

Vietnam's news media and journalists in the internet age

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**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.

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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. ■

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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

Chapter 1

The Vietnamese press in the age of the internet: context and background

The year 2007 marked the ninth year I had worked for the Vietnamese State Television, VTV, which is one of the most important media organisations in Vietnam. I was based in Hanoi and my job was as a news presenter, news editor and later news producer for the daily news programmes broadcast in English on channel VTV4. I needed access to the internet throughout the day to read world news, search for information, collect facts, check data, contact people and communicate with my colleagues. I still remember the cool morning in autumn 2007 when, having just finished searching on Google to explore the facts of a news story, I turned to a colleague nearby and said, 'What would happen if we did not have the internet to do our daily work?' My colleague replied: 'When that day comes, we might have to die or quit this job!'

That short conversation was just for fun but later we discussed this issue several times in our office. My colleagues offered different explanations for their basic need for the internet but they all agreed with the point that internet access had become vital for us, as journalists. Without internet access, we didn't die or have to quit our jobs but our work would be so much harder, more lonely, less interesting, less informative and much slower.

I belong to the earlier generations of VTV journalists, trained to research and write the news without the internet. I started my journalism career in 1998 by writing on paper translations of the news copy provided by the international

news agency Reuters. What I remember of information technology in the first days of its introduction to our work is a large computer placed right next to my boss's office. We were only allowed to use the internet-connected computer to check the list updated by Reuters and to print out selected news stories. The internet was in limited use in my news group during that period until the year 2000, when we were given two more computers. More than 12 journalists in our team had to take turns to use the two computers connected to the internet to produce the 15-minute news programme. It was not until that time that we became used to reading online news and using emails.

Many years later, when we started using laptops, working on the office's local area network with faster wifi internet access, we still experienced slow access speeds and prolonged interruptions to our internet connection. These problems were explained to be caused by breaks in the undersea fibre optic cable system used by Vietnam. Breaks happened annually from 2009 and continue today. In 2012, five years after the internet discussion with my colleague, I asked myself a broader question: What has the internet brought to the Vietnamese press and its journalists?

Answering this question led to this thesis. It has taken much time and effort to explore the many layers of the topic. In this thesis, I present the core of my discussion, and in this chapter, I begin with the first layer in which I provide a brief overview of the present economic, political and social conditions in Vietnam. I then highlight the uneasy path of digital development before the internet rose to its influential position in various sectors and industries of the country. Having set the scene, I then review the Vietnamese press system, which is tightly constrained and controlled by the Communist Party of Vietnam but which has grown towards the consumer-based media under the impact of the open economy. I explain how, in the communist controlled country, the internet's arrival became a new influence 'opening up other institutional arenas,

from everyday life to science, to greater social accountability' (Dutton 2013, p. 4). I describe how the more recent media climate in Vietnam no longer imposes the same conditions professionals endured for more than 20 years. I review the ways in which the landscape has changed and through which the Party's control has been shaken by 'the emergence of alternative sources of information' and the development of an active public (Nguyen 2014a). I suggest that to understand and explain these larger issues and their impact, we need a balanced stance, drawing on updated conceptual frameworks and relevant methodological approaches. I argue that by taking such an approach, my study provides satisfying answers to the questions that initiated my research.

1.1 Vietnam in the internet age

Vietnam has been widely known as a country which for three decades was gripped in fierce wars between the communists and the world's most powerful countries (France, Japan, the United States and its allies). The Vietnam War (1954–1975) has become an endless topic for writers from Vietnam, the United States and other nations. Googlereads offers a list of the 213 best books about the Vietnam War as voted by readers. After the war ended in 1975, the country was unified into a one-party Communist state. To escape economic difficulties, in 1986, the country gave up its planned economy and implemented economic reform (*Doi Moi*) to free the economy and create economic opportunities.

The economic reform was such a milestone for the country after the war that it has even been described as 'the Second Revolution' (Nugent 1996), allowing the country to escape poverty and become 'the new East Asian dragon' (Irvin 1995). With some differences in the timing and impacts, Vietnam's economic reform shares key similarities with that of China, including the model of a socialist market economy, the step-by-step strategies of development and the same challenges in managing the multi-sector economy, reforming the state-owned enterprises and the unresolved problems of social gaps and administrative

procedures (Van An & Duc 2007). A typical characteristic of Vietnam's *Doi Moi* is that the reform 'has not been accompanied by political reform' which occurred in the Eastern communist countries (Hang 2003, p. 144). However, the reform has 'unintentionally' brought in political reform, leading to 'a weaker hold' by the Communist Party on its power (Nugent 1996).

As of January 2016, Vietnam's population numbered 92,858,906 million (Countrymeters 2016). More than three decades after the first economic reform, Vietnam is experiencing hard times. In the economic sector, the nation has been struggling to pull itself out of the global economic recession and has also suffered from the global financial crisis. In 2013, the World Bank noted that the country's economic growth rate was at its slowest since the 1980s (SaigonGiaiphong 2013). The government has tried to revive the high growth rate of the country through private sector support, enhanced exports and direct foreign investment stimulants but falling global oil prices and rising pressure on its currency mean that the Vietnamese dong (VND), threatens to continue haunting the economy (Nguyen 2015). Behind the image of 'Vietnam [as a] Rising Dragon' (Hayton 2010) are the long-lasting problems of corruption, human rights issues and the rising cost of environmental pollution caused by industrialisation and urbanisation. The country is changing into a 'new society' with greater social inequality, higher civil awareness and stronger public demands for further political reforms. After successfully leading the country's transition from Stalinism to a market economy, the Communist Party is being questioned over whether it can maintain its leadership in a society with increasingly complex and intricate problems (Hayton 2010, pp. 227,228). If economic reform brought Vietnam into the world, the advent of the internet in 1997 signalled the 'beginnings of electronic networking in Vietnam' (Surborg 2008), pushing the country to integrate more deeply with the global networks of economic values, knowledge and ideologies. The freedom and democratic

values of the internet have gradually taken the Vietnamese people further from their economic worries to revitalise their desire for the right to voice their opinions, for the media to speak the truth and for the authorities to change.

1.1.1 A decade of delay in internet delivery (1997–2007)

On 19 November 1997, the Vietnam Post and Telecommunications Group (VNPT) sent an email linking Vietnam to the global internet system, saying 'Hello the world' when Vietnam officially accessed the World Wide Web (Le 2012). The date became a national day of celebration, marking the dominance and impacts of the digital technology in all parts of the country. In fact, electronic networks had been introduced to Vietnam many years earlier. The first international connections were established by the Institute of Information Technology (IOIT) in 1992 through a dial-up connection to the Coombs Computing Unit at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra (Surborg 2008). The connection was made under an Australian-sponsored project to network sources of information about Vietnam, create databases, assist individual access to information and organise workshops (Henninger 1995). The project also helped establish the Vietnam Academic Research and Education Network (VARENet), which was intended to allow Vietnamese researchers to connect with ANU in Canberra. The administration of the network and technical expertise was located at IOIT (Henninger 1995) so IOIT is said to be the first internet service provider in Vietnam. In 1993, Netnam was established to serve the international community in Vietnam. The first email at the government level sent by Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet to his Swedish counterpart, Carl Bildt, in April, 1994 was an historic event (Surborg 2008). However, access to the electronic network was still limited to the academic and expatriate community in Vietnam.

At the national level, the period from 1986 to the early 1990s was a key period during which Vietnamese leaders accelerated the economic and social

reform of the country. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) had led the Vietnamese people during the two 'continual' wars against the French and the Americans (Hang 2003). After becoming the nation's leader from 1975, the CPV was not successful in rebuilding the country's economy from scratch with its policy of 'collective agriculture and central planning'. The 1975–1985 decade was recognised by the CPV as having 'gone badly' and Vietnam 'needed to change' (Perkins 2013). Then the economic reform or *Doi Moi* was introduced at the Sixth Party Congress in December 1986, under the newly elected reformer leader, CPV General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh. The *Doi Moi* started in 1986 but scholars believe that the acceleration of radical change really began after the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991. It was the end of economic subsidies, all prices were freed and people started enjoying 'the better material life' (Hang 2003). *Doi Moi* did not include political reform but control was loosened and the country was 'no longer a monolithic state' (Van Koert 2004). In this context, the CPV needed more resources to boost economic reform and the commercial potential of the internet was finally recognised.

Vietnam did not have an information and communication technology (ICT) policy until 1993. Since the very first days of the ICT sector's development, Vietnamese leaders decided to put the sector under the 'highly protected' control of the government and excluded it from the open economy (Boymal, Martin & Lam 2007). In 2012, former senior officials of Vietnam's telecommunication sector revealed on public media during the 15th anniversary of the country's connection to the internet that the internet had finally been approved officially in Vietnam on 19 December 1996, under a decision made by the CPV at the second plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Vietnam

Communist Party¹ (ICTnews 2012). The CPV had had concerns and ‘anxieties concomitant of unbridled information’ (Henninger 1995, p. 107) which lasted for several years and resulted in the CPV delaying access in Vietnam for a decade. In summary, the CPV authorities had little sympathy with the internet but they accepted it for the economic benefits. Despite the ten-year delay in its introduction, the technology has taken root and grown widely and deeply across all sectors of the country. The following section reviews the rough path that led to the broad applications of information technology now present in Vietnam.

1.1.2 Fear of losing control

Several years after the internet’s arrival in 1997, Vietnam was said to have an ‘undeveloped telecom infrastructure’ (Hachigian 2002, p. 47; ICTnews 2012) and to be ‘on the periphery of the network’ (Van Koert 2004, p. 200) due to high internet charges and slow access (Boymal, Martin & Lam 2007). Surborg (2009) adds that the internet sector in Vietnam was given a late and low starting point with ‘a stark rural–urban’ divide within the country (p.21). While scholars take various approaches to the internet’s growth in Vietnam, they share a common answer to the question of what was behind the slow initial growth of the internet in Vietnam: the subtle political and economical calculations of the CPV, designed to keep the internet under the party’s control. Researchers such as Boymal, Martin & Lam (2007) and Van Koert (2004) point out that the central role of the Vietnamese government is one of the major reasons delaying internet

¹ The Central Committee of the Vietnam Communist Party (*Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam*) is the highest authority within the Communist Party of Vietnam. The current 12th Central Committee has 200 official members. The committee appoints the Politburo and the General Secretary of the Party, and nominates candidates for key positions including National Assembly Chairperson, State President and Prime Minister.

innovation in Vietnam. The internet had been a 'deeply contentious political issue' because the CPV 'hardliners' were worried about its political and cultural influence (Nguyen 2008).

A brief introduction to Vietnam's politics is necessary to understand the CPV's cautious attitude towards the internet. The phrases 'single-ruling party leadership', 'authoritarian regime', and 'socialist ideologies' are commonly used by researchers to describe the politics of Vietnam but understanding this in the present context is 'enigmatic' (London 2014, p. 3). Despite the perception that Vietnam is a one-party state with all political power centralised, researchers have recognised that political decision-making is a complex process involving various factions or political dissidents inside the CPV (Hayton 2010; Surborg 2008; Van Koert 2004). Consensus within the CPV is finally reached by compromise among the factions but this process frequently prolongs debate and results in many shilly-shallying policies, which then impact on the national economy and society.

The fight between the 'hardliners' and the reformists ahead of the final recognition of the internet has become a popular story, described by many researchers studying the internet in Vietnam. The story was also implied in the Vietnamese press years later (Cam 2013; Le 2012; VietnamNet 2013; VNEconomy 2012). While the 'hardliners' worried about the threat of the internet to CPV power, the opposition argued that the technology could be controlled and its economic benefits would accelerate the *Doi Moi* process. The introduction of the internet in 1997 put an end to the temporisation. The 'prevailing power' within the CPV finally agreed to allow Vietnam access to the internet but compromised, requiring that the internet be put under strict monitoring through the numerous decrees, directives and resolutions imposed on the cyberspace (Surborg 2008; Van Koert 2004). The CPV's intentions behind its management policy in this initial period have been explained as follows: 'the

internet's development must follow (within) the management policy' (Le 2012) to guarantee the internet's development within the CPV's absolute power and desire. Vietnamese authorities kept reminding the people of internet abuse by 'hostile foreign forces', 'social evils' or a plot of the 'peaceful revolution'. Using this propaganda, the CPV could defend their monitoring of the internet and rule out possible threats to their legitimacy.

The internet management policy of this stage made the internet 'fairly harmless' to the CPV authorities (Van Koert 2004, p. 229) but yielded low economic benefits. Hachigian (2002) puts Vietnam and China in the group of the 'one-party East Asian states' using 'compromise strategies' with significant restrictions on public use of the internet. This solution meant that Vietnam gained less economic benefit from IT due to the lower investment and slow network connections. Together with 'an avalanche' of decrees and ordinances regulating every aspect of the internet, censorship was applied, firewalls were implemented and high access costs limited internet use. The monopoly of the Vietnam Post and Telecommunications Group (VNPT), a major contributor to the state's annual budget, was maintained. During the first two years of the internet's existence in Vietnam, internet users were Western expatriates and businessmen. Intellectuals and students had little or no opportunity to access the internet because of the high fees (Boymal, Martin & Lam 2007).

The restrictive policy could be seen as a win-win solution for the factions of the CPV. The restrictions eased the fear of losing control and power. However, they did not please the reformists who wanted to tap the internet's commercial advantages fully. The radical supporters continued using economic pressures to demand more internet applications.

1.1.3 Money is important

A key date in the development of the internet in Vietnam was the issuance of the decree 55/2001/ND-CP in 2001, which replaced the 1997 regulations and

which partially liberalised the monopoly of the VNPT and lessened the government's management of the internet (Surborg 2008). Licences were granted to more internet service providers (ISPs) and internet exchange points (IXPs). In 2002, five new ISPs were granted licences, including one private ISP. The change meant that competition among ISPs increased, state control was reduced and prices were lower for internet users. From then on, the government claimed it was placing control over the internet in second place after internet development. The concept behind policy of this period was that 'the management policy must catch up with the development of the internet' (Le 2012). The changes marked the dominant role of the reformist faction and the stronger commitment for economic reform within the CPV authorities. The country witnessed immediate impacts of the new policy: competition in the internet market was increased, internet prices were lowered and the number of internet cafés was described by senior officials of telecommunications as 'mushrooms growing after rain' (An 2012). The introduction of broadband in 2003 was one further step to gradually bringing the internet into the homes of Vietnamese families.

Broadband internet has been praised by the Vietnamese press as 'the magic of modern life' (Trang 2011). Four years after the launch of the ADSL internet service in 2007, the access speed was 7,700 times faster. Internet connectivity reached all 63 cities and provinces of the country. The number of internet users increased from 1.8 million in the 1997–2003 period (or 4% of the population) to 18 million or 21% of the nation's population in 2011 (VNEconomy 2012). In parallel with the rocketing number of internet users, revenues worth US\$13.7 billion were earned by the ICT industry by the end of 2011. In 2014, the figure increased to US\$27 billion (MIC 2014b; VNEconomy 2012).

Those achievements, however, did not keep pace with the potential of digital technology so the reformists have been mobilising to reduce further

administrative control, arguing that 'management must stimulate the internet development' (Bach & Khiem 2012). Dr. Mai Liem Truc,² one of the founders of Vietnam's ICT industry, said the management policy has to be further changed to catch up with the internet growth (An 2012; Bach & Khiem 2012). This total policy revision placed legal decrees and ordinances second to the development of the internet and its socio-economic impacts. More than a decade after the internet's arrival in 1997, it had become clear that the CPV authorities had accepted any risks of the internet in exchange for the financial gains and economic development it could bring. The internet is far from being free but the CPV's choice finally opened up a new chapter of the growth of internet in Vietnam among which remarkable economic gains are only part of the changes. The growth of the internet in the form of information networks has brought about chances, challenges, contradictions and ambivalences in the Vietnamese society.

1.1.4 Beyond economic benefits

The two-decade development of the internet in Vietnam has been regularly described as 'a significant landmark' and as a successful highlight of influence of the leadership of the CPV on the mainstream media. The internet has been praised as 'the most important tool of production' (Bach & Khiem 2012) and its dominant role in the daily life of Vietnamese people has been compared to the basic needs of electricity, food, water and air. With 47,300,000 internet users in November 2015, half of Vietnam population is using the internet. This percentage puts Vietnam among the top 20 countries with the highest proportion of internet users in the world (InternetWorldStats 2015). It is

² Dr Mai Liem Truc was former Deputy Minister of Vietnam's Ministry of Posts and Telematics until he retired in 2006. He is part of the driving force in the technological development and one of the biggest contributors to the expansion of Vietnam's information technology.

noticeable that the internet users of Thailand and Vietnam, most of whom are young people, spend the greatest amount of time online in the region, 27.2 hours and 26.2 hours a month respectively (Comscore 2013). Broadband internet connection has become very popular in Vietnam and computers are present in 22.1% of Vietnamese houses. Smartphones have become the latest trend among young Vietnamese, with 17,220,000 smartphones sold in Vietnam in 2014 (An 2014).

Internet usage is not only typically measured by the mushrooming number of users but also by examining what users are doing on the internet. Beyond providing economic benefits, the internet has expanded from giving access to 'Western entertainment' to being 'a forum for free, fair and unrestricted public debates' (Surborg 2008, p. 355). The most striking trend among the Vietnamese online community is the surge in the use of social media and social networks in everyday life. If the decade of the mid-2000s witnessed 'a minute-by-minute increase' of around three million blogs (Nguyen 2009, p. 2), the arrival of Facebook went even more viral. From 1.4 million Facebook users in 2011, the number rose to 31.3 million in March 2015, multiplying 22 times over the five-year period (Moore 2015). With 35 million Facebook users in 2015 (InternetWorldStats 2015), the social network has no rival and has penetrated into everyday life in Vietnam.

The significant preferences of the online community have affected the CPV authorities in their management policy, which has changed from unofficial blocking to loosening. Vietnamese officials always deny they are deliberately blocking Facebook but employees in web firms have said they have been ordered to block it (Marsh 2009). While I was working for VTV in Hanoi from 2011 to 2012, it was not always easy to log on to Facebook. Access to Facebook was instant and faster while I worked in a building at the headquarters of VTV in Hanoi. When I was at home, access was very slow and intermittent. Slow

internet speed and blocking were the reasons for these problems. However, my colleagues and I could still use Facebook regularly because we taught each other simple tricks such as changing Domain Name System (DNS) server settings. The same thing happened to a large number of the Facebookers in Vietnam. Users' consistent preference for Facebook has worn down the Vietnamese authorities. These days, people can easily access Facebook as the authorities have given up their efforts to ban the social network (Gray 2015) and internet speed has improved.

The internet has grown to occupy a dominant position in Vietnam, with its influence reaching far beyond the economic sector. While young Vietnamese people aged 15 to 24 years are using the internet for chat, social networking, email and study, users aged 25 to 34 years old regard the technology as part of their daily work and they habitually send emails, chat, read news and check social networking (Moore 2015). By highlighting a decade of the internet's development from zero to its current position of influential power, I have set the background for the following introduction to Vietnam's contemporary news media in the digital age.

1.2 The Vietnamese press from the economic reform to the internet age

1.2.1 The press after the economic reform

The economic reform (*Doi Moi*) in 1986 led to landmark changes in the Vietnamese press. A chaotic boom occurred in different categories of news media: the number of media publications increased from 376 publications in 1995 to more than 500 newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations in 2000 (Hang 2003b). This was also the time when the CPV authorities called for 'press reform', allowing people to express 'thoughts and wishes', but not 'opposing ideas' (Hang 2003, p. 90). Most of the studies of Vietnam's media from early 2000s to the present time have investigated the media of Vietnam in

the context of *Doi Moi* and the control of the authoritarian ruling system (Hang 2003; Heng 2000, 2001; Heng 2003; Palmos 1995).

While some foreign scholars express their disappointment with this period of press reform because the Vietnamese press was not given the freedom expected (Palmos 1995), others regard the period as the hey day of the Vietnamese press. Some researchers use the term 'liberal' to describe the level of reform among state news media's editorial content and agenda during the first years of the *Doi Moi* (1986–1989) (Heng 2003), while another researcher describes the period as the 'wind of change' that led to 'an outburst of freedom' and 'democratic ripples' in cultural fields (Hang 2003, pp. 144,145). This moment of so-called freedom of the Vietnamese media did not last long but its impacts strongly influenced Vietnamese journalists and intellectuals. Journalists had more freedom to deal with negative topics, corruption was exposed and freedom of speech and of journalism was written into the law (Hang 2003).

From 1989, the economy continued to be opened up to the world but press reform was shut down quickly. The fall of the communist block at this time had a significant impact on the CPV authorities. They were worried about losing ideological control, which could lead to them losing power. They again put a tight grip on state media, destroying the small hope that further reform and further democracy would be allowed. The Press Law issued in 1989 failed to protect media rights, with clauses included to oblige the press to follow the CPV's leadership and its policies. The concept of freedom of Vietnam's media, therefore, only has 'face value' and should only be regarded as 'rudimentary' and a 'growing notion' (Heng 2000, 2001). By emphasising the 'social responsibility' of the press, the CPV wants the Vietnamese press to practise 'party journalism', and be an instrument for propagandising their policies (Hang 2003).

While the domestic press muted their voice during this period, overseas media articles written in Vietnamese and about Vietnam were the major sources reflecting the country's politics and socio-economic urgencies with any freedom at that period of time. The overseas media include the Vietnamese media outlets managed by Vietnamese individuals in exile and the Vietnamese news section of foreign media corporations such as BBC Vietnamese in the UK, Voice of America Vietnamese in the US or SBS Radio Vietnamese in Australia. With the advantage of being based in the democratic countries where much freedom is given to the press, some of the expatriate Vietnamese media's contributions are badged as a 'media battle' to demand democracy, freedom and progress in Vietnam (Ngo 2016). Since the Vietnam war ended in 1975, more than four million Vietnamese have migrated abroad to live around the world. The largest community of expatriate Vietnamese people is in the United States (Lam 2012) with more than 1.5 million. Because the majority of this diaspora community had left the country to escape a fallen Saigon, this community has a 'complicated relationship' with the homeland (Lam 2012; Lieu & Lam 2007) with the memories and love for the homeland but hatred of and opposition to the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party. These emotions have strongly affected the media outlets owned and run by the Vietnamese diaspora community. This can explain why the press of the Vietnamese diaspora has never been included as part of the Vietnamese press despite the fact that it has been thriving among the overseas community for nearly four decades and thus should be researched thoroughly and on a large scale including investigations of its connections with history, political and social conditions.

The spread of the internet in Vietnam since 2007, and its impact on opening doors between Vietnam and the world, has brought other opportunities and a new stimulus for the Vietnamese press to resume a path towards more authentic reform. The internet has also created more 'political opportunity'

(Abbott 2013) for the Vietnamese people, representing a challenge to the CPV to maintain an open economy while protecting its authoritarian regime at the same time. In 2003, (Hang) recognised the arrival of the internet and, in two short paragraphs, forecast the role of the internet as a challenger to the Party's political control in the future. Hang's forecast would come true a few years later when the internet and its power brought social transformation and many changes in social communications and civil awareness. At a time when the internet dominates different social sectors, there is an urgent need to explore how the technology has affected Vietnam's press system.

1.2.2 The Vietnamese press in the age of the internet

Krishna Sen states that the media in Asia in the 21st century is 'in transition' and thus requires more academic research (Sen & Lee 2008, p. 2). The Vietnamese media is particularly ripe for research. The economic reform of 1986 inspired international researchers to investigate how far the press system has been opened up but there is limited research on the impact of the internet on Vietnam's press.

Several reasons explain this gap in knowledge. First, the annual reports of world-renowned independent organisations defending press freedom and internet freedom such as Freedom House, OpenNet Initiative and the Committee to Protect Journalists always rank Vietnam among the countries with 'not free' status. Vietnam scores low on press freedom and is always in the list of enemies of the internet. These reports are not wrong but they discourage international attention and interest in investigating the Vietnamese press in the digital age. Vietnam also loses out because of the academic world's concentration on China, which is regarded as the typical example for research on the contemporary press in one-party states. In fact, cyber technology has largely affected all social sectors in Vietnam and internet users are catching up with the world's technological developments through the wide and deep

penetration of global giants like Google, Facebook and Instagram. Recent research since 2012 has shown more interest in the cyber life of Vietnam but attention tends to focus on the surge of internet-based media and its impact on civil society and the public sphere. Contemporary state media in Vietnam remains under-researched.

Of the few studies of Vietnam's state media and the impact of the internet, most explore challenges and solutions for specific news organisations rather than providing a broader and more comprehensive analysis of the system. Huong's doctoral thesis (2008) analyses the impact of the internet on the press but the research topic is limited to the fall of the country's radio in the fierce competition with other broadcast media. Using mixed methods of surveys and focus group interviews in Vietnam, Huong argues that the recent decline in radio listening in Vietnam is caused by the rapid development of the media after the nation's economy was opened up and by the lack of flexibility of *Voice of Vietnam radio (VOV)* and its failure to adapt to technological and social changes. Huong's findings show the emergence of a new way of broadcasting: Vietnamese internet users tend to use online radio. With people increasingly rejecting traditional radio, VOV needed to further develop its online content and deliver better services that capture the interest of radio listeners and web users (Huong 2008).

The development of online newspapers is a typical example of the influential role of the internet. This trend is captured by Nguyen (2008), who reviews an online newspaper's development. Nguyen Anh Tuan, the author of the study, is widely known in Vietnam as the founder of the first web portal in Vietnam and the first editor-in-chief of *Vietnamnet.vn*, the online media outlet which has been described as the 'most popular', the 'most influential' and a 'pro-reform voice' (pp. 1,20). In his article, Anh Tuan Nguyen details his constant efforts to build a reputation of journalistic excellence for his news

website as a reform advocate while 'trying not to alienate powerful interest groups' (p. 20). The success of *Vietnamnet* was achieved after Anh Tuan Nguyen and his staff overcame a host of challenges technologically, economically, culturally and politically. Along with his recount of the decade-long journey of the news websites, Anh Tuan Nguyen includes comments and explanations about the growing role of the internet in the Vietnamese press, the existence of censorship, competition between the mainstream and new media, the relationship between politics and the media and the ambition to develop an editorial platform that was 'not just propaganda'.

Anh Tuan Nguyen's article is interesting because it is unusual for a Vietnamese editor-in-chief to write openly about his professional experiences and the challenges of overseeing a propaganda newspaper. However, as theory is the 'footing for considering the world' and the impetus for any research (Silverman 2013), Nguyen (2008)'s article would have benefited from a blending of the arguments with theoretical concepts. His article is full of important data and impressive statements but lacks persuasive arguments. His paper, therefore, is more successful in sketching a rough way towards liberalisation from the point of view of a media administrator responsible for an online newspaper in Vietnam, rather than for asking questions about why and how the phenomena occur.

In contrast with the lack of research into Vietnam's contemporary news media, researchers have closely monitored the development of cyber social life in Vietnam with a number of studies about social media, social networks, citizen journalism and the online public sphere. Scattered among these studies are some limited findings and discussions about the mutual impacts and relationships between Vietnam's state media and internet-based media. Hoang, Nguyen and Huynh (2009) and Nguyen (2009) are among the few researchers to highlight the prospect of citizen journalism in Vietnam as a 'new medium' for

people to discuss social issues. In a report written for the US-based opposition party (Viet Tan Party) against the CPV authorities, Hoang, Nguyen and Huynh (2009) draw international attention to and support for the social phenomenon of the blogger movement rather than discussing the topic from an academic perspective. Meanwhile, Nguyen (2009) provides a systematic look at the surge of citizen journalism by placing it within the non-determinist theoretical concepts of Brian McNair, who argues that the internet 'does not create a climate for progressive democratic change where none exists, nor can it by itself force reform on an unwilling regime prepared to use violence and repression as tools' (Nguyen 2009, p. 8). Unlike other scholars who often look at Vietnam through the lens of the international watchdogs or from a political perspective, Nguyen (2009) or An Nguyen observes 'substantive day-by-day changes' and uncovers positive developments in 'a progressive democratisation process' through the roles of breaking the news and stimulating public discussions in the country. He goes further by explaining the rise in citizen journalism as an outcome of globalization, arguing that Vietnam's citizen journalism will not be able to make a major impact on the larger community 'unless Vietnam's authorities continue to be tolerant' (p.8).

Nguyen's argument about the CPV's tolerance has been frequently quoted in later research on the further expansion of citizen journalism in Vietnam. However, I do not agree with him on this point, as I will argue in detail in the final chapter of this thesis. Briefly, An Nguyen's argument can be explained by the fact that activists and dissidents were making limited use of social networks at the time of his research. Nguyen underestimated the potential of internet-empowered online users in the role of citizen journalists. In Nguyen's research, the label of citizen journalists is reserved for 'technically savvy and socio-politically active' online users only. This label strengthens his argument that the coercive forces can enable the CPV to prevent blogs from disrupting its power

in the future. An Nguyen could not have imagined that citizen journalism would expand not only among the 'technically savvy' but also among millions of ordinary citizens who are empowered by the internet to undermine the control of the CPV and to challenge the longstanding domination of state media.

An Nguyen makes an important finding when he analyses the relationship between citizen journalism and the mainstream media in Vietnam. At the time of his study, he noticed the influence of citizen journalism in filling the gap around 'politically sensitive' news (p.7) which was being censored in the state news media. However, An Nguyen still places more emphasis on the mainstream media's key role, which he argues to be the initiator of an issue or the provider of the material. Again, An Nguyen maintains his argument of the Communist Party's tolerance, using the 'level of press freedom' to predict the future of citizen journalism. In fact, Vietnamese citizen journalism has been expanding based on the concept of online freedom of speech. An Nguyen's perspective is therefore less persuasive these days when citizen journalism in Vietnam has its own network of audiences and is rising to become the provider of material for state media.

Vennevold (2011) conducted a useful study of the blogosphere in Vietnam, targeting political blogs and investigating how bloggers conduct themselves quite differently within the boundaries and strict limitations on free speech set by the government. Vennevold categorises bloggers into two groups: those whose members blog well within the Government's permits and those whose members challenge the government's boundaries. To survive the regulations and threats, bloggers use strategies such as keeping a low profile, hiding their true identity and using pseudonyms, keeping their business far from political issues, using 'parallel language' to write about socially disturbing issues, writing 'satire' or using loopholes in the laws and restrictions to show their attitude. The most interesting part of Vennevold's discussion is her answer to

the question: Does a political space exist in Vietnam, particularly in the blogosphere? Framing the argument in terms of the power cube theories of John Gaventa (Gaventa 2007), she concludes that 'the internet *does* enables [bloggers] to create certain parts of the blogosphere as a kind of autonomous, political space' (pp.97). Despite this positive comment, Vennevold's findings are affected by An Nguyen's 'CPV tolerance' argument, so she argues that Vietnam's blogosphere cannot produce any major impact on the wider community although it can bolster critical discussion of public affairs among some public groups.

During her research, Vennevold faced the problems of the language barrier (English and Vietnamese) and geographical distance. She conducted interviews through emails rather than face-to-face. These limitations prevented her from penetrating further into the world of Vietnamese bloggers and the political and socio-economical debates in the country. The blogosphere in Vietnam has also changed as part of the democratising process and some progress has been made since 2011. The blogger community in Vietnam is trying to push the boundaries set by the CPV to a much greater extent by writing open criticism on more sensitive issues, with bloggers using their real names. The 'deeply rooted culture of fear' and self-censorship which Vennevold finds has been gradually eroded, and usage of social networks and online social movements in Vietnam have expanded. Today, bloggers are more courageous. This means that categorising bloggers will no longer depend on how far they can step outside the 'fence', as suggested by Vennevold's. Later in this study, chapter six, I will categorise Vietnamese political bloggers based on the motives and ideologies behind their blogs.

In my opinion, studies published since 2012 and reports of international watchdogs provide a more positive outlook on the dynamism of cyber society in Vietnam. Data and discussion have shifted to focus on social platforms such as

Facebook, Youtube, Google, and Wordpress, and the definition of online users has expanded to include the general online community instead of being limited to political bloggers and dissidents (Duong 2013; Duy Hoang 2015; Gray 2015; Nguyen 2014b; Sharbaugh, Robert & Brown 2012). The broader influence of social media and social networks has begun to convince researchers that we are witnessing the start of an 'active online public sphere' (Sharbaugh, Robert & Brown 2012) that includes the participation of different social groups, especially young Vietnamese, in 'critical discussion' of public affairs (Nguyen 2014b). Researchers note that political discourse is the concern not only of dissidents and activists but also of the general population, and technological advances have helped blur the line between political activists and everyday readers (L.Gray 2015). These lively changes in public discourse are attributed to the impact of social media, which are predicted to continue to influence political discourse and permanently change the 'landscape of political control and contestation in Vietnam' (Gray 2015, p. 16).

An updated finding shared by several researchers is that citizen media (social media, citizen journalism, social networks) have come to play the role of an alternative media against state media (L.Gray 2015; Nguyen 2014b; Sharbaugh, Robert & Brown 2012; Abuza 2015). This is significant in Vietnamese media research because it suggests that the boundaries of the propaganda press have been loosened. A number of issues have arisen with this expansion. Researchers, however, give more attention to analysing citizen media and social networks than to investigating how state media has been affected in this context. Nguyen Thuy Duong emphasises that blogs and Facebook are influential enough 'to provide alternative viewpoints from state-controlled official media outlets' (Nguyen 2014b, p. 11). She came to this finding after her survey of selected audiences who frequently search for more information and alternative opinions on social media rather than relying only on the state media.

Nguyen did not go deeper to explore the contradictions and developments behind this phenomenon because her target was the role of citizen journalism among Vietnamese young people and urban internet users.

Abuza (2015) addresses this gap when he discusses citizen journalism's impacts in making state media 'vigorous', with more coverage of sensitive topics, leading journalists to 'push the envelop' further (pp. 49,50). Abuza also acknowledges the fundamental contradictions for the CPV between the need to control corruption and the 'unleashed freedom' of the press. Abuza concludes that there are hopes for further national reform in Vietnam but that this should be accompanied by the 'free flow of information' for the press (Abuza 2015). As Abuza's research is presented within a short article, the explanation of the CPV's contradictory interests is limited. The discussion of the data would be more convincing if the researcher had engaged more fully with the media climate of Vietnam, for example through personal interviews with selected propaganda journalists and media administrators. As I will argue later in this thesis, I disagree with Abuza's claim that Vietnam's state media is 'suspended between two opposing models: the plan and the market' (pp.51). In fact, the CPV-owned media is not suspended but has been performing according to the intentions of the CPV leaders and this facilitates media control. While Abuza points out the desire and urgent demand of the people for the CPV leaders to free the press, a broader study would have seen him touch on more layers the media context and explore more questions.

The viewpoint of international researchers on alternative media in Vietnam is different from that of those Vietnamese researchers who believe in the influence of the state press and the need for media management. Do and Dinh's book (2014) and Nguyen's article (2014c) are two typical academic works written in the Vietnamese language about the interactions between the Vietnamese press and social media and social networks. I selected these

academics because they received research training in developed countries and then returned to work as the radical and popular academics for the famous universities in Vietnam and thus their viewpoints can be more open than the academics who study and work only in Vietnam. The article of Khac Giang Nguyen (Nguyen 2014c) is published in the journal of the renowned University of Social Sciences and Humanities while Do and Dinh's work (2014) is a specialist book used for teaching journalism in Vietnam. The authors all share the view that social media have had a strong impact on the state-owned press of Vietnam by furthering the connections with the audience, improving news quality and renewing journalistic processes. Nguyen (2014c) regards the popularity of tabloid news as one negative effect of the internet on the Vietnamese press and argues that bloggers represent untrustworthy news sources. He points to the 'information indigestion' caused by the combination of a growing press system and a rise in citizen journalism (p.5). Do and Dinh (2014) value the role of social media and social networks, emphasising the indispensable role of social media in promoting information from the mainstream media and in exchanging criticisms (pp.99,100). Studies in the Vietnamese language usually suggest solutions, and these authors have proposed solutions by which CPV media administrators could improve the management of social media and the state press. Nguyen (2014c) recommends that policy makers minimise the 'negative effects' of social media by establishing a more specific legal framework within which to manage users' behaviours. Do and Dinh (2014) stress that Vietnam's press needs to participate in guiding the information flows on social networks. They conclude that the press has a key role in contemporary society. The analyses and discussion in the latter parts of this thesis will explain my reasons for disagreeing with these recommendations.

1.3 Research questions

This chapter has explained the political control of the internet in Vietnam and has reviewed the latest trends in cyber space and the current state of the Vietnamese press. The chapter has thus provided a sketch of the general context, while at the same time highlighting the research gap that this thesis will help fill. My research aims to reflect the present situation of Vietnamese state news media and the interactions with the internet-based media at a time when the internet is having a growing influence over all corners of the country. But beyond this, I aim to point out that the impacts of these interactions are to have created contradictions, cracks and divisions that underpin the entire press system in Vietnam. I hope that this thesis contributes a more balanced and in-depth investigation of the contradictions and challenges faced by Vietnamese state news media in the information age. To this end, the thesis provides a strong conceptual framework, enriched with original data and detailed discussion. While maintaining a focus on the press, my research provides rarely found contemporary illustrations of the experiences and opinions of Vietnamese audience members and propaganda journalists. Propaganda journalists who work for the media organisations owned by the CPV authorities have long been ignored, not credited with adequate knowledge, and not recognised for their awareness and professional efforts. My discussion will connect state news media with two fundamental phenomena: the economic reform in 1986 and the internet's dominance. I will explore how these phenomena have dragged the propaganda press far from the control of the CPV authorities. By making these connections, I present a more comprehensive and critical analysis of the impact of the internet on the social structure of Vietnam. My research departs from core questions about how the internet has reshaped the news media. The focus is then expanded to a broader sociological discussion of contemporary Vietnam based on the network theory developed by Castells (1996, 2007, 2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2013).

1.3.1 Investigating Vietnam's news media and journalists in the internet age

Primary research question:

How has the recent rise of the internet impacted on Vietnam's news media and journalists?

Subsidiary research questions:

1. What are the impacts of market forces and the internet on the news media of Vietnam?
2. How has the internet empowered internet-based media and online users in Vietnam?
3. What is the strategy of Vietnam's contemporary propaganda journalists? For example, do propaganda journalists break the boundaries or live a double life? What is the role of the internet in these practices?
4. How are Vietnam's contemporary news media responding to the internet? For example, are they finding ways to manage its contradictions or networking with internet media to bring about changes?
5. What happens when the Communist Party of Vietnam resists the power of networked individuals?

1.4 Thesis overview

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of internet usage as well as the economic and social impacts of internet technology, particularly its powerful effects on state media. I have also contextualised the Vietnamese press and described the sector's unrealised dreams of freedom after Vietnam adopted a market-economy model. I then explained how the Vietnamese press is described as impacted by the arrival of the internet and reviewed recent research on the impact of the internet, highlighting unresolved questions.

In chapter two, I present the theoretical foundations of this study, explaining the combination of theories used in the research. This chapter opens with a critical review of what I will argue is the inappropriate application of the communist theoretical framework by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) in analysing modern Vietnamese media. I will argue that although Vietnam's political regime has not changed, the economic reforms have impacted on the propaganda system from inside, making it function according to the rules and demands of the market economy. In light of this critique, I explain my choice of the Propaganda Model of Herman & Chomsky (1988) to discuss how the Vietnamese news media has been marketised. However, the key theory providing the foundation of my research is the network theory of Castells (2007, 2011a, 2011b), which I draw on to position my final discussion of the present and future of Vietnam's press system. I also employ the concept of 'the Fifth Estate' (Dutton 2009) to question claims about the current level of influence of the internet in Vietnam and the theory of online freedom movement (Dutton et al. 2010). I argue that there is an increase in demonstrations of expressions, attitudes and reactions to state issues among the online community.

In chapter three, I introduce my methodological approaches. To address the research questions in this study, I have applied the mixed methods of natural data analysis (news stories, editorials, blog postings, news readers' comments), semi-structured interviews and case studies. I will demonstrate that with this three-way approach, my arguments are strengthened and my research is able to generate valuable findings. Chapter three describes the challenges and risks I experienced during the research process and during my two field trips to Vietnam. While I note that some risks are invisible, I point out that they are strong enough to haunt my work and that of my study participants. The chapter also recognises the limitations of my study, which I regret not having been able

to minimise during my field trips to Vietnam or during online data collection and coding.

Chapters four to seven then present the data description, discussion and analyses, which constitute the major contribution of my study. In chapter four, I apply the Propaganda Model in an analysis of the marketisation of news in Vietnam and investigate the continued points of control exercised by the government. I describe the news media situation in Vietnam as a propaganda system but one that has shifted considerably towards a consumer-based system. I review the changes that are reflected through the structure of the size, ownership and profit targets; advertising power; news sources; the threatening and interventions in news production and ideological issues. The discussion draws on a new conceptual framework to describe the marketised parts of the Vietnamese news media, to help readers compare impacts of market forces and those brought about by the internet.

In chapter five, I examine the growth of online newspapers or the electronic press in Vietnam. I have chosen to feature the electronic press as it is currently the most active and developing sector of state news media, and it is on the way to becoming the most sought-after platform among news organisations in Vietnam in transmitting news, attracting advertisements and interacting with news readers. In this chapter, I discuss the impact of online newspapers on news quality and the evolving complexities of censorship and propaganda imposed on a modern type of journalism. I argue that censorship and propaganda have delayed the growth of the electronic press and even resulted in a chaotic situation where the electronic press is trapped between readers' demands, the potentials of the technologies and the CPV authorities' control. Chapter five also presents the first discussion of the active role of Vietnamese newsreaders, whose constant interactions and engagement in the news making process are a significant factor in understanding online media in Vietnam.

Chapter six investigates the evolution of social media (political blogs and Facebook) and the growth of online communities in using their networked voices to react against social problems. Chapter six analyses the latest landscape of political blogs in Vietnam, showing that they are enthusiastically employed by activists, critics and even CPV supporters to gain public attention and influence. Chapter six also presents the surprisingly free space of news on Facebook with the participation of the Vietnamese-language service of foreign media corporations and CPV-owned news organisations. Using a case study approach, chapter six then explores the dynamism of internet users who network in online social movements to pressure the mainstream press to write about their concerns and to urge the CPV authorities to resolve urgent problems.

In chapter seven, I present original data from interviews, a case study, policy statements and document analysis to demonstrate the impact of the internet on Vietnamese journalists working for state-owned news organisations. This analysis reveals key signs of change among ‘propaganda’ journalists as they adapt to the digital era of journalism and increasingly participate in and engage with cyber democratic discourse and social networks. Chapter seven reveals how journalists working for state-owned news organisations are living a double life: passive at work but active in social networks. I analyse developments in the bridging between journalists and their audiences, the competitive challenge of the rise of citizen journalists and the growing participation of journalists in cyber deliberative discourse. I argue that while the internet facilitates journalists to break boundaries, they are still at high risk of losing jobs and may face even more serious consequences when they go against the CPV-set rules. To emphasise how propaganda journalists negotiate their survival in the digital age, I present a case study of a journalists’ forum that is providing an online arena for a growing democratic discourse among the

members, who are full of aspirations but resigned to the CPV's management. Together with the discussion of the contemporary Vietnamese audience, this chapter challenges research literature that describes the inactive position of Vietnamese journalists (Hang 2003; Heng 2003) and complement Abuza 2015 's analysis of professional performance.

In chapter eight, I first summarise the main findings of each chapter and then extend my argument, expanding the discussion beyond the topic of the internet and the news media in Vietnam. In this concluding chapter, I argue that the internet is having a more influential role in Vietnam than the economic reforms are. With its broad social impacts — including the rise of internet-based media and the increased empowerment of audiences — the internet has forced state news media to follow the changes or be ignored. I also explain why the internet cannot be regarded as the 'Fifth Estate' by investigating the contradictions, failures and challenges caused by the two-faced management policy of the CPV authorities. I argue that if the internet's dominance continues in Vietnam, the CPV authorities may gradually be driven to change their mode of control towards further democracy as the influence of the information networks will increasingly have an impact in the political realm. ■

Chapter 2

Theoretical foundations for the study of the Vietnamese press in the digital age

This chapter provides the theoretical framework that constitutes the foundation for my analysis and argumentation. In the sections below I explain and critically review the selected concepts, arguing that some theoretical perspectives do not apply to the press systems of communist countries. To explore the news media of Vietnam in the changing social context of globalisation and the spread of information technology, I argue for a combination of recent theories and concepts of marketised media, network society, deliberative discourse, internet freedom and democracy, tabloidisation and audience focus as the foundation for my analyses and interpretation of findings.

2.1 The outdated Soviet communist theory of the press and the relevance of the propaganda model

2.1.1 Revisiting Soviet communist theory

Six decades after Schramm (1956) introduced the Soviet communist theory of the press, this theoretical approach is still being chosen by many researchers and students who study the press of Marxist countries including Vietnam. The Soviet communist theory is one of the models included in Siebert and colleagues influential work *The Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm 1956). This work has shaped global perceptions of the typology of the press and its relations with government. Siebert, Peterson and Schramm offered

four theoretical frameworks: authoritarianism, libertarianism, communism and social responsibility (Reilly 2010; Siebert et al. 2002). Given that countries such as China, Cuba, North Korea and Vietnam are Marxist, scholars often examine the press system of these communist countries from within the Soviet communist theory before considering critiques of these approaches. Communist theory has been widely viewed as offering a viable analytical tool for analysing the news media in the communist world (Huang 2003, p. 444). However, in the context of remarkable changes in political, economic and social systems internationally, scholars have questioned whether the four theories are still relevant (Nerone 1995). In particular, Huang (2003) has raised an 'inner theoretical flaw' and suggested the 'insufficiency' of Schramm's Soviet model in conceptualising the transition of communist media but he discusses China's press only as the typical example. What Huang suggests is 'a transitional media approach' or 'nonnormative thinking', viewing a society's media in connection with its social changes, political and socio-economic environment and culture (p.454). I will strengthen Huang's viewpoint of conceptualising the media of communist countries with a 'nonnormative' theoretical framework other than Schramm's model by focusing on the Vietnamese press. I begin my theoretical discussion by revisiting Schramm (1956) discussion of Marxist press theory to evaluate the extent to which the theory should not be applied to the contemporary Vietnamese context.

Between the Western and the communist press systems, according to Schramm (1956), lies a 'bewildering gap' (p.105) because the two systems are based on very different philosophies: Marxism in communist countries and the liberalism of John Stuart Mill in Western countries. Marxism proposes an ideal 'classless, stateless' society where viewpoints should not be different (Schramm 1956, p. 110). Marx's 'optimistic view' of a classless society has generated a system in which the press belongs to and is controlled by the Communist Party.

Schramm (1956) lists three ways the Communist Party controls the press of the Soviet Union: through the Departments of Propaganda and Agitation, through a large number of directives, and through reviews and criticism. In this communist press, there are no profit targets, private media do not exist, and the provision of timely news is not important. The press in a communist country is therefore a mouthpiece of the Party and the working class, having an 'instrumental rather than a service function' (Schramm 1956, p. 136). This makes it quite the opposite of the functions served by the Western press, where the press is intended to serve social and public needs and speak the 'truth' (Siebert F.S, Peterson T. & Schramm 1956, p. 5). Schramm's explanation of Soviet communist theory has strong connections with authoritarian theory, and may even be understood as a development of authoritarian theory (Siebert F.S, Peterson T. & Schramm 1956). The press is used to control citizens and to ensure the power of the elite (Reilly 2010). Schramm notes that Soviet communist theory differs from authoritarian theory because of its state ownership, non-profit objective, limited criticism and its incorporation within a planned system (Schramm 1956).

The Four Theories of the Press by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) has been revisited frequently by academics, attracting both agreement and critique (Hachten & Hachten 1987; Nerone 1995; Reilly 2010; Siebert et al. 2002). In this thesis, I concentrate on comments about Schramm's Soviet communist model made by researchers based in the communist countries of Vietnam and China, whose voices have rarely been heard but are valuable because these scholars work in, live with and witness their countries' press systems. In China, the theory used to be 'highly recognised' by Chinese academic readers (Huang 2003). In Vietnam, *The Four Theories of the Press* was translated, extracts published in books, introduced to journalism students and selected as a theoretical framework for analysing the Vietnamese press (Hang 2003).

Recently, criticisms have increasingly commented on the outdated application of Soviet communist theory in these two countries, given the transformation in the communist press. While not denying the hegemonic role of the CPV in press control, Hang (2003) mentions the movement of Vietnam's press from the 'original Soviet communism' to 'becoming more commercial'. Huang (2003) calls for scholars to revisit 'the normative media approach' of Schramm and engage in a 'more systematic study' of the transitional media globally because Schramm's schema has become 'highly problematic' and 'insufficient' (p. 452). These critiques stem from the fact that Schramm (1956)'s theory has failed to keep pace with 'changing global media' and does not recognise that the media or press in countries such as China have experienced strong transformations since the post Cold-war era (Huang 2003).

The revolutions in Eastern Europe that replaced communist governments in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 resulted in a 'fundamental transformation' in international politics and widespread 'reforms and revolutions' in communist countries (Koslowski & Kratochwil 1994; Minxin & Pei 2009). The collapse of socialism can be understood as requiring formerly socialist countries to give up their planned economies and shift to a free market economy (Hang 2003 p138). The need for economic reform in Vietnam is not only the result of the impact of global politics in the 1980s but also a response to urgent domestic needs as the country's agricultural policies had failed and the country suffered from food shortages and increasing poverty (Van Koert 2004, p. 203). The decision of the Vietnamese leaders to choose a market economy under the banner of *Doi Moi* (the renovation process) in 1986 has been described as 'a bold political move but an obvious economic one' (Van Arkadie & Mallon 2004, p. 189). The Vietnamese leadership described *Doi Moi* as a limited reform within a so-called socially oriented economy and asserted that the pursuit of Marxism–Leninism ideology was not changed. With this model, the CPV

leaders were said 'to follow the Chinese way' which promotes 'a market economy without political reform' (Hang 2003, p. 171).

The shift to a market economy revived the country, making it the world's second largest rice exporter, but it also posed increasing challenges. The unprecedented 'marriage' between socialism and capitalism led to 'inevitable contradictions' (Hang 2003, p. 176). Facing the challenges of globalisation and battles between the conservatives and the reformists, the CPV authorities re-shaped its Marxist–Leninist ideology and Ho Chi Minh's doctrine to interpret 'socialism in a new way' to pursue a market economy while still maintaining its monopoly. In the context of Vietnam, the application of Schramm's model can be connected to Nerone's comment that the theory creates 'superficially coherent systems of thoughts that are historically chimerical' (Siebert et al. 2002).

While many other scholars have revisited *The Four Theories of the Press*, social and technological change means the question still remains: Which theoretical framework is most suitable for researchers analysing the contemporary news media of Vietnam? In other words, what theoretical framework can most effectively be applied to study a media system currently ruled by Marxism and Ho Chi Minh doctrine, functioning in a market economy and influenced by the power of the information technology?

This thesis suggests a way to address this challenging question by drawing on theoretical perspectives that do not share Vietnam's ideological philosophies of Marxism–Leninism. The theories I draw on have been developed in the information age, at a time when digital media such as mobile phones and the internet are having enormous social impacts (Howard 2011). Today, empowered with advanced technologies, the Vietnamese people are struggling every day to gain more freedom to voice their thoughts on national issues. In this current context, it is necessary to ask how the state news media of Vietnam

can catch up with the demands of its more active audience while maintaining its propaganda role under the control of the CPV authorities. Drawing on a combination of different theories offers a broader, stronger foundation for finding answers within the Vietnamese context, where the news media is a servant of the state, and is both a beneficiary of and a loser from the arrival of the internet. Western-based theories may not be a perfect approach to analysing the transformed communist press of Vietnam but they offer an up-to-date approach to analysing emerging trends, actual conditions and obstacles to the development of the Vietnamese news media in the 21st century.

2.1.2 The relevance of the propaganda model

Herman and Chomsky introduced the propaganda model in 1988 to explain the mass media's performance in the United States and to propose a new approach to examining the relationships between the media and political, economic and social power. In one of the most democratic nations in the world — the United States — the media has been often claimed to function as a 'guardian of public interest' with objectivity, fairness and freedom. Instead, Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that the media have become 'propaganda vehicles' controlled by the corporations, and driven by profit, power and ideology (Klaehn 2009; Landman et al.; Mullen 2010; Mullen & Klaehn 2010).

To make the media into a propaganda tool, governments and corporate interests use five 'filters' on the media: the size, ownership and profit orientation of the mass media; advertising benefits; sources of news; 'flak' or negative responses to media; and ideology of anticommunism. These five elements 'interact [with] and reinforce' one another to create a propaganda system, which is not easily seen but which exists even in a democratic regime (Herman & Chomsky 1988). Herman and Chomsky's model originates from their analysis of the media system of the United States, but it is also a relevant

model to apply to any nation whose economy depends of the supply-and-demand principle of the market.

The first reason for the propaganda model's relevance is that Herman and Chomsky (1988) do not only use the lens of social systems, beliefs and philosophies to look at the mass media in a capitalist, democratic and free country. The model also recognises the political economy of the media. Within this political economy approach, the propaganda model is said to be concerned with the effects of the behaviour of the media or how the media performs in society. The model is said to challenge the liberal-pluralist view of the media as the 'Fourth Estate' (Mullen 2010; Mullen & Klaehn 2010), offering a more realistic way to understand the media system of democracy, where news sources and publications are shaped by market power. In the United States, journalism functions under the corporate model. Censorship is also available to serve the elite and advertisers and freedom of expression can be ignored where there is 'enough incentive' (Reilly 2010). By analysing the media within the political and economic context, the propaganda model has introduced a more balanced and convincing approach to assessing any media system that is managed for the benefit of the government and corporates.

The second strength of the propaganda model is its high 'applicability' at a time when the world has witnessed significant political and economic changes. The impact of globalisation has been widely accepted in the fields of economics and the media in both capitalist and some communist countries. Increasing corporate power, the competitive race for advertisers and the manipulation of the press coverage by the public relations industry have proved the importance of the first four filters of the propaganda model (Herman 2000). Even the spread of the internet does not undermine the strong position of the propaganda model. As Herman (2000) argues, advanced technology does not necessarily promote democracy. Herman (2000) only accepts the 'possibly weakened' status

of the fifth filter — anti-communist ideology — due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, he argues that ‘ideological power’ has not disappeared but has been replaced by ‘faith in the market’ and suspicion of ‘non-market mechanisms’, and this ideology has been ‘internalised’ by journalism (Herman 2000, p. 109). Some argue that in the 21st century, the five filters of Herman and Chomsky (2008) have even been ‘strengthened’ rather than ‘diminished’ (Mullen & Klaehn 2010). Filters have been strengthened by the greater concentration and importance of media ownership, growth in advertising power due to the globally commercialized media and expansion to the new media, the continued dominance in sourcing news by government bodies and corporates, media control by elites, and the rise of ‘the market’ as a replacement of anti-communist ideology as a filter (p. 224).

Another strength of the propaganda model is that the theory has been widely tested by international scholars analysing different political and economic situations of diverse countries. A number of studies following the 1988 introduction of the propaganda model confirm that the model can be ‘usefully applied’ to discussions of the media of other countries, even where the political systems are different (Klaehn 2009; Mullen 2010). Mullen & Klaehn (2010) found that the propaganda model has been applied by many scholars to analyse mass media in the United States, Britain and in Canada, three countries with similar political regimes and media. However, Corner (2003) questions whether or not the propaganda model can be extended to countries with very different media and politics. In this thesis I test the application of the propaganda model to the Vietnamese context, a country with a completely different political structure (communist) and a media system (totally controlled). My argument about the application of the propaganda model is based on the present economic model of Vietnam and the state-market ‘nexus’ imposed on the country’s media.

2.2 The applicability of the propaganda model to Vietnam

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) survived during the period when the former Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991. The successful maintenance of legitimacy in the face of economic and social challenges has been attributed to 'survival instincts' (Van Koert 2004). These instincts are not natural good luck but an internal drive by the CPV to change to adapt to public demand and global trends politically and economically.

In terms of the economy, it is widely known that since 1986 Vietnam has changed from a centrally planned economy to a social market economy. The term 'social market economy' is defined as 'an economic system based on a free market operated in conjunction with state provision for those unable to work, such as elderly or unemployed people' (Oxford Dictionaries). This economic model pleased the CPV leaders because it enabled them to keep the people happy with a prosperous economy, which in turn helped the CPV maintain power (Hang 2003; Irvin 1995; Perkins 2013; Van Koert 2004). Although the CPV leaders chose not to make political reforms, they have had to accept certain capitalist economic rules, which run counter to Marxist–Leninist philosophies. A social market economy has a similar nature and functions as a market economy in that it requires open policies to attract investment and it allows personal acquisitiveness, private ownership and operates according to the supply-and-demand rule.

'Single party state', 'authoritarian regime' and 'communist regime' are phrases commonly used by outsiders to describe the Vietnamese political scene. The CPV is thought to be a monolithic system, which leads the country towards the socialism laid out by classic Marxism–Leninism and Ho Chi Minh ideologies. In fact, the Party includes various competing factions and the political decision-making process has been always complicated (Surborg 2008). Some scholars have even suggested that the highest authority within the CPV,

the Central Committee, has a 'more democratic' atmosphere than its Chinese counterpart (Thayer 2009a, p. 62). Others point out that 'political changes' from the 'rice roots' have existed in the country (Wells-Dang 2010, p. 109). While the 'hegemonic control' of the CPV authorities over the country is not in doubt, these views demonstrate the 'dynamics' of the CPV's 'everyday politics' (Thayer 2009b). On the other hand, it shows the unstable stance of the communist leadership which has at time been reflected in the CPV's different levels of control of the media since 1986.

The question of interest in my research is: How has the Vietnamese news media been performing within the grip of the CPV while having to transform itself to adapt to a freer world opened by the market economy and then by the internet? Vietnam's state press used to be called 'the revolutionary press', and its main responsibilities were to be the propaganda tool of the authorities (Hang 2003). After many years of economic reforms, the CPV has accepted a longer name to describe the functions of the press: 'the revolutionary press in the market mechanism' or 'the revolutionary press in *Doi Moi* (renovation process)' (Duong 2014; Hieu 2014). On one hand, the new name still recognises the unique ownership of the media by the CPV. On the other hand, it reflects a breakthrough in acknowledging that the press is affected by the market economy. A retired editor-in-chief of *Tien Phong* (*Pioneer*), one of the largest newspapers in northern Vietnam, explains that the press should be regarded as a 'special product' of the market and that it has to abide by the law of supply and demand (Duong 2014). Accordingly, the contemporary press of Vietnam still belongs to the State and must speak for the legitimacy of the CPV. In terms of the finance, the CPV has accepted the commercialisation of the system by gradually giving up state subsidies and allowing media organisations to function under the rules of self-financing and profit making (discussed further in chapter four).

At this point, the Soviet communist theory of Schramm (1956) becomes inadequate, unable to account for the increasingly marketised press system of Vietnam. In fact, as I argue in this thesis, it is no longer possible to frame the Vietnamese press system within a single paradigm, even within 'a kind of hybrid' model, the 'Neo-socialist' press model, which combines the principles of former Soviet-Communist model with functions in the market economy (Hang 2003, p. 250). At the present time, the transition of the Vietnamese news media has not only been further commercialised but has also been strongly influenced by cyber technology. This is one reason why the system needs to be interpreted from within new theoretical frameworks that feature the media's performance and put the system before politics but that are still able to recognise the relationship between the media and political regimes, the economic situation and social circumstances.

Returning to the academic discussion of Herman & Chomsky's propaganda model, I am influenced by the arguments by Andrew Mullen and Jeffrey Klaehn, who advocate for the broad application of this model. To sum up, the propaganda model was developed within the capitalist context of the West but its critical approach can be applicable as a conceptual framework to look at the contemporary Vietnamese news media. It takes a critical look at the mass media in connection with ideology, power and the market, and this complicated relationship has been seen vividly in Vietnam in recent years. The first four filters put forward by Herman and Chomsky are visible in the context of Vietnam and their roots are growing deeper into the press system, especially in light of Vietnam's urgent need for a second reform to change its political system and revitalise its economy (Cam & Pho 2016). Testing of these filters is discussed in depth in chapter four where I provide examples of financial power, state control, corporate interventions, the commercialisation of news, and various means of disciplining the media. The following chapter also examines the 'fifth

filter', drawing on a revised interpretation of that term. Herman (2000) has accepted that anti-communist ideology (the fifth filter) is 'possibly weakened' these days due to the Soviet Union's collapse and global socialism. Herman has replaced it with 'belief in the market' when he briefly explains that journalism has 'internalised' the importance of the market's power (pp. 109). In the situation of Vietnam, extremist ideology still exists: the authorities want the people to trust only their leadership and ideologies in order to resist 'hostile forces'. Further explanation of this filter is presented in chapter four.

Last but not least, the propaganda model is very useful for this research because it does not place the media in the position of 'Fourth Estate'. The Vietnamese press has never played this role. For many years, the country's press has been growing and transformed under the combined effects of some features of Soviet propaganda style, CPV political leadership with factions and economic pressure. These elements have jointly created a present propaganda press, which is difficult to compare with the Soviet propaganda system. The propaganda model is a relatively new and up-to-date model, which can be applied to Vietnam's press in the 21st century when the CPV has tried to prove its globalisation ambitions and to divert the public from the perception of their 'hegemonic power'. The country's press, influenced by the public demand for changes and the internet, is transforming itself towards Western standards of journalism but the press is still a propaganda tool in the hands of political leaders and the corporates. In the following chapters, I provide examples that give a more detailed picture of the Vietnamese press.

My research explores the most relevant evidence to demonstrate the applicability of Herman and Chomsky's model in Vietnam's contemporary communist press system. I want to offer an open-minded and up-to-date reflection on the Vietnamese press based on the current environment, where the CPV's legitimacy is accompanied by economic strength and where the internet's

power is growing faster than any regulations to control its impact. By describing the news media using a critical Western approach, I expect to ease the dissatisfaction of some Vietnamese scholars who believe that their propaganda press has been viewed with prejudice for a long time. One scholar believes that the changes in the Vietnamese press have 'not [been] recognised and analysed in a fair manner' through its constant changes in recent years (NDD 2013, pers. comm., 14 December).

2.3 The internet as the Fifth Estate

The concept of the Fourth Estate is attributed to the 18th century English political theorist Edmund Burke, who contrasted the oversight role of the press with the roles of the three estates of the clergy, aristocracy and commons (Dutton 2009, 2013; Hampton 2010; Hassid 2011; Reilly 2010). However, there are many different candidates for the Fifth Estate, among which the internet is often listed. The world has changed very rapidly since the internet's significant impacts first emerged in the mid-1990s (Lee et al. 2012), and the role of the press has been shaken. Scholars have been kept busy identifying the Fifth Estate to challenge the news media which some argue has failed to fulfil its role. Dutton's (2009) focus on the 'existing reality' of the power of the internet has become a persuasive argument for the internet as the Fifth Estate.

William Dutton does not regard the internet as 'an adjunct' of the Fourth Estate (2009) but places the internet in a parallel role with the press, radio, television and other mass media (2013). This makes the Fifth Estate a 'new force' with broad roles in various institutional arenas and affecting many spheres, 'from everyday life to science' (2009, p. 4). Dutton's view of the Fifth Estate highlights the 'political resource' of the internet's power for governance and civil society. There are two key elements in the Fifth Estate according to Dutton's theory: networked individuals and the relationship between the internet and mass media.

To analyse the effect of the Fifth Estate on the mass media, Dutton does not view the internet as a rival of traditional media. He argues that the mass media has its own 'weakness', such as the trend towards sensational news or the poor quality of news reporting. In the digital era, the mass media has been supported to reinforce and to sustain its role among readers (or internet users). The internet also becomes a 'source of news' for various social actors so Dutton believes the internet will substitute for or complement traditional media, rather than rivalling it. This viewpoint highlights the positive 'balancing' effects of the internet on traditional media, and offers a view of the internet as a 'competing alternative' to the Fourth Estate (the press) (Dutton 2009, p. 14).

The phenomenon of 'networked individuals' is one of the key elements in the rising power of the Fifth Estate, according to Dutton (2013). This is because 'networked individuals' can reach beyond the boundaries of institutions, and can link with one another at any time, at any place. In this light, membership of the Fifth Estate is not limited to the blogging community but 'to a wide array of networked individuals' (p.41). This way of communicating provides a new source of accountability of public intellectuals, economic elites, the government, the mass media and any sectors that are involved in the networked societies. The 'networking' made possible by the internet reshapes the way individuals and groups communicate with each other and enhances the power of 'citizen communication'. In countries with authoritarian leadership and constrained media such as Vietnam, the emergence of the Fifth Estate has a vital role because in many cases the internet is the only weapon individuals can use to demand for freedom and democracy (Dutton 2009, p. 15).

The establishment of the Fifth Estate also has its Achilles's heel. This is when the internet loses its independence from government control or it is challenged by the strategies of other estates of the internet realm (Dutton 2013). Dutton also argues that the Fifth Estate has its vitality but it can face challenges

coming from the strategies of other estates of the internet realm such as the centralisation of information utilities, censorship, controls and competition. Evidence to support this argument comes from the limited power and diffusion of the internet in Vietnam due to the state strict legal regulations, stringent surveillance and content filtering with threatening to the regime, state unity or national security (ONI 2012).

2.4 Network society and social movements

Dutton (2013) attributes his concept of 'networked individuals' to the key ideas of a 'network society' shaped by social theorist Manuel Castells. It is necessary to bring in this key conceptual framework and include it in the foundations of my research in order to situate the contemporary news media of Vietnam within an internet-empowered society consisting of different networks between one-to-many, one-to-one, many-to-one and many-to-many (Dutton 2009, p. 5). Using the network perspective of Manuel Castells, I can examine the contemporary Vietnamese news media context more broadly and relate it to state control and the study of individuals in the media network. The theory enables me to understand the media system and the ties, connections and relationships involved in the internet society of Vietnam. As Howard (2011) argues 'a network perspective allows us to make important connections between who the media is and what the media is' (p.8).

Based on the 'pervasiveness' of the information technology revolution in all social realms, Castells (1996) defines the network as 'a set of interconnected nodes'. The distance between these nodes varies (zero for the nodes within the network) to infinite (for the external nodes) (p. 501). Castells' definition of 'network society' is very broad, covering functions and processes of 'a new economy' that is informational, global and networked. The new economy leads to transformed work and employment, with new types of part-time work, self-employment or work by contract. Networks are also present in the cultural

realm with diverse and networked media systems (network TV, satellite TV ...) and the rise of interactive audiences in a culture of 'real virtuality' (Castells 2000, p. 13). These communication trends have a 'fundamental effect on politics' since the media becomes 'the space of politics' for all people, which changes the nature of political competition.

Under Castells' network concept, society is viewed as a new structure of 'the space of flows' or 'the technological and organisational possibility of' the 'simultaneity of social practices'. Castells believes that most of dominant social functions (finance, production or media systems) are organised around 'the space of flows'. In this society, individuals can move across and beyond the boundaries of existing institutions to network, and this boundary-less society is the basis for the development of Dutton's theory of the internet as the Fifth Estate (Dutton 2009). The new social structure also strongly impacts on 'the central power-holding institution' or the state by 'weakening its power and credibility'. While the state does not disappear, 'it adapts and transforms' to become a 'network state' made out of power-sharing and negotiated decision-making among the relevant institutions (Castells 2000, p. 14).

An important feature of networks, according to Castells (2000), is that they are 'neutral'. After a network is programmed (by social actors), it will 'impose its logic' on all members (actors). If any members want to control the network, they have to be the winners in the struggle to set the rules of the network. They can destroy the network but only by 'building an alternative network around alternative value' or by setting up a non-network structure without outside connections (p.16). This theoretical basis provides a meaningful tool to analyse how Vietnamese society is transforming in the information age when the structure of online social networks has begun to grow at a level tolerated by the CPV authorities. The 'neutral' nature of networks is fundamental to exploring how networks are developing in Vietnam and what occurs when both

Vietnamese internet users and the CPV authorities are trying to adapt networks to their own purposes. The CPV in particular is applying control to resist the 'neutral' nature with a view to controlling the networks.

In the network society, Castells (2007) also notices the rise of 'horizontal networks of communication' on the internet and wireless networks, which are termed 'mass self-communication' (p.248). This mode of communication, facilitated by the digital age, is supporting the 'social actor' to react against the control of governments and corporations. This leads to the hate side of the 'love-hate relationship' between governments, corporations and the internet (Castells 2011b). Castells goes further to explain the nature of 'power relationships' as the social foundation and the existence of both power and 'counterpower' at the same time. The existence of 'counterpower' is natural because 'wherever there is domination, there is resistance to the domination' (Castells 2007, p. 248). Each society has a 'specific form' of power and counterpower and Castells states that the exercise of counterpower can result in the formation of networked social movements. In the present network society, social movements are characterised by interactive, autonomous, re-programmable and self-expanding communication but the origin of social movements is not changed. Social movements are formed when many individuals feel humiliated, exploited, ignored or misrepresented. The cause of these emotions may be social, economic, political, cultural and psychological but they finally turn into 'a process of collective action' (Castells 2011a), and are expressed in social movements in the internet age (Castells 2013).

Manuel Castells developed his expansive theoretical study of network society based on global capitalism but his focus was also on individuals placed within the globally pervasive presence of information technology. Castells places the role of the 'individual' higher in society when the mass media has become a propaganda tool managed by the government and media

corporations. Thus, the mass media has found it necessary to converge with the internet for their survival (Castells 2007, 2011b). In today's world, which is dominated by digital communication, the technology has enabled the individual to network and to create changes through social movements. The social movements advocated by the internet as the Fifth Estate can be seen in the recent Arab Spring uprisings in the Arab world and in some democratic countries (Castells 2013). Internet power can also be implicit, obstinate, and prolonged as in the nations with the least independence, freedom and democracy such as Vietnam. With the internet, the press is forced to change and almost every individual gets connected faster and is able to enjoy freedom and democracy online before they can experience these in real life.

2.5 Towards cyber democracy: online freedom, tabloidisation, active audiences and the journalists' profession

2.5.1 Online freedom of expression for future cyber democracy

The Athenian legacy, with its democratic values of equality among citizens (albeit excluding women and slaves), liberty, and respect for law and justice, has become the central source of inspiration for democracy through to modern times (Held 2006). To gain democracy, men can fight to the death. While some countries appreciate their achievement of democracy, people in other countries are still only dreaming of democracy. Other than fighting with tears, blood and death, struggles for democracy these days continue at new levels, with 'new dimensions' and new developments (Held 2006). The internet has been said to dramatically enhance the processes and practices of democracy (Banerjee 2004).

Unlike Western countries, the journey towards democratisation has only just begun in Asia although the ideas of democracy have been spreading across the continent (Banerjee 2004). Long periods of colonial rule, indistinct national identities and the tasks of national development have slowed down the democratisation process in Asian countries. Other mediating factors of political

culture, regulatory regimes and the unequal level of digital access to the information technology have also constrained democratic potential in Asia (Kluver & Banerjee 2005). According to Kluver and Banerjee (2005), democracy has existed in Asia, but has been fitted to match with the diverse political and socio-economic situations of different countries, such as multi-party democracy (the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, India) and authoritarian democracies (Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia).

There has been some pessimism about the state of Asian democracy in the internet age due to heavy state regulation, surveillance, control, censorship and continuing commercialisation (Abbott 2013; Gomez 2004; Loo 2007). However, a majority of scholars agree on the existence of 'cyber democracy' (Banerjee 2004) thanks to the spread and dominant role of the internet. Abbott (2013) points out that 'the flowering of ICTs' (information communications technologies) — and especially the new social media — provide more access to information and create more political opportunity for the people in Asian countries. And despite challenges, the internet and new social media have brought opportunities for activists and social movements to operate in a freer public sphere (Abbott 2013). Along with the emergence of the 'net-generation', Loo (2007) believes that democratic values will be spread while the voice of the state will be weakened. Kluver (2007) has also stressed that there are grounds for optimism for expanded democratisation in Asia based on an analysis of the three logics of the media and the internet: narrative, database and conversation.

Democracy, even 'cyber democracy', is still a distant dream for authoritarian countries such as Vietnam. The country has been consistently ranked by international watchdogs as one of the countries with the least internet freedom (CPJ 2015; FreedomHouse 2015a; InternetWorldStats 2015). In fact, the cyber atmosphere of Vietnam has experienced remarkable changes in recent years when the internet's effects have reached beyond the economic industries

to the media, public discourse and civil society in the form of online discourse or online social movements among the virtual community inside Vietnam. In this context, I apply the concept of freedom of expression or online freedom of expression in the internet world as discussed by Dutton et al. 2010. This type of freedom highlights the internet as allowing individuals 'to express themselves freely' and giving them 'a chance to reach and join a wider audience' (p.6). With this unprecedented freedom powered by the internet, individuals can voice their ideas on political issues. This type of freedom is limited to the cyberspace only and Dutton et al. (2010) also notices that more governments are applying methods to 'monitor the internet messages' (p.20), as the internet has brought hopes for the dream of a future cyber democracy and networked society coming true in Vietnam. Because this finding shows how important the internet is in gradually liberating people in authoritarian countries, the concept of online freedom of expression, therefore, is an appropriate way to frame the present social situation in Vietnam.

The development of online freedom of expression also establishes a basis for the hope that future cyber democracy (or e-democracy) will be recognised in Vietnam when networked individuals can make further use of the internet to break state control. At the time of writing, participation in online discourse forums is on the rise among some professional groups, especially some Vietnamese propaganda journalists who are working for the state news media sector. Dahlberg (2001) uses the phrase 'extended public sphere' to describe the trend. Based on Habermas' theory of the public sphere, Dahlberg develops a set of six requirements for these online discourses: the exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims, reflexivity among participants, ideal role taking through understanding one another's perspective, sincerity in providing information, discursive inclusion and equality among every

participant and the discourse's autonomy from state and economic power (Dahlberg 2001, p. 623).

It is important to take into account the ongoing academic discussion on how the public sphere conceptualized by Habermas 1991 has transformed or been affected by the globalization and the spread of the information technology. Scholars have focused on the status of the internet and analysis offers the prospect that the technology can improve the public sphere (Gerhards & Schäfer 2010, p.145). However, some scholars such as Dean (2003) argue that the 'net is not a public sphere.' Dean's 2003 article defends this idea by saying that the net lacks basic things required for it to be 'a proper public sphere'. Dean cites the analysis by Brooks and Boal who said the net doesn't have 'individuated agents as the vehicle for discussion and rational, active participants in a reasonable, worthwhile exchange' (Dean 2003, p.99).

In the context of non-democratic countries, scholars are very cautious about using the term 'public sphere' because the pre-conditions such as critical discourse, equality and freedom of the sphere set by Habermas do not exist. Instead of using the term 'public sphere,' scholars have called it 'a new public field' (Zheng & Wu 2005, p. 522) or 'a new public space' based on a free internet (Castells 2009, pp. 414, 415). In this thesis, I will combine Dahlberg's phrase of 'extended public sphere' with the term 'public space' to discuss the formation of extended public space in Vietnam. I will apply Dahlberg's requirements to test the emergence of online deliberative forums in Vietnam. The focus on a forum of journalists will strengthen the broad argument of this thesis, that the internet has strongly impacted on the Vietnamese news media by producing changes among the audience, journalists and the performance of the system.

2.5.2 Active online audiences

Academic scholarly research into the active role of the audience can be attributed to the theory of Hall (1993), whose encoding/decoding model has become well-known (Long & Wall 2014; Philo 2008). Under this model, Hall explains the relationship between the producer, text and audience as a process in which the message is encoded by the producer in texts and these texts (messages) are then decoded in consumption. Accordingly, media organisations have power in setting the agendas and determining media content but the audience interprets the content within their social and cultural perspectives (Long & Wall 2014, p. 247). One important point is Hall's three positions of decoding the viewpoint behind the text:

1. dominant hegemonic position or decoding the message as it is encoded
2. negotiated position or adapting and opposing
3. opposition or decoding the message in a 'contrary way'.

(Long & Wall 2014, p. 247)

While Western scholars have re-visited Hall's theory and pointed out some errors in the way audiences can reject messages (Philo 2008), the emphasis on the active audience is the basis for my discussion on the improved position of today's Vietnamese audience. My thesis limits the discussion to the online audience because audiences have changed. In the age of the internet, the term 'audience' of television has been expanded to 'users' of 'new, converged, interactive' media (Livingstone 2004). With changing audiences in changing media communication, Livingstone (2004) has applied existing theories of audience to the users of new media, drawing particularly on the encoding-decoding approach. I also use this approach because Hall's model is still effective in reflecting relationships from production to reception and helps capture the activeness of Vietnamese audience in selecting, receiving and interpreting the message. If the State authorities have succeeded in controlling

the producer of the message (the Vietnamese press), they have the power of encoding. However, they are experiencing a time when the internet challenges this power by giving the audience the power to choose and interpret the message. In this active role, the audience members express what they have decoded through the commentary sections of online newspapers or on social forums, thus placing pressure on 'the producer' to become more aware of the audience's role and be more responsible in their production.

2.5.3 The global scale of tabloidisation

The concept of 'tabloidisation', evolved from discussions of tabloid journalism, has quickly become a key discussion topic in journalism studies across the globe. 'Tabloid' describes a style of journalism that originated in 'cheap and sensational scandal papers', often referred to as 'the penny press' or 'yellow journalism' in America (Esser 1999; Harris 2006; Lehrmann 2011; Örnebring & Jönsson 2004). Tabloids in the UK are newspapers published in smaller formats than the quality 'broadsheets' (Esser 1999; McLachlan & Golding 2000; Uribe & Gunter 2004). Meanwhile, the term 'tabloidisation' refers to both the 'tendency' and the 'process' of the news media shifting towards tabloid journalism (Alotaibi 2013; Esser 1999; McLachlan & Golding 2000; Örnebring & Jönsson 2004; Uribe & Gunter 2004).

With this difference in mind, Örnebring & Jönsson (2004) note that the concept of tabloidisation is not confined to the tabloid press. Defining the concept of 'tabloidisation' has been a global discussion of various approaches and attitudes. Tabloidisation can be simply explained by Kalb in 1997 as the process of 'downgrading of hard news and upgrading of sex, scandal and infotainment' (Esser 1999). Kurtz (1994) has found three aspects of 'tabloidisation': falling journalistic standards; reductions in coverage of hard news (politics and economics) with a corresponding increase in soft news such as sleazy, scandalous, sensational and entertainment news; and a general

change in the media's definition of what they think voters need to know to evaluate a person's fitness for public office. 'Tabloidisation' has also been characterised by McLachlan & Golding (2000) as evident in the 'range' of news stories (with decreasing coverage of hard news compared with more soft news), the 'form' of stories (with more illustrations and simpler presentation) and the 'style' of writing (with a 'casual tone' or more personalized stories) (McLachlan & Golding 2000, pp. 76,77; Uribe & Gunter 2004).

As academic discussion of tabloidisation has expanded beyond the media industries of America and the UK, researchers have connected the trend to social developments, issues of culture, democracy and the public sphere. 'Tabloidisation' can be seen as a 'new type of culture' and part of the media changes caused by market and social pressures but not hindering democracy (Alotaibi 2013). Academic investigations show two oppositional perspectives on tabloid journalism. On the one hand, critics condemn tabloids/tabloidisation for having negative social impacts, such as a 'contamination' of 'serious media,' as when the media adopts a 'tabloid agenda' (Kurtz 1994). On the other hand, researchers value the positive effects of this tendency as journalism that represents 'a break with the 'official journalism'' (Esser 1999), reaching every individual (Zelizer et al. 2000) and providing an 'alternative public sphere' (Örnebring & Jönsson 2004).

The tabloidisation of a country's press is no longer limited to Western democratic countries but has become a widespread 'epidemic' (Harris 2006). Tabloidisation continues to grow in today's American and Canadian news media and has been adopted in Mexican television news (Lozano 2004). 'Tabloidisation' has been identified to increase in the sacrosanct heartlands of 'hard news': Britain, Australia and New Zealand (Alotaibi 2013; Baker 2012; Esser 1999; Harris 2006). The evolution of 'global infotainment' privileging 'soft news' over 'hard news' has been found in the propaganda press systems of

some communist countries (Thussu 2008). China has been researched as a typical communist country increasingly accepting tabloid journalism as a result of moves to a market economy. Despite the authorities' control, researchers have emphasised the positive aspects of tabloids in China's print newspapers. Along with the goals of making a profit and demonstrating China's diverse media, Chinese print tabloids form part of a transition process towards further press freedom and challenge authoritative power (Huang 2001; Thussu 2008; Yu 2010).

In this thesis, I make use of the term and the definition of tabloidisation because it not only depicts a change in the 'degree of news' but also the on-going trends in this evolution. Including the positive aspects raised by scholars of tabloidisation, in later chapter I discuss the emergence of 'sex, scandal and infotainment' news in online newspapers of Vietnam's news media as an important 'break' which provides such newspapers with their only choice to bypass the heavy censorship imposed on 'hard news' and to satisfy the public's demand for information in the digital age. Furthermore, I argue that tabloidisation can be observed as a limited freedom given to part of the heavily censored news coverage in Vietnam.

2.6 Conclusion

In the following chapters, I present and discuss empirical data I have collected to answer the research questions in the light of these selected theories and concepts. The analysis and findings will then be crystalised in the final arguments, where I provide a new critique of the overall nature and context of the Vietnamese news media in the information age. In the chapters of discussion and analysis, from chapter four to chapter eight, I also point out specific limitations that arise when applying conceptual frames developed in Western democracies as tools to analyse the social phenomena and specific cases of the Vietnamese media and public spheres. I suggest that these

limitations help strengthen my arguments about the rise of unresolved, still smouldering contradictions and conflicts in the present media climate in Vietnam. ■

Chapter 3

Methodology: a three-way approach and thematic analysis

I started my thesis with a single focus: to explore the changes in Vietnamese journalism in the context of the internet's development. As I probed more deeply into the theoretical discussions about the media and the internet, I came to the decision that I would base my approach on several theories including the propaganda model (Herman & Chomsky 2008), network theory (Castells 2011b, 2013), and the theoretical concepts of framing the active role of audiences, tabloidisation and the internet as the 'Fifth Estate'. As I argued in chapter two, this combined theoretical approach provided a strong foundation for my discussion on the mutual impact between the media, the internet, netizens and the authorities in Vietnam.

International scholars researching politics, the press and the internet in Vietnam sometimes choose China as a role model of political control of the media by a communist country in the digital age (Abbott 2013; Abbott 2001; MacKinnon 2012; Rawnsley 2006). The case of Vietnam has been mentioned in some discussions as a supplementary reference in arguments about one-party control of the internet (Gomez 2004; Hachigian 2002). However, there are major differences between these two countries when it comes to internet management policies and the use of cyber space. Current developments in Vietnam are also shaping new social tendencies in the economic, political and civil sectors. These changes have immediate effects on the domestic press and the Vietnamese people. Along with these trends a rich source of material available online have

recently emerged in Vietnam thanks to the growing popularity of Facebook and the more active participation of the users on the online sphere. For these reasons, the time is ripe for researchers to monitor the transition underway in Vietnam and predict its future directions. It is therefore time for further international research to examine the contemporary media and society of Vietnam.

The choice of a multifocal position from which to analyse the contemporary news media of Vietnam means that I have had to deal with a large amount of empirical data. This chapter first explains the methods employed to gather the empirical data and the ethical issues and risks I faced during field trips to Vietnam. I then detail the steps required in carrying out semi-structured interviews, case studies and thematic analysis to arrive at results. I also indicate the challenges and limitations involved in the data gathering and processing.

3.1 The three-way approach

My thesis employs mixed methods of natural data analysis, semi-structured interviews and case studies to answer the research questions, thus offering a richer picture than previous research of the Vietnamese press in the internet-dominated age. Silverman (2013a) has emphasised that there are no 'right or wrong' methods for a study but that it is necessary to have the 'appropriate' methods. This trio of approaches is appropriate in this thesis because each data set strengthens the others, allowing a triangulation of the data to ensure the validity of the thesis and resulting in more complete and persuasive arguments.

My first data source consists of observations of online topic-related discussions in news stories, editorials, blog postings, professional forums and social networks with a focus on the domestic news and current affairs as well as on the newsreaders' comments from October 2012 to December 2015. The second data source is 19 semi-structured interviews with 18 participants including Vietnamese media administrators, journalists, media academics and

bloggers. Most of the interviews were conducted during two field trips to Vietnam, including one trip of more than five months from October 2012 to February 2013 and a one-month trip in June, 2015. Some interviews were conducted in 2016 through email exchange and telephone due to participants' requests and geographical distance. Data gathered from online discussions and interviews were also used for the two case studies discussed in chapters six and seven.

3.1.1 Media discussion

The data I collected daily from Vietnamese online newspapers, international media, Vietnam's general information websites, political blogs and online discourse forums contributes much to my discussion. I regard this material as 'naturally occurring data' which does not involve the intervention of a researcher (Silverman 2013a). The advantages of such 'natural' data are its relevance and abundance. The fact that media documents are regularly and easily sourced from the internet has facilitated my research, especially during my absence from Vietnam. With more than 45 million internet users or nearly half of the Vietnamese population in 2015, the online news media and forums have become a mirror reflecting up-to-date social developments and sentiments. To capture this data, I followed a daily routine of checking the six most popular online newspapers and digital versions of newspapers of Vietnam, four of the most-read political blogs and three selected discussion forums. I captured screenshots of any data relating to my research topic or within my research interests and saved it in computer folders. I subsequently categorized and coded the data using NVivo qualitative data analysis software and added the records to my Endnote library for future reference.

Another advantage of naturally occurring data such as this is that the documents are not artificial so they reveal innovative angles and interesting ideas which might not arise during interview. The data collection process,

however, is a prolonged task that demands a lot of patience, responsibility, organisation and a sense of what qualifies as appropriate information. My previous career as a TV journalist helped me during this time, making the work of reading and collecting clippings an enjoyable part of the research. A typical experience of natural data collection is that I had to stay up late or get up very early in the morning to capture the desired data before the links were replaced by 'error' messages due to the intervention of the Vietnamese authorities, without explanation, correction or apology. The message '*404 Not found error*' was a common sign of this reality. The natural data eligible for collection included news and opinions analysing Vietnamese press-related issues and internet management, and top political economic and social news stories that were making the news headlines. I also monitored the sections with audience comments and opinions and online social discussion on the most urgent state issues. A majority of the news stories, opinions, comments and blog postings I collected were written in the Vietnamese language, which was convenient for me because Vietnamese is my mother tongue.

3.1.2 Semi-structured interviews

A fundamental goal of this research was to elicit information from key informants working in, managing or studying the Vietnamese news media in the information age. I therefore needed early approval for research involving human participants. This approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Technology Sydney (approval number UTS **HREC REF NO. 2012-306A**). The process of preparing the research design and ethics committee application was helpful preparation in clarifying important standards for the interviews I planned to conduct in Vietnam. The ethic approval process, with its requirements for a detailed explanation of my study, proved extremely useful when I first contacted the participants. I was able to

gain participants' trust and co-operation rapidly after the participants read the information and consent documents.

I choose to apply semi-structured interviewing in this research because this 'flexible technique' can involve different categories of people (Drever 1995). I selected three main categories of people with direct involvement with the press system of Vietnam: media scholars, media administrators and media workers. I selected these three groups because I wanted to hear different ideas and statements about the same issues to enhance the triangulation of the data collected. I use the term 'media workers' to cover propaganda journalists and freelance journalists or bloggers. While these roles can be grouped under the one role of 'journalists' in democratic countries, in Vietnam they are differentiated in terms of legal definition, social recognition and type of work (see chapter seven). Table 3.1 below summarises details of the interview participants.

	Real Name	Pseudo- nym	Occupation	Company	Interview Date
1.	Lê Doãn Hợp		Media Administrator (Former Minister of Information & Communication)	Vietnam Digital Communication Association	17/06/15
2.	Trần Đăng Tuấn		Media Administrator (General Director)	An Vien Television	22/05/15
3.	Phạm Hiếu		Media Administrator (Vice Editor in chief)	VnExpress.net (e- newspaper)	26/12/12
4.		NDD	Scholar of Media	Academy of Journalism & Communication	14/12/12
5.		DCN	Scholar of Media	Academy of Journalism & Communication	15/01/13
6.	Mai Quốc Ẩn		Journalist	TTVN.vn (Young Knowledge e- newspaper)	10/01/16
7.	Hoàng Nguyên Vũ		Journalist	TTVN.vn (Young Knowledge e- newspaper)	18/05/16
8.	Mai Phan Lợi		Journalist Administrator	Ho Chi Minh City Law Newspaper Young Journalists Forum	12/12/12 4/6/2015
9.	Huy Đức		Freelance Journalist	Osin Blog	21/08/15
10.	Trần Tiến Đức		Freelance Journalist		15/06/15
11.		VT	Retired Journalist		14/06/15
12.		NKH	Journalist	Vietnam Television (VTV)	18/01/13
13.		LLH	Journalist	Vietnamnet.vn (e- newspaper)	26/10/15
14.		KD	Journalist	Vietnamnet.vn (e- newspaper)	22/06/15
15.		NND	Journalist	Sport & Culture newspaper	28/09/15
16.		NBK	Journalist	Pioneer newspaper	30/11/12
17.		NVA	Journalist	Vietnam Television Corporation (VTC)	15/01/13
18.		NT	Former Technician	VOV e-newspaper	19/10/2015

Table 3.1: Summarised information of 18 participants interviewed (2012 – 2016)

Among the 19 interviews I collected, one participant was interviewed twice, as this person performed two separate roles at the time of communication: as a regional chief representative of a newspaper and as an administrator of an online forum for journalists. One interview was carried out by phone and five interviews were conducted by email as those participants preferred not to take part in face-to-face meetings and could not manage the meeting time due to the geographical distance. In 2012, I conducted seven interviews during my first field trip in Vietnam. The remaining interviews were conducted from May 2015 to May 2016. These interviewees include two local media scholars, eight propaganda journalists currently working for state-owned news organisations, one activist who had previously worked as a propaganda journalist, one blogger who claimed to be a freelance journalist after many years working as a propaganda journalist, and five media administrators. Among the five media administrators, one had been the Minister of Information and Communications from 2007 to 2011; two are the deputy editor-in-chief and editorial manager of two popular online newspapers in Vietnam; one is a regional chief representative of a newspaper; and one used to be the Deputy General Director of State Television of Vietnam VTV. I also interviewed one IT technician who knew about the application of content management systems during the time he worked for the e-newspaper *Voice of Vietnam (VOV)*.

The duration of each interview is varied, ranging from 15 minutes to two hours in length. The extended duration of the interviews was varied because it was at times a challenge to extend the interview with Vietnamese propaganda journalists and media administrators to explore critical issues in the Vietnamese press and society. These professionals may be easy to contact and open about discussing various topics before and after the interviews but during the interviews their attitude often changed to hesitation and caution, especially when the voice recorder was on. Some refused to give their comments or

answered briefly when being asked the issues outside their professional tasks such as media management or freedom of the press in Vietnam. The reason for these changing attitudes is that interviewees were scared, worried or apprehensive about their comments possibly being traced so this would affect their work. Propaganda journalists feel more comfortable writing about other people than being written about themselves, especially in a language they are not familiar with. These participants always required me to hide their identity and the name of the organisations they were working for. However, several journalists and media administrators had an open attitude and talked freely during the interview. These participants wanted their names and position titles to be published in full.

Eighteen interviewees from a 50-candidate list may not be a high proportion. The journalists interviewed for this thesis cannot represent the 23,000 or so propaganda journalists who are working for state-owned news organisations in Vietnam and the large number of citizen journalists who are mushrooming among the online community in Vietnam (discussed further in chapter seven). However, the quality of the interviews exceeded my expectations. The common attitude among Vietnamese professionals working for the state press was caution. But once I had their agreement, they were much more open and could speak out about the things they had to say. Their ideas were sharp, and they were practical and thoughtful in their portrayal of the key aspects of the most recent press circle in Vietnam. All participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the project and ensuring confidentiality (where needed) and each participant was asked to provide written/oral consent. The consent form was sent by email after the participant accepted my interview invitation. I also prepared a printed consent form for the interviewees to sign before we started our conversation. For the email

interviews, the participant was asked to use their e-signature and to send me the signed consent form together with their answers to the interview questions.

I had been waiting two years to interview the former Vice General Director of Vietnam Television. He had moved into a leadership position at An Vien Television in 2011 and is currently an influential Facebook user for his charity project 'Rice with Meat' and offers sharp critiques of social problems. I had tried various ways (direct contacts and assistance by a journalist) to convince him to talk to me during that time. But my patience was rewarded not only with his acceptance but also with his frank discussion of various key issues in the Vietnamese press. I give very high priority to protecting the confidentiality of the participants and the interviews because formal statements about politics are always sensitive in Vietnam. Pseudonyms are used for many participants. Audiotapes, transcriptions and translations of the interviews are protected with passwords to assure their safety. However, not all of the interviewees required this condition. The retired professionals, the activist, the blogger and some media administrators were very open throughout our communication process. These interviewees refused to have their identities changed or hidden since they have publicly spoken about their critical ideas and they want their thoughts and ideas to be widely shared. When I asked if they feared threats, retired journalist Tran Tien Duc said: 'The people living on the state salaries can be scared but the people like us are not. They can put difficulties in my way but I trust what I am doing is right' (2015, pers. comm., 15 June).

The sites of the interviews included the capital city of Ha Noi in northern Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh city in southern Vietnam. These two biggest urban areas of Vietnam are home to the headquarters of almost all the media organisations. These two cities have historic role of the 'two opposing press camps', with the northern press representing the 'communists' and the southern press for the 'capitalists' during the Vietnam war from 1954 to 1975 (Hang 2003).

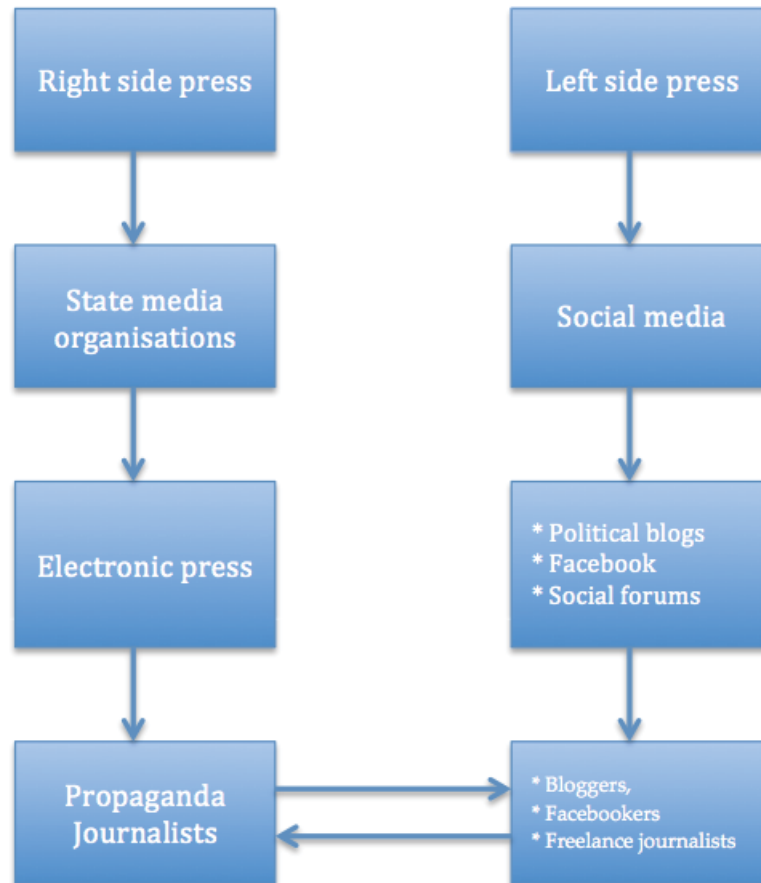
After Vietnam was unified in 1975, the press of the two regions press was also merged under the Vietnamese state press but the different styles of journalism exist to this day. Ho Chi Minh city has more commercialised but more open newspapers such as *Tuoi Tre* (Youth) or *Thanh Nien* (Young People) and Hanoi has the more conservative but principal media organisations of the CPV authorities such as the newspapers *Nhan Dan* (People) and *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (People's Army), as well as *Vietnam State Television* (VTV), or *Voice of Vietnam Radio* (VOV).

Lapadat & Lindsay (1999) believe that transcription is an 'important component' of analysing data. When conducting interviews in a language other than English, the transcription work is important. A detailed and sufficient transcription of every interview helps yield a good translation from Vietnamese into English. All transcripts were transcribed carefully in Vietnamese before being translated into English. I performed these tasks with the confidence of being a certified translator/interpreter of Vietnamese and English. My journalism experience working for the English news bulletins of Vietnam television also facilitated this translation work during the transcription process.

Key types of Vietnamese journalists and media players

'Right side' press	'Left side' press
<p>- The press is owned and managed by the CPV authorities. The 'right side' press is sometimes called 'mainstream media'.</p> <p>- Other names for the media in this stream:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • state media • state-owned media, • state-run media • propaganda media (from the viewpoint of western countries) 	<p>- This stream of journalism is the non-mainstream media and is not owned by the Vietnamese authorities.</p> <p>- Advocates refer to it as the journalism of liberty, equality, democracy and civilisation. In many instances, 'left side' press players fill the gaps in reporting negative and sensitive issues left by the 'right side' press.</p>
State media organisations	Social media
<p>- State media organisations at all levels/tiers.</p> <p>- Electronic newspapers, e-newspapers or e-press are popular terms for online newspapers which are part of the state media organisations.</p>	<p>Social media provide platforms where internet users in Vietnam can create and share content include social networks (Facebook), weblogs (political blogs), social forums and social groups.</p>
Propaganda journalists	Citizen journalists
<p>Propaganda journalists are the journalists who work for mainstream media and are granted press cards.</p>	<p>- Citizen journalists are the internet users whose news stories and opinions are initially written not for a state media organisation but published on social media.</p> <p>- A propaganda journalist can be a citizen journalist when his/her writings are not controlled by their media organisation. And a blogger can have his/her posting published by a state newspaper.</p> <p>- Other names for citizen journalists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • freelance journalists • citizen journalists • facebookers • bloggers.

Two streams of Vietnamese journalism and players analysed in this thesis



3.1.3 Case studies

The naturally occurring documentary data helped me gather observations about the broad scale of important issues in Vietnam, and the interviews gave me the best chance ‘to speak at length and develop rapport with informants’ (Wells-Dang 2011). However, I also recognised that it was important to investigate ‘contemporary phenomenon’ (Yin 2003, p. 13) which could generate ‘generalisability’ (Flyvbjerg 2006; Yin 2003). For this reason, I employed case study methodology as the ideal method to answer the questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ the internet is empowering the majority but still constrained Vietnamese netizens to speak their minds. I preferred the strategy of the case study over a survey because the phenomena are only in the early stages of emerging, are still evolving and happened within recent years. Using case studies, I was able to examine the characteristics of the phenomena, tracing the reasons behind them and making further connections with related social factors and industries (Yin 2003).

I chose the cases to study based on the ‘four aspects of quality’ set by Yin (2003): a) construct validity, b) internal validity, c) external validity, and d) reliability. I decided to select two single cases typically seen in more recent years. In chapter six, I explore the phenomenon of online social movements through the prominent case of the Hanoi Tree Movement. In chapter seven, I highlight the case study of an online discourse forum of propaganda journalists. These single cases are studied on the proposition that they are ‘contemporary’ phenomena that affect the state press of Vietnam and thus allow us to generalise the process of social transformation in the information age. Sources of the evidence used for the selected cases include documents collected, interviews with participants and observers, archive documents, and direct observation of different media sources and discussion forums. To ensure the quality of the case studies, I followed Yin’s advice to keep revising the case regularly so that when

a problem occurred, changes and adjustments were made in a timely fashion. With the cumbersome administrative system and the cautious characteristic of the Vietnamese people, it was important for me to have a large network of media contacts and good knowledge of the domestic working culture to ensure trust and cooperation during the period of data collection.

3.2 The risks of researching the media in Vietnam

I started the first field trip and data collection in my first year of this study, so the considerable task of analysis was begun early. As suggested by Silverman (2013a), early data analysis allows more time to test different methods before choosing the most appropriate ones. I had not planned to write about Vietnamese propaganda journalists but the first field trip and the first four interviews with journalists uncovered numerous ideas, questions and insights about doing journalism in Vietnam. Despite their typical working conditions and professional guidelines, some propaganda journalists I interviewed showed themselves to be radical and open-minded in reviewing their work, the social situations, and the international context. The journalists, especially those working for online newspapers, were tech savvy, and with their rich knowledge of social issues and desire for change, these journalists were also well aware of the limits and risks they are living with, and the struggle to find a balance these days between the freer world of cyber space and their daily professional world, narrowed by ideological tasks and censorship.

Another advantage of making two field trips for my study was that I had enough time and clear guidelines to make revisions during the phases of data collection, data management and result testing. The early field trip enabled me to gather numerous experiences of the location, people and their situations. I had never conducted academic research in Vietnam and this work was very different from my previous job as a propaganda journalist. Based on the lessons and experience I gained in the first field trip, I was able to make much better

preparations for the second field trip. The second time I conducted interviews and collected data in Vietnam, I had a very detailed research design of specific chapters and sections so that I asked more direct questions, had a clearer focus and targets in mind for the interviews and final data.

My research, however, also encountered challenges and risks. The first challenge was the difficulty accessing the latest media-related information and management documents such as financial statistics, internal administrative and management documents, or information about newspaper licensing issues. In Vietnam, information is often regarded as secret until it is publicly released. Another challenge was to convince media administrators and propaganda journalists to accept my requests for interviews and to discuss their viewpoints in an open manner (discussed above). Having worked as a TV journalist for 12 years in Vietnam, I also had to face the challenge of using a journalist's eyes to look at the phenomena. Some scholars believe that the skills of journalism might not be appropriate to academic research because a journalist's focus is very different from that of a researcher (Silverman 2013a, 2013b). While journalists focus on the 'unusual' and more 'public' part of social problems, researchers are expected to have 'an analytic manner' and 'theorise' about situations based on 'a coherent model and set of concepts' (Silverman 2013a, p. 328). In my particular research on Vietnamese news media, journalism experience helped facilitate the communication process with the participants. It allowed me to negotiate the complex administrative procedures to collect data more easily and to save time in overcoming cultural and social challenges. I made the best use of my journalism skills to get involved in the press circle and to keep updated on developments in Vietnam while doing my research in Australia.

I should also mention my personal safety while contacting bloggers and activists in Vietnam. I had taken into account this issue during my ethics application and research design because of the risk of potential conflict and

punitive measures by the State, which might follow if I was not careful and professional. This is an appropriate way to understand ethics in my study: it involved the task of finding the 'best and 'most right' solution among many less-than-satisfying options' (Plaisance 2013, p. 22). Doing research about Vietnam, you have to prepare for the situation of being monitored when you contact dissident bloggers or democrat activists or if you have the intention of exploring the legitimacy of the CPV. My Gmail address has been under threat of hacking during the past four years. On one occasion I received an email inviting me to an event and inviting me to click on a link. Two other times, I received Google's warnings notices about unusual sign-in activities to my Gmail account. The situation was repeated in 2013 after I sent out invitations for interviews to some freelance journalists and bloggers. I have reason to believe that those emails may not be spam after FreedomHouse (2015a) pointed out that activists in and outside Vietnam have been 'the target of sophisticated cyber attacks' or malicious software. Blogger Huy Duc, one of my interviewees, stated on his Facebook page on 13 December 2015 that his Facebook and email had been constantly attacked. He attached a photo of Gmail's warning that his account could be at risk of state-sponsored attacks. In general, I did not receive any direct threats during the four-year study but I needed to maintain a cautious attitude to keep quiet about my research activities in public. For example, I did not mention my work on Facebook or discuss it openly with friends and VTV colleagues.

During some of my email exchanges and face-to-face interviews, I also received warnings from an English-speaking researcher, a Vietnamese researcher and a media administrator. They urged me to be cautious with what I wrote in my thesis if the topic was sensitive and pointed out that my work could be reported and monitored. This risk is real: Vietnam has been listed as an enemy of the internet (RSF 2014). When I first realised that these threats existed,

I experienced a moment of being scared and worried for my own security. However, in the final stages of this study, those feelings faded considerably. One more important thing is that writing this thesis has released me from the pressures of the self-censorship which had been followed me during the time working as a journalist in Viet Nam. I now understand that many other journalists and bloggers are working and living in far riskier situations but they continue to voice their criticisms. Thus I am no longer scared. I still need to be cautious to manage the research work but I have been determined to investigate the research question thoroughly.

3.3 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a process that can be used with qualitative information (Boyatzis 1998). It is a search for themes (Daly, Kellehear & Gliksman 1997) and a method for recognising patterns (themes) (Braun & Clarke 2006). More than that, thematic analysis is regarded as a 'foundation method' for qualitative analysis. Its basic skills can be useful for various types of information and can yield 'a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon' (Boyatzis 1998; Braun & Clarke 2006) and assist in developing new theories to explain phenomena. While scholars still argue about the need for detailed guidelines for this method, Braun & Clarke (2006) appreciate the openness and flexibility of thematic analysis, which enables researchers to approach the data without the demand for deep theories or technological knowledge. This makes thematic analysis a good methodological choice for early qualitative researchers, like myself. Widely applicable but effective, thematic analysis still ensures accuracy in understanding and interpreting the observations of people, events, situations, and organisations with the requirement of sensitivity and 'careful reading and re-reading' of the data to track down the themes for analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2008). The method has been very productive and allowed me to manage my sizeable dataset over a long period

of time (nearly three years), to build up my findings gradually, to enrich my interpretation step by step and to develop a comprehensive understanding of my research topic in a sustainable manner.

The coding process is one of the most important and challenging parts of this study. When themes and codes are developed, then the researcher moves towards theory development (Boyatzis 1998). In this study, I developed the codes based on a combination of theories of media and on the data system. This hybrid approach of 'theory-driven' and 'data-driven' codes is inspired by Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2008), who incorporated the 'data-driven' inductive approach by Boyatzis (1998) and the deductive priority template of codes by Crabtree & Miller (1999). The hybrid approach can generate 'good codes' both from the theoretical tenets and from the data, complementing the research question (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2008). In my study, a majority of the themes or patterns were developed in an inductive or ground-up way from the data. Some of the themes were driven by my theoretical interest in the arguments about cyber freedom, press 'censorship', or 'internet control'. In this 'top down' way, the theory–data themes maintained the dynamics between the data and my theoretical perspectives, the literature review, analytic preconceptions and the primary research questions (Braun & Clarke 2006). In addition, the inductive method (Boyatzis 1998) enabled me to have some freedom to reach beyond the existing frame, searching for new themes among the media discussion, blog posts and interviews. This helped to better shape the research questions and enhanced opportunities to answer them.

3.3.1 The six steps of analysis

The coding process was guided through six phases of analysis offered by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process is explained as 'a step-by-step guide' (p.15), not 'a linear' but a 'recursive' process (p.16). During the process, I was able to move around the guided steps, back and forward, and could repeat the steps several

times. The following sections detail the work I completed in every step of the six-step process.

Step 1: Get to know the data

Data collection included two important tasks: gathering the news stories, press columns and blog postings through the internet; and conducting field trips for the interviews and case studies. The first task sounds easier than doing the interviews and gathering data in the field but it was not. This work can be compared with that of a soldier ant, which takes place every morning. Every night I needed to read and save data from various online sources. In special situations, some sensitive news items were published on Vietnam's online news websites for only one or two hours before they were permanently deleted at the demand of media administrators. This meant I needed to skim all the news at a set time every day to get the latest coverage of the news about the press in Vietnam.

This first step of thematic analysis was essential in my study because the prolonged and repeated process of reading the data allowed me to really 'immerse' myself in the data, becoming familiar with both the depth and breadth of the content (Braun & Clarke 2006). It made me develop my ability 'to see the pattern' (Boyatzis 1998) in a rapid and active way. As explained by Boyatzis (1998), thematic analysis requires a strong grounding in the context — in my case, the Vietnamese situation and press performance — as well as an open-minded ability to make the right selection. My protocol for deciding the data were eligible depended on the material having a close connection with the research topic, which meant a keen scrutiny of relevant data published in popular newspapers of Vietnam and the world, on popular political blogs and written by renowned journalists or bloggers. During this step, I made notes and wrote down new ideas while I read the data and transcribed the interviews. The transcription of the interviews was also valuable as this 'interpretative act' can

generate meanings and ideas rather than being simply a writing down of the 'verbatim words' (Lapadat & Lindsay 1999, p. 82).

Step 2: Develop initial codes

The main job of this step is to produce the codes from the data. The codes are identified from the raw data. This is when the analysis really begins at the micro scale (Braun & Clarke 2006). In my study, at this stage in the process some of the codes were already defined in my mind and it was my desire to find the data or part of the data that represented the codes (theory-driven codes) while the remaining codes rise from the data during the reading and re-reading process (data-driven codes).

Coding 13 recorded interviews of more than 600 minutes in length and five email interviews of 25 pages took me ten days, but coding nearly 190 news articles, opinion pieces and numerous postings on eight blogs and three Facebook forums was a prolonged process, stretching from 2013 to the end of 2015. Each data item was given 'full and equal' attention to make sure that I did not miss the 'good quotes'. Extracted paragraphs and sentences were coded. As advised by Braun & Clarke (2006), I tried to code as many themes as possible because I still had time for this work and I could not be sure what would later be revealed as important. At this stage, there were frequent overlaps among the codes and the coding system did not look smooth but I took time to thoroughly process the data, identifying many 'good quotes' to illustrate common themes and codes. Codes were also collated up to three times to increase their validity and accuracy.

In my study, the initial codes were often more 'theory-driven' because I began by approaching the data with specific questions in my mind. I therefore sought and chose data to code that centred on these specific topics. The more I became absorbed in the data system (through reading several times, translating and checking), the more 'data-driven' codes appeared and this drove me to

finalise the data-driven themes. Here below I present two examples of a 'data-driven' code and a 'theory-driven' code in the stage of developing themes.

Table 3.2 describes how theory-driven codes were developed for the data. The coloured rows are the themes,³ the rows with labels in bold are nodes and the rows with bullet labels are child nodes.⁴ Definitions of themes and nodes are made by the researcher to explain briefly the meaning of each node (themes and codes).⁵ I developed the nodes based on my aim to find relevant data to answer such questions as how the Vietnamese authorities are controlling the internet; how they have relaxed the control policy; what the disadvantages of their management are; and how observers and users are reacting to the state-set boundaries.

Table 3.3 describes the theme of political blogs and Facebook which are presented in full in chapter six. This theme has four nodes, each defined. The nodes reflect the ways in which social media are rising to compete against the state news media. These nodes also capture the fact that the more influential social media become, the tighter the control that the CPV applies to the virtual space. When I first worked with these nodes, I did not have specific targets but the more I analysed the data content, the more clearly nodes came up. This enabled me to shape the sub-themes before concentrating them into a final

³ 'A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question' (Braun & Clarke 2006). Some scholars regard themes as broad 'patterns' across the data set which help describe the phenomenon and attach with a sub research questions. Codes are the 'list of ideas' generated from the data during the time you get familiar with your data (Braun & Clarke 2006) so they are 'the most basic segment' (element) of raw data with connection to the phenomenon (Boyatzis 1998).

⁴ A node means a collection of references about a specific themes/place/person or an issue. Used in NVivo, the term describes the process of gathering related material in one place, then looking for emerging ideas and patterns. This process is to code sources of data. Nodes can be organized in hierarchies from the general topics (parent nodes) to more specific topics (child nodes).

broad theme that focused on the arguments and findings about political blogs and Facebook and their reciprocal impacts on the state news media of Vietnam.

Name	Sources	References	Created On	Modified On	Definition
Internet's state control	20	68	4/17/2014 3:53 PM	11/19/2014 12:28 PM	This theme reviews how Internet has been managed by VCP.
More Freedom	6	13	4/23/2014 1:56 PM	12/12/2014 11:55 AM	This node explains how far the Internet has been freed further by the authorities and even by Vietnamese users.
Control measures	2	24	12/11/2014 5:40 PM	12/12/2014 2:07 PM	This node details how the Internet is controlled within Vietnam.
Chasing behind IT growth	8	11	2/5/2014 11:20 AM	12/11/2014 5:38 PM	This node explains how the state control policy has run backwards and passively behind the IT applications and freedom in Vietnam. This node is then DELETED on 22/12/2014 because it overlaps too much with other nodes.
Censorship reactions	1	2	12/12/2014 11:45 AM	12/19/2014 5:50 PM	This node shows different attitudes of the interviewees, scholars and media discussion towards the internet management. This node is then merged with the node of more freedom for the usage of internet in Vietnam to analyze the contradictions.

Table 3.2: An example of theory-driven codes extracted from NVivo in stage 2 of the thematic analysis

Name	Sources	References	Created On	Modified On	Definition
Blogs, Facebook	26	84	11/19/2014 12:14 PM	11/27/2014 4:04 PM	This theme focuses on blogs and Facebook as the challenger to mainstream media in Vietnam.
Challenge State press	16	25	11/26/2014 3:53 PM	12/16/2014 3:50 PM	This node states the blogs & Facebook as the rising challengers against state controlled mainstream media.
Journalism or Not	8	9	11/20/2014 5:15 PM	12/16/2014 3:49 PM	This node states the status of blogs in Vietnam, which is not regarded as journalism legally but read by rising Internet users as a source of news.
Prospects	5	8	11/26/2014 3:53 PM	12/16/2014 3:51 PM	This node focuses on the future position of blogs and Facebook in Vietnam.
Controlled & Threatened	10	42	11/26/2014 3:53 PM	12/16/2014 3:50 PM	This node explains the measures VCP has applied to contain and manage bloggers and Facebook users in VN.

Table 3.3: An example of data-driven codes extracted from NVivo in stage 2 of the thematic analysis

Step 3: Search for themes

This stage occurs when the researcher finally has a complete list of codes. Some child nodes are grouped under a parent node. By this stage of the analysis, differences among the codes and code groups became so obvious that I was able to sort them into 'potential themes' (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 89). Again, the

NVivo software helped me to test the codes in different thematic maps of the relationships among codes and themes. The next main task was to check the set of the codes to see whether any codes did not fit in the theme. The process ended when I had defined the names of the themes, sub-themes and their codes. However, this was also the time when I experienced feelings of worry and uncertainty about the validity of the themes. I wondered whether I had enough themes and whether they were significant enough to be the themes for the final analysis. This feeling is explained by Boyatzis (1998) as similar to a marathon runner 'hitting the wall' (p.47). It often came after I re-read the translation and other data too many times, made too many comparisons in a short time and distinguished or re-read too many themes from subsamples. To follow Boyatzis's advice, I chose to do other work and chat with other colleagues about analysing data because these breaks helped me refresh my mind and generated new energy for getting back to the analysis.

Step 4: Review and test themes

My worries and nervousness were eliminated when I started step four, reviewing and verifying all the themes. Braun & Clarke (2006) call this the 'refinement' of themes. This is the moment at which some themes and sub-themes could be deleted, merged, separated or even divided to arrive at the final list of coherent and valid themes. The first list of the themes was finalised and the thematic map was also confirmed, as illustrated in the concept map of final themes (see step five below). The selected themes were considered valid if they fitted with the data set as a whole and if they also supported the interpretation of the discussion. As this step was happening while I was still continuing to update data with the latest media stories and blog postings, new codes were created and injected into the themes. I also used this time to check the coding one last time for final corrections. I officially stopped data collection six months before the submission of this thesis but no new themes were

generated in that last phase and the additional data was very limited and only used to extend the breadth and depth of the analysis.

An important part of this step was to ask others to carry out a final check of the reliability of the themes and nodes to mitigate the limitations of coding from only a one-person perspective, as explained by Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2008). Under the suggestion of my supervisor (Dr Catriona Bonfiglioli 2014, pers. comm., November), I was lucky to find two colleagues to assist me in this stage: Benjamin Hanckel and Amina Singh. I trusted these two colleagues because they had good knowledge of qualitative research and social science theories. I had also regularly discussed my research and other research theories and methodologies with these two colleagues.

During a two-hour workshop on 17 December 2014, I provided my colleagues with a shorter version of data, each with two different themes. This subset of data was taken from NVivo and included interview quotes and quotes from documents (news opinions, editorials, reports). I asked my colleagues to make nodes. I then gave them the themes and the nodes I had coded for this data. I also gave them a table of all the themes and the tables with nodes in each theme. We checked their nodes against mine and continued comparing the similarities and differences between their nodes and mine. We estimated the percentage of our agreement based on the number of matching nodes against the unmatched ones. After the face-to-face meeting, my colleagues noted down their comments and evaluation of the tables of themes and nodes. Comments were positive and showed interest in the content. I also asked my colleagues to email my supervisor directly with their evaluation of the reliability and credibility of my codes. My colleagues demonstrated 85% agreement on my codes and their evaluative comments were positive. I therefore considered that I had reliably performed a verifiable standard process of coding to generate the key themes for my research.

Step 5: Define themes and perform initial analysis

Step 5 began when I was satisfied with my themes. At this stage I began seriously analysing the data behind these themes. This was my favourite period of the research but it was also very challenging. It is the time when I learnt to 'speak the language' of my theoretical perspective and concepts (Boyatzis 1998). At this point I could see how far I needed to go to establish the 'essence' of each theme, how much 'meaning' I could gather and what I should choose to describe and discuss in my thesis. This was when I started finding the answers to my research questions. To put it simply, this was when I realised the characteristics of my own dataset and its capacity to answer epistemological questions (Crotty 1998). Section 3.4 below introduces these five themes.

Step 6: Final report (check back over steps 3, 4 and 5)

In this study, step 6 was not very different from step 5. In the last step of thematic analysis, I completed the final analysis to explain the narratives revealed by my data. The challenge of writing up my final report was to avoid merely paraphrasing the selected data, i.e. to interpret my data, not just to describe it (Braun & Clarke 2006).

3.3.2 Thematic analysis and NVivo

The qualitative data analysis software package of NVivo proved to be a supportive tool during the analysis process. The documentary data and the transcribed interviews were imported into NVivo weekly or monthly depending on the frequency of the data and the importance of the issues. NVivo can manage a great volume of the data in various formats, and while it is hard to master at first, it becomes much easier with regular practice. The program was timesaving and helpful during the coding process (especially in steps 2 and 3). Coding requires multiple phases and steps, and many changes occurred in different phases before the final codes and themes were decided. If

this work had been done manually, I cannot be sure that the results would be the best that could be achieved. With NVivo, I could quickly change the code, check the sources at any time, detail the context of the code and manage the workload easily. This enabled me to enhance the 'rigour' of my analysis and the 'theoretical ideas' emerging during the coding (Welsh 2002). While NVivo can be a trustworthy assistant, it cannot 'gain a deep understanding of the data' (Welsh 2002). It depends on the researcher to discover how far the empirical data can lead in the search for the answers to the research questions.

3.4. Over-arching themes emerging from NVivo analysis

As explained above, after coding the data collected from multiple sources (news stories, editorials, blog postings, professional forums and social networks) and the interview scripts of 18 participants, I analysed the data using NVivo. The codes/nodes were developed from the data, regrouped and adjusted multiple times before generating the final themes and codes. The five themes that finally emerged from this process were:

1. commercialised press
2. ascending electronic press
3. blogs and Facebook
4. propaganda journalists
5. State control.

Table 3.4 below shows how the final themes are listed in NVivo with the specific time frame, number of sources and number of references attached to each theme.

Nodes				
	Name	Sources	References	Created On
+	Ascending Electronic press		27	66 19/11/2014 12:11 PM
+	Blogs, Facebook & online community		38	107 19/11/2014 12:14 PM
+	Commercialised Press		36	139 17/04/2014 3:51 PM
+	Internet & journalists		17	33 17/04/2014 3:55 PM
+	State control & prospect of Press		65	196 17/04/2014 3:53 PM

Table 3.4: Final themes listed in NVivo

Figure 3.1 captures the five themes and their key nodes. Each theme represents the codes, data and analysis that are presented in chapters five to seven and which answer my research sub-questions, as set out in chapter one. In the remainder of this chapter I provide a brief overview of the themes, as a way of foreshadowing and outlining the more detailed discussion of the themes in the following chapters. I provide tables that show the results of my thematic analysis with the nodes or sub-themes and the child nodes under each final theme. Each child node is accompanied by an example of a coded reference from the data.



Figure 3.1 Concept maps drawn in NVivo showing the final themes

3.4.1 Theme 1: Commercialised press

Table 3.5 indicates the nodes in theme 1, with examples from the data.

Theme 1	Commercialised press	
Node 1.1	Signals of marketization	
Child node 1.1.1	Size, ownership, profit	<p>‘Báo VietNamNet.vn tự nuôi nhau, vừa làm báo, vừa làm doanh nghiệp (Interview with KD – journalist of VietNamNet.vn 22 Jun 2015)</p> <p>Translation: ‘VietNamNet newspaper feeds itself, doing journalism and doing business at the same time’</p>
Child node 1.1.2	Advertising	<p>‘Chiến lược của VTV là phải cố gắng giữ được thị phần quảng cáo của mình dành cho truyền hình trong miếng bánh chung đang bị thu hẹp và chia sẻ’ (Vietnam Television General Director’s Speech viewed 15 Feb 2015 http://vtvcantao.vn/tin-tuc/67/73661/khong-thay-doi-se-la-chet.html)</p> <p>Translation: ‘VTV strategy is to try maintaining our advertising marketshare of television in the cake which has been narrowed and shared’</p>
Child node 1.1.3	Sources	<p>‘Nhắc đến vụ ‘Hồ sơ Panama’ liên quan đến Việt Nam, Cục trưởng Cục chống tham nhũng cho biết, đây mới chỉ là thông tin một chiều, cũng không phải nguồn tin chính thống (Laodong viewed 11 May 2016 http://laodong.com.vn/thoi-su-xa-hoi/cuc-truong-cuc-phong-chong-tham-nhung-ho-so-panama-lien-quan-den-viet-nam-chua-phai-chinh-thong-550086.bld)</p> <p>Translation: ‘Regarding the Vietnam-relating ‘Panama papers’, Head of the Anti-corruption Department said this is the one-sided information and is not the official source’</p>
Child node 1.1.4	Negative response	<p>‘Những người đứng đầu các tòa báo rất dễ mất ngủ khi nhận được tin nhắn chỉ đạo vào thời điểm đêm khuya, khi mà bài báo sắp qua nhà in’ (TuoiTre Online viewed 26 November 2015 <http://tuoitre.vn/tin/chinh-tri-xa-hoi/20151126/nhieu-tong-bien-tap-dau-dau-voi-tin-nhan-giua-dem/1009816.html%3E)</p> <p>Translation: ‘Managers of newspapers can easily have a sleepless night after receiving a guiding order at late night, when a news story is about to send to the printer’</p>
Child node 1.1.5	Anti hostile forces	<p>“Diễn biến hòa bình” là sự thực, là thực tế, đã và đang diễn ra hằng ngày, hằng giờ trên mọi lĩnh vực của đời sống xã hội nước ta’ (People’s Police Online, viewed 7 August 2015, <http://cand.com.vn/Su-kien-Binh-luan-thoi-su/Bieu-hien-</p>

Theme 1	Commercialised press	
		<p>moi-cua-dien-bien-hoa-binh-355633/%3E)</p> <p>Translation: ‘Peaceful evolution’ is the truth, reality, which has and is going on every day, every night in all fields of our society’</p>
Node 1.2	Unchanged & unresolved issues	
Child node 1.2.1	CPV monopoly	<p>‘Báo chí đương nhiên phải quản lý, đặc biệt với những nước như chúng ta thì càng cần’ (Interview with DCN – media lecturer 14 Dec 2012)</p> <p>Translation: ‘Press is certainly to be under controlled. Especially in the countries like ours, it is more necessary’</p>
Child node 1.2.2	Profit only	<p>‘Vì chạy theo lợi nhuận, không ít tờ báo đã bỏ rơi mục đích, tiêu chí ban đầu của mình’ (People’s Police Online viewed 15 Jan 2013 http://vnca.cand.com.vn/dien-dan-van-nghe-cong-an/Khi-bao-chi-chay-theo-loi-nhuan-330072/)</p> <p>Translation: ‘To chase for profit, not a few newspapers have abandoned its initial objectives and criteria’</p>
Child node 1.2.3	Passive audience	<p>‘Ngày xưa việc cung cấp thông tin ra công chúng là độc quyền của báo chí thì cách quản lý theo kiểu cam đoan, định hướng chỉ đạo tỏ rõ hiệu quả. Nhưng trong thời buổi bây giờ thì cách quản lý đó không hiệu quả nữa’ (Interview with Mai Phan Loi – Journalist of Ho Chi Minh City Law newspaper 12 Dec 2012)</p> <p>Translation: ‘In the past, providing information to the public is the monopoly of the press so the management style of making commitments and guidelines had effects. But in the present time, that management style is no longer an effect’</p>

Table 3.5: Theme 1 and selected quotes coded for child nodes extracted from NVivo

3.4.2 Theme 2: Ascending electronic press

Table 3.6 exemplifies theme 2 nodes, with examples from the data.

Theme 2	Ascending Electronic press	
Node 2.1	Dynamics	
Child node 2.1.1	Bridge audience	<p>‘Họ chính là hàn thử biểu của tờ báo. Chăm sóc họ chính là chăm sóc ‘nồi cơm’ của chính mình. Họ vừa là động lực cho tờ báo, cho phóng viên’ (Interview with NND – journalist of Culture & Sports Newspaper 28 Sept 2015)</p> <p>Translation: ‘They (news readers) are the thermometers of the newspaper. Caring them means caring our ‘cooker of rice’. They are the stimulator of both newspaper and</p>

Theme 2		Ascending Electronic press
		journalists'
Child node 2.1.2	Fast messenger	<p>'Yêu cầu không chỉ là chất lượng mà tốc độ còn được đặt cao hơn' (TuoitreOnline viewed 21 Jun 2013 http://tuoitre.vn/tin/van-hoa-giai-tri/20130621/bao-chi-phai-thay-doi-tao-khac-biet/555122.html)</p> <p>Translation: 'The demand (of electronic newspapers) is not only the quality but the speed is placed in the higher position'</p>
Child node 2.1.3	Tabloidisation	<p>'Cách đây khoảng mười năm, có một tờ báo điện tử thời em nói luôn là tờ Vietnamnet lúc ấy là một niềm tự hào của báo điện tử VN. Những bài góc nhìn thứ ba rất sâu. Lúc đó Vietnamnet có những tin rất hay, nhanh và chuyên nghiệp. Rồi sau đó thay ekip đưa một ông nhà văn nhà báo ngoài Hà Nội này vào. Từ đấy thì báo điện tử Vietnamnet là sốc sex hiếp...' (Interview with Hoang Nguyen Vu – Journalist of TTVN.vn 18 May 2016)</p> <p>Translation: 'About ten years ago, Vietnamnet.vn was the pride of Vietnam's e-press. It had in-depth stories. Its news was of good quality, fast and professional. Then it had new bosses being a journalist and a writer from Hanoi. Since then, Vietnamnet.vn has become the shocking, sexual and raping (newspaper)'</p>
Node 2.2		Messy situation
Child node 2.2.1	Censorship & Propaganda task	<p>'Sau một vài bài ở mục Chính trị có nút Dislike, báo đã bỏ' (Interview with LLH – journalist of Vietnamnet.vn 26 Oct 2015)</p> <p>Translation: 'After some stories of the Politics section has Dislike, the newspaper has removed it (the button)'</p>
Child node 2.2.2	Degrading news quality, commercialisation	<p>'Còn báo khác (báo điện tử) còn thiếu chuyên nghiệp thể hiện ở việc chọn đề tài, triển khai, tần suất đăng thông tin. Hoặc cố tình bịa đặt để câu view rồi quay về thông tin chính xác.' (Interview with Mai Phan Loi – Journalist of Ho Chi Minh City Law newspaper 12 Dec 2012)</p> <p>Translation: 'Other electronic newspapers are not professional enough in selection of news topics, news production and publishing frequency. Or they intentionally fabricate to earn pageviews before returning to accurate information'</p>

Table 3.6: Theme 2 with selected quotes coded for child nodes extracted from NVivo

3.4.3 Theme 3: Blogs, Facebook and online community

Table 3.7 shows the nodes in theme 3, with examples from the data.

Theme 3	Blogs, Facebook & Online Community	
Node 3.1	Political blogs	
Child node 3.1.1	Three groups of blogs	<p>‘Kể từ khi có blog, Facebook, tôi nhận ra rằng, nếu chỉ để thực hiện quyền tự do ngôn luận thì không nhất thiết phải lệ thuộc vào một tờ báo nhà nước’ (Interview with Huy Duc – independent journalist 21 Aug 2015)</p> <p>Translation: ‘After the introduction of blogs, Facebook, I realise that it is not necessary to depend on a state newspaper if only to perform freedom of expression’</p>
Child node 3.1.2	Evolution of blogs	<p>“In Vietnam, they (bloggers) now fill the void left by the state-run media, which are subjected to very strict news control and relay the government’s views” (Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Christophe Deloire viewed 2 Jun 2014 http://en.rsf.org/reporters-without-borders-awards-07-03-2013,44178.html)</p>
Node 3.2	Facebook & media	
Child node 3.2.1	Diversified sources	<p>‘Tôi dùng Facebook như cách thu thập thông tin: thông tin báo chí được chia sẻ trên Facebook; thông tin từ các nguồn khác báo chí được người dùng Facebook chia sẻ; tâm thế và các quan điểm xã hội bộc lộ qua các ý kiến cá nhân, các thảo luận trên Facebook (Interview with Tran Dang Tuan – media administrator 22 May 2015)</p> <p>Translation: ‘I use Facebook as a way of getting news: press news shared on Facebook; non-press sources of news shared by Facebookers; and public feelings and viewpoints in individuals’ ideas and Facebook discussions’</p>
Child node 3.2.2	State acceptance & control	<p>‘Thủ tướng yêu cầu chủ động đưa thông tin chính thống lên các mạng xã hội như Facebook, trong bối cảnh bùng nổ công nghệ mới và trước yêu cầu về quyền tiếp cận thông tin của người dân’ (Dantri.vn viewed 15 Feb 2015 http://dantri.com.vn/suc-manh-so/khi-thu-tuong-noi-ve-facebook-1422138317.htm)</p> <p>Translation: ‘The Prime Minister demands active updates of official sources on social networks such as</p>

Theme 3	Blogs, Facebook & Online Community	
	Facebook in the context that there is a boom of new technologies and the people require to have the right of accessing information'	
Node 3.3	Facebook users & social movements	
Child node 3.3.1	Case: Hanoi tree movements	<p>'Trước khi các ý kiến của đông đảo người dân lan truyền trên mạng xã hội, thì vấn đề này không thật sự nóng trên báo chí chính thống' (Interview with Tran Dang Tuan – media administrator 22 May 2015)</p> <p>Translation: 'Before a large number of users' ideas are shared on social networks, it was not a hot topic on the mainstream media'</p>
Child node 3.3.2	Online social movements	<p>'Trình độ của công chúng là 'văn hóa làng xã'. Thông qua những việc như thế, công chúng Việt Nam đang dần trưởng thành' (Interview with Huy Duc - independent journalist 21 Aug 2015)</p> <p>Translation: 'The public is at the level of 'village culture'. After experiencing those issues, Vietnamese people have been gradually mature'</p>

Table 3.7: Theme 3 and selected quotes coded for child nodes extracted from NVivo

3.4.4 Theme 4: Internet and journalists

Table 3.8 shows the child nodes for theme 4, exemplified from the data.

Theme 4	Internet & journalists	
Node 4.1	Chances & competition	
Child node 4.1.1	Chances	<p>Mở blog là một cách đem đến thông tin cho bạn đọc không đọc báo chính thống' (Interview with KD 22 June 2015)</p> <p>Translation: 'Having my blog is a way of providing information to the readers who don't read mainstream news to the readers'</p>
Child node 4.1.2	Competition	<p>'Chỉ sau vài giây, nếu báo chí nói sai, người đọc sẽ vạch cái sai đó ra trên mạng xã hội' (Interview with Huy Duc - independent journalist 21 Aug 2015)</p> <p>Translation: 'After a few seconds, if the press says something wrong, readers will point it out on social networks'</p>
Node 4.2	Impacts of double life	
Child node 4.2.1	The challengers	<p>'Bài học cho các nhà báo là hãy nuôi dưỡng niềm tin, chiến đấu cho sự thật và công bằng vì không gì có thể vùi dập được những điều đó' (Interview with VC – retired</p>

Theme 4	Internet & journalists	
		journalist 14 Jun 2015) Translation: 'A lesson for journalists is to nurture their trust and to fight for the truth and fairness because nothing can wipe out those things'
Child node 4.2.2	Case: Young Journalism forum	'Đây là diễn đàn phi lợi nhuận. Tính chất quản lý không chính thức' (Interview with Mai Phan Loi - Journalist of Ho Chi Minh City Law newspaper 4 Jun 2015) Translation: 'This is a non-profit forum. The management is not officially performed'

Table 3.8: Theme 4 and selected quotes coded for child nodes extracted from NVivo

3.4.5 Theme 5: State control & prospects of Vietnam's press

Table 3.9 shows the nodes in theme 5, exemplified in the data.

Theme 5	State control & prospects of Vietnam's press	
Node 5.1	Contradictions	'Vì phần sai anh không nói thì nó thiếu một mảng hiện thực cuộc sống và mảng đó công chúng đòi hỏi có thì người khác tìm tòi đưa ra cái đó để bù đắp cái mà chúng ta không nói' (Interview with Le Doan Hop – media administrator 17 Jun 2015) Translation: 'Because when you (press) don't speak out the wrong things, you lack part of the realities of social life which the public demands. And other people have found out those things to write in compensation for what we don't speak'
Node 5.2	Press future	'Ở Việt Nam là báo chí không thể hay không còn có vị thế độc quyền về thông tin. Và sự tồn tại của môi trường thông tin qua Internet là sức ép khách quan khiến báo chí phải cạnh tranh để thu hút công chúng' (Interview with Tran Dang Tuan – media administrator 22 May 2015) Translation: 'In Vietnam, press can't or has no longer had monopoly of information. The existence of internet-based information is the objective pressures making press competitive to attract readers'
Node 5.3	Socio-political prospect	'Điều quan trọng nhất là phải đẩy nhanh cải cách thể chế' (BBC Vietnamese viewed 16 Jun 2016 http://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam/2016/06/160615_viet_major_problems_ledoanhop) Translation: 'The most important thing is to enhance institutional reform' – a quote from the interview of former Minister of Information and Communications Le Doan Hop.

Table 3.9: Theme 5 and selected quotes coded for child nodes extracted from NVivo

3.5 Conclusion: the challenges and limits of methodology

In this chapter I have set out the three-way methodology I employed to address my research questions and the over-arching themes that emerged from my analysis. All studies have their own challenges and limits but the broad scope of my research topic has always represented a challenge. I have been lost, stuck or puzzled a number of times during the research. The data collection was a challenge due to the different time zones and distance between Vietnam and Australia. However, the hardest part of the research process was to settle on the final codes and themes. When you do this analysis alone, striving to ensure the reliability and validity of the codes become an issue. I had to face the constant question of how to ensure I was taking a rigorous approach in my analysis and writing. Rigour is always required when qualitative researchers 'conduct multiple levels of data analysis'. Rigour is needed because it validates 'the accuracy of the account'. It can be achieved through member checking, data triangulation or using peer or external auditors (Creswell 2007). Individual research guarantees the 'consistency' but is unable to 'provide multiple perspectives' on the final results (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2008). As noted above, I am indebted to my colleagues for their contribution to validating the coding and themes. While thematic analysis is not 'a complex method' and has high flexibility for the researcher (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 26), the method requires that researchers keep asking what the focus is or they will become lost among too much data and too many codes and themes. In the later period of data analysis, I had to remind myself again and again what the key aspects of the research questions were and stick to my theoretical foundation in order to make appropriate analytical statements.

In the following chapters, I present the answers provided by this triangulated research approach to the richness of my data. In chapter four, I present the observational and documentary evidence to sketch the impacts and

failures of the market economy on Vietnam's news media. Chapters five, six and seven illustrate and explain in detail the key themes crystalised by NVivo from interview data and document collection. In chapters six and seven I present two case studies to strengthen my discussion and analyses. In the final chapter, chapter eight, I draw together my major findings and arguments and also extend the analysis to suggest the prospects of the Vietnamese press and its social context as the internet continues to spread, in the process of further empowering the cyber society of Vietnam. ■

Chapter 4

Market forces and their failure in Vietnam's news media — a propaganda model approach

Having outlined the limitations of applying Schramm's (1956) concepts to the Vietnamese news media, this chapter employs Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model in an analysis of market forces and market failure in today's news media in Vietnam. Although Vietnam has been led by the communists for decades, the country has witnessed tremendous changes after the economic reform of 1986. The arrival of the internet pushed the reform to a new levels, with the public demanding both economic prosperity and ideological reform. Scholars have noted how the Vietnamese news media has been commercialised along with the opening up of the economy (Hang 2003; Heng 2003; Palmos 1995) but no one has yet applied the propaganda model to these phenomena. In understanding the press of a country, Hallin (2004) emphasises the importance of comparative analysis to 'sensitise' the researcher to both variation and similarity. One approach could therefore involve assessing the Vietnamese press by testing a recent theoretical model developed in countries where media research is well developed. This would give us a fairer and more recent overview of a country that is on rapidly catching up with developed countries. In this light, understanding the Vietnamese news media needs a new and multidimensional approach. This chapter will employ the propaganda model developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) in an analysis of the marketised aspects of the contemporary Vietnamese news media. Based on that analysis I

will then argue that the market economy has successfully commercialised the propaganda press of Vietnam towards the consumer-based system but failed to connect the system with the audience or shaken its monopoly position as the only powerful news provider. This analysis lays the foundations for a discussion of the broader impacts of the internet. This chapter, therefore, offers readers an analysis of the changing context of the media climate in Vietnam.

4.1 Testing the five filters of the propaganda model on the Vietnamese state press

Despite the marketised aspects of the Vietnamese news media, the application of the propaganda model is limited by political, economic and cultural differences between Vietnam and the United States — the context from which the model developed. The propaganda model is a theoretical model designed to account for the operation of a media system in a liberal democracy, while in Vietnam we have a propaganda media system. My approach is to focus on using the 'political-economic' base of the propaganda model (Klaehn 2009) to view the Vietnamese media's 'performance' rather than its 'effects' because this pathway is more likely to lead us to a new understanding of the ongoing transition inside the system. Moreover, using the propaganda model will shape our understanding of the Vietnamese news media by taking into account the impacts of the internet, market economy and political control. With this stance, the critique of the propaganda model for 'downplaying' the role of journalists and audiences (Herman & Chomsky 2008; Klaehn 2009) turns out to fit with the context of Vietnam, where journalists' strength has been undermined by the sophisticated self-censorship system.

Heng (2003) noticed the market impact on 'media growth' and 'economic interests' as represented through the shaping of small media conglomerates and the rise of media advertising in Vietnam. Illuminated by the five filters of the

propaganda model, the following discussion provides specific examples and statistics to describe the present situation.

4.1.2 Size, ownership, and the profit orientation of the Vietnamese media

4.1.3 Size and levels

Vietnam's *Doi Moi* economic reform program not only created a booming number of businesses but also resulted in the rapid increase in media organisations and publications (Hang 2003; Heng 2003; Huong 2008). In the early 2000s, there were more than 500 publications and radio and television broadcasters in Vietnam (Hang 2003). Ten years later, these figures were reported to have doubled: according to the Ministry of Information and Communication's (MIC) report, Vietnam had 838 media organisations owning 1,111 publications in 2014. These statistics exclude 67 central and local radio and televisions managing 180 channels (MIC 2014a). A noticeable trend is the introduction and rapid multiplication of electronic media. From the first introduction of an independent news website, *VnExpress.net* in 2001, there were 90 electronic newspapers and magazines and more than 1,600 general information websites disseminating news from online newspapers and magazines (MIC 2014a; Minh 2015).

The market economy has enlarged the size of the press system and at the same time transformed the system's structure. Here it is useful to draw on the concept of 'media tiers' proposed by Ben Bagdikian (Herman & Chomsky 1988). 'Media tiers' include top and lower tiers, where the top tiers are seen as having the power to 'define news agenda', making 'the low tiers' and 'the general public' dependent on them for the news agenda (p. 282) This multi-level phenomenon has existed for a long time in the media of Vietnam. The system has three levels categorised according to the CPV's propaganda aims (Hang 2003). This means that all the mass media speak for the CPV but that the lower

the level, the fewer the privileges and tasks. Level I media or the top tier consists of Vietnam Television, Vietnam Radio, Vietnam News Agency and two broadsheet newspapers, *Nhan Dan* (People) and *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (People's Army). Level II includes publications, radio and televisions at the provincial level. Level III includes the publications belonging to the ministries, federations and associations (Hang 2003). These divisions of media levels existed before the *Doi Moi* process and still exist these days although the efficacy of the tier system has declined significantly. Level I media, which are given 'special treatment' in accessing the CPV's news sources and finance, still set the daily news agenda for media at the lower levels. However, the opening up of the media has expanded the space to serve the public demand with the rise of the newspapers ranked at the lower levels. The newspapers *Lao Dong* (Labour), *Nguoi Lao Dong* (Labourers), *Tuoi Tre* (Youth) and *Thanh Nien* (Young People) have been the first choice of readers for many years due to their dynamic news gathering methods and presentation.

4.1.4 Ownership and profit orientation

After the economic reform, the expanding scale of the media and the burden of financial dependence reached beyond the administrative and financial control of the CPV. This led the party to relax the rules and restrictions on management of media organisations. The changes, explained by most local researchers as the requirements of a shift to a market economy, are clearly seen in profit targets and ownership. Profit has become a vital target and the motive for competition for a majority of Vietnamese news media organisations. The government's decree on financial autonomy and self-responsibility of public non-business units issued in 2006 officially allowed state media organisations to implement profit-targeting mechanisms and reduced funding from the state budget. Under this decree, media organisations were allowed to manage actively their smooth

organisational apparatus, payroll and finance but they were required to strictly ensure their task performance ('Degree 43/2006/ND-CP' 2006).

This financial independence decree (*tự chủ tài chính*) is hailed as helping the State save the budget, encouraging the dynamism of news organisations and reducing their dependence (Hoang 2014). By 2015, one third of the media organisations in Vietnam had implemented the mechanism of financial self-management. This means that the mechanism has been implemented slowly but steadily to reduce the financial dependence of media organisations, forcing them to strive for economic survival. The mechanism also opens the door to the involvement of individuals in the media industry. While private media is not legally allowed, individuals still jointly produce and own media products with state media organisations. Vietnam Television has made the greatest use of this policy, with more than 100 television shows and programs allowed to be jointly produced with 36 private companies (Quan 2015a). Although private involvement is limited to the entertainment media only, this breakthrough proves that the Vietnamese media has expanded rapidly beyond the control and ownership of the CPV.

The 'financial independence mechanism' has been applied from the lower tiers (levels II and III) up to the top tiers (level I) with much priority given to the level I media so that they are still under CPV control. The smaller media with smaller scale operations find it easier to adapt to the changes and even become more competitive. In fact, some newspapers at the lower levels had managed their own financial sources for a long time before the introduction of the 'financial independence mechanism'. The newspaper *Tuoi Tre* (Youth) is a typical example of a profit-driven newspaper. Belonging to the Youth Union of Ho Chi Minh City, *Tuoi Tre* became the first financially independent news organisation since the 1990s (Dung 2013). This broadsheet newspaper has been running based on reader subscriptions since 1985 (Le 2008). With a stable

income from selling copies and advertisements, the newspaper now owns four print publications and four websites, a print house and other real estate assets worth nearly US\$200 million. The newspaper is always among the top-selling newspapers in Vietnam. At the top level, the implementation of financial self-management records both successes and failures. Vietnam's state television station is a typical example of the mechanism's success: its monopoly over national television broadcast means the station can easily implement the mechanism of financial autonomy (Nguyen 2013b). By contrast, other top-tier media outlets such as the newspapers *Nhan Dan* (People) and *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (People's Army) have failed to sell in sufficient numbers to daily readers and thus are still dependent on the State budget and on the compulsory purchase of limited copies by all state agencies, departments and companies as required by the CPV.

Financial autonomy does more than generate dynamism in the Vietnamese media. Managers have to focus more intensively to attract greater audiences and advertising revenue. Ambitions for greater profit and expansion have also led to the 'trend to diversify beyond the media field' (Herman & Chomsky 1988). Profit haunts the leaders and journalists of the news organisations. It has become an important tool to assess the popularity of a publication or a television channel in Vietnam. For newspapers, the number of daily copies is important. For television, audience ratings become the measurement of success. For electronic news websites, the ultimate target is to raise the number of views per story because this provides a measure of the website's popularity. Managers of all forms of media try to make the best use of their positions to sell to the audience and to attract more paid advertisements. In an interview conducted for this study, senior reporter KD of *Vietnamnet.vn* revealed that the strategy of her news website was simply 'to keep raising the number of views and viewers in the future' (KD 2015, pers. comm., 22 June). She stated that if the number of

pageviews for published stories falls, this would directly affect the payment to journalists.

To meet profit targets, many newspapers and organisations have to play down their propaganda tasks. Tabloid content has been introduced and has become part of the daily news. A number of words and phrases were introduced by the CPV administrators on the news media to disguise the fact that the press was moving further beyond its control. For example, 'financial independence' (*tự chủ tài chính*) describes the fact that more media organisations have to function in a business model because state budget can no longer afford to subsidise the whole press system. 'Socialising' (*xã hội hoá*) or 'co-production' of entertainment programs refers to media shows/programs produced by private companies but broadcast on state-owned television channels. In 2005 a plan to establish media conglomerates was publicly agreed to and was boasted about by senior officials (BBCVietnamese 2005). Although the plan has not been implemented and no explanation for this has been published, some media organisations such as *Vietnam State Television (VTV)*, *Radio the Voice of Vietnam (VOV)*, *Tuoi Tre (Youth)* and *Thanh Nien (Young People)* have increased their scale and function to the level of media groups. *Thanh Nien* newspaper is a typical example of an organisation that has expanded from being one of the most popular newspapers in Vietnam to become a giant media group. The Thanhnien Corporation had been developed from a jointstock company by the newspaper in 4 January 2006. The corporation now has a number of member companies doing business in publishing, advertising, communication, entertainment, real estate and import and export trade. Thanh Nien Corp also established a branch company in the United States on 1 June 2009 (Company's Profile).

Viewed from the lens of the propaganda model, these facts and figures suggest that Vietnamese 'news dispensers' are not exceptions but have been strongly affected by the first filter. To put it simply, the news media of Vietnam

has been oriented not only by CPV control but also by the need to make a profit. Media organisations have changed to function as enterprises. This reality has impacted on news choices, having both positive and negative sides, which I analyse further below when summarising how the propaganda model applies in the context of the Vietnamese news media.

4.1.5 Advertising as a licence to do business

The second filter in the propaganda model, advertising as a licence to do business, is another strong foundation for analysing the contemporary news media of Vietnam in a market economy. As the competition in the media gets fiercer and the audience wants to pay less and less for media content, advertising becomes the main source of finance. According to Herman and Chomsky (1988), advertising enables papers to sell below the production costs and ensure sale surpluses for any media organisations. But the relationship between media and advertisers is not simple. Under the propaganda model, the advertiser is the 'patron' who can demand and control media companies with their money. Advertisers choose the media organisations to sponsor, influence the selection of news and programs they want and the audience they prefer. This leads to the fact that media production is tailored for an 'audience with buying power' in order to sustain advertising ratings and revenues.

'Ad-based media' are very common in Vietnam these days. For many media organisations, advertisements are vital because the organisations are no longer subsidised by the state budget. The growing competition from the electronic media is not strong enough to overtake the leading role of Vietnam Television and other local television channels in their commercial market share. Based on the report of Vietnam Television's advertising in the first half of 2015, advertisements on television still lead the market with an increase of 7% in the first five months of 2015. Revenue from advertisements in this period is

estimated to be about US\$100 million (TVAd 2015). Unilever, Procter and Gamble Vietnam and ADT Group Holdings are typical names found among the largest advertisers on Vietnam Television.

Competition is tough between television stations in different cities and different regions; between free TV channels and pre-paid channels; among the print publications; between traditional media and new media; and between state-owned media and social media. Every newspaper and television has its own staff to work with advertisers. Vietnam Television has a special centre for services and advertisements named the TVAd. The staff numbers in this centre have been increasing hand-in-hand with the rising revenues from advertisements, growing from about 100 to nearly 150 employees in the five years between 2010 and 2015. As the largest state television channel, VTV easily attracts advertiser, but smaller media organisations struggle to gain even a small share of the advertisement market. The competition is very fierce among the level 3 newspapers. These newspapers have dedicated staff responsible for searching out advertisers and convincing them to pay for advertisements in their newspapers. Potential customers can include corporations, companies, shops, enterprises, non-governmental organisations, and even state agencies and departments. To maximise advertising revenues, companies are hired to do the marketing and their agents are required to chase customers to sell advertisements. The disturbances caused by advertising agents have been complained about regularly on social media and even reported to the Minister of Information and Communications but the situation has not improved (Chuyen & Anh 2014).

As advertising supplies media subsidies, advertisers in Vietnam have power as 'patrons' as defined by Herman & Chomsky (1988). Vietnam Television is regarded as one of the major media organisations in the top tier of the CPV but its propaganda tasks can now only be seen clearly on two channels (VTV1 of

news and current affairs and VTV4 for Vietnamese people living overseas). The other nine channels of Vietnam Television focus on programs designed to sell the most to the Vietnamese audience. These programs are television series, reality shows, game shows, music and dance, which have been expanded in both duration and quantities on all channels (excluding pre-paid television channels) to maximise advertising revenues. The intensive broadcast of these programs is described by local media as an overdose of food that is 'poisoned' and that gives the audience 'indigestion' (Trang 2014; Vietnamnet 2014). Despite some public displeasure, these entertainment programs show no signs of waning on Vietnam television. They often have high audience ratings, which please even the most demanding 'patrons'. Channel 1 (VTV1) of Vietnam Television, which is the only national news and current affairs TV program in Vietnam, began inserting advertisements before and after the sports news in its prime-time news programs broadcast daily from 7pm to 7.45pm in 2011. The cost of a ten-second advertisement after the sports news is VND35,500,000 or nearly US\$1,600 (AdsReport 2015), acknowledged by a TVAd staff to be the top price in 2015. The inclusion of advertisements in prime time news is an unprecedented policy step. The program is the unique national news and current affairs broadcast and thus this change is regarded as commercialisation of a key propaganda channel. Despite objections from a group of the audience, Vietnam Television has maintained the practice of advertising in the prime time news, explaining that it helps to improve news presentation and generate income for the channel ('Correspondence No.252/THVN-VP' 2015).

4.1.6 Sources of the news

Sourcing of news is vital to any media organisation. A newspaper with the best access to sources of news is likely to have more power. In the propaganda model, government and corporate sources are the two main powers in the 'pre-eminent position' over other sources. These sources are regarded as having

'great merit' due to their 'status and prestige'. The relationship between the mass media and these powers is described as 'symbiotic' (Herman & Chomsky 1988). While the media can maintain stable and reliable sources of news and save costs during news production, the government and corporates have used these advantages to 'manage' and 'manipulate' the media (p.296). In fact, the relationship is therefore not 'symbiotic' (which implies equality). The objectivity of the media is eroded because the media is actually influenced and controlled to reflect the 'agenda and framework' of the sources.

This filter of news sources is obvious when I apply the propaganda model in the context of the Vietnamese news media. The CPV and the government-related ministries, agencies and organisations are the official, legitimate and accurate sources of mainstream press by default. Not only are they the dominant sources, but it is compulsory for all news media to make headlines of CPV senior leaders' activities. For the newspapers and broadcasters in the 'top tiers', speeches by the top leaders must be quoted as much as possible. The fact that this top news is not real breaking news but coverage of top leaders and the activities of the CPV, government and National Assembly has been detailed by Hang (2003). Up to now this news agenda remains unchanged for the most important news program broadcast nationally from 7pm to 8pm on VTV1 channel of Vietnamese State Television.

Reporters are highly dependent on the statements and announcements of central state offices such as the government's office, ministries and central committees of the CPV. The pronouncements of the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are always quoted as official news with no further comment or additional information by the reporters. In many cases, the announcements are simply faxed to the media organisations, whose responsibility it is to transfer the message to the public. Journalists are not permitted to argue with senior politicians. Newspapers, television and other

media organisations ranked in Level 1 also have assigned correspondents in charge of working with the top leaders of the Party, the State office and the government. These reporters' task is to follow the activities of the leaders and report the news using this information. They are not allowed to select newsworthy activities or to question the 'veracity' of news provided by these powerful sources because what is provided by the sources is the news and is certainly 'legitimate'. In fact, this process has existed for decades since the first days of Vietnamese journalism (Hang 2003). Word counts and broadcast duration for these types of news are a little shorter these days than they used to be but the writing style and the top position of the leaders' news in any broadcast media has not changed.

Besides the CPV and government agencies and offices, other 'trusted' sources include Vietnamese state corporations and international organisations (e.g. World Bank, World Health Organisations, International Monetary Fund). Editors and reporters regularly quote the statements and statistics of businesses and trade organisations by way of confirmation. During the more than 10 years that I worked as a news editor for the English-news bulletins of Vietnam Television, I saw many complaints that VTV reporters or other newspapers' simply copied press releases provided by these sources to make the news. This sort of news is described as 'salon-news', which means reporters just sit in their office but write news about important issues based only on press releases and quotes from approved statements.

Strengthening the manipulation of the CPV over the press are the 'experts' who often echo the views of the CPV. These 'experts' work for the institutions and organisations funded by the CPV so they are believed to have an interest in expressing supportive comments and opinions rather than opposing arguments. When interviewed about the CPV's media censorship and press freedom, some of these 'experts' completely denied the CPV's interference in state news media

and the multi-layered censorship system. A senior argued that journalists of Vietnam work with their 'social responsibilities'; the Vietnamese press has its own 'specific characteristics' and that the West is always prejudiced against the country's press (NDD 2012, pers. comm, 14 Dec).

Among the five filters of the news proposed by Herman and Chomsky (1988), the sourcing filter shows up the obvious power of sources over the Vietnamese press, making the system a tool of propaganda and completely dependent on the CPV's will. At this level, the relationship between the CPV and the news media is not 'symbiotic' or one of 'mutual dependency'. Rather, it is one of a monopoly of sources or censorship, a concept which the CPV has never recognised but which still prevails. Local media have no alternative sources and passively await these sources to provide the news. As a result, the media is nothing more than a loudspeaker and a puppet in the CPV's hands. The CPV has enjoyed this management style for such a long time and believed that the dependency of the news media would help maintain their legitimacy. The arrival of the internet has brought the Vietnamese audiences tremendous opportunities to access other information sources. Social media has risen to become a popular source of news for audiences, challenging the 'legitimate news'. The audience and journalists have gradually realised their rights to access the news and question the nature of the news.

4.1.7 Negative responses

Herman and Chomsky named the fourth filter in their propaganda model 'flak', which refers to any 'negative response' to media statements or programs. 'Flak' is actually threats in the form of letters, phone calls, petitions or lawsuits produced by individuals and organisations. Large or small, 'flak' is 'uncomfortable and costly to the media'. This filter is, therefore, also linked to power (Herman & Chomsky 1988, p. 298).

The Vietnamese press offers many examples illustrating the threats and intervention caused by producers of 'flak.' These can be individuals and groups with substantial financial resources or political power who challenge the news media when their rights, fame and privileges are affected by the news. They can be political leaders from the grassroots level or owners of business corporations. They can also be associations, institutions and organisations backed by the government and financial powers. Complaints by these powers can directly shut the mouth of certain newspapers or change the tune of the media. They also have indirect impacts by threatening powerful relationships or threatening to withdraw advertising. This 'flak' means that media managers and reporters must always consider whether to write or to publish certain news and media programs so that they can avoid possible harm to the advertising 'patrons' and the newspapers' benefactors.

One recent incident of 'flak' in action was the Hanoi Tree Massacre scandal in 2015 when the public heavily criticised the city's instant decision to cut down thousands of trees without consulting local residents (see section 3 of chapter six). Popular discontent spread nationally and was echoed by the mainstream news media, which stood for the people's voice in a rare situation. Amidst the storm of critics on the news media and on social media, the Hanoi authorities sent out a message to all news media organisations based in Hanoi to request that the news media help maintain social stability and not further complicate the situation. A photo of this correspondence was posted on a professional forum of Vietnamese journalists. Although the post was soon deleted, members of the forum had enough time to read the document's message, which was a demand to stop covering this news topic.

The 'flak' seemed to work for some local news media under the administrative management of the Hanoi authorities. The *Hanoi Moi* newspaper (*New Hanoi*) published news stories with a mild tone insisting on an

'appropriate guideline' for the tree-removal project and on the efforts of Hanoi's leaders to resolve the scandal (Binh 2015). By contrast, some other newspapers and electronic news websites belonging to the ministries and associations ignored Hanoi's request by updating news about the public anger, investigating the scandal's consequences and questioning the legal punishment of the individuals and organisations involved (Duc 2015; Quan 2015b; VnExpress 2015a). Further evidence of 'flak' for the possible intervention of Hanoi's authorities in the news media was a ban stopping scientists from answering media interviews about the tree-removal project. This indirect impact was revealed through a statement by the University of Forestry announcing punishments for lecturers who had given interviews to newspapers and criticised the tree-felling project (VnExpress 2015a).

The 'flak' produced by Hanoi's authorities in the tree massacre scandal is only one among numerous examples of 'flak' disguised in many forms, which the editors-in-chief and journalists in Vietnam endure suffering in their daily work. Members of the Young Journalists Forum have complained many times about the pressures they have to face when writing investigative stories. One media administrator said many editors-in-chief could not sleep after receiving 'guiding' text messages in the middle of the night when news stories are about to be transferred to the printing house (Le 2015). During more than 10 years working as an editor and a producer for the English-news bulletins of Vietnam Television, I became very familiar with directions or orders from my boss to edit the news after my boss received a request, a message, a phone-call or a reminder from the higher authorities. Our working mechanism often treated this kind of 'flak' as desired, by accepting not to continue covering the topic or by re-editing all the required details. These make the news bulletins safe and standard but the values of news worthiness and informing audiences deteriorated. This is described as the self-production of 'flak' within news management (Herman &

Chomsky 1988). If social media had not been present, these sorts of 'flak' would have still been circulated among journalists only. Social media has meant that the public is now also involved.

4.1.8 Ideology of anticommunism

According to Herman and Chomsky, the United States used to be haunted by the 'fuzzy' perception of anti-communism so the 'liberals' tried to depict themselves as 'reactionaries' against communism. The authors called this an 'anti-Communist fervour' (Herman & Chomsky 1988, p. 301) which had a 'profound influence' on the mass media. The last propaganda model filter of 'anti-communism' is stated as being outdated for a majority of readers, given that the authors wrote their book during the Cold War (Mullen & Klaehn 2010). However, the idea behind this argument is still applicable in the context of Vietnamese media although the theory should be viewed from the other end of the ideology.

In applying the propaganda model to the context of the Vietnamese news media, I replace the concept 'anti-communism' with the concept 'anti-hostile forces', which has been widely used in Vietnam. The name is changed but the nature of the theory persists. First, I need to explain what 'anti-hostile forces' means. Officially adopted through a resolution in 1992, 'peaceful evolution' (*diễn biến hòa bình*) has been repeatedly emphasised by the CPV leaders as one of the biggest threats to national security (Brown 2010; Van Koert 2004; Vuving 2006). In the words of the CPV, peaceful evolution is a silent but fierce war against internal targets in the fields of politics, economics, ideology, culture, arts, defence and security, deepening contradictions, breaking unity in ideology, and weakening the will of the communist party, until the people become 'weak and self-evolve' (Long 2014). The concept shares similarities with the peaceful

evolution campaign led by the US to transform China's political system in the Cold War era (Ong 2007).

In the post-Cold War era, 'peaceful evolution' is still referred to by Vietnamese senior officials in their speeches, interviews and statements in state press as a warning and explanation of many unresolved national problems that prevent Vietnam from reaching the destination of socialism. In the past, the US was named as the leader of the 'hostile forces' behind the peaceful evolution (Brown 2010). Now, the phrase has larger targets, making it even more 'fuzzy' as a concept to scare and confuse the Vietnamese public. The phrase 'hostile forces' has recently been attached to activists, political dissidents, bloggers and any individuals and organisations who have opposing political viewpoints from that of the CPV. CPV leaders often use 'hostile forces' to describe the 'evil' power that causes national problems such as declining national unity, public criticism of the CPV leadership or reduced support for Marxist and Ho Chi Minh ideologies. 'Hostile forces' were blamed by Hanoi's Party Secretary Pham Quang Nghi for stimulating the public's anger against the Hanoi tree-felling project (Binh 2015). 'Hostile forces' are argued to be using the internet to incite negative thoughts and acts among Vietnamese youth (Nga 2013). 'Hostile forces' is the term used to label some international organisations and overseas reactionary organisations that 'push up democracy' and carry out 'sabotage' in political, economic and social areas with the final target of overthrowing the regime (Long 2014). Furthermore, 'hostile forces' were also named as being behind a plot to destroy the prestige of a large domestic beverage producer whose products the public boycotted due to the company's cheating behaviour when dealing with customers' complaints (Anh 2015).

To adapt the ideology of peaceful evolution to the present, Vietnamese researchers working for state academic institutes note that the evolution has had new developments in the form of 'self-evolution' and 'self-transformation'

within the communist party and its members (Huong 2015). As the phrase has been repeatedly mentioned and quoted in the mass media, it has had an influence on the news-filtering mechanism. The problem of 'anti-hostile forces' becomes the responsibility of the news media. Under this demand, news of dissident bloggers, activists and organisations is regarded as sensitive and is published in a cautious manner. When a dissident blogger is arrested, the state newspapers always reproduce the information identically, word for word, because all the publications copy from one unique source, i.e. the Vietnam News Agency or a Ministry. When famous dissident blogger Nguyen Quang Lap (see section 1 of chapter six) was arrested on 6 December, 2012, four news websites (*VnExpress.net*, *Vietnamnet*, *Investment Online* and *Life & Laws Online*) published similar stories of around 120 words sourced from the Ministry of Police website. Meanwhile, the news made the headlines on the BBC's Vietnam service and RFA Vietnamese which published detailed informed in articles of more than 500 words (BBCVietnamese 2014a; Mi 2014). Another impact of the 'hostile forces' concept is that advocates of democracy or liberal demands are not invited to speak on state-owned news media, despite these people's public prestige and expertise in the field.

While the CPV keeps trying to blame the involvement of hostile forces for all national problems and instability in everyday life of Vietnam, the Vietnamese people are making their own judgment about these forces based on the information they can freely enjoy through cyber technology. Unfortunately, the mainstream media is being controlled by this filter, leaving a gap filled by the increasing popularity of the non-mainstream media, which publishes free from ideological filters.

4.2 The failure of market forces

As indicated in chapter three, other researchers have analysed the media systems of authoritarian regimes using the framework of the propaganda

model. Hearn-Branaman (2009); (Zhang 2013) used the five filters of the propaganda model to analyse China's news media and concluded that the propaganda model also has 'effects' in China. The reason why the propaganda model is still applicable is that it was not created based on a specific 'government structure' but on the concept of a 'capitalism-based' economy (Hearn-Branaman 2009), an economic model that is now prevailing in almost every corner of the global economy. I anticipate that this first application of the propaganda model to the Vietnamese press can present compelling evidence about the commercialised parts of the Vietnamese media in a new light.

Applying the propaganda model, my analysis of the Vietnamese press yields a number of interesting points. The model reflects the ways in which the Vietnamese media has been affected by the economic renovation process. The matching of the five filters adds further affirmation to previous academic statements (Hang 2003; Heng 2003) that the market economy has not only transformed economic development but also the news media of the country towards a 'real consumer base' (Heng 2003, p. 564). The transformation has been made towards the benefits of profit evidenced by the application of financial autonomy mechanisms, private involvement in media ownership and the expansion of media entities. As profit becomes the priority, advertisers have become the ones who can intervene in the final decision-making process, and 'official' sources have more power in the competition among media organisations who are all hunting for news with the lowest production cost.

However, the propaganda model also reveals the reality that, despite thriving marketisation, the news media of Vietnam is still constrained by the CPV authorities. The party's control is shown through its continuing subsidising of some key newspapers, its control over news sources and its imposition of no-go areas when it comes to criticisms of top leaders and key political issues. CPV control is also seen in its continued ownership of

Vietnamese state media, its monopoly power to appoint media management positions and its refusal to allow private involvement in news production. The propaganda model has thus been shown to be not a perfect frame for the news system of Vietnam due to the significant differences inherent in by the socialist-oriented economic model and the constant intervention of the CPV in the media system. As Hearn-Branaman (2009) suggests, we could develop other 'filters' to add to the propaganda model to respond to 'culture and historical differences'.

This chapter, however, is not designed to explore other 'filters' that would allow the propaganda model to be shaped to fit the Vietnamese press. My principal goal has been to emphasise that the market economy has succeeded in commercialising the press but has failed to propel the system towards freedom. Viewed from the outside, the country's news media have shown remarkable improvements and activism in the mushrooming number of newspapers, magazines, TV channels and news websites, the greater financial independence of news organisations and the promising sales revenues from advertising. However, the fundamental nature of the press system, controlled by the CPV since 1986, has remained largely untouched — and untouchable — thanks to the top-down media control system and its sophisticated forms of self-censorship, censorship, regulations, and economic ties.

From the mid to late 1980s, economic reform was accompanied by a number of unexpected changes that reached beyond the economic sector to the media and literature. Hang (2003) described this period as 'the wind of change'. In the early years of *Doi Moi* investigative journalism was encouraged at key national newspapers such as *Nhan Dan* (People). The atmosphere of freedom was extended to literature when writers were permitted to uncover more of the truth behind the legendary wars. Intellectuals in Vietnam were very quick to catch on to the changes but that led them to realise flaws in Marxist-Leninist philosophies. They began to lose 'enthusiasm' for the party's doctrine and this

loss of positive emotion finally spread among the general population (Hang 2003). CPV leaders soon realised enthusiasm was declining and resumed tough control with the arrests of writers, repression of public discussion and the application of stricter rules (Hang 2003, p. 146). Since the 1990s, the CPV has endeavoured to get their ideological influence back on track through various solutions such as the launch of 'criticism and self-criticism campaigns' against corruption and mismanagement and nation-wide campaigns calling for the return of Marxist- Leninist and Ho Chi Minh ideologies (Hang 2003). The CPV authorities not only reined in the 'liberal tendencies in the media', but they have successfully kept the media sector busy with economic calculations. These led the media to the 'dark side of the market' with the introduction of sensational stories, the degradation of journalistic skills and a weakening of journalists' ethics (Heng 2003, p. 565).

In summary, the market economy has successfully commercialised the state press of Vietnam and made the CPV authorities accord a certain 'tolerance' to openness in the media. What the market economy failed to do was to change the passive role of Vietnamese audiences, to bring in alternative media which could challenge state media, and to create a 'public sphere' for individuals to voice their thoughts. In his interview with me for this project, retired journalist Tran Tien Duc argued that the aim of commercialised news media in this period was to guide the audience towards non-urgent state issues. Calling it 'obscurantism', Duc said that on the one hand the audience was provided with propaganda information. On the other hand the media had been freed up to cater for 'the cheap tastes' while there was no public sphere for critical debates on important national problems (2015, pers. comm., 15 June). Scholars such as Hang, Heng and Palmos (Hang 2003; Heng 2003; Palmos 1995) have expressed their disappointment that Vietnamese leaders have been able to free up the economy but not the press system. Freedom for the news media of Vietnam might be still

‘unrealised’ but with the arrival of the internet, cyber technology has brought with it the necessary conditions to impact on Vietnamese society more broadly and the power to touch on the nature of the press system.

4.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the application of Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) propaganda model to the marketised media of Vietnam. Despite certain limitations, the propaganda model has been shown to be a strong conceptual framework that allows me to demonstrate how the contemporary news media of Vietnam have been fully drawn into the circle of the market economy but are still tightly controlled by the CPV authorities. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the dominance, authority and tactics of the CPV leaders to manage the media and public discourse by using market forces and control measures. However, as I will argue more fully in the following chapters, the arrival of the internet has changed the situation. Changes in the information age may not affect CPV control but they are likely to transform Vietnam socially, thus producing combined pressures on the state press system. If the propaganda model provides a strong base from which to describe the changing nature of the Vietnamese news media, the internet with its network power of the ‘Fifth Estate’ has risen to be the transformer and the challenger. What has the internet done for the news media, journalists and the audience of Vietnam? What happens when the cyber age of change and freedom conflicts with censorship and control? And what are the prospects for the Vietnamese news media? These questions will be discussed in the following chapters, where I will argue that the internet has produced more impressive social effects on Vietnam’s news media than has the economic reform process. ■

Chapter 5

The good, the bad and the ugly in Vietnam's electronic press

In the previous chapter, I painted a rough picture of the Vietnamese press in a freer market. I identified the characteristics of the Vietnamese press that are typical of the propaganda model developed by Herman & Chomsky (1988) but I also pointed to the lack of fundamental change and dynamism in the Vietnamese press. I described how the internet, arguably serving as the 'Fifth Estate', has played an influential role. It has helped to re-shape the media industry, breaking barriers between different news media, reshuffling the hierarchy of press categories and increasing the voices of the press, journalists and audiences in a country where the quest for democracy is still in a very early stage. Unfortunately, the internet's power has collided with the CPV's desires. Those who have suffered are the press, media professionals and readers. Although the internet has the potential to be a 'savior' (Tran Tien Duc 2015, pers. comm., 15 June), carrying the wind of freedom to the Vietnamese people, the internet has also been blamed for 'kill[ing] the press' (Tran 2015a).

To appreciate the reasons behind these contrasting statements, it is necessary to first explore the contemporary Vietnamese press as reflected in the context of the rise in the electronic press, social media, and the changing roles of contemporary Vietnamese journalists. While these aspects may not represent the entire press system, they are the elements that have shown the most dynamism, undergone the most change and experienced more of the direct impacts that are influencing news in the digital age. Investigating these three

aspects allows a triangulation of the research findings, in order to target the key contrasts, contradictions, and discrepancies, and the logical and illogical elements of the Vietnamese press.

In this chapter, I focus on the growth and influence of online newspapers as a case study of the first major impact on the press brought about by the internet. Online newspapers have become the media frontrunners, overtaking all other categories of mainstream news media and even challenging the giant State-sponsored newspapers. The growth of online newspapers offers insight into the multi-faceted changes and new trends in the contemporary press of Vietnam.

5.1 The origin of Vietnam's electronic press

It is not novel to write about the international rise of online news over the traditional media of print newspapers, television and radio. However, the story is still fresh in Vietnam due to the very recent emergence of online news and the country's specific political context and press system. While the Western world witnessed the boom of online news from the 1990s (Nguyen 2003), the migration of online news to Vietnam came a few years later and took longer to gain its position. These types of news media are often referred to as online news, online journalism and online newspapers (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski 2009). In Vietnam it is called '*báo điện tử*' (electronic press/electronic newspapers or e-press/e-newspapers for short). The very first electronic press was the *Que Huong* magazine (*Motherland*), which was launched on 6 February 1997. However, rather than being an electronic newspaper, this magazine had a propaganda purpose: to create a beautiful image of Vietnam for Vietnamese people living overseas.

The history of Vietnam's electronic newspapers really began with the introduction of online-only newspapers targeting readers living in Vietnam, including, for example, *Vietnamnet.vn* in 1997 (Nguyen 2008) and *VnExpress.net*

in 2001 (VnExpress 2011). In 2002, *Vietnamnet.vn* and *VnExpress.net*⁶ were licensed as the first electronic newspapers in Vietnam. These two newspapers specialise only in online news and target domestic news readers. Initially founded and managed by technology companies, not media organisations, these two electronic newspapers were not financially dependent on the state budget and not affected by the structure of conventional state news entities, although the newspapers are still subject to the same censorship and propaganda mission. The founder and first editor-in-chief of *Vietnamnet.vn* stated he had chosen to run *Vietnamnet.vn* as 'a business in which employees would have the incentive to experiment and innovate', not 'just propaganda' (Nguyen 2008). These efforts have shaped the two e-newspapers as young, competitive and open to change.

The development of the electronic press was associated with the introduction of broadband internet to most households in urban areas in 2003. With the high-speed internet access of the ADSL service (asymmetric digital subscriber line), demand was greater than supply. Online news brought users a new world where they could get instant information throughout the day. The major newspapers, national television and radio stations soon joined the online news industry with their digital versions and online newspapers. The year 2005 is said to be the time at which the electronic press boom began and it has kept on thriving until today. From two online newspapers in 2002, by 2015 Vietnam had 105 online newspapers and magazines, of which 22 newspapers and magazines are online only (MIC 2015a). This rapid growth led the Vietnamese

⁶ *Vietnamnet.vn* was initially owned by the Vietnam Data Corporation (VDC) and *VnExpress.net* belongs to FPT Corporation, a leading company in the ICT industry in Vietnam.

Government to recognise the e-press as 'a major form of media' and as having 'a key role' in the future of the Vietnamese press (MIC 2015b).

Before describing the impact of e-newspapers in Vietnam in detail, it is necessary to understand how Vietnam's laws define an e-newspaper and its functions. Decree No.72 is the most recent relevant legal document in Vietnam and it regulates all internet-related issues, including network information. The decree defines five categories of websites:

- 1) Electronic newspapers in the form of websites
 - 2) General information websites⁷ belonging to organisations and enterprises that post general information cited from official sources, and specify the authors or managing agencies of the official sources and the time of posting
 - 3) Internal websites of organisations and enterprises that post their own information but are not allowed to post general information
 - 4) Personal websites established by individuals or via social networks to provide and exchange personal information. These websites neither represent other organisations and individuals nor provide general information
 - 5) Specialised websites of organisations and enterprises that provide applications for telecommunications, information technology, radio and television, commerce, finance, banking, culture, health care, education, and other fields. Specialised websites do not post general information.
- (Decree No.72/2013/ND-CP, article 20)

⁷ General information websites have been included in the newly amended Press Law passed by the National Assembly on 5 April 2016. Under the new law, these websites must apologise and correct or remove the false information as electronic newspapers do. Previously, only electronic newspapers publishing the information were responsible for their mistakes.

Based on this decree, electronic newspapers are not the only news websites where Vietnamese readers can get information. Other online sources are general information websites, blogs, social networks or organisations' websites. Within the scope of this chapter, I will further explain the category of general information websites and note its similarities to and differences from electronic newspapers and its fast-growing influence over state-owned online newspapers.

General information websites can be owned by state news media organisations, private companies, agencies and organisations. General information websites can also publish news copied from other sources on the condition that the sources of the information are cited under the approval of the source's owner. This means that a news media organisation, i.e. a newspaper or a television channel, can have general information websites as their digital version. A private company can also manage a general information website as long as the company abides by the rule to cite their sources accurately. The key difference between an electronic newspaper and a general information website is that only electronic newspapers are allowed to produce news stories. The decree ensures that all electronic newspapers must belong to state-run organisations and their employees must be legally recognised as journalists (33/2011/TT-BTTTT 2011), while general information websites are not allowed to perform any functions of journalism.

However, the legal distinction between electronic newspapers and general information websites still has loopholes, allowing general information websites to compete with news media organisations, especially online newspapers. Since general information websites are allowed to copy news stories from any newspaper as long as they cite the source, these websites are free to copy news stories from newspapers to paste on their websites. In many cases, the original source of the news is quoted in the form of shortened letters or even ignored to

make news readers believe that the news stories were produced by these websites. With an abundance of news stories and topics copied from various sources, general information websites can be constantly updated with information on various topics. These advantages have enabled information websites to become popular among online readers who only need to get the desired information, not details of its sources. The higher readership of general information websites has led to them attracting more advertisers.

Another loophole is that although general information websites are not recognised as newspapers, there is no rule differentiating the web design of these two types of news websites. General information websites often have a similar professional design as an electronic newspaper. In some cases, general information websites carry the name of a newspaper or a magazine, so if the news audiences do not check the website's licence, they often think they are still reading an electronic newspaper. As they are not state newspapers, general information websites are less supervised and censored by media administration so they have more freedom to choose news topics favoured by different groups of readers. This freedom has contributed to the rise of 'tabloidisation' and the chaotic situation with online information in Vietnam, which I explain further later in this chapter.

The loosening of regulations applying to general information websites has provided space for a mushrooming number of general information websites. In 2015, there were 1,610 general information websites. Of these, state media organisations have 251 websites (Minh 2015). These statistics show that around 30% of general information websites are run by state media organisations and the remaining 1,359 news websites belong to individual companies, organisations and agencies. *24h.com.vn*, *baomoi.com* or *soha.vn* are the dominant general information websites whose popularity and rising turnover from advertisements have challenged even the largest online newspapers. *Baomoi.com*

is the largest website in aggregating news stories in Vietnam. In its introduction, the website promotes itself as a general information website functioning as an automatic aggregator. Every day, the website aggregates 6,500 news stories from nearly 200 online newspapers and information websites in Vietnam. In 2013, online newspaper *Petrotimes.vn* launched a public inquiry, demanding that *baomoi.com* stops using its news without having the newspaper's approval. According to the editor-in-chief of *Petrotimes.vn*, *baomoi.com* has been earning its high number of page-views and advertisements by copying 10,000 news stories from *Petrotimes.vn* newspapers. While *Petrotimes* threatened to sue *baomoi.com* for its copyright infringement, a director of *baomoi.vn* argued that the website conformed to the regulation of being a general information website; and that what the website copied was only the title of the introduction of the stories (Quang 2013). The director added that if readers wanted to read the whole story, they would be directed to the original source. The anger of the *Petrotimes.vn* management was placated when the directors of *baomoi.com* apologised, but the fact is that *baomoi.com* was listed as one of the top 15 websites for advertising content while *Petrotimes.vn* was not (VndigiTIMES 2014).

The photos below capture the front (i.e. home) pages of three different types of news websites in Vietnam:

1. the electronic newspaper *TuoitreOnline* owned by one of the most popular newspaper in Vietnam, *Tuoi Tre* newspaper (*Youth*) (Figure 5.1)
2. a digital version categorised as a general information website of *The Thao & Van Hoa* newspaper (*Sports & Culture*) (Figure 5.2)
3. a general information website owned by a business company, *24h.com.vn*.

In the Alexa list of websites' traffic in Vietnam dated 31 Oct 2015, *24h.com.vn* ranked 10th while the electronic newspaper *TuoitreOnline* ranked 43rd and *Sports & Culture* ranked 304th. Along with its higher ranking, the advertising revenues for the *24h.com.vn* website account for 16% of the online advertisement market while *TuoitreOnline* has 2%. The *Sports & Culture* website is not in the list of the top 15 websites leading the online advertising market which is worth over US\$49 million excluding Google and Facebook (VndigiTIMES 2014).



Figure 5.1: The front page of TuoitreOnline, the e-newspaper owned by a popular newspaper, captured on 31 October 2015



Figure 5.2: The front page of Sports & Culture general information website, owned by a newspaper, captured on 31 Oct 2015



Figure 5.3: The front page of 24h.com.vn, a general information website owned by an advertising joint-stock company, captured on 31 Oct 2015

In fact, general information websites are not only copying and citing the news but owners of these websites have found ways to get involved in news production activities. Nguyen (2013b) lists typical ways which owners of general information websites have applied 'to bend the law'. For example, owners invite experienced editors and journalists to work for them and they publicly employ editors to develop the websites to ensure that the websites have the appearance and style of an online newspaper. These editors can work as news reporters writing news stories for the websites but 'label them as re-posted products' (p.21). Getting a licence for a general information website is the first step for some private companies to join the press system. After some years operating as a general information website, they then seek the sponsorship of a state newspaper, a state agency or organisations that are allowed to run a newspaper. From that point onwards, the website can be licensed as an electronic newspaper belonging to a state organisation although it is managed by a business company or corporation. Contemporary online newspapers such as *Ngoisao.net* (*Star*), *TTVN.vn* (*Young Knowledge*) or *Zing.vn* have chosen this way to move into the state propaganda system. This trend is referred to as 'socialisation of the press' activities' (Nguyen 2013b, p. 20) but it is in effect simply an unorthodox way to legalise private participation in the state news media.

The evolution of state-owned newspapers (in the form of electronic newspapers and digital versions) and private companies (in the form of general information websites) has created a very particular online news environment in Vietnam. Despite the tight control of the Vietnamese authorities, the booming number of electronic newspapers and information websites demonstrate the active and busy environment of cyber information in Vietnam these days. From the viewpoint of readers, it is very hard to tell which sites are online newspapers and which are general information websites. Even a reporter from

the *Sports & Culture* website said she had been working for the website for years but only realised that the website was not an electronic newspaper when it was fined by the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC) for over-reaching the legal rules set for general information websites (NND 2015, email comm., 28 September). The limited definitions contained in the legal regulations and the contrasting reality have resulted in both pros and cons for the growth of Vietnamese online news, which will be explained in depth in this chapter. This combination of dynamism and backwardness has both propelled and at the same time challenged the progress of Vietnamese online news.

5.2 Dynamics of the Vietnamese electronic press

5.2.1 A money-making machine

Vietnam has 105 electronic newspapers and magazines, and 248 information websites that are the digital versions of print newspapers and magazines (MIC 2015a). Based on the statistics given by Vietnam's Ministry of Information and Communications, the number of electronic newspapers and magazines still lags far behind the number of 199 print newspapers and 630 print magazines. However, the electronic press has been the most rapidly growing section of the mainstream media with an increase of 44 electronic newspapers in the five years 2012 to 2015, and the multiplication of digital versions of print newspapers and magazines. The rapid development of Vietnamese electronic newspapers is challenging the multi-billion-dollar advertising market, which has long been dominated by the traditional media giants in Vietnam.

As in other countries, the Vietnamese print newspaper industry has witnessed a shrinking in its previous dominance, with closures of print publications and reduced volumes of daily copies. The *e-CHIP* magazine marked its 10th anniversary with a goodbye letter to its print readers on 21 June 2013. From that date, it became an online-only magazine specialising in

information technology news. After a decade being one of the best-selling IT magazines in Vietnam, with bi-weekly print publications and one electronic edition, *e-CHIP Mobile*, the magazine became an online-only newspaper. An IT magazine's change from print to online may seem a logical move but the process is not so easy for other print newspapers and magazines. *Dat Viet Daily* (*Viet Land Daily*) was forced to change from a daily newspaper to a weekly magazine. The newspaper also moved its headquarters from Ho Chi Minh to Hanoi and cancelled employment contracts with 180 employees (Lam 2012). The *e-CHIP* and *Dat Viet* are two typical smaller-scale print newspapers knocked out in the competition between the print and the electronic press. Newspapers of a larger scale have also suffered in the digital age.

For the larger scale newspapers, which have well-known brand names and print a larger number of daily copies (30,000 copies a day or more), daily volume has tended to reduce gradually. *Tuoi Tre* newspaper (*Youth*), one of the leading daily newspapers based in Ho Chi Minh City, has reduced its daily volume from 450,000 copies a day for the 2008–2009 period to 300,000 copies a day in 2015. Within three years, from 2010 to 2013, the once famous *Tien Phong* newspaper (*Pioneer*) in northern Vietnam saw its daily publication volume fall from 100,000 to 70,000 copies a day. The reduction in daily copies results in less revenue from advertisements, lower investment in news production and reduced payments to journalists, and this all again forces the publisher to make further reductions. It is not only print newspapers that are under pressure: large-scale media organisations such as the national carriers *Vietnam Television* (VTV) and *Voice of Vietnam Radio* (VOV) are caught up in the challenge of losing their audience to online newspapers. Highlighting the pressure VTV faces in competition with the electronic press in the digital era, VTV General Director Tran Binh Minh stated clearly and concisely: 'No changes means we will die' (Tran 2014a).

While it has become more difficult for printed newspapers to thrive, the path of growth has expanded for online newspapers. *VnExpress.net* with 34.5 million readers and *Dantri.com.vn* with 40 million users are currently topping the list of e-newspapers in Vietnam. These newspapers have only digital versions but they continue to develop well thanks to the higher number of daily pageviews. Established on 26 February 2001, *VnExpress.net* was the first independent online newspaper to be founded by a private corporation (FPT) rather than by a state or governmental organisation in Vietnam. This e-newspaper is said to have 34.5 million readers (users). Pham Hieu, *VnExpress* deputy editor in chief, explained that choosing the right time and a commitment to implementing core principles have been key to the current success of the only-online newspaper:

First, the founders of *VnExpress.net* had foreseen the dominant role of the internet in developing an irreplaceable trend among news readers ... We had built our own reader community in our first days [of establishment] and the community has been gradually expanding. Second, we have our working principles, which are not new but have been consistently applied since the days when we only had 20 staff through to the present time when the newspaper has 150 employees. Our principles are objectivity, speed and accuracy (Pham Hieu 2012, pers. comm., 26 December).

There are many advantages to managing an online newspaper as opposed to a printed newspaper in Vietnam. Internal advantages are that online newspapers require a lower investment in employees and news production and that the news can be constantly updated, quickly edited and cover a wide range of topics to satisfy the various tastes of readers. External advantages such as faster broadband speed, the increasing number of smartphone users and the high percentage of young people in the population have also contributed significantly to enhancing the popularity of the electronic press. A report on the

digital landscape of Vietnam in 2015 said that most of the internet users in Vietnam are in the younger age group from 15 to 34. Within this group, users aged from 25 to 34 spend most of their online time reading news (Moore 2015).

Thanks to these many advantages, the electronic press is able to challenge the traditional news media in getting a greater market share in the multi-million-dollar media advertising market. In 2014, the online advertising revenue of Vietnamese websites was estimated to reach nearly US\$50 million. Of 15 websites with the largest online advertising revenue, three are online -only newspapers which are famous in Vietnam: *VnExpress.net* (24%), *Dantri.com.vn* (7%) and *Vietnamnet.vn* (3%). The speedy expansion of e-newspapers in attracting more readers and advertising revenue has not only taken print newspaper publishers by surprise but has also shaken the role of television, for a long-time the dominant media power. Leaders of *Vietnam State Television* (VTV), the largest state-run television station, have talked about the increasing loss of television advertising to digital media. At the current time, VTV still maintains its dominant position in the advertising media market but the general director of this powerful state television station has admitted that internet media are growing fast enough to become 'the main rival and the biggest challenger' to VTV because 'they have more advantages in technologies, potentials and easy accessibility to the audience' (Tran 2014a).

5.2.2 The rapid messenger

The electronic press has proved to be not just an effective money-earning tool, but also a catalyst in producing changes in the conventional journalistic values of speed, objectivity and accuracy in Vietnam's news industry. This is significant because 'the wind of change' brought by the *Doi Moi* economic reform process (Hang 2003) has gradually faded. The standards set by online news to be fast, informative, accurate and convergent have made online news

more competitive than the sluggish and conservative style of traditional news, particularly than the press that is controlled tightly by the CPV.

The electronic press has confirmed its advantage in the speed of its news delivery over all other traditional news media in Vietnam. In the past, Vietnamese audiences often turned on the television or the radio or bought daily newspapers to get the news. Since the arrival of the internet, this habit has changed. Within nearly a decade from 2005 to 2014, the number of Vietnamese internet users more than tripled, from 12.9% to 39.8% of the population. Recently, 44% of the country's population of over 90 million has had access to the internet (Moore 2015). Vietnamese people have quickly acquired the habit of logging on to the internet to find out what is going on inside and outside the country.

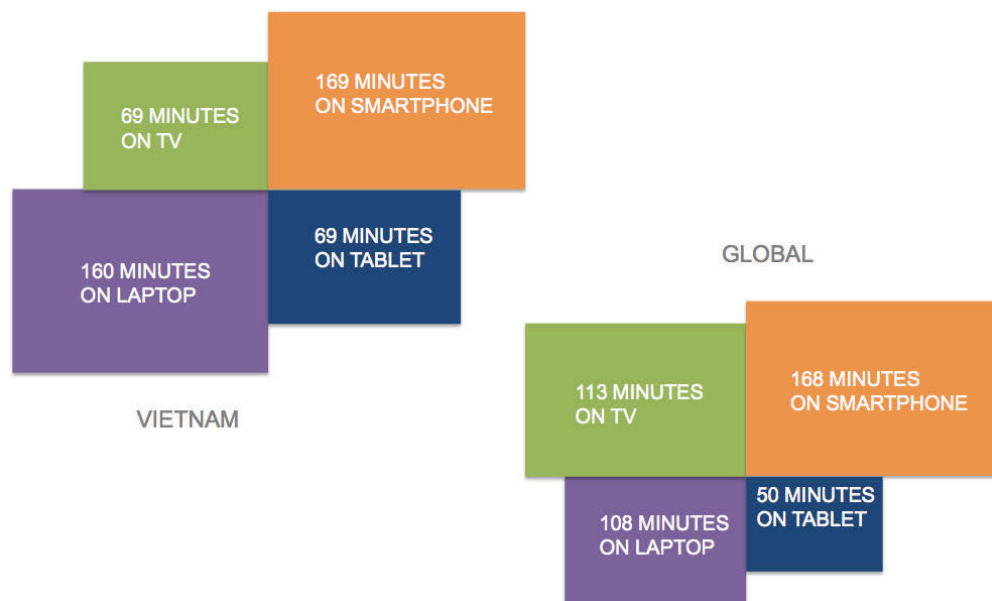


Figure 5.4: Vietnamese users' device usage time compared with global usage

Source: Moore 2015

The local electronic press has exploited this advantage by making the speed of news its top priority. *VnExpress.net*, one of the leading online newspapers in Vietnam, states news speed as number one among its core principles. Deputy editor in chief of this e-newspaper, Pham Hieu, said that speed is the 'vital

element' his newspaper has been committed to since the first days of the e-newspaper's establishment. To ensure the speed of the news, *VnExpress* selected employees certified with foreign language skills before training them in journalism skills and the newspaper's style. The online-only newspaper also set up various templates for different news topics and for the process of news coverage from the field to the news office to ensure that news was published at the earliest time. Pham Hieu emphasised the importance of news speed because his newspaper is in competition with other online newspapers, blogs and social networks whose 'millions of users are both audience and messengers'. Hieu recognised that if his newspaper published the news later than other competitors, it would lose its audience immediately (Pham Hieu 2012, pers. comm., 26 December).

The competition to produce 'high-speed' news then leads to the race not only to be the first messenger but also the most informative messenger. The concept of the most informative messenger means that news websites publishing news about a current affair in Vietnam or elsewhere in the world must update the story frequently to keep readers and encourage them to return to the website. To do this, electronic newspapers have various sources for the news produced by their own reporters, edited from print, television, radio and social media, translated from foreign sources and developed from the audience's contributions. Like other journalists of online news in the world, Vietnamese journalists of the electronic press are required to multi-task: they write news stories, take photographs and even capture videos. Journalists at electronic newspapers are encouraged to work as video journalists through the stimulus of higher salaries and promotional opportunities (LLH 2015, email comm., 26 October).

To stay informative and compete with television and print, Vietnamese electronic news tends to focus more on 'soft news' rather than 'hard news'. A

senior editor at *Vietnamnet* electronic newspaper explained that the decision to increase coverage of 'soft news' was made based on statistics measuring the pageviews and user visits which are higher for soft news (HL 2015 email comm., 26 October). Deputy editor-in-chief Pham Hieu argued that Vietnamese readers have a stronger demand for sharing news items than for being updated with news. His electronic newspaper has responded to this behaviour by enhancing the section for sharing news and thoughts to attract more readers (Pham Hieu 2012, pers. comm., 26 December). Changes are visibly seen through the dynamism of electronic newspapers, the choice to step much closer to the audience and the greater popularity of soft news over propaganda news. These tendencies are completely new for the marketised but ideological media of Vietnam. As the changes are only in the early stage and are held back by the constant monitoring of the authorities, the development of the electronic press has shown signs of chaos and stalemate, which threatens to subdue the most active sector of Vietnam's contemporary press.

5.3 The rise of tabloidisation

Few researchers have explored tabloidisation in the propaganda press of Vietnam. Heng (2000) is the first international scholar to briefly point out that some publications 'are going in the direction of tabloid sensationalism' as their 'marketing formula' to earn profit (Heng 2000, pp. 6,7). Tabloid stories came along with the 'advent of market economics', first in the form of weird and salacious details in crime stories. Heng continued his discussion of the increase in sensational stories several years later when he categorised the trend as a consequence of the 'dark side of the market' in the Vietnamese media (Heng 2003). As sensational stories sold well, there was a rise in 'undesirable journalistic practices' such as the use of creative fiction in investigative journalism and even the distortion of information in exchange for bribes (pp.565).

Discussion of tabloidisation has recently come to the surface again, but focused on the electronic press. In two separate studies, Nguyen Khac Giang (Nguyen 2014c) and Thuy Nguyen (Nguyen 2013c) pointed out that tabloids, originating from the consumer-based market economy, have grown become a rapidly increasing 'trend' in the electronic press. These researchers both approach tabloid journalism as 'still somewhat tainted' (Andersson 2013, p. 005) to confirm that tabloidisation is on the rise in the news media of Vietnam, particularly in the electronic press. Nguyen (2014c) mentions the tabloidisation process as an example in his study of the impact of social networks on mainstream media. Nguyen 2013c presented a larger study specialising in the tabloidisation of the Vietnamese e-press. In this study, Thuy Nguyen focuses on the effects of tabloidisation on Vietnamese journalists and social values. She explains that tabloidisation has affected the awareness and responsibilities of journalists who break professional codes of conduct to write to satisfy the curiosity of viewers. Tabloidisation has also affected moral values such as family ties, human relationships and material lifestyles. Finally, it also violates individual privacy (Nguyen 2013c). Thuy Nguyen has connected the phenomenon of tabloidised online news in Vietnam to freedom of expression and freedom of the press by highlighting the point that the production of entertainment news is the 'freest aspect' of Vietnamese press (Nguyen 2013c, p. 60). Nguyen also mentions the 'conflict' between the freedom of publishing and accessing tabloid news versus the right to individual privacy and moral values. However, she only touches on this characteristic rather than investigating it in depth.

In the next sections, I examine 'tabloidisation' in the electronic press of Vietnam to describe how this trend has been driven by the internet. Initially tolerated by the Vietnamese authorities as a way of filling in the lack of hard news, tabloidisation has been a back door for online newspapers to enjoy

limited press freedom. Tabloidisation is forecast to continue to grow as the news media of Vietnam transitions further from propaganda guidelines. I begin my discussion by reviewing the indicators of a decrease in hard news and an increase in sensational and entertainment news (Esser 1999). I then explore changes in the range, form and style (McLachlan & Golding 2000) in the online newspapers of Vietnam.

5.3.1 The indicators of tabloidisation

Several years ago, tabloid journalism was a hot topic for debate and argumentation in Vietnam's state media. On 28 May 2012, *Saigon Giai Phong* newspaper (*Liberated Saigon*) published a feature article entitled 'The Tabloid Journalism Calamity', claiming that some newspapers and magazines were enticing readers with shocking titles and news stories about celebrities' private lives, sex and crime. The newspapers and magazines, referred to under abbreviated names, were claimed to belong to the 'corporation' of tabloids whose top priority was economic benefit and which forgot its roles to guide public opinion and maintain professional standards and the ethics of journalists (Loan 2012). The report ignited a noisy tit-for-tat debate, with several state newspapers and magazines denying or accusing one another of being a tabloid newspaper. This was the first time the topic of tabloid news had been publicly debated in the mainstream media of Vietnam. After this public debate, tabloid journalism came to be implicitly recognised as existing as part of the state propaganda system although it was not mentioned in Vietnam's press law. With 81.48% of readers in a survey agreeing that there was too much tabloid news, all online newspapers in Vietnam were said to be led by the trend towards entertainment news (Nguyen 2013c, p. 44).

The news media was forced to re-visit the issues around tabloidisation in 2015, when ministerial level media administrators warned media organisations

about the increase in tabloid content and threatened to punish media if tabloid-style stories caused negative social impacts. On 10 July 2015, leading electronic newspapers in Vietnam published news informing audiences of the arrest of two men accused of killing six out of seven members of a wealthy family in the southern province of Binh Phuoc. The news quickly topped the list of audience clicks on that day, with 14,000 readers sharing the story through the 'like' button on *VnExpress.net* and *Vietnamnet.vn*. The news report on *VnExpress.net* received a record number of 1,766 comments from readers expressing their anger, anxiety and questions about the murder.

The Binh Phuoc murder became the front-page story of most online newspapers. Online publications exploited every development and detail about the murder: its context, the suspects, the victims and the families of both victims and suspects. These news reports were among the best-selling news items ever on the internet and in online journalism in Vietnam. On the news aggregator website *Baomoi.com* (*Fresh Newspaper*), there are 50 pages aggregating 900 stories about the murder from local news websites. The news stories maintained high levels of attention among Vietnamese readers, as demonstrated by the large number of readers' comments. Among 34 news reports of the murder on *VnExpress.net*, 20 news reports had at least 300 or more comments, four reports had fewer than 300 but more than 100 comments, and five reports had fewer than 100 comments (my data show that three reports were photo reports for which no comments were allowed). The large number of news reports on the topic shocked media managers. The local press began using the phrase 'massacre journalism' to describe the increase in news stories detailing murders to attract readers (Ha 2015).

'Massacre journalism' is only the latest example that demonstrates the fact that Vietnam's electronic newspapers are changing the range, form and style of their news stories towards tabloidisation. In terms of range, the e-press has

published a higher number of news reports using sensational headlines to shock, frighten or enrage the audience. These stories are designed to be sensational and eye-catching, using words typical of tabloid news: 'massacre', 'sexy', 'shocked with' or 'frightened by'. When I typed the key word 'shocked' into the search box of the online newspaper *Vietnamnet.vn* on 16 July 2016, I found 2,456 results among all news sections of this online newspaper. The space for hard news has also shrunk on the front page of electronic newspapers. The search term 'politics' generated 19,463 results on *VnExpress.net* while searches for entertainment news produced 26,860 results. No longer limited to sensational crime stories, soft news topics have expanded to include food, travel, romance, gossip, entertainment or fashion for various ages and genders. Another popular electronic newspaper, *Vietnamnet.vn*, once proudly claimed to be 'at the forefront' of the transition of the Vietnamese press to become more vibrant and politically influential (Nguyen 2008), has increased its daily news by saving more space for entertainment news.

The tendency to soft news has been multiplied by the participation of general information websites and by the subtle connection between electronic newspapers and these websites. As explained earlier in this chapter, general information websites are not electronic newspapers and are not legally recognised as newspapers by the Vietnamese authorities but they function as news aggregators. They publish news copied from newspapers on the condition that they cite their sources and have the approval of the source's owner. Some general information websites can be sister websites of a popular electronic newspaper and they specialise only in infotainment news such as stories of celebrities, gossip, fashion, murders, travel and cooking. For example, *Vietnamnet.vn* is linked with *2Sao.net* (2Stars) and *TintucOnline* (NewsOnline). *Thanhnienviet.vn* e-newspaper (*YoungPeopleOnline*) is linked with *iHay* (Online Interesting). As well as constituting a 'backyard' for electronic newspapers,

many other independent general information websites and news aggregators have been set up to publish soft news only. Leading names among these websites include *Baomoi.com* (*Fresh newspaper*), *24h.com.vn*, or *Ringring*. Some online newspapers specialise only in human interest stories, gossip, fashion, travelling or crime stories, serving the needs of different groups of readers such as teenagers, young adults, women, men or fans of technological innovation. Two popular names in the infotainment news group are *Ngoisao.net* (*Star*) and *Zing.vn*, whose licenses have been upgraded from general information websites to electronic newspapers.

Local journalists are very familiar with tabloid news and refer to such news as 'trivia, shocking, emotionalised' news (nhảm, sốc, sến). One forum of local journalists has expressed their reaction to the increasing number of tabloid news items through a monthly nomination and vote for the worst tabloid story under a parody award called Vulture. Launched in May 2013, the award is designed to name the worst news story of the month that meets the criteria of being 'false, evil, harmful, nonsense, shocking, cheesy, not up to the standards of journalism and mercenary' (YoungJournalistsForum 2015). Since 2013, nomination of tabloid stories has become a regular task for the forum's members. More than 20 news reports — dubbed 'Vulture reports' — have been announced among hundreds of news stories nominated by more than 11,000 members. 'Vulture' has become a key word implying unethical news stories or unethical behaviour by Vietnamese journalists (Phan et al. 2015, p. 105).

5.3.2 Behind the phenomenon of tabloidisation

Tabloid news offers many advantages for Vietnam's electronic news media. First, this type of journalism is a quick and profitable solution that allows Vietnam's electronic press to thrive in the digital age. In Vietnam, political, social and economic news stories are placed under the stricter supervision of

the Vietnamese media authorities. Writing hard news also costs more in wages and demands journalists with professional training and production skills. Meanwhile, tabloid news is not censored, is cheaper to produce and easily catches the public's attention.

In an email interview conducted for this study, a senior editor⁸ of *Vietnamnet.vn* explained that readers' preference for infotainment news and the lower costs of news production led her newspaper to tabloidise. The process has shown positive results in raising revenues for the newspaper, which is not subsidised by the state budget (HT 2015, email interview, 26 October). Under pressure to be the first to publish as much news as possible, electronic newspapers are increasingly giving priority to infotainment news sourced from international tabloids and social life in Vietnam as a shortcut to attract a larger audience and minimise administrative supervision while still earning good revenue from advertisers. Some newspapers have chosen the more positive side of tabloid journalism to build up their prestige. They concentrate on human interest news and soft news, particularly human interest stories, lifestyle or travel, while limiting their coverage of sensational stories and celebrity news. One editor of a general information website explained that this is the target for his newspaper because they want to maintain readers' trust in the long run (Hoang Nguyen Vu 2016, mobile phone comm., 18 May).

Tabloid journalism is legally excluded from Vietnam's propaganda system and its existence is regarded contrary to journalists' social responsibility and the role of media. The revised *Press Law* passed on 5 April 2016 has no words or phrases mentioning the existence of tabloid news. Former Minister of Information and Communications Nguyen Bac Son affirmed at a Question &

⁸ Human ethics interviews approved by UTS HREC (REF No. 2012-306A). The interviewee asked to be anonymous for reasons of personal safety.

Answer session of the National Assembly on 21 November 2013 that Vietnam has no tabloid journalism. What he did acknowledge was the 'manifestation of the tendency of tabloid news'. He said the reason for this trend was that some media organisations were failing to abide by 'the guidelines and objectives' of the Vietnamese press (Nguyen 2013a). Despite this denial, the tabloids have implicitly recognised they are encroaching on the territory of the traditional propaganda news media. In 2015, a deputy minister of information and communications admitted to the 'phenomenon' of a large number of newspapers covering crime news in detail. Ministerial correspondence sent to all newspapers in Vietnam, described as an 'ultimatum' document, warned them not to embellish crime details (Nguyen 2015).

Media administrators also take tough action against electronic newspapers and information websites when they publish tabloid news. In 2014, 68 media organisations and 31 information websites were fined for journalistic wrongdoings such as publishing wrong information or violating Vietnam's habits and customs. Financial fines for online information violations account for most of the cases, with the total charged worth about AU\$52,000 (Thuy 2014). In the opinion of media administrators, tabloid news represents a 'decline in the quality of the contemporary press' caused by ignorance about journalists' ethics and social responsibilities and by media organisations' desires to chase profits (Nguyen 2015f). In the mainstream media, Vietnamese administrators always state that their intervention does not mean a prohibition on crime news but they forbid the sensational reporting style that they see as harming society. Tabloid news with its numerous descriptive details, long interviews and simple languages does not set the standards of journalism. However, these stories have become more interesting to read than the conventional forms of important news stories about political events and top leaders. To write these conventional news stories, Hang (2003) states that journalists are required to follow the instructions

from higher authorities, must write stories that contain no analysis or criticism and must use quotes from speeches rather than interviews with top CPV leaders (pp.116).



Figure 5.5 Cartoon capturing the two choices facing Vietnamese journalists

If a journalist chooses to write news about corruption (hard news), the future path is full of spikes and thorns. If a journalist chooses to write about scandals, celebrities or crime, the path is easy, comfortable and highly paid.

Source: Ho Chi Minh City Law Newspaper

5.3.3 Tabloidisation as a back door to press freedom

Tabloidisation can be considered the only option available for Vietnamese electronic newspapers to break the deadlock caused by the audience's growing demand for information and the lack of hard news in an industry tightly supervised by the Vietnamese authorities. Western researchers define hard news as news that covers political, economic and social topics, that has a 'high level of newsworthiness' and that is reported rapidly because of its importance (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky 2010; Lehrmann 2011). Under this definition, much of the news published in the Vietnamese press cannot be classified as hard news. Since all media organisations operate under 'a hierarchy' of controlled by the Ideology and Culture Department (Hang 2003, p. 106), hard news must pass through a long process of censorship before it can be published in Vietnam.

There are 'forbidden areas' where news is censored to avoid 'political taboos' or the risk of offending high-ranking officials and their families (Hang 2003; Heng 2003; Nguyen 2013c). After the economic reforms, the state news media has gradually shifted towards the goal of functioning as 'a reflection of the 'reality of life'' (Hang 2003). However, the country has always featured among the countries with the least press freedom in the world (RSF 2016). The increase in hard news on mainstream media in recent years is far from the ongoing social developments and the demand of newsreaders. The rapid expansion of the electronic press in an internet-based society has created constant demand for information. The tabloid news style is able to satisfy readers' demands for immediate news and has filled the gap left by the insufficient supply of hard news. This context explains why more electronic newspapers rely on tabloid stories about showbiz scandals, violent crimes, fashion, cooking or gossip.

Tabloids could have not increased to the level of 'an epidemic' without the tolerance of Vietnam's media administrators, who have exploited the trend to ease the demand for information. This tolerance initially brought certain advantages at a time when the CPV was trying to maintain the success the leadership had earned during the economic transition (Hayton 2010). The multiplication in the number of electronic newspapers and information websites, even the moves towards tabloid journalism, have been cited as evidence of press freedom in Vietnam's contemporary press. This tolerance has had another advantage for the authorities: tabloid news can deflect readers' concerns away from national affairs, which are a core part of hard news. Former journalist Tran Tien Duc links the dominance of infotainment news in the Vietnamese press with the authorities' implementation of 'the obscurantism policy' to 'direct the people's attention to state problems which are not sensitive and urgent' (Tran Tien Duc 2015, pers. comm., 15 June).

However, tabloidisation has expanded beyond the authorities' expectations. The phenomenon has undermined the image of Vietnam's revolutionary press as 'providing information' and 'shaping the public opinion' (Loan 2012). Media officials are worried that tabloidisation casts a shadow over Vietnamese society, leading to public pessimism and anger at the CPV's leadership. Tabloid content may lead citizens to feel that they are living in an unsafe society, with news media highlighting negative aspects of society such as murders, unhealthy lifestyles and rising materialism, all of which suggest moral values are being eroded.

In the internet era, tabloidisation has been developing at a rapid pace and across a broad scale along with the growth of electronic press. It has evolved to a position of undeniable popularity in the propaganda press. Örnebring & Jönsson (2004) have argued that tabloid journalism gives better news access to the people, who have previously felt that they are not part of the country's politics. From this angle, tabloidisation can be seen as a break from 'official news' (Fiske 1992), offering Vietnamese journalists the opportunity to report the news freely, and giving newspapers the chance to publish cheaply and news readers the freedom to comment. In a country where the news media 'lies between the hammer and the anvil' (Hang 2003), tabloidisation is worth valuing as a narrow back door through which Vietnam's contemporary news media can move towards press freedom. Realising this freedom requires adopting a broader vision, one that goes beyond concern about the 'contrary effects' caused by tabloidisation. I recognise that the freedom generated through tabloidisation in Vietnam is a limited, temporary and intentional freedom, which is tolerated within the Vietnamese authorities' censorship to satisfy the speedy growth of the media in a digital era. This freedom reflects the 'relative absence of government restraints' on tabloid news only (see Weaver 1977 quoted in Becker,

Vlad & Nusser 2007), making tabloid journalism an 'alternative arena for public discourse' (Örnebring & Jönsson 2004).

On one hand, the process of tabloidisation also shows the continuity of the Vietnamese contemporary media's transition to a 'real consumer base' (Hang 2003; Heng 2003) with more news stories to attract readers and to sell advertisements. On the other hand, the increasing amount of tabloid news of more sensational crime stories and murders or shopping and fashion reveal more about the social reality in Vietnam where violence is on the rise and consumerism is more popular among different social groups. Tabloidisation, therefore, should not simply be blamed for creating fear or enhancing negativity among the public, as claimed by Vietnamese media authorities. It should instead be recognised for 'performing its function' of reflecting the rising disorder of the society (Vi 2014).

At present, tabloidisation in Vietnam is still in its initial stages so the process is not influential enough to represent a 'grassroots-based' critique of the elites, which is what some argue has happened in US and UK tabloid journalism (Örnebring & Jönsson 2004). It may take some time for Vietnamese tabloidisation to expand its topics to cover, for example, the private lives of the political elite, and to become a 'crusade' where tabloid stories may become a form of social pressure demanding government actions and change.

5.4 Connecting with the audience

This section continues to analyse the dynamism of Vietnam's electronic press as reflected through its interactivity and closer connections with readers.

Characteristics of Vietnamese online users and readers will be discussed in chapter six. Like online newspapers elsewhere, online readers or the online users are an indispensable part of the Vietnamese e-press. A successful electronic newspaper in Vietnam is a newspaper that receives many comments

and content contributions from users. The user is not only a reader but 'a content producer' (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski 2009). Electronic newspapers in Vietnam have successfully tapped into this feature to triumph over other traditional news media in creating a huge virtual reader community. A small tag showing the number of readers' comments next to the headline of a news story has been regarded as a visible way of measuring public concern about the news. Comments by readers appear directly below news stories, a tactic which encourages users to spend more time reading the comments and which may even draw them into the discussion enticing them to add their own comments. Senior journalist KD of *Vietnamnet* e-newspaper said some of her editorials can attract up to 400 reader comments and the newspaper can only select around 10% of these to publish because the newspaper's staff needs to 'read and filter' the comments. Like her colleagues, KD often checks the number and the content of readers' comments 'to understand what the social reaction is'. KD calls it a 'wonderful way of reaction' and considers it 'helpful' for her newspaper (2015, pers. comm., 22 June).

VnExpress.net may be the leading online newspaper when it comes to tapping into interaction with online users. Every day, this electronic newspaper receives about 15,000 comments, with some users making dozens of comments a day. The comment section on *VnExpress* is recognised by colleagues of other online newspapers as a special feature of these online newspapers. The section is famous for attracting many comments and for being interesting to read (HT 2015, email comm., 26 October). *VnExpress* has not only published readers' comments frequently, its staff are also skillful in making readers' comments become social arguments. They do this by focusing on topics of public concern, saving room for supporting and objecting ideas and encouraging readers to write at length to defend their opinions. In November 2014, *VnExpress.net* launched a new column entitled 'My opinions', reserved for audience comments

only. With 4.1 million comments published in 2014 alone (VnExpress 2015b), *VnExpress.net* is the most successful e-newspaper to interact with the audience in Vietnam.

The section that received the most readers' comments on *VnExpress* was not news or current affairs. This was confirmed by Deputy Editor-in-Chief Pham Hieu, who revealed that the information which has attracted the largest number of readers' comments on the newspaper is the 'confidences' section. This section has nothing to do with news and current affairs but hosts emotional contributions by readers seeking advice about their personal issues such love affairs, family problems and personal relations (Pham Hieu 2012, pers. comm., 26 December). For example, one man shared a story about his failure to win the love of his female boss. First published on 21 September 2015, the story had attracted 607 readers' comments on *VnExpress.net* after five days (Hoang 2015). Every week, comments that have been 'liked' the largest number of readers are published once more to make readers whose comments have been selected feel that their comments are heard and valued by the majority of people. By doing this, *VnExpress* encourages more readers to write new comments, to comment again and to keep visiting the website to check the number of 'likes'. Even more than participating in a public forum, readers are dragged into a competition to write the first comments or to earn 'likes' from other readers. While the audiences have kept arguing about the truthfulness of the confidential stories shared on this column, *VnExpress.net* has enjoyed an increasing number of comments to the section. As a result, it has expanded the option for comments to other news sections and is attracting more advertising based on increasing pageviews. Deputy Editor-in-Chief Pham Hieu acknowledged that the 'confidences' section is 'not being seen in newspapers of the United States or United Kingdom because it is not news' but it is still a success for this e-newspaper because they it shows that the newspaper 'understands' that

Vietnamese online readers prefer to share their thoughts to being provided with news (Pham Hieu 2012, pers. comm., 26 December).

Mastering the skill of getting readers to voice their opinions, Vietnamese electronic newspapers have included more user-generated content in their daily news — a common strategy for any online newspapers to make the news production 'a collective endeavour' (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski 2009). Local e-newspapers keep encouraging readers to send photos and videos, or share any incidents they have witnessed in their life. These materials can be used as sources of information for journalists or be published in the section saved for readers only. Among 20 electronic newspapers randomly picked, 14 newspapers have a separate section for readers' contributions. These are often given names such as 'The Reader', 'Readers write', 'Audience' or 'I Write'. In these sections, readers' comments are summarised and highlighted weekly to show which issues are of most public concern. Stories and opinions written by readers are also available. Some electronic newspapers have gone further by entitling readers to be journalists and launching awards for best readers' stories. In December 2013, the online-only newspaper *Dantri.com.vn* (*Intellectual*) introduced quarterly prizes granted to the readers who have their comments, videos, photos, news reports or opinions most shared or by liked by other readers. Under the name 'Each Reader – A Journalist', the awarded readers are invited to the newspaper's headquarters based in the capital Hanoi. They are then presented with flowers and a cash prize by the newspaper's Editor-in-Chief. *Dantri* editors say comments and opinions are 'the voice of the people' and the readers are 'the people's journalists' (Dantri 2014).

Another typical example of the dynamism of Vietnamese e-newspapers in enhancing the voice of the audience is the introduction of the 'dislike' and 'like' buttons placed below each news story. The dislike button is worth explaining in this thesis because while I was in the final state of my research (2016), the owner

of the like button, Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg, explained that he had refused to introduce a dislike button to Facebook to avoid 'bad and demeaning' posts (Johnston 2014). Placed right next to the like button, the dislike button is in the image of the human hand with the thumb pointing down. If liking is explained as an expression of 'positive sentiment' (Bosch 2013) and 'a quick and easy way' to share the content directly (Gerlitz & Helmond 2011), disliking can be translated to represent negative reactions to the posts. This makes the dislike button very powerful and, in Zuckerberg's view, too sensitive to be available for public use. No one wants to be disliked, even virtually disliked.

While Facebook has been delaying release of a dislike button, Vietnamese online newsreaders have been able to use this social option on several leading news websites such as *TuoiTreOnline* (*YouthOnline*), *ThanhNienOnline* (*YoungPeople Online*), and *Vietnamnet.vn* since 2013. Technically, these social buttons (like and dislike) represent another effort by electronic newspapers to enhance their interaction with their audience. These buttons are placed below all news sections ranging from political news to economic news, from social news to the entertainment news. By checking the number of likes and dislikes, both readers and the newspapers can know immediately which topics are of concern. More than that, like and dislike buttons are a simple way for the readers to show their attitude towards the writing style, the content, interviewees or anything in the news story. The buttons may be commonplace in countries that have press freedom but in Vietnam they mean a great deal. They can be called a rare representation of the freedom given to readers to express their pleasure and displeasure without being censored. Since the buttons are not filtered like readers' comments, readers can show their displeasure with all published news, including 'sensitive' issues. In this way, the buttons are not only a direct way to 'interact with readers' (HT 2015, email comm., 26 October) but they can be regarded as symbols of freedom of

expression. Unfortunately, Vietnamese media administrators have realised the impact of these buttons. As a result the dislike button was quietly removed from the three electronic newspapers (*TuoitreOnline*, *ThanhNienOnline* and *Vietnamnet.vn*) in 2014. The existence of the dislike button was a short but sufficient demonstration of the efforts of Vietnamese electronic newspapers to function less as propaganda tools of the CPV and more as products catering to readers' demands. I discuss the removal of the dislike button further in the next section, in exploring the ugly part of Vietnam's electronic press.

5.5 A 'messy' situation

The title of this section borrows the word 'messy' which was used by a senior media administrator in Vietnam to warn of the harmful impacts of increasing 'tabloidisation' (Ha 2015). In this section, the adjective 'messy' is a figurative way to capture the flaws and backwards steps that have overshadowed progress in Vietnam's electronic press.

5.5.1 Censorship and propaganda

This argument will start with an expanded discussion of the removal of Dislike button from some Vietnamese electronic newspapers. On 26 August 2014, *Vietnamnet.vn* published a story entitled 'Users to be responsible for sharing information on social media' written by Trong Cam. This was an opinion piece explaining a controversial legal document, the guiding Circular No.9 of Resolution No.72, issued by the Ministry of Information and Communication. The resolution required individuals to take legal responsibility for sharing information on social media from 3 October 2014 (Cam 2014). The social buttons for this story showed three likes and 78 dislikes by the time I captured the screen of the page at 10am Australian time, 27 June 2014, one day after the story was published. Several hours later, I logged on to the website again and could not see the dislike button. From that time, the button with the thumb down has

never been seen again on *Vietnamnet.vn*. This means that readers can only have the choices of clicking on the like button or sending comments to share their thoughts and attitudes (which are moderated).

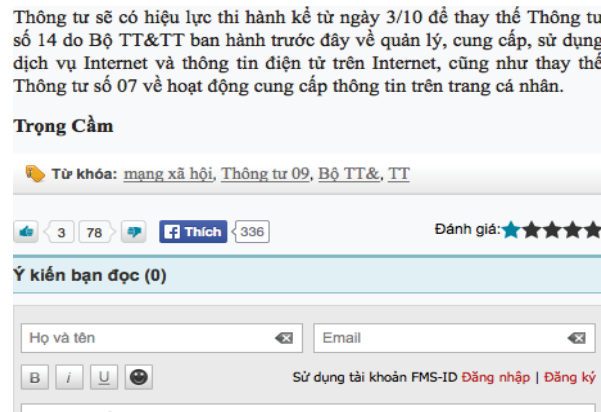


Figure 5.6 Photo captured on 27th August 2014, on the last day the dislike button was seen on Vietnamnet

BBC Vietnamese broadcasters have discussed readers' attitudes as expressed through a large number of dislikes in response to a political opinion written by a professor of Vietnam's Central Theoretical Council published on *ThanhniênOnline* (*YoungPeopleOnline*). Entitled 'Our Party, all for the people's happiness', the opinion celebrates the CPV's role in 'making giant breakthroughs and great achievements to change the destiny of a people and to open up beautiful prospects for people's lives' (BBCVietnamese 2014b). BBC Vietnamese noticed that there were two readers' comments below the story. The first comment said the opinion was 'very good, very thoughtful and comprehensive' while the second reader comments the opinion is 'cũ mòn và giả dối' (translated 'outdated and lying'). The second comment was liked by 1,000 users and the first complimentary comment was 'disliked' by nearly 3,000 users. After several hours, both comments were removed. A short time later, the dislike button disappeared permanently from *ThanhniênOnline*. Another example is a news story on *Vietnamnet* pointing out that Vietnam has gained progress in press freedom and freedom of expression. The story published on 5 February 2014 had 7,724 dislikes over 236 likes (see figure 5.7).



Figure 5.7 Photo captured from the screen of Vietnamnet.net on 5 February 2014

The removal of the dislike button only occurred after a large number of readers clicked on the button to disagree with an appreciation of the CPV's leadership. Unlike Facebook, pressing on like or dislike buttons on these electronic newspapers did not automatically share the content with readers' friends. *Vietnamnet* and *ThanhNienOnline* had no official explanation for the removal of the dislike button but a senior editor of *Vietnamnet* revealed that her newspaper removed the dislike button after the button was seen below 'some news stories in the political section' but refused to explain further (LLH 2015, email comm., 26 October). These buttons were first created as a technical measurement of the amount of public traffic on each news story but were immediately used by readers as a good way to speak their minds. And when public attitude is against sensitive political issues, the button worried Vietnamese media administrators. Removal of the button is a form of intervention by media censors. A *Vietnamnet* journalist in the off-record part of my interview confirmed this conclusion, saying that there had been an order by the 'higher administrators' (KD 2015, pers. comm., 22 June).

Why did the dislike button disturb the media administrators of Vietnam? One likely answer is that the dislike button enabled readers to express both

constructive and also negative criticism. When readers clicked on this button, there are many reasons why they might dislike the news. They might dislike the content, use of words or content of quotations, or they might just be following other readers. Whatever the reason for removing dislike button, it is clear that administrators in the mainstream media were not pleased about receiving any negative reactions from the audience. Therefore, they decided that it would be better to stop using it before the number of dislikes grew large enough to become the subject of a broader social discussion.

Censorship is also evident in the strict filtering system of readers' comments. A former technician at the *Radio Voice of Vietnam* (VOV) website stated that his news website has an editor responsible for filtering readers' comments through the content management system. Readers' comments are saved in the server's system and checked by the editor, who then decides if the comments are 'safe or not violating the laws'. The technician also commented that it is said readers are free to send comments but the comments are not free to be published because publication depends on cultural issues and the sensitivity of the news topic (NT 2015, phone comm., 19 October). Another journalist revealed that her websites filter readers' comments based on the criteria that they are healthy, not offensive to the Party and the State, not offensive to other readers, not offensive to the newspaper and make no use of bad words (NND 2015, email comm., 28 September). This explanation coincides with the opinions of two other journalists who indicated that readers' comments are carefully filtered, especially on 'sensitive' topics (KD 2015, per. comm., 22nd June) (NND 2015, email comm., 28 September). Again, Vietnam's media administrators have not provided media organisations with definitions of what could be sensitive topics but editors and journalists regard as 'sensitive' top political issues, the most senior leaders or the most sensitive diplomatic issues such as border disputes with China. For these topics, the like button often shows large numbers

of clicks (several hundreds or even several thousand), suggesting strong reader interest, but the section for comments may be left blank or strictly filtered.

In summary, the examples of the disappearance of the dislike button and the filtering process of readers' comments show the reality of online media in Vietnam. Online newspapers have tried to give their audiences a taste of cyber freedom but they have been restrained not to reach beyond the strong grip of censorship of the CPV. If the dislike button was a flash of democracy given to the audience by certain Vietnamese online newspapers, its disappearance has halted what little opportunity audiences had to freely express their views in the mainstream media. The reality remains that despite the internal dynamics and extensive power that the internet offers, the Vietnamese electronic media is still tightly in the CPV's control. Online newspapers can publish more rapidly and be more informative and more interactive with their audiences, but they are still part of the propaganda news system manipulated by the Vietnamese Government.

5.5.2 The decline in news quality

The illegal copying of news is a popular and pressing problem for Vietnam's online news media. Copying has occurred in various ways and with high frequency: online newspapers and general information websites copy news from traditional news media; online newspapers copy news from one another; general information sites copy news from online newspapers; news websites copy Facebookers' posts and edit it into news. The information can be copied in part or whole, or can be re-edited to become new stories. The uncontrollable copying of news means that readers may read the same stories on numerous news websites (including both electronic newspapers and general information websites) but it is hard to know which is the original source.

There are some news websites publishing 1,200 news stories a week of which more than 1,000 stories are copied from other sites (Vinh 2012). On 2 November 2015, one electronic newspaper denounced a general information website as a 'blatant thief', accusing the site of 'stealing' hundreds of news stories from many electronic newspapers (Linh 2015). The licence of the violating general information website was then withdrawn but the fine had little impact on this common feature of today e-news media in Vietnam. The fines and punishments were too little, too late, compared with the copying situation which has been occurring since the first days of Vietnamese electronic news.

Vietnamese journalists have various nicknames for copying behaviour such as 'cooking news', 'counterfeited news' or 'copy-paste news'. The problem of copying news has been widely mentioned in the local news media but media administrators have taken little action to halt it. Reasons are said to include the loose legal regulations around copyright; readers' lack of interest in tracing the sources of news; the repeated copying actions by all kinds of news websites; and the huge financial benefits from copying which can outweigh any legal lawsuits and complaints (Thi 2015). The origin of the copying practice is the desire to gain the power of 'high-speed news' (Pavlik 2000), to be the fastest and the most informative messenger. Some newspapers have found ways to live with this problem by making the copying of news legal. The online-only newspaper *Dantri* has a content-sharing agreement with more than 40 media organisations (Nam 2011). This allows *Dantri* and the news websites of these organisations to share publication of some stories. This provides a temporary solution for these newspapers but makes no impression to newsreaders and still contributes to the high rate of similarity among news stories on news websites in Vietnam.

News copying, legal or illegal, has distorted the environment of online news in Vietnam. Firstly, copying degrades the quality of the news, which becomes

repeated, less informative and boring. With similar news on multiple websites, readers are not provided with much information and the news is reported from only the one angle of the original source. Secondly, news copying causes unfair competition among the news organisations and other parasitical websites that survive by reproducing others' intellectual work and efforts. Thirdly, the extensive copying of news has added to 'undesirable journalistic practices' (Heng 2003) since reporters and editors see copying as routine and a must-do act if they are to survive in the digital age. Online news copying has become more frequent with the expansion of online news websites. This contagious problem is described as 'embarrassing' and 'seen only in Vietnam' (Thi 2015).

The competition to get more pageviews haunts and drives journalists even more since it has come to be used to measure the value of a story. Editors of electronic newspapers give more priority to the most-viewed information. Journalists are paid based on the number of readers' pageviews and the number of visitors. A reporter said her newspaper only pays royalties if a story has at least 1,000 pageviews (NND 2015, email comm., 28 September). It is argued that this condition of payment at electronic newspapers enhances the news quality based on reader demand. However, on the other hand, the condition has made journalists pay more attention to view-catching techniques rather than to news quality. Some journalists have even fabricated information. On 18 September 2012, the electronic newspaper of the national radio of Vietnam, *Voice of Vietnam Radio (VOV)*, published a story titled 'Father-in-law stuck on daughter-in-law after 'eating on the sly''.⁹ The title of the story was followed by many paragraphs describing the relationship but the article lacked facts and

⁹ 'Eating on the sly' is ironic slang used to describe a covert sexual affair in Vietnam. In this situation, the two people were described to get stuck together during sexual activity.

trustworthy sources (VOV 2012). However, the information quickly went viral online since it was immediately copied onto other news websites and widely shared on social media. Two days later, the newspaper removed the report and made a public apology, accepting that the information in the story was incorrect. It turned out that a VOV reporter copied the story from an acquaintance who overheard the story which had been told during somebody's chat with a doctor. The reporter was moved to other tasks outside journalism, the VOV editor-in-chief was reprimanded and VOV was mocked as the 'Voice of Duck' publishing 'garbage news' on a prestigious online newspaper (Minh 2012). Though VOV apologised for the fabricated story, not many readers would have known about the apology and retraction. Copied versions of this news article are still available on many other general information websites.

The mistake by VOV is only one among many of examples of incorrect information published on electronic newspapers. The VOV example also shows another reality: that renowned media organisations have been drawn into the race for high numbers of pageviews and reader visits. In the online news industry, the concept of ranking media organisations into levels does not depend on the CPV but on the choices made by readers and advertisers. On one hand, this is an advantage for electronic newspapers, allowing them to compete with the traditional news media, which have traditionally been highly subsidised by the CPV. On the other hand, this advantage has lured electronic newspapers to overlook news standards and principles and focus only on views and sales. As a consequence, although electronic newspapers have grown rapidly, their credibility has been further eroded. Senior journalist Mai Phan Loi commented that no online newspaper in Vietnam meets the required standards of quality journalism (Mai Phan Loi 2012, pers. comm., 12 December), while another journalist stated that writing for an online newspaper requires less thought but more techniques so she finally returned to work for a print

newspaper so that she could work as a journalist (NND 2015, email comm., 28 September).

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an up-to-date account of views and observations of both the good and the not-so-good sides of the Vietnamese electronic press. The Vietnamese electronic press was born late but has grown quickly to taking a leading role in media competition in Vietnam. Like it or not, the growth of the electronic press has woken up Vietnam's conservative press system which had been lagging behind the country's economic development. While the economic reforms have partly commercialised Vietnam's news media, the internet has meant that the electronic press has progressed much faster than traditional media. 'Tabloidisation' has become dominant to fill the gap left by the lack of 'hard news', and the role of readers has become important. At the time of writing, the electronic press has proved to be the brightest part of the country's propaganda press. However, the growth of Vietnam's electronic press is in a tangle, with part of this chaos caused by the CPV's consistent control through censorship, legal regulations and prohibition. In the borderless world of the internet, the CPV's intervention has held back the growth of the Vietnamese press, leaving it trapped among the conflicting demands of being the state propagandist while needing to achieve profit-making objectives and meet the demands of news readers. Unless the Vietnamese electronic press is given the freedom to grow, it is likely to be overtaken as a force by social media and by the activity of local internet users. The next chapter analyses how these forces are challenging mainstream media in the internet age. ■

Chapter 6

The evolution of social media and online communities in Vietnam

The internet has brought to the Vietnamese people online news and a new virtual world of social media. This virtual world, which is expanding every minute, is showing itself to be much more than merely a space for 'self-presentation' and 'self-disclosure' (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). In this virtual world, Vietnamese users are making friends, entertaining themselves and making sales. They are also reading news, sharing information and speaking their minds. What is going on in social media in Vietnam can be viewed as the emergence of a 'powerful tool' of citizenry, which has the potential to promote political discussion and create an 'autonomous political space' in the country (Hoang, Nguyen et al. 2009, Vennevold 2011, Sharbaugh et al. 2012, Nguyen 2014b).

Drawing on Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), the concept of social media is here defined as all of the 'internet-based applications' built on the foundations of web 2.0 and which allow the 'creation and exchange of user-generated content'. In this public space, the 'audience' consists of online internet users who are not only readers of content but also the people actively generating content (Livingstone 2004). As the discussion in this thesis centres on the news media in the age of the internet boom, I limit my analysis of the country's social media and audience to its reciprocal relations with the mainstream news media. Due to the scope of the research, this chapter focuses only on political blogs, the social networking platform Facebook and the beginning of online social movements

involving empowered netizens. All of the data has been selected with the aim of mapping the evolution of Vietnam's social media into a space that offers more freedom of expression and networks of individual netizens. As I argue in this chapter, this process has had significant effects on the state-run press system.

6.1 The politics of the Vietnamese blogosphere

6.1.1 A snapshot of Vietnamese blogs and their readers

The history of Vietnamese blogging is said to start in 2006, when the word 'blogs' became a 'buzzword' among young Vietnamese (Nguyen 2009). With three million Yahoo! 360°¹⁰ blogs recorded in 2007, the growth of the Vietnamese blogosphere has been highlighted as a 'social phenomenon' or 'a new sort of freedom' (Nguyen 2009, Quinn 2010, Vennevold 2011). Two million Vietnamese chose to use the Yahoo! 360° service and most of them were young Vietnamese who discovered blogging as a great way to share their own stories with friends. While blogging is not only for 'uncontroversial social issues' such as friendship, fashion and celebrities, initially the number of blogs about politics and sensitive issues was small (Vennevold 2011). However, bloggers began to express more personal opinions about corruption and other political issues. Along with the mushrooming number of Yahoo! 360° blogs, bloggers in Vietnam began witnessing the CPV's moves to enhance its censorship of internet activities through the enforcement of legal regulations, use of firewalls, distribution of malware, harassment and arrests of political bloggers (Quinn & Kierans 2010, Duy Hoang 2015). The collapse of Yahoo! 360° in 2009 marks a

¹⁰ Operated by American company Yahoo!, social network Yahoo! 360° was introduced in 2005 for its users to create personal web sites, share photos, maintain blogs and lists, create and share a public profile and see online friends. Even when it was shadowed by Facebook or My Space, Yahoo! 360° had a long influential time among young internet users in Vietnam till 2009.

setback for the blogging phenomenon, with the number of Vietnamese bloggers and blog visits down from 46 per cent to less than 40 per cent (Vennevold 2011).

The decline in access to blogs in Vietnam continued after 2008, with the rate of blog writing among internet users falling from 16 per cent in 2009 to 11 per cent in 2011, and the rate of blog visiting dropping from 41 per cent to 17 per cent in the same period (Cimigo 2012). However, this drop is explained by internet users shifting across to social networks, particularly Facebook and to other online services. Visiting blogs declined but this period marked the rise of political blogs as more Vietnamese intellectuals, journalists and activists began to voice their thoughts and comments on urgent social problems, politics, corruption and other politically sensitive issues. The links between blogs and social networks (particularly Facebook) has helped disseminate political blogs to millions of Vietnamese internet users. From about 2008, social media and internet use meant that Vietnamese citizen journalism moved beyond a 'tipping point' (Nguyen 2009) to enter the stage of 'active usage'. The rapidly increasing influence of the internet on social life became apparent, and the internet came to play a role in providing an independent channel of news for Vietnamese audiences. This is also the time when Vietnamese political blogs were divided with typical writing style and political targets which will be further analysed in this section.

6.1.2 Three groups of political blogs

As a result of the impact of blogs on political campaigns, blogs have been considered to offer a 'cross-section of media, politics and discourse' (Coleman 2005, Burroughs 2007). In the United States, where blogs have been the most robust from the earliest days, scholars have proved the power of blogs in shaping political tactics, strategies; affecting legal outcomes and even the foreign and domestic policies (Drezner and Farrell 2008). In the introduction to

a special issue on blogs, politics and power, Drezner and Farrell (2008) provide a plethora of examples and academic findings illustrating these claims.

Examples include American politician Howard Dean using blogs as 'a tool for rallying activists' and finally leading other candidates to copy the idea of using a 'campaign blog' in the 2004 Democratic primary (pp.3). The power of blogs on politics has also been noticed outside the United States. Internet users have used blogs to advocate for democracy (in Iran, Iraq), to exert political pressure (in France) and to express their political viewpoints (pp.5).

The blogs studied in this thesis are political blogs relevant to the research questions addressed in this thesis. Political blogs have been described as 'the key source of information and analysis' and for people who 'prefer to trust their own judgement' rather than depend on the 'usual sources' such as news media (Coleman 2005). In Vietnam, political blogs are regularly updated (daily or weekly), using popular blog services such as Wordpress or Blogpost, and they have close connections to other sources of information including blogs and news websites within and outside the country. These blogs are written in Vietnamese for Vietnamese readers. They deal with mainly domestic social and political topics. Based on the identity of the writers of the blogs, their writing styles and the selection of posting topics, I have categorised political blogs in Vietnam into three separate groups: blogs by activists, pro-CPV blogging and anonymous blogs. My classification is based on my personal research and assessment within a limited period and scale so I recognise that the classifications may have minor shortcomings. However, these classifications do represent the first-ever mapping of the latest evolutions and zigzagging of Vietnamese political blogs.

Group 1: Blogs by activists

Blogs in this group are created and managed by individuals or by a group of activists who write to criticise or question issues of public concern. Bloggers in this group included ordinary citizens, a musician, an expert on information technology, a journalist, a lawyer and a scholar. Popular activist blogs include those by *Bauxite Vietnam*, *Anh Ba Sam (Brother Ba Sam)*, *Blog Osin*, *Dieu Cay (Farmer's Pipe)*, *Doan Trang*, *Me Nam (Mama Nam)*, *Tuan Khanh*, *Que Choa (My motherland)* and *Huynh Ngoc Chenh*. A majority of these bloggers live in Vietnam. Some live overseas or have been exiled after being jailed. These bloggers do not claim to be representing any particular political faction but they request changes and promote the values of truth and freedom of expression. Each of these bloggers has his or her own manifesto that motivates their political blog. Blogger and writer Bo Lap has to write because 'life has hit on me, forcing me to speak out' (Lam 2014); Netizen-awarded blogger Huynh Ngoc Chenh uses his blog to raise concerns and 'struggle for freedom of information' (RSF 2013); and a group of Vietnamese scholars run blog Bauxite Viet Nam as a critical voice about national problems.

Several visible features characterise activists' political blogs. The first common feature is that the postings on these blogs focus on issues of public concern that are not mentioned or only mentioned with moderate expressions of attitude in the mainstream news media. Bloggers write their critiques, opinions or commentary on the news and current affairs on topics of public concern, such as the territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea, an unfair death sentence by the courts, the failure of an educational reform policy, or the lower than expected economic growth of the country. Some bloggers have gone further to discuss 'sensitive issues'. These moves have been commented on as attempts to 'fill the void left by the state-run media' (RSF 2013).

Hand-in-hand with the expansion of social media, the discussion of 'sensitive topics' has become broader and deeper. More political bloggers have revealed their previously concealed identity to question publicly the legitimacy of the CPV, to criticise the outdated Marxist ideology or to show their dissatisfaction with specific CPV senior leaders. One recent example of such 'fence-breaking' blogging is the posting on 25 February 2013 by journalist Nguyen Dac Kien in which he criticises a speech by the CPV chief leader who was not happy with political reforms (Kien 2013). Other examples include the series of postings on blog *Osin* requesting that legal charges be laid against some relatives of the Prime Minister of Vietnam; and other postings on blogs *Bauxite Vietnam* and *Dan Lam Bao (People Doing Journalism)* demanding the elimination of the one-party regime (Cu 2013; Nghia 2014).

The second feature of Vietnamese political blogs is the increasingly influential roles of some bloggers, who have acquired the status of 'blogging gods' (Burroughs 2007) among Vietnamese internet users. Their social influence comes from their popularity and professional status as writers, journalists, musicians or researchers. Beyond their initial status, these bloggers have increased the influence of their blogs through their selection of topics of wide concern, their persuasive arguments and their bravery in publishing discussions of 'forbidden issues'. Some political blogs such as *Anh Ba Sam* of blogger Nguyen Huu Vinh are regarded as more than blogs of political commentary. *Anh Ba Sam* is also seen as a news blog, a site where a wide range of Vietnam-related news items from domestic and foreign sources are published, combined, translated and linked around the clock. Readers use the blog to read the news, share comments and are even encouraged to get involved in the production process by sending information, comments and analyses (My 2013). Some famous bloggers have a large number of followers and pageviews, exceeding those of state-run electronic websites. For example, the *Que Choa blog (Father's*

Homeland) of writer Nguyen Quang Lap, characterised by bitter and ironical comments mixed with humour, reached the milestone of 100 million views in 2012, two years before the blogger was arrested and then released in 2014 (QueChoaBlog 2012). Meanwhile, influential blogger Huynh Ngoc Chanh, with his blog named after himself, attracted 15,000 visits per day (RSF 2013). The CPV has refused to recognise bloggers as journalists but bloggers call themselves 'free journalists'. The owner of blog *Osin* described himself as a 'freelance journalist' (Huy Duc 2015, email comm., 21 August).

While bloggers who voice critical viewpoints on political issues are often harassed with verbal abuse or technical threats of malware attached to emails, many face greater dangers. In December 2014 alone, three bloggers were arrested on charges of speaking against the regime. Freedom on the net 2015 reports that 29 netizens were imprisoned and eight bloggers arrested in Vietnam, continuing the country's record as one of the worst jailers of bloggers in the world (FreedomHouse 2015a). The safety of political bloggers in this group has been closely monitored by international organisations, as part of their observations on the level of democracy and freedom in Vietnam (HRW 2013b; RSF 2013; FreedomHouse 2014; RSF 2014). In the past, harassment and arrests of bloggers often took place quietly but Kerkvliet (2012) has found that these incidents have become more openly discussed in the mainstream media. The change might be connected with the rising public discontent about particular incidents and growing support by Vietnamese internet users for political bloggers, as seen by their sharing, 'likes' and comments on the blogs. When blogger Do Quang Lap was arrested on 6 December 2014, the news was said to surprise Vietnamese readers. A short news item announcing the arrest was published by various online newspapers in Vietnam. On the popular news website of *VnExpress*, this news item was 'liked' by 2,300 Facebookers (VnExpress 2014). The news spread virally on Facebook, igniting numerous

questions and expressions of surprise, shock and grief about the unexpected arrest. The arrest was said to cause much 'anxiety' among the intellectual circle and among the online community of Vietnam (Dang 2014). The arrest prompted Bo Lap's supporters to launch a new Facebook page — 'Friends of Bo Lap' — demanding his immediate release. Well-known intellectuals praised Lap's influence. This public pressure led to Lap's release after being held for two months with no official reason given by the authorities.

A recent tendency among political bloggers in Vietnam is that they network in order that their voices can echo further across the community and internationally. Bloggers can network in various ways: by voicing critiques on the same topic, by calling for public support when fellow bloggers are harassed or arrested, by sharing one another's postings or by running a blog jointly so it is more sustainable and its influence and resources enhanced. *The Network of Vietnamese Bloggers* and *Bauxite Vietnam* are typical of these joint activist blogs.

The Network of Vietnamese Bloggers gathers individual bloggers across Vietnam together to criticise human rights in Vietnam. This is the first-ever organised network of Vietnamese bloggers and they aim to have statements heard not only in Vietnam but also around the world. Since July 2013, representatives of the network have submitted the network's *Statement 258* to the embassies of democratic countries, human rights organisations and the international press. The statement was named after Article 258 of the 1999 Penal Code of Vietnam, which includes 'the crime of abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State, the legitimate rights and interests of organisations and citizens' (Trang 2013). The Network has also tried to make the best use of the internet by calling on the community to sign a petition supporting their statement. About 100 bloggers have signed this list (NetworkofVietnameseBloggers 2013). This blog is also the first blog in Vietnam

to post in both Vietnamese and English so that viewers other than Vietnamese speakers can read their statements and they can receive global support.

Bauxite Vietnam is a typical group blog. First appearing in April 2009, *Bauxite Vietnam's* foundation guidelines say the blog provides information and exchanges on bauxite-related issues in Vietnam. The blog claims to be the space of critiques on various issues written by Vietnamese intellectuals. Founded by three intellectuals — two professors and one educator — *Bauxite Vietnam* became publicly known in 2009 for publishing the strong views of a number of Vietnamese intellectuals who opposed the government's plan to allow Chinese companies to exploit bauxite in the Central Highlands. With only ten postings in 2009, the entries increased more than 300-fold in 2010 with 3109 and have been at around 2,000 entries a year since then. In January 2015 alone, 156 entries were published, at a rate of five new posts a day (BauxiteVietnam 2013). This output is not up to the production of a news website but nonetheless represents a remarkable amount of work for a blog since the topics cover the whole range of social and political issues.

After reviewing the headlines of the ten postings in 2009 and from January to August of 2013, I observed that the topics covered by *Bauxite Vietnam* had concentrated on issues of Sino-Vietnam relations. More recently, though, discussions on this blog have been broadened to cover all the pressing issues in Vietnam, categorised under 48 topics such as human rights, corruption, authority, border issues, democracy and civil issues, politics, history, diplomacy, nuclear power and others. Messages by political activists are also published to call for public support. Updated daily, the stories can be news articles, academic journal articles, opinions, analysis or translated documents. Written by Vietnamese intellectuals — writers, historians, scientific researchers and retired senior officials — most of the stories offer in-depth analysis, convincing arguments and subtle comments, making use of metaphor and

comparison as is typical in the Vietnamese style of writing. The stories are also illustrated with figures, diagrams, statistics and photos which can be used as reference sources (BauxiteVietnam 2013). This forum has hosted many debates among Vietnamese academics within and outside the country, with discussions of 'taboo issues' that are not covered or covered only to a limited extent by the mainstream media. In an interview with BBC Vietnamese, *Bauxite Vietnam* founder Nguyen Hue Chi said the blog has 'stirred up a civil movement' and is one of the few democratic voices in Vietnam (BBCVietnamese 2013c).

Group 2: Pro-CPV blogs

Blogs listed in this group are at the other end of the political spectrum from the activist blogs in group 1. Bloggers of the pro-CPV group often introduce themselves as retirees, researchers, writers, soldiers or journalists. Pro-CPV blogger Nguyen Van Minh's message on his blog is 'On the way of journalism and against wrong doings and reactionaries' (Nguyen 2015e), while Nguyen Bien Cuong's blog is named 'I am a soldier' (Nguyen 2015a). Bloggers in group 2 voice their support for all CPV-related matters at any time and in any circumstances. Their posts also ridicule any statements calling for democracy. They fight back against comments by individuals, organisations or countries that have words or propose action against the CPV leadership and ideologies. These bloggers often refer to activist bloggers from group 1 with teasing and dismissive words. Activist bloggers are referred to with ironical nicknames like 'Mr and Mrs Democracy', the 'Reactionary', or the 'Betrayed'. Activists are painted as people with negative thoughts, characteristics and behaviours who destroy the stability of the country. Members of group 2 also criticise the struggles of individuals and groups for freedom and democracy by pointing at the negativism. The Charlie Hebdo shooting in France in January 2015 was commented on by blogger Nguyen Bien Cuong as an example of the need to 'set limits against someone who has been boasting and encouraging freedom of

expression in an extreme way' (Nguyen 2015b). On the latest posting published on 10 November 2015, blogger Nguyen Bien Cuong looked down on the victory of democratic activists led by Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2015, stating that the leadership of the CPV offers the only chance for peace and the development of the Vietnamese people (Nguyen 2015a).

From the viewpoint of oppositional readers, pro-CPV bloggers are not independent bloggers but are paid by the CPV to write for them. The phrase 'Đur luận viên' has been widely used in recent years to name the people who are believed to work for the CPV by supporting the regime on social media. There are several ways to translate 'Đur luận viên' into English including propaganda agents, pro-government internet commentators, internet polemicists or pro-regime bloggers (AFP 2013, Pham 2013). In a rare interview on the role of 'Đur luận viên', an official of the Propaganda and Education Department of Hanoi said his department hired 900 internet polemicists and managed some 400 online accounts and 20 microblogs 'to monitor and direct online discussions on everything from foreign policy to land rights' (AFP 2013). These people do not belong to the 'cyber troop', i.e. they are not members of the police or army of Vietnam. They are believed to be part of the network of an estimated number of 80,000 political propagandists, according to a story on a CPV news website (Dao 2013). However, there have never been any revelations about the bloggers working for the authorities although rumours often circulate among the public about a large group of skilled journalists, writers and bloggers quietly working for the CPV elite leaders.

The Vietnamese Government has never recognised the existence of the 'Đur luận viên' group but it is easy to notice the presence of this force in the virtual community. Apart from the pro-CPV bloggers, there is a website under the name 'Đur luận viên' (<http://www.dlv.vn/>) which is constantly updated with commentaries on political and social issues using a tone protecting and

sympathetic to the CPV. Some active members of the website are said to dress in the uniform with the logo and words of 'Đur luận viên' to interrupt protests and activities of the activists and dissidents (BBCVietnamese 2015a, VOA 2015). This section will focus only on senior members of the 'Đur luận viên' who have individual blogs or collective blogs that support the legitimacy of the CPV. Some bloggers manage individual blogs; others are produced by a group of members working professionally to run pro-regime blogs.

Pro-CPV bloggers are compared with China's model of 'fifty-cent army' ¹¹ (Han 2015) and are believed to be an 'effective tool in controlling public opinion' (Pham 2013). In fact, the job of these bloggers is more than just shaping public opinion. They are paid to protect the policies, ideologies and leadership of the CPV. According to a post written by a former propaganda official, the internet polemicists also write to protect the leaders who hire them despite criticism posted by writers who work for other leaders. This leads to the situation of internet commentators working in different groups. They write for different senior leaders from the city to the central levels. They write for different ministerial organisations and they are willing to join in the tit-for-tat of online arguments, called 'pen fighting', to defend the ruling authorities and also to defend their bosses (Tran 2014b).

Examples are numerous, but a typical one is the post by Lam Truc rejecting a comment posted on a pro-Government's website (nguyentandung.org) that implied that a senior official, the Hanoi Party Committee's secretary Pham Quang Nghi, was involved with a former chief of Vietnam Marine administration who had been charged in a mismanagement scandal (Truc 2014).

¹¹ China's fifty-cent army or fifty-cent party is the informal term for internet commentators/agents hired by Chinese authorities to engage anonymously in online discussions producing pro-regime commentary. The name of 'fifty-cent' derives from the allegation that a commentator is paid fifty cents for each posting.

The defending post confirms there is no connection with the Hanoi leader, identifying the rival post's aim to be to 'distort, slander and stain the leader' (Truc 2014). Comments in response to these kinds of posts usually adopt the same tone and attitude as the writer and condemn the rival post. These kinds of posts are described by some bloggers as vivid evidence of the fighting of 'parasitic mosquitoes', with bloggers using all writing methods to protect their owners (Tran 2014b).

While some pro-CPV blogs are owned by individuals, there are blogs named for the senior leaders of Vietnam. Under the topic 'Fan club of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung', blog Nguyen Tan Dung (<http://nguyentandung.blogspot.com.au/>) looks like a personal page of the current Prime Minister of Vietnam, Nguyen Tan Dung, with posts about his biography and working activities. The content of these posts — both words and pictures — is identical to the respective news stories on the official news website of the Prime Minister and the official news websites of his government. In fact, when I searched I found 13 others blogs, websites and Facebook fanpages featuring the activities of the Prime Minister. Many of the news portals are as well designed as an online newspaper and updated daily with news stories copied from the mainstream news websites of Vietnam but covering a wide range of economic, political and social topics. Vietnam's media administrators have always denounced these sites as 'fake websites' that mock the prestige of Vietnamese leaders in order to cause 'social disorder' (Quang 2011). According to BBC Vietnamese, some of these 'fake websites' were registered in Queensland, Australia, or were hosted in Dallas, Texas, of the United States (BBCVietnamese 2011). Not all the Vietnamese leaders have websites under their names but some internet users believe that these websites are genuine. Some bloggers believe that there are connections between the owners of these blogs and the propaganda press, i.e. that they swap information. In my opinion,

the popularity and existence of these ‘fake websites’ that are not blocked in Vietnam implies the underhand involvement of pro-CPV bloggers who are using these websites to protect the CPV against activist bloggers and the comments of internet users.

This brief introduction to the aims and characteristics of political blogs in groups 1 and 2 demonstrates the opposing viewpoints of political blogs in Vietnam. But political blogs in Vietnam do not only have supporters and opponents, those on the ‘left side’ and those on the ‘right side’. In fact, there is a third category of blogs that cannot be placed in either group 1 or 2 but which still attract considerable attention and exert a significant influence on politics and audiences in Vietnam.

Group 3: Anonymous blogs

The third group of blogs is classified separately because of its unique features, which are not found in the political blogs of other countries but are typical elements of the political context in Vietnam. I call this group ‘anonymous blogs’ because nothing is known of the identity of the bloggers behind these blogs. Despite being anonymous and far less numerous than the other groups, these blogs can attract millions of viewers within a short period of time. They quickly become a centre for public political discourse and make the headlines in domestic and international news stories. The key to the rapid rise in popularity of these blogs is their release of WikiLeaks-style information, combined with the emergence of political tabloids and investigative stories of corruptions at the highest level. Vietnamese audiences do not have access to such content on any of the channels of mainstream and non-mainstream news media. The information on these blogs is not simply comments or opinions but includes statistics, dates, audio files, confidential documents and photos targeting the most prominent figures with a close relationship to the top CPV leaders.

Vietnamese audiences attribute high credibility to these sources because some actual events often show very quickly that their information is true. Although these blogs quickly became popular, they are usually only highly active before an important political event in the CPV's internal affairs. They immediately fall silent after the event. Anonymous blogs of this type are very rare. The typical ones are *Quan Lam Bao* (*Officials Doing Journalism*) or *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* (*Portrait of Power*).

Quan Lam Bao, translated as 'Officials doing journalism', first appeared in June 2012 but soon topped the page-view ratings among Vietnamese weblogs. Postings written on this blog were all signed QLB, the first initials of *Quan Lam Bao*. While claiming to target corruption and support the cause of a republican democracy in Vietnam, a majority of *Quan Lam Bao*'s postings directly attack Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, his family and followers (QLB 2013). The arrest of one of the richest bankers in Vietnam on 21 August 2012 was first posted on the *Quan Lam Bao* blog hours before the news was released on mainstream media (QLB 2012). This breaking news immediately attracted a record number of readers. With thousands of new visitors a day, and more than 40,000 daily views, *Quan Lam Bao* was at that moment among the top blogs in Vietnam. Two months after its launch, the blog's page views reached 15 million. A majority of *Quan Lam Bao*'s postings exposed their million-dollar assets and business transactions of the Prime Minister and his close associates and accused them of abusing power and destroying the economy. Within four months (from May to September 2012), there were nearly 900 stories published, including 400 stories written within Vietnam and 150 stories copied from other opposition blogs and websites. This was the most productive period for political blogs, just ahead of a significant political event, the sixth plenum of the 11th CPV Central Committee, at which Prime Minister Dung was openly challenged. The Prime Minister finally won the political confrontation at the plenum, described in a

metaphor of ‘thunder without rain’ reflecting ‘political instability’ and contest at the CPV’s highest level (Koh 2012). At the same time, the voice of the *Quan Lam Bao* blog fell quiet.

More than two years later, in December 2014, Vietnamese people were attracted by another political blog, titled *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* (*Portrait of Power*), which was introduced in the same style but caused even more turbulence, speculation and anxiety in the country. Once again, an unknown political blog quickly caught the public attention with a series of posts explaining a possible poisoning plot against a popular anti-corruption senior official Nguyen Ba Thanh (Nikkei 2015). The case is referred to as Vietnam’s Litvinenko (Gray 2015). While the state press, as usual, was silent about this news, and the public was suspicious of the theory, the blogger kept posting photos of the politician saying he had been diagnosed with myelodysplasia and was receiving medical treatment in the United States. The blog posts also frequently updated the date and the time he was expected to be brought back to his hometown in Da Nang city. Based on this information, the people of Da Nang waited at the local airport to see their leader return. Large numbers of Vietnamese netizens kept logging on to the blog to get the latest information. The public interest forced the mainstream news media to question officials about whether the politician had been poisoned and to request updated information about his situation. Finally, senior health officials were forced to organise a press conference to provide information about the politician’s return trip and the health (Lam 2015; Nikkei 2015). The interesting thing is that most of the official information released about the sick leader’s return trip and health matched the words released by the *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* blog. By then it was too late for the Vietnamese news media to convince the public that these were merely ‘bad and toxic’ online rumours. The public made its own judgment and

the *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* blog attracted an increasing and record number of viewers every day.



Figure 6.1: Front page of the political blog *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* (Portrait of Power)
Photo captured on 25th February 2015.

Within a month of mid-December 2014, *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* had jumped to nearly 16 million views. The blog was intensively updated daily for two months only — December 2014 and January 2015 — which coincided with the 10th plenum of the 11th CPV Central Committee, a key political event at which the nominees for the leading positions in the country were selected. Observers noticed that during this period the blog published more stories uncovering the ownership of assets, bribery, corruption and underground transactions of several top leaders and their family members (including a Deputy Prime Minister, the Defence Minister and the Prosecutor General).

Table 6.1 summarises the blog's coverage during this period. It also became clear that the blog did not have enough balanced information about the leaders. Some leaders were heavily targeted across a series of posts written in a strongly negative style, filled of arguments accusing the officials and their families of owning luxury ships and real estate and of controlling the economy. By contrast, other leaders such as the Vice Chairperson of the National

Assembly, the Prime Minister and some other Deputy Prime Ministers, were not the subjects of any negative posts. Any posts about these officials were only positive, hailing their contributions and depicting their bright political prospects.

Name of politicians	Headlines	Date	Viewpoints
1. Nguyen Phu Trong (CPV Party Chief)	09 headlines	04/07/2014 – 24/01/2015	Critical
2. Tran Duc Luong (State President)	08 headlines	24/03/2014 – 10/12/2014	Critical
3. Nguyen Sinh Hung (National Assembly Chairman)	10 headlines	11/11/2014 – 08/12/2014	Critical
4. Nguyen Tan Dung (Prime Minister)	04 headlines	25/01/2015 – 18/11/2012	Supporting

Table 6.1: Summarised information of four top leaders posted on Chan Dung Quyen Luc blog

The *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* blog followed in the footsteps of the *Quan Lam Bao* blog, shaking the people with its behind-the-scenes information that sounded trustworthy and convincing and was supported by facts, photos of the people involved, landowner documents and even audio files. These two blogs also shocked the public with information that had never been heard before but was finally published, before finally being covered by the mainstream media.

In a final surprise, the bloggers behind these types of political blogs have never been identified and never arrested. The reactions of the government sounded very serious at first but the threatening tone gradually faded away and finally fell silent. At the most intensive time when every Vietnamese person was talking about the blog about the politician's poisoning, the mainstream media kept publishing news stories and interviews of media administrative officials urging the public to 'boycott' such sites and 'throw the bad and poisonous information in the rubbish bin' (Vietnamnet 2015b). No evidence was found, nor any investigative stories researched, to either confirm or denounce the blog's

information but those blogs such as *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* in Group 3 are publicly believed to be the space for elite political power struggles.

The last feature of these types of political blogs is that they fall suddenly quiet at the end of the political event they were covering. The *Quan Lam Bao* blog has not published any further breaking news stories or accusations targeting the Prime Minister as it used to do; and the *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* blog stopped updating new posts from 29 January 2015. Before completing its mission and falling into silence, the blog shocked the public again by publishing the results of the CPV Central Committee's credibility vote, with the Prime Minister topping the list. The news was said to shake the public because not a single one of Vietnam's news media organisations published this information, despite the mounting public pressure.

From *Quan Lam Bao* to *Chan Dung Quyen Luc*, observers have pointed out much progress among anonymous blogs. Some observers said that some information on the *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* blog seemed 'trustworthy' and that there has never such type of information in Vietnam (Phuong 2015). The blog is also better designed and its well-organised stories look convincing to readers since they include more evidence of numbers, photos, audio files and documents. Despite the progress, *Quan Lam Bao* and *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* are similar in that they are the only space that is releasing unique information about forbidden topics and about the supremely powerful people in Vietnam. Before these blogs existed, such information was never seen or was seen much later on other news channels, including on the state-owned news media.

The increasing number of anonymous political blogs does little to advance freedom of expression because this kind of freedom is not genuine. Gray (2015) uses the word 'hypocrisy' to describe the fact that 'relatively unhindered access to the internet' is allowed in Vietnam while political dissent is not. Instead, freedom of expression has been distorted and used by Vietnamese leaders for

their own political purposes. This politics of blogging is particularly risky for named activist bloggers. Named bloggers risk their lives to write against the CPV. They continue to be harassed, arrested and jailed (Duong 2013). Meanwhile, bloggers on the CPV's side are protected and sponsored to write whatever they want as long as they defend the CPV's legitimacy and leadership. A further contradiction arises when senior leaders in government communication keep urging people to boycott reading the anonymous blogs but no crackdowns on anonymous blogs are made. No one can explain why the anonymous bloggers are allowed to get away with criticising certain leaders, directing the worst charges at them and challenging them in many ways without being shut down or having their identities traced. There have been mixed reactions from the public, the CPV leaders and the news media during the short active time of the blogs in group 3. People continue to guess which 'very high- level political figure' could be giving out this information and guaranteeing the safety of these blogs and their bloggers in order to stir up political in-fighting (Gray 2015; Nguyen 2015d). Others argue that these blogs are created and managed as political weapons among the CPV factions (Phuong 2015; Vu 2015). The reality shows the contradictions in the CPV's current management of blogs and behaviour towards them.

6.1.3 The evolution of political blogs

My analysis of Vietnamese political blogs shows a picture that is more complex than just black and white. With the involvement of pro-CPV bloggers and the anonymous blogs, the discussion cannot be only about freedom of expression and the story of citizen journalists in the Vietnamese blogosphere. For some people, Vietnam is among the worst enemies of the internet and the worst jailer of dissident bloggers (HRW 2013b; FreedomHouse 2014; RSF 2014). However, that is only part of the situation. From the constant efforts pushing the boundaries or with 'fence-breaking' (Vennevold 2011), Vietnamese political

blogs have evolved to become a multifaceted, sophisticated and highly influential place, playing an important role in the expression of critical viewpoints on everyday political matters. The blogosphere has become a battleground for ideologies, where the activists argue for reform, the supporters hail the role of the CPV, and the political factions manipulate the public for their own purposes. The battle of opposing arguments and black-and-white information has made the blogosphere a more popular channel among local netizens, while at the same time putting the mainstream news media in an awkward position. When political blogs are the first place, and in some cases the only place, where readers can find highly sought information, it is easy to argue that the news media of Vietnam have lost significant ground to the political blogs.

Another significant feature of Vietnam's political blogs is that they have been used as a replacement for the state-owned press system to stir up public discourse for desired political purposes. Instead of leaning on the media to reveal information, blogs seem to be a much better way to tell the public special news. Blogs are easy to create, share and delete. On the one hand, the CPV refuses to recognise blogs as a part of journalism (Decree 72/2013) and continues arresting activist bloggers. On the other hand, blogs have been used to create 'media scandals', to provide 'credible information' and to 'trigger' public concern. These changes seem to be very similar to the tactics used by politicians on their political blogs in democratic countries like United States, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. These characteristics can be interpreted as initial signs of the direction the evolution of Vietnamese political blogs is taking. Some day, blogs will perhaps become the official news channel and have a stronger impact on social and political change in Vietnam.

The diversity of different political blogs and the appearance of a richer diversity of blogs raise questions about blog readers. On the surface, it seems to

be good for Vietnam's content consumers to benefit from the evolution of a political blogosphere since they get access to information of a kind and quantity they cannot find in the mainstream news media. Vietnamese readers have long been accustomed to information being always 'vague' (Minh 2012). Political blogs have become a new and credible source of more solid information. The accumulation of facts, figures and photos makes the public think that the blogs generate 'truthiness' (Munger 2008). This perception among readers has the advantage of increasing support for activists' blogs. However, the involvement of pro-CPV and anonymous bloggers can also drive Vietnamese audiences into a matrix of information where propaganda, truth, 'truthiness' and lies are mixed up together. I do not mean to imply that Vietnamese readers are naive but I suggest that they may need to be more active so that they do not become lost in the matrix.

6.2 Facebook — a space enabling diversified sources of news

Facebook arrived in Vietnam in 2009 and quickly rose to be the top social network in the country. According to Internet World Stats, the country had 35 million Facebook subscribers by November 2015. As figure 6.3 shows, Facebook is not the only social network in Vietnam. Some Vietnamese netizens use Twitter, which was present in the country at the same time with Facebook's arrival but has been unable to expand because it does not fit well with the culture or provide a relevant utility to Vietnamese people (Duy Hoang 2015). Another social network, Zing Me, is said to be the second largest online community in Vietnam. Owned by a domestic company, this nine-million-strong community tends to be the home for gaming and music mainly for young Vietnamese people (Quinn & Kierans 2010; Duy Hoang 2015; Gray 2015). The popularity of global social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube has made Vietnam have a more relaxed image than China where only state-approved networks are allowed. Some people explain that this is the

tolerance of the Vietnamese CPV (Nguyen 2009; Nguyen 2014b). Others say the CPV has had to accept the risk because of the 'economic gains' (Duong 2013) and that Vietnam has let social media grow until it is too late to apply strong censorship so it is better to 'catch up and adapt' (Do 2013). My discussion will centre on the social media giant, Facebook, for reasons of its fast rising impact on the news media, its connection with political blogs, and the power of online freedom it offers the Vietnamese people.

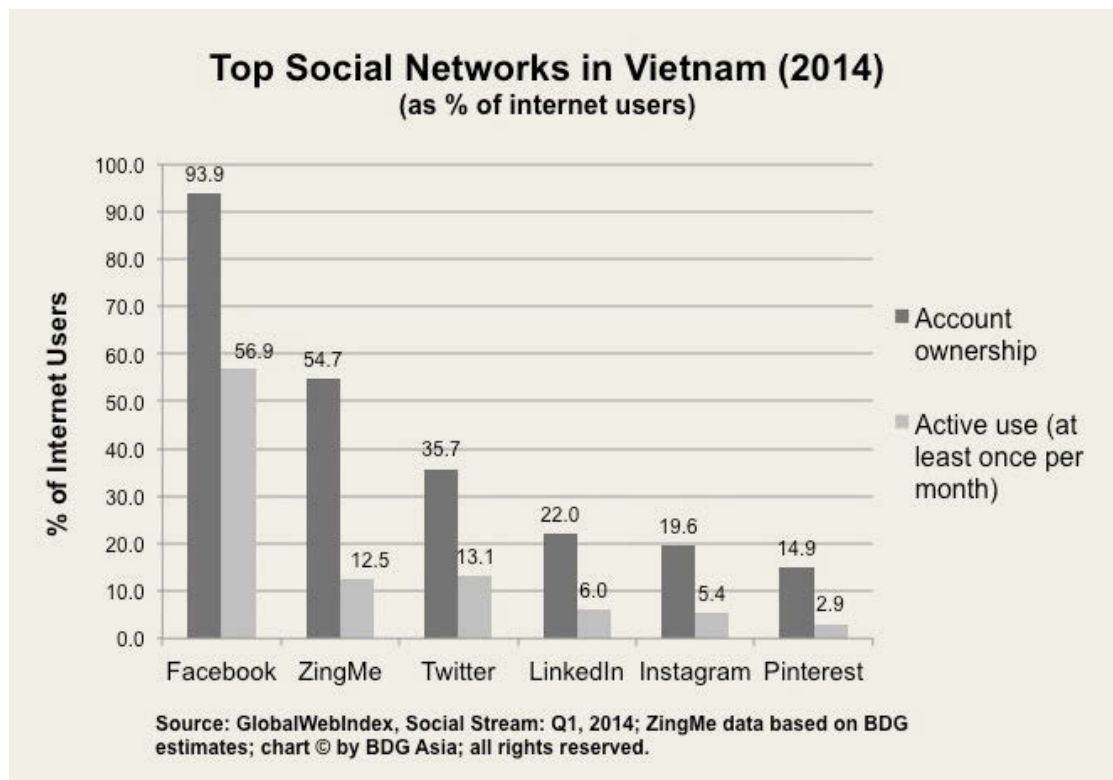


Figure 6.2: Top social networks in Vietnam in 2014

Source: BDG Asia

Facts and figures demonstrate the frenzied uptake of Facebook in Vietnam (see figure 6.2). Even now, the frenzy shows no signs of abating. Instead, the social network keeps expanding ever more rapidly and is even being used by CPV leaders. Facebook has therefore become a question of how the CPV leaders have adapted to both the chances and the challenges brought by this networking giant.

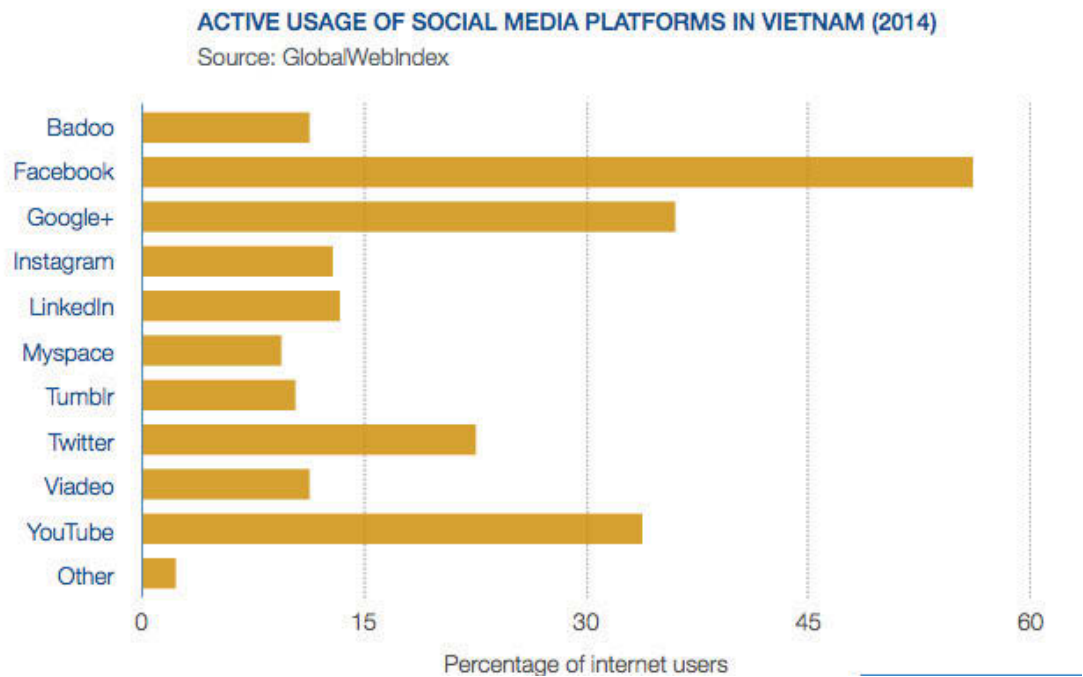


Figure 6.3: Dominant usage of Facebook among other social media platforms in Vietnam (2014)

Source: GlobalWebIndex

Statistics show that one in every three people in Vietnam logs onto Facebook at least once a month. Vietnamese Facebookers are aged from 18 to 34. They use the social network mainly for entertainment purposes such as to visit pages about fashion, beauty, dining or travel (TuoitreNews 2015a). But Facebook is also proving convenient and useful for the news media and readers. Scholars have discussed the rising trend of people using Facebook as an alternative source of news other than the mainstream media (Sharbaugh et al. 2012; Nguyen 2014b). This trend has come about because the Vietnamese audience can see for themselves the ‘gaps’ and ‘insufficiency’ in daily news coverage by state-owned media. When the demand for more information and the other side of the information is not satisfied, Facebook users ask questions, search for other sources and share their findings. This process is accompanied by exchanges of complementary statements, contributions of ideas, and analysis. These exchanges gradually lead users into critical discussions of everyday issues. This strengthens a recent claim that the ‘active online public sphere’ has

come into existence in Vietnam (Sharbaugh et al. 2012). In the following section, I detail the dominant ways Facebookers use this social network to get up-to-date news. My discussion shows how the spread of Facebook has challenged the monopoly of Vietnam's press system by allowing audiences to experience a much freer space in which there are multiple sources of news other than the CPV-owned news organisations, including foreign media, bloggers, individuals, state agencies and non-governmental organisations.

6.2.1 Individual information makes headlines

Getting news posted, shared or liked by users, friends, groups and forums is becoming a daily Facebooker routine. The habit of pressing the 'like' and 'share' buttons and making comments mean that information is quickly known in the cyber world and shared in real life. If the information has connections with many Facebookers, it can go viral thanks to online discussions.

Here is one recent example of an individual story making the news headlines. On 19 January 2016, a mother posted accusations about immigration officers at Noi Bai International Airport. She said they had made her and her young daughter wait for more than an hour for a visa after she refused to pay bribes. Within days, this post has been shared by 101,469 Facebookers and received 187,800 likes, and nearly 20,900 comments. The mother's posting received mostly supportive comments from people who said they had experienced the same situation, heard about this and felt ashamed for the immigration section of Noi Bai airport. A week later, the Facebook page of Noi Bai made an official statement rejecting the accusations and claiming there was false information in the mother's posting. This story has not concluded yet but the example yields interesting facts: First, the mother's story became the major topic of online community discussion without the involvement of the press system. The mainstream media only mentioned the story one week after the first

news was seen on Facebook. Second, when the news did get picked up by mainstream media, all of the news stories ran the headline that Noi Bai Airport rejected the mother's accusations. Third, the writer of the post said the mother had been contacted by the newspapers for interviews but she had refused and that the response of the virtual community to her issue has been influential beyond their expectations.

The example of the mother's posting is only one among numerous stories of individuals using Facebook to release information, personal analysis or opinions on many matters ranging from individual topics to urgent social situations. Other examples include the story of a father desperately trying to find his lost little son; a love story of a girl's grandparents; a boy pleading with the police to protect his family who were being frequently harassed by criminals; or the call to grant a reprieve from the death penalty. Vietnamese people are increasingly choosing Facebook to publish information, enabling them to reduce their dependence on the mainstream press. This is dislodging the press from its long-held position as the first and only 'messenger' in the country. Facebook users not only provide information about individual Facebook posts. They also provide extra information or point out incorrect details, suspicions or a lack of information in the news stories published by the mainstream media. Freelance journalist Huy Duc commented that users are employing social media as a tool for freedom of expression, something the state-run media is unable to satisfy (Huy Duc 2015, email comm., 21 August).

6.2.2 Uncensored foreign news media

The second popular way of getting online news is through the 'media gatekeeper' Facebook. Before Facebook, the only way to read the Vietnamese-language and English websites of the BBC, Radio Free Asia RFA, SBS Australia or Voice of America (VOA) was to break the firewall blocking content about

international democratic campaigns, political opposition and any stories about Vietnam's politics, press freedom, human rights or religion. Although international organisations tried to popularise digital techniques, international news websites could not reach the majority of Vietnamese readers who did not have enough time and technical skills to use circumvention tools. With the arrival of Facebook, Vietnamese readers no longer needed to access the websites of popular news organisations within and outside the country because Facebook brought these websites to their home pages. Reading the Vietnamese-language news websites of the BBC and Voice of America, which used to be listed as 'reactionary' sources, has become common and easy, demanding only a click.

BBC Vietnamese has 1,753,947 Facebook followers while Voice of America Vietnamese has 1,530,009 followers for its Vietnamese news site as at 27 June 2016. The increasing readership of international news websites shows that Vietnamese Facebookers are more interested in choosing other sources beside reading local sources. Within the Facebook space, for the first time readers can get different sources of information on the same topic and, more importantly, they can express their opinions through comments. If local newspapers continue to censor themselves by not reporting top political news and giving priority to the news on daily social issues, the websites of the international media corporations focus more on 'forbidden' news. BBC Vietnamese has attracted its readership through news stories and opinions on every political issue, asking stimulating questions, making comparisons and encouraging readers to comment on key political events. Without being filtered, each news story on the 'sensitive' issues of Vietnam on BBC Vietnamese can be shared and commented on by hundreds of people. This open space for the media and readers of news is referred to by former journalist Tran Tien Duc as a new sphere for 'the

exchanges of ideas' on the issues not mentioned or given only one-sided coverage by the local press system (Tran Tien Duc 2015, pers. comm., 15 June).

In this scenario, domestic newspapers cannot ignore the Facebook community. Electronic newspapers and the most progressive papers are among the most active participants in the Facebook space. Apart from a main page kept up to date with the latest news, some newspapers attract readers through special interest pages on finance, culture, tourism, charity, etc. The leading electronic newspaper *VnExpress* had the largest number of Facebook followers on Vietnamese Facebook at 2,157,752 by the end of January 2016. The giant level 1 media organisations have also joined Facebook to launch promotions and publish behind-the-scene photos and videos to attract an audience through Facebook. Aside from its marketing potential, Vietnamese media organisations have been forced to join Facebook if they don't want to be outside the 'public sphere' network inhabited by more than 30 million young and dynamic members. Media organisations also need to keep up with the Facebook profiles of other news providers, which include foreign news media, general information websites, blogs, social forums and organisations.

6.2.3 Network with political blogs

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the number of blogs in Vietnam has recently declined but their influences are on the rise thanks to the connection with social networks. Before Facebook arrived in Vietnam, blogs proved to be the best way of sharing information among the people, but even three million bloggers could not make a social phenomenon. The arrival of Facebook created a powerful shortcut between the audience and political blogs, further strengthening the social influence of famous bloggers among the online community.

The three groups of political blogs described earlier in this chapter are connected with Facebook and share updated posts on Facebook. The Facebook pages of the political blogs were created much later than the launch of the blogs, mostly in 2014, which is the time when Facebook reached a peak in growth in Vietnam. These pages gathered a large number of followers on Facebook within a short period. For example, 34,782 'likes' were earned by the *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* blog from the launch date 5 December 2014 to 24 Feb 2015. I first received the breaking news about the plot to poison the politician from a friend's shared link. The shared link then led me to the political blog *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* and the whole package of so-called 'untold stories' about the CPV leaders' families. The political poisoning plot and a series of what seemed to be investigative stories targeting some top CPV leaders and their families became a hot topic but the *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* blog seemed have the best content. The blog was immediately among the most accessed political blogs in Vietnam. Facebookers talked about the blog; bloggers talked about it; international media talked about it (Nikkei 2015; Phuong 2015; Vu 2015). Eventually the domestic press had to explain information posted on the blog. Vietnamese media administrators repeatedly denounced the blog and called on the public not to trust it. Only the CPV leaders kept quiet about the information and no arrests were made.

Another advantage of the networked blogs and Facebook is the more open conversations in which readers can comment and offer analysis. Rather than just reading posts, Facebookers can express their attitudes to the story by clicking the like or share buttons and by joining the conversation with hundreds, thousands or millions of other people. This process is then repeated again and again, spreading the information across the social network to reach a network of millions of users within minutes. Statistics on the first post on *Chan Dung Quyen Luc* about the claims the senior political leader had been poisoned indicate that

the post was shared by 8,900 users and had 781 comments from Facebookers, making it top the public concern at that moment.

I have tried to illustrate how Facebook has become an open space for Vietnamese readers to have access to news written by individuals, bloggers, the local press or international media and to choose the news sources they prefer. In this space, the CPV's control is becoming less and less visible. By contrast, the role of readers becomes more important as they are not only producing their own message but also have the significant role of choices makers. Urging readers to stick to mainstream sources and boycott the 'toxic sources', Vietnam's media administrators have tried to maintain the monopoly of the press system. While the local press has been reformed to cover more social issues with a stronger and more professional voice, the remaining 'gaps', boundaries and censorship have become fertile land for other sources to grow. Vietnamese readers are also showing their need for more information and critical viewpoints. As the state media cannot satisfy their demand, Facebook has many advantages to 'fill in the gap' (Nguyen 2014b). As a result of all these developments, Facebook has become a tool helping Vietnamese online users gain some freedom of expression — a fundamental right that Vietnam's press has failed to manage under the restrictions of the CPV authorities.

6.2.4 Reluctant acceptance by CPV authorities

Facebook has been through a long and difficult time under the censorship of the Vietnamese government. Since its introduction to Vietnam, the network has been periodically blocked (DPA 2015) because the CPV worried that the social network could facilitate anti-regime ideas (Trung & Hai 2014). CPV leaders have realised the key role of the internet in economic reform but they have always been suspicious of the rise of social networks. In 2011, a story was published on the *Communist Review* magazine that argued that Facebook was

being used as a tool by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States to achieve its 'political plots' of 'overthrowing' the governments of various countries in the Middle East and Africa (Mai 2011). Any blogs and websites that display comments against CPV policies and guidelines are called 'toxic' websites of 'evil forces' (Duong 2013). But the rapid growth of the Vietnamese Facebook community and their exciting social and political postings are forcing the CPV to accept Facebook or find itself an outsider.

A change in the CPV's attitude towards Facebook from antipathy to official support has been noticed since 2014 when access to the network became easier. The government has not only 'given up the ban' (Gray 2015) but publicly praised Facebook as 'an essential and unprohibited need' and as offering 'sharper communication tools than conventional methods' (Chinhphu.vn 2015). A fanpage for the Health Minister was announced on 15 January 2015 to enable the Ministry to connect effectively and rapidly with the people. This change of attitude created both surprise and pleasure among Vietnamese netizens, while the media commented that this was an 'unprecedented' attitude from Vietnamese leaders (BBCVietnamese 2015b). In a step forward, the Vietnamese Government officially announced the launch of its page on Facebook on 21 October 2015. The page is designed to share the government's press releases and promote its activities. The page lacks the attractive design elements and content of other pages as it contains standard information and only a few positive comments. The move is a logical way for the CPV to demonstrate its friendliness and its promise to support Facebook's growth in the country.

However, it would be a delusion to believe that this 'unprecedented' attitude will soon free Facebook in Vietnam. This is especially the case given that the social network's influence has gone far beyond being simply an online social space. In Vietnam it has become for readers an alternative media space and a sphere for political discourse. Vietnam applies a 'soft' blocking policy on

Facebook (Gray 2015) and employs numerous tactics such as regulating internal documents in state-run agencies and companies, hacking, and reporting false claims of spam anonymously on activists' pages. Legal regulations have also been issued to ensure the government's supervision over the communications of the online community. The first and most common tactic is the application of legal regulations (i.e. Degrees No.97 and 72), which regulate the management, provision and usage of internet services and online information. The Vietnamese Government is notorious for the 'expansive and vaguely worded' degree No.72, which limits the use of social media sites to individuals only, and prohibits the sharing of news and reactions against the State (Duy Hoang 2015). In October 2013, social campaigner Dinh Nhat Uy was arrested after he ran a campaign on Facebook calling for the release of his brother who is also an activist. Uy is said to be the first Vietnamese Facebooker brought to trial under the penal code's article 258 for 'abuse of democratic freedom' based on his Facebook postings (BBCVietnamese 2013a; HRW 2013a).

Another example of the CPV's tactics is the deployment of their propaganda force (Du Luan Vien) into any public forum or group to troll activist pages (Duy Hoang 2015) and denounce any CPV-related critiques. It is not difficult to notice a Facebooker doing the task of a Du Luan Vien. Some use their own photo and name while others use the names and photos of prominent CPV figures or anonymous figures. Du Luan Vien people participate in all public discussions but they are keen on defending the state, whether or not their arguments are opposed to the opinions of the majority. To present their ideas, the members of the propaganda force use all sorts of communication strategies, from using polite and intellectual words to using abusing and insulting phrases to condemn any statements or postings that criticise people and agencies of the state.

The acceptance of and flexibility of Facebook first came about naturally as part of the technological changes of economic reform. The CPV thought they

could find ways to control the technology. However, the growth of Facebook, backed up with the fast economic globalisation, pressure for stronger reform, rapid advances in technology and the high level of activity of Vietnamese Facebook users led the censors change their management policy. Explanations for this concession point to the fact that the Vietnamese Government has found itself caught in the 'dilemma' of modernisation and economic growth (Gray 2015), and the country's limited technical skills have prevented the CPV from maintaining censorship as strongly as its northern neighbour China (Do 2013). My argument is that the CPV's changing attitude is a concession in exchange for the benefits of economic profits and public support for their legitimacy. The internet and its products, according to Etling, Faris et al. (2010), are never an 'option' in authoritarian states. Yet the CPV has chosen to accept the internet as 'one of the carrots' in their commitment to economic development (Gray 2015), to help them present a nice-looking diplomatic face internationally and to help achieve their political tactics. Blocking Facebook could cause social discontent, even anger, as well as a loss of face internationally. The growth of Facebook is no longer conditional on the 'tolerance' of the CPV (Nguyen 2009) but is an unpleasant must-have consequence of the CPV's other commitments. Vietnam's Government will not give up its supervision of Facebook but their attempts at controlling it are like to be kept in the shadows and the carrot-and-stick management policy is likely to continue as long as the CPV's legitimacy is maintained.

The present two-faced policy of the CPV has had limited effect on curbing the expansion of Facebook. When a plan to develop a made-in-Vietnam social network for Vietnamese youth was mentioned by the Prime Minister in March 2013, users immediately rejected this two-hundred-million-dollar plan. Vietnamese users seem very satisfied with the utilities provided by Facebook. Behind the popular usage for entertainment purposes, Facebook has networked

individuals into online social movements that are pressuring the CPV to listen to their opinions and driving the press system to provide a voice for the Vietnamese people.

6.3 Active netizens and the beginning of online social movements

In chapter five, I showed how Vietnamese news audiences shifted from a 'passive' to a more 'active' position but their level of engagement is still limited by the filtering system that is part of the press's self-censoring policies. In this chapter, I extend the notion the 'active' audience to include 'active' netizens. The freedom of the internet has provided the ideal trigger for the maturing of Vietnamese online users. These days they are more professional in using cyber freedom to make their voices heard. They challenge the media, choose 'alternatives' and participate in the process of news making because the internet has empowered them, making them 'hard to control' and very connected across society (Beckett 2011). Few researchers have commented on the active participation of Vietnamese online users as most attention has been directed to the growth of social media, which is seen as the 'beginnings of an active online public sphere' (Sharbaugh et al. 2012) and the place for 'critical discussions on public affairs' (Nguyen 2014b). My research has uncovered the active role of Vietnam's Facebookers. I will now analyse the progress of Vietnamese online users in using the advantages of the internet to create networks in response to the urgent social issues. The 'togetherness' of individuals has laid the first bricks towards 'a network society' (Castells 2013). The change has had initial impact on pressuring the propaganda tone of the state media for the desire of the networked individuals. I will now look at then 2015 Hanoi tree movement case which can be the typical case study for the beginning of online social movements in Vietnam.

6.3.1 Hanoi Tree Movement: key developments

On 17 March, 2015, a senior journalist and media administrator sent a letter to the Chairman of Hanoi's People's Committee, recommending that the capital's leaders suspend the massive and on-going removal of trees planted along the streets and roads of the city. Cutting trees down before the summer in times of heavy rains and storms is an annual job managed by Hanoi's Construction Department. However, in 2015 the Department planned to remove 6,700 trees planted on 190 streets and roads for reasons of public safety, traffic safety and in order to plant new trees. This plan for massive tree removal was implemented immediately after it was publicly announced, shocking the people of Hanoi and tree lovers round the country. However, it was not until the open letter by the senior journalist was published in the news media and widely shared on Facebook that people's shocked reactions spread widely and multiplied, growing into public anger both on social media and in the mainstream news media.

On Facebook, users published posts denouncing the plan, reporting the tree removal activities in their residential areas and sharing photos of healthy trees that had been removed, of parents and children hugging the trees and calling one another to protest against the plan. A number of forums were launched to share tree-removal information and unite people in their objection against the plan. The public realized that the tree-removal plan had been developed without any consultation with the city's residents and scientists. The Hanoi authorities finally decided to suspend the plan on 20 March 2015, but the social anger grew even stronger after the city's Vice Chairman of the People's Committee hosted a press conference on the problem but failed to answer any of the 21 questions asked by journalists. The city's leader left the press conference immediately after his speech to the surprise of hundreds of reporters. Two days earlier, many news media quoted a member of Hanoi's leadership as saying that

the removal or planting of trees was the job of the city's authorities and there was no need to advise the city's residents.

The anger intensified as scientists argued on news media and on their own social pages that the newly planted trees were not the same tree type claimed by the city's authorities and that they would add little value to the urban environment of the capital city. This time, the people of Hanoi did not wait for an explanation from the city's leaders. They joined social forums to evaluate the tree-removal plan, with a majority objecting. They shared scientific information collected on the internet or written by agro-forestry scientists and experts. They established a number of fanpages to call for public unity against the city's tree removal plan.

The largest discussion forum was named '*6,700 people for 6,700 green trees*', created by a Hanoian housewife. Within days, more than 10,000 Facebookers joined the forum, which kept growing until it reached 62,000 members by 28 April 2015. Members of this forum include journalists, artists, scientists and people of all walks of life, and many of my friends also joined. On this forum, people updated tree-removal news; expressed opinions and analyses of the development of the case development; and posted photos taken by members inspecting the situation. The page's activities grew beyond the scope of an online discussion forum: the members signed a petition, sent to the city's leaders, and organised 'parades for Hanoi trees' for two consecutive Sundays, 22 and 29 March 2015. People use the angriest words to show their objection to the plan by naming it the 'tree massacre of Hanoi' and describing those carrying it out as 'urban poachers'. Under the increasing social pressure, the Hanoi authorities were forced to stop the plan and suspend some of the people responsible for it. They also reviewed the entire campaign and advised the city's residents about the reasons for the tree removal plan.



Figure 6.4: Home page of the tree removal protest fanpage

Words on the timeline photo on the page translate as 'I love trees, #6700 trees'

Social activists have commented on the positive progress of the civil movement and democracy as a result of the public protest against Hanoi's authorities, who play a key role in the CPV's leadership. While some activists called this a step forward for democracy, others expressed pleasure at the united reactions of the people and at the unexpected tolerance of Hanoi's leadership toward the protests by the people (BBCVietnamese 2015c; Nguyen 2015i). Some National Assembly deputies and prestigious scientists were also on the side of the people, arguing that the people had a right to be advised on public issues and have their questions answered. The city's leaders had learned a lesson about the importance of listening to the voice of the people (Ngoc & Hoang 2015; Truc 2015). Numerous social impacts can be identified as a result of this case but within the limited research scale of this thesis, I will stress just two arguments in the case of the Hanoi tree massacre: the active use of social media by the Vietnamese people to reclaim their civil rights; and the role of the mainstream media in learning how to handle both the public's demands and their propaganda tasks for the CPV.

6.3.2 Active netizens

All the surveys conducted by market research companies have suggested that the Vietnamese people use social media, mainly Facebook, to get news of friends, to exchange gossip and to shop (Cimigo 2012; Epinion 2013). In fact, the story of the Hanoi tree massacre shows that Facebookers also care about social issues. As the people in Vietnam do not have the opportunity to access the information they need and express their thoughts and feelings through the state-owned mainstream media, many have come to Facebook to share news and comments. More than that, people join Facebook to produce content by posting analyses drawing on their own knowledge and experience and synthesising information about aspects of the tree-removal plans. Beside their role as content producers, Facebookers also function as supervisors of the behaviour of the authorities and monitors of information coverage. On 27 March 2015, Facebooker Nguyen Huy Cuong posted a comment saying that recent editing of the open-access Wikipedia to add explanations in favour of the Hanoi authorities' position had no scientific value. The post stated that the editing was done to please 'certain people' but more than one million people knew very well that the newly planted trees were not the type claimed by the leaders. The post was shared by 2,602 people and commented on by numerous Facebookers, ridiculing the Hanoi officials responsible and adding further photos and facts to support their opinion. Protesters against the plan also replaced their individual avatars with a symbolic photo of the group's logo and a message calling for the delay of the plan and actions to protect the trees.

The Vietnamese social media users' fury then spread to the commentary field of online news websites. When on 19 March 2015 *VnExpress* e-newspaper asked readers for their opinion on Hanoi's plan to cut down 6,700 trees, the site received 32,517 votes in 24 hours. Sixty-nine percent of the votes objected to the plan. Each of 28 news stories published on this news website on the issue also

received several hundreds comments. On other popular e-newspapers in Vietnam such as *Dantri.com.vn* or *Vietnamnet.vn*, the tree removal stories were always the top news item, commented on by hundreds of readers. The tree-massacre topic soon made headlines in the foreign media such as the BBC, Reuters, AFP and Voice of America. More than just reporting the tree-removal issue, foreign media also noted the social media users' outrage and the cumbersome reactions of the communist leaders faced with an issue of social demand (AFP 2015; Hung 2015).

The tree removal case can be analysed by drawing on the encoding/decoding model developed by Hall (1993). From the data I collected, I observed that Vietnamese Facebook users became significantly more 'active' in the way they decoded the hegemonic viewpoint encoded in the Hanoi CPV leaders' tree plan. The message the Hanoi authorities encoded was that the plan would ensure safety for city dwellers during the stormy season and improve the urban environment. However, the event shows that a majority of viewers (Facebookers) interpreted the plan in a 'contrary way' to that intended. Whatever Hanoi's leaders said or explained, viewers refused to accept that meaning and read the explanations as abuse of power, misconduct and lying. Although the hegemonic viewpoint of the plan's environmental benefits was initially encoded in media stories, the media failed to make viewers take the stories 'full and straight'. Rather, viewers used their own knowledge, experience and emotions to resist the meaning in a very determined way.

Vietnam's press is owned by the CPV so their messages encode the hegemonic viewpoint of the authorities. Immediately after the public anger spread, the Hanoi authorities requested the editors-in-chief of media organisations to publish more stories on solutions rather than criticisms of their plan, in order to reduce public anger. Scientists from a Forestry University were also advised not to answer media questions on the negative impact of the tree-

removal plan. These moves could be explained in terms of censorship, state control or simply as the efforts of the authorities to encode the hegemonic viewpoint in media messages with the aim of re-affirming the 'dominant order' (Hall 1993). The message the authorities desired to spread was that the plan was good and that the public should accept this meaning. However, viewers were keen to resist the order and pressured the Hanoi authorities to make a public apology, stop the plan, investigate officials and accept criticism from the Prime Minister.

6.3.3 The rise of online social movements

Rheingold (1993) describes the 'virtual community' as those people who only use words to express their feelings and thoughts online but whose words are strong enough to engage thousands of people in the discourse. A 'virtual life' is very much the same as 'real life'; sometimes it is even better as in virtual life people can attract the attention of a large number of people immediately and without the pressures often seen in a one-party country such as Vietnam.

The connectivity of Facebook also allows an individual's opinion (an open letter) to be heard and supported by many other users who share the writer's view and who can also contribute ideas and voluntarily monitor the case. In the tree removal case, words and outrage expressed online not only went viral but were transferred into real activities. Hundreds of people gathered in Hanoi's downtown to march against the tree-removal plan. About 22,000 people signed a petition asking the city's leaders to stop the plan. The virtual and real-life public pressure grew into a social movement, making CPV leaders worried enough to force them to stop. This is a wonderful example of the power of a social movement created by networked individuals who have long been ignored and misrepresented by the CPV.

The tree removal case also raises questions about the performance of the Vietnamese news media in covering a scandal that had direct impact on the leadership of the country's capital city. Overall, the Vietnamese news media provided intensive coverage of the Hanoi tree-removal case. Statistics collected from 17 March to 30 April, 2015 on four major online newspapers show a high number of stories, opinion pieces and interviews on the topic: *VnExpress.net* with 28 results, *VietNamNet.vn* with 28 results, *TuoiTre Online* with 10 and *ThanhNien.vn* with 24 results. The story was reported from multiple angles, with fairness and good quality investigative journalism, which observers commented on as very 'open' (Nguyen 2015g). Many stories quoted examples and figures taken from Facebook and some investigative stories were very explicit, for example *The Law* newspaper ran the headline 'Which is the crime in the case of cutting trees in Hanoi?' (Que 2015). *The Labour* newspaper carried the story 'Cutting down trees in Hanoi: Strict punishment to maintain trust' (Luong 2015). Observers recognised that this event offered an unusual 'freer door' for the state-owned press. Commentators argued that the press had a louder voice in this story because if they had not reported the scandal, social media and bloggers would have done the job. Other observers questioned a possible political motive behind the rare open coverage by the press because the CPV was preparing for the appointment of new leaders in 2016 (Nguyen 2015g).

The Hanoi tree phenomenon was the first in a series of Facebook movements in 2015 in which Vietnamese netizens networked to show their anger and united to demand changes. Typical examples were the boycott movement against a local drink manufacturer for treating its customer in an unethical way and the movement critical of the fines imposed on two employees for minor insults of a provincial leader. In a recent example, occurring at the time of submission of this thesis, Vietnamese individuals are joining online forums and offline protests in a large social movement protesting against the

toxic discharge from Taiwan's Formosa's steel plant on the central coast that led to mass fish deaths in April 2016.

Such examples show that when an issue is of serious concern for many people, it has the potential to become a national topic of discussion, analysis and criticism, leading to action or a commitment to solutions by the authorities. This process of communication has been conceptualised by Castells (2007) as the rise of 'horizontal networks' which are facilitated by the internet when individuals connect to one another to develop their 'mass self-communication'. Facilitated by the digital age, this mode of communication enables Vietnamese netizens to react against the will of the government and corporations. With their features of autonomy, personal interaction and self-expansion, the recent popular online movements in Vietnam are shaped like Castells's concept of social movements but limited to the sphere of Facebook.

Castells traces the origin of social movements to the social discontent of individuals. Castells argues that such movements can lead to revolutions of 'outrage and hope' (Castells 2013). Several reasons mean that the online social movements in Vietnam are still far from promising any expectation of a revolution, even a 'digital revolution'. First, the internet is not an autonomous space for debates and calls for organisations and individuals to act, so there have not been large-scale online uprisings. The blogs and Facebook pages of activists and dissidents are always under tight control through blocking, spamming or hacking, which prevent them from being widely diffused among the community. Second, Vietnamese netizens are not specifically interested in discussing issues like democracy, freedom or human rights. A movement named 'I don't like the Communist Party of Vietnam' on Facebook has only 16,669 members one year after it was launched in early 2015. This contrasts with a page opposing the Minister of Health, which attracted tens of thousands of followers within a short time. It seems that Vietnamese netizens pay more

attention to everyday problems such as corruption, food hygiene, traffic, health care or education. Realising these public concerns, the CPV authorities act quickly to appease public anger with promises and minor changes and the movements soon calm down. In his email interview, freelance journalist Huy Duc uses the 'village culture' phrase to explain the start of online social movements. Since 'village culture' expresses the importance of community over personal ideas (Ngo 2004), Huy Duc implies that the public in Viet Nam has the habit of following the ideas of the majority (2015, pers. comm., 21 August).

These explanations for the initial phase of online social movements in Vietnam are logical when considered in light of Castells's frame of social movements. Internet-based social networks are 'a necessary condition' but not 'a sufficient condition' for today's social movements. The different political, social and cultural context can also have an impact on social movements (Castells 2013). Vietnamese netizens have adapted to using social networks to react against unfairness, but the networked reactions are not politically motivated; nor are at the level of outrage needed to generate rebellion. Enjoyment of economic reform is still current and the nightmare memories of wartime devastation stills haunt the peacefulness of present life. These mixed feelings may contribute to making netizens hesitate to go further than participating in online social movements. At this stage, online social movements act as important alarm bells and as barometers of social attitudes that catch the attention of the media and CPV leaders. These movements have also shown their ability to drive the state-owned news media closer to the popular stance, rather than sticking to the position of a propagandist for the CPV. However, the development of online social movements is still within the control of CPV although it is trending against the CPV's intent to use the press to shape online opinions.

6.4 Conclusion

The objective of this chapter has been to sketch out the evolution of Vietnam's social media at a time when the internet has become deeply embedded within the daily life of the country. This evolution has been demonstrated by three prominent phenomena: the diverse development of the political blogosphere, the relatively free space of news media on Facebook and the dynamism of netizens in networking in online social movements. Although this chapter has been limited to analyzing only the key features of each of these phenomena, I have suggested that the examples provided are typical of the rapid expansion and integration of Vietnam's social media into the political and civil life of the country. I have shown that social media and its users have evolved to form an active virtual society, which is beginning to have its first practical impact on daily life. Two key actors suffer the most from this evolution: the CPV and the press system. Because of its initial 'tolerance' of the internet, the CPV has been forced to reluctantly accept social media and join the social media space to avoid being left outside. For the press system, the impact seems greater since the state-controlled press has lost its monopoly in the face of cyber freedom of expression. The press is increasingly being put into the difficult position of learning to be a 'gate-keeper' and maintaining its role as a loyal propagandist. Social media has evolved to be the 'alternative media' (Sharbaugh et al. 2012; Nguyen 2014b) and its active netizens are pressuring the press for change. In this situation, the question arises: How are Vietnamese journalists doing their work to satisfy the tasks assigned to them by the CPV while also meeting the expectations of the public? Chapter seven offers evidence and arguments in response to this question. ■

Chapter 7

Contemporary Vietnamese propaganda journalists in the digital age

Very few scholars have explored how Vietnamese journalists are performing their work. The world's knowledge of Vietnamese reporters is limited. The common perception has been that Vietnamese journalists work under the constant risk of being arrested, and that they have no freedom to write. International journalism organisations regularly report on jail sentences imposed on reporters and bloggers for what they have written (CPJ 2015; Overland 2008; RSF 2012, 2015). These observations are true — but not the whole truth. This chapter offers an in-depth and more up-to-date description of the situation of contemporary Vietnamese journalists and how they navigate the constraints on their journalism.

My thesis so far has explained the most recent situation of the Vietnamese news media in the context of economic and technological development. This chapter argues that the internet has impacted on the profession of journalism and has led to journalists living a double life, as propaganda journalists and internet users. This chapter concentrates on analysing the major influences of the internet on Vietnamese journalists through their usage of the internet for their investigative journalism, active participation in social networks and discussion forums. My research focuses on Vietnamese journalists who are legally recognised by the Press Law of Vietnam. To work as a journalist in Vietnam, the law requires you to meet the 'criteria of politics, ethics and

professionalism regulated by the State' and to be granted a press card (Law on Press 1989). Journalists accredited by the State are called propaganda journalists in this thesis to differentiate them from freelance journalists, who can be retired propagandists, bloggers, writers, activists and dissidents. As this chapter explains, Vietnamese propaganda journalists work under conditions shaped by the opportunities and pressures of the internet and in recent times they have gradually side-stepped the many layers of control imposed by the State system.

7.1 Emerging trends for propaganda journalists in the digital age

As the press system of Vietnam is under the control of the CPV, journalists have no choice but to be responsible for providing a voice for the CPV's leadership. The Vietnamese economy has undergone remarkable changes but the CPV's common understanding of journalists has never changed: being a journalist involves supporting the CPV's beliefs about 'social responsibility' and 'citizen's obligations'. More than that, the concept of 'social responsibility' is not 'an ethical requirement' but entails the political task of advocating for the CPV and being a follower of the CPV's policies (Hang 2003, p. 95). It is always safe for Vietnamese propaganda journalists to work within their limited boundaries but they face tremendous risks whenever they step out of line because a hierarchy of control is always there to monitor and punish them. Behind a journalist is not simply his or her boss but an administrative control system including the Ministry of Information and Communications, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ideology and Culture Department. If journalists around the world are generally known as professionals who do not want to be licensed, certified or classified by anyone outside journalism, then the conditions of Vietnam's propaganda journalists are extremely constraining.

The system of control imposed on the profession of journalism and on the press has not changed in Vietnam for decades but propaganda journalists these days are not the same as the certified members of their profession used to be.

Present-day Vietnamese journalists are working in the digital age when the internet has changed both the news media and the audience. Contemporary journalists have certainly been affected by the digital revolution but it is not easy for Vietnamese journalists to be both members of a liberal-minded profession and executors of CPV responsibilities. My research suggests that the present generation of Vietnamese journalists is leading a double life, as propaganda journalists and as active online users. Not only do journalists use internet services for their daily work, they also use social media for other purposes. Some write blogs or post on Facebook ideas and material they cannot write in news articles. Some republish their news articles to attract more readers. Some exchange items with colleagues to turn their individual pages into individual news pages. Others simply use their page to communicate with their friends. According to statistics released by the Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications, 23,000 journalists are working in the news organisations in Vietnam, of whom 18,000 hold certified press cards.¹² The remaining 5,000 are still working as journalists but 'are not eligible for the cards' (Trang 2014). Official statistics of journalists' social media accounts do not exist but Vietnam's media administrators believe that the number is equal to or higher than the 23,000 journalists.

7.1.1 Becoming 'friends' with the audience

Many journalists with prestige and fame in their profession own social media accounts with a large number of followers. The Facebook page of journalist

¹² Press cards are provided by Ministry of Information and Communication and are valid for five years. The cards are professional licences issued by the CPV, authorising journalists to practice journalism. Journalists are required to work for more than two years before being eligible for a press card. If they do not have a press card, journalists need to have their newspapers' letter of introduction. The cards are also used as a tool of censorship. Recently, some journalists have had their press cards revoked due to their Facebook postings which are claimed to violate Government's regulations.

Manh Quan had nearly 10,800 followers by December 2015. On this page, Quan, a senior journalist of the high circulation *Thanh Nien* newspaper (*Young People*), often posts about his friends, families and daily activities but a majority of posts are his news stories, personal opinions and analysis of current affairs. Quan often shares brief information instantly from the field before writing for his newspaper or he asks his interviewees questions sent by his followers or forwards questions to his newspaper. Never before have Vietnam's journalists and readers been so closely involved in a 'conversation' by which the news is transformed from a lecture into a conversation (Gillmor 2006). These internet-based 'conversations' have brought positive changes for mainstream journalists in Vietnam. Journalist KD of an e-newspaper has over 1,000 Facebook followers and she has been running a blog which has received more than 12,700,000 visits since she started blogging in 2013. She said her blog helps her say more 'personal things', provide 'non-mainstream news to the readers' and measure the 'temperature of the news topic' (KD 2015, pers. comm., 22 June).

To manage the direct conversation between journalists and their audience, journalists work under constant pressure to write better and to write what the public needs or asks about, not the stories dictated by their editors. Journalists realise that they are not only writing for their newspapers (which means for the CPV) but also for the audience. If journalists ignore the audience, the audience will instead read the news on internet-based social media. This change brought by the internet is exceptionally important in circumstances where the press system has been controlled by the CPV. Within this sphere, direct communication between citizens and the professionals (journalists and editors) shows the first signs of freedom of expression. Even though this freedom occurs only in cyber space, it is an importance step for both journalists and their audience in expressing, listening and changing.

The Vietnamese Government is certainly not pleased with the increasingly close connection between journalists and citizens, which has grown beyond their control. On the one hand, media administrators encourage the free usage of social media by journalists. On the other hand, they claim journalists are taking the role of 'guiding the news' in the cyber environment. They threaten to punish journalists who step over the boundary on social media (Nguyen 2015h) or they demand that media managers issue internal regulations limiting journalists' usage of social networks. The carrot-and-stick policy sets the limits for Vietnamese journalists, narrowing freedom of speech among propaganda journalists so it is even more restricted than that of online users. As well as pushing the boundaries around their journalistic profession, Vietnamese journalists also have to battle on the internet for further freedom. This battle has resulted in both hope and tragedy.

7.1.2 The internet as a safety net for investigative journalists

The difficult fate of investigative journalism

Whittle (2014) argues that judging Vietnamese journalists only on the index of press freedom could be a 'mistake' because contemporary Vietnamese journalists have become 'passionate, courageous and resourceful'. I agree with this encouraging statement because it points to the role of investigative journalists who have overcome risks and danger to perform the toughest role in Vietnamese mainstream news media: investigative journalism. Before considering how journalists have used technology to do this work, I briefly review the ill-fated past of Vietnam's investigative journalism.

The role of investigative journalists is linked to the start of the economic reforms in 1986. At that time, the CPV authorities wanted the media to fight the country's shortcomings. The then CPV General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh had his own column entitled *Những việc cần làm ngay* (Things need to be done

immediately) in *Nhan Dan* newspaper (*People*) criticising 'the corruption and incorrect behaviour' of some Party officials (Hang 2003, p. 145). This was the time when Vietnam's media witnessed 'the wind of change', 'an outburst of freedom' and 'democratic ripples' (Hang 2003) with 'a more progressive and undeterred' journalism (Hang 2003; Heng 2003). A senior reporter I interviewed for this study remembered the 1986-1991 period as 'the brightest time of the Vietnamese cultural field' (Mai Phan Loi 2012, pers. comm., 12 December), when open criticism of the government and the CPV appeared in the mainstream news media and was even reflected in literature. This freedom of the media, never seen before, created a generation of talented journalists and was a victory for the media in the fight against powerful CPV senior officials (Heng 2003). But the freedom did not last long. The fear of 'unpredictable shakeups' and the shock of the dismantled socialist bloc in the early 1990s made the CPV return to its policy of tight control over the news media (Hang 2003; Heng 2003). The CPV leader's press column suddenly fell quiet. Some writers were arrested or supervised and some editors were fired. What the CPV wanted was for investigative journalism to continue to focus on exposing 'negatives' but only under the CPV's control.

In the period from 2001 to 2006, investigative journalism achieved another milestone. In 2003, two of the most progressive newspapers — *Thanh Nien* (*Young People*) and *Tuoi Tre* (*Youth*) — ran a series of investigative stories exposing a notorious crime gang led by Nam Cam with the involvement of many senior officials and police. In 2006, readers and international observers praised the role of Vietnam's mainstream news media in fighting corruption through the investigative stories that revealed bribery, corruption and gambling in the Ministry of Transport known as PMU 18. New hopes were raised for the revived freedom of domestic investigative journalism but these hopes were soon stamped out. After the officials linked to the PMU 18 scandal were

convicted, journalists covering the story were interrogated for reporting the scandal. Twenty-five journalists, editors and editors-in-chief of news organisations were summoned to court. Even journalists who had played safe by using police information were still convicted. Two journalists were charged with 'abuse of power' in spreading 'false information' in May 2008 (Overland 2008) and the senior editors in chief of *Thanh Nien* and *Tuoi Tre* newspapers were dismissed, along with their assistants. In the interview for this thesis, one of the journalists who had been taken to court said the authorities might 'succeed' in eliminating those newspapers and journalists who fight corruption. However, he noted that they had failed to take the journalists and police officers to court before the end of the PMU 18 investigation (VT 2015, pers. comm., 14 June). Since that time, investigative journalism is said to have fallen into a national crisis but this does not mean that investigative journalists have stopped reporting investigative stories.

Investigative journalists have realised that the CPV's call for an active role for the news media in fighting corruption is only half the truth. On one hand, the CPV praises the role model of the mainstream media in fighting corruption. On the other hand, they use legal punishment and dismissal to draw a boundary around investigative journalists. In this contradictory situation, it is understandable that investigative reporting has risen and fallen. The news media cannot function as a watchdog as well as having a role in 'intra-elite politics.' There have been many times when journalists and editors have become 'entangled' in the fighting amongst the political elite as they can become the 'proxies' and their investigative stories are used to 'sabotage political rivals' (Heng 2003, p. 568). The impact of the marketisation process has also made the news media spend less on investigative stories to save money and space for tabloid-style news, which is easy to report and cost-effective. However, as corruption and social issues have become more widespread along with

economic growth, investigative journalism still plays a key role in the news media and attracts the most attention from the readers. Investigative journalism can be a short cut for a small-scale newspaper to become a best seller and get the most pageviews. Investigative journalists always earn respect from their colleagues and readers. This explains why investigative journalists have been continuing to do their jobs with the support of their news organisations but they have learnt from bitter lessons to find new forms of practising to minimise political risks and get their stories published. Changes include collaboration on an investigative story by different newspapers, enhanced cooperation with lawyers to cover legal aspects, and expansion of investigative topics to issues that affect the public (environment, food quality, educational standards, healthcare) rather than focusing on political corruption. Typical among the changes to investigative journalists' practices are the use of social networks to create public support and pressure. Within the scale of this research on the impacts of the internet on the Vietnamese's news media, I examine in-depth the example of journalist Thu Trang, who was one of the first Vietnamese journalists to successfully use Facebook to turn one of her investigative series into a major topic of public discourse.

The internet as a shield

In early July 2014, an investigative series published on *Phu Nu* newspaper (*Woman*) shocked the Vietnamese public. The story exposed the truth behind a philanthropic pagoda in the capital Hanoi, which had been thought to be a home for hundreds of abandoned children including those born with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Through the series of 15 investigative stories, the pagoda's managers and staff were alleged to be earning money from its orphanage centre by embezzling financial donations, selling gifts for cash and even trafficking children. The series made the entire Vietnamese press system join in the reporting. Police finally conducted an investigation and the

allegations were found to be true. Two carers working for Bo De pagoda were arrested for selling a child; the orphanage at the pagoda was disbanded; and the head monk of the pagoda was not charged but the pagoda's image was heavily damaged. After the scandal, reporter Nguyen Thu Trang became a heroine, praised by the news media and the public for her bravery, excellent investigative skills and community devotion (MEC 2014). The internet, particularly Trang's own Facebook page and viewers had played an important role in her success.

Trang exploited a number of benefits by using her own Facebook page to provide extra information of her investigation and communicate with the public. Facebook was not filtered so she was able to share the information that would have been censored by her state-owned online newspaper. She also attached her personal opinions and added more evidence and explanation instantly in response to the opposing statements by the local authorities, who had first attempted to tone down the scandal by denouncing her investigative results. Trang's uncensored material was 'liked' and shared, going viral among millions of Vietnamese Facebookers. They accessed her page to get more information about the case, to find out about the threats she had faced during her investigation and to have the chance to communicate with Trang and others. For a month in July and August 2015, Trang updated her Facebook page daily and each posting was liked by thousands and shared by hundreds of people.

In their comments, Trang's readers expressed their emotions and thoughts about the case and respect for her bravery. They also committed their full support for Trang and discussed the hints given by the reporter about the next stories to be published. Trang made online users wait for her postings every day, providing information the readers believed to be more trustworthy than the authorities' information. Some readers even said Trang's Facebook postings were more interesting than reading the news stories and they demanded that

the authorities resolve the case. To some extent, Trang made the best use of the Facebook communities to form a channel of public opinion where she could raise and maintain the public's attention and enormous support. This created a shield of safety for herself and her newspaper. In the period before the internet, the CPV authorities could easily make investigative reporters and their newspapers keep quiet because the reporter and the public had no direct, instant connection and could not easily network and stand by each other. The online environment enabled the public to network their voices into a storm of opinions, pressuring investigative reporters to go to the end of the story and the authorities to take action on the case.

The internet and an active social media also generate a tremendous source of hints, data and headlines for investigative reporters. A survey conducted by the Vietnam Journalists Association shows that seventy-two percent of Vietnamese reporters agree on the important contribution of social media to their profession. Fifty-six per cent of reporters said they could not do their daily work without using the social media and sixty-seven percent of the reporters believed that the press would not be in operation without social media (Dong 2015). The Hanoi tree movement (discussed in chapter six) was a typical demonstration of the wide usage of information sourced from Facebook and blogs to develop intensive news coverage in the mainstream news media. After the incident of Hanoi tree movement, a number of investigative reports originated from the sources of citizen journalism and online forums. In March 2015, the mainstream news media all published stories pointing to the environmental impacts of an urban development project by Dong Nai river, resulting in the suspension of the project. In fact, the story was intensively discussed online on pages named 'Joining hands to protect Dong Nai River' or 'Save Dong Nai River'. Another example is the reports on a 17-year-old boy who died in police custody in October 2015. Before the news was on mainstream

media, online users had shared emotional posts and a photo, taken by freelance photographer Doan Bao Chau, capturing the painful moment when Chau's mother heard about her son's death.

Using the internet as a safety net, does not work all the time, however. In May 2015, Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security announced charges against Kim Quoc Hoa, former editor-in-chief of *Nguoi Cao Tuoi* newspaper (*Elderly*), under Article 258 of the Penal code for 'abusing freedom and democracy to infringe upon the interests of the state'. Hoa was charged after his newspaper had increased its popularity with a number of investigative reports targeting alleged official corruption. During Hoa's leadership from March 2007 to March 2015, he said his newspaper had uncovered about 2,500 cases of corruption in Vietnam so the charge was believed to be 'revenge' against a senior journalist who had dared to voice what other official media outlets dared not (Lam 2015a).

In another story, on 19 October 2015 senior investigative reporter Hoai Nam of *Thanh Nien* newspaper shared a long posting on his Facebook page alleging he was bullied by his newspaper's deputy editor-in-chief and faced a high likelihood of dismissal. The reason for Nam's problem was his refusal to publish investigative reports as required by the media administrator. His boss's connection with the targeted individuals was the reason for the bullying. Nam is the first journalist in Vietnam to use social media to reveal a professional problem in a newspaper. Nam's revelation provides evidence of the pressure imposed on investigative journalists when reporting effects the relations between media administrators and powerful social sources. Using Facebook to share his messages publicly was Nam's last resort after he received unsatisfactory feedbacks from his newspaper and media management authorities (BBCVietnamese 2015d).

In the two cases just mentioned, the reporters' stories were widely shared and received substantial online support. Hoai Nam's first posting against *Thanh*

Nien newspaper had 6,955 likes and 1,930 shares. A Facebook fanpage gathering public support for Kim Quoc Hoa was created and bloggers questioned whether it was fair to apply the penal code to civil charges against the editor-in-chief (Tran 2015c). These journalists were hailed as heroes, leading the media fight against corruption. Public opinion said they should not be charged or fired. However, the public pressure was not be intense enough or was not enough of a priority for the CPV so the two cases did not have happy endings. The seven-month prosecution process against reporter Kim Quoc Hoa was terminated in December 2016 but Hoa could not return to manage his newspaper, and reporter Hoai Nam had to leave his job of ten years at *Thanh Nien* newspaper on 30 November 2015.

In the current crisis of Vietnam's investigative journalism, journalists are using the advantages of cyber technology so that they can continue investigative reporting. The uncensored nature of Facebook and the expanding Facebook community have brought a new outlet and a new source for investigative journalists to avoid political pressure. Given the strong online community that consists of one third of the population, investigative journalists with good social media skills can attract online users to follow and support their reporting. Accordingly, the new practice can lower the risks for reporters and also generate pressure on the CPV to do something to resolve the problems. However, the power of the internet and its use as a 'shield' has been limited to certain issues and certain cases. It will need more time for investigative reporters and online users to take full advantage of the internet as the 'Fifth Estate'. When it comes to political issues involving senior officials, there are still unbreakable barriers for investigative journalism in Vietnam. This means that the resolution of the crisis of Vietnam's investigative journalism is still a long way off.

7.2 Rise of citizen journalists

As the discussion above shows, when investigative journalists use the internet to attempt to disrupt the barriers of censorship and pressure, they face many challenges. However, the internet has offered a means for the 'Fifth Estate' to empower more Vietnamese citizens to work as reporters regardless of whether they hold a press card or employed by a state newspaper. The phenomenon of citizen journalism is an emerging 'grass roots' power that, in the face of tolerance by the CPV (Nguyen 2009), is growing to become as socially influential as that of propaganda journalists. This next section analyses the growing maturity of citizen journalists who are progressively joining in news production on mainstream media and who are competing with propaganda journalists.

The category of citizen journalist used to be defined narrowly as a subgroup of bloggers and young online users in Vietnam (Nguyen 2009; Nguyen 2014b). Recently, the world has become more aware of Vietnamese citizen journalists who are dissidents and activists using their own social media or web pages to voice their ideologies and demand changes. In fact, the concept of citizen journalist has expanded to include the majority of Vietnamese citizens with access to the internet and knowledge of how to use it, the necessary technical equipment and a sense of observation. Along with the group of professional journalists (retired, employed or freelance) and bloggers, there has been strong growth in the number of 'ordinary' online users engaging in the journalistic practices of current affairs (Goode 2009). Under this looser definition, users mainly report a current event that they witness or are highly concerned about by posting an item, taking photos, filming, sharing, rating or commenting. In some cases, users are simply the 'content creator', reporting an incident. In other cases, they participate in the news process by adding more information or expressing their opinions, emotion and attitudes. With more than 40 million

increasingly vocal and active online internet users, the grass root movement of Vietnamese citizen journalism has become one of the major challenges facing professional Vietnamese journalists and their newspapers.

7.2.1 Examples of citizen journalism

On 10 September 2015, three transport police officers in the southern province of Dong Nai were suspended after a 31-second clip released on Facebook accused the police of protecting a man seen to attack a woman at a traffic point on 5 September. The video showed images of a plain-clothed man cruelly attacking a woman after she refused to pay a bribe and asked the police to explain what the money was for. Since the police did nothing to stop the attack, the public assumed that the plain-clothed man had some connection with the police. The video was seen as evidence of traffic bribery and unprofessional working behaviour by police, all of which had been denied by Dong Nai policemen. The woman who had been attacked had filmed the video herself and sent it to her brother. The published video received 400,000 views and 23,000 viral shares within ten hours. Without the video, the policemen would have had the final word in the case denouncing the victim's accusation. But this time, the evidence enabled the woman to defend herself, igniting public anger and making the state press report her case. This increased the pressure on the policemen of Dong Nai province to act to calm public anger. In a country where the police force is powerful but also corrupt (TI 2013), it used to be impossible for ordinary citizens to fight back against the police. But today, empowered by smart phones, social media and internet access, Vietnamese people are able to express their attitude and reactions.

The Dong Nai police case is only one among an increasing number of examples of Vietnamese citizens using technology to play the role of citizen journalists. Using Youtube, Facebook and online forums, the online community

has the advantages and skills necessary to become a messenger: better internet infrastructure, the availability of cheap smart phones and tablets, and understanding of how to use social networks. Individuals can compound their influence by joining discussion forums. Many forums have grown to be influential communities where their user-generated content becomes the news and their discourse affects society. Otofun forum was established in 2006 with the aim of creating a place for Vietnam's car lovers to exchange knowledge and information. By 2015, the online forum had more than 270,000 members and their online chat has expanded beyond the love of cars. Every minute, members of the forum update the forum with news of everyday incidents, report changes in legal regulations, comment on police behaviour and draw attention to important news. Posts on the forum are widely commented on, shared, modified and argued about. Members regard the forum as a source for news, knowledge and exchange. The social influence of Otofun has made the National Traffic Safety Committee cooperate with the forum to promote traffic safety. The mainstream media regard it as a significant source of the most up-to-date information. On 12 June 2015, fierce winds with thunderstorms ravaged Hanoi, killing two people and uprooting 1,000 trees, damaging houses and destroying property. While the disaster was still raging, Otofun members constantly updated the forum with photos, videos and short commentaries about the disaster in different streets of Hanoi. The lively, detailed and rapid sharing of the incident was compared to a 'live broadcast that no news organisation can manage' (Truong 2015). Some television news channels and newspapers used many of the photos, videos and updates that Otofun members posted of the historic storm.

Such journalistic practices by online users are only two of the latest stories of the recent trend for citizens to engage in journalistic reporting in Vietnam, a trend which manifests the larger interests, engagement and influence of citizen

journalists in the country. While professional citizen journalists (commonly known as activist bloggers) are more concerned about the macro stories of politics, human rights, democracy and institutions, citizen journalists can also be online users from any background who have social concerns and who own the technology to contribute. Citizen journalists care about the daily issues that they witness or that have immediate effects on their life and the lives of families, friends, neighbours or passers-by. The news they create, therefore, is everyday news: stories about new regulations, daily traffic jams, a car accident, the violence of police, a public protest against high tolls or a funny incident. The contributions of citizen journalists are initially 'random' and individual: people report events they have witnessed or participated in. But their news becomes 'not-so-random' (Holt & Karlsson 2014) in the way that it can be responded to through immediate comments, likes and shares by large online communities. Stories by these citizen journalists are updated rapidly because they do not go through an editorial process. The news is also frequent and diversified because more and more online users have now developed the skills to record, report and upload to the internet.

A report by Mai et al. (2015) noticed the trend for citizen journalists to research their own investigative stories for newspapers or for publication on their own social media page. Based on a survey of 108 readers, citizen journalists and bloggers (p.21), the report showed the disadvantages and risks facing these citizen journalists such as the 'unfair treatment' they received from the authorities, lower levels of co-operation from the community and a lack of the standards skills, equipment and protection required for investigative journalism (p.102). Despite these challenges, more citizen journalists have become involved in investigative journalism because of their personal interest in writing, filming and publication. Evidence shows that their independent information is welcomed by the public. Without doubt the news of these citizen

journalists has instant appeal: online users want to read the citizen journalist's information because they share their concerns and sympathies.

7.2.2 Challenges for propaganda journalists

The growth of citizen journalism is now the most worrying competitor for Vietnam's mainstream media and propaganda journalists. All the journalists I interviewed for this thesis expressed their surprise at the unexpected and rapid emergence of Vietnamese citizen journalists and their growing influence which has been strong enough to pose a day-by-day challenge to their profession. Journalists LLH and NND, who work for two online newspapers, said that every day at work they were under pressure to keep their eyes on social networks to ensure that their newspapers did not miss important information. This reality is also explained by Bui (2016) as the falling behind of the mainstream press 'on the information front' and chances being given to the citizen journalists to disseminate their critical knowledge (p. 104).

In the past, audiences often shared their 'created content' with the news media. Now, citizen journalists can be more rapid messengers than the press because they choose to post on their page or on their forum first and actively call for their friends to like and share the news. From a professional viewpoint, citizen journalism has limitations, including the writers' poor professional skills, personal subjectivity and inaccuracy of information. However, these disadvantages have generally been ignored by readers, who are show more trust in independent sources that publish news and comments on 'the topics not published or in the one-way manner on the mainstream news media' (Tran Tien Duc 2015, pers. comm., 15 June).

The active performance of citizen journalists blurs the boundaries of journalism as a profession, placing the profession under pressure. The rise of citizen journalists and their journalistic products exposes the disadvantages of

the propaganda press of Vietnam to the news audience. Readers have realised the inconsistent details, the lack of information and the propaganda aims behind news stories coming from the propaganda press. Citizen journalists are competing directly with propaganda journalists to provide relevant, timely news. This is putting propaganda journalists under pressure to work better.

The activity of citizen journalists is also helping to reduce the propaganda functions of state news media and enhance the real values of journalism. In the earlier example of the Dong Nai police beating up a woman, police had denied any inappropriate behaviour in the newspapers until the clip was widely shared on Facebook. Online users made their own judgment as they watched the video, and newspapers then began interviewing the participants in the case to find out the true story. In the censored press system of Vietnam, cases such as this have been a turning point for propaganda journalists who had previously been trapped in the multiple layers of control and the monopoly of the state-owned press, with the CPV-dictated agenda of social responsibilities.

The challenge from citizen journalists can be seen as a positive stimulant for both propaganda journalists and the state news media of Vietnam. The cartoon in figure 7.1 captures the stress on propaganda journalists in the age of the citizen journalist.



Figure 7.1: Cartoon showing propaganda journalists struggling to deal with competition from Facebook's citizen journalists

The sweaty-looking journalist is burdened with a heavy box of responsibilities (collecting, reporting, editing) and a smaller box of administrative procedures (stories being reviewed, waiting for printing). His anxious portrait contrasts with that of the carefree citizen journalist who only needs a smart phone and Facebook to have his news immediately published, making the citizen journalist's news available more rapidly than the journalist's.

Source: Ho Chi Minh City Law Newspaper

Vietnam's mainstream media professionals are well aware of the challenges and potential of citizen journalists. Online newspapers are trying to cope with the situation by exploiting the vast potential of citizen journalists. *Mot The Gioi* electronic newspaper (*One World*) has a page named 'Facebook news' which republishes the most-liked and shared information written by individual Facebookers. Meanwhile, one of largest newspapers, *Tuoi Tre* (*Youth*), encourages readers to share news, photos and videos on their online page. Their efforts have proved fruitful. On 1 December 2015, a fire broke out in a slum in the central district 1 of Ho Chi Minh City. *Tuoi Tre Online* newspaper provided instant and detailed coverage of the fire produced by their journalists and citizen journalists (Phan, Manh & Roset 2015). Other newspapers have journalists or editors responsible for monitoring the Facebook pages of famous people, celebrities and the most popular postings as potential daily news

sources. Domestic journalists now use the phrase 'Facebook correspondent' to describe this type of work, demonstrating the increasing influence and contribution of citizen journalists in the state news media.

Despite the influential role of citizen journalists, Vietnam's authorities still refuse to recognise their efforts and use legal boundaries to refuse to accept citizen journalists as equal to propaganda journalists. Unworried by this, citizen journalists continue to do their work and are becoming increasingly skilled. Their increasingly important role is seen through the expanding use of their information by state media and in the growing support of the online community, which has chosen them as a source of news along with the mainstream media. Their contribution is also earning increasing respect from propaganda journalists. On 17 January 2016, the administrator of the Young Journalists Forum asked members if the forum should include the work of bloggers and Facebookers in its nomination for the best news story of the month. Sixteen of 35 comments supported the idea. The supporters argued that citizen journalism offers creativity in the writing and selection of news topics. Those who refused to vote for citizen journalists argued that citizen journalists were not a mainstream source of news and their material was not trustworthy.

The rise of citizen journalists in Vietnam is strengthening the power of the non-mainstream media to become capable of bridging the news gaps left by the mainstream media. The activity of citizen journalists is also challenging propaganda journalists to push their professional boundaries as much as possible if they want to maintain their position as the dominant news provider. Social networks, especially Facebook, are now the 'most important and influential outlet of information' (Bui 2016, p.94) where citizen journalists, regardless of being denied recognition by the CPV authorities, are making the best use of internet-powered advantages to act as the journalists for with the large support of the online community. The competition between mainstream

media and citizen journalism is intensifying, bringing both divisions and impetus to the progress of the contemporary Vietnamese news media. The CPV authorities may not be happy with this situation but the local audience is the beneficiary.

7.3 The double life of contemporary propaganda journalists

Journalists are believed to be among the most active online users in Vietnam. Using social networks and personal websites has become a daily habit for journalists. Among 220 Vietnamese journalists participating in a survey conducted as part of the teaching materials by the Academy of Journalism and Communication of Vietnam in March 2015, 96.82% of these journalists owned a Facebook account. The controlled press system in which they work professionally is a complete contrast to the free and connected cyber world and provides a perfect complement for local journalists to explore other sources. In the next sections I explain how the internet has created a 'public space' of deliberative discourse for journalists as well as citizens through journalists' individual and group participation.

7.3.1 Breaking boundaries: the fate of the challengers

On 3 September 2015, senior journalist Do Hung of *Thanh Nien* newspaper (*Young People*) was removed from his post as Deputy Managing Director. The next day, Hung's press card was withdrawn, which meant that he was dispossessed of the professional title of journalist according to Vietnam's press law. These punishments were not officially explained but it was believed that Hung's satirical post on his own Facebook page was the main reason. With the play on only one among six tones of the Vietnamese language (the high tone), Hung's writing satirised quotations from speeches made by two national

heroes, Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap.¹³ Hung's satirical piece was published on his individual page on September 2, the day of Vietnam's 70th celebrations of its National Day. Hung's supporters liked and shared his item because they said his writing was a smart play on words, full of humour. But Vietnamese ministerial media officials took the item seriously. Apparently they called *Thanh Nien* newspaper's managers and the decision was made the next day. Hung's press card was revoked and he was removed from the position of deputy managing director. Hung is still working for *Thanh Nien* but in the role of a sports journalist. Hung re-opened his Facebook page after some months' closure but he now only updates non-political and social statements. He also refused my request for an interview for this study. Hung's punishment was believed to be intended as an example to other journalists who attempt to use social media to express their personal viewpoint on political issues.

Do Hung showed his skill through satirising political figures but journalist Dac Kien of *Gia Dinh & Xa Hoi* newspaper (*Family & Society*) chose to challenge CPV leaders directly through his blog. Early in 2013, Vietnamese leaders urged the public to make recommendations for the amendment process of the country's constitution. Many critics urged the CPV to change the policy of one-party rule and promote democracy. These critical comments did not please the CPV Party Chief who said that those who call for pluralism, a multi-party system and separation of powers represent 'a deterioration of the political,

¹³ These are two famous and influential leaders in Vietnam. Referred to as Uncle Ho, Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969) has been promoted by the CPV authorities as the most prominent national hero who led the campaign for the national liberation of the Vietnamese people (Bui 2009). General Vo Nguyen Giap (1911–2013) is known as one of the 'foremost military commanders of the 20th century'. He led the Vietnamese forces in their defeat of the US and France (Templer 2013). When Giap died in 2013, tens of thousands of Vietnamese took to the streets to show their respect for the general. Similar crowds had not been seen since Ho Chi Minh passed away over four decades ago (AFP 2013).

ideological and moral environment' (Brown 2013). After the CPV leader's speech was broadcast live on television, Kien expressed his viewpoint on his blog, directly targeting the CPV's first leader. Kien claimed that the CPV leader could only use the word 'deterioration' in reference to CPV members, not in relation to the entire Vietnamese people. He wrote: 'You [i.e. the CPV Party chief] can't assume that [the continuation of one party rule] is the wish of the Vietnamese people' (Kien 2013). The post went viral because of it was unprecedented for a working journalist to so strongly react against a CPV leader. Criticising CPV leaders has become more common in the non-mainstream news media but such criticism is most often written by bloggers, activists, dissidents, intellectuals and retired officials. Many Vietnamese journalists were said to share Kien's view but they did not dare to voice these thoughts out loud, even freelance journalists (BBCVietnamese 2013b). It was unprecedented for a journalist employed in a state-owned newspaper to oppose the CPV's top leader. Kien was fired by the *Family and Society* newspaper within 24 hours of making his post and he was threatened with prosecution. Two years after the case, Kien has not returned to professional journalism but is a freelancer and activist for democracy and freedom in Vietnam.

The examples of Do Hung and Dac Kien are typical of the fact that propaganda journalists are increasingly expressing critical viewpoints in cyberspace. The cases also show that journalists are in danger of being dismissed, punished, harassed or even jailed. Risks are important but these examples reflect a transformation in the thinking and ideological positions of some contemporary Vietnamese propaganda journalists. What they are writing from their position as propaganda journalists is very different from what they are really thinking, and the internet has become an ideal space for them to think freely and express their thoughts. The freedom of the internet may be greater than that of the censored press system but it is still limited for propaganda

journalists. The popularity of social media and journalists' active participation in this cyber world has grown beyond the expectations of Vietnamese authorities and it is clear that they feel the need to re-assert control. Journalists whisper about their newspapers' internal bans and limits on the use of social media. On the Facebook group of the Young Journalists Forum, the forum's administrator, who is also a propaganda journalist, has mentioned that some newspapers prohibit journalists from liking, writing comments or posting on journalism-related issues on Facebook. In the mainstream media, media officials constantly remind journalists that what they write on social media will be interpreted as not only the journalist's personal statement but as also the viewpoint of their newspaper. In an interview about journalists' responsibilities on social media, the Minister of Information and Communications stated that the government requires journalists to use social media cautiously in order to avoid 'ruining the image of the revolutionary press among the people' (Cam 2016).

The withdrawal of press cards from journalists who have expressed critical viewpoints is further evidence of the displeasure of the Vietnamese authorities at the active role of journalists on social media. When journalists are brave enough to breach the boundaries, their press passes are revoked by the CPV for fear that the journalists' influence may impact the public and ruin the CPV's legitimacy. Media administrators in Vietnam have argued that news organisations should have regulations banning journalists from expressing views that differ from those of their newspapers (Chau 2015), which is interpreted to mean views against the CPV authorities. It is a tragic situation for journalists: if they transgress the boundaries, they are fired or they have to accept that in the future they will keep within the limits.

7.3.2 Pushing the boundaries: the case of the Young Journalists Forum

Most of Vietnam's 23,000 professional journalists have chosen to stay within the limits but there are other ways to exploit the freedom of the internet. While we can appreciate the bravery of individual journalists who dare to challenge the system, it is also crucial to recognise the more gradual efforts of some propaganda journalists to push the boundaries. In the following study of the case of a professional online forum for Vietnamese journalists, *Diễn đàn nhà báo trẻ* (Young Journalists Forum), I assess Vietnamese journalists' participation in more democratic discourse. I chose to look at the Young Journalists Forum because the forum met several of the criteria for this research.

Firstly, the forum was created by a group of journalists working for a state-run newspaper and most of its participants are Vietnamese propaganda journalists. Secondly, the forum, until now, has shown the nature and typical features of a civil forum, free from the management of the Vietnamese Government. This criterion should be noted because all professional organisations in Vietnam must include representatives from the authorities. Journalists' associations, clubs or centres are managed even more strictly. The standing Vice Chairman of the Vietnamese Journalists Association (VJA) elected in late October 2015 used to be the Head of the Hanoi Party Committee's Propaganda Department. The VJA has been known to play a puppet role in relation to the leadership of the CPV and state authorities over the press (Stern 1993, p. 71). Finally, the forum is where journalists are encouraged to exchange their expertise and experience with their peers and other professionals. This diversity creates a democratic environment for conversations and ensures the quality of discussions since ideas are contributed from members of various social groups and job categories.

7.3.2.1 Evaluating the forum's professional and social effects

The Young Journalists Forum is not a forum for young journalists as its name suggests. The forum's administrator Mai Phan Loi explained that young journalists' should be defined as journalists with young, 'new' or modern thoughts (2015, pers. comm., 4 June). The forum was founded in November 2011 by a group of more than 30 propaganda journalists during a training course sponsored by Sweden after their Swedish lecturer encouraged them to use the new technologies. The relevance and advantages of Facebook at that time made the journalists choose the social network to be the foundation for their professional updates and sharing. The forum grew to 1,000 members within a month. By 7 January 2017 — four years after its formation — the number of members reached 13,747. This figure is not large compared with other popular forums in Vietnam whose members can number 100,000 or more. However, it should be noticed that the forum targets journalism-related topics and professionals so the management board has maintained a careful selection of membership to ensure the quality of the discourse. According to the statistics through the professional survey of the members conducted by the administrator in 25 September 2016, the forum has 2,822 members who are journalists, 460 editors and news managers, 40 media media researchers, lecturers, 26 freelance journalists/bloggers and retired journalists and more than 470 members working in the communication sector. The remaining are students of journalism or communication and the various professionals and laymen who have interest in the journalism of Vietnam.

Starting as a discussion space for a group with shared interests, the forum is now one of the most popular virtual communities in Vietnam. The popularity of the forum can be measured by the rapid expansion in membership, the social influence of the forum's discourse and its journalism-related activities. The value of virtual communities is often derived from the connection of like-

minded members sharing similar values, interests and concerns (Wellman & Gulia 1999). The Young Journalists Forum was first founded so that journalists could exchange information, professional skills and provide peer support. Because the forum organisers recognised the characteristics of journalism as the communication of news on current events and the 'process of professionalisation' of being a journalist (Witschge & Nygren 2009), they aimed for diversity of membership. The forum accepted as new members journalism students, public relation professionals, lawyers, media administrators,¹⁴ freelance journalists, bloggers, foreign journalists (such as journalists and editors of BBC Vietnamese), activists, NGO representatives, researchers and even retired media administrators. This expansion of members and member categories since 2014 caused tension among the founding administration group. It resulted in the withdrawal of the administration group and the appointment of a single manager to run the forum.

The Young Journalists Forum set out to be a space for professional exchange, expression of journalistic issues and discussion of news and current affairs. The most important news stories or journalism-related issues are posted on the forum by the administrator or other members to allow members to make comments, evaluate or explain the issues. The diversified membership of the forum means that journalists and laypeople with knowledge can directly exchange viewpoints. Many journalists find these conversations very beneficial

¹⁴ In an interview for this study in June 2015, administrator Mai Phan Loi confirmed that various senior media administrators and editors in chief were members of the Young Journalists Forum. From my own observations, I have seen the participation of an account under the name of a former Deputy Minister of Information and Communications. On 27 January 2016, the administrator posted congratulations to the news and an account under the name 'Minh Tuan' replied 'thanks Loi'. Checking this account, I am confident in saying that it belongs to the Minister due to the updates of his activities and his friendship with my colleagues at Vietnam Television.

and regard the forum as a strong reference point. They can ask questions to get more experience in how to investigate a case or take the best photo and they can develop their understanding of the ethical standards of journalism. Whenever a member asks a question, one or more replies are made immediately. In many cases, journalists' problems have been successfully resolved through the joint assistance of members. A typical example of the power of the organisation is the request of a member posted in November 2015 asking for advice about what to do when a newspaper had not paid him for four months. The young journalist's question led to an intensive discussion that was liked by 819 members and generated 280 comments with direct tags linking the journalists and media officials of the newspaper. After just one day, the online pressure made the newspaper's representatives apologise on the forum and immediately resolve the payment delay for the young journalist. With more than 12,000 members, the forum has a large network monitoring shortcomings and noticeable news stories across all newspapers, websites and channels. The members also report and deliberate on current affairs discussed in Vietnam's and the world's media. Using smartphones and their sense of journalism, their supervision creates positive pressure to reduce mistakes, appreciate high quality news and make journalists take greater care with their stories because they can be checked at any time and place.

More than just a professional forum, communication on the Young Journalists Forum has become a critical discussion of different issues mostly concerning Vietnam. The topics of discussion relate to daily current affairs so the topics cover all fields, from political events, economic issues and education to legal matters, social issues and cultural stories. The forum's discussions have ignited a number of large scale public discourses among the Vietnamese online community such as the Hanoi tree massacre plan, the fly-in-the-drink case discussed later in this chapter and public anger at a state-run TV investigative

series accusing a young soccer player of lying about his age to play in younger-age football competitions. Current administrator of the forum Mai Phan Loi said he had been 'surprised at the influential impacts the forum's discourse has had on the mainstream media and on Vietnamese online users' (2015, pers. comm. 4 June). A number of topics discussed on the forum have gone much further than the news covered in the mainstream media. When famous activist blogger Bo Lap (Nguyen Quang Lap) was freed on 10 February 2015 after being in jail for four months, only foreign newspapers reported this news. A member of the forum immediately asked why local media had kept silent. Another example is the heated discussion among the journalists and other forum members about the arrest of editor-in-chief Kim Quoc Hoa, with a majority of contributors showing support for his bravery and expressing discontent that a senior journalist was charged with violating the penal code. This public expression of opinions and attitude on a journalists' forum had never been seen before in Vietnam where journalists had previously confined themselves by self-censorship, external censorship and a belief in CPV-defined social responsibility.

Another feature of the Young Journalists Forum is its autonomy from two key entities that have powerful impacts on deciding the democracy of a public debate (Dahlberg 2001). This feature should be considered in the political context of Vietnam where the hegemonic role of the CPV is present in professional and social organisations (Thayer 2009a). The autonomy of the Young Journalists Forum is evidenced by its refusal to allow corporate sponsors or advertisements. In some cases, corporations send representatives to approach the administrator to offer financial support in exchange for the forum's muting of corporate-focused debates but these suggestions have all been refused. Finance for the forum's offline activities is sourced from the voluntary contributions of members. As for administrative intervention, the forum has no

connection with other CPV-managed journalism associations. Any members of the forum can freely post and give their personal opinions on a topic being deliberated. Maintaining this autonomy is up to the efforts of the management board of the group, especially the current administrator Mai Phan Loi. A senior journalist at Ho Chi Minh City Law newspaper, Loi is among the founders of the forum. He has run the forum in a 'benevolent dictatorship' style (McFalls 2010), providing clear decision-making, strong leadership and strict rules. Journalists must be one of the most difficult professional groups to manage, especially in a virtual community with minimal ties and much personal liberty. Loi has drawn on his professional standing and reputation to call for members' votes, lead many discussions, make the final judgment and expel members violating the rules.

7.3.2.2 Prospects of the forum

The Young Journalists Forum is still far from meeting the requirements of online deliberation seen in Western democratic countries but initial evidence shows it offers the prospects of an online democratic discourse. This type of online deliberative forum can be related to the 'extended public sphere' which Dahlberg (2001) has proposed based on the requirements for the 'public sphere' (Habermas 1991). In the context of Vietnam, I call it the rise of the extended public space exemplified by the Young Journalists Forum. The forum is also linked to other cyber spaces of political exchange and critique through Usenet groups, email lists, web forums, chat groups and web publishing. The Young Journalists Forum has grown through exchange and critique based on rules of reasoned discussion, mutual respect, sincerity and autonomy. All of these are important to create a public sphere of democratic communication that is limited to the internet (Dahlberg 2001, p. 623).

The Young Journalists Forum was first created to meet the interests of propaganda journalists but it has since been opened up to other professionals and social groups as long as they have a serious interest in current affairs and media issues. This expansion has helped to bring in different ideologies, viewpoints and knowledge to enrich the forum's arguments. On the forum, there are no constraints and no differentiation between propaganda journalists, freelance journalists, bloggers, activists and laypeople. The forum's discourse is therefore more attractive because it offers many different ideas and arguments. The year-long discourse on the forum about a local drink manufacturer provides a good example.

This discussion was ignited by the arrest of a restaurant owner in February 2015 who was said to have tried to demand that the THP Beverage Group, a local drink giant, pay him US\$25,000 after he found a fly in an unopened bottle of a THP energy drink. The court's decision to impose a seven-year sentence on the man in December 2015 prompted a widespread boycott of THP drinks to show anger at THP's unethical treatment of its customer. Immediately after the case was first published on the news, there were dozens of postings on this topic. Members of the Young Journalists Forum analysed the story from the various angles of law, communication, journalism, consumers' rights, hygiene, social impacts, economic impacts and social impacts. The variety of ideas helped the journalist members of the forum enlarge their understanding while members who were not journalists were able to make immediate positive contributions to the journalists and their news stories. The forum's discourse on the THP case then spread to other forums and online groups, contributing to the internet-based discussion and boycott. At the time of completing this thesis, the final outcome of the 'fly' case is still unknown. The long-awaited appeal court proceedings were started on 30 June 2016 but the case was postponed due to the

absence of THP representatives. In December 2015 a lower court sentenced the restaurant owner to seven years behind bars for his act of extortion of assets.

On Facebook, the forum of young journalists is described as a space where friends who share a passion for journalism can express viewpoints, opinions and comments on journalistic issues. The description also details the rules of discussion. These rules indicate that the forum's discourse involves arguments and ideas of various viewpoints where members must explain and defend their points with evidence and reasons. Members are not allowed to make assertions or accusations without offering supporting arguments. Members who violate this rule are first warned by the administrator and, if they ignore the warning or fail to provide a convincing explanation, their membership is terminated. By involving themselves in the arguments about journalism-related topics, members reveal their ideologies, knowledge and interests as well as their level of understanding other members' views. This results in the requirement that the participants must be critical but positive when they participate in the commentary process. Therefore, they have to show some of what Dahlberg (2001) refers to as the 'ideal requirements of public sphere discourse' for online deliberations including 'reflexivity', 'ideal role taking' and 'sincerity' if they want to express their views and be listened to by other members. To maintain the dynamism and 'valid claims' of the members, the administrator monitors the number of participants, use of language and reasoning in all discussions. Members with little involvement or aggressive attitudes or who make statements without validity have their membership revoked.

The forum has introduced interactive activities among members rather than deliberation alone. The administrator and active members launch polls to get quick opinions of members on divisive topics or key issues. These polls have been used in media reports or on the news media as one of the barometers of public opinion on the country's news and current affairs. Two of the most

popular polls are the monthly vote for the best and worst news stories. Starting from the voluntary voting of the forum's members, the Vanh Khuyen Award (White-Eye Bird) for the best news story and the Vulture Award for the worst news story have become influential awards among Vietnamese journalists. As well as voting, the forum's members contribute a small sum of VND3 million (US\$134) to the winner of the Vanh Khuyen award.

These awards are valuable for two reasons. First, they are the first and the only public choice awards for a news story in Vietnam. All other journalism awards in Vietnam are made by state-owned organisations, news organisations or journalists' associations and the award criteria are highly propagandist. Meanwhile, the forum's award winners are selected on the criteria of journalists' bravery, investigation, community devotion, social influence and impacts (KhuyenClub 2015). Second, the forum has initiated the first-ever award for the worst news story (the Vulture Award) to highlight mistake and limitations. Together with the White Eye Bird Award, the Vulture Award provides the balance to make journalists and news organisations pay more attention to the quality of their news stories. In fact, these two awards are gaining increasing prestige because of the high number of votes they attract from the forum's members and the recognition they received from the nominated and awarded journalists and newspapers.

The management board of the forum has also come up with a clever way to extend the virtual discourse of the forum by linking its online activities with offline activities. The Khuyen Club (White Eye Bird Club) was founded on 21 June 2014 to host meetings and exchanges. Together with the enlargement of the forum, the Khuyen Club has hosted activities to connect journalists who are members of Young Journalists Forum. More than a meeting space, the journalists gather to talk with senior journalists, bloggers or media administrators. The club also conducts short training courses on journalism

practices and hosts awards events of the forum. The management board of the forum also organises conferences and seminars on key journalism policies and events. Such creativity and improvements have built up the forum's popularity in both virtual and real life.

The Young Journalist Forum has expanded beyond being simply a professional forum to provide an autonomous and open space for sincere and informed exchange and critique about matters of most concern in Vietnam. The forum shows that Vietnamese journalists are among the most active online, who are making use of the technical advantages of the profession to benefit their practice as journalists. The forum also provides an online public space, distinct from the responsibilities and ties required by controlled profession, where members can debate and deliberate on social problems. With the increasing influence of the forum's discourse on certain domestic affairs, it is reasonable to mention the forum's prospects to increase the trends towards democracy and a civil society. Journalist and member of the forum Mai Quoc An regards these initial democratic signs as 'a normal phenomenon' and believes that Vietnam should accept the trend as part of its globalisation (Mai Quoc An 2016, email comm., 10 January).

The online deliberation by journalists is far more open than any discussions they can have in strictly controlled news media at the present time. This suggests that propaganda journalists are living two lives simultaneously, as critical and active online users and as compliant propaganda journalists. These two lives have mutual effects on each other. The effects on propaganda journalists' practices are positive. More propaganda journalists are talking about the importance of the audience and are recognising the audience's active role, their demand for news and their knowledge as well as the question of the journalist's 'social responsibility' and their role in 'shaping public opinion' (Hang 2003). However, while these prospects are only at an initial stage, the

limits of the Young Journalists Forum are more visible and threaten to prevent the forum from growing into an extended public space in the future.

7.3.2.3 Unresolved limits

The first worrying limit on the forum is how far it can ensure its present autonomy from the CPV's hegemonic power and corporate intervention. The fact that only one administrator is managing the large forum makes this question more important. Cyber commercialisation is growing fast in Vietnam and is putting down roots in social forums that have large social influence. A good example is the popular forum Otofun — a phenomenon of Vietnamese citizen journalism — which has been put under the management of a joint-stock company. The expansion of the Young Journalists Forum requires finance to support its activities while donations from the forum's members are voluntary and irregular. In October 2015, the administrator issued a warning that the forum lacked the budget to continue the financial bonus of VND 3 million (US\$134) for the best news story of the month. Other financial challenges are finding money for the Khuyen Club's rent and other offline activities. The administrator of the forum has asked whether or not the forum should accept some advertising to maintain its budget. Although the members made immediate contributions to help resolve the forum's financial difficulties, some members have suggested allowing advertisements on the forum. Many members have expressed concern about whether the forum could resist the offers of corporate sponsorship or advertisements, and whether the quality of the forum's discourse would be affected.

An equally critical question is whether a popular forum of journalists independent from the CPV's administrative power will be allowed to continue. In fact, the Ministry of Interior Security has dispatched representatives to work with the administrator. To date there has not been any official interference but

the chance is high that interference will happen if the members discuss forbidden issues. The administrator has recognised that some of the forum's members are highly likely to be CPV internet polemicists. Such members can be journalists or have an extensive knowledge of the press but they maintain CPV-sympathetic attitudes and comments, defend state-related policies, ideologies and CPV leaders and attack any opposing ideas. The insistent stance of these members has reduced the 'validity claims' and commitment to the arguments and has certainly threatened the 'sincerity' and 'equality' of the forum's debates. This disadvantage explains why, although the forum numbers more than 12,000 members, only a small percentage of participants contribute to the most sensitive topics on political issues. Hundreds of members argued about the delayed payment of a newspaper journalist but fewer than 10 members answered a question on why they did not criticise the prosecution of former editor-in-chief Kim Quoc Hoa. Many members press the 'like' button, share, or join in voting but they do not become involved in the debate. In response, in the forum's description the administrators have explained that they will not allow discourse with 'reactionary information' or 'against the national benefit'. In other words, the forum does not allow discussion of topics which are not in line with the ideologies, legitimacy and leadership of CPV. This boundary is similar to the discussion of taboo topics in the mainstream media but it is harder to define and enforce on an open forum with a diversified group of members. This has led to a number of fierce debates and even expulsion of forum members.

Another limitation of the Young Journalists Forum is that it does not include all journalists in Viet Nam. The participation of journalists and members who live and work in large urban areas and who tend to spend more time on the forum has allowed urban journalists to dominate the discourse. It is easy to notice the rising 'elitism' on the forum these days based on the frequency of posts and participation of dominant members. Two-thirds of the on average ten

posts on the forum each day are created by dominant regular members, who are also the initiators of the topics and the most active participants in most arguments. As a result, the interests of these dominant individuals become the interests of the forum. This has led the forum's discourse to expand beyond professional-related topics, focusing more on certain topics and resulting in less participation by members. Dahlberg (2001) explains the lack of full inclusion and discursive equality in online public spheres as 'inequalities in the distribution of social resources' (p.628).

The Young Journalists Forum is also constrained by the lack of freedom of expression in Vietnam, which is stricter for propaganda journalists than for other Vietnamese citizens. When journalists work for Vietnam's newspapers, their participation on social media is limited by internal regulations controlling the topics and boundaries of their participation in online discussions. The limit is tighter for journalists who work for the key level 1 media organisations and the more influential newspapers (discussed in section 1 of chapter four). On 17 March 2016 the forum's administrator created a poll asking members' opinions after he received information the leaders of some media organisations prohibit journalists from writing comments, liking, posting or voting about journalism-related issues on Facebook. A majority of the forum's members voted for the statement that the prohibition was narrowed-minded and cowardly. The result indicated that a number of the forum's members avoid direct participation (comments, shares and likes). In other words, they restrain themselves from making statements or being reminded of the controls by their boss. The administrator of the forum estimated that hundreds of members of the forum who are journalists may be reading all topics but keep silent in the discussion. This reality undermines the requirements of 'inclusion' and 'equality' for a public sphere.

These limitations cast a shadow over the prospects of the Young Journalists Forum to develop as a space for a deliberative discourse among Vietnamese journalists. Although the forum has made significant efforts to transform itself into an online public sphere for Vietnamese journalists and the public, there is a high risk that the forum's expansion will be limited or that it will be directed towards becoming a civil professional forum rather than a deliberative forum in the future. In a country where the CPV authorities has 'hegemonic control over state institutions, armed forces and other organisations in society' (Thayer 2009b), the administrative scale of the Young Journalists Forum can never compete with the Vietnam Journalists Association (VJA) even though journalists are vague about the VJA's exact role. The participation of propaganda journalists in civil organisations or democratic deliberations can worry the CPV, which has consistently sought to manage the press system as a propaganda tool for their legitimacy and leadership. The forum has the potential to overcome this restriction by fully exploiting the internet's advantages, recruiting more journalist members and maintaining its autonomy from the state. Members are urged to develop discussions with focus and depth rather than touching lightly on many trivial issues.

The future of the Young Journalists Forum remains a question for researchers interested in studying the tolerance of Vietnamese authorities towards the active participation of propaganda journalists in online deliberations. In the latest development a month before I submitted my thesis, the forum experienced a significant event. Administrator Mai Phan Loi's press card was revoked after he posted a poll on Young Journalist forum on 18 June 2016 asking about the reasons behind the missing Vietnamese Army's CASA

212-40 sea patrol aircraft.¹⁵ Loi's poll received heavy criticism on social media and mainstream media for his use of the words 'ripped to pieces' to describe the state of the aircraft. Loi was obliged to take the poll offline and make a public apology. He was suspended from work pending further investigation (Dao 2016).

While Loi's story is another example for the risks and dangers propaganda journalists face if they step beyond their professional boundaries on social networks, it has also had other impacts on the Young Journalists Forum. On 23 June 2016, the administrator posted a comment raising the possibility that he might have to close the forum the members. The posting immediately became a news headline and was widely shared on Facebook. Hundreds of comments expressed readers' disappointment and sadness at this prospect. Some posts did support the closure of the forum but they were a small minority (six members voting for closure compared with more than 300 clicks on maintaining the forum, as seen on 1 July). On the same day a member set up a poll asking whether members thought Mai Phan Loi should maintain the role of administrator. This poll received 693 votes in support of Mai Phan Loi over 19 votes demanding Loi's resignation. For more than a week after the incident, the forum was bursting with postings and comments discussing the administrator's choice of words, the withdrawal of his press card and the profession of journalist in Vietnam. At the time of writing, discussion has quietened down, The Young Journalist forum is still in operation under the administration of Mai

¹⁵ CASA-212-40, a rescue flight with nine people on board, went missing on 16 June 2016 while searching for the Su-30 fighter. The Su-30 had crashed two days earlier off the central coast of Vietnam. One of the two pilots was successfully rescued but the body of the other was later found. These events were a double loss for Vietnam's air defense force.

Phan Loi but he is no longer a journalist and is working for the Centre for Media in Educating Community (MEC).

I had hoped that the Young Journalists forum would grow to a new level under the courage and dynamism of Mai Phan Loi, with improved organization and expanded social influence. Whatever answers the forum decides on regarding the recent crisis, it is clear that the forum was an important initiative. From a small group of journalists, the Young Journalists Forum has become the first discourse forum created to express the values of a civil society,¹⁶ despite the fact that it is managed by propaganda journalists.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the opportunities and pressures the internet has brought to the propaganda journalists who work under the recognition and control of the CPV. It has not been easy to research propaganda journalists in Vietnam because these professionals are always very cautious and hesitant when discussing their jobs in depth, particularly the boundaries they are not allowed to step over. Behind this attitude is their full awareness of the professional risks: that they might lose their economic independence, be forced to resign and thereby become unable to contribute as credentialed journalists. I am therefore very grateful for all that they have done beyond their professional journalism roles and for their courage in responding to my questions. This chapter has analysed some of the latest developments in the lives of today's propaganda journalists who are open to the technologies and global social and political developments but who are not free. In this chapter, I have argued that the internet's advantages for journalists outnumber its

¹⁶ Administrator Mai Phan Loi of the Young Journalists Forum was one of six civil society activists invited to meet US President Obama during his Vietnam visit on 24 May 2016.

disadvantages. The technology facilitates the journalist's job, especially by making the investigative journalist's job easier in terms of speed, information and social response. The internet connects Vietnamese journalists with audiences in direct conversations. Further, the internet has allowed journalists to join in an online public sphere to deliberate social affairs with colleagues and other professionals. In this space, propaganda journalists reveal another side to themselves, showing that they are active, liberated and knowledgeable, which is very different from the usual portrait of propaganda journalists as self-censoring and obedient. My portrait of the double-life of propaganda journalists reflects the new aspects and contradictions Vietnamese propaganda journalists are living with every day in their jobs. The rise of citizen journalists to rival propaganda journalists is another force that adds strength to the contributions of Vietnamese propaganda journalists. Based on the interviews and research I have carried out, I believe that punishments and censorship are unlikely to deter propaganda journalists. They will continue writing and speaking out online — intelligently, patiently and gradually — until they have broken down the major barriers the CPV authorities have used to fence in the journalism profession. ■

Chapter 8

Conclusion: promise or peril on the internet pathway?

My thesis has concentrated on analysing the most recent situation in Vietnam's media climate, focusing particularly on the broad and profound effects brought about by the internet. To highlight the internet's role, I have re-drawn the marketised features of Vietnam's news media to compare the impact of market forces with that of the internet. This approach has involved combining key theories, concepts and rich data to allow for an in-depth analysis. This multi-theoretical approach may be ambitious, while still not exhaustive. However, it has illuminated both the media and social issues in the particular political system of Vietnam, thus making it possible for me to explore the recent inter-related changes and contradictions in social communication and the contemporary news media.

With a political regime led by the Communist Party of Vietnam, unchanged since the end of the Vietnam war (1975), the shift from a planned economy to a market economy and the introduction of the internet have so far been among the key drivers causing remarkable changes at the macro and micro levels. Despite being tightly controlled by the Party, the news media in Vietnam has been highly exposed to the effects of these key drivers. While researchers have explored the powerlessness of market forces to untie the Vietnamese press, the internet is demonstrating its promising potential to bring about social changes, thus forcing the Party and the press to reform. In this concluding chapter, I synthesise the core arguments of each chapter drawing on the results and

discussions presented in chapters four, five, six and seven to underpin my final conclusions about my discoveries and to support my recommendations for a more practical and modern approach to contemporary media in the Vietnam of the future.

8.1 A commercialised but not a free press

The initial success of the economic reform had sown early hopes that it could lead to media reform with much greater press freedom and less censorship. The open-door economy brought some changes, mostly in the commercialisation of the press system. Viewing Vietnam's press through the propaganda model, there are a number of realities and characteristics showing the effects of the marketised news media. Obvious effects are the expansion of news organisations with priority given to profits and a corporate model and growing interventions by advertisers. Other obvious characteristics of the Vietnamese media scene are the domination of the CPV-run sources of news in the mass media, negative pressure on the news media and the constant repetition of CPV-created goals of maintaining social responsibility and combatting hostile forces as the first and foremost tasks for the news media. Under the trend of marketisation, the press system of Vietnam has grown in its scale and presentation but the status quo of systematic control has been maintained.

The marketisation process of the Vietnamese news media is evident but the relationships between media, political and socio-economic powers and the prioritisation of economic benefits have facilitated the CPV's control, making the news media continue to be an effective 'propaganda tool' for defending the CPV's legitimacy. Previous studies of Vietnam's press since Vietnam's renovation process have concentrated principally on the economic impacts, the role of the CPV and the stagnancy of the media. However, the role of the Vietnamese audience has been neglected. This shortcoming was

understandable, given that Vietnamese audiences had no choice but to passively receive what state-owned news organisations published.

When economic forces gradually lost their power to motivate, create and transform Vietnam, expectations were lowered for changes to Vietnam's press system. However, better late than never, the increasing influence of the internet has brought with it not only economic benefits but also internet-based freedom that has fostered the growth of alternative media, social movements and active netizens. Although the changes are typically seen in cyberspace, its effects have gradually begun to fracture the conservative and tightly managed press system. Changes in the press are visible in the ascending position of electronic newspapers, the participation of empowered online users as the audience and the activism of propaganda journalists on social media.

It is undeniable that the internet's impacts on Vietnam's media climate are more than mere technical advantages. If the economic reform made the state media of Vietnam face up to the dilemma of adjusting to market expectations while constrained by the socialist legacy (Heng 2003, p. 1), the internet has driven the media further, pushing it to examine the fundamental criteria and values of the media, but still within the existing political control. The ways in which the internet has transformed the long-controlled press system are both internal and external. To prove this thesis, I have developed my argument across chapters five to seven, supported by analyses of my extensive and varied datasets and selected case studies. I situated my argument within the theoretical framework of the internet as the 'Fifth Estate', drawing on the concepts of online social movements, active audiences, networked individuals, online freedom of expression, extended public space, tabloidisation and journalism as a profession. I chose to analyse Vietnam's online newspapers to exemplify how the internet has transformed the conservative news media of Vietnam. I have shown how, nurtured by the internet, popular political blogs, social networks

and online social movements are typical web-based phenomena that are impacting on the Vietnamese press day by day. My portrayal of current propaganda journalists, with their growing capacity to adapt and deal with chances and challenges brought by the internet, shows them to be wonderful examples of the power of the technological advances.

8.2 Electronic press leading the way

In focusing on the electronic press I recognised that while this sector is not fully representative of the whole of the Vietnamese news media, the e-press is currently the most progressive among the state-owned press, and the one which has shown the most positive changes in the internet-based ecology. Electronic newspapers have developed close connections with the new media and the online space including social networks, online discourse forums, political blogs and the expanding virtual community. In-depth coverage of both the dynamism and unresolved problems of Vietnamese online newspapers has enabled me to explore the major implications.

The rise of the electronic press to its leading position has exceeded the expectations of the CPV leaders. The electronic press has grown in number, revenue and influence. Relevant conditions which have facilitated the rise of electronic press include cheaper and more popular internet infrastructure, the rocketing number of Vietnamese online users and the audience's new ways of accessing news. In addition, electronic newspapers have been thriving thanks to the global trend of digitisation in media and the large online community, now numbering more than 40 million users. The rapid popularity of the electronic press can also be credited to the dynamism of Vietnam's online newspapers in grasping these advantages of the internet to make their online news websites the most profitable and fastest news messengers. However, speed and profit do not necessarily bring in success unless there is also a greater focus on the reader. This focus needs considering in a context where Vietnam's mainstream media

were traditionally fully occupied in fulfilling the propaganda functions demanded by the CPV authorities and where little attention was given to understanding the audience.

Directors of electronic newspapers have shown their clear ambition to make these publications the number one news provider for readers in Vietnam. They are on the right track to achieve this target, with these publications becoming the most popular state newspapers with readers. Never before have audiences had such direct influence on and involvement in the news making process of the state press in Vietnam. I supported my argument about the high level of activity among the audience in Vietnam through evidence of the rise of tabloidisation and growth in readers commenting on and contributing to news materials in the electronic press. The rise of the electronic press and its democratic features have helped it attract advertising revenue away from the other major traditional media organisations. These electronic newspapers are on its way to outstrip other types of CPV-favoured traditional news media to top the propaganda press.

Despite its many advantages, the electronic press also demonstrates major flaws which threaten to slow its growth. The sector is underpinned by the unstable foundation of being a mix between a propaganda tool of the CPV and a news service aimed at satisfying readers' demands. The tabloidisation seen on almost all popular news websites is evidence for the contradictory demands of satisfying readers' demand and fulfilling ideological tasks. The trend towards soft news is a safe way for contemporary news media to satisfy readers and cope with the heavily censored topics of hard news. Another weakness of the electronic press is its failure to push the CPV-set boundaries in order to grow faster and compete with social media and social networks. When conventional methods of censorship are imposed on modern forms of journalism (i.e. electronic press), the outcome is setbacks, clashes and also counter-effects. With

traditional news media, state control can be more easily concealed because it takes effect before the news is published. Now, when the internet allows electronic news to be updated and shared every second, the edited news content, discrepancies in truth or content removals are easily visible, noticed and questioned by the public.

The rapid growth of the electronic press, combined with the regressions caused by the state re-imposing old methods of media control, has resulted in the chaotic and 'messy' situation of the Vietnamese electronic press. The electronic press, however, is facing its greatest challenge in the development of social media, social networks and citizen journalism. The audience has realised the unprecedented advantages offered by the internet, allowing them to create their own networks to access information, start news production and engage in public discourse. This is the space where the internet has shown its greatest power and brought about remarkable developments.

8.3 Pressure from social media and networked netizens

One of the greatest personal rewards of my research is the four years I spent observing social media developments and online discourses. I have engaged with a large volume of scholarly materials during the process of gathering data, identifying and refining theoretical approaches and concepts and crystalising the main themes. I believe that the current time is a key moment during which to closely monitor the online community in Vietnam because we are seeing the progress of a cyber society. Vietnamese internet users are actively updating the latest information. The discourse and reactions of these netizens can help us understand the attitudes and feelings of the majority of Vietnamese citizens. However, research also brings challenges. Feeling the pulse of the online community can be an impossible task because the number of online users is multiplying every second. At the time of writing (24 July 2016), the number of online users in Vietnam stands at 49,063,762 million, representing 52% of

Vietnam's population (InternetLiveStats 2016). The tendency of Vietnamese online users to group together on the social network of Facebook forced me to keep alert during the data-collecting period (2012 to 2015) and monitor every major event. As I explained in framing the research in one chapter, I finally chose to discuss the evolution of political blogs, the cyber information freedom brought about by Facebook, and the phenomenon of networked individuals to shape online social movements. These facets of the growing online community are the most eye-catching and influential developments and have caused significant impacts on the mainstream news media.

Political blogs in Vietnam have passed the 'fence-breaking' stage (Vennevold 2011) to evolve into independent and influential news sources with more professional quality writing, uncensored opinions and richer information. In chapter six, I classified the three main groups of political blogs, with each representing different political targets and different political factions in the country. The trend among blogs to split into different types and the rival battles of words and random leaks of top sensitive information make the blogosphere even more attractive to readers than the slowly changing mainstream media. Despite the conspiracy rumours that suggest that political blogs 'throw stones to hide their hands', these blogs are becoming independent and supplementary sources to the mainstream news. The label *báo lề trái* (left side press) has become a controversial title for political blogs or other non-mainstream information sources, positioning such blogs in opposition to *báo lề phải* (right side press) or mainstream news. My research has suggested that as long as Vietnamese news media continue to be censored, barred from freely discussing sensitive topics, the mainstream media is likely to continue to gradually lose its readers and influence to political blogs. Some propaganda journalists have realised this bitter truth and have said that they cannot compete with the coverage of some news topics on blogs because they are not provided with enough information or

they are not allowed to write about the sensitive topics. As one journalist commented, 'The key is information. Information is the most important weapon' (Mai Phan Loi 2015, pers. comm., 4 June).

The popular use of social networks, especially Facebook, has generated more advantages for political blogs and has further shaken the stance of the Vietnamese news media. Facebook is not only connecting online users for friendship, e-commerce and entertainment; the social network has also brought about the freedom of expression to speak out opinions and to seek, receive and share information. In section two of chapter six, I explained the unprecedented opportunity that now allows Vietnamese readers to choose from various sources of news published by individuals, foreign media corporations and even political blogs. In this open space, progressive and leading media organisations in Vietnam are participating as just one among a number of sources. Facebookers play the role of final decision makers by choosing their favourite source through their comments, likes and shares. Faced with the popularity of Facebook, the CPV has reluctantly changed its attitude from one of 'tolerance' (Nguyen 2009) to one of giving concessions to the Facebook by giving up bans on Facebook and even by having governmental agencies participate in the social network. This changing attitude of the Party can be explained by the fact that the most active groups of Vietnamese citizens are now connecting online to discuss everyday issues. Through their online social movements, Vietnamese netizens have begun networking to react to social issues and, through these networks, are pressing the authorities and state media to listen to their voice.

In chapter six, I traced the origin of online social movements through my case study of the networked objections of the Facebook community to the Hanoi authorities' tree-removal plan in 2015. Starting with an open letter of objection by a senior journalist, reaction spread throughout the online community. The online network of individual Facebookers led to peaceful parades and tree-

loving actions, forcing a halt in the plan. I argued that this case demonstrated the ongoing progress of Vietnamese netizens' usage of internet-based social networks. The internet had become not only an online public sphere space for social discourse on everyday issues but was also proving to be an ideal space for individual users to get together, exchange ideas and build enough pressure to create social movements that have been closely monitored by the Party. The phenomenon of online social movements has only been noticeable since 2015 and is characterised by limited scale, clumsiness and hesitation. However, it has shown the initial features observed by Castells (2011) to characterise online social movements. These features include the use of interactive, autonomous 'self-communication' among individual online users, which generates 'mass communication' in the form of participating in forums, likes or sharing postings expressing their outrage and hope. In Vietnam, more time and studies are needed to observe the development of online social movements before any predictions can be made about a digital revolution. Right now, these online movements have begun exercising 'counterpower' against the weak management of the CPV authorities and against the unfulfilled role of the Vietnamese press in speaking for the needs of the community.

8.4 Adaptation by propaganda journalists

Previous media research about Vietnam has had little to say about propaganda journalists although they are important actors in the propaganda press.

Through specific cases and interviews with experienced journalists, I have shown that contemporary propaganda journalists have more liberal viewpoints than in the past and that they attribute their changing perceptions to the role of the internet and its abundant resources of knowledge and values. All of the interviewees in my study, including journalists and media administrators, have said they are among the most frequent users of the internet and they all offered the most complimentary words for the technology. Unfortunately, the tight grip

of the CPV through its ideological and professional constraints has prevented journalists from fully tapping into the internet's resources, restraining journalists with 'social responsibilities' and the need to follow 'day-by-day instructions' (Hang 2003, p. 95). While some journalists are dissatisfied by the challenge to survive in this censored profession, the majority of propaganda journalists accept the need to live a double life, as CPV journalists and as active online users.

In chapter seven, I described the typical context and challenges facing contemporary Vietnamese journalists. I noted, firstly, that the internet has allowed journalists to connect closely with their audience by becoming friends and exchanging comments on social networks, forums and blogs. Although this connection is virtual, it reminds journalists that they are not only writing to advocate for the CPV but also to meet the demands of Vietnamese readers. Online communication has not only connected journalists and news audiences; it has also provided a large social support network, protecting and encouraging journalists to push against the CPV's boundaries. The rise of the audience reduces the dominant decision-making role of the CPV, particularly in sensitive investigative journalism. The open support of news audiences creates strong ground, sometimes constituting a shield for journalists, allowing them to continue to investigate stories. Public support makes the authorities cautious about intervening or preventing journalists from reporting news stories of significant public concern. Examples of journalists using their own Facebook page or blogs to share news stories and opinions or to explain their professional problems have become a common phenomenon. Again, my research suggests that the CPV's ultimate control over propaganda journalists has been reduced as the internet has empowered the audience to connect and demand of journalists the information they want, not only the information they are allowed to read.

Online connections with the audience are not simply a matter of choice but are inevitable for contemporary journalists. Journalists need to catch up with their online users who have acquired skills in using advanced technology and who are taking part in online discourse about social concerns. In the active role created by digital technology, netizens are capable of competing with propaganda journalists because they have become skilled enough to sense the news, report, publish and promote the news among their networks. The CPV authorities' efforts to curb the activity of citizen journalists have proved of limited use. It is ironical that citizen journalists and bloggers have been able to use the internet to minimise the disadvantages caused by the authorities' denial, prevention and even threats. Unlike propaganda journalists, citizen journalists can write without being censored by others or by themselves. They don't need to be granted a press card, nor do they need to wait for the approval of a newspaper because they can publish anytime on blogs or Facebook. They are free to connect and communicate with millions of readers without a filtering system. They are also not scared about losing their jobs because they can earn a living directly or indirectly through social media and the support of their loyal readers. From the position of being marginalised, citizen journalists have come to have their own (social) networks to distribute their information. Their work is quoted and republished in the mainstream media. I supported my arguments with two examples: the case of an individual filming inappropriate behaviour by Dong Nai police and a forum of car lovers well-known for its frequent contribution to mainstream news media. Vietnam's citizen journalism has grown from 'a social phenomenon' among just three million bloggers (Nguyen 2009) to become a common practice among the more than 35-million-member community.

If Nguyen (2009) was right to predict that Vietnam's citizen journalism could 'move out of the margins' and might signal 'a healthy democratisation

process', he might not have expected that citizen journalists would begin generating substantial social changes. I can make this statement after synthesising my findings on social media, online social movements and citizen journalism detailed in chapters six and seven. Citizen journalists are confirming their autonomy by acting independently and getting their news to the top of public discourse without the mediating role of mainstream media. Citizen journalists have affirmed their influence through an increase in online social movements in which they play the multiple roles of messenger, critic and audience. With the professionalisation of political blogs, Facebook dominance and online equality with the mainstream media, citizen journalism has a golden opportunity to become a media channel that exists in parallel with the mainstream media. Citizen journalism has grown rapidly and its influence is now intense enough that the CPV now has to accept it, not 'tolerate' it.

In chapter seven, I also argued that to fully understand the complex situation of Vietnam's contemporary propaganda journalists we needed to study their enthusiastic participation in online public discourse. I presented recent examples of two journalists being punished for expressing their personal liberal viewpoints on the internet and on a forum of propaganda journalists discussing professional skills and social topics. While the two journalists were disqualified for criticising the CPV chief and for satirising a CPV-state event, the forum for propaganda journalists to discuss professional skills and everyday affairs is still in operation. I selected the Young Journalists forum as a case study because it reflects the increasing interest of contemporary propaganda journalists in expressing more than they are allowed to write in mainstream media. While the Young Journalists forum may show little progress towards greater freedom for the profession of Vietnamese journalists, it is at least providing a new space for them to discuss more than what they are allowed to report. The political regime of Vietnam means that my journalist colleagues

have to work in a stuffy atmosphere overshadowed by control, censorship, self-censorship and economic pressure. The internet has allowed in a breath of the fresh air of freedom, enabling journalists to express themselves in the extended online public sphere. In this sphere, journalists are not completely free but the online connection enables them to network for professional development. A journalist of *ttvn.vn* (*Young Knowledge Online*) said he had more friends and was able to learn from participating in the arguments on the Young Journalists forum (Mai Quoc An 2016, email comm., 10 January). Journalists' contributions to the forum have had an influence on their colleagues and the public, stimulating journalists to interact for their own experience and professional exchange. This benefit seems valuable for journalists who previously worked only under propaganda guidelines.

At the time of writing this final chapter (early 2016), at least five large forums managed by propaganda journalists are in operation. The increased number of forums established by state-run organisations and individual journalists proves that journalists are keen to be networked, are seeking more freedom of expression and are demanding social change. The quality of discourse on these professional forums has also improved and has influenced the virtual community. In my research, I found that Vietnam's contemporary journalists are living a double life, as standard propaganda journalists at work and as liberal-minded netizens in the cyber world. At the current time, these professional forums focus principally on social and economic issues, while political topics are less openly discussed. The limitations of these forums are that journalists self-censor their expression of attitudes and avoid the most sensitive issues. Members are also not equally active. Other than that, the trend towards these forums proves that propaganda journalists are making the most of online freedom to gradually free themselves from CPV ideologies and responsibilities. While 'the internet is not the answer' to all questions (Keen

2015), it seems that it can be valuable as an outlet towards freedom for propaganda journalists in a country like Vietnam.

8.5 The internet's impact on the news media

In chapters from five to eight, I captured the recent major impacts the internet has had on the Vietnamese news media. Impacts can be direct or indirect but the scale of this thesis has only allowed me to discuss the most typical phenomena rather than provide a comprehensive update of the entire press system. Despite this constraint, I am still confident in generalising about the major impact of the internet on the state news media.

First, it is clear that the economic reform in 1986 played a significant role in loosening the media of Vietnam economically and ideologically, allowing it to develop towards a 'real consumer base' (Heng 2003, p. 564). Apart from this overall change, the media remained a dull sector, lacking stimulus, accountability and breakthroughs. The state news organisations had experienced a long period as the unique players in the media field, with any progress and change attributed to the 'tolerance' of the authorities (Heng 2003; Nguyen 2009). However, in the age of the internet, changes are proving to be more visible, comprehensive, fundamental and powerful because impacts are coming from networks both inside and around the news media, forcing the CPV to reluctantly accept change and make concessions.

The strengths of recent technological advances have transformed the overall face of Vietnam's press, driving it towards the digitised path that global journalism has followed elsewhere. The new leading role of the electronic press over other key traditional news organisations has re-arranged the longstanding press hierarchy, prompting the entire press system to wake up and join in the digital competition. The rise of electronic news media has also forced both the authorities and journalists to recognise the role audiences in choosing and co-

producing news. Although the Vietnamese audience is still adapting to its new rights within the news media, their dynamism is maturing day by day, forcing the state news media to be on the go all the time. The progress in the professionalism of propaganda journalists is one remarkable effect of the internet: the technology has dragged them far beyond their traditional position serving the CPV to become part of the public discourse with an open mind for exchange and criticism. These never-before-seen changes have generated a vibrant media climate in recent years in Vietnam.

The internet has also held back the giant shadow of CPV control, challenging its monopoly over providing news and persuading Vietnamese authorities to adjust their media management strategies. The principal evidence for this is the changing relationships and interactions between the news media and audiences, and reactions to the growing role of social media and online social movements. To respond to the more active audience and the increasing influence of internet-based information, the CPV has found tactics and solutions to maintain the dominant position of their propaganda press. On one hand, they have promulgated tighter legal instructions and have deployed their propagandists to prevent online public discourse. On the other hand, the mainstream media have been compelled to compete with social media and listen to the audience's needs. The significant political event of the 12th Party Congress's vote for CPV leadership positions represented an unprecedented breakthrough in news coverage by online newspapers. Key developments of the eight-day congress were reported immediately after every meeting, encouraging the public to follow the news on state media instead of checking political blogs. As freelance journalist Huy Duc commented on his Facebook page:

Whatever the result [of the Congress] will be, the Communist Party of Vietnam will no longer be the same as it used to be, at least regarding the

information. Every development [of the result] has been updated by the parties involved. (2016, Facebook posting, 24th January)

Information accountability and news speed are different from the old style of delayed information release. The CPV leaders have finally realised that they have to adapt to the digital rules of an internet-based environment if they do not want their role to be superseded by social media.

Last but not least, the internet has expanded online freedom of expression since individual netizens can speak their mind, create networks and share reactions. Voicing critical comments on social problems has become a routine for Vietnamese netizens. The space of expression is not only limited to social media but has also spread to state media, among which electronic newspapers are demonstrating the greatest advantages over traditional media. Freedom of expression has also been promoted through the growth of the political blogosphere where contributors are no longer anonymous but where some bloggers can have a significant social influence, providing inspiration to the virtual community. The internet has blurred the lines previously drawn by Vietnamese authorities between state-owned and private media, between local and foreign media, and between professional and citizen journalists. The credibility of a newspaper is no longer only granted by the Party but is also judged by the audience's assessment of the quality of information. Online freedom is in direct contrast to the controlled press system and threatens to seize whatever functions the mainstream media fails to deliver. This explains why former Minister of Information and Communications Le Doan Hop has referred to the transformative role of the internet:

The internet has transformed the whole press system [because] what the press can't do what it needs to do, the work will be taken by the internet. (2015, pers. comm., 17 June)

The internet has proved that it can bring about remarkable changes in the news media and in the virtual life of Vietnamese citizens. Applying Dutton's (2009, 2013) conceptual frames, we can say that it is undeniable that the internet's power is relevant in 'everyday life', creating an online public space, networking individual Vietnamese people and nurturing online freedom of expression. The internet has given the Vietnamese people unexpected resources with which to create horizontal networks. Across these networks they can express their opinions and demand changes from the authorities. Given its impact on these broad social issues, the internet can be recognised as the Fifth Estate in Vietnam. I return to this question after discussing the hurdles that remain in the incomplete progress of the news media in Vietnam.

8.6 As yet unrealised press freedom

At the same time as it has contributed to online freedom of expression, the internet has at the same time blocked the liberation of Vietnam's press system in some ways. Pessimists even claim that the internet is distorting the growth of Vietnam's press system (Tran 2015a) and that freedom of the press has declined along with the growing dominance of the internet (Le Doan Hop 2015, pers. comm., 17 June). The international freedom index offers evidence for this statement. From a press freedom score of 82 given to Vietnam by Freedom House in 2010, the score then worsened to 83 in 2011, 84 in the years 2012, 2013, 2014, and reached 86 in 2015 (0 = best, 100 = worst). The tools used to constrain the press system are said to be legal regulations, political control and economic ties (FreedomHouse 2015b), among which financial power has become less significant than legal and political control.

The controversial project for national press management from now to 2025, announced on 26 September 2015, is the latest example of how Vietnamese authorities are trying to manage the press system more strictly. The new planning document is an ambitious plan to restructure the entire press industry.

The authorities claim it will improve the efficiency of the press system's leadership, address overlapping investment and enhance the capacity of media managers and journalists. The plan's aims are to keep constraining private media and to enhance press control by placing newspapers under the authority of ministries and provinces instead of state organisations and agencies and by limiting the number of electronic newspapers (TuoitreNews 2015b). Local newspapers, journalists and lawmakers have criticised the draft plan on the grounds that it attempts to restrict press freedom, reverse global trends of modern journalism and potentially exert an abuse of power over journalism. Reacting to the plan, even a state newspaper criticised it as for its impractical management ideas and that news readers should be the ones who decide the existence of a newspaper, not the state agencies (Nguyen 2015k, 2015l). In a survey on the Young Journalists Forum conducted on 2 October 2015, most of the forum's members voted the draft plan unfair, lacking attention to the opinions of the audience and as an inappropriate solution in the present media climate in Vietnam.

The continuity of the authorities' control of the press and their blocking of press freedom seem to conflict with my arguments about the dynamic performance of the electronic press, the more-open attitude of the CPV authorities and the early signs of internet speech freedom. However, this situation can be explained as a consequence of confusing, conservative and backwards media control. Since the early days of the economic reform in 1986, the media has been controlled with caution and calculation. From the first days of the internet's arrival, Vietnam's authorities have shown their hesitation and concern about the effects of 'internet-generated information flows' (Van Koert 2004, p. 204). Economic resources made CVP leaders accept the internet but suspicion about its impact never faded. The CPV leaders believe that their firm control of the press helps them defend their legitimacy and cope with increasing

critical expression. With the administrative system unchanged, and a top–down form of control, the contemporary news media and its professionals have been limited in their performance and activity with increasing legal regulations, policies and planning. Propaganda journalists are regularly reminded of their responsibility to shape public opinion, including the opinions on social media.

Today, the CPV's concerns about 'information flows' have become apparent. Although they had speculated about this possibility, the CPV authorities have not prepared well to adapt to these changes. They seem to be paralysed when it comes to finding ways to balance their will, commands and censorship of the media sector with present circumstances. Determined to keep the press system under their leadership, the authorities urge news organisations to make greater profits and more reforms to cope with the ever-expanding social media and social networks. These conflicting demands have caused confusion, inconsistency and even passivity in recent media management policies and guidelines. Poor management has dragged the mainstream media backwards at the same as the country is seeing the growth of social networks and citizen journalism.

While concentrating on carefully shielding the press, CPV authorities have underestimated both the power of the internet in the domain of social issues and the rapidly developing civic awareness of local internet users. Internet usage by Vietnamese people has grown from the role of being simply daily infotainment to the role of an online sphere for discourse about everyday issues. In this sphere, users find freedom of expression and draw on the strength of networked individuals. As a result, fear of the CPV's influence is fading among the growing online community. These contrasts between an unchanged administrative management and the more open online sphere are affecting the contemporary mainstream media of Vietnam. Excess demand, limited freedom

and institutional constraints are undermining the press system. Conflicts are becoming more visible, from daily routines to the large-scale issues.

8.7 Present contradictions in Vietnam's press

The principal purpose of my study has been to explore the existing contradictions in the news media of Vietnam. The most widely known contradiction is the mixed functions of the state news media, which has to be a strong propaganda tool and a profit-seeking machine. This contradiction has been related to discussions about consumer journalism, with the major question being whether or not the propaganda press of Vietnam should be regarded as a type of 'special goods' (Duong 2014). These days, the main question has shifted to the relationships between the state news media and the digital communication of social media, social networks and citizen journalism. While the CPV authorities demand that the news media and propaganda journalists take on the task of 'shaping opinions on the social networks' (Do & Dinh 2014), the contradiction is that state newspapers are showing increasing dependence on the online public sphere. Journalists and local media researchers are divided in their assessments of the significance of mainstream media and the non-mainstream media and interactions between these two types of media.

The co-existence of left side press and right side press (*báo lề trái & báo lề phải*) is not only a prominent characteristic of contemporary news media but also exemplifies the most recent conflicts and contradictions in Vietnam's media. Former Minister of Information and Communications Le Doan Hop first used the term 'right side press' in 2007. In a long-awaited interview for this thesis, the former minister said the term 'right side press' means that propaganda journalists should write according to the state's rules, very much as a traveller has to abide by the right-hand traffic rule in Vietnam (2015, pers. comm., 17 June). After the minister first used the term, the phrase 'left side press' was widely adopted by bloggers as a category of news stories and

opinions written by non-propaganda journalists (bloggers, dissidents, freelance journalists) and by Western media agencies (BBC, RFA, VOA etc) with liberal ideologies and viewpoints contrary to those of Vietnam's state media. When I asked Mr Hop about the term 'left side press', he said his words also have a figurative meaning in that Vietnamese state media has left a gap in reporting negative issues and that gap has been filled by left side press (2015, pers. comm., 17 June).

Left side and right side press have now become official terms representing the two opposite streams of journalism in Vietnam. While state media condemned left side press as 'the garbage on the internet' produced by dissidents (Nguyen 2011), its advocates refer to it as the journalism of liberty, equality, democracy and civilisation (Thich 2010). Behind these two streams are conflicting ideologies, different professional practices and confrontations. While right side press is backed by the authorities and provided with favourable conditions, left side press has been thriving thanks to the bravery of the writers, the booming development of the internet and the support of the audience who crave more information and critical viewpoints rather than the monotonous message of state news media.

I have found that in recent years the scale of left side press has expanded further than the political and ideological realm to include any economic, social, cultural and historical issues that are not fully covered or partially covered by mainstream media or right side press. Along with expanded news topics, left-leaning journalists have increased their membership and have earned more prestige among online readers who read left side press as a daily habit. With the wider usage of the internet as a means of getting news, the left side press, combined with citizen journalism, public discourses and online social movements, have become a young but influential media force, challenging the state news media. The fact is that Vietnam's state media can no longer manage

the CPV's task of 'shaping public opinion' because Vietnamese readers can 'encode' information based on their own judgment and active selection from various sources of news. State media is no longer the only news provider but has been forced to start sharing the task with the non-mainstream media.

The contradictions within Vietnamese's state media are also visible in the trapped position of propaganda journalists. A majority of propaganda journalists choose to continue living and working within these conflicts but some journalists have abandoned their propaganda career and exchanged it for online freedom. Freelance blogger Huy Duc gave up his 21-year career in state newspapers in 2009. In an interview with me he defended his choice:

I realise that if only to have freedom of expression, it is not necessary to rely on a state newspaper ... When working for a state newspaper, journalists cannot break the principles set by a political system, even if most of those principals run against the implementation of freedom of expression and contradict the desire to be a professional journalist. (Huy Duc 2015, email comm., 21 August)

The internet has brought remarkable changes to the media climate of Vietnam but it has still revealed failures and contradictions. As of the present time, the internet is not able to function as the Fifth Estate since the CPV's tight control has prevented the technology from reaching to the core of the system with all democratic values. On the face of it, the status quo in Vietnam's news media has not changed but its solid nature has been shaken. Impacts are reverberating from the social transformation towards the formation of information networks.

8.8 The power of the network

CPV leaders have committed to extending the market economy model and are giving priority to applications of information technology because the technology achieves economic benefits in a shorter time. The future role of the

internet has been guaranteed by the Vietnamese Prime Minister who promised to continue bringing the technology to 90% of the Vietnamese population (Nguyen 2015j). The Government stated that information technologies would be one of the key drivers of state growth (CPV 2011). In fact, the role of the internet has not only been given priority but, as one of my interviewees states, such a position is a must-do choice:

Internet development is not an issue of the wanting or not. It is already a demand and a part of this life (in Vietnam). (Tran Dang Tuan 2015, email. comm., 22 May).

This comment suggests that Vietnam's future social structure will witness a transformation in which information networks will play a 'substantial role' in various relationships of power, economy, culture and communications (Castells 2011b).

Networks are not a new form of social organisation but they have taken on 'a new life' in the information age through the shape of information networks and their 'pervasiveness' across all social realms (Castells 2000, 2011b). In choosing the internet as a platform for a nation's sustainable development, the state actors need to prepare for a future 'information society'. In such a society, technologies cannot be limited to the economic sector but will function across corporations, culture, politics and social organisations through 'a set of interconnected nodes' of various networks and subnetworks. Within Castells' framework, in a network society the state can no longer monopolise information and state power has to be shared with the media networks (Howard 2011).

Choosing the internet for economic development means Vietnam has to accept that its social structure will transform into information networks with their logics. It is not difficult to notice already the formation of information networks in the economy (the introduction of international financial systems,

self-employment tendencies) and culture (introduction of digitised organisation in musical products, movies, internet programs). Moreover, the transition to a network society will be seen not only through the effects of the internet but also through the 'culture of mobility' (Howard 2011, p. 78). That is, citizens will increasingly connect to others and do their work using mobile phones and the internet, as well as managing their various personal networks (Facebook friends or being an online forum's member). In Castells' words, this means individuals are creating their own networks.

This thesis has focused on the rise of network relations through social media and social networks, explained in detail in chapters six and seven. There are networks in which political bloggers and dissidents play the role of 'nodes' connecting users who share the same interests and concern for political issues. There are social forums and online social movements whose members network because they do not attract the news media's attention and their best choice is therefore to spread the information and messages that interest them online through their networks of friends or among online groups. There are also the networks linking journalists and other social groups to discuss journalism-related topics. In this way, Castells' network theory is demonstrated as a practical reality among the Vietnamese online community, where people have formed networks of 'mass-self communications' (Castells 2013) to deliberate 'everyday' issues and topics. State news media are unable to fulfill the role of 'gate-keeper', and are no longer the sole providers in the political discourse sphere. 'Mass-self communication' through networks of individuals represents a public reaction to the ineffective role of state news media, and even to the control of the authorities. In this thesis, I have chosen to discuss Facebook's key role in creating a virtual space for networks that connect people, share news, host public discourse or mobilise people in social campaigns. The social network (in the form of Facebook) has become a significant sphere, one that is

ideal for reflecting a measure of social reactions about important state issues and about the CPV's management in Vietnam.

The formation of social networks has also appeared in the political realm in Vietnam. Wells-Dang 2010 has noticed the formation of a 'civil society network' when he researched the joining of some civil organisations and individuals in organizing land protests and launching campaigns against the authorities' park-renovating plan. While Wells-Dang 2010 applies the theoretical concept of re-defining political place and social movement (Wells-Dang 2010, pp.96, 97) to approach the shaping of networks in Vietnam, it can be seen to fit with Castells' network theories in the current context of the rising social media influence. In chapter six, I described examples of pro-CPV political blogs, anonymous blogs bypassing state media to publish sensational stories about senior officials and the deployment of cyber propagandists as CPV-supporting networks. These are all evidence of the existence of applying information networks in today's politics in Vietnam. The fact that the government and its lower level administrators join Facebook and the enthusiastic participation of state news media on the social network add further support for my argument.

My findings about the existing network society in Vietnam are framed in light of Castells' statement that this is the 'social structure characteristic' of the Information Age which 'permeates' most societies. In the context of communist leaders beginning to set up networks and using digital media in their leadership, it is important to notice that networks have 'no centre', require shared decision-making and only accept the logic of 'inclusion/exclusion' (Castells 2000, p. 15). These rules demand that actors obey the strategies of networks. If users want to challenge the network, they have two choices: (1) destroying it by building an alternative network or (2) 'building a defensive, non-networked structure' (p. 16). Understanding these characteristics of

networks provides a key to explaining why the contemporary Vietnamese mainstream media is increasingly struggling with contradictions.

I believe that the CPV leaders are smart enough to recognise that social networks have played a role in social transformations around the world. In particular, the Arab Spring has been linked with networked social movements expressing outrage, enthusiasm and hope (Castells 2013). However, the key question is how the communist leaders of Vietnam will manage the country in the information age. The CPV's 'survival instincts' (Van Koert 2004) allowed them to survive the collapse of communism in 1989. These days, the Vietnamese authorities are using the same skills to repeat the strategy they used then: they tolerate change in order to maintain their legitimacy but they in fact retain ultimate power and control. In chapter six, I described how the CPV leaders did not follow the path of their giant neighbour, China, which chose to build its own information technology structure and disconnect from the international cyber world. By contrast, the CPV is cautiously enhancing its participation in information networks and using digital media in leadership. I recognise that these moves are reluctant but they mean that Vietnamese society is on its way to becoming part of the international information network. However, at the same time the CPV authorities are actually trying to resist the information networks for fear that they will have to share their power, particularly media control. To maintain this two-faced strategy, CPV leaders are using silent strategies to impose their power to prevent the expansion of the networks. They are using legal regulations; scattering fears among online communities through their cyber police and cyber propagandists, arresting and threatening dissident bloggers and even constraining the mainstream media more tightly.

In fact, the situation has not been developing as the CPV had planned. As Castells has pointed out, the 'evolutionary nature' of today's information networks resists any attempts to curb them. The CPV's plan to use mainstream

media to control internet-based media and break the 'mass-self communications' networks has failed. This means that the authorities' measures are not proving effective and they face the very real prospect of being excluded from the networks of the Vietnamese online community. My analysis suggests that these information networks are in their initial stages and so their resistance to authoritarian power is still limited. However, further applications of digital technologies and expressions of basic democratic values will demonstrate how well Castells' network theory applies to the Vietnam's particular political system. At the moment, the impact of information networks can be seen most visibly in the general media climate, which I have explored by describing the competition between state and non-state news media.

As this study has centred on the contemporary news media in Vietnamese in the information age, I have stressed that the press needs to find the answer in the context of a network society. Blaming negative impacts and setbacks to the mainstream media on commercialisation is no longer relevant in Vietnam. The most pressing question for the Vietnamese press at the moment is whether (and how) the system will be able to maintain its influential role in the social formation of information networks.

There is absolutely no doubt that the state news media is still the most influential media power in Vietnam thanks to its longstanding expertise and the authorities' sponsorship and support. Despite the tremendous advantages offered by the internet and by online users' support, non-mainstream media or left side press (citizen journalism and social media) faces many difficulties such as financial shortfalls and administrative obstacles. As senior journalist and media administrator Tran Dang Tuan said, the news covered by the privileged state newspapers still has great importance. Social networks, such as Facebook, are not the ideal environment for publication of complicated social issues. Information published in the form of Facebook postings is not as 'best-selling' as

the postings on issues that stimulate readers' curiosity (Tran Dang Tuan 2015, email comm., 22 May).

However, the social structure of information networks is reducing those disadvantages and empowering non-mainstream media to confront state news media. Favourable conditions brought about by globalisation, economic stimulus, an active audience and information technology may help the non-mainstream media progress dramatically within a short time and rapidly become able to compete with mainstream news media. In the information age, the control and protection of the CPV authorities may well become the key hurdle limiting the competitiveness and performance of the Vietnamese press, thus creating space for non-mainstream media to exclude the mainstream press from the networks.

Whether desired or not, the growth of internet-based media in Vietnam proves that control of information is already being shared by the CPV and online forces. Unless the CPV accepts the rule of 'sharing' power with media networks (Howard 2011, p. 20) and follows a path towards freeing the state press, the media climate of Vietnam will continue to be held back by conflicts that will result in the advance of the more adaptable and less controlled non-mainstream media. From the analysis of my interviews and from media discussions, I have found that a majority of propaganda journalists are well aware of the constraints of their tight and stuffy professional working environment. As the following quotations show, what they really long for is that their newspapers become liberated from state control so they could be free to do their work and be positive about an improved press system in the future:

Nguyen Cong Khe, editor-in-chief of *Mot The Gioi* e-newspaper (*One World*): 'The Vietnamese government must allow the media to operate freely ... Opening up the media would help our leaders win back the trust of the people, which they need if they hope to advance Vietnam's main

goals. Freedom of the press is good for the country, and it is good for the regime' (Nguyen 2014a).

Mai Quoc An, journalist of *Tri Thuc Tre* e-newspaper (*Young Knowledge*):

'If I have power, press must be free to be competitive and freedom of press must be at the highest level' (2016, email comm., 10 January)

Le Doan Hop, former Minister of Information and Communications: 'I think it [privatisation of state media] will not be a far future. If it is slow, it can take around 10 years. It can be fast to be less than 10 years' (2015, pers. comm., 17 June)

Tran Dang Tuan, former Deputy General Director of Vietnam Television:

'I think the Vietnamese press is changing but it is not in a straight line. The line has many turning points. (2015, email comm., 22 May)

While waiting for future changes, the media climate is less claustrophobic thanks to the thriving performance of internet-based media. The dividing lines between left side press and right side press, mainstream media and non-mainstream media, censored and liberated media, state media and citizens' media are signals of cracks in the monopolised propaganda press system. I anticipate that this divided situation in Vietnam's media context will continue until non-mainstream media is officially recognised by the CPV authorities for their participation in media networks in Vietnam. That future is predictable because the non-mainstream media has continually earned the audience's trust and because Vietnam's state media is moving towards an online-based system.

8.9 Future research

With the re-election of 71-year-old Nguyen Phu Trong as CPV General Secretary in January 2016 (Reuters/AFP 2016), there is very little hope for political breakthroughs in Vietnam in the near future. However, the newly re-elected Party Chief has pledged a commitment to economic reforms to fulfill the

country's dream of catching up with more developed neighbours and to gain public support for the CPV.

More than thirty years after the first economic reform was instituted in 1986, Vietnam's leaders are facing the reality that the country has exhausted its two key drivers of robust growth: a young and cheap labour force and the transition to manufacturing and services (Breu, Dobbs & Remes 2012; Vu et al. 2015). As the golden period of growth is declining, the country's development has shown signs of stagnation and it is lagging behind its South East Asia neighbours. The CPV leaders are keen to limit the discussion of further economic reform and often blame unresolved state problems on corruption or describe them as side effects of the market economy. However, these days the public is more demanding. Across all media — both left and right — critics are urging a second round of national reforms that will focus on internal economic restructuring but also political reform. In a rarely seen speech at the National Party Congress on 22 January 2016, Planning and Investment Minister Bui Quang Vinh raised this problem overtly before ending his term:

The political system appropriate with the planned economy, especially the war-time economy, is no longer suitable with the market economy, even becoming obstacles. Therefore, it is an urgent need to reform the political system and the economy comprehensively (Cam & Pho 2016).

The phrase 'political reform' is the strongest term ever used officially by an incumbent senior CPV member. Previously, the phrase commonly used on mainstream media when it came to the topic of political problems was 'institutional reform', which referred to comprehensive reform through enlarging political participation, giving a larger role to the National Assembly and reforming the judiciary (Vu et al. 2015).

The progress, at least in the usage of words, reveals fundamental changes in social awareness and the media climate in Vietnam. Sensitive topics such as freedom for human creativity, democratic trends and political reform have been mentioned in progressive newspapers (Bui 2015; Hoang & Phuc 2014). In cyberspace, the public discourse on those topics is openly happening among tens of millions of online users. When Myanmar's people had the chance to cast their ballots after 25 years, Vietnamese Facebookers wrote congratulations on pages and expressed the wish that the day will come when they will witness free elections in Vietnam. The mass democracy protest in Hong Kong was also covered on Vietnamese state news media. The portrait of the young leader Joshua Wong inspired many Vietnamese, who hope that one day young Vietnamese people will be able to live with enthusiasm, courage and freedom to fight for democracy like Hong Kong's students (Nga 2014). For the first time ever, activists and dissidents are calling on Vietnamese netizens to support more than 20 non-CPV candidates who self nominated for seats in the parliamentary elections on 22nd May 2016. Without CPV nomination and back up, these candidates use Facebook and other social networks to mobilise social support and communicate with voters. Senior reporter Tran Dang Tuan, interviewed for this thesis, is among the self-nominated or independent candidates. His announcement of his decision on Facebook went viral with 1,447 shares, over 25,000 emoticons expressing like, surprise and love and nearly 2,400 supporting comments. Tuan did not pass the third round to be qualified for the national voting but his and other independent candidates' moves express the desire for a democratic future in Vietnam and test how the CPV will adapt and manage the increased public pressure for political reform. The internet has connected the Vietnamese people to global networks and the technology is penetrating into the everyday lives and dreams of the people.

Within the scope of this thesis, I have found both answers and also more complex layers in response to the question of the internet's impacts on the Vietnamese press. But research is an ongoing journey, and it has led me to ask yet more questions about the Vietnamese press system. I wish I had more time and the opportunity to continue following the academic path. I believe that my research so far, as presented in this thesis, offers suggestive evidence for a modern and flexible approach to analysing the propaganda press of Vietnam. I hope that my work will inspire other researchers to explore this topic further. I anticipate that in the years to come, the press system of Vietnam will witness further changes, possibly even reforms, caused by the internal and external impacts of the political re-organisation, economic reform and social and cultural changes. Future research is needed to continue to monitor the impacts of information networks when they reach more deeply into political, economical, cultural and social relations. Within three to five years, other researchers will be in a position to evaluate the social actors joining the network and the roles of different nodes connecting the networks. Future research can usefully examine the reactions of the Vietnamese authorities, to see whether they become 'compatible' with the networks or whether they resort to destroy the networks. Investigating these questions may help predict the political prospects of Vietnam.

The mushrooming online community of Vietnam is also a potential topic for international researchers. Empowered by information technology, the community is becoming the most progressive and active social group in Vietnam. With members coming from all walks of life, including propaganda journalists, freelance journalists, citizen journalists, dissidents, intellectuals and workers and other the community is growing to be another society but functioning with more freedom and independence from the control of the CPV authorities. Future research into the cyber society of Vietnam might usefully

focus on the prospects of cyber democracy, the growth of civil society and the counterpower movements of horizontal networks. Again, I quote from Keen (2015)'s book: 'The Internet is not the answer'. The answer calls for the awareness, will and strength of the Vietnamese people to shape their own lives and the future of the country. And in this journey, the internet is a golden chance they should grasp tightly. I hope in the future that we will have the answer to the question how far Vietnamese users can exploit the power of the internet as the Fifth Estate and whether or not a digital revolution can happen in the future Vietnam.

On a smaller scale, the media climate should continue to be investigated because this sector is the most sensitive to every social change and effect. To observe the Vietnamese media, researchers will need a broad understanding of the social context, in which the internet will be an indispensable indicator of political and economic context. I hope my thesis will remind researchers that the concept of the Vietnamese media should not be limited to only the state-run propaganda system but should instead be extended to cover non-state journalism or left side press including citizen journalism and social media.

I look forward to seeing future research on state media that pays close attention to the cyber society, the development of internet-based media and the role of the audience. It is now clear how influential the internet is on the Vietnamese press but we need to observe whether and how the press's control is loosened, how far the CPV can deal with the conflicts, and how the propaganda system transforms to survive the pressures of the age of digital power. Another avenue for academic research into the Vietnamese press is to target the concepts and perceptions of the profession of journalism in the future. There is also the need for a large-scale study investigating why and how Vietnamese journalists have performed their work with little concern about codes of ethics, and the consequences of this working mode.

To encourage the CPV to loosen its control over the press in Vietnam, other countries need to apply pressure to ensure the widespread and unfettered access to the internet for Vietnamese citizens. This will allow the continued expansion of the network society, encourage civic awareness and the development of a civil society and support the demand for democracy. In this respect, my thesis has tried to pave the way for future studies analysing reforms in the Vietnamese media, which I believe is an irresistible trend. ■

List of abbreviations

ADSL	Asymmetric digital subscriber line
CMS	Content management system
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
ISPs	Internet service providers
IXPs	Internet exchange points
IT	Information technology
ICT	Information and communication technology
MIC	Ministry of Information and Communications of Vietnam
NVivo	Qualitative data analysis computer software package
VJA	Vietnamese Journalists Association
VND	Vietnamese Dong – the currency of Vietnam
VTV	Vietnam State Television, the only national television station
VOV	Voice of Vietnam, the only national state radio station

Appendix

Selected interview data

This appendix contains selections from 19 interviews conducted with 18 participants with expertise and experience with the Vietnamese press system. Some participants agreed to have their names published. Interviews with the people whose names were changed and shortened in the thesis are not included in the appendix to protect their confidentiality. All the interviews were conducted in the Vietnamese language. Only the coded sentences and paragraphs were translated into English. The value of the interviews is that they provide access to the exact words spoken by the participants.

Interview with Mai Quoc An

Reporter of *ttvn.vn* (*Young Knowledge*); former reporter of *Sai Gon Tiep Thi* newspaper (*Saigon Marketing*) and Vietnam News Agency

Theo bạn, có sự khác nhau nào giữa việc làm phóng viên cho một tờ báo giấy và một tờ báo điện tử?

Tôi đã làm cả 2 thể loại ở 3 cơ quan khác nhau: Sài Gòn Tiếp Thị, Thông tấn xã Việt Nam, báo điện tử Tri Thức Trẻ. Áp lực thông tin và phản ứng của báo điện tử đòi hỏi nhanh hơn nhiều trước sự kiện. Nhưng chiều sâu thông tin và độ sai sót của báo giấy ít hơn nhiều. Một vấn đề khác là công tác tòa soạn và biên tập của báo điện tử kém báo giấy khá nhiều. Có thể nói phóng viên, biên tập viên báo điện tử đa phần chỉ là thợ báo. ‘Nghệ nhân’ báo chí nhiều hơn ở báo giấy. Tuy nhiên so về mức độ sử dụng công nghệ thông tin để tác nghiệp thì báo giấy lại kém hơn nhiều.

Cá nhân bạn thích làm cho loại hình báo nào hơn? Bạn thấy thích nhất ở điểm nào và cảm thấy mệt mỏi nhất ở những điểm nào?

Tôi thích làm báo điện tử. Vì nó đúng xu thế của thế giới và luôn đòi hỏi nhà báo phải học và tự học nhiều hơn để nâng cao kỹ năng. Đôi khi tôi phát bực vì áp lực bài vở bởi họ đòi hỏi tôi phải có 1 loạt điều tra (thực hiện 1 mình) trong thời gian ngắn. Đó là 1 lời đòi hỏi ngô nghê. Tôi cho họ ví dụ để thực hiện 1 bài điều tra (không phải 1 loạt), báo TT (tôi nghĩ nên viết tắt) mất 8 tháng, hơn 10 máy quay to nhỏ các loại và 14 phóng viên đi từng tốp.

Người ta hay nói đến sự hội tụ truyền thông và các trang báo điện tử là một thí dụ điển hình. Bạn phải làm những công việc gì cho Soha khi tác nghiệp? Bạn cảm thấy như thế nào so với trước kia, khi báo điện tử chưa phát triển?

Hiện nay Soha (ghi chính xác phải là báo điện tử Tri Thức Trẻ) đang yếu mảng clip, audio và bắt đầu triển khai. Cái khó nhất không phải là máy móc mà là con người có kỹ năng và tư duy để sử dụng máy móc. Tôi làm báo hoàn toàn trên smartphone (khá hiếm tại VN-Viet Nam). Tôi chọn cách làm việc đơn độc vì tôi làm mảng điều tra nhưng cần phối hợp với phóng viên trong 1 sự kiện lớn thì cũng không vấn đề. Tôi thấy mình năng động hơn trước đây. Dù vậy, đôi khi tôi sẵn sàng từ chối yêu cầu ngô nghê như đã nói ở trên.

Các báo điện tử khác, trang tin điện tử, mạng xã hội, blogs.... đâu là đối thủ cạnh tranh quan trọng nhất với Soha hiện nay? Tại sao?

Mạng xã hội là đối thủ lớn nhất. Đơn giản là báo chí công dân đang phát triển rất nhanh tại Việt Nam.

Bạn đánh giá như thế nào về xu hướng giảm bớt những tin chính sự và tăng những tin giải trí của báo điện tử Việt Nam?

Tôi ghét điều đó. Không thể phủ nhận tin giải trí được đám đông quan tâm. Nhưng túi tiền của người dân có bị mất hay không là do trình độ của họ. Và nó rất ít có ở giải trí, đa phần lơ lửng và xa rời đời sống. Tôi thích các thông tin mang tính bạch hóa chính sách và chống tiêu cực. Nó mới tốt cho dân!

Bạn có cho rằng báo điện tử là xu hướng nhưng lại được đặt ở thứ hạng kém hơn về mặt chuyên môn so với các báo truyền thống? Việc này có ảnh hưởng gì đến phóng viên báo điện tử không khi bị coi là kém nghề hơn?

Tôi không nghĩ rằng có tờ báo lớn mà chỉ có những tờ báo có nhiều phóng viên lớn. Tôi không thích nhận xét về các phóng viên khác. Còn tôi, cứ để bạn đọc đánh giá.

Bạn đánh giá như nào về vai trò của mạng xã hội với cuộc sống và công việc phóng viên của mình?

Khá quan trọng. Điện thoại tôi online 24/24 và đôi khi tôi bị bạn bè, người thân trách vì hay cắm mặt vào điện thoại. Tôi cũng ít có thời gian hơn cho gia đình vì làm báo điện tử không có giờ nghỉ chứ không nói là ngày nghỉ.

Các nhà quản lý báo chí không có quy định chính thức nhưng luôn cho rằng phóng viên phải có nhiệm vụ dẫn dắt mạng xã hội. Bạn đánh giá như nào về quan niệm này?

Dẫn dắt theo hướng nào? Phóng viên xấu sẽ dẫn dắt theo hướng xấu và ngược lại. Tôi không thích quan điểm này vì tôi không coi đám đông là bầy cừu còn tôi là kẻ chăn chiên.

Tại sao bạn tham gia Diễn đàn nhà báo trẻ?

Hoàn toàn vì nghiệp vụ.

Xin hãy cho biết ưu điểm và nhược điểm của diễn đàn này.

Ưu điểm là đông, nhược điểm là không tinh. Nếu lựa chọn tốt trong các tranh luận thì cũng có thể có vấn đề hay để học.

Bạn có là thành viên của Hội nhà báo Việt Nam không?

Dĩ nhiên!

Bạn có so sánh gì giữa Hội và Diễn đàn?

(no answer)

Diễn đàn nhà báo đã cố gắng phát triển bằng cách mở rộng thêm các hoạt động offline. Bạn có cho rằng diễn đàn sẽ được phép trở thành một tổ chức quy mô cho nhà báo trong tương lai không? Tại sao?

Diễn đàn có offline và tôi quen và học được vài nhà báo giỏi. Hội thỉnh thoảng tổ chức các lớp nghiệp vụ khá bổ ích. Chuyện tương lai tôi không bàn.

Hiện đang có cuộc tranh luận về việc chọn admin của diễn đàn, quan điểm của bạn là gì? Việc có một admin duy nhất quản trị như hiện nay có tác động như thế nào?

Tôi thấy một admin là quá thiếu, là quá sức và không hay. Tôi nghĩ nên tăng, ít nhất là 3 admin và được diễn đàn bầu ra.

Làm báo ở Việt Nam, theo bạn, có gì hay, chưa hay hoặc rủi ro? Nếu được quyền thay đổi, bạn sẽ làm gì cho báo chí Việt Nam? Tại sao?

Việt Nam có quá nhiều vấn đề để viết, chỉ có nhà báo lười và dốt mới không tìm ra đề tài. Và nó cũng rủi ro khi nhà báo, tờ báo rất dễ tổn thương bởi việc hạn chế tiếp cận thông tin, bị đe dọa hay tấn công, không có ưu đãi về thuế và thu nhập thấp. Nếu tôi có quyền, báo chí phải tự do cạnh tranh và tự do báo chí phải ở mức cao nhất. Các hành vi ngăn cản báo chí phải có mức phạt nặng hơn.

Sự phát triển của Internet đã đóng góp như thế nào cho công việc phóng viên của bạn? Rộng hơn nữa là đóng góp gì cho xã hội Việt Nam?

Quá tốt. Tôi học được rất nhiều thứ hay và quen thêm nhiều nhân vật thú vị. Với xã hội tôi nghĩ về cơ bản là tốt.

Khi phóng viên Hoài Nam có mâu thuẫn với báo Thanh niên, bạn đã có ý kiến rất rõ ràng nhưng phần lớn các đồng nghiệp khác, kể cả Hội nhà báo lại có thái độ ngược lại. Bạn thấy gì từ thực tế này?

Tâm lý chung người Việt là dĩ hòa vi quý và không quen với việc đấu tranh tới cùng, thích thỏa thuận ngầm. Tôi quen Hoài Nam đủ lâu để biết anh ấy đang hoang trong cuộc sống và giới khi tác nghiệp. Tôi biết tôi mới nói! Bảo vệ Hoài Nam, tôi bị nhiều người ghét. Nếu im lặng, tôi sẽ ghét chính mình.

Từ đó, bạn có nhận xét gì về báo chí Việt Nam và phóng viên Việt Nam trong việc tiếp cận những vấn đề mang tính cấm đoán và nhạy cảm? Có gì thay đổi tốt hơn không? Có gì suy giảm không?

Không dễ tiếp cận những vấn đề mang tính cấm đoán và nhạy cảm. Tiếp cận xong tòa soạn chưa chắc dám đăng hoặc không đăng vì lý do nào đó ngoài chuyên môn. Có khi đăng xong bị bắt gỡ xuống. Có 1 thứ tốt hơn là mạng xã hội có xu thế bạch hóa thông tin và nó tạo áp lực ngược cho tòa soạn.

Bạn đánh giá như thế nào về sức ảnh hưởng của các blogger, các nhà báo tự do, các nhà báo công dân hiện nay và trong tương lai?

Họ có sức ảnh hưởng lớn và sẽ ngày 1 phát triển hơn.

Chắc bạn có biết về Đề án Quy hoạch báo chí. Đánh giá của bạn về đề án này?

Tôi chưa đọc nó hoàn toàn, mới chỉ qua báo chí và mạng xã hội. Đành không nói thứ mình chưa rõ, như mọi khi.

Xin cho biết tác động của dự luật Tiếp cận thông tin với báo chí Việt Nam?

Như câu trên.

Nếu bạn còn có đóng góp gì cho nghiên cứu liên quan đến vai trò của Internet với báo chí đương đại Việt Nam mà tôi chưa hỏi, xin mời bạn bổ sung giúp tôi.

Hãy nghiên cứu người đọc nhiều hơn. Họ mới quyết định báo chí thế nào.

Bạn cho biết bạn muốn nêu tên đây đủ hay giấu tên trong nghiên cứu của tôi? Nếu muốn sử dụng tên và chức danh đầy đủ, bạn muốn hiển thị như thế nào. Xin chân thành cảm ơn và xin được trao đổi thêm nếu câu hỏi chưa rõ nghĩa.

Mai Quốc Ấn, phóng viên báo điện tử Tri Thức Trẻ. Nguyên phóng viên Sài Gòn Tiếp Thị và Thông Tấn Xã Việt Nam.

Interview with Huy Duc

Freelance Journalist, Blogger of Osin blog

Theo ông, báo chí Việt Nam đang thiếu những tố chất gì để có thể tiến đến gần hơn những tiêu chuẩn quốc tế về vai trò của báo chí?

Báo chí Việt Nam thiếu hai yếu tố cốt lõi để đạt đến các tiêu chuẩn quốc tế: tự do và tính chuyên nghiệp.

Internet có đã giúp báo chí Việt Nam thay đổi như thế nào? Còn gì mà Internet vẫn không thể thay đổi được? Lý do tại sao?

Internet đã buộc báo chí phải thay đổi rất nhiều. Trước hết nó lấp dần khoảng trống thông tin giữa sự thật và những gì được nói trên báo chí nhà nước. Nó là một công cụ để dân chúng thực hiện tự do ngôn luận, phần mà báo chí nhà nước không thể đáp ứng. Trước đây, khi báo chí nhà nước đưa tin sai hoặc ca ngợi chính quyền, người đọc chỉ có thể gửi thư tới tòa soạn (nếu có phản ứng); việc trả lời, đính chính, phụ thuộc vào sự tử tế của các báo (trừ những cái mà chính quyền cho là sai, buộc báo chí phải đính chính). Nay, chỉ sau vài giây, nếu báo chí nói sai, người đọc sẽ vạch cái sai đó ra trên mạng xã hội. Những điều chỉnh trước áp lực của mạng xã hội, đặc biệt là trong vụ Đoàn Văn Vươn, cho thấy rõ điều đó.

Nếu được cải cách báo chí Việt Nam, đâu sẽ là ưu tiên của ông? Tại sao?

Trả lại quyền ra báo cho khu vực tư. Nhà nước (các bộ) không ra báo. Coi báo chí như một ngành kinh doanh, nhà nước chỉ can thiệp vào việc nộp thuế và áp dụng các điều luật để xử lý.

Ông nhận xét gì về dự án cải cách báo chí của bộ 4T-Bộ Thông tin và Truyền thông?

Dự án được hình thành trên nền tảng tư duy tập trung bao cấp. Trong điều kiện VN hiện nay, lẽ ra Bộ chỉ có thể quy hoạch những tờ báo nào được ngân sách tài trợ nhằm phục vụ quyền tiếp cận thông tin của người dân, và đưa ra quy định các bộ không được sử dụng ngân sách để ra báo trừ công báo.

Những án phạt tài chính vi phạm của báo chí hay thậm chí giải thể một tờ báo của bộ này, theo ông có ảnh hưởng gì?

Đây là sự lạm quyền. Việc giải thể hay lập một tờ báo là quyền của nhà đầu tư (cơ quan chủ quản) không phải quyền hành chính. Nhà nước chỉ có thể áp dụng quyền tư pháp để xử lý trong trường hợp báo chí phạm luật. Như trên đã nói, nếu báo chí có dấu hiệu vu khống, xúc phạm danh dự nhân phẩm người khác... thì các nạn nhân của báo chí phải kiện ra tòa; các chế tài như đình bản, đóng cửa một tờ báo... chỉ có thể được đưa ra bởi tòa án chứ không thể được đưa ra bởi cơ quan hành chính. Phạt tiền, trong một nhà nước pháp quyền cũng thường chỉ được đưa ra bởi tòa án.

Theo ông, blog và mạng xã hội (Facebook) liệu có thể lớn mạnh đến mức độ nào? Báo chí chính thống VN sẽ phải làm gì để cạnh tranh với sự lớn mạnh này?

Mạng xã hội không bao giờ thay thế hoàn toàn được báo chí chính thống (vì nó không có kinh phí sẵn tin). Mạng xã hội chỉ buộc báo chí phải trưởng thành.

Ông đã từng trải qua nhiều biến cố với nghề báo. Sau khi bị từ chối làm việc cho một tờ báo chính thống của Việt Nam, cảm xúc của ông là gì? Đây là giới hạn của ông?

Trong nghề nghiệp, tôi đi dần từng bước từ một phóng viên sẵn tin đến một nhà phân tích. Kể từ khi có blog, Facebook... tôi nhận ra rằng, nếu chỉ để thực hiện quyền tự do ngôn luận thì không nhất thiết phải lệ thuộc vào một tờ báo nhà nước.

Một nhà báo ko làm cho các báo nhà nước ở VN thì có thể làm việc gì để nuôi sống gia đình và vẫn tiếp tục lập trường phản biện như ông?

Tôi có thuận lợi là con cái đã lớn (không còn phải lo cho gia đình) và tôi có thể làm tư vấn để mưu sinh nên có thể viết mà không phụ thuộc vào tiền bạc (tôi từ chối quảng cáo trên blog trước đây và Facebook hiện nay); khi tôi đã viết thì không liên quan đến tiền bạc.

Ông có sợ mình sẽ 'ngã ngựa' (bỏ tù) như một số đồng nghiệp khác không? Tại sao?

Nguyên tắc của tôi là , 'luôn tìm cách mở rộng ranh giới an toàn nhưng không vượt qua ranh giới đó' (Always try to push the line but not to cross the line). Tất nhiên, viết

lách ở VN thì không phải lúc nào cũng nhận biết chính xác where the line is và người viết phải chấp nhận rủi ro kể cả đi tù. Nếu làm những gì để đất nước có dân chủ, tự do mà phải đi tù thì không nên coi là 'ngã ngựa'.

Ông thích công việc nào nhất ở Việt Nam: nhà báo (làm việc cho báo chính thống), blogger, hay nhà văn? Tại sao?

Tôi từng viết văn (có truyện ngắn đăng trên Văn Nghệ trước khi viết báo. Nhưng tôi đã chọn báo như một sự nghiệp trọn đời. Tôi luôn mong muốn được làm báo trong môi trường chuyên nghiệp. Tôi lựa chọn trở thành một blogger thay vì tiếp tục làm việc trong một tờ báo nhà nước vì khi làm cho một tờ báo nhà nước, các nhà báo không thể phá vỡ các nguyên tắc mà hệ thống chính trị (đang chi phối nhà nước) lập ra, cho dù phần lớn các nguyên tắc đó là đi ngược lại việc thực thi quyền tự do ngôn luận và mâu thuẫn với ước muốn của một nhà báo muốn trở thành chuyên nghiệp.

Là một blogger, ông tự coi blog của mình thuộc nhóm blog nào trong số 3 nhóm mà mọi người hay nói nôm na là Trắng, Đen và Nhờ nhờ? Tại sao?

Tôi không thuộc 3 nhóm đó. Tôi là một nhà báo độc lập.

Ông nhận xét gì về blog Chân dung quyền lực?

Đấy không phải là 'báo', đấy là công cụ của các băng đảng.

Ông nhận xét gì về công chúng (audience) của Việt Nam qua những sự việc gây ồn ào trên mạng xã hội và báo chí như vụ Tân Hiệp Phát và Cây xanh Hà Nội?

Nó phản ánh trình độ của công chúng; là 'văn hóa làng xã'. Thông qua những việc như thế, công chúng Việt Nam đang dần trưởng thành.

Theo ông, Việt Nam đã có tự do, dân chủ trên mạng xã hội ở Việt Nam chưa? Mức độ của khái niệm này ở Việt Nam đã đạt đến đâu và sẽ đi đến đâu?

Nên nói trên mạng có tự do chưa, thay vì dân chủ. Ở một mức nào đó mạng xã hội đang là nơi tốt nhất để thể hiện quyền tự do ngôn luận tuy nhiên sự sợ hãi vẫn tồn tại, vẫn đe dọa người phát ngôn, nên không thể đòi hỏi ở đó có đầy đủ tự do.

Xin ông cho biết ông có muốn nêu tên đây đủ hay giấu tên trong nghiên cứu? Nếu có, ông muốn sử dụng tên và chức danh gì. Xin chân thành cảm ơn và xin được trao đổi thêm nếu câu hỏi chưa rõ nghĩa.

Những gì tôi viết ở đây không cần giấu tên. Chỉ cần ghi: Huy Đức, nhà báo.

Interview with Hoang Nguyen Vu

Reporter of *ttvn.vn* (Young Knowledge)

Các nhà báo thuộc báo điện tử, họ luôn đòi bỏ trang thông tin điện tử. Bạn làm ở cả Trang thông tin điện tử và Báo điện tử thì nghĩ gì về vai trò trang thông tin điện tử?

Thứ nhất, nhà báo nào kêu gọi như vậy thì đấy là sự thiếu hiểu biết. Em khẳng định luôn. Vì trang thông tin điện tử bây giờ cũng phải 3-4 loại, của công ty, doanh nghiệp... Nếu bỏ thì là hủy diệt một phần kinh tế. Hai là... Việt Nam có một thế hệ làm báo in không biết gì về báo điện tử nên khá cay cú với các tờ báo khá phát triển. Nên coi lại xem ở Việt Nam có báo nào đúng là báo điện tử hay chỉ là một tờ báo giấy phát hành trên mạng? Nó khác nhau nhé. Giờ đa số nhiều tờ có giấy phép nhưng đơn thuần chỉ là báo giấy phát hành trên mạng chứ không phải báo điện tử. Còn báo điện tử đúng nghĩa phải sử dụng các loại hình đa phương tiện của nó. Nó phải tích hợp các nội dung điện tử để tương tác với bạn đọc và thứ ba là huy động được tất cả các điểm mạnh của các loại hình báo chí khác... vì thế nên báo điện tử trở lên nguy hiểm. Nó có thể giết chết các loại báo chí khác.

Bạn có cảm nhận được sự phân biệt không vì khi mình phỏng vấn những người làm báo in, mình có cảm giác họ có sự phân biệt khá rõ. Họ coi họ là những nhà báo chuyên nghiệp, chắc tay và đáng tin cậy hơn các nhà báo thuộc dòng kia (báo điện tử).

Câu đấy phải để cho bạn đọc trả lời. Một người làm báo chuyên nghiệp, chắc tay nhưng không ai đọc thì phải coi lại sự chuyên nghiệp chắc tay đấy... Vì báo chí bạn đọc là ng quyết định. Khách hàng quảng cáo cũng chọn những tờ có nhiều bạn đọc (dĩ nhiên là bạn đọc đúng target của họ). Bản thân bạn đọc cũng chọn những tờ báo uy tín để đọc. Em khẳng định báo in VN chưa chuyên nghiệp...

Thách thức với báo điện tử VN?

Đầu tiên là công nghệ, đó là cái quyết định cho báo điện tử. Không phải là tốc độ đường truyền, máy móc mà công nghệ là sử dụng để đưa những sản phẩm cho báo điện tử cho phù hợp. Cái này là vấn đề con người sử dụng công nghệ. Hai là đội ngũ làm báo điện tử Việt Nam chưa chuyên nghiệp, vẫn là báo in phát hành trên mạng. Ba là những người làm báo đa phương tiện chưa thực sự nhiều. Họ làm video thì làm theo tư duy truyền hình. Tư duy clip online khác hẳn. Bài cho điện tử thì viết như báo in. Đội ngũ quá lớn làm báo in, truyền hình quá lâu. Với báo điện tử, nhìn thấy là đọc liền.

Bốn là tác động tiêu cực về mặt nào đấy của mạng xã hội.... Bản thân một số tin, clip xảy ra ta đã thấy trên mạng.... Đôi khi, một số tin trên báo điện tử còn bị giáo điều về mặt thông tin. Chốt hạ lớn nhất vẫn là vấn đề con người.

Trong bức tranh chung của báo chí Việt Nam, loại hình báo chí nào sáng nhất, năng động, triển vọng nhất?

Báo điện tử là chắc rồi, là xu hướng. Cái không hài lòng là nội dung tích hợp cho phiên bản mobile chưa nhiều. Vẫn là trang web phát hành chuyên biệt cho mobile.

Chính vì sự không chuyên nghiệp nên ndung nhiều tò lộn xộn, ko xác minh 2 chiều. Nếu làm vậy thì không khác Facebook. Gần đây là những tiêu cực trong sai phạm y tế Đắc Lắc của Hoàng Thiên Nga của Tiền phong... Nhiều tò như vậy. Làm vậy để câu view. Đi quá đà về người nổi tiếng.... Làm bạn đọc mất niềm tin vào báo chí, khiến họ nghĩ báo chí hết việc để làm.

Báo điện tử Việt Nam là loại hình báo chí góp phần thúc đẩy xu hướng lá cải hóa. Bạn bình luận gì?

Nói như vậy oan cho những tờ báo đó. Thật ra những ng làm báo không muốn lá cải hóa tờ báo của mình nhưng có một bộ phận không nhỏ thiếu kỹ năng, thiếu tâm như em nói được đặt vào một số vị trí của tờ báo và nó đã biến mặt báo thành khoảng đen. Lá cải không chỉ chờ đến báo điện tử mà từ thời làm báo in... Chị nhìn xem một loạt như Đang yêu, Đời sống pháp luật (đồng báo in ấy) có cái nào là không lá cải đâu. Nhưng khi đưa những người ấy lên làm báo điện tử thì trời ơi, có tội với bạn đọc. Nhưng bạn đọc họ vẫn minh lắm. Đừng có nghĩ họ ngu. Cách đây khoảng 10 năm, có một tờ báo điện tử thôi em nói luôn là tờ Vietnamnet lúc ấy là một niềm tự hào của báo điện tử Việt Nam. Những bài góc nhìn thứ ba rất sâu. Lúc đó Vietnamnet có những tin rất hay, nhanh và chuyên nghiệp. Rồi sau đó thay ekip đưa một ông nhà văn nhà báo ngoài Hanoi này vào. Từ đấy thì báo điện tử Vietnamnet là sốc sex hiếp... Tức là nó vẽ một vết đen lên Vietnamnet mà mười mấy năm sau không xóa được vết đen ấy. Không xóa được. Với bạn đọc một khi niềm tin mất thì khôn thay được.

Interview with Tran Dang Tuan

General Director of An Vien Television & Vice Chairman of Vietnam Digital Communication Association. Former Deputy General Director of Vietnam State Television VTV

Anh là người thường xuyên cập nhật Facebook. Anh thường sử dụng mạng xã hội này vào mục đích gì?

Tôi lên mạng để đọc và để viết. Về Đọc, thì tôi dùng Facebook như cách thu thập thông tin: Thông tin báo chí được chia sẻ trên Facebook; Thông tin từ các nguồn khác báo chí được người dùng Facebook chia sẻ; Tâm thế và các quan điểm xã hội bộc lộ qua các ý kiến cá nhân, các thảo luận trên Facebook ...

Về viết, tôi sử dụng Facebook để viết phục vụ các mục đích khác nhau: Ưu tiên hàng đầu là để thực hiện dự án Com Có Thịt và các dự án khác của Quỹ Trò Nghèo Vùng Cao. Tiếp đó là chia sẻ với cộng đồng những việc, những người, những suy nghĩ liên quan đến hoạt động xã hội phục vụ cộng đồng, đặc biệt là các đối tượng trẻ em nghèo cần giúp đỡ; Trình bày và chia sẻ suy nghĩ về các vấn đề xã hội tôi quan tâm; Cuối cùng, một cách riêng tư hơn, là chia sẻ cảm nhận, tâm tư, đôi lúc cả những đoạn tản văn, thơ... của cá nhân hay của người khác.

Tại sao anh chọn Facebook chứ không phải một cách truyền thông khác (ví dụ: viết blog, gửi email, nhắn tin...)?

Tôi từng viết blog, rồi tôi sử dụng Facebook song song. Mỗi loại hình có cái mạnh hơn nào đó. Facebook đã bao gồm cả nhắn tin và email, nhưng nhanh hơn và tính tương tác cao hơn. Nhưng thông tin trên Facebook nhanh chóng bị 'ủ' và việc tìm lại không dễ dàng lắm. Facebook không thay thế được email và nhắn tin. Thực ra tôi đâu chỉ dùng trang Facebook, mà sử dụng tất cả các phương tiện kể trên. Tôi nghĩ mọi người cũng đều sử dụng nhiều loại hình thức như vậy.

Anh là người đầu tiên có tiếng nói chính thức về việc chặt cây (thư gửi lãnh đạo Hà Nội). Với cá nhân anh, câu chuyện chặt cây đã bắt đầu như thế nào?

Nó bắt đầu từ chỗ tôi nhìn thấy cây bị chặt hoặc bị di dời. Chuyện này có trước năm 2015 nhưng tôi chỉ thấy tiếc, chứ không thấy lý do có thể thắc mắc, do khi đó tôi nghĩ cây bị hạ hoặc di dời do công trình xây dựng. Tháng 3/2015 tôi có một số ngày thấy xót

xa vì những hàng cây tại dọc đường tôi đi đến nơi làm việc bị đốn hạ hay đánh gốc. Tôi cũng theo dõi trên báo chí thông tin về kế hoạch thay thế cây ở Hà Nội. Tôi không nhất trí ở nhiều khía cạnh với các lập luận và cách thực hiện kế hoạch này. Tôi viết thư ngỏ cho Chủ tịch Hà Nội sau vài ngày chứng kiến việc này.

Trước khi thư ngỏ được gửi đi, anh có nghĩ đến phản ứng của công chúng không? Và trước thực tế là sự hưởng ứng lan toả và sâu rộng của người dân Hà Nội và trên mạng xã hội, anh có suy nghĩ gì?

Khi viết thư, tôi căn cứ chỉ vào tình cảm, suy nghĩ của mình, không dự đoán điều gì cả. Tôi thấy là một công dân, tôi có thể và cần phải có quan điểm, ý kiến về những gì liên quan đến cộng đồng, đến cuộc sống xã hội nơi tôi đang sống. Tôi cũng cảm nhận rằng nhiều người có cảm nhận và suy nghĩ như tôi về vấn đề cây xanh. Nhưng tôi không nghĩ nhiều về chuyện ý kiến của mình có được nhiều người chia sẻ hay không. Tôi không ngạc nhiên khi nhận thấy nhiều người có suy nghĩ, lo lắng và bức xúc giống tôi sau khi gửi thư ngỏ.

Đã có người gọi phong trào phản ứng chặt cây ở Hà Nội là một phong trào xã hội dân sự, anh có đồng ý với nhận xét này không? Xin hãy cho biết lý do nếu anh đồng ý hoặc không đồng ý.

Tôi không quá quan tâm về định nghĩa việc nhiều người lên tiếng về dự án thay thế cây ở Hà Nội là hiện tượng gì. Tôi nghĩ nó phải là chuyện bình thường trong xã hội. Chúng ta có một khẩu hiệu rất tốt, là 'Dân biết, dân bàn, dân làm, dân kiểm tra'. Chỉ cần làm được điều này, chúng ta sẽ có một xã hội khác, một cuộc sống khác. Người dân có thể và cần có ý kiến về những gì thiết thân với họ. Đó là sinh hoạt bình thường trong xã hội. Và chính quyền có trách nhiệm và có lợi ích trong việc lắng nghe tiếng nói của người dân, đối thoại với những ý kiến đó. Tôi nghĩ đó là phản biện xã hội với một dự án liên quan đến họ. Tiếc là lẽ ra phản biện đó phải được tạo điều kiện để diễn ra sớm hơn, trước khi dự án được thực hiện. Có lẽ xã hội dân sự có nội hàm lớn hơn. Và tôi nghĩ sớm muộn gì thì cũng phải hình thành xã hội dân sự lành mạnh, như là kết quả của một quá trình dân chủ hoá mọi hoạt động của xã hội.

Theo anh, câu chuyện Chặt cây ở Hà Nội bắt đầu lan rộng từ đâu, thông qua báo chí chính thống, mạng xã hội hay từ nguồn nào?

Trước đó trên báo chí có những thông tin về dự án thay thế cây. Nhưng câu chuyện lan rộng là do những người dân nhìn bằng mắt mình chuyện này trên đường phố và bộc lộ ý kiến qua mạng xã hội. Sau đó những ý kiến này quay lại các trang báo chí và tiếp

tục lan rộng ở mọi kênh truyền thông. Về cá nhân, thì thư ngỏ của tôi, tôi gửi theo đường bưu điện, đưa lên trang cá nhân, đồng thời gửi cho các tờ báo. Với tôi khi phát biểu một ý kiến công khai thì các kênh đó đều có thể là cách để gửi đi ý kiến của mình.

Giả định, Việt Nam chưa có mạng xã hội Facebook, anh vẫn gửi thư cho lãnh đạo Hà Nội và câu chuyện Chặt cây ở Hà Nội được báo chí chính thống đưa tin. Nếu như vậy, liệu hiệu ứng của công chúng có giống những diễn biến tiếp hiện nay?

Vâng, chưa có mạng xã hội thì vẫn có thể nói lên ý kiến qua các cách khác. Đây không phải lần đầu tiên tôi gửi thư ngỏ tới các cá nhân có thẩm quyền để góp ý và phát biểu ý kiến về một vấn đề nào đó. Có lúc tôi gửi qua báo chí, và chỉ sau khi báo chí đăng tải, có thể tôi mới đưa trên trang của mình ở Facebook. Nhưng thường thì tôi không đưa lại. Bạn bè hay dẫn link các thư đó từ báo chí lên Facebook. Tôi nghĩ việc viết gửi cho báo chí, hay viết lên trang cá nhân, hoặc cả hai cách song song... là tùy từng vấn đề, tùy từng cảm nhận tình huống riêng.

Với riêng chủ đề chặt cây, anh có nhận xét gì về cách xử lý thông tin của báo chí chính thống?

Báo chí chính thống đưa tin khá nhiều, khá đủ, và hình như họ cũng lấy thông tin nhiều từ mạng xã hội. Tôi không đọc hết nên không thể đánh giá đầy đủ về cách xử lý thông tin của họ. Tuy nhiên có một thực tế là trước khi các ý kiến của đông đảo người dân lan truyền trên mạng xã hội, thì vấn đề này không thật sự nóng trên báo chí chính thống. Khi dư luận lan rộng, báo chí đưa nhiều hơn. Các nhà báo nhiều khi không dễ chỉ dựa vào sức mình mà đưa ra các vấn đề, sự việc mang tính tranh luận gay gắt. Việc báo chí qua mạng xã hội để biết rõ hơn sự việc, ý kiến, tâm thế người đọc, rồi có những quan điểm của mình, là chuyện bình thường.

Theo anh, tương lai của Internet sẽ như thế nào ở Việt Nam?

Tôi nghĩ những người có trách nhiệm, kể cả lãnh đạo cấp cao đã nói và tôi cũng nhiều lần nghe từ các chuyên viên, quan chức nói về vấn đề sử dụng Internet ở Việt Nam. Đó đều là những lời khẳng định không ngăn cản, và không thể, không nên hạn chế sự phát triển của Internet ở Việt Nam. Tôi nghĩ phát triển Internet không phải là vấn đề muốn hay không muốn nữa. Nó là một nhu cầu và nó là một phần của cuộc sống rồi.

Dựa trên suy đoán đó của anh về tương lai của Internet, diện mạo của báo chí chính thống Việt Nam sẽ như thế nào?

Báo chí vẫn có sức mạnh riêng. Theo tôi nghĩ người ta nói nhiều về sức lan toả mạnh mẽ của mạng xã hội, và nói thế là đúng. Nhưng cũng có khía cạnh khác: Các thông tin trên mạng xã hội, nếu không phải là thông tin cực kỳ quan trọng với tất cả nhiều triệu người, và nếu không phải là một tình huống bùng nổ dư luận nào đó, mà chỉ là nhịp điệu hàng ngày, thì mức lan toả không thể sánh với thông tin trên báo chí. Ít ra hiện nay là vậy. Ta nói ví dụ trên Facebook chẳng hạn. Facebook rất rộng, nhưng lại phân chia ra thành các nhóm ‘hẹp’ tồn tại song song. Có sự liên thông giữa các nhóm (do cơ chế hoạt động của Facebook là có các ‘bạn chung’). Nhưng cho dù một status nào đó có cả chục ngàn người đọc hay hàng trăm người chia sẻ, thì cũng không phải là lớn so với cũng nội dung đó đăng tải trên một tờ báo có uy tín. Khuôn khổ của Facebook cũng không thuận tiện cho những nội dung phức tạp. Một status dài ít người xem như một câu ngắn, hay một bức ảnh. Tôi nhận thấy những status mang tính xã hội cao thường không ‘ăn khách’ bằng những nội dung kích thích sự tò mò của người đọc. Điều này là hợp lý trên môi trường Facebook.

Theo tôi, Facebook hay các mạng xã hội hiện nay không có nhiều khả năng ‘sản xuất thông tin’ như báo chí. Facebook phần nhiều phản ánh ý kiến, tâm trạng, phản ứng...trước những thông tin mà phần nhiều người ta biết qua báo chí. Vì thế nói chuyện Facebook thay cho báo chí thì chưa phải. Nhưng nói như thế không có nghĩa là một ‘nguy cơ’ như vậy không có. Nó tiềm tàng. Trên môi trường mạng xã hội có thể hình thành những trang ít nhiều giống như tờ báo, tức là có thu thập, sản xuất, đóng gói thông tin định kỳ. Với môi trường mạng, sự ‘kiểm soát’ đối với loại hình này khó có thể làm giống như với tờ báo thông thường. Theo như tôi quan sát thì ở Việt Nam nếu báo chí năng động, cởi mở, thì Internet không đe dọa vị trí của báo chí. Cả hai có thể song đôi vì đều có những thế mạnh và có thể bổ sung rất tốt cho nhau. Báo chí tốt sẽ giúp hạn chế những rủi ro của thông tin qua mạng, đồng thời khẳng định những thông tin chính xác có trên mạng. Và thông tin hữu ích trên mạng bổ sung cho thông tin báo chí. Mạng cũng nối dài các thông tin của báo chí. Trường hợp ngược lại, dù vì lý do gì chăng nữa, nếu báo chí không đáp ứng nhu cầu thông tin, nó sẽ hụt hơi trước thông tin không chính thống trên Internet...

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