

VIETNAM

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1) What is the basic political system in your country (e.g. pluralist democracy, semi-authoritarian, one-party state, dictatorship)?

Mono-party state

2) What are the main features of your media landscape? (private/public, print/broadcast/internet usage, ownership concentration, government control, etc.)

Vietnam has no private media and the Communist Party controls the media (broadcasting, newspapers, publishing houses and online portals) through government agencies e.g. ministries in charge of media and communications, culture and sports. The Party's Central Committee and its Propaganda and Education Department is supervising all media outlets regardless of their forms of ownership (state-own, financially independent or joint-venture). They hold weekly editorial meetings for all editors (or their deputies) of all TV, radio and newspapers to attend. Media trainings are also directly managed by the Party's Media and Information Institute in Hanoi. Ministry of Interior has specialised branch (A25 Department at central level or PA25 at provincial and municipal level) to directly intervene (including rights to arrest or stop journalists from reporting sensitive events. At the same time Vietnam is a vibrant market with all types of media: terrestrial, satellite and cable television, SW and FM radio, mobile telephony, and increasingly web-based services. They are allowed to make compete to make money in areas such as business (advertisement, entertainment, sports) and contribute to the central or regional budgets.

3) Where does your country come in the rankings of Freedom House (on freedom of the press) and Reporters Without Borders?

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&year=2009>

<http://www.rsf.org/en-classement1003-2009.html>

Vietnam's score is 83 in the Freedom House Index 2009.

4) Would you broadly agree with their characterisation of your situation?

Yes. Although the state control over media has never been absolute, especially in relations to online news, according to research scientists like Bjorn Surborg the situation has got worse than ever in 2009, with more journalists and bloggers being arrested and jailed than ever before. In the first days of 2009, the anti-press campaign also targeted Nguyen Cong Khe and Le Hoang, the editors of the two largest pro-reform newspapers (both men are Communist Party members), over their coverage of the October corruption scandal trial. In fact, a government directive (Circular N07) came into force in Jan 2009 just to tighten control of the media and web space. It now gives the police power to arrest any bloggers if their web

publications are deemed 'breaking press laws'. Cyber-dissidents have become the main target of this policy because the Internet is the only space where they can exchange views. In October six democracy activists sentenced to up to six years in prison for "spreading propaganda". The year 2010 has continued with that trend: in January, five dissidents were given jail sentences from five to 16 years, also for writing web articles criticising the ruling party (other charges included 'plot to overthrow the people's power' by allegedly preparing a new constitution for Vietnam).

5) a) what are the main challenges facing the media in your country in the next five years (economic, political, technological etc)?

Both political direct control and economic pressure, combined with a lack of fair rules are damaging the development of professional journalism in Vietnam.

To an increasing extent, corporate business (Vietnamese and foreign companies with strong links to the government circle) has become an area of sensitivity for the press. While reporting human rights and popular dissents is still a no-go area, the coverage of corruption cases has become more difficult. At the same time, the traditional, Leninist control exercised through internal mechanism of Party membership, career demotion but also ideological indoctrination and blatant censorship has not been diminished. On top of that, taste and decency remain a huge issue. For example a bizarre combination of market-oriented creativity and dated propaganda has produced some grotesque things like a documentary by former Miss Vietnam Nguyen Thi Huyen about Ho Chi Minh. Money (buying power) and lack of public standards also make the media market a rather uneven playfield where rules about impartiality, fairness are absent. Because of this, journalists could be easily blamed and even charged for the reports while and politicians and also people with vested interests could easily influence the media and limit the practice of journalism in its true professional sense.

b) what are the main limits on the practice of a free press in your country, based on your own practical experience of working there?

First a few words about Vietnamese media: As a BBC Vietnamese Editor, I travel at least twice a year to Vietnam and what I gather from all meetings with fellow journalists and editors, their main concern is that over the last five years, the once relatively relaxed atmosphere for the press has gradually shrunk. While the ruling party cannot control what people think and talk privately, they can also put pressure on the press to prevent publications of certain topics such as human rights, democracy but more and more even corruption and business news that would be uncomfortable for the government to hear. The censorship has recently spread from not publishing any 'bad news' about China, Russia to even Latin America. For example there is no critical reports about President Hugo Chavez who had visited Vietnam and when oil companies in both countries now are closely co-operating. On international news organisations, it is worth noticing that the working environment for foreign media in Vietnam has never been easy, both in terms if the professional relationship

with government agencies and practical newsgathering works on the ground (violence and harassment from the police).

BBC World Service's last English reporter (Bill Hayton) was refused a visa request in 2008 and had to leave Vietnam. BBC Vietnamese Service still can send reporters back to the country for short trips, up to two, three weeks each time, but all activities are closely monitored by Government Press Department where permission for each newsgathering journey must be obtained in advance. Most of the daily news reporting has to be conducted on the phone and by emails. Staff (when they visit the country as foreign passport holders) and family members back home face constant police harassment. There is, however some flexibility when it comes to less sensitive topics BBC wants to cover from inside Vietnam. In December 2008, a multi-lingual team of 15 World Service reporters were given permission to report from the Mekong Delta on Climate Change. Nonetheless there is no discrimination against the BBC because the permit mechanism is applied to all international media and also foreign news agencies. AP, AFP Dow Jones and Reuters have representative offices in Hanoi mainly because they don't broadcast news in Vietnamese but must also request individual permit to go out of the main urban areas. When it comes to field reporting, they too are subject to the treatment of local authorities and police who are less friendly to foreign press than central government agencies. Back in Sept 2008, AP's Ben Stocking was beaten up by Hanoi police when covering a Catholic protest. Earlier BBC's Bill Hayton and Hung Nguyen were pushed and kicked at a demonstration in Hanoi. BBC Vietnamese reporters sometimes have been stopped by local police in provinces for ID checking.

6) What are the main roles that new media play in your country?

Government's policies to encourage Internet development and technical advancement – networks of fibre-optic cables were set up thanks to investment and financial aids - have provided Vietnam with a very modern infrastructure for telecommunications and the Internet. Out of the 86-million population, Vietnam has over 20 million of regular web users. The Internet is widely accessible in urban areas and connection costs are relatively low. All long-standing newspapers like Tuoi Tre, Tien Phong, Thanh Nien, Lao Dong have their websites. Even the Communist Party's newspaper Nhan Dan also has web pages in both English and Vietnamese, so have state television, national and provincial radio broadcasters. Online news and entertainment services play an important part in business, culture and social life.

The Internet is also the main channel for information to flow into Vietnam from the 3-million Vietnamese diaspora in North America, Europe and Australia. As the web censorship has been tightened in Vietnam, the main source of free news comes into the country from the Vietnamese-language broadcasters like BBC, VOA, Radio Free Asia and RFI (increasingly via web pages) while the remaining independent news magazines and discussion forums (Talawas, Dien Dan, X-Cafe, Bauxite Vietnam) have their servers based abroad to survive.