	103
4.1.2 Size, ownership, and the profit orientation of the Vietnamese media	104
4.1.3 Size and levels.....	104
4.1.4 Ownership and profit orientation.....	105
4.1.5 Advertising as a licence to do business	109
4.1.6 Sources of the news.....	111
4.1.7 Negative responses	114
4.1.8 Ideology of anticommunism	117
4.2 The failure of market forces	119
4.3 Conclusion	123
Chapter 5 The good, the bad and the ugly in Vietnam's electronic press	124
5.1 The origin of Vietnam's electronic press.....	125
5.2 Dynamics of the Vietnamese electronic press	134
5.2.1 A money-making machine	134
5.2.2 The rapid messenger.....	137
5.3 The rise of tabloidisation	140
5.3.1 The indicators of tabloidisation	142
5.3.2 Behind the phenomenon of tabloidisation	145
5.3.3 Tabloidisation as a back door to press freedom	148
5.4 Connecting with the audience	151
5.5 A 'messy' situation	156
5.5.1 Censorship and propaganda	156
5.5.2 The decline in news quality	160
5.6 Conclusion	164
Chapter 6 The evolution of social media and online communities in Vietnam.....	165
6.1 The politics of the Vietnamese blogosphere	166
6.1.1 A snapshot of Vietnamese blogs and their readers.....	166
6.1.2 Three groups of political blogs.....	167
6.1.3 The evolution of political blogs.....	184
6.2 Facebook — a space enabling diversified sources of news	186
6.2.1 Individual information makes headlines	189
6.2.2 Uncensored foreign news media	190
6.2.3 Network with political blogs.....	192
6.2.4 Reluctant acceptance by CPV authorities	194

6.3 Active netizens and the beginning of online social movements	198
6.3.1 Hanoi Tree Movement: key developments	199
6.3.2 Active netizens	202
6.3.3 The rise of online social movements	204
6.4 Conclusion	208
Chapter 7 Contemporary Vietnamese propaganda journalists	
in the digital age.....	209
7.1 Emerging trends for propaganda journalists in the digital age.....	210
7.1.1 Becoming 'friends' with the audience.....	211
7.1.2 The internet as a safety net for investigative journalists	213
7.2 Rise of citizen journalists	221
7.2.1 Examples of citizen journalism	222
7.2.2 Challenges for propaganda journalists.....	225
7.3 The double life of contemporary propaganda journalists.....	229
7.3.1 Breaking boundaries: the fate of the challengers.....	229
7.3.2 Pushing the boundaries: the case of the Young Journalists Forum	233
7.3.2.1 Evaluating the forum's professional and social effects	234
7.3.2.2 Prospects of the forum.....	238
7.3.2.3 Unresolved limits	243
7.4 Conclusion	248
Chapter 8 Conclusion: promise or peril on the internet pathway?	250
8.1 A commercialised but not a free press	251
8.2 Electronic press leading the way	253
8.3 Pressure from social media and networked netizens	255
8.4 Adaptation by propaganda journalists	258
8.5 The internet's impact on the news media	263
8.6 As yet unrealised press freedom	266
8.7 Present contradictions in Vietnam's press	269
8.8 The power of the network	271
8.9 Future research	278
List of abbreviations.....	284
Appendix: Selected interview data	285
References	298

List of figures and tables

Figures

Figure 3.1 Concept maps drawn in NVivo showing the final themes	93
Figure 5.1: The front page of Tuoitreonline, the e-newspaper owned by a popular newspaper	131
Figure 5.2: The front page of Sports & Culture general information website, owned by a newspaper	132
Figure 5.3: THE front page of 24h.com.vn, a general information website owned by an advertising joint-stock company.....	132
Figure 5.4: Vietnamese users' device usage time compared with global usage	138
Figure 5.5 Cartoon capturing the two choices facing Vietnamese journalists	148
Figure 5.6 Photo captured on 27th August 2014, on the last day the dislike button was seen on Vietnamnet.....	157
Figure 5.7 Photo captured from the screen of Vietnamnet.net on 5 February 2014.....	158
Figure 6.1: Front page of the political Blog Chan Dung Quyen Luc	181
Figure 6.2: Top social networks in vietnam in 2014.....	187
Figure 6.3: Dominant usage of Facebook among other social media platforms in Vietnam (2014)	188
Figure 6.4: Home page of the tree removal protest fanpage	201
Figure 7.1: Cartoon showing propaganda journalists struggling to deal with competition from Facebook's citizen journalists	227

Tables

Table 3.1: Summarised information of 18 participants interviewed (2012 – 2016).....	71
Table 3.2: An example of theory-driven codes extracted from NVivo in stage 2 of the thematic analysis	87
Table 3.3: An example of data-driven codes extracted from NVivo in stage 2 of the thematic analysis.....	87
Table 3.4: Final themes listed in NVivo	92
Table 3.5: Theme 1 and selected quotes coded for child nodes extracted from NVivo..	95
Table 3.6: Theme 2 with selected quotes coded for child nodes extracted from NVivo	96
Table 3.7: Theme 3 and selected quotes coded for child nodes extracted from NVivo..	98
Table 3.8: Theme 4 and selected quotes coded for child nodes extracted from NVivo..	99
Table 3.9: Theme 5 and selected quotes coded for child nodes extractedfrom NVivo...	99
Table 6.1: Summarised information of four top leaders posted on <i>Chan Dung Quyen Luc</i> blog	182

Abstract

After the Vietnam War, and particularly since 1986, Vietnam has been internationally recognised as one of the few communist countries to successfully implement a socially-oriented market economy. In the internet age, Vietnam has become one of the most active locations in Asia for the use of information technology. This progress, however, has not been enough to improve the international image of the country's press, which remains stained by heavy censorship and the tight control of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

This study investigates the impact of the internet on the Vietnamese news media and journalists, presenting evidence to show that the internet has brought more than economic benefits to Vietnam. Through the thematic analysis of rich natural data, semi-structured interviews and selected cases, the study shows that the virtual community made possible through the internet provides a mirror that reflects Vietnam's social crises, gives voice to public feeling and tests the limits of the Communist Party of Vietnam's leadership and authority.

After discussing the failures of the economic reforms on mainstream media, the study highlights the internet's role in transforming the state-owned press and the online social sphere. The study identifies electronic newspapers as the most progressive media sector and links their rise to the rapid growth of the Vietnamese audience, citizen journalists and the expansion of social networks. Drawing on recent case studies the thesis discusses the cracks that the internet has provoked in Vietnam's propaganda system.

This study offers a picture of the current situation of the Vietnamese news media as it struggles to survive, continually pushing unsuccessfully against the

boundaries set by the authorities. The analysis also identifies broader social and political contradictions and divisions in Vietnamese society, illustrating the risks and opportunities facing Vietnam's contemporary news media and propaganda journalists.

This study's findings provide a timely critique of the roles of the Vietnamese authorities and the news media at a time when the internet is on the way to becoming the 'Fifth Estate'. The study suggests that both the state news media of Vietnam and the Communist Party of Vietnam's authorities will need to respond to citizens' demands for change or face the growing power of information networks. In addition, this thesis reminds readers of the vital role the internet can play in Vietnam because the technology provides the most direct way to give Vietnamese citizens the basic values of freedom and democracy despite the control of the authorities. ■

Key words: Vietnam's news media, political blogs, electronic newspapers, propaganda journalists, active audience, online social movements, networked individuals