

Between State Tolerance and Direct Control of Mass Media in Vietnam The Rise and Decline of ‘Quasi-Private’ Press

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This study examines the evolution of the state-press relationship in Socialist Vietnam over the past two decades. Following economic reforms and the advent of the internet, Vietnam has witnessed the emergence of various forms of mass media. Despite historically restrictive state-press relationships, these outlets have captivated larger audiences than their state-owned counterparts. Focusing on privately-owned online press within the tightly controlled media landscape, we explore the development of ‘quasi-private press,’ facilitated by the internet and big tech enterprises. We posit that this new media landscape has navigated stringent state censorship, leading to an enhanced degree of media autonomy. Furthermore, it has emboldened some journalists to engage in an effort to push the boundaries of permissible content. In this paper, we also underscore that the government’s recent intensification of press regulations could potentially stifle the dynamism of new media.

Keywords: Quasi-Private Press, Mass Media, Communist Party, Vietnam, State-Press Relationships

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the mass media in democratic societies that provides plural perspectives for public discussion or acts as watchdogs of state agencies, mass media in authoritarian regimes are usually controlled in ways that stifle criticism of ruling regimes or carry out state propaganda (Geddes and Zaller, 1989). Such regimes often utilize restrictive

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measures, including censorship and regulations, to ensure national media outlets frame specific perspectives justifying state policies or disseminating regime-friendly information (Price, 2015).

Given the existing explanations about the status of national media in authoritarian regimes, it might not be too difficult to imagine that the Vietnamese government, the Communist Party state, monopolizes news and information and restricts counter-narratives to the regime. By law, all media must be registered under a government organization, and only official media companies can produce news content. Other types of media, such as online information websites, were only allowed to ‘republish’ content from the official newspapers. This Communist Party state tightly controls any form of private participation with specific restrictions detailed in the Vietnamese Press Law and used the official press to disseminate ‘pro-state’ or ‘pro-regime’ content effectively. Under these circumstances, Vietnamese citizens are expected to exclusively access news through these ‘official’ channels.

However, the reality is more complex than that suggests. Much of the information that Vietnamese people access nowadays does not necessarily come from the state-owned ‘press,’ as defined in the Press Law. Among the top four most visited news websites in Vietnam, as reported by SimilarWeb in 2019, VnExpress and Zing News are official online newspapers backed by two private technology corporations in the country, which are Financing and Promoting Technology Corporation (FPT hereafter) and VNG Corporation respectively. The other two websites, namely ‘Kenh14.vn’ (owned by VCCorp) and ‘24h.vn’ (owned by 24h Advertising JSC), actively participate in news production even though they operate with ‘general information website’ licenses.

It is intriguing that despite strict government control over mass media in Vietnam, these media outlets with private participation have experienced significant growth. Although it may be challenging to attribute this phenomenon directly to media liberalization or pluralism in Vietnam, these news and information websites, referred to as ‘quasi-private press’ in this paper, have provided citizens with access to a more diverse range of news resources and have attracted a larger readership compared to the official press. This situation deviates from the imperial rule of the state, which dictates that no private press is acceptable. It differs from frequently discussed narratives among many international scholars and organizations that highlight the tight control exerted by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) over the media (Bass, 2017; Reporters without Border, 2019; Repucci, 2019).

Against this backdrop, we ask two questions: what factors have contributed to the rise of the nontraditional media in Vietnam? How has the new form of quasi-private press become institutionalized within the Vietnamese political landscape? We traced the evolution of the quasi-private press and the development of mass media in Vietnam. Our argument is based on the increase in internet users, marketization, and the government’s ‘soft control’ (or tolerance) over mass media since the opening of the national economy in 1986 (Tang and Iyengar, 2011). Cases of newly established media outlets since the introduction of the internet in 1997 were also analyzed to demonstrate the significant role played by entrepreneurs’ involvement in the institutionalization of partially private media, giving rise to what we term ‘quasi-private press.’ This type of media is privately owned, allowing for some degree of professional autonomy while remaining under

the legal authority of the state. The institutionalization of this quasi-private press is noteworthy, given the tightly controlled organizational structure of the media by the state. Despite ongoing censorship, newly emerged media outlets in the internet era have introduced changes that diversify the information environment and enhance media professionalism. Our analyses of these new media outlets also highlight successful institutionalization processes involving institutional entrepreneurs, resulting in constant dynamics within the framework of state agencies in non-democratic countries like Vietnam. More importantly, this dynamism has been overlooked in current scholarship, as we will demonstrate in the next section.

To track the diversification of mass media and the evolving state-press relationship in Vietnam over time, we sought evidence in documents from government authorities, mass media sources, and international organizations. Additionally, we also conducted field research and interviewed government officials, as well as current and former journalists, using semi-structured questionnaires. These interviews aimed to provide insights into the 'behind-the-scenes' institutional changes and facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

STATE INSTITUTIONS AND NON-STATE MASS MEDIA

Contemporary media in Vietnam, a rare case of a socialist state in transition, has received limited scholarly attention, as noted by several scholars (Nguyen-Thu, 2018; Duong, 2016). Domestic publications often take the CPV's control over the media for granted (Phan and Nguyen, 2018; Nguyen, 2016). Independent studies on the Vietnamese media system in the Vietnamese language are often discouraged. At the international level, while an increasing number of scholars across the globe have explored the evolution of the mass media landscape in other post-Cold-War contexts, only a few studies have focused on the potential signs of media liberalization in Vietnam (Toefl, 2013). These studies characterized the media as being associated with business conglomerates, shedding light on the ongoing debate surrounding the marketization of the news industry (Tran, 2002). Some studies have explored the evolution of the Vietnamese press within the context of economic integration and technological advancement (Le, 2013).

Regardless of these changes, the existing literature predominantly focuses on the strict political censorship imposed by the CPV government. Vietnam consistently ranks low in the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2019) and is often categorized as one of the least free countries (Repucci, 2019). Researchers frequently underscore the significant presence of the state in the Vietnamese media, describing it as 'of the state, for the state, yet against the state,' or 'a tool for managing society' (Cain, 2013; Hayton, 2010; Heng, 1999). Although some exceptions have been explored in the literature on public dissent in Vietnam (Kerkvliet, 2019; Labbé, 2015), the prevailing perception is that extensive control leaves little room for media freedom.

Although there is some truth to this conclusion, it may be problematic or unfair to depict the state-press relationship in Vietnam as a permanent 'the suppressor-the suppressed' model. The media system in non-democratic countries has been

insufficiently studied, often observed primarily from a Western perspective. There is a lack of research examining the complexities of press organizations within Vietnam's hybrid political economy, where an emerging open economy intersects with the state's aim for societal guidance. Additionally, limited attention has been given to the organizational-level practices of press organizations in Vietnam. This disproportionate focus on the CPV's censorship in the existing studies fails to fully capture the dynamism and evolution of non-state media in the internet era.

For decades, theories on the state-press relationship have been built around *Four Theories of the Press*, the seminal work of Siebert et al. (1956) who categorized press systems based on their dichotomous view of political liberalism and authoritarianism. They attempted to answer, 'why is the press as it is?' by explaining what the press 'should be and do' in each political regime. Yet, despite its usefulness, this politically oriented linear classification is not attuned to the varieties of the state-press relationships.

Instead, those who studied the media in transitional societies in Asia and Africa strongly challenged this dichotomous categorization (Hallin and Mancini, 2012; Yin, 2008). The conceptualization of media in Siebert et al. (1956) is firmly rooted in a North American understanding, and its unrefined ideas of the political regime lack 'sufficient nuance' to capture the ambiguous and even contradictory roles performed by different media actors (Hallin and Mancini, 2012: 202). The application of those models could lead to a disproportionate dichotomy between authoritarian censorship and democratic press freedom (Cain, 2013). For example, this view might face difficulties in explaining the somewhat nuanced state-press relationships in authoritarian states like China after the turn of media commercialization, as described by Stockman (2012). She explained that China's media system has a 'peculiar structure' where each newspaper has a varying level of autonomy from the state while the state effectively sets boundaries for content and utilizes nontraditional media to spread propaganda. Other scholars have also noted that the Chinese government often 'selectively' uses information manipulation through media censorship and propaganda to please the citizens, prevent citizen activism (Chen and Xu, 2017), or monitor local politicians (Huang, 2019).

In addition, the sole focus on the state's intervention is likely to overlook the management-level dynamic interaction among organizations, journalists, and the state. It is crucial to mention the 'semi-autonomous' nature of the press that creates the foundation of journalistic professionalism (Yin, 2008: 46). The operational principles of the press that constitute the micro dimension include editorial decisions, media operations, and journalistic reporting created inside the media organizations.

In this context, the framework that Hallin and Mancini introduced (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) has become helpful in understanding mass media formation in non-Western settings. Although their categorization is still based on North American and Western European systems, they newly suggested a set of four pillars to analyze the media system across the globe. These include (1) political parallelism meaning the extent to which the media system reflects the political system, (2) the degree and nature of state intervention, (3) media markets, and (4) journalistic professionalism. Its usefulness comes from its holistic approach: while the first three dimensions present the media's relationship with external factors such as the economic, social, and political context, the fourth dimension looks at internal media organizations' distinctive operations,

professional activities, rules, and norms. Regardless of their political orientation or development level, all media institutions must deal with these external and internal matters. This framework has proven its applicability in analyzing media systems in non-Western countries with non-liberal political regimes, such as Russia and China (Voltmer, 2012).

Recently, a new wave of research has emerged that balances the existing literature with fresh data on Vietnam's media landscape in the era of economic and technological change. Lehmann-Jacobsen (2017) proposed an alternative approach to studying media systems in non-Western countries characterized by strong state intervention. She selected Southeast Asia as her focus, using Vietnam and Singapore as divergent cases to identify distinctive features of the ASEAN media system. By applying Hallin and Mancini's theory, the author analyzed the media systems of both countries and concluded that Vietnam, with its allowance for 'ambiguity' within the system, possesses a more lenient media environment compared to Singapore. Similarly, Mai Duong (2016) offered an overview of Vietnam's media landscape post-1986, encompassing the advent of the internet age. Her research combined the propaganda model and network theory, conceptualizing the internet as the 'Fifth Estate.' Duong shed light on the messy state of online news management, influenced by competition arising from 'general information websites,' and explored the trend of tabloidization. This study viewed the trend in Vietnam as a means for online newspapers to navigate limited press freedom through a 'backdoor' approach. Nguyen-Pochan (2022) recently discussed the Press Plan 2025 while providing a broad history of media commercialization in Vietnam from the mid-to-late-1990s and its interaction with ideology. We primarily focus on the new policy issued to regulate the internet, including the Cyber Security Law, with little attention given to the impact of the internet on media development. The author argued that the 'intrinsic contradictions' within the Vietnamese press contribute to an uncertain future.

Building upon the aforementioned literature review, our research contributes to the current body of work on contemporary Vietnamese media, examining the intersection of ideology, market forces, and technological development. In addition to the existing literature, our study examines the emergence of internet media as a result of the determination of private entities and the toleration of the one-party government during the transitional period. Through the analysis of cases such as VnExpress, Zing News, and similar platforms, we delineate the trajectory that has allowed the emergence of 'quasi-private press' owned by private companies while maintaining the identity of government mouthpieces over the past two decades. Regardless of the uncertain environment, we argue that the rise of online media has had a profound impact on audiences and journalism than mere tabloidization.

THE HYBRIDITY OF CONTROL ON THE PRESS IN VIETNAM

Political Parallelism: Dual Characteristics

The political economy of Vietnam reflects the dualistic nature of a socialist one-party government and an integrated market economy. The economic renovation (*Doi Moi*)

in 1986 reduced the state's economic role while maintaining its crucial role in guiding national development in politics, culture, and information. This hybrid regime is most evident in the media sector, where the growing market intersects with the state's aim for societal guidance. Those contrasting goals have opened up opportunities for private participation in various forms.

In 2018, Vietnam had around 800–900 press organizations. According to Figure 1, in the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC) report from November 2018 (MIC website, 2019), the press/media landscape in Vietnam consists of 868 press organizations (excluding broadcasting and radio stations). This includes 184 print newspapers, 660 magazines (including scientific journals), and 24 standalone online newspapers.¹ Additionally, more than 90% of print newspapers have online versions. Furthermore, there are over 1,500 registered 'information websites' that contribute to a vibrant information industry, although they are not considered official press organizations.

Hallin and Mancini (2012: 21) suggested that a media system often aligns with its political system, a concept known as political parallelism. The political model in Vietnam is often described as a 'soft' or 'marketized authoritarian' state (Price et al., 2015; Tang and Iyengar, 2021). Pham argued that despite the one-party ruling system in Vietnam, it would be naive to assume that the CPV, with its 3.6 million members, acts with a collective mindset. Instead, the political organization functions as a diversified apparatus with a decentralized bureaucratic system (Pham, 2016). MacLean (2013: 207) also confirms the existence of a 'significant degree of flexibility' tolerated by the state power, allowing for a certain level of autonomy embedded within, yet separate from, the centralized regulation.

Likewise, the media system in Vietnam exhibits dualistic characteristics. On the one hand, Vietnam's case aligns with the concept of party-press parallelism, representing the strictest form of political parallelism. On the other hand, Vietnam's media system also demonstrates elements of external pluralism through the presence of various types of media outlets and organizations that reflect different societal groups and trends (Hallin and Mancini, 2012: 29).

Nevertheless, much has been said about the strict and pervasive control of the press in Vietnam. This strictness is enforced by three key players: the CPV's Central Propaganda & Training Commission (hereafter the Propaganda Commission), the MIC, and the Ministry of Public Security. According to the Press Law, the press is officially recognized as an instrument of the party-state while private newspapers are prohibited (Article 4.1). All official press organizations are required to obtain licenses and report to the respective state agency within the government. Unofficially, editors-in-chief of the most prominent newspapers are members of the party. The Propaganda Commission holds regular meetings with editorial managers to convey its perspective on current affairs.² During these meetings, journalists receive direct or indirect guidance

¹ 'Stand-alone online newspapers' refers to outlets that were not formerly print newspapers.

² This is a common procedure in the Vietnamese press by interviewees: an official at Local Propaganda Commission (Nov 7, 2019); a former officer at Central Propaganda Commission (Nov 24, 2019); an official at MIC (Dec 13, 2019); a former official at Vietnam Journalism Association

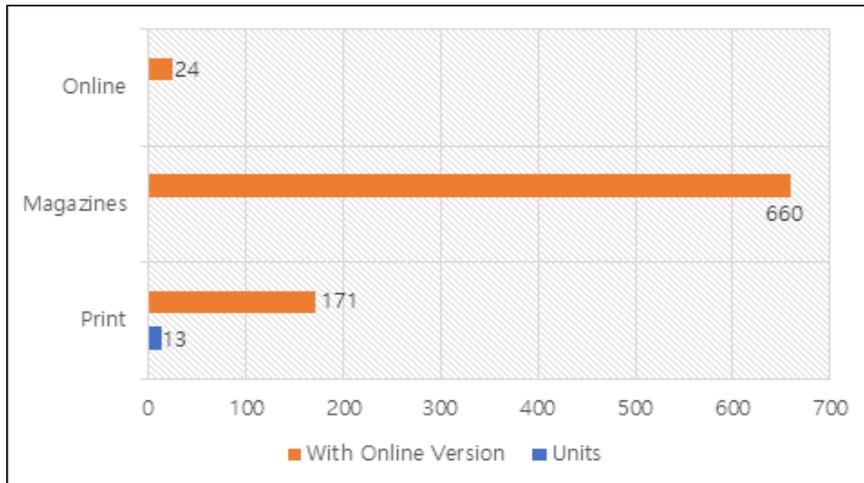


Figure 1. Number of Press Organizations in Vietnam

Source: The MIC (2018)

on what they should avoid, setting the standard for ‘permitted’ information as defined by the party. The regulations, including administrative sanctions and punishments, are fully developed and primarily implemented by the MIC. Additionally, there are several articles in the Penal Code that can be used to penalize journalistic practices. Despite the absence of pre-censorship over the press, the media control in Vietnam has created an atmosphere of fear that fosters self-censorship among journalists (Cain, 2013).³ One of the interviewees stated as follows:

“The government is tying up the press with funding, licenses, human resources, and information. There are weekly meetings with the Propaganda Commission. There are sometimes informants of the security forces inside the editorial team [...] but there are some organizations managing self-sufficient finance, which can lead to more autonomy.”⁴

In this regulatory environment summarized in Figure 2, it might be easy to conclude that the press completely submits to the state. However, this is not the whole story. Not much has been discussed about the fact that, just like the party, control over the press is also one of ‘apparatuses with different and sometimes competing forces’ (Pham, 2016: 275). This type of tolerance is evident in the fragmentation of the aforementioned strict and pervasive regulations. For instance, the Press Law states that the mass media should guide the public without contracting the interests of the state and the party and serve as a platform for promoting freedom of speech (Article 4.2). As a result, the media was able, or allowed, to cover corruption cases such as the Vinashin

(Oct 27, 2019).

³ Interviews with a journalist (Aug 17, 2019); VnExpress journalist (Nov 23, 2019); editorial member of a newspaper in Ho Chi Minh City (Nov. 23, 2019).

⁴ Interview with a journalist on August 17, 2019.

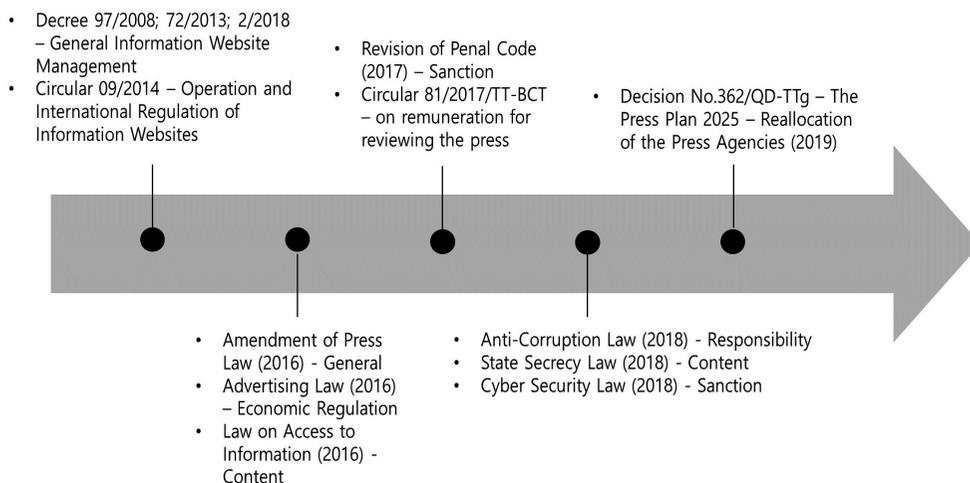


Figure 2. Timeline of Principal Press Regulations in Vietnam

corruption scandal in 2012.⁵

Regarding the governing agencies of the press, in addition to party and government organizations, associations can also have their own press entities. Specifically, the press organizations affiliated with associations are intended to serve as ‘the forum of the people.’ This means that they are allowed to report on a wide range of issues that are relevant to the interests of the general public rather than solely those of the state. This provision creates some space for plural perspectives within Vietnam’s media system. These associations are referred to in the law as ‘socio-political organizations,’ ‘socio-politico-professional,’ or ‘socio-professional organizations,’ characterized by a low degree of state instrumentalization and a high degree of fragmentation.

Not all associations in Vietnam can be considered genuine civil society organizations. However, apart from the six mass organizations (including associations for veterans, women, farmers, youth, workers, and the Vietnamese Fatherland Front) established by the CPV for political purposes, there is a significant number of associations operating in different fields. Among these, 28 are classified as ‘specialized organizations’ according to Decree 45/2010, comprising nine socio-politico-professional organizations and 19 social and socio-professional organizations. The 19 organizations in the latter category are not required to have a CPV unit, which allows for a lower level of political intervention. Those organizations have a nationwide presence with over 1,700 local branches, averaging 139 organizations per province (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2018).

According to Article 14 of the Press Law, province-level associations are eligible to

⁵ Most recently, serious corruption scandals of two former MIC Ministers were uncovered in September 2019. The information was first revealed on *Tuoi Tre Online* and became breaking news across the Vietnamese media later on.

create and operate their own press organizations. As of 2019, these associations' press organizations accounted for nearly half of the total press organizations. Furthermore, a press organization can have various supplementary publications by law, creating a loophole where market forces can participate, in the name of those public associations. With increasing levels of pluralism, the press landscape showcases a range of publications officially affiliated with specific public associations but covering news from various fields. Other publications may exist as subsidiaries of official newspapers, with a media company operating behind the curtain. Forbes Vietnam Magazine serves as an example as its license falls under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism's Báo Văn Hóa (Culture Newspaper). However, the formation of the magazine in 2013 originated from a well-known franchise contract between Forbes Media LLC and Interactive Media Vietnam (Chinh, 2022).

As such, the media system in Vietnam is not as unified as it is often portrayed. Competing regulations and the decentralization of the system created room for non-state forces to participate under the tolerance of the state.

The State's Tolerance and Unintended Consequences: Diversification of the Press

The state's tolerance toward media commercialization can be largely explained by two reasons. First, there is a responsiveness toward the market forces post-1986 as a way of accommodating a thriving media market. This mirrors China's strategy since the late 1970s when the government relaxed control over the media market and encouraged media organizations to support themselves through advertising (Stockman, 2012). Second, despite the political desire to keep the media as instruments of propaganda, subsidizing the entire media system becomes a financial burden. Thus, the state pushed the low political press into the market and 'outsourced the burden of funding the media' while maintaining boundaries for news reporting (Nguyen-Thu, 2018). This led to a greater degree of independence for newspapers, particularly for online media, which are not reliant on traditional state-controlled infrastructures. In the following, we analyze how government policies have allowed for the formation of different types of press organizations. We focus on two main factors: funding and ownership.

Funding

Before 1986, Vietnamese press organizations were funded by the state and assigned the political mission of propagandizing and educating citizens. As mentioned, after 1986, they were also given economic responsibilities and encouraged to engage in various monetizable activities. Amendments to policies were implemented to pave the way for new commercial forces. In the amended Press Law of 1999, Article 17c.2 was added to legalize the for-profit activities of press organizations, along with their tax responsibilities. This provision was further enhanced in the Press Law 2016 (the current version), explicitly allowing partnerships between press organizations and the private sector to produce supplementary content products in different forms (Article 37).

With these permissions, the number of financially independent media organizations has increased over time. According to the MIC in 2018, over 300 organizations (equivalent to one-third of all press organizations) were self-sustained (MIC Press

Authority, 2018). With financial independence, press organizations are essentially treated as private companies, with the exception of their legal status as administrative units. They are also subject to the same 20% tax rate as private companies (Law on Enterprise Income Tax, Law No. 32/2013/QH13).

Ownership

Although private ownership of the press is prohibited in Vietnam, private forces navigated their way through, thanks to the policy fragmentation explained earlier. For instance, the fact that government units are permitted to have multiple publications under a single press license has led to the emergence of ‘franchised magazines’ since the 2000s. Media companies localized international magazine brands such as *Her World* (Singapore), *Harper’s Bazaar* (US), *Elle* (France), and others under the status of supplementary products of newspapers, operating them independently in the market this way (Le, 2012). The case of *Forbes Vietnam Magazine* mentioned above is a prominent example. This trend, often referred to as ‘hidden privatization,’ persisted for over a decade until the legalization of public–private partnerships in the 2016 Press Law.

The ownership of online media in Vietnam has continued to diversify. The internet has opened the field for private firms to enter the information market. Although the government controls licensing and limits their eligible activities, the number of information websites created has become impossible to count. In response to this trend, the government issued and revised decrees in 2008, 2013, and 2017 to manage the new players. However, technological advancements and market incentives have outpaced the government’s ability to keep up. According to MIC’s estimate in 2015, although there

Table 1. A classification of the press organizations in Vietnam

Group	Party press	Government press	Association press	Quasi-Private Press
Ownership	Party	Central/Local Government units	Associations	Government units/Associations + Companies
Legal Status	Press	Press	Press	Press, Information websites, Social media
Political Role	High	Medium	Medium	Mixed
Possibilities for Private Participation	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Funding	State-funded	Partly funded	Partly/Self-funded	Self-sustained
Key Examples	Nhan Dan, Sai Gon Giai Phong	Bao Van Hoa, Phap Luat Viet Nam	Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien, Phu Nu	VnExpress, Zing News (2013-2020), Soha, CafeF, Kenh14

were fewer than 200 official online newspapers in Vietnam, the number of websites operated by companies under the categories of ‘general information websites’ or ‘social networks’ was ten times greater (Infonet website, 2015). These numbers include some firms savvy enough to acquire official press status, forming what we term ‘quasi-private press.’ This phenomenon is analyzed in-depth in the following part about the internet era.

To summarize, the party-led government has implemented tight regulations on the press, characterized by a high level of political parallelism. However, these regulations often exhibit fragmentation and lack clear definition. This amorphous situation has created space for media pluralism within a press system and various forms of social organizations and associations have emerged, co-creating a diverse media landscape. This is reminiscent of the media landscape in China, where different forces, including capital and professionals with media philosophies diverging from those of the Communist Party, have given rise to various types of media organizations (Luo, 2015; Stockman, 2012).

Table 1 contains a classification of press organizations in Vietnam based on their ownership, legal status, and financial status, along with key examples in each category. Although private entities are still prohibited from owning media outlets, private participation is possible, except for those affiliated with the CPV. As we can see, the situation is much more perplexing than what the state-centered narrative would suggest. Our focus is on the final group, referred to as the quasi-private press, which highlights dualistic characteristics.

The Growth of Internet Media

The arrival of the internet marked a significant turning point in the media industry, allowing media production to become increasingly reliant on technological development and offering a potential escape from the state’s control. Concerned about uncontrolled influences from the outside world, the CPV government took measures to regulate the internet, establishing internet security systems and implementing regulations in late 1997. However, it was not until the late 2000s that the CPV’s Political Bureau embraced technology development as a guiding force (Huy Duc, 2012). The number of internet service providers increased from one in 2000 to eighteen in 2007 (Nguyen, 2007), and the internet gained enthusiastic popularity among Vietnamese people. By 2018, there were 68 million internet users in Vietnam, accounting for two-thirds of the total population (Internet World Stats, 2018). Unlike China, Vietnamese citizens have enjoyed relatively unrestricted access to major search engines and social networking platforms such as Google and Facebook.

The introduction of the internet has transformed media-related behaviors in Vietnam and leveled the playing field in the news industry. Although print and broadcast distribution systems are subject to monopolistic control by the government, the online platform provides an opportunity for anyone to publish. The new era of online content production and advertising has become a promising business model that has captured the attention of entrepreneurs.

The development of online media in Vietnam can be divided into several phases.

Table 2. Timeline of Online Media Development in Vietnam

Period	Event	Year
1997 – 2000	Vietnet, TTVN, among the first networks to operate unregulated.	1996
	Introduction of the Internet / Vietnamnet launched as a website named VASC	1997
	First online newspapers: Que Huong, Nhan Dan, VTV, VOV	1998
	Press Law Revision: include online newspaper / recognize the business activity	1999
	Directive 58 encouraged internet growth/allowed competition among internet service providers	2000
2001-2005	VnExpress launched an online newspaper in 2002	2001-02
	Vietnamnet was granted license as a newspaper	2003
	Tuoi Tre, 24h, Dan Tri, etc. launched online	2004-05
2005 - present	Zing by VNG, Kenh 14 by VCCorp. (Zing became newspaper in 2013)	2007-08
	Press Law Revision: recognized private participation in news production	2016
	Prime Minister's Decision 362 on reallocating the press, due in 2025	2019

Source: Huy (2012); Phan et al. (2018)

In the initial phase (1997–2001), the emergence of online newspapers was primarily led by government organizations. The first online newspaper, *Que Huong* (Motherland), was launched by the Commission of Vietnamese Abroad under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs just one month after the introduction of the internet. In June 1998, the CPV's *Nhan Dan* (People) Newspaper also launched its own online version. By the end of the 20th century, many large state-owned organizations, including Vietnam National TV (VTV) and Vietnam Radio (VOV), had established their online presence. Policies regarding this new format were initially restrictive, and the quality of technology and journalism was still limited. Yet these pioneering efforts laid the foundation for policy changes. In 1999, the Press Law was revised to officially recognize online newspapers as the 'fourth press format,' alongside print, broadcasting, and radio.

With this policy change, the rise of online newspapers became evident. Notable traditional newspapers quickly embraced the new platform, including *Thanh Nien* (The Young), *Tuoi Tre* (Youth), *Lao Dong* (Labor), and *Tien Phong* (Vanguard). These newspapers obtained online newspaper licenses, enabling them to establish dedicated production teams for online news. Alongside these established titles, this period also witnessed the emergence of independent online newspapers such as *VnExpress* (2001) and *Vietnamnet* (2002), which have maintained their popularity to this day. Furthermore, information websites made their debut during this period, with *24h.com.vn* ranking fifth among the most widely read websites in Vietnam (SimilarWeb, 2019). As Table 2 indicates, the mid-2000s witnessed a flourishing of online media regarding

both quality and quantity. Various technology corporations entered the market, initially obtaining licenses as general information websites before transitioning into different types of organizations. Notable names in this period include *Zing News* (2007, by VNG/Zalo Group), *Kenh14* (2007, by VCCorp).

The Rise of ‘General Information Websites’ as New Players in the Media

The rapid growth of online media eventually led to the delayed implementation of relevant regulations and legal frameworks in Vietnam. It was not until 2008 that policies specifically addressed information websites and categorized them as restricted businesses (Decree 97/2008). As the online platform does not clearly differentiate between official ‘online newspapers’ and ‘information websites,’ competition to attract more readers intensified.

In fact, running information websites is more convenient in many respects, leading to their proliferation compared to official online newspapers. Although the MIC’s Authority of Press has exclusive power to grant online newspaper licenses, permissions for general information websites can be obtained at the provincial level of the same ministry. The administrative process for obtaining licenses for general websites is much faster at the provincial level, taking approximately ten days, whereas the central government level may take up to 90 days.

However, the expedited process comes with limitations. The license for general information websites does not allow firms to engage in the core aspects of journalism, such as producing and publishing news content. They are only permitted to republish news from ‘official sources,’ which include press organizations, the CPV, and/or other government institutions’ websites. Violation of this regulation can result in the revocation of the license.

Nevertheless, private entities have found ways to navigate the system. Many media companies registered to operate information websites with their in-house content production and advertising teams. The strategy involves borrowing the names of reputable online newspapers as the source of news.⁶ In particular, any content posted on a general information website, despite being produced by the company’s production team, must cite official sources, something along the lines of ‘reposted from [an official newspaper]’. For instance, VCCorp’s *Kenh14*, the most popular website for teenagers in Vietnam, operates as an information website with its own editorials while citing *Tri Thuc Tre* (Young Intellectual) Online Newspaper (ttvn.vn) as its official source. VCCorp owns a total of eight information websites, all of which use *Tri Thuc Tre* Newspaper as their information source (as of 2019).

Regarding revenue and traffic, the websites backed by private companies outperformed traditional media. In 2019, six out of the top ten most visited online news websites in Vietnam were directly linked to media companies: VCCorp (*Kenh14*, *Soha*, *CafeF*), 24h Advertising JSC (24h), FPT (*VnExpress*), and VNG (*Zing News*).

⁶ A media expert saw this as ‘common sense’ in the media industry in Vietnam (Nov 30, 2019). The other interviewee who used to be in charge of the licensing procedure of a famous news website also concurred (Aug 17, 2019).

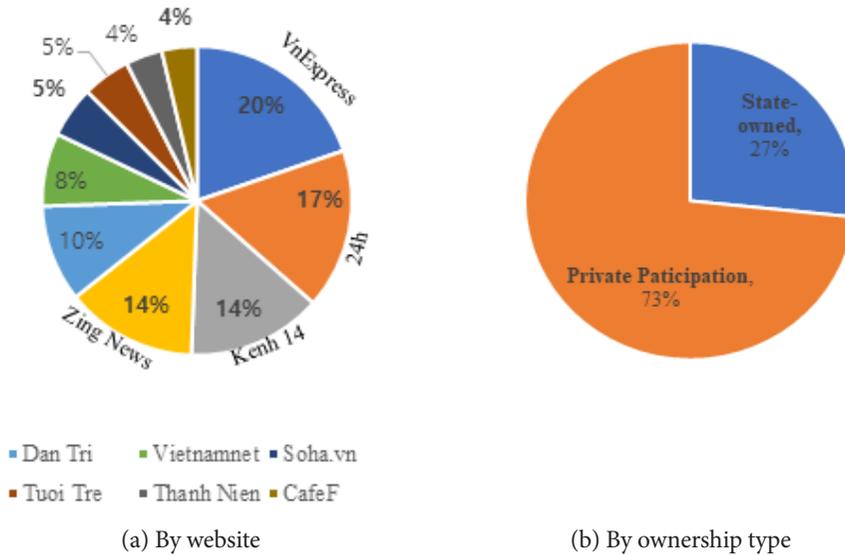


Figure 3. The Top Ten Readership of Top 10 news websites
Source: SimilarWeb (2019)

VnExpress and Zing News initially operated as general information websites before receiving an official press license. A calculation of the proportion of traffic shown in Figure 3 indicates that the majority of news consumed by Vietnamese people is not from state units. Private entities account for 73% of pageviews generated in the three-month period from July to September 2019, according to SimilarWeb data (Figure 3). Regarding advertising, the owners of the top three news websites also operate the largest advertising networks in Vietnam, excluding the two global giants Google and Facebook.

The professional finance model employed by these new media corporations gives them a comparative edge over traditional press organizations. One of the main reasons for their success is their ability to attract top talents in the field by offering better compensation than the traditional ones. Although the salaries for working for traditional newspapers are equivalent to those of public officials, which are generally low in Vietnam, these media conglomerates provide higher remuneration packages.⁷ They can recruit young individuals with multimedia skills, particularly those who have received training abroad in the Western journalistic tradition. For instance, Zing successfully recruited two Fulbright journalism scholars as their lead editors for several years.⁸ VnExpress, conversely, boasts a team of 230 journalists, with an average age of 31, along with 100 technicians and 80 sales officers, all holding bachelor's degree or higher,

⁷ Our interviewees confirmed this information: A former journalist at VnExpress (Nov 21, 2019); a journalist at Tuoi Tre Newspaper (Oct 17, 2019); a media practitioner at VCCorp (Nov 30, 2019); a former journalist at Saigon Times (Dec 12, 2019); a journalist at VnExpress (Dec 13, 2019).

⁸ Interviews with a journalist at Zing.vn (October 29, 2019); a former journalist at Sai Gon Tiep Thi and Zing.vn (November 10, 2019).

according to FPT Online Credentials. Therefore, the private sector has made its mark with technological innovation and professionalism (Le, 2012).

The Case of VnExpress: Dual Identity and the Struggle to Autonomy

Established in 2001 by entrepreneurs and later evolving from a general information website to an online news portal, VnExpress has earned recognition from both the state and readers, emerging as a widely acknowledged successful model. The story of VnExpress began in the summer of 2000 in Hanoi. Truong Dinh Anh, the founder of TTVN Online Forum, recruited Thang Duc Thang, who was serving as the head of news at Lao Dong (Labor) Newspaper, to establish Vietnam's first online news portal (Thang, 2007). Sharing a common vision, they aimed to provide Vietnamese people with access to quality news on a daily basis through the internet. At that time, most online newspapers simply republished content from print sources, and the number of internet users was still relatively small. Undeterred by the risk, the two co-founders collaborated to bring their ambitious plan to fruition. Thang Duc Thang leveraged his expertise gained from his doctoral degree and 20 years of experience in journalism while Truong Dinh Anh contributed technology and business strategies. Within two months, they presented the concept of VnExpress to the board of FPT Corporation and secured the necessary investment. VnExpress was established with a clear vision to create a different type of journalism in Vietnam, Thang Duc Thang puts:

"I had dreamt for a long time of creating a new kind of journalism organization, totally different from the propaganda policies. The awakening of the Internet inspired me in 1997 to build a publishing platform on which the government would have less control. These two aspirations crossed paths, and VnExpress was born." (Thang, 2017).

When VnExpress launched in 2001, it did not have an official status as a newspaper. The website operated as an information portal of FPT. It was not until November 25th, 2002 (after 20 months) that they managed to obtain the press license. Given that the page was established by a private company, the legalization of it was unprecedented. Thang also confirmed in his essay that the government needed to 'review press regulations and open new procedures to acknowledge VnExpress' (Thang, 2017).

The legalization of VnExpress required two important components. Firstly, it aimed to gain the status of a prominent newspaper backed by popular support. The primary objective was to attract readers, and when the pageviews reached two million in 2002, VnExpress became the most widely read online newspaper (Thang, 2017). The impressive response from Vietnamese readers compelled the government to take notice, leading to negotiations for its official recognition. According to the co-founder and editor-in-chief, Thang Duc Thang, the partnership with the government was a 'survival strategy' for VnExpress in Vietnam's challenging policy environment for new online media platforms (Thang, 2017).

The second element was the involvement of institutional entrepreneurs, especially VnExpress' co-founders. The government had an incentive to include them in the official hierarchy due to their innovative contributions. As a result, VnExpress successfully

negotiated for a dual status, becoming what we refer to as ‘quasi-private press.’ Although on paper, VnExpress operated as a unit of the Ministry of Science and Technology, it was, in fact, a branch of FPT Online. The online newspaper had its own editorial that made content decisions, and advertising served as its primary source of revenue. Although private participation could be seen as illegitimate, VnExpress developed into an online newspaper and is recognized as ‘the pioneer in creating new forms of press in Vietnam’ by the government leaders, including Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam (Thuy, 2016). As of 2019, VnExpress continues to operate with a dual identity. One interviewee explained that embracing VnExpress as a press entity benefited the government regarding taxes and building a brand of innovation. Furthermore, VnExpress has demonstrated its ability to compromise.⁹

After more than 20 years, VnExpress has garnered a substantial following, attracting over 40 million monthly readers, and generating billions of pageviews annually (Figure 4). On average, the platform produces 500 news articles per day and receives an impressive number of four million online comments from readers. Regarding revenue, VnExpress estimated an annual growth rate of around 20% in 2016. Additionally, in the same year, they launched VnExpress International, the English version of the platform, which was regarded as the best in Vietnam (ASEAN UP, 2016). The co-founder and editor-in-chief, Thang Duc Thang, graced the cover of World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers’ (WAN-IFRA) magazine in 2017, and VnExpress was heralded as ‘the first private publication’ in Vietnam (WAN-IFRA, 2017).

The success of VnExpress has paved the way for other private information websites. Following VnExpress’ licensing in 2002, Vietnamnet, which had operated as an information website for five years, also transitioned into a newspaper in 2003 by registering under the MIC. This development marked a period of increased vibrancy in the media landscape, fueled by the competition between VnExpress and Vietnamnet¹⁰

Similarly, Zing News (by VNG), an entertainment website launched in 2008, followed a similar path and transformed into an online newspaper in 2013. To acquire official press status and the right to produce news legally, Zing established a brand name, which is *Báo điện tử Tri thức Trực tuyến* (Online Knowledge Newspaper), registered under the Publishing Association of Vietnam. This strategic move allowed Zing to transition from an entertainment website to an official online news platform. Despite its relatively short history, Zing has gained significant popularity, becoming one of the most accessed news websites in Vietnam, particularly excelling in mobile platforms (SimilarWeb, 2019).

It is true that different ownership models alone cannot eliminate state censorship, but they have created diverse forces that strive for press autonomy and citizens’ access to information. VnExpress, as a quasi-private model, has played a pivotal role in empowering the professionalization of journalism, supported by its strong foundation of capital and technology. A journalist also noted that VnExpress marked a turning point in the Vietnamese press history, as it could create an official press organization inside the

⁹ Interview with an independent journalist, August 17, 2019.

¹⁰ Interview with a VnExpress first cohort journalist, November 23, 2019.

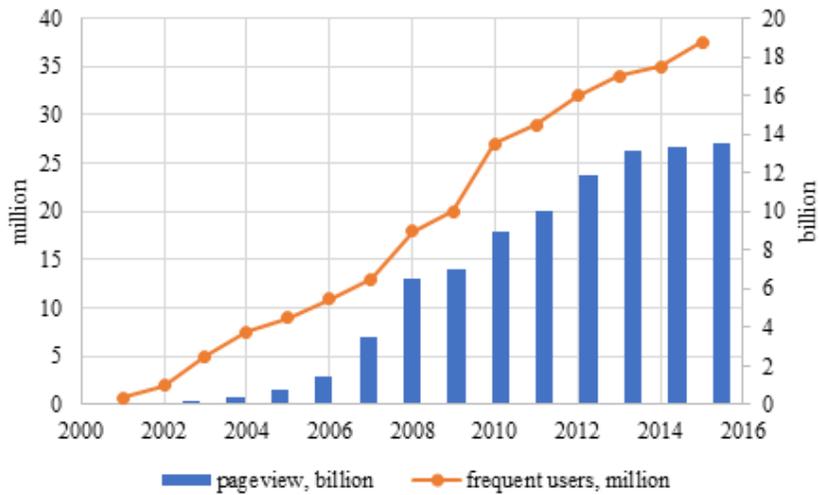


Figure 4. The Growth of VnExpress

Source: VnExpress' public data (2018)

system and claimed 'some autonomy.'¹¹

Through the framework of journalistic professionalism proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2012: 38), we can analyze the case of VnExpress from three perspectives. First, regarding autonomy, VnExpress' financial independence played a crucial role. Due to financial stability, the editorial was able to have a certain level of independence from the beginning. They had to trade it off to obtain a press license to publish news legally, but VnExpress was able to keep its founder as the editor-in-chief for almost two decades. This relative editorial independence, though it was far from full-fledged autonomy, provided the basis for the media to cover a wide variety of topics ranging from politics to entertainment.

Secondly, Thang Duc Thang has been recognized as a pioneer of objective journalism, emphasizing that 'the right to make judgement lies with the readers' (Thang, 2017). He was also known to be instrumental in promoting the standards of newsworthiness, which have become common in journalism training in Vietnam. A former journalist at VnExpress highlighted three distinctive professional norms of this newspaper: Using non-ideological pronouns when referring to politicians, maintaining the presumption of innocence in reporting court cases, and emphasizing the independence of journalistic work.¹²

¹¹ Interview with a journalist on August 17, 2019.

¹² VnExpress displayed several key differences in its professionalism during its early days. Firstly, although other press outlets in Vietnam referred to politicians as 'comrades,' VnExpress tends to use neutral pronouns like 'Mr.' and 'Mrs.' Secondly, VnExpress refrained from using insulting pronouns to refer to defendants or suspects in court, unlike other newspapers. This shift in language had a significant impact on the readers and writers, challenging the prevailing norms at the time. Additionally, it emphasized three functions of journalism: reporting, analyzing/commenting, and

Thirdly, VnExpress demonstrated public service orientation through the way it adheres to journalistic values while covering politically sensitive topics. For example, in covering political dissident trials, VnExpress viewed police reports as one among several sources, resulting in unique news products. An illustration of this approach is evident in the trial of activist Pham Doan Trang in December 2021. Unlike other outlets that echoed the government's stance, VnExpress alone referenced her lawyer's defense, citing the Constitution and international conventions (Lam, 2021).

Another notable instance of VnExpress' journalistic approach was evident during the Dong Tam land dispute in 2017 when the outlet distinctively incorporated the villagers' viewpoints into their reporting. This stood in stark contrast to the predominant trend among other media outlets, which primarily adhered to the police narrative, thereby portraying the villagers in a detrimental light. Bao Ha's article titled 'Conversation with Hoanh Village' (Đổi thoại ở thôn Hoành) was particularly noteworthy as it presented the story from the villagers' perspective (Ha, 2017). These instances exemplify VnExpress' effort to maintain independence in news reporting.¹³ Although the government still holds the utmost power when it comes to content restriction, censorship in Vietnam largely operates based on the self-censorship of journalists (Nguyen-Thu, 2018b). In that context, the bottom-up initiatives implemented by VnExpress are noteworthy. We contend that the increased autonomy of a standalone media entity has significantly contributed to this attitude.

In conclusion, the transition to a market economy in Vietnam, coupled with the emergence of the internet and ICT development, has led to the rise of 'quasi-private' online newspapers. The participation of capital forces, particularly technology corporations, has facilitated the professionalization of the media industry. This, in turn, has the potential to weaken press control and foster common practices among media organizations, as outlined by Hallin and Mancini (2012: 38).

The Demise of Quasi-Private Press? The Press Plan 2025 and Its Implication

The two-decade era of online media development, marked by the growth of quasi-private press, is now encountering new policy challenges. The Press Plan 2025 with strict quotas for press agencies, the illegalization of 'newspaperization' (báo hóa), and the government's effort to establish state-media conglomerates demonstrates the party-state's determination to address the issues and complexities associated with the rise of the quasi-private press. These recent policy changes specifically target the two key factors that facilitated the emergence of the quasi-private press, as discussed earlier. Firstly, the ability of social organizations and local government departments to establish press agencies and lease press licenses to other entities. Secondly, enterprises were granted permission to operate 'general information websites,' enabling their entry into the news

monitoring/criticizing, which differed from the legal framework and prevailing practices in the 2000s. These unique approaches set VnExpress apart and contributed to its professionalism and distinctiveness within the media (Interview with a former VnExpress journalist, November 23, 2019).

¹³ Interview with a former VnExpress journalist (29 Oct. 2019).

production market (such as Zing and Kenh 14).

‘The National Press Development and Management Planning until 2025’ (Press Plan 2025) aims to restructure the media landscape by the implementation of a strict quota system and the reallocation of press agencies.¹⁴ The superficial goal is to optimize the press system, but the criteria for determining eligibility for press agencies are based on top-down decision-making rather than the performance of newspapers. Under the new plan, only national-level organizations are permitted to have press agencies, and provincial organizations are no longer eligible, except those affiliated with the CPV. The new plan also outlines a few types of organizations that can have press agencies, with each type limited to only one agency, and expects a substantial reduction in the number of press organizations.

The new policy has removed the rights of local government organizations, provincial political-social organizations, social organizations, and religious organizations to have press agencies. Previously, these organizations were eligible for press agencies under the Press Law (2016), but now they are restricted to having ‘magazine agencies.’ Although this term is not defined in the law, from a management perspective, it implies that these magazines can only focus on topics related to their governing unit’s narrow field. Going beyond that field to cover news, as official newspapers do, is considered a violation (Song, 2019). After three years of implementation, in 2021, the MIC reported the completion of the first phase of the reallocation plan, with all national organizations and half of the provinces having reallocated their press agencies. During this process, certain prominent newspapers, such as Zing News and Doanh nhan Sai Gon, lost their press licenses, Others encountered challenges in finding a new governing body to maintain their press status, as seen with Phap Luat (Law) Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), which had to transition its governing body from the HCMC Justice Department to the city government.

In 2021, three years after the plan was enacted, the MIC reported the completion of the first phase, with all national organizations and half of the provinces having reallocated their press agencies. During this process, certain prominent newspapers’ licenses such as Zing News and Doanh nhan Sai Gon (Sai Gon Entrepreneurs), were demoted to ‘magazine’ status. Others encountered challenges in finding a new governing body to maintain their press status, as seen with Phap Luat Ho Chi Minh City (Law HCMC Newspaper), which had to transition its governing body from the HCMC Justice Department to the city government.

Based on this result, the CPV is now planning another grand scheme with a vision for 2030 to strengthen regulation (Mai, 2023). More regulations are introduced as MIC’s inspection continues. In July 2022, the main tactic of information websites, which involves borrowing official newspaper names as content sources, has been officially termed ‘newspaperization’ and recognized as illegal activities in MIC’s

¹⁴ Decision No. 362/QĐ-TTg signed on April 3, 2019. In Vietnamese: “Quyết định số 362/QĐ-TTg ngày 03/4/2019 của Thủ tướng Chính phủ phê duyệt Quy hoạch phát triển và quản lý báo chí toàn quốc đến năm 2025”. Full text of the decision can be accessed here on the website of the Communist Party of Vietnam: <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/he-thong-van-ban/van-ban-quy-pham-phap-luat/quyet-dinh-so-362qd-ttg-ngay-0342019-cua-thu-tuong-chinh-phu-phe-duyet-quy-hoach-phat-trien-va-quan-ly-bao-chi-toan-quoc-den-5312>

Decision No. 1418.¹⁵ More organizations have been fined. As of October 2022, around 30 organizations with magazine and/or general information websites have been fined for this reason (Vietnamnet, 2022). In July 2023, Zing News was also included in the list. The quasi-private press organization was suspended for three months for several violations that showed the signals of privatization of the press (Reuters, 2023).

The party state is reclaiming complete control of the press system and limit news reporting to only a set number of press organizations under clear governing agencies. The recent moves targeting online media are part of a determined campaign to ‘clean content on the internet’ (Nguoi Lao Dong, 2023), which is part of a larger movement to crack down on the Vietnamese public sphere that has been flourishing in the past decade. The timing of this intensifying crackdown is explained by Nguyen and Luong (2023) through three reasons: the ascendance of the conservative group within the CPV led by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, its enhanced proficiency in cyberspace management, and the government’s greater influence on social media platforms and Western partners. It is anticipated that this trend will persist at least until 2026, coinciding with the transition in leadership.

In summary, the recent policies implemented by the Vietnamese government in 2019 and beyond present a significant challenge to the country’s media market. With firm political determination and advanced technology capabilities, the government aims to thwart attempts at private participation in the press, posing significant challenges to advocates of a diverse media environment.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to investigate the newly emerging online media in Vietnam, which evolved within the complex relationship between the government regulation/legal framework and private entrepreneurship. Through the case analyses and the investigation of the development process, we have made two arguments. First, the state’s adaptability to media commercialization has reduced its control over media business operations. This has created opportunities for diverse forces to shape various organizational forms in the mass media sector. Consequently, although the state continues to set limits on news coverage and the official private press remains absent, a type of quasi-private press has emerged. This trend became most apparent during the internet era, when technology companies, under the guise of ‘information websites,’ entered the news industry, competing with state-run entities and progressively transforming the industry.

Second, the cases of VnExpress in this paper showcased bottom-up change in the strict regulatory structure. Like the concept of ‘increasing objectification’ proposed by

¹⁵ MIC. 2022. “Tiêu Chí Nhận Diện ‘Báo Hoá’ Tạp Chí, Trang TTĐT Tổng Hợp, Mạng Xã Hội và Biểu Hiện ‘Tư Nhân Hoá’ Báo Chí.” [Identification criteria of newspaperization of magazines, information websites, social media platforms, and signs of privatization of the press]. Accessed on Nov 20, 2023. https://mic.gov.vn/mic_2020/Pages/TinTuc/154300/Tieu-chi-nhan-dien--bao-hoa--tap-chi--trang-TTdt-tong-hop--mang-xa-hoi-va-bieu-hien--tu-nhan-hoa--bao-chi.html.

Tolbert and Zucker (1996), institutional entrepreneurs in the ICT field interpreted the changing political and economic environment, produced new ideas, and innovated a new type of press in Vietnam. The outstanding performance of the novel organization was not only followed by other companies but also heralded by the government as innovative. The institutionalization process has fostered a dynamic media market and enhanced the autonomy of media outlets, even under state oversight. Consequently, this has led to increased bargaining power regarding space for news reporting.

The historical development of Vietnam's online newspaper suggests that the state's attitude and policy toward mass media must be one of co-development, but the recent hostility toward private participation by the CPV is evident in the portrayal of private participation. The government justifies its new rules by linking private forces with certain infringements, such as journalist corruption, while ignoring the fact that the top online newspaper is praised by the government because innovative journalism is the product of such private participation. The new regulations can do more harm than good to the press for two reasons. First, it possibly weakens the ability to fight against fake news. The rule discourages registered and organized companies from participating in the market, creating a void filled by social media such as Facebook. The recent dissemination of fake news and misinformation by unregulated personal social media companies has high social costs (Hartley and Khuong, 2020). The prominent case of VnExpress already proved that quality journalism could be created and sustained as a form of quasi-private organization.

Second, the newly introduced rules go against the trend of the internet economy, where demand for an information market is inevitable. The decision to limit the rights to produce news to the state units is likely to have negative consequences considering the track record of the government's inefficiency. The quasi-private online newspapers already proved this by outperforming state-owned newspapers in Vietnam.

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