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Written Journalism in Vietnam

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Written Journalism in Vietnam

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Abstract

Written journalism acts as an important bridge between states and their citizens. The relationship between the written journalism industry and the citizens of a given state is a result of both the respective history of state-society relations and the modern political atmosphere within the state. In the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the written journalism industry is a complex system that derives from a long colonial history and complex political landscape. The Vietnamese Communist Party currently operates the written journalism industry in Vietnam, exercising a monopoly on media authority. The first part of this research traces the historical evolution of the Vietnamese written journalism industry to contextualize analysis of modern Vietnamese written journalism. The following section analyzes the determination of newsworthiness and the derivation of the state government’s central media authority, and the succeeding section examines the ways that the Vietnamese Communist Party’s state government retains control of its media authority. The final section analyzes the major threats to the state’s media authority. Holistically, the research serves to describe and understand the relationship between the Vietnamese state-controlled written journalism industry and the people of Vietnam.
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Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Key phrases

SIT – School for International Training

ISP – Independent Study Project

MIC = Ministry of Information and Communications

SOE = state-owned enterprise

VCP = Vietnamese Communist Party

Note: The Vietnamese system of government has only one party. In this research, unless otherwise indicated, the VCP, as sole instrument of political arbitration in the state, is synonymous with “the state” or “the state government.”

Objectivity and non-objectivity = in the context of this research objectivity is relative to the central media authority, which is the VCP. Unless otherwise indicated, objectivity implies alignment with Party ideology and non-objectivity implies non-alignment with Party ideology.

Written journalism = the combination of print and online written journalism, a phrase chosen to reflect the increasing multi-dimensionality of news publications.

Đổi Mới – translated literally as “reform,” the Đổi Mới reform agenda was enacted in 1986 in response to poor economic conditions in the state.
I. Introduction

In the modern Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the system of governance is a single-party socialist republic that is administered by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). The modern Vietnamese government that is administered by the Vietnamese Communist Party is a product of many of the various colonial influences, ideological currents, and historical conflicts (Jamieson 1993).

In the modern world, written journalism is closely linked with politics, as the degree to which the press is free to investigate, describe, and report the news is determined largely by the state (Josephi 2012). Under Vietnam’s political system, all modern Vietnamese media sources, including the written journalism industry, are owned and regulated by the state. The Vietnamese Communist Party, which is in charge of all media output in Vietnam, acts as the central media authority in Vietnam and uses the written journalism industry not only to report current events and happenings, but also as an instrument with which to promote its political agenda and reinforce social and political ideologies.

The Vietnamese Communist Party operates a complex mechanism of censorship that is meant to politically streamline all media content that is produced in Vietnam. Some of these methods of censorship are direct and involve diligent scrutiny of all drafted journalism prior to publication, while other methods of censorship are indirect and more subtly embedded within the Vietnamese Communist Party’s social infrastructure (Mit 2013). Indirect methods of censorship include journalist education programs that are created to educate Vietnamese journalists about the nuances of political rectitude (Sapoche 2013).

State censorship policy is designed to ensure the ideological security of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and it is a source of tension between the state government and the people of Vietnam (Mit 2013). Some Vietnamese news consumers find the coverage provided within state newspapers to be inadequate, and they turn to alternative sources of news to learn about politically sensitive issues that have been censored from mainstream Vietnamese written journalism (Xoai 2013).

The emergence of non-state written journalism outlets challenges the media authority that is desired by the Vietnamese Communist Party. In an attempt to preserve
its authority over media output, the state government has adopted a policy of stringent regulation designed to restrict alternative journalism in an attempt to subvert “anti-state propaganda” (Mit 2013). The rapid development of technology, coupled with the increasing globalization of the Vietnamese journalism industry and increased pressure from the international community to adhere to global standards, makes the complete elimination of non-state written journalism in Vietnam impossible.

The state government has incarcerated a number of online dissidents in recent months in the process of developing a regulatory framework that outlines the rights of Vietnamese online journalists (Brown 2013). While the current situation is relatively volatile due to the incompletely defined legal landscape of online journalism in Vietnam, the Vietnamese government is in the process of updating its policy on online journalism. In the future, the Vietnamese Communist Party plans on becoming a more active participant in the online journalism arena by using a number of social media platforms and investing more heavily in websites as outlets of state journalism (Mit 2013; Sapoche 2013). This increased online governmental presence will broaden the Vietnamese Communist Party’s propagation network and will precipitate a more stable coexistence of state and non-state written journalism outlets.

**Research Objectives**

This research attempts to situate the Vietnamese written journalism industry in the context of both domestic and foreign influences and examine the relationship between the state-controlled written journalism industry, the news, and the people of Vietnam. This paper will examine the Vietnamese written journalism industry in the context of the complex historical emergence of the written journalism industry.

The phrase “written journalism industry,” used above and employed throughout this paper, is chosen carefully to represent the many constituent modules of the modern written media mechanism, be they in print or, as is increasingly common, online.

The landscape of the written journalism industry in Vietnam is a complex and hybridized product of the long and complex political history of Vietnam. The paper will therefore begin with a brief review of the political history of Vietnam that will outline the
evolution of the journalism industry over time in the context of colonial occupation, war, and the prevailing systems of authority.

The following analysis of the written journalism industry will explore the degree to which the political and economic systems in Vietnam shape the operation of the written journalism industry and the way that it is regulated by the state. Moreover, this paper will reexamine how, by whom, and for what purposes events are deemed “newsworthy” as a way to understand the process by which written journalism is produced in Vietnam.

The rapid shift of the written journalism industry from a print-oriented media platform to an online media platform has further thrust the Vietnamese written journalism industry into the international media arena. It is in the context of this continuing globalization of the media that it becomes crucial to analyze the means by which the Vietnamese Communist Party manages to maintain ideological control. In order to do this, it is important to develop a basic understanding of the relationship between the news, journalists, and various types of government.

This research seeks to understand the nuanced relationship between the state-controlled written journalism industry and the audience for which this journalism is produced. More importantly, this research will try to analyze this relationship in the context of the globalizing media atmosphere in an attempt to understand the future of the written journalism industry in Vietnam.

**Research Questions**

This research is guided by two central questions. These questions are primarily exploratory in nature; they were designed to allow the course of this research to lead to an organic, and perhaps unforeseen conclusion. The questions are:

a.) What is the nature of the relationship between the news, the written journalism industry operated by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), and the people of Vietnam?
b.) How will new methods of news dissemination, such as online social media platforms, impact the relationship described above?

II. Methodology

Research Goals and Methods

Vietnamese journalists themselves offer the most comprehensive insight into the written journalism industry. With this in mind, journalists were used as the primary source of information in this research. Information included in this research was compiled chiefly by means of interviews with journalists and other professionals in the field of journalist education. A total of four interviews were conducted over the course of the research period; all four of these interviews were conducted in person. Of the four interviews conducted, three of them were conducted entirely in English and one of them was conducted with the help of a Vietnamese interpreter.

The names of all of the interviewees have been altered for security purposes. For the purposes of clarity and continuity, each of these respondents has been assigned a pseudonymous identity. The pseudonymous names of the respondents are as follows:

Ms. Sapoche - educator
Mr. Thom – editor and reporter
Mr. Xoai - reporter
Mr. Mit – reporter

These identities, while veiled, will maintain their integrity throughout this research paper; all quotations and allusions to the words of these individuals will be cited consistently with these false identities throughout the paper. These four individuals all work in the Vietnamese journalism industry. Two of the interviewees, Mr. Mit and Mr. Xoai, are staff writers at Vietnamese newspapers. The newspapers for which these men work have been concealed to protect their identities. One of the interviewees, Ms. Sapoche, works as an administrator in the department of journalism at a Vietnamese university. The final interviewee is one of the administrators of the association of journalists in Ho Chi Minh City.

All of the interviews were recorded digitally by means of an audio recorder and subsequently transcribed into written form. The electronic interview was recorded in its
original form. Transcripts of all of these interviews can be found in the appendix section. All of the interviews were undertaken in Ho Chi Minh City in November and December of 2013.

**Research Biases and Obstacles**

This research reflects an attempt to understand the modern Vietnamese written journalism industry as thoroughly as possible. However, this research is incomplete in a number of ways; this methodology section will address the inherent shortcomings and biases of the research conducted and include a discussion of the major obstacles encountered over the course of study.

A number of structural and translational obstacles emerged during the research period. The first primary problem is one of bias. The author of this research is a product of the American written journalism industry; although he made every attempt to detach himself from the institutional norms of this brand of journalism, the effect invariably skews perception of differing models of journalism. Moreover, the researchers status as a foreigner, and as a representative, however obliquely, of the American media, may have distorted the content of the interviews.

The language barrier may also have distorted the research. In the case of the one interview with Mr. Thom that was conducted through the conduit of a native-speaking Vietnamese interpreter, many of the finer details of the interviewee’s responses were lost in translation since the interpreter had to abridge and summarize his statements. Furthermore, although the other interviews were conducted in English, it is possible that the difficulty of articulating abstract or politically sensitive ideas in a second language may have detracted from the accuracy and precision of the responses received.

Structurally, the written journalism industry in Vietnam is one that is naturally resistant to incisive scrutiny. Since the industry is owned and operated by the government, the degree of access is determined by the authorities and is limited. While questions are about the function of various agencies and the relationship between different actors within the mechanisms of the journalism industry are acceptable, questions about censorship, incarceration, and Party policy are often considered inappropriate. Furthermore, certain politically sensitive potential interviews, such as
government censors, could not be contacted for interviews and/or were unwilling to participate in my research. The lack of these different voices and perspectives limits the multi-dimensionality of the research.

In addition to the limited breadth of perspectives with respective to the interviews, the research conducted for this study was carried out over the course of roughly three weeks in Ho Chi Minh City. To gain a more thorough understanding of the journalism industry in Vietnam, it would be helpful to undertake research over a longer period of time in a number of different locations throughout the country. This variation would add greater depth to the study and allow a more thorough and nuanced view of the written journalism industry to emerge.

III. Background: A History of Vietnamese Journalism

Before undertaking any kind of comparative analysis of the modern Vietnamese written journalism, it is important to contextualize the modern industry within the long and complex history of Vietnam. The following section details the political history of Vietnam as it pertains to the development of the modern Vietnamese written journalism industry.

Since a comparative discussion of the Vietnamese written journalism industry necessitates a discussion of the political and economic systems in which journalism is produced, it is important to understand the system of governance in Vietnam that creates them to understand the creation of written journalism. In Vietnam, the system of governance is rooted in history of colonialism, conflict, and clashing ideology.

Historical Roots of Central Authority: The Colonial Period

Governance in Vietnam has been historically unstable; different actors have imposed a number of different styles of governance on the Vietnamese people at different times in the state’s history. The Vietnamese people spent more than a thousand years under the subjugation of various Chinese empires and rulers; during this period of time, the Vietnamese people developed a proclivity for highly centralized, proto-authoritarian government. This socio-political trend, while encouraged by imported Confucian values, is rooted primarily in traditional Vietnamese agriculture and family life (Jamieson 1993).
In this traditional model of Vietnamese social organization, power is localized in the village and central authority is dominant. This mode of social organization stems from both a deep-seated reverence for elders known as filial piety. This respect for elders (or, in a more politicized context, superiors) is absolutely unquestioned (Jamieson 1993). This ancient system not only legitimized and systematized political hierarchy, but it created a system that could not function without it.

While the fundamental precept of superiority-based submission to authority continued to exist due to its inherent propagation in the family sphere, the incursion of numerous foreign powers began to dramatically alter the manner in which Vietnamese people interacted with their government. In the 19th century, western influence precipitated a shift in the locus of political control, from the embattled Nguyen dynasty to the occupying French (Karnow 1997). By 1886, the French had occupied all of modern Vietnam, beginning a period of colonial administration that would last until 1954. This occupation by the French represented the first time that a western power held political control of Vietnam, and during this time the Vietnamese people were exposed for the first time to ideas of democracy and republicanism, albeit obliquely.

Throughout the latter half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, Western governance dominated the political system, and Vietnamese people observed the mechanism of Western political governance; in this way, many Vietnamese intellectuals either formally or informally became pupils of French political theory. The nature of resistance in Vietnam during these early years began to witness a subtle but crucially important divergence in opinion. While many Vietnamese still demanded a return to tradition Vietnamese village-based feudal governance, many Vietnamese people also began to call for the establishment of a republic (Karnow 1997). Thus began a proliferation of contradictory authoritarian and democratic ideas within Vietnam. At this time, Vietnamese written journalism dwindled to a near halt due to the strict colonial administration of the French, and the journalism that was produced was directly influenced by the French administration (Huong 2013).
Division and Reunification: The Suppression of Private Journalism

In 1954, another watershed moment in Vietnamese social history occurred when the country split into two states controlled by ideologically opposite foreign powers. The Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north continued to operate under the authoritarian, socialist model and the United States-supported Republic of Vietnam in the south operated in a republican, capitalist framework (Nguyen An 2008). The divergent styles of governance highlighted the impact that various styles of political and economic administration could have on society, and many Vietnamese people in the north and south began to adopt their administrators’ theories of authoritarian socialism and democratic-republicanism, respectively (Kerkvliet 2003). At the same time, theories of Marxism that had already been adopted by fringe groups during the French colonial period gained traction.

During this period, two separate types of written journalism emerged in concordance with the respective styles of governance under which they were produced. In south Vietnam, even though a number of small, private written journalism outlets emerged, the mainstream media was controlled by foreign media agencies that stifled large-scale Vietnamese competition (Kerkvliet 2003). While the south ostensibly operated under a capitalist economic regime, the government imposed barriers to entry that indirectly censored would-be Vietnamese written journalism (Earl 2013).

In north Vietnam, a revolutionary press emerged to educate the people about official platforms. Citizens in north Vietnam had already begun to produce a number of private publications in the 1940’s (Kerkvliet 2003). In subsequent years during the sovereignty of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (north Vietnam during the war), some intellectuals argued for an open journalistic dialogue to prevent governmental dogmatism, while others argued that any journalism unrelated to the agenda of the revolutionary cause should be considered “unconstructive criticism” and therefore be outlawed (Kerkvliet 2003). This debate came to a head in 1956 in an event known as the Nhan Van – Giai Pham affair where the government explicitly curtailed the freedom of expression (Kerkvliet 2003). Despite the ideological challenges, the government controlled the two national daily newspapers and instituted a program to teach journalists to adopt a policy of self-censorship that exists, albeit in a modified form, to this day, as
described in Section V-1 (Earl 2013). By 1958, all private media outlets had been shut down by the government (Kerkvliet 2003).

The policy of censorship that characterized the regimes in separated north and south Vietnam continued when the country was reunified (Earl 2013). In 1974, upon reunification of the country under the banner of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the state began a process of reconciliation that strove to bridge not only the emotional gulf between the two war-torn regions of the ruined country but also the intellectual one between the host of ideologies espoused therein (Kerkvliet 2003). From 1975 to 1986 the government of Vietnam operated by means of a rigid social and economic apparatus of control and submission. During the period of reunification, the mass media, including all kinds of written journalism, was incorporated into the Vietnamese Communist Party’s rhetorical toolbox as the state’s favored method of educating the public and promoting their social and political agenda (Kerkvliet 2003; Mit 2013).

Đổi Mới: Incongruous Expansion of Economic and Journalistic Freedoms

Human rights and economic productivity suffered, and so in the latter half of the 1980’s the government made a bold policy decision to pursue a policy of deregulation with the “Đổi Mới” reform agenda in 1986. The Đổi Mới reform agenda had wide-ranging implications; while written journalism producers still ostensibly worked for the government, they were encouraged for the first time to report on social and political activities (Huong 2013). For the first time, journalists had access to foreign media sources (Earl 2013). This period, in which state authorities allowed an unprecedented amount of press freedom, became known as coi troi, or “untying of the mass media” (Huong 2013).

At this time, the journalism industry also began to interact for the first time with corporate sponsors, who put advertisements in newspapers (Earl 2013). Accountable for the first time to economic forces, newspapers began to focus on circulation, readership, and advertisements to ensure that they made enough money to cover costs (Earl 2013). While financial separation from the government made newspapers more accountable to
readers, the government still maintained its dominant regulatory role in the administration of newspapers.

The government continued to focus disproportionately on the regulation of the journalism industry due to the politically sensitive nature of its ‘product.’ As such, the growth of the written journalism did not mirror the growth of the Vietnamese economy at large, particularly with respect to regulatory relaxation. Concomitant with the post-Dổi Mới economic growth there was a surge in access to foreign media networks. While the industry experienced unparalleled freedom from 1988 to 1990, the collapse of a number of socialist countries in Eastern Europe in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s precipitated a clampdown on media freedom that curtailed freedoms of written journalists (Huong 2013). Beginning at this time, the government began adopting a number of measures to consolidate its regulatory control of written journalism in Vietnam.

**The Modern Era: Attempts to Retain Control in a Globalizing World**

While the government made the decision to allow use of the internet in Vietnam in 1997, it is has since struggled to regulate internet use. The first internet editions of major state newspapers in Vietnam appeared in June 1998 (Earl 2013). In response to an increasingly interconnected and online media landscape, the government issued a number of decrees in the late 2000’s and early 2010’s targeting use of the internet that allegedly “undermines national security, social order, and safety” of the state (Huong 2013). In 2007, the Vietnamese Communist Party created the Ministry of Information and Communications as a way to manage the press more efficiently (Huong 2013).

Vietnam’s turbulent sociopolitical history, characterized by centuries of colonial occupation, war, and demographic instability, sets the backdrop for Vietnam’s modern written journalism industry. In this way, Vietnam’s economy has achieved a kind of capitalistic-socialism and its political system has achieved a kind of democratic-authoritarianism. The modern Vietnamese political and economic system represents the long history of competing political and economic ideologies.

The journalism industry in Vietnam, determined as it is primarily by these two systems, bears the distinct impressions of all four of these ideologies in varying degrees. The modern written journalism industry, a highly dynamic sector of Vietnamese society,
is a complicated and hybridized instrument of the state that reflects the formative influence of both Vietnam’s sociopolitical history and also the distinct socioeconomic imprint of media globalization. As global interconnectivity continues to increase, the government of Vietnam will have to find new ways to accommodate an increasingly socially fluid global atmosphere that makes regulation of written journalism increasingly difficult.

IV. The Vietnamese Written Journalism Industry in Theoretical Context

Newsworthiness and Media Authority

The relationship between the news and journalism is often ambiguously defined and it differs across the globe; different societies have different views on the role of the journalist in reporting the news. Generally, to be considered authentic news, the style of reporting must be perceived by the reader as a factually truthful account of actual events (Berry 2010). However, the concept of objectivity in journalism is one that is less agreed upon within the media world and within broader society. News is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as, firstly, “current events, important happenings, or interesting recent events,” and then secondly as “interesting or important information not yet known or realized” (Berry 2010). This definition reveals the central ambiguity surrounding the role of the journalist in reporting the news.

Strict interpreters of the role of the journalist believe that journalists should simply transmit information and relate current events and happenings; these thinkers adhere primarily to the first half of the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of news. Loose interpreters see the role of journalists as not only transmitting current events, but also as subjectively interpreting it. These thinkers focus on the qualitative nature of the news suggested by words such as “interesting” and “important.” In this later model, journalism is a subjective craft rather than an objective task.

It is important to acknowledge the inherent power of journalism, particularly in the political context of this research. To ignore the subjectivity inherent to the production of written journalism is to negate the utility of a comparative study of journalism; all
news agencies would simply record events as they occurred in a world of purely objective journalism. In the real world, different news agencies in different parts of the world respond to current events and happenings in different ways based on their political, social, and financial goals. A media authority determines “newsworthiness” based on pre-determined moral and political ideological viewpoints and therefore has the power to propagate these viewpoints to all people who have access to the news (Berry 2010).

The media authority can be diffuse or centralized. In a model where the central media authority is diffuse, a number of different actors determine “newsworthiness.” Such a system allows for the propagation of a number of different social and political viewpoints. This model requires a socio-political atmosphere in which various sources of news production can freely proliferate. This model functions well in liberal political environments that allow diversity of political expression and financial climates that enable the easy collection and mobilization of capital.

In a model where the media authority is centralized, a single actor determines newsworthiness and therefore possesses an ideological monopoly. This ideological monopole has the sole power to propagate its social and political ideologies. The system in Vietnam is one of imperfectly centralized media authority. As described above, the Vietnamese Communist Party owns and operates all media and technically does not allow for private written journalism of any kind. In this way, the Vietnamese Communist Party attempts to control the socio-political climate and keeps a finger on the pulse of the Vietnamese people.

Objectivity versus Truth and Power Dynamics

The definition of journalism is important to the maintenance of political power because it legitimizes state-sponsored writing as journalism and disqualifies writing that is potentially dangerous as propaganda. As journalism theorist David Berry observes, journalism ethics are concerned not solely with the manner in which media is produced, but also with the manner in which the media is framed for consumption (Berry 2008). In the determination of what is journalism and what is not, the concepts of truth and objectivity are importantly distinct. While truth is concrete and immutable, objectivity is relative; in most cases, objectivity is relative to standards set forth by the media authority.
To illustrate this concept in a pithy example, Berry uses British political commentator and revolutionary Thomas Paine to highlight the difference between journalistic truth and objectivity. Contrary to the British government, Thomas Paine felt that the American colonies were entitled to freedom. Paine published a number of pamphlets describing the nature of the relationship between Britain and the American colonies and outlining his beliefs. Paine was not considered a journalist because his writing wasn’t considered objective (Berry 2008). However, from a factual standpoint, all of what Thomas Paine said was true. Since Thomas Paine did not adhere to the ideologically objective viewpoint of the media authority, the British government, he was officially considered a radical dissident despite the factual truth behind his reporting (Berry 2008).

The divide between truth and objectivity is very much alive in the modern Vietnamese written journalism industry. State-determined objectivity, not truth, is the standard of journalism in Vietnam (Xoai 2013). All mainstream, state-operated newspapers must be “objective,” or aligned with the Vietnamese Communist Party’s political agenda. Non-state, alternative producers of news, however, may be non-objective by adopting political perspectives that are not espoused by the government. In such cases, these non-objective journalists may be publishing pieces of writing that are entirely factually true but rendered illegal anti-state propaganda on the basis of their non-objectivity.

Citizen Journalism

Tradition holds that authority is the criterion that separates journalist from amateurs and agitators (Berry 2008). Objectivity, rather than factuality, is the primary determinant of journalistic legitimacy. While journalists and amateur writers alike make factual errors in reporting, alignment with the media authority shields journalists but not amateur writers from backlash in the event of factual inconsistency. Typically the media authority attempts to stifle writers who are “non-objective” and disagree with prevailing political discourse. Dissidents may have the means to expand their alternative political ideologies or they may be silenced or even killed for their radicalism, depending on the amount of power the central authority wields.
Historically, disagreement with the central media authority has taken a number of different forms. The dominant method of countering mainstream journalism depends both on available technology and on political climate. In the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe, for example, political pamphlets and circulars served as the primary means of producing and disseminating anti-establishment viewpoints (Berry 2008). The distribution of these pamphlets required both the technology to print large amounts of these periodicals and also a political environment in which pamphlets could be produced and distributed, even surreptitiously, without unreasonable government reprisal. Historically in Vietnam, one or more of these prerequisites has always been absent. Only with the recent rapid development of internet technology have the tools to produce and distribute political dissent become available to the average Vietnamese citizen (Thom 2013). The rise of the Vietnamese “citizen journalist” has significant ramifications for the media authority and the nature of regulation.

V. The Operation of the Media Authority Monopoly: Regulatory Mechanisms

Unquestioned media authority is an important and widely deployed instrument in the Vietnamese Communist Party’s rhetorical toolbox. Journalism in Vietnam is “the speaking body of the government;” a complex mechanism that functions as a nationwide public address system that is considerably more difficult to ignore than the country’s physical loudspeaker system designed with the same purposes in mind (Sapoche 2013). Since 97 percent of the urban population in Vietnam and 92 percent of the rural population are literate, the written journalism industry has a particularly broad reach (Earl 2013). The Vietnamese Communist party manages to retain its unchallenged position as centralized media authority in a number of direct and indirect ways.

Education of Journalists

One primary way that the Vietnamese Communist Party attempts to preserve control of media authority is to play an active role in the education of journalists throughout the country. Political doctrine is embedded in the very foundation of the journalism education. The first ever course in journalism education was offered to 42
Vietnamese journalists in 1949 (Nguyen An 2008). President Ho Chi Minh wrote a letter instructing these aspiring journalists that the purpose of a newspaper is “to propagandise, mobilize, train, and organize the people so that they will obtain their common aims” (Nguyen An 2008). To this day, the Vietnamese Communist Party hopes to subvert future dissidence and streamline journalistic expression by educating journalists in political rectitude and Party policy.

The state government issues licenses for education in the field of journalism; in modern Vietnam, only three universities possess licenses to teach journalism and one university is licensed to offer a specialization within the communications department (Sapoche 2013; Nguyen An 2008). Although other universities would establish journalism departments if they were given permission by the government, the Vietnamese Communist Party limits the number of licenses issued to teach journalism in an attempt to more efficiently ensure adherence to “rules and regulations and the orientation of the Party and the government” (Sapoche 2013).

The state engineers the curriculum of journalism departments to ensure that students of journalism are well versed in the ideologies of Marx, Lenin, and Ho Chi Minh and professors of journalism are directed to teach aspiring journalists “how to write in a way that the government allows, that is not against their views” (Sapoche 2013). Furthermore, the state ensures that students in journalism departments are of the highest caliber not only by limiting the number of journalism programs in the state but also by making the entry requirements for these programs stringent. In the universities where journalism is offered, the standard scores required to enter the department of journalism are the highest of all social science disciplines (Nguyen An 2008).

Of the roughly 14,000 journalists working in Vietnam, approximately 70 percent studied something other than journalism in their respective universities (Sapoche 2013, Mit 2013). A number of these journalists have also been educated abroad (Mit 2013). As can be seen by the significant number of journalists who come from non-journalism degree programs, the education of journalism of journalists is certainly not the only means of standardizing the social and political content that is produced by newspapers. As described in the following section, diligent censorship is required to maintain a unified media projection. Censorship and monitoring of journalists trained abroad is
particularly important, because, as will be described in greater detail in the following section, foreign-educated journalists pose the greatest threat to the ideological integrity of Vietnam’s state news agencies. While there are a number of problems with journalism education in Vietnam, the state plans to refine this ideological tool in the future.

In its National Information Development Strategies agenda, published in 2010, the Vietnamese Communist Party outlined plans to establish a national university of journalism and communication from which to coordinate journalism education throughout the state (Nguyen An 2008). As evidenced by the plans to expand the apparatus of journalism education, the state government plans to continue to educate Vietnamese journalists as a way of maintaining central media authority.

State Ownership, the Journalists’ Association, and Censorship

The Vietnamese Communist Party manages media expression in the state by means of a complex network of censorship. Censorship in Vietnam takes a number of forms in the modern written journalism industry, some of them direct and others indirect.

The most basic way that the Vietnamese Communist Party guarantees control of the media sector is by owning and operating all the means of production. In modern Vietnam “all newspapers belong to an organization of the government” (Mit 2013). Individuals and private groups are not allowed to create news publications (Sapoche 2013). While it is impossible for private actors to establish news media outlets, it is possible for organizations to successfully petition the government for the right to collectively produce a new piece of journalism (Sapoche 2013). As an example, Tuoi Tre News, the most circulated newspaper in Vietnam, was institutionalized as an instrument of Vietnam’s youth union (Sapoche 2013). In such cases, the government must still control the publishing group.

By owning and operating all media agencies and outlets for written journalism in the state, the Vietnamese Communist Party ensures that it has a structurally unimpeded ability to censor all forms of social and political expression. Generally speaking, the institutional mechanism of censorship operates at a number of direct levels. Mr. Mit, a prominent Vietnamese reporter who has worked over the course of his career at both of Vietnam’s two largest newspapers, Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien, explains that the censorship
process operates institutionally on “several levels” (Mit 2013). The first of these is the editor, who is responsible for reviewing the work of each written article received (Mit 2013). The editor then passes the article on to the second tier of review, the secretary, and the secretary passes it on to the third level, the deputy in chief (Mit 2013). Each of these people reviews the article for form, content, and political correctness.

According to Mr. Mit, however, this complex mechanism of censorship is largely superfluous. By his estimation, self-censorship is the most potent of all levels of censorship (Mit 2013). “Every reporter, every editor, they know what they should write, what cannot be published,” explains Mr. Mit, “I know what can’t be published, and if I know that, I won’t write about it” (Mit 2013). Mr. Mit echoes the importance of ideological education, and asserts the prominence of the Vietnam Communist Party’s ideology even in an industry where only 30 percent of journalists have been formally educated under the doctrine of the state curriculum.

Every week, representatives of each and every newspaper attend a “censorship meeting” in which government officials debrief journalists on which current events can be covered in the news and how they are to be described (Sapoche 2013). In many cases, entire topics in domestic or international current events are blacklisted, forcing newspapers to omit significant news events (Xoai 2013).

Furthermore, the Vietnamese Communist Party operates a journalists’ association to participate even more fully in the process of reporting and synthesizing the news. According to Mr. Thom, a senior administrator of the organization, Vietnamese journalists are expected to join this association to “protect their legal rights, work rights, ethics rights and economic rights” (Thom 2013). Furthermore, the association is designed to “train the journalists to improve their skills;” in return, journalists are expected to contribute a monthly membership fee, participate in community-building events and competitions, and “protect the reputation of the association” (Thom 2013). In the words of Mr. Thom, “that means that they cannot do anything unethical that goes against the purpose of the association” (Thom 2013).

In Vietnam, the journalists’ association functions to protect journalists when they “meet obstacles and difficulties from local authorities” (Thom 2013). The journalists’ association allows for an added layer of protection for state-sanctioned journalists that
puts further distance between them and any non-objective extra-state writers. The Vietnamese Communist Party discourages dissidence and exerts an oblique form of control over the journalism industry by providing journalists with additional benefits and obligations to the state in the form of the journalists’ association.

Some of the techniques used by the Vietnamese Communist Party to perpetuate media control follow the model of other authoritarian states such as China (Mit 2013). Many commentators on the future of censorship in Vietnam indicate that future government policy will follow the model institutionalized by China; according to journalism educator Ms. Sapoche, the Vietnamese “government will learn a lesson from China” (Sapoche 2013). While China provides a model upon which the Vietnamese Communist Party bases much of its internet regulatory policy, both countries are struggling to incorporate social media platforms into their regulatory regimes. Additionally, other more liberal media policies in foreign countries impact the Vietnamese written media industry and challenge rigid codes of journalism regulation.

VI. Challenges to Media Authority

The primary factors that challenge government authority are technological improvements, foreign journalist education, and international pressure. Owing to the foundationally important role of state-controlled journalism the Vietnamese Communist Party in maintaining power dynamics between the government and the Vietnamese citizenry, the Vietnamese government invests a disproportionate amount of time and money enforcing laws related to written journalism (Kerkvliet 2003). The globalizing media atmosphere poses a number of challenges to the Vietnamese Communist Party’s media authority, particularly in terms of expectations for content and regulation. The growth of social media, in particular, challenges the hegemonic authority of the Vietnamese Communist Party in the arena of media authority.

Journalist Education and International Pressure

Another way that the globalizing media atmosphere is challenging Vietnamese journalism is by shifting standards for journalism education. The impact of alternative theories of journalism are becoming evident in the Vietnamese journalism industry due to
increasing numbers of Vietnamese journalists who have studied abroad and expanding
reader demographics that encourage major Vietnamese newspapers to pander to English
readers (Mit 2013; Xoai 2013).

According to prominent Vietnamese journalist Mr. Xoai, many Vietnamese
newspapers are reluctant to hire students who studied journalism in Vietnamese
universities, favoring instead uninitiated aspiring journalists who can then be schooled in
the newspaper’s personalized brand of journalism doctrine (Xoai 2013). Official statistics
validate Mr. Xoai’s claims; of the 154 editorial staff members at Thanh Nien, only 9
percent received any kind of formal journalism education (Nguyen An 2008). Newspaper
officials “think the way [journalism students are] trained is outdated,” explains Xoai, “so
they would prefer to receive someone who wants to be a journalist and they will retrain
them from scratch” (Xoai 2013).

On top of the ineffective attempts to indoctrinate journalists by means of a
comprehensive education system, the influence of liberal foreign media systems poses
challenges to Vietnamese newspapers. “The problem with many journalists who stop
their work, study abroad, and then come back,” explains Mrs. Sapoche, “is that they find
it difficult to adjust themselves again to the old environment” (Sapoche 2013).

Moreover, English-speaking audiences pressure Vietnamese newspapers to relax
standards of journalism regulation. Mr. Xoai, who works “in an environment […] with
foreigners who publish newspapers,” says that publications in Vietnam, which are on the
rise to due to increasing English literacy among Vietnamese students and a growing
expatriate community, enjoy more flexibility “primarily because the guys who censor the
newspaper everyday don’t speak English. In the language, we can be a bit stronger and
more liberal” (Xoai 2013). While Xoai acknowledges that, topically, he and his
colleagues still “cannot stray well beyond [their] boundaries,” the influence expands
political horizons in a manner that is problematic to the conservative rhetoric of the
Vietnamese Communist Party (Xoai 2013).

In addition to indirect pressure for a more globally minded reporting style, a
number of foreign agencies are highly critical of the Vietnamese Communist Party’s
policies with respect to media freedom. The organizations “Reporters San Frontieres,”
(Reporters Without Borders), Amnesty International, and the Human Rights Watch have
all criticized the Vietnamese Communist Party for its cyber-censorship (Viet Tran 2013). This criticism from the international community threatens Vietnam’s trade relationships with foreign states and therefore causes significant concern to Vietnamese Communist Party policy-makers. Most of the criticism focuses on Vietnam’s policy regarding social media and blogging, one of the foremost policy objectives for the Ministry of Information as it struggles to resolve the “headache” of how “to regulate this new kind of content online” (Sapoche 2013).

**The Internet, Social Media, and Blogging**

The improvement of technology makes it increasingly easy for average citizens to illegally produce and disseminate private written journalism (Kerkvliet 2003). The development of photocopy technology created the first outlet for renegade private journalists in the late 1990’s (Kerkvliet 2003). Soon, the development of fax technology and, later, internet technology, became the dominant means by which renegade journalists produced illicit journalism (Kerkvliet 2003). The first internet editions of major state newspapers in Vietnam appeared in June 1998, and non-objective, extra-state publications soon followed suit (Earl 2013). Today, the internet poses the most imminent and significant threat to the Vietnamese Communist Party’s central media authority.

“In Vietnam right now there are about 30 million people who use the internet,” explains journalism educator Mrs. Sapoche, “we are the most growing market for online newspapers of all of the Southeast Asian countries — higher than even Thailand or the Philippines” (Sapoche 2013). The rapid growth of the internet makes regulation of written journalism increasingly difficult for state authorities in Vietnam. While the state government possesses the means to monitor and control almost all physically printed journalism, it lacks, as yet, the means to monitor all digitally produced journalism. The development of instantaneous and easy-to-use social media platforms, in particular, threatens the Vietnamese Communist Party’s ability to control information that “undermines national security, social order, and safety” (Huong 2013).

As mentioned in section IV.3, the expansion of internet access and the ease with which the average person can produce and distribute written journalism has given rise to a surge in “citizen journalism” in Vietnam (Xoai 2013). Whereas in the past the
Vietnamese Communist Party’s tight control of technological and social capital in the state has prevented the emergence of significant “non-objective” currents of news reporting, the internet has enabled an alternative to the objective mainstream media that is published by state agencies.

A complex system of political blogs and on-line forums provides an outlet for news on topics that have been deemed inappropriate for the purview of the state-journalism industry in weekly censorship meetings (Xoai 2013). Mr. Xoai explains that these blogs provide an important source of information for Vietnamese citizens who wish to learn about global affairs, revealing that he and his fellow editors consult the blogs “almost every day” to “see what is going on out there” (Xoai 2013). While Mr. Xoai thinks that the blogs pose a threat to mainstream media sources such as the top national newspapers, he still believes that most news consumers consult the blogs to supplement the information they receive from the newspapers (Xoai 2013). “[People] have to read the mainstream media to see what is new,” explains Mr. Xoai, “then they check the blogs to see another angle of the same issue. That’s the way they balance between blogs and mainstream newspapers.”

With respect to the future of blogging and the regulation thereof, Mr. Xoai explains that “there is no point in stopping [bloggers], because even the [state] journalists now blog” (Xoai 2013). The Vietnamese Communist Party recognizes the futility of halting all activity in the blogosphere, but they have plans to scale up efforts to monitor internet activity, much like China has done in the past (Sapoche 2013). Moreover, the Vietnamese Communist Party is attempting to stake out a role in the social media landscape from which to coordinate social media activity. Current government efforts focus on establishing a presence on Facebook, the most commonly used social networking site according to many sources (Xoai 2013). Facebook is a tool for the promotion of news articles, as well as a bridge between informal social networks and state-operated websites. Modern newspapers are also encouraging civilians to send in photos and videos that may then be uploaded to news websites as a way to legitimize the concept of the “citizen journalist” in a way that is not politically inflammatory (Xoai 2013).
Government efforts to monitor online expression in Vietnam continue, and online rights of Vietnamese citizens are fluid. Although state newspapers are attuned to “the advantages of Facebook” and are working diligently to harness the power of social media platforms, the incidence of cyber-dissidence remains high, and incarceration of cyber-dissidents remains high, raising concerns for international rights organizations, as mentioned in section VI.2 (Mit 2013; Xoai 2013).

VII. Conclusions: The Future of Written Journalism

A number of factors specific to the Vietnamese socio-political environment characterize the modern Vietnamese written journalism industry. The first of these factors is the hybridized ideological landscape that exists in Vietnam due to the country’s complex colonial and war-torn past. This landscape, while ostensibly socialist and authoritarian, bears the distinct imprints of capitalism and democracy due to the long history of colonial occupation, war, and foreign influence. The second of these factors, and the more dynamic of the two, is the digitalization of written journalism and the rise of social media platforms. In the future, these two factors will continue to influence the relationship between the state-controlled written journalism and the people of Vietnam.

Mutual Accountability in an Authoritarian Framework

“We are reporters, we report the truth,” explains Mr. Thom, “we are not just writing for someone, no. We write for the truth. We write for people” (Mit 2013). While the degree of freedom within the existing system of written journalism in Vietnam is not satisfactory for either journalists or readers, the system itself is stable, and Vietnamese journalists generally believe that they are usually able to provide interesting and informative news to the Vietnamese people (Xoai 2013; Mit 2013). Even in politically sensitive situations, journalists within the objectively tethered and heavily censored state journalism industry manage to find “flexible” ways to indirectly acknowledge politically sensitive events (Mit 2013).

While the Vietnamese written journalism industry doesn’t adhere to global standards of media pluralism, it satisfies the most fundamental goal of any journalistic
institution, it conveys news to the Vietnamese people. In fulfilling the expectations of the Vietnamese public by providing “interesting and important information” and simultaneously functioning as an effective medium for the propagation of state policy, the Vietnamese written journalism industry proves to be institutionally stable. Although the state government controls the written media industry and operates a monopoly of media authority in Vietnam, national newspapers are still responsive to the preferences of news consumers (Xoai 2013).

Unlike other journalism industries in authoritarian states that are propped up by military force, the Vietnamese newspaper industry is a socio-politically self-sufficient institution that delivers a product consumed by most Vietnamese people. There are certain instances where Vietnamese citizens butt heads with the monolithic state-run journalism industry, such as the recent incidents involving the Vietnamese blogging community. The incarceration of these journalists demonstrates the rigid operational boundaries under which Vietnamese journalists work, but does not preclude the existence of meaningful reciprocity between the state-controlled journalism industry and the Vietnamese news consumers.

The Vietnamese written journalism industry operates on a tacit, informal social contract between the government and the people whereby the people agree to accept the limited content of the journalism and the state agrees to acknowledge the interests of the people. While this model of mutual accountability differs from the capitalist contract that characterizes the relationship between newspaper readers and the written journalism industry in democratic nations, it demonstrates the mutual accountability of the newsmakers and the news consumers to one another.

The written journalism industry provides a stable, albeit limited, medium of “dialogue” between the Vietnamese Communist Party and the people of Vietnam. Administrators at newspapers are becoming increasingly aware of consumer demands, and they are making every attempt to satisfy these demands when it is within the boundaries of political rectitude to do so (Xoai 2013). Although in many cases the mainstream Vietnamese journalism industry, led by newspaper powerhouses like Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien, is capable of satisfying the curiosities of the Vietnamese people, there are numerous instances where state topic blockades prevent news producers from
reporting on current events (Xoai 2013). Cases such as these have precipitated the emergence of an alternative source of news: the Vietnamese blogosphere. The Vietnamese blogging network is highly popular news source for political non-objective thinkers and Party members alike, and it is growing in popularity (Xoai 2013). Although radicals with anti-government proclivities are the creators of some blogs, many more bloggers are politically “objective” commentators and even Party members (Xoai 2013).

**Government Adaptation**

The current explosion of cyber-dissidence and radical blogging poses the most significant threat to the Vietnamese written journalism industry of any of the many threats posed to the media authority of the Vietnamese government. While the incarceration of a number of cyber dissidents reflects the imperfect dialogue between the Vietnamese Communist Party and the people of Vietnam, it does not necessarily represent a paradigm-shift in government media policy. Blogs have emerged as a controversial but necessary policy propagation tool, and, recognizing their potential utility, the government has adopted a policy of encouraging members of state-run newspapers to create politically objective blogs (Xoai 2013). In choosing to become a part of the blogosphere rather than rejecting it, the Vietnam Communist Party has decided to attempt to adapt to the rapidly shifting social media landscape rather than futilely try to completely wipe out social media in Vietnam (Xoai 2013).

Accepting the inevitability of a robust blogosphere is just one of the ways that the Vietnamese government has accepted a certain amount inevitable of change in the written journalism industry. The government has also allowed many large newspapers to create Facebook pages (Mit 2013). The government has also recently endorsed a policy of citizen journalism. Even though the degree to which Vietnamese civilians can actively participate in the creation of news is minimal and there still exists no formal channels for dissenting opinions, the allowance of even a limited corps of “civilian journalism” represents a subtle expansion of non-state media authority (Xoai 2013).

In the future, government adaptation to developing social media platforms will continue. In addition, the government will maintain or expand existing structures for censorship of written material in Vietnam, particularly online. By expanding the presence
of the state on the internet, the government will attempt to become a more active part of Vietnamese society. They will also continue to propagate the ideological tenets of state-sponsored journalism by means of an expanded journalist education apparatus (Nguyen An 2008).

By expanding their online presence, state authorities hope to glean a more implicit understanding of the networks through which online social networks operate in Vietnam, which will hopefully lead to a clarified definition of the online rights of Vietnamese citizens. In theory, clear outline of online rights will curtail the large incidence of cyber-dissidence and subsequent detention. As the Vietnamese authorities develop more refined methods to regulate social media and amateur written expression, it is likely that the social media landscape will become less volatile and the rate of incarceration of cyber dissidents will decrease (Xoai 2013). As the Vietnamese Communist Party is unlikely to accept complete political transparency, it is likely that alternative media streams such as blogs will continue to be an important means of gathering information for Vietnamese news consumers (Xoai 2013).

VIII. Suggestions for Further Research

As discussed in the methodology section of this paper, there are a number of shortcomings to this research. One of these problems was the brief research period. Due to the limited duration of this research, it was also impossible to canvas a suitably large and diverse segment of the Vietnamese population and assess media satisfaction. Further inquiry would benefit from the perspectives of Vietnamese news consumers and help illuminate the degree to which the Vietnamese written news industry is successfully purveying “interesting or important information” (Berry 2013). The people, after all, are the ultimate barometer of whether news is interesting and informative. Also, expanded access to the Ministry of Information and the networks of censorship would help offer a more nuanced view of the written journalism industry. Future research about this topic should focus on expanding the breadth of perspectives on the written journalism industry captured. Furthermore, further research should include the perspectives of members of the Ministry of Information.
IX. References


Mit. Personal interview. 25 November 2013.


Sapoche. Personal interview. 26 November 2013.

Thom. Personal interview. 28 November 2013.


Xoai. Personal interview. 5 December 2013.
X. Appendices

Note: The following interviews represent the actual dialogue between the researcher and the interviewees. The only alterations that were made are indicated parenthetically, and were made to protect the identities of the respondents.

A. Transcript of Interview 2 with Mrs. Sapoche, Vice-dean of the Faculty of Journalism and Communications at [Omitted] University

Conor: What exactly is your job title working for the University of [Omitted]?

Sapoche: Right now I am the vice dean working for the department of journalism and communications. I am in charge of international activities between my department and other foreign institutions. I am also in charge of student activities in the department. My major is journalism and I teach online journalism and the history of journalism and also I am the instructor of some research.

C: When you went to University, did you study journalism as well?

S: When I went to university, I studied journalism for my BA and I took my masters in international journalism in Sweden, and now I am doing my PhD thesis also in journalism.

C: So your faculty is a major that students can choose, right?

S: Yes.

C: So you mentioned online journalism, what other courses are taught in your faculty other than the ones you teach?

S: I will give you a brief overview of my faculty. We start with a training program in journalism in 1992. At that time we belonged to a bigger faculty called “The Faculty of Vietnamese Language, Linguistics, and Journalism.” In 2007 we separated from the big one and we became the Faculty of Journalism and Communications. So at that time we changed the training program and offered two majors; the first was print journalism and the second one is called electronic media. Electronic media involves online journalism, television, and radio. We plan on opening a new major called Communications. In Communications we will teach corporate communications, advertising, public relations and things like that. That is the plan for the future.

In my department there are around 600 students. There are 150 students each year that come to the University to study journalism. In total we have 600. We are the main hub of journalism education in [omitted]. We are the only one in all of
There are three places to train journalist in Vietnam. There are two institutions in Hanoi and the only one in the South is our university.

Journalism in Vietnam belongs to the government. It is the speaking body of the government. All of the institutions that train journalists must be allowed to do so by the government. They belong to the government, and you need a license and permission from the government to train journalists.

C: So how does an institution obtain that license? Are there other universities in [omitted] that want to teach journalism as well?

S: Yeah, many of them want to, but the Ministry of Education just allows one university in the South. Only our department has the right to train journalists. Other universities have communications programs that can teach public relations and advertising, but not journalism. When you teach journalism you need to follow the rules and regulations and the orientation of the Party and the government.

C: So does the government have anything to do with the curriculum that you use for your courses? Is there someone who regulates which kinds of courses should and should not be taught?

S: Yes, in general, all of the curricula in Vietnam are monitored by the Ministry of Training and Education. They give the frame and that frame is set by the government. There are some general subjects that are required. I don’t know how to say it… You must have to learn them in the first two years…

C: We call them “core requirements.”

S: Yeah, core requirements, something like that. They are usually in politics subjects, like Marxism and Leninism and Ho Chi Minh’s ideology.

C: Does every student in Vietnam have to take those?

S: Yes, every student in their first year and a half. Then they move to their specialized field. In the specialized field, we can adjust our curriculum, we can suggest and update it to the requirements of the labor market. We also have to put some subjects. We call it “Publishing Law” and “The Viewpoints of the Communist Party on Journalism.”

C: That’s a mandatory class?

S: Yes, it is mandatory. Besides that, we also have to teach students how to work and how to write in a way that the government allows, that is not against their views.
C: That’s something that you teach the students? Do you tell them what they should and shouldn’t be writing about, or do you teach them a certain writing style? Or both?

S: We have to teach them a certain writing style and techniques in television and radio, how to produce a television program, how to write lines for printing. Actually our program is quite based on the programs of some universities around the world. We work with one university called the London City University and another one is Deakin University in Australia. Our university has some similar points in teaching techniques and the skills to produce a journalism product. Besides that we also have to talk to the students about how to make (their writing) more authentic in a way that is suitable for journalism in Vietnam.

C: I write for my school newspaper at my home university. Is it common for universities to have school newspapers in Vietnam, and does the University of Social Sciences publish its own newspaper?

S: We have an internal newspaper at the school. Students can write for that newspaper. We also have an online version that the students produce. They write, they work on video clips and audio clips. You can write down the name of the website.

C: Definitely. So that’s produced by the students?

S: Most of the content is produced by the students.

C: So, in America right now the journalism industry is a tough industry to get into because it is very competitive. Do you find that students coming out of your faculty right now have a good degree of success when they are looking for jobs? Do you find that most people — after they graduate — find a job at a newspaper or is it sometimes difficult?

S: At the time that I graduated from my university it was quite easy, but that was ten years ago. Now it is more challenging, but still our students can have the chance to work at a newspaper, television, or radio or some media company.

In Vietnam we don’t have private media, but we have some private companies that can produce some entertainment programs for the national television — they outsource. They produce with some (foreign companies). The company will produce entertainment content in a foreign format for television. The newest one, the latest one is “The Big Brothers,” which has been produced in Vietnam. Or “Vietnam’s Next Top Model,” or “Vietnam’s Got Talent,” or “Vietnam Idol.” Some companies in Vietnam produce that content and then sell it to the television channels. That is a place where students can work.

We have a strong point (in) that Ho Chi Minh City is the biggest market in Vietnam and the students from our faculty still have many places to work after
graduation. Even if they don’t want to work in journalism or communications they can come back to their hometown to work for the administrative system as a clerk or as an information executive.

C: So because there is no private media, is there a way for individuals to start new news publications working with the government? If someone said “I want to start a newspaper” or “I want to create a magazine,” could they do that with the government’s permission?

S: No, they wouldn’t get the government’s permission. They could ask but they wouldn’t get the permission. You know in Vietnam, if you want to set up a magazine or a newspaper, you have to work with an organization, a state organization — for example the Womens’ Organization, the Youth Organization, a scientific organization, something that belongs to the state. Vietnam allows each organization to have its own newspaper to express their opinions. So organizations can get permission from the state to publish, but not private companies or individuals.

C: So you said that your university has its own paper. Is it only because you have a Faculty of Journalism that you have a newspaper, or do other universities — such as the University of Economics — have newspapers as well?

S: Well we just have an internal newspaper. It is just for the students in the school, not to (be sold) in the market.

C: So other universities have internal news as well, so its like a newsletter.

S: Kind of.

C: Is it common for towns to have newspapers, or is it mostly just national newspapers that are distributed?

S: We have very strong local newspapers in Ho Chi Minh City such as Tuoi Tre.

C: Yeah, that’s a big one.

S: Yeah it has the biggest circulation in all of Vietnam, they have 400,000 copies every day. Each province can have their own paper.

C: So even south of here, for example Can Tho, can have their own papers?

S: Yeah they are run by the local administration.

C: The local government?

S: Yeah, but the local government belongs to the central government.
C: It’s all connected, of course. Are there many people who major in something else and/or study elsewhere, in the U.K. or something, who are competing with your students and is that a problem?

S: There are a lot of people from other majors who can work as journalists. If they have the ability to write and to find the news and to write a report, they can do that. Yes, the students can go abroad and come back. There are lots of people in Vietnam — as I remember there are about 14,000 journalists — so there are many people who come from many other sources. Are they competitive? Until now, I don’t see any trouble because the demand of the market is still large. We have people who really have the ability to work in that field.

If I am from a newsroom and I have to choose from a student of journalism and a student from another major and a student coming from abroad, then I will give them a chance to work. Whoever can work for a long time, I will keep them. In journalism, you don’t choose the one that you think has a better degree. Usually you choose them after a long time of challenging them and letting them work for you. You will see who really has the ability to be a journalist. Sometimes the job is very hard, and people will say no to it.

C: Some people can’t handle it.

S: Some people can’t handle it. For example, some people will find a job with a higher salary in some organization. So you keep the one who is most suitable to your organization.

C: So a few minutes ago you were talking about how part of your job is to teach students how to write appropriately within the parameters of the government. In what ways do you help teach students to write within those parameters? How do you instruct them what they can and cannot talk about?

S: It is in the law — what you can do and what you cannot do. You also have a meeting — it’s called the Censorship Meeting — between the government and the newspaper and television and other journalistic organizations in Ho Chi Minh City and other provinces in Vietnam. We have that kind of meeting every week. They will censor people, they will look to all of the newspapers and they will (say) “this one is correct, this one you cannot say,” something like that. Based on that we will talk to the students so that they understand censorship in Vietnam and what you should do and should not do.

C: So that report is the product of a meeting between government officials and representatives of all the newspapers, so they come together every week. You have access to that meeting?

S: Yes we have to attend the meeting.
C: You attend the meeting as well?

S: Yes, but sometimes there are a lot of things to do during the week and we are not the ones who have to attend 100%, so sometimes we are there and sometimes we are absent, but we still get there report by e-mail.

C: So are you affiliated with any newspapers? Do your students have a chance to work with any of them?

S: Our students have a chance to have their internships in every newspaper in Vietnam. After they finish their third year, the students will give us a request for which newspaper they would like to work for and we will send it to all of the organizations and newspapers. So if the newspapers accept the student to come in, they can have two months working in that place. Mostly all of the newspapers in Vietnam accept. So we have quite a good relationship with the newspapers, television and radio stations in Vietnam. In Ho Chi Minh City, we have a strong relation with Tuoi Tre newspaper, Thanh Nien newspaper and Ho Chi Minh City Television and Radio. Those are some of the places we have a strong affiliation with.

C: What do you think are going to be the most significant changes in the journalism industry in the next ten years or so, and how are you preparing students for them? Do you anticipate the changes having to do with a shift to online media, do you have any ideas of any government policies changing? What do you think will change in the journalism industry?

S: Well, you mentioned one of them is the changing from printing to online media. In Vietnam right now there are about 30 million people who use the internet. We are the most growing market for online newspapers of all of the Southeast Asian countries — higher than even Thailand or the Philippines. The growth is very fast now. I have conducted research recently and I see that nearly 90% of the students who read online still read the print because they study printing, for example, so they still have to read print, but they mostly read online. That is the trend.

In the future, the young generation, they will read online. So from our Faculty we prepare for that trend. We opened the online journalism program several years ago, and then we train the students how to produce packets for online media. We have a multimedia lab and we have the website and students can produce for that. I think that is the biggest change in the future — that people will move from print to online. We are preparing students to work in an online environment.

Second, I think that television will develop very fast in the future, especially in the field of entertainment. We see that, in the last five years, there are a lot of activities in the foreign game-show format and they are coming to Vietnam. They attract a large audience in Vietnam to watch and to see, to enjoy this kind of
program. You also have now cable television, so each family now can enjoy 80 or 90 channels. Most of them are from foreign countries — for example, HBO, Star movies, many things from outside. That will be a big challenge for the Vietnamese media industry. I’m not a major in television, but I think in the television field they will update the curriculum to teach the students to work for and produce this kind of entertainment.

C: So do you think that this shift — both the shift from print to online journalism and the shift towards a more entertainment-based newsmaking industry — will cause the government’s role in regulation to change? Is the government going to have to adapt to be able to regulate the growing online media industry and the growth of this entertainment industry? Do you think the relationship between the government and the newspapers is going to have to shift to accommodate those changes or can it stay the same?

S: This is a very big question that creates a headache to many people from the Ministry and from the government. I met some of them — even some of the highest people — and I have been to meetings and conferences where they also question themselves to regulate this new kind of content online. Online there are not only newspapers, but also a lot of blogs, and Facebook. People can write and express their own opinions and many of them are against the government. That creates a headache. As I know, they are trying their best to find a way to regulate and they are trying some new decree...

C: Yeah, they issued one last spring about Facebook news sharing.

S: Yeah something like that. They are trying to give out new rules — also in entertainment and commercial (industry). Before the year 2000, the Vietnamese media did not pay attention to the commercial entertainment. Now we are open, and the economy has changed. The newspapers now need money to grow up, so they change the commercial way. They cannot stop that trend. They need to let that trend keep going on, but they need to find some other way. They try to educate. For example if you are against the rules, you are fined. They try a lot to gain control and to regulate all the new things coming.

In my own opinion, you see China, who has the same politics as Vietnam, and they also have to regulate their media. Until now, it seems that China can still do that, so I think that the government in Vietnam will learn a lesson from China. I don’t, can they do it or not? The old people will try their best to regulate everything. But with the young people, especially the people who come from abroad, who go overseas and then come back, if they work for the government, I think that their mind will change, I think that they will be more open. Maybe in the next ten years, there will be some changes if they change the people there.

C: If the people in the government change their minds, you mean?
S: The young ones, they will be easier to change the government.

C: That was great, that was most of what I wanted to learn.

S: Let me show you our brochure.

C: Great. (She verbally walks me through the brochure, which is printed in Vietnamese)

S: These are some objectives of our Faculty for the students. For example we have learning facilities, multimedia labs, the studio, the reference books, the teaching staff. We have 18 teachers. We invite many journalists and reporters from the industry to come to be our guests.

Here is the first semester, the second semester, the third one, so the students can follow the curriculum schedule. In the first semester, the students have to study — as I told you before — the Marxism and the Leninism and Ho Chi Minh’s ideology. It’s very Communist in the first year. You also study something about social sciences, like sociology, literature, linguistics.

In the third (semester) you learn something about journalism, like magazine printing, photojournalism. The next is radio, television, public relations or something like that.

These are some student clubs in out university. For example we have the alumni, the charity club, the performing club, the Young Communists for the students who want to be members of the Party in the future, the music club — you can go to the website, its quite cute, to see the students videos, they sing, and the young reporters club — there are 50 members — and they produce news videos and other things on their own Facebook page, and this one is an e-photo club.

There are some pictures of our staff. They are quite young because, as I told you before, we have just separated from the old (Faculty) in 2007, just six years ago. Here is the e-mail of our faculty, and some addresses where the students can meet — for example the center for the student support. I can give this one to you.

C: Thank you.

S: Look at this diagram, it shows the core requirements, the specifics for the major and English. (A pie chart shows that most of the curriculum is dedicated journalism, then to core requirements, then to English study.) This shows our new modular program, it is the newest one. We chose thirty students to participate in this (program) — it is experimental. If we think it is a success, we will change it so that every student follows this one.

C: I feel like I have learned so much. Yesterday I spoke with a reporter for Tuoi Tre news and it is interesting to get the different perspectives. He studied abroad in Houston,
Texas. He studied Communications there and he came back. It is interesting to think about what effect that will have, these people having different ideas of journalism.

S: What is his name?

C: His name is [omitted].

S: Ahh, he is a famous reporter, he worked for [omitted].

C: Yeah he worked for [omitted]. He told me has done a lot of reporting abroad. It’s very interesting.

S: Does he still work for [omitted] after coming back from the US?

C: Yeah, he worked for [omitted] for awhile and he is working for [omitted](sic, I mixed up the chronology).

S: You know, he was a famous reporter before going to the US. I knew him many years ago. The problem with many journalists who stop their work, study abroad, and then come back is that they find it difficult to adjust themselves again to the old environment. They learn many things new outside, and they find that it is very difficult for them to work in the old way.

C: It seems restrictive now.

S: Many of them quit and they work in other fields.

C: Interesting. Great, that’s more than I could have hoped for, thank so much!

B. Transcript of Interview with Mr. Thom, Chief Editor of Journalism Magazine and ranking member of Journalists’ Association

(Disclaimer: This interview was translated by Vy and it therefore reflects a constructed dialogue; everything recorded below represents the words of Mr. Thom as given by Vy’s translation.)

Conor: What is the purpose of the journalist’s association and what are the benefits of joining the organization and the responsibilities once you have joined the organization?

Thom. The association of journalists is a political, social, and career organization. The members are all journalists and they joined in the association so that the association can protect their legal rights, work rights, ethics rights and economic rights. The association will also have to train the journalists to improve their skills. In the association they will continue to train themselves. It is political because the association is legalized by the government.
C: So it's a state organization. Is it something you join as an individual or is it something that you automatically become a part of when you work for a newspaper?

T. The association is open to all of the individual journalists who want to join it. It’s voluntary — if they want to sign up. It’s open only for journalists who have the card issued by the government. They are qualified to write. They are just open for long-term journalists and they are looking for hardworking collaborators, and these collaborators have to be introduced by the newspapers.

C: So the benefits of joining the association are that you can rely on the training network. Once you join, are there any responsibilities, be they financial or otherwise? Do you have to attend a weekly meeting or pay a certain sum of money annually?

T. There are three main responsibilities for the members. The first is that they pay 10,000 dong a month for a joining fee. The second one is that they have to protect the reputation of the association. That means that they cannot do anything unethical that goes against the purpose of the association. The third one is that the association usually organizes some things like sporting competitions for the journalist community.

C: In your mind, what is the single greatest advantage to joining the association for journalists?

T. The greatest benefit for all the members is that they have the support and protection of the association, especially when they go and do reporting. When you do reporting in Vietnam sometimes you meet obstacles and difficulties from the local authorities, from the person you are interviewing or something like that. If the association finds that the reporter is right and the local people are wrong they will stand up and protect the journalist. In the past five years there have been 20 or 30 cases of the reporter getting prevented from doing a proper report.

C: So because this is a state run association, does the government encourage all journalists to join it? If not, why? I guess the parallel question is, for what reasons would someone choose not to be a part of the association? Just start with that last question, to keep it simple. Why would someone choose not to be a part of the association?

T. During my time working here, I have just seen a few cases who don’t want to become a part of the association. Most of these are because of personal reasons; they don’t think they have enough time to go to the meetings of the association or all of the activities the association has organized. Just a few people don’t join. Everyone needs to have a community.

C: More generally speaking, what do you think the biggest challenge facing journalists in contemporary Vietnam is?
T. In my opinion, there are four challenges that the journalism industry is facing right now. The first one is globalization, because in other foreign countries, journalism develops so fast. They are at another level compared to our local journalism. How do we improve ourselves to catch up with other countries? Also, how do we keep our unique basis of Vietnamese journalism? The second one is the finance. Right now people are switching to online newspapers and the demand for print newspaper has dropped. We don’t get enough profits to keep them. The third one is because of the switching. They all try to have an online newspaper besides the print one. It will be a social change of the whole society, not just the journalists. The fourth one is the training for the new journalists. Education in Vietnamese universities is still limited; we have limited resources.

C: In what ways are both the association but also more importantly, the government, responding to those challenges? How is the state responding to the issue of his first point, globalization, and the third one, the social change that accompanies that globalization?

T. The only solution for all of those problems is training and re-training. The association will organize seminars and field trips to other countries to learn how they do journalism in other countries and try to update the latest knowledge for journalists. The only thing is training and re-training.

C: I know that one thing that he has said before is that the Vietnamese newspaper industry is trying to catch up to newspaper industries elsewhere in the world by following in their footsteps in terms of what they are trying to do. So what is the government doing in terms of balancing these attempts to globalize and become a part of the international news community while at the same time regulating and maintaining their standards of political appropriateness. Elsewhere in the world, news reporting is sometimes based more on personal opinion, so how are they balancing both growing and become more global and at the same time maintaining regulation?

T. Right now there are major changes happening in the newspaper industry. The first one is the printing of newspapers. If they find that they cannot handle that anymore, a lot of them shut down and switch to online newspapers. The second thing is that even though (the news industry) is globalized, they need to have the ethics in reporting and try to make (the news) accurate and ethical. That’s all they need to follow. The third one is that right now the major changes are not about what the government says to the people but also about what the people want to say to the government. The newspaper right now is a bridge between the government and the people, so it’s not just one way, it’s two ways; they are trying to do that right now.

C: What is your least favorite part of your job and what is your most favorite part of your job?
T: The thing that made me follow the newspaper industry is my passion for journalism. I love doing it. Doing journalism, I find freedom in myself. I can do whatever I want, I can go wherever I want. I can say what I think and what my opinions are. I can get people to know my voice and to know my name. That is what I like about it. My least favorite part is that sometimes I am crazily busy. I cannot have time for myself or my family.

(He pulls out a magazine with colored pictures of journalists of varying ages arranged on the front cover.)

T: This is my student, the next generation of journalists, who usual do excellent in the online newspaper. This is the previous generation of journalists, and during the American War they did army journalism. These are the generations of journalists in Vietnam.

C: So you are the editor of this periodical. How often is it published?

T: This is a monthly newspaper with limited editions just for the members of the association.

C: Are you affiliated with any specific newspaper other than the work you do for this?

T: I write articles for other newspapers.

C: But not for one specifically?

T: No.

C: What is your background in terms of your educational career? What was your major in university?

T: I studied art in a vocational school, and then I studied literature in university and then I graduated and got another journalism degree in another university.

C: In Hanoi?

T: I studied in Hanoi, then in Saigon, then in Hanoi. There are nine journalists in my family.

C: Are they older or younger?

T: My grandfather and my grandmother, my father and my mother, and my sibling, and my daughter. I was born to be a journalist.

C: Great, that was awesome! Thanks so much!
C. Transcript of Interview with Mr. Xoai of a National Newspaper

Conor: One thing I have been pretty interested in while doing my research is the degree to which foreign media outlets impact the way the news is reported in Vietnam. So my question for you is to what degree do you feel that international or foreign news agencies impact the way that the news is reported in Vietnam?

Xoai: The thing is, I am working for an English language edition in Vietnam, so with my newspaper we share much of the same readership (we international newspapers). They cover the angle that we are interested in. You asked about the impact — they do have an impact on our publishing because I will look at the news to see what they are interested in, what we want to put in our foreign edition so we can follow it up. We can check the angle foreigners are interested in.

C: How does that angle differ from the angle that caters to the domestic audience in Vietnam?

X: They are very different. Sometimes they are similar, sometimes they are different. They are similar in terms of politics. Everyone cares about economic performance, how the prime minister is facing (inaudible) confidence, for example. In terms of the difference, a story about a vendor may be of no interest to the domestic audience, but it could be of great interest to foreigners if you know how to make the most of our daily life, how street vendors interact with ordinary people every day. I mean, in terms of this, it can be very different.

C: So your audience is primarily expats?

X: Expats living here, and, you know, in Vietnam now a lot of young people are learning English, and they want to speak English. They want to live in an environment that is entirely English, so they practice English. So they find us. The development community also wants to know more about Vietnam, so they read us as well.

C: One of my areas where I am least clear is understanding the financial side of the journalism industry. So, generally speaking, I wanted to ask how much you know about the way — you can speak just to your experience at your newspaper — what is the relationship between streams of capital? How is, for example, your newspaper funded? To what degree does government assist financially, or do they assist you at all?

X: Technically, all the newspapers in Vietnam are state-owned, but very, very few news outlets depend on the state financially. Except for some newspapers like the Communist People’s newspaper, the mouthpiece of the government, who receive direct funding from the government and the Communist Party. For the majority of newspapers in Vietnam now, we have to fend for ourselves financially. We don’t receive any funding from the government. We have to sell our own advertisements, we have to try to increase our circulation, we have to try to
increase our readership. So, in a nutshell, we have to fend for ourselves when it comes to financial issues.

C: At what period — and this may be beyond your purview — historically did newspapers become self sufficient and reliant on advertising?

X: We have been sufficient since the very beginning.

C: So it has only been certain newspapers that have been subsidized by the government?

X: Very few, very few.

C: So what kind of marketing strategies do you guys have and what kind of advertising sponsors do you attract primarily? Is it mostly Vietnamese companies? Do you ever seek out international companies to advertise in your newspapers as well?

X: Actually, for the purposes of our newspaper — because, frankly, we are the number two largest selling newspaper in Vietnam — I have to say that the advertising people don’t have to go find customers, it is the other way around. They think we are a large newspaper so they come to us, sometimes through advertising agencies. There are now quite a few (advertising agencies) in Vietnam. Sometimes we have to find our customers as well. We have to come to them and offer them our advertisement (space).

C: One of my other questions goes hand in hand with the issue of financing. How responsive are you to the preferences of your readers? In what ways do you determine what people will be interested in reading?

X: I think in Vietnam it is more about guesswork. I am not sure if there is any survey of readers’ interests. We have our own channels to figure out what they care about every day. As a journalist you have to build your own network of readership and patronage, so you can catch up with them and talk to them and get to know more about their daily lives. As is the case for my boss, they interact with a lot of people, so they get a general picture of what is going on out there in daily life. We try to put ourselves in the shoes of the readers and see what they care about. I’m not sure if our newspaper or any other newspapers carry out a survey on an annual basis about what the readers care about. We measure their interest through the stories we post up on the website. If we see many comments, we will think it is big news and it is worth following up.

C: With that in mind, are there channels through which readers can write back to the newspaper about stories that they have read or publish an editorial or an opinion piece?

X: In our newspaper they have a reader’s department that is responsible for handling all of the comments and feedback from readers. We receive readers’ stories and complaints, so we interact with our readers.
C: So are those reactions or responses ever reprinted in the newspaper for other people to see?

X: A lot of our stories are thanks to the tips of readers. They come to us and they expose — not expose, but accuse — they accuse a company of damaging the environment. Of course we cannot print their complaints entirely in the newspaper. We have to come to the site to see what is going on there and conduct an investigation. The concept of “citizen journalism” is very new in Vietnam, but it does exist now.

C: It exists as far as tips and suggestions?

X: If you see a traffic accident out there and you videotape it with your iPhone and you send it to us, we will use (it).

C: Online, or something?

X: Yes.

C: So you mentioned the internet and social media, but before we move on to that topic, which is a whole new can of worms, would you say generally that you feel that readers — not just of your newspaper, but of newspapers in general, are satisfied with the content they read.

X: It depends. You cannot say that they are always satisfied. In Vietnam, there are certain circumstances where you are not able to report things as much as you want. That may last a bit longer, so the readers are very sensitive. Every day they pick up the paper and they say “oh today there is nothing in the paper.” But some days there are a lot of interesting stories on the front page, so it depends on the circumstances.

C: So it differs day to day?

X: No, let me give a specific example. For this period, our relations with China are so strained, so we are asked not to report things that can say bad things about the Chinese, but the readers, they hate the Chinese. The want to read stories about it, but they don’t see those stories in our paper, and they react.

C: They are frustrated.

X: They think “why are you so cowardly?” or something like that.

C: So there’s definitely a degree of frustration with certain topics and certain issues. You started briefly mentioning videos that had been taken by readers and things like that. How much of a priority is online journalism and social media and things like that? How do you
personally, and perceive the industry as a whole, will incorporate things like Twitter or Facebook in the future?

X: Twitter is almost nonexistent in Vietnam, but Facebook is so popular. We have used Facebook to promote our stories. Whenever we have a new story that goes online, we post it on Facebook to see the reactions of the readers. Our bosses try to ask every single reporter to become a multimedia journalist. You can’t just report things, but you have to videotape the accident site, for example. You need to be as versatile as you can. Facebook is the most popular tool in Vietnam.

C: It’s a similar problem in America right now, because social media platforms are developing so quickly.

X: But you guys use Twitter and we don’t.

C: Certainly that is slightly different. I have never used Twitter personally, so I know very little about Twitter, but I think that American news media outlets are struggling to incorporate things like Twitter into their repertoire. In many ways people look to their Twitter feed to learn about news as it happens. The nature of Twitter and Facebook is that postings happen instantaneously. A lot of times, people are looking for that kind of instantaneous satisfaction and instant knowledge instead of looking to more venerated news sources like the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal. It is an interesting dilemma that is unfolding here and there.

I have had a couple of conversations with Vietnamese journalists who are from Vietnam who studied abroad in the US —

X: On Fulbright scholarships?

C: —Some of them on Fulbrights and some of them on exchange programs. Many of them get their bachelor’s in communications and then come back and report in Vietnam. My question for you is are those people who study abroad and are exposed ostensibly, to these different models of journalism, regarded any differently by Vietnamese news agencies? Do they have a different role than people who are educated in Vietnam?

X: Have you asked those journalists these questions?

C: I have, but I am curious to hear your perspective.

X: I am looking to apply for a Fulbright scholarship. I have been in an environment where I work with foreigners who publish newspapers so I think that I understand western standards. For (foreign-educated) journalists, it seems that when you study abroad, you get better. That is often the case. Sometimes when they come back to Vietnam — and I am not speaking for anyone else — there are some people who think they should be treated with a privilege because they have studied something which is a standard.
The thing is, you have to be practical. Before you apply for a scholarship, you have to understand that what you are going to study abroad — be it in the US or elsewhere — cannot be applied in Vietnam strictly or rigidly. What you need to seek to learn when you study abroad is the critical thinking and the ability to counter-argue, how to organize a story in the most logical way. You just cannot expect to apply (everything) that you have studied in this environment and in this setting. You have to be very clear from the beginning. I think for those who are frustrated with the state, they cannot use what they have learned at all, because they only want to do what they already know they cannot do in Vietnam. For critical thinking, for asking questions, for the ability to go to the bottom of an issue, you can apply this everywhere. I am working for an English language newspaper and I use the structure of an English news story and sometimes I use the structure of an English story. It works because it is very clear from the very beginning. You cannot do it the other way around. The way a story is written in Vietnamese, you cannot apply that structure in an English story. You have to restructure the entire story. So you need to know what you have to learn.

C: So do you find that because you write for an English publication that you have any more latitude or flexibility?

X: I think so, primarily because the guys who censor the newspaper everyday don’t speak English. In the language, we can be a bit stronger and more liberal, but in terms of the philosophy, the main theme of the story, we cannot stray well beyond our boundaries.

C: The same politically subjects are off limits, but they way that you talk about issues is more flexible. One thing that you mentioned before was how people become frustrated when there is a topic that comes up that can’t be reported on, China as an example. Do you see, in the future of your career as a journalist, politically sensitive issues like that finding some way to be reported upon?

X: We have to brace for that every time, because we can see that. Our job is to find something else to report on, because people will stand still and keep complaining. If you cannot report on certain areas, you need to know how to cheat around (them). You need to wait for the right moment so you can sneak the story through.

C: What’s an example of being able to do that? Is it by mentioning things obliquely in other articles?

X: No, no. It is difficult to find examples. When you want to talk about politics, even the current geopolitical climate of Vietnam attempt to discuss the environment — no, no that’s not an example, sorry.
Just like corruption, you have different ways to report it in Vietnam. You cannot talk about corruption in high places, but sometimes — I think its maybe better if I go back and find some stories as examples of where I sneak things through.

C: Oh no, its totally fine. Another question I have, without needing any kind of specific examples or anything, do you think that there will be a day in the future — in the next ten years or so — when something like the dispute with China will be reported in major Vietnamese newspapers or do you think that the government will never be accepting of something like that?

X: We don’t need to wait for ten years. Sometimes it takes only one month to report something that we didn’t think we could do.

C: You’re talking about, after one month, the government saying, “now you can talk about it”?

X: Yeah, the political landscape changes almost every day, so you do not have to wait for ten years.

C: What is your educational background? Did you study journalism in school?

X: No, I was trained to be a teacher. In Vietnam, I think most of the newspapers don’t like to accept someone who was trained to be a journalist or who has a journalism background. They think the way they were trained is outdated, so they would prefer to receive someone who wants to be a journalist and they will retrain them from scratch.

C: Why would they retrain them from scratch?

X: They just want someone who doesn’t come from a journalism background.

C: Is that because most newspapers don’t like the way journalism is taught in universities?

X: Unlike in the US, there is a major school in Vietnam where the dean of the journalism department in the university has never been a journalist. What can you expect from that guy? Of course they invite other journalists to the school to teach the students, but it’s not rare for the lecturers (in journalism departments) to have no hands-on experience.

C: So with respect to issues that are politically sensitive, do you find that when there is an issue that is sensitive that people want to hear more about people write to the newspaper and say, “I want to know more about what is happening with China”?

X: They write a lot, but they do have another channel to learn about such issues in Vietnam. Blogs. On-line forums. Lots of journalists write blogs, as a way to point
out their frustration because they cannot write what they want to write. A lot of individuals are resentful against the government, so they write the blogs. We journalists, we read the blogs as well, almost every day.

C: You do?

X: I do, to see what is happening out there. You see, sometimes to get an angle for my own story, I read the blogs.

C: From my understanding, a lot of those bloggers have been getting in considerable trouble with the government… Is that true.

X: Not quite a number… but there are a few. A few were arrested for writing anti-state propaganda, but others were arrested for other crimes, like tax evasion, or any (number) of other crimes. I know in the US they have compiled some data about the arrests of bloggers in Vietnam, and I think the number has climbed up to tens of bloggers. I’m not sure of the number, but over the past years, there is an increase in the number of arrests.

C: So you said that you and other journalists check blog pretty regularly to understand what’s going on. Do you think that’s common in the general populace, that most people check the blogs, or is it just because you work in journalism and you have a vested interest in knowing about the world?

X: For those who care, they care, and for those who don’t, they don’t. For those who care about the politics, they can’t find those stories in the mainstream media, so they turn to the blogs to learn more about what’s happening. We need to know, to find the angle.

There is another audience every day: the police. Vietnam has up to hundreds of thousands of plain clothes police who track down what is going on in the blogosphere to get an understanding of who is doing what.

C: People who are unsatisfied with media coverage of sensitive issues turn to blogs. Do you think there are people who have abandoned major newspapers and only read blogs, or do you think there are people who still read the newspapers and the blogs?

X: I think they are going both ways, but they are losing interest in the mainstream media because they don’t believe what the mainstream media says and they tend to believe more in the blogs. I also think there are people who totally abandon the mainstream media, but I think there are quite few.

C: You don’t think that’s a significant problem? Are the leaders of newspapers worried about losing circulation because of blogs?
X: It doesn’t take the blogs; we worry about our decline in the print newspaper with the emergence of mobile devices and online newspapers in Vietnam. We are already worried how to keep readers most updated and how to keep our news “new” every time it comes out.

If you are asking about the quality of news on the blogs, I don’t think it should be a major concern, because not everything in the blogs is quite correct. They write things sometimes that are not true, and readers are offended by that.

For some issues, the readers are curious. For infighting within the Communist party, they will go to the blogs — there might be some interesting news out there. I don’t think that every morning they would check the blogs to see what is new. They have to read the mainstream media to see what is new. Then they check the blogs to see another angle of the same issue. That’s the way they balance between blogs and mainstream newspapers.

C: Is the government and/or major newspapers actively trying to stop people from blogging or are they willing to accept that some blogs will continue?

X: There is no point in stopping them, because even the journalist now blog. My boss asked my colleagues, my coworker, not to write anything reactionary in the blogs. Don’t write something bad about the government. You can write whatever you want, but don’t say bad things about the state. For independent bloggers though, I don’t think the government has spent any effort trying to stop them. I think they will increase their efforts to watch them, to see if there is a point where they can write a blog that is too extreme or too dangerous for the state. They will take some kind of action — not really action, because I can see the bloggers, they have been pretty liberal. But if you write something in the blogs that tomorrow we will take to the streets to demonstrate against the government, then they will crush you before you can do that.

D. Transcript of Interview with Mr. Mit, reporter for a National Newspaper

Conor: The first questions I want to ask you are about what news agencies you have worked for and who you have gotten published with in the past — to get a sense of who you’ve worked for, who you’ve worked with. Are you a freelance journalist?

Mit: I work for [omitted] newspaper. In the past I worked for [omitted] newspaper. Do you know [omitted] and [omitted]?

C: Yes.


C: Since you’ve been back from the states?
M: Yeah.

C: So can I also ask you what did you study in university before you graduated?

M: In the states I got a bachelor’s of broadcasting and communications.

C: Cool, so what, exactly is your role at the newspaper now? Are you a staff writer?

M: Yeah, now I am a staff writer. My major is about labor and about youth.

C: So, you write most of your articles about labor and youth?

M: Yeah.

C: So does every journalist for a Vietnamese newspaper have a specific topic that they usually cover?

M: Yeah, sure, but I think just because reporters have a major that they master, they can (still) also write about other topics.

C: Oh, ok, they can write about other things. So what is the relationship that you have with the editors at the newspaper? Is there someone who tells you what articles to write, or can you say ’I want to write about this’?

M: Now mostly I just let my chief editor know what I will write. Sometimes they will let me know what I should write about.

C: So it goes both ways?

M: Both. But mostly I just tell my editor about the topic(s) I will write (about).

C: So is your newspaper owned by the state?

M: No.

C: It’s a private newspaper?

M: No, in Vietnam, until now there (are) no private newspapers. All of the newspapers belong to an organization of the government. For example, Tuoi Tre belongs to the organization about youth in Hồ Chí Minh City, and Thanh Nien belongs to the organization for youth in Vietnam.

C: So it’s owned by a division of the government?
M: You know all organizations belong to the government. They are a part of the government.

C: So have you ever had a situation where you wanted to write about something but your editor said ‘we don’t want you to write about that’?

M: Sometimes.

C: What kind of topics?

M: Democracy. If you write about just democracy in general, that’s fine. But if you write about multiple parties, or about communists, maybe it is too sensitive and you are not allowed to do that. You can write about that, but your editor won’t accept it to be published.

C: So has it happened where you have written an article and sent it to your editor and they have said ‘no, we can’t do it’?

M: If you write something more sensitive, I think it is not allowed to be published.

C: Interesting. So you write about labor and youth movements?

M: It is just about the social life. How teenagers have fun.

C: Have you found that to be a sensitive issue at all?

M: No, because my major is not about politics. I think just politics is the most sensitive.

C: So you have now worked for multiple newspapers for a couple of years now --

M: Just the two, but sometimes I just write articles.

C: Like freelance?

M: Just like freelance, yeah.

C: In your time working as a writer for newspapers, have you noticed any changes in the newspaper that impact the way you work or the relationship that you have with your editors?

M: Changes between what?

C: So in the past few years have you noticed that your editors have asked different jobs of you or have you changed the kind of writing that you’re doing or anything like that? Part
of the reason that I ask is that in America, where I write for my school newspaper, the news is changing a lot because most people are getting their news online. So, for instance, a lot of newspapers in America are publishing less print editions as they put most of their work online. Some newspapers are putting out, say two issues a week instead of a daily issue. Is that happening in Vietnam at all?

M: It may happen to some newspapers, but the newspaper I work for is a daily newspaper.

C: Do you feel that they have shifted a lot of their content to online content?

M: Right now, online they will update (their sites) with all of the news. But right now maybe the printed newspaper is more focused, more detailed.

C: At your newspaper, if you were to have written something that is considered sensitive, is it the job of your editor to say, ‘no, we can’t publish that,’ or is it the job of some censor?

M: Every reporter, every editor, they know what they should write, what cannot be published. So I know what can’t be published, and if I know that, I won’t write about it.

C: So is there one person who works at the newspaper whose job is to make sure that everything is ok?

M: You have several levels. First, when I’m done with my articles, I give them to my editor. Then my editor will give them to a secretary. The secretary will give them to a deputy in chief. So there are two or three levels, especially for the politics majors. They are concerned about that a lot.

C: So most of you know not to write about that anyway, so it doesn’t have to go through all the levels.

M: In my opinion, we will find a way, day after day, to tell about that (which is sensitive), just in an intelligent way, a flexible way. So if, for example, you would like to tell about multiple parties or something, you don’t tell that about Vietnam, but you would tell about another country. That way, the reader will see multiple parties, the advantages, the disadvantages. We try. We are reporters, we report the truth. We are not just writing for someone, no. We write for the truth. We write for people.

C: What is the most difficult part of your job?

M: It depends on the person. But I think there are some topics that reporters are not allowed to talk about.
C: But for you personally, what is the toughest part of your job? Is it finding things to write about? Coming up with people to interview?

M: For me, let’s see… Finding interesting topics, always.

C: At home, that’s always the hardest. Finding something that people care about. So do you plan on staying with your current newspaper?

M: Yeah I’m happy.

C: So you plan on staying with them?

M: Yeah, because I graduated from the University of Architecture in Vietnam.

C: Oh really?

M: Yeah I’m an architect, too. But I decided on journalism as my career.

C: So what made you decide to go to America to study.

M: I wanted to train professionally.

C: So you had already decided you wanted to be a journalist and then you went to America?

M: I started to write when I was student, when I was a freshman.

C: In Vietnam?

M: Yes, in Vietnam, in 1996 and 1997 I had my first articles published. During the time I was a student I wrote a lot.

C: Who did you write for?

M: I wrote a lot about social life.

C: For the same newspapers? [Omitted] and [omitted]? 

M: No, maybe just two or three newspapers.

C: Was there a newspaper affiliated with your university or no?

M: No, I didn’t write for the university newspaper because the university newspaper just had some (content) but they paid so cheap, but if I published in the national newspaper it was much better.
C: So your university did have a newspaper, it was just poor quality.

M: Yeah, but not many universities have newspapers.

C: So, have most people who work for the newspapers in Vietnam studied journalism in Vietnam or have they studied communications abroad like you?

M: Day after day, reporters are educated by communications in Vietnam. In the past several years, I think that 70 percent of reporters study another major, like me. Like architecture or economics.

C: It’s similar in America. For instance, the university that I go to doesn’t have a journalism major.

M: I think that makes sense. If you are an architect, you are an expert in architecture. So if you write something about that you know what you’re talking about.

C: Are newspapers in Vietnam using Facebook or Twitter or things like that to reach their audience?

M: Yeah sure, they know about the advantages of Facebook. So I think that most newspapers right now have pages on Facebook.

C: A lot of newspapers in America have a button at the top of the page that you can click and share the article on Facebook right away.

M: Right now some newspapers in Vietnam may have that.

C: Do you feel that a lot of people in Vietnam read the newspaper? Or do you think that people are shifting to reading online articles?

M: As you know, day after day people are more likely to read online because it is so convenient.

C: Are you worried about the future of print newspapers?

M: The print newspapers will discontinue, right?

C: You think so?

M: Well no, I don’t think so. But the print newspapers have to be more focused and have to have something unique that the inline news cannot. The online news is fast, but just because it is fast doesn’t mean it can have more detail.
C: So technically everyone working for a newspaper is affiliated with the government? So is there anyone who directly comes in to check that everything is appropriate?

M: There is a branch of government whose mission is to check all newspapers to see if they are sensitive, and if you write something that is sensitive you will be punished.

C: So does that happen? Do newspapers get in trouble sometimes?

M: All newspapers and all reporters work for the government. Everyone.

C: What’s your favorite article that you’ve ever written?

M: A series of articles in Haiti.

C: You were in Haiti?

M: Just two days after the earthquake, I was there. It was on January ninth and I was there on January eleventh.

C: So you wrote multiple articles about it?

M: I wrote about ten articles about it. I was there for nine days. I was week late for my semester.

C: Did your newspaper send you there or did you go yourself?

M: At that time [omitted] in Vietnam called me and said ‘there is an earthquake in Haiti, will you go’? I said ‘yeah sure, I will go.’ They called me at 2 am and I was in the airport at 5 am. […] I tried my best to go to Haiti fast. In the Dominican, I and some reporters from Mexico and other countries rented a car to go to the border, From the border I asked the red cross of the Dominican to go with them. That’s the fastest way to go.

C: Did the newspaper help pay for your flights?

M: They paid for it all. Everything. It was cheap. I went for about nine days and it was about 5,000 total. I think its cheap.

C: Maybe for the newspaper, at least.

M: When I was in Haiti I had to pay for safeguards.

C: It was dangerous.
M: At that time there was looting and there were robbers. I had to pay for a safeguard and a translator. Always at least two people went with me. I had a camera and it was valuable. So if I lost that I would have lost it all. (Other countries had large teams), but it was just only me. (I did) all of (the jobs). At that time I slept only two hours a day. At that time I had to ask the AP to send my articles and my pictures to the newspaper because there was no internet and no power. Also no food, so I had to ask the AP. At that time, money was useless. You could not use that for anything.

C: Are you planning on doing any more traveling like that?

M: I am a travel writer. I love to do that. I used to be in Tibet in 2003. I went to Tibet by bus. Most writers fly, they take a flight from Beijing or Cheng Du. I wanted to get a local experience. I have also been in the Gobi desert. I went to the Amazon in 2011, and I went deep into the jungle and lived with them for ten days. It took time and a lot of money, but I loved that.

C: Did you pay for those yourself?

M: Most of the cases the newspaper sent me there, but the last Amazon trip in 2011 I paid. I had to borrow 8,000 dollars but I still have to pay back 4,000 but I love it. I was in South America for 4 months. I was in Peru twice for two months and I lived with the Quechua people for two months in 2008 and 2009. In 2008 I went to Mexico twice.

C: That’s the coolest job ever.

M: I love South American culture so I love to go deep inside.

C: Where are you going to go next?

M: South America. I would like to go for at least a month or two months or more. I just want to go to one place many times so I can get deep inside.

C: Is it competitive to get a job like your job?

M: It depends on who you are. For me, that’s fine. When I applied to [omitted] newspaper, they said ‘ok, come on.’ Other people may have to intern.

C: You had already been writing for years, right?

M: That’s right. I would like to be a reporter and write about war or something. I love the hard cases. For sure, we don’t want that to happen, but if that happens I would like to be the one to go there to report that.

C: That’s great, thank you!