

**Digital Media, Digital Democracy and the Changing
Nature of Freedom of Speech in Vietnam**

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I also declare that this work has not been previously submitted in any form for a degree or a diploma in any university.

Mai Thi My Hang

In Prague, 26.04.2019.

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Abstract

This paper discusses the influence of digital media and its online presence on freedom of speech in Vietnam by analyzing three different kinds of emerging online media tools: blogosphere, electronic/online newspapers, and social media networks (SNSs). As a single-party socialist republic country, the controlling power of the media lays in the hands of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The Doi Moi reform in 1986, marketization and the introduction of the Internet in 1997 have slightly transformed the Vietnamese media environment, however, it remains highly restricted. This paper explores several sources including academic research, research articles, as well as analysis of online press coverage in the Vietnamese media environment to examine governmental control over the media which influences the free flow of information. Understanding digital media developments within the Vietnamese online media environment helps us to understand how Vietnamese netizens utilize these tools to maximize their online freedom of speech, the CPV's approach to regulate the Internet in order to maintain its legitimacy, and several challenges facing Vietnamese netizens including bloggers, journalists, and the wider public in the digital age.

Keywords: digital democracy, Vietnamese online media, Internet governance, blogosphere, electronic/online newspaper, social media networks, freedom of expression

Chapter 1: Introduction

The digital age or so-called information age or new media age is a remarkable period that has, since the 1960s, marked a significant shift from traditional media to information technology, or computer-mediated media. The invention of the Internet, and the digital revolution following it, has completely changed the way our society functions, just as the industrial revolution did about two centuries ago. The digital revolution has transformed the way we access information, our methods of doing research and the way we interact with other people by making communication faster and more convenient. Meanwhile, the digital revolution has also made access to information and communication more complex. Personal information and privacy issues, authenticity of news, concentration of power within media markets, media and democracy, etc. are among the most prominent issues we face today. Digital media developed during the digital era is often associated with digital democracy because it has facilitated the free flow of information and political engagement globally. It allows citizens to actively participate in political discussions, political elections, and express political views through online platforms such as blogs, social networking sites, and electronic newspapers.

However, these online platforms, and digital media in general have not fulfilled these functions in Vietnam due to heavy control and censorship by the Vietnamese government. Vietnam is a single-ruling party country dominated by the CPV (Freedom House, 2018). According to the World Press Freedom Index (2018), Vietnam ranks 175th on freedom of the press. Freedom House (2018) also reveals that the Vietnamese media environment is unfree. Both traditional media and the new media in Vietnam are heavily controlled by the authority of the Vietnamese government. The Vietnamese media environment is considered as not free by

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Freedom House, ranked 13/25 in obstacles to access, 28/35 on limits to content, and 35/40 on violations of users' rights. In recent years, government censorship has become more systematic. In January 2014, Decree 174 was implemented to fine up to VND 100,000 for anyone who “criticizes the government, the Party, or national heroes” or “spreads propaganda and reactionary ideology against the state”. In December 2018, the Vietnamese government launched Force 47 with 10,000 staff members to manipulate online content (Freedom House, 2018). Under government censorship and legislation, media entities and media writers have adapted to be extremely careful of the media content they create, factoring in whether the information is offensive or damaging the government's reputation.

The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between online media and freedom of speech, and to explore the specific case of Vietnam in order to assess the democratic prospects for the online media environment. The relationship between digital media platforms and online freedom of speech demonstrates how digital media could be the premise for digital democracy. While online media can promote the free flow of information in society, it also can be a tool for the government to retain its power by censoring and restricting media content that is potentially damaging to their reputation. This paper also aims to examine the changing role of digital media in promoting and facilitating the free flow of information in Vietnam. Despite the fact that the Vietnamese online media environment is highly restricted by the state, the Vietnamese netizens continue to fight for the free flow of information and claim their rights to free speech with all the digital technology advancements available to them.

To achieve the goals of this paper, three main aspects of new online media and its online presence will be focused on. Firstly, this paper will explain digital democracy theoretically and practically, and explore how theories can be applied in the real digital media platforms in

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Vietnam. It focuses on three types of digital media: blogs, electronic/online newspapers, and social media networks. Secondly, this paper will explore the government's tactics and actions to control new online media platforms in which government authorities are key actors. Finally, it will discuss the changing roles of three different types of digital media in freedom of speech: how the blogosphere has developed as a tool to promote freedom of speech, how the online press has transformed itself from state-owned to partially privatization, and how social networking sites stimulate social activism and public opinion.

Chapter 2: Digital Media and Digital Democracy

Since the focus of this paper is digital media and its influences on the Vietnamese media environment, it is important to understand what digital media really is. This chapter aims at discussing the types of digital media in the case of Vietnam while further exploring the influences of digital democracy in political practices.

2.1 Digital Media

According to Hansen (1999), anything labeled as digital uses data to represent signals. For instance, a computer processes digital data that represents texts, sound, pictures, animation, and video content. Digital media is a form of media that is encoded/digitized in machine-readable format. Digital media content can be created, distributed, viewed, and saved on digital devices. Examples of digital media are software, interactive websites, video games, digital images, digital television, and electronic books. It is distinguished from traditional media such as printed books, newspapers, magazines, and analog media.

The new millennium has experienced a significant transformation introduced by a fast-changing media industry due to the invention of online media and digital technology. Digital media has had broad and complex impacts on our society in areas such as politics, journalism, education, entertainment, etc. Before the digital age, the only ways to access information were through books, printed newspaper, radio, or television. Online media has changed both the way media content is generated and the way it is consumed. Traditional brands now compete for online presence. Printed books are digitized into electronic books. Likewise, traditionally printed newspapers are transformed into online newspapers in order to be accessible by digital

consumers. Blogs and online newspapers have become the arena for political journalists and politicians to express their political agendas and influence public opinions. Meanwhile, blogging has also become a way of participating in politics that has been adopted by political activists.

In addition, the invention of SNSs also facilitates information consuming habits. Many have turned to social media as their main source of information. SNSs has affected the mainstream and traditional media by creating participating communities in which users can freely communicate and express their opinions about social, economic, and political issues. Similarly, social media has also changed the online media environment in Vietnam. Distinguished from print and broadcast media which are controlled by the state, social media plays a role in independence of thought and discourse and thus becomes a new battlefield for political activity. It engages citizens in political discussions and social activism. The focus of this paper will be on blogs, social media, and electronic newspapers as well as the role of each platform in promoting freedom of speech in Vietnam.

2.2 Digital Democracy

Theoretically, digital democracy is the application of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) in political democracy (Hacker, 2000). Digital democracy is thought of as a way to enhance political participation and political dialogue regardless of time, space, and physical limits (Hacker, 2000). "Digital democracy" is distinguished from other similar-sounding terms such as "virtual democracy", "electronic democracy", and "cyberdemocracy" for many reasons (Hague, 1999; Hacker, 2000). For example, the term "virtual democracy" refers to a democracy supported by ICT,

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however, it is separated from the traditional form of democracy which is set in specific time and space. The term "electronic" in "electronic democracy" also includes broadcasting and telephone. "Cyberdemocracy" is sometimes understood to mean that the Internet is the only medium supporting democracy (Hacker, 2000). Therefore, the term "digital democracy" is still preferred since it embraces all digital technologies that would support ICT in digital data transfer (Hague, 1999).

The innovation of digital media has set the stage for digital democracy and a whole new series of practices in politics, suggesting that digital media has the power to transform dominant trends of action and communication in politics (Hacker, 2000). Before, political activities were largely based upon physical meetings, oral negotiations, and paper-based practices. Digital democracy would revolutionize these old practices into entirely new methods in which individuals independently participate in politics. Individuals would look for information from their electronic devices, posting or answering questions on several platforms. Hague (1999) also stated that the concept of digital democracy could be useful to improve representative democratic institutions by using digital technologies to improve citizens-government interactions. The basic notion is that less verbal skill or direct communication is required to participate in political activities with support from ICT/CMC, or digital media (Hacker, 2000).

Nevertheless, it is still important to reconsider whether or not digital democracy has the potential to change the political system. Such a transformation requires a certain period of time to happen. While it has been observed that ICT or CMC has accelerated or improved the market economy in terms of the stock market, finance, hospitality, etc., it has not completely transformed the basic procedures of the market economy (Hacker, 2000). Similarly, the ICT/CMC has probably accelerated the opinion formation process, decision-making, and

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political discussion through the direct transmission of communication. However, it has not yet completely changed the political practices of representation.

Hacker (2000) stated that ICT enables and support three tendencies of movement in the political system. The first tendency is the reaction of the nation-state whose autonomy and sovereignty are affected. These states are investing more in public administration systems than in systems of citizen information and political participation. The second tendency is state bureaucracy introducing ICT to transform the traditional bureaucracy into infocracy. Infocracy is the use of ICT to increase central control and decentralize executive responsibilities (Hacker, 2000). This gives the state more effective working procedures because it connects and systemizes a variety of data. This last point is similar to the second one, but with the difference that institutional forces form parties. ICT serves as an intermediate agent between political parties and their supporters. As a technology, it also exerts a powerful influence over the electoral process. Hacker (2000) also emphasizes two main functions of ICT in democracy. Firstly, it provides more systematic information to governors, politicians, and citizens. Secondly, the new media/digital media might create a representative democracy by giving more voice to citizens and allowing more political participation through ICT/CMC.

However, to discuss the concept of digital democracy, it is important to put it into the context of a political system and the culture of the nation. Several aspects could be taken into consideration such as institutional forms of representation, roles of political parties, and roles of mass media. Hague (1999) stated that governments are leading factors in facilitating and developing ICT infrastructures to achieve the prospect of a strong democracy.

Since the purpose of this research is to analyze the role of digital media on freedom of speech in the Vietnamese media environment, it is necessary to put it in the context of the

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Vietnamese political system. Vietnam is a single-party socialist republic country in which political power is dominated by the CPV, which is not necessarily compatible with the term "democracy". Therefore, the digital democracy concept might be more useful to apply in a virtual democracy which is created by online and digital media. The Vietnamese government has control of both traditional and new digital media. The Vietnamese government has taken great advantage of ICT/CMC to systemize citizens data, which makes administration much easier. The trend of movement in Vietnam political system is likely to be the second one described by Hacker. The Vietnamese government has taken advantage of the ICT to control the media which will be discussed later in chapters 3 and 4. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to analyze the role of digital media in promoting digital democracy under the context of Vietnamese online media. Generally, it is undeniable that these digital developments can help facilitate the political system in terms of supporting the free flow of information and the exchange of ideas. However, these developments also have tendencies to consolidate political power, give control and surveillance of citizens to the state, and allow political actors to shape digital democracy.

Chapter 3: Government Restrictions and Regulations on New Digital Media

Internet infrastructure and Internet governance play interchanging roles in the dissemination of information and media content. Eventually, these two factors will shape digital democracy and the political system globally and within each nation-state. This chapter will explore which factor is more influential in shaping the free flow of speech.

3.1 Internet Governance

According to UNESCO (2019), Internet Governance is the processes in which governments, policies makers, technical community, and civil society all take part in shaping the norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and uses of the Internet. This section of the third chapter will focus on models of Internet governance and how different countries exercise their power in controlling and monitoring the Internet. Comparisons of two countries, China and Vietnam, will be discussed to highlight the influences of each nation-state on determining the development and application of the Internet within each country.

3.1.1 Models of Internet Governance

The Internet is a platform that provides applications such as email, file transfer protocol, and file sharing programs. It consists of a technical system of Transmission Control Protocol and Internet Protocol (TCP and IP) number to keep track of individual computers and servers on the network. The Internet consists of billions of computers that run these applications to generate, circulate, and even manipulate information (Bygrave, 2019). More specifically, the

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Internet includes the devices used to generate information such as personal computers, mobile phones, and programs that help with transferring information such as YouTube, blogs, electronic newspapers. The Internet's core function is to maintain the interactions of communication/ entertainment activities and the exchange of information, which certainly plays a key role in the development of digital media and freedom of speech.

Based on the Internet's functions in relation to communication and entertainment activities, exchange of information, and development of digital media, the theoretical framework of Internet governance might be important to examine for its effects on freedom of speech and the future of digital democracy. Thus, it may be deemed important to understand what Internet governance is. Bygrave (2009) defined Internet governance based on two levels. In a narrow sense, "Internet governance is about processes, systems and institutions that regulate things like TCP/IP, the Domain Name System and IP numbers" (Bygrave, 2009, p.50). Firstly, Internet infrastructure has a certain impact on the regulation of content and applications. Internet infrastructure influences and interacts with the government's capacity to regulate media content, citizen activities, and communication enabled by these regulations, which eventually determines the degree of freedom of speech (Bygrave, 2009). Secondly, the Internet has enabled and facilitates the development of new digital media. However, how strong digital media's impact on the free flow of speech within a nation depends on a government's control and censorship. In Vietnam, the government's control of the media severely restricts the extent to which information can be spread freely. Several applications and platforms such as YouTube, Google, Facebook, etc. are under government censorship (Hoang, 2015; Peel, 2017).

In a broader sense, Internet governance is "the regulation of the Internet encompassing the policy questions that are really different when the content and conduct are communicated

and acted on and through the Internet" (Bygrave, 2009, p.50). Government regulations and policies could either facilitate or create problems for Internet's infrastructure when it comes to operation. Nowadays, the Internet plays a key role in communication. Contents transferred through the Internet can also be transferred through phone, email, text, tele messages, etc. Therefore, any changes in the regulatory system could also impact how effectively information is communicated.

Bygrave (2009) states that there are 3 central ideas that should be considered to analyze Internet governance. The first one is that the Internet is constituted of a system of technical devices (hardware system) and codes (software system). The second idea analyses Internet governance by approaching such classical tools of policy analysis as normative, economics, and social theory. This idea is challenged by the idea that Internet governance should mainly be influenced by Internet infrastructure, which means preventing all human outsiders from interfering with the network. This would eventually let everyone connect with neutral networks and information could be freely and respectfully transmitted without any restrictions. However, this notion is too ideal and far removed from the fact that politicians, policymakers are often ignorant of Internet architecture.

The last idea discusses Internet governance through five sets of models of Internet regulations. Five ideal types or models of Internet governance are discussed: (a) the model of spontaneous ordering; (b) the model of transnational and international governance institutions; (c) the model of code; (d) the model of national regulation; and (e) the model of market-based ordering (Bygrave, 2009). Among them, the fourth model, national regulation, demonstrates the idea that national government oversees Internet regulations. This model opens up a two-paradigmatic context. The first context is that Internet infrastructure is subjected to government

regulations (Bygrave, 2009). And the second context is that of the government's censorship of Internet content. However, the two contexts sometimes overlap because regulating Internet infrastructure also influences the regulations of Internet content.

3.1.2 The Chinese Government's Attempt to Control Online Flows of Information

In his book *Who controls the Internet? Illusions of a Borderless world*, Goldsmith (2006) argues that "the failure to understand the many faces and facets of territorial governmental coercion is fatal to globalization theory as understood today, and central to understanding the future of the Internet" (p.133). The Internet was believed to provide people with an online community; however, governments have taken their first steps to control the internet. Goldsmith (2006) explains in-depth views on governmental control of the Internet within every nation: "Government can achieve a large degree of control by focusing on the most important ISPs that service the vast majority of users" (p.60).

The Chinese government has the monopoly on power regarding Internet regulations (Eek, 2007, Tiezzi, 2014)). Chinese's leaders have the capability to censor the Internet since China Telecom is directly owned by the government. The Ministry of Information Industry (MII) is the gatekeeper of the Internet in China and publishes the "Computer Information Network and Internet Security, Protection and Management Regulations" which stringently restrict Internet content and access to global networks (Goldsmith, 2006). Materials which are deemed subversive to state power and the communist system, insulting and violating the constitution, and libel are prohibited. Since the MII has monopolized the Internet, it oversees the administration of all global channels through ISP addresses (Goldsmith, 2006). Every global

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channel accessing China must be licensed and follow government rules and regulations. China's attempt to control the Internet is often referred to as the construction of the "Great Firewall" which marks the Chinese government's ambitious attempt to control information access. The Great Firewall of China is a filtering system that blocks websites on domestic Internet connections (MacKinnon, 2011). Its enforcement of the IP layers regulation makes it difficult to hide and makes it easier for the government to track IP addresses. China has eight IP layers/gateways that can monitor all sites/channels to and from the global Internet. In fact, this approach to regulate the Internet is very costly and ineffective because the IP system is not hierarchically organized to identify with national boundaries (Goldsmith, 2006). In addition, the legal regulations of content access to Internet users are also costly because the government cannot afford an acceptable cost for content providers outside of the nation.

However, the Chinese government's attempt is not to control everything on the Internet. Essentially, Chinese citizens can freely talk about anything unless the discussed topic causes a threat to the government and its reputation (Goldsmith, 2006; MacKinnon, 2011). The Chinese government believes that the Internet "can give them both modernization and enhanced powers of central control and stability" (Eek, 2007, p.13). MacKinnon (2011) called it "networked authoritarianism", in which an authoritarian government could seize total control of all possible digital communication changes. In an authoritarian state, the single-ruling party takes control over all media and communication channels while public conversations about social issues or current news still run on digital communication channels (MacKinnon, 2011; Eek, 2007). In this way, the Internet still provides enough freedom to support the world's fastest growing economy, and the government still maintains its monopoly on political ground. Evidently, there are one hundred million Internet accounts, four million blogs, a considerable

number of commercial sites such as eBay, travel sites, etc. in China (Goldsmith, 2006). However, online information and conversations are censored to such an extent that no opposition to the government has been successful. Cases related to politics, religion, or ethnic descent, which were charged with "endangering state security", were doubled in 2008 in just three years from 2005 (MacKinnon, 2011). Nevertheless, even setting aside linguistic and cultural differences, the Chinese Internet is becoming more and more different from the rest of the world because of the monitoring and filtering system discussed above (Goldsmith, 2006).

3.1.3 Similarities Between Vietnamese and Chinese Online Information Management

Firstly, it is important to note that Vietnam is a single-party country monopolized by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), which has a significant impact on the nation's Internet governance (Freedom House, 2018). This means the ownership and the power of controlling the Vietnamese media falls in the hands of the government, or the CPV (McKinley, 2009; Wagstaff, 2010; Cain, 2014). The typical term "state-run press" is often used to describe the highly-restrictive media environment in Vietnam, which is quite similar to the case of China discussed in the previous section (Cain, 2014, p.88). As Nguyen Anh Tuan, CEO and chief editor of VietNamNet has stated:

At present, all media outlets are controlled directly or indirectly by agencies of the state or the Communist Party. Private ownership of media outlets is forbidden and foreign participation—even after Vietnam's accession to the World Trade

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Organization—is restricted... This is because, while Vietnam is a one-party state, its politics are anything but monolithic (Nguyen, 2007, p.3, 4).

Secondly, Vietnamese government's attempt to control Internet communication and digital media is similar to the Chinese government's online content censorship in that it continuously establishes an increasingly sophisticated content-filtering system (Freedom House, 2013). However, instead of the IP gateway levels implemented in China, the Vietnamese government relies on ISPs to monitor online content and identify specific URLs for future censorship. ISPs are used for blocking and banning website owners' licenses to operate on the web. More specifically, the authorities could monitor online content in present time (Freedom House, 2013). Not only are citizens required to provide their ISPs for their home internet connection with government-issued documents, but cybercafe owners are also obligated to install specific software to track their clients' online activities. These cybercafe owners are also responsible for their customers' access to websites that are against the interests of the government.

According to Poetranto (2012), OpenNet Initiative's technical testing of Vietnam's Internet filtering in 2005, 2007, and 2010 found documented proof of Internet filtering. The tests were conducted on the three largest Internet Service Providers in Vietnam: Financing and Promoting Technology Corporation (FPT), Telecom and Vietnam Posts, and Telecommunications Group (VNPT). Tests yielded different results each year, but similar trends were observed in filtered content. Most content found filtered was in Vietnamese and covered topics which were politically sensitive in Vietnam. In addition, the tests' results also found blocked contents including criticisms of CPV, human rights issues, indigenous people, and religions.

In other words, any topics or materials considered to be threats to the CPV and Vietnamese authorities' power are under censorship and will be blocked. Interestingly, the censorship system primarily focuses on Vietnamese-generated content rather than English-generated content. Such websites as the New York Times, the website of international NGO Human Rights Watch, and English-generated sites of Radio Free Asia are accessible since they are edited in English. However, the Vietnamese language site of Radio Free Asia, websites with anti-communist content, and BBC websites in Vietnamese could not be accessed (Freedom House, 2013; Poetranto, 2012). Despite being justified for Internet censorship, content such as pornography was not restricted by any ISPs.

However, it would be an overstatement to refer the Vietnamese media as "state-run" and completely under control of the Vietnamese government. Technological developments, economic growth, and marketization are driving factors in changes to governmental control and censorship. Cain (2014) suggested that the Vietnamese media was driven by both profit and egalitarian motives (i.e. the rise of money politics and models of bureaucratic socialism). Like China, the ruling CPV permits a certain amount of criticism at a low level while still censoring dissenting content that is considered to be a threat to the party's reputation and legitimacy (Abuza, 2001; Nguyen, 2007). Nguyen (2007) stated:

Since VietNamNet was established in 1997, the Vietnamese government's attitude towards the Internet and online media has evolved to one that is perhaps best described as guarded ambivalence (p.18).

3.2 Key Developments in Cyber Law in Vietnam

Decree on Cultural and Information Activities in 2006 defined criminality of "reactionary ideology", as a disapproval of the party's "revolutionary achievement". The Decree

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signed by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung states that all publications must be previewed before dissemination. In addition to this, written articles are not permitted to rely on anonymous sources. Committing these crimes can result in imprisonment or punishment of 30 million VND (Abuza, 2006; Cain, 2014).

Decree 72 focusing on Management, provision and use of Internet services and online information was brought into effect after Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung signed it on July 15, 2013. It was established to "ban the use of Internet services and online information to oppose the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; threaten the national security, social order, and safety; sabotage the "national fraternity"; arouse animosity among races and religions; or contradict national traditions, among other acts" (Abuza, 2015). In other words, Decree 72 was established to extend control over media platforms such as blogs and social media. It also sets limits for certain online activities such as "opposing the Socialist Republic of Vietnam", revealing state secrets, and providing false information (Abuza, 2006; Truong, 2013; Freedom House, 2018).

Decree 174, which was made effective in January 2014, clearly states the punishments for anyone posting "anti-state propaganda" on online social networking sites. The punishment includes fines of 70 million VND to 100 million VND (Abuza, 2015).

To conclude, it is clear that the Vietnamese government has taken a very similar approach to the Chinese government regarding media censorship. Both governments use filtering systems to control and monitor online content. However, the filtering system used by the Vietnamese government is less sophisticated compared to the one in China. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese media environment is highly restricted with an Internet filtering system targeting political and activist bloggers. In addition, regulations the on Internet and online media make it difficult for citizens and media users to exercise freedom of expression.

Chapter 4: Digital Media and Freedom of Speech in the Vietnamese Media Environment

Though it is discussed above that theories of digital democracy cannot be fully applied to the Vietnamese media environment, it is still useful to discuss digital democracy in the Vietnamese online media context. Because the term digital democracy is not associated with Vietnam's current political system, it would more likely to associate it with the emergent new media which has been used by Vietnamese netizens for political participation. This chapter will discuss how three types of new digital media – blogs, electronic/online newspapers, and social media networks – have developed as tools to promote freedom of speech and digital democracy.

4.1 The Blogosphere – The Battleground

The first arena for freedom of speech emerging along with the invention of digital media is the blogosphere. The blogosphere in Vietnam started in 2006 (Mai, 2017). The first blogs were mainly concerned with social issues and were used for communication and building networks. There were only a small number of blogs written about political issues. The Blogosphere has grown as a platform for competing political ideologies. Mai (2017) lists three kinds of political bloggers: activists, pro-CPV, and anonymous bloggers.

4.1.1 Three Types of Emerging Bloggers

Firstly, activist bloggers are those who strongly criticize the government and its policies. These are usually more influential but face more risk from government censure. These bloggers

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are ordinary citizens including musicians, journalists, lawyers, and scholars. Mai (2017) also stated three features of activist bloggers. One feature of activist bloggers is that they write about public concerns, an activity which is restricted in the mainstream media. Their blogs cover a wide range of topics from Vietnam's territorial disputes with China in the East Sea to even more sensitive topics such as human rights, democracy, and freedom. Another feature is that many of them have become such influential bloggers that their number of views exceeded those of state websites, and their followers named them "blogging gods" (Mai, 2017). Activist bloggers also face risks of being physically abused, being sent malware, or being sent to prison. To make their voice stronger, they connected to form Bauxite Vietnam in 2009 and The Network of Vietnamese Bloggers in 2013. These networks started to gain attention and support from both national and international readers. The Network of Vietnamese Bloggers was posted in English so that their representatives could visit Western embassies and human right organizations in Vietnam to call for international support. On the other hand, Bauxite Vietnam made a huge impact when there were publications about opposing the government's approval for Chinese exploitation of bauxite in Vietnam's central highlands. Nguyen Hue Chi, one of Bauxite Vietnam's founders, said that the blog was "one of the few democratic voices of Vietnam" that it had "stirred up a civil movement" (Mai, 2017).

Secondly, Pro-Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Bloggers are those who have an opposing agenda to that of the activist bloggers (Mai, 2017). CPV Bloggers work for the state as researchers, journalists, writers, and soldiers to promote the government's agenda. They often fight against activist bloggers by accusing them of destroying the country's stability and calling them by ironic names such as "Betrayer", "Reactionary", and "Mr. and Mrs. Democracy" while emphasizing the disadvantages of democracy (Mai, 2017). These Pro-CPV bloggers are thought

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to be hired by the CPV to manipulate public opinions about the government's policies and generate support for the CPV. In addition to this, they are paid to defend CPV leaders from various factions with their parties and to use propaganda to protect them. Pro-CPV bloggers are often involved in pen fighting with activist bloggers and other propagandists both to protect their respective leaders and the CPV's agenda (Mai, 2017).

The last kind of bloggers are the so-called anonymous bloggers whose identities are often unknown to the public. The rise and fall of anonymous blogs are often unpredictable. However, these kinds of blogs can have a great impact, attract a large audience, and become a hub of political discourse (Mai, 2017). This is explained by the fact that the tactic of anonymous bloggers is to release Wikileaks-style articles to attack the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) leaders which helps their articles go viral. Mai (2017) states that a feature of anonymous bloggers is their intention is to support or discredit specific individuals. These bloggers actively work to release posts before political events happen, which essentially makes the information more credible since it was supported by the subsequent event. A typical example of an anonymous blogger is Quan Lam Bao whose ratings reached 15 million views within only two months since it was first launched. Some blogs from Quan Lam Bao have led to the arrest of one of Vietnam's richest bankers and several accusations of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's abuse of his power (Mai, 2017). Nevertheless, it is unclear how these bloggers maintain their anonymity and how they could escape from accusing CPV's political leaders without having their identities revealed.

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has used the blogosphere as the battleground to promote their ideologies and interests. Meanwhile, blogs are also sources for independent news to express ideas. Facebook emerges as a form of "unprohibited and essential need" (Mai,

2017). However, Decree no.97 and no.72 were established by the government to surveil and restrict the online cyberspace (Mai, 2017). For example, Yahoo! 360° was a "social phenomenon", "a new source of freedom", but it was shut down in 2009 which started the decline of blog readership in Vietnam. According to Mai (2017), this period witnessed intensive censorship by CPV of the Internet through "enforcement of legal regulations, application of firewalls, distribution of malware, and the harassment and detention of political bloggers.

Nevertheless, the rise of social media such as Facebook, Google Plus, and Zing Me as alternative tools has promoted political discussions among the public. The rise of social media is thought to have led to the opening of the "active online public sphere" (Mai, 2017). Blogs and social media have developed and transformed the cyberspace in Vietnam and provided it with more online freedom of expression (Mai, 2017).

4.1.2 Government Pressure on Political and Activist Bloggers

The Vietnamese media environment is regulated and controlled by the CPV, which makes bloggers and citizen journalists the only sources of independently reported information. Unfortunately, journalists and activist bloggers are subjected to government persecution, interrogations, physical abuse, and imprisonment. Freedom House (2013) revealed Vietnam as the world's second largest prison for netizens just after China in 2013. The number of Vietnamese bloggers jailed increased from 17 in 2011 to 25 in 2013. In just one year (2013), there were 35 netizens put into jail as reported by Reporters Without Borders (Freedom House, 2013).

According to Abuza (2015), activist bloggers often face lawsuits and government persecution for committing actions such as "threatening the unity of the socialist fatherland", "abusing democratic freedoms" (Article 258 of the Penal Code), "threatening national security",

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and engaging in "activities aimed at overthrowing the government" (Article 79). One example of this is the Vinashin case of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in 2012. Bloggers who reported about the case were targeted for punishment as officials stated that "they have slandered the country's leadership, fabricated and distorted information, agitated against the party and the state, and caused suspicion and mistrust in society" (Case, 2014; Abuza, 2015).

Trials for media offense are often abrupt, lasting only a day and lacking media coverage. The most common punishment for activist bloggers is imprisonment followed by "physical attacks, job loss, termination of personal internet services, travel restrictions, and other violations of their rights" (Reporters Without Borders, 2013). Abuza (2015) stated that these bloggers who were sentenced to jail often face an average of over eight years in prison. For example, Nguyen Van Hai, whose pen name was Dieu Cay ("the Peasant Water Pipe"), was sentenced to twelve years after he reported the Vietnamese government's accommodation policy to China (Human Rights Watch, 2009). In 2008, he was sentenced for two and a half year before being kept in detention until September 2012's trial which sentenced him to twelve years in prison and five years under house arrest for committing "activities against the government" (Freedom House, 2013).

Other two bloggers also sentenced at the same trial were Ta Phong Tan and Phan Thanh Hai. Ta Phong Tan was a former police officer who wrote under the penname Cong Ly va Su That ("Justice and Truth"). In 2011, Ta Phong Tan was sentenced to ten years before being exiled to the United States and losing her party membership for denigrating the State (Banyan, 2012). Phan Thanh Hai, who blogged as of Anh Ba Sai Gon, was sentenced to three years (Reporters Without Borders, 2013). These three bloggers' trials all lasted just one day (Abuza, 2015). They were all charged with the crime of misrepresenting State and Party truthfulness and

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authenticity to create mistrust among citizens which they said was "seriously affecting national security and the image of the country in the global arena" (Abuza, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Another Western-trained lawyer Le Cong Dinh was arrested for defending dissidents and bloggers and then imprisoned for four years from 2009 to 2013 (Abuza, 2015; Parker, 2014). He was charged with domestic and foreign reactionaries to undermine the Vietnamese government. His arrest and punishment were a warning and also a threat to his fellow lawyers who might make any attempts to defend other dissidents and bloggers. In 2019, the Vietnamese blogger Truong Duy Nhat was taken into formal custody under dubious circumstances only to turn up in Hanoi on 28th January after he went missing on 26th January in Bangkok (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). Reporters Without Borders has called on Vietnamese authorities to explain the reason why Truong Duy Nhat was arrested. It was speculated that his arrest was because of his journalistic activities, namely that he used to write political articles for Radio Free Asia. Moreover, he was jailed for two years since 2014 for "abusing democratic freedoms" with his own blogs criticizing the Vietnamese government (Reporters Without Borders, 2019).

Nonetheless, it is difficult for activist and political bloggers to develop their online presence within the context of the Vietnamese media environment. Several cases discussed above are just a few among a series of examples in which political and activist bloggers were arrested, abused and sentenced to prisons because they were trying to fight for freedom of expression. However, the blogosphere, along with online newspapers and emerging social media networks, continues to be the battleground for Vietnamese netizens to fight for their voice and promote freedom of speech in Vietnam.

4.2 Electronic Newspapers - From State-owned to Partially Private

This section of the chapter will deal with the journalistic profession, with a particular focus on electronic/online newspapers. Government plays a significant role in shaping the media environment. However, there are several factors that also influence journalism, especially online newspapers. Economic growth and technological advancement have fostered changes in journalism. However, journalism in Southeast Asia, and especially in Vietnam, is not as fully developed as in Western countries.

"We are being berated on both sides. The government hate us, and our readers think we are just mouthpieces – it means we are doing something right, right?", said a Singaporean online news editor about the challenges faced by journalists in Southeast Asia (Lehmann-Jacobsen, 2017, p. 19). It seems that journalists in Southeast Asia, and certainly those in Vietnam, are facing a great number of challenges that will be discussed later in this chapter.

4.2.1 State-owned Media

According to the World Press Freedom Index (2018), Vietnam ranks 175 on freedom of the press. Findings from the Freedom House (2018) shows the Vietnamese media environment as unfree. In January 2014, Decree 174 was implemented to fine up to VND 100,000 for any individual who “criticizes the government, the Party, or national heroes” or “spreads propaganda and reactionary ideology against the state”. In December 2018, the Vietnamese government launched Force 47 with 10,000 staff members to manipulate and censor online content (Freedom House, 2018).

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Both traditional media and the new media in Vietnam are heavily controlled by Vietnamese government authorities (Freedom House, 2018; Wagstaff, 2010; Nguyen, 2007). According to Law on Media (1999), Vietnamese media is directly controlled by the government as all media institutions must be registered and affiliated under the control of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Several media institutions are structured, affiliated to the Prime Minister's office, and ideologically to the Communist Party of Vietnam: Vietnamese Television, Radio Voice of Vietnam, Vietnam News Agency for instance (Wagstaff, 2010). National newspaper institutions are not excluded from state censorship and are controlled centrally since most of them are owned by the party's committee department, government institutions, and ministries (Wagstaff, 2010).

However, since the beginning of the Doi Moi reform in 1986, the government started shifting its control "to allow the media to seek other financial resources including those from advertisers and subscribers" (Dang, 2018). The Vietnamese government could not ignore the essentials of the Internet in the digital era. Its suspicion of the Internet and online media has undergone a slight shift from deep-seated paranoia to cautious ambivalence. The legalization of the Internet in 1997 has started a new page for Internet journalism which was lessened under state censorship. Evidently, the number of online news providers has increased from one in 2000 to eighteen in 2007, which ended the monopoly on the Internet services industry in Vietnam (Wagstaff, 2010; Nguyen, 2007).

4.2.2 Challenges to Professional Journalism

On the macro-level, the journalistic field in Vietnam is made up of both economic and symbolic resources (Lehmann-Jacobsen, 2017). Though journalism is highly controlled by the government, it is also dependent upon economic forces. It is subsidized very little by the state

but depends on sales and advertising as a source of revenue. Even though economic resources are gradually gaining importance within the field of journalism, political capital still plays an important role. In Vietnam, professional journalism faces challenges from both economic and political capital (Nguyen, 2007). While domestic and foreign competition continues to increase, the government persists in the reinforcement of its power on regulations and policies.

On the micro-level, the role of journalists is defined by four primary groups of norm senders: other journalistic professionals, the public, the state, and especially new online actors such as bloggers—active social media users discussed in both the previous and following sections of this chapter (Lehmann-Jacobsen, 2017). In Vietnam, journalists strive to meet certain expectations from their peers to earn journalistic credibility. This means they are highly admired once they dare to push boundaries and report on societal malfeasance. This also means they need to follow the ethical standards and norms of Vietnam journalism while avoiding being attacked by the leading party and state forces (Lehmann-Jacobsen, 2017).

The state certainly has a huge impact on the field of journalism. Journalists and editors know that it is their responsibility to work closely with the state, either to frame stories or emphasize some over others, to advocate for the country's values and reputations (Lehmann-Jacobsen, 2017). They are restricted in various ways and sometimes have to abandon content to conform with national media regulations. Censorship and self-censorship make it more difficult for journalists to do their best work under the universal standard of "good journalist" (Lehmann-Jacobsen, 2017). As a young Vietnamese journalist stated:

Clearly, this media environment and the mechanisms that are controlling it now doesn't appreciate it and doesn't encourage the journalists to do the best journalism that they can. They can do good journalism, but the best journalism, that the readers, that the

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audience deserves, is not encouraged here in the system. Do Vietnamese people deserve the same journalism as people around the world, as in Denmark? Of course, they do. But it is not encouraged here. Because, clearly, understandably, the ones with power, they don't want anything to threaten them (Lehmann-Jacobsen, 2017, p.29).

Public expectation is also a big challenge for journalists and editors in journalism. Journalists and editors often find it difficult to meet public expectations, because news reportage has responsibilities towards its target audience but can also have a wider public impact. The tension between these two factors is often difficult to negotiate and reconcile. Nowadays, younger generations tend to pay less attention to the news which undermines journalistic credibility. Additionally, the Internet and other technological advancements have allowed the public to post their comments and opinions with greater freedom and latitude.

Finally, a part of the public such as social media activists and bloggers – new online actors that arose from the development of digitalization – also have a certain influence on journalism (Lehmann-Jacobsen, 2017). Yet, these new online actors, who are seen as amateurs, play an important role in pushing limits and redefining the media agenda. However, by not following the rules of journalism, they are also undermining journalistic credibility. This notwithstanding, the majority of the general public are often misguided by amateur content since they are not qualified enough to identify professional content. Unfortunately, this devalues the journalistic profession in the eyes of more discerning readers and professional journalists. Therefore, journalists face considerable challenges from public criticism.

"In the role of producing news, they are doing a very bad job. Because it is full of biases, biased reporting, full of speculation, full of misleading information... You still need the real media – the professional media to do the real job," said a senior editor from Vietnam (Lehmann-

Jacobsen, 2017, p.30). What he means is that institutionalized media and media professionals should take their responsibilities in filtering and verifying information seriously to make sure the public has access to accurate, carefully vetted information. Only in this way will journalistic integrity and credibility be less vulnerable to public censure.

4.2.3 News Coverage of Corruption in Vietnam: Media Coverage of the Vinashin case and the Eleventh Party Congress

Media coverage of corruption is probably one of the most transparent proofs of government control over the media in Vietnam. In this section, the Vietnamese government's corruption in relation to media coverage will be discussed. Case (2014) explained that there is a relationship between the single-party state and the media supervised by the government in Vietnam. McKinley (2009) pointed out that Vietnamese media covered a wide scope of anti-corruption including monitoring of state actions, expositions of new cases, and providing space for public discussions about corruption. However, McKinley's content analysis research revealed that most of the news coverage is monitored. In addition, news coverage about corruption is only considered as safe at a below provincial level, but those discussing higher-level corruption receive more state attention and reprisal (McKinley, 2009).

The Vinashin case explains how factionalism and patronage could influence the press coverage of the nearly-collapsed state-run shipbuilder Vinashin in July 2010, and the eleventh Party Congress following it in January 2011 (Cain, 2014). Vinashin was a part of Project Management Unit 18 (PMU-18), advocated by prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung at that time. Vinashin was granted billions of dollars by the government with the goal of making it the world's fourth- biggest shipbuilder in 2018. The project lost the government \$4.4 billion in debt

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by 2010 since it was using state backing sources to invest into noncore sectors such as hotels, tourism, and real estate which increased the firm's debt to the equivalent amount of 5 percent of Vietnam's gross domestic product (Ruwitch, 2010). As a result, Vinashin chairperson Pham Thanh Binh was arrested in 2010 and another eight executives were sentenced twenty years in prison (Cain, 2014).

What is worth mentioning is that the press only covered provincial corruption and did not go further to report on high-level corruption (Cain, 2014). The Vinashin case shows how the CPV manipulated media coverage of corruption at the provincial level authorities, which would in turn help protect political prospects of higher-level authorities supporting low-level authorities. Moreover, it was because the case broke before the Eleventh Party Congress in which Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung was running for re-election. Allegations were reported to the press through the Ministry of Public Security. But this case was exceptional since the advocator of the Vinashin project, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, was head of the government with power over police leaders (Cain, 20014). Though this bizarre incident was widely recognized by journalists, media coverage was limited. In an interview with an anonymous reporter at *Tuoi Tre*, a daily newspaper in Vietnam, he said: "When the factions fight, we can write about pretty much anything we want, but only if it will be accepted politically" (Cain, 2014, p.97).

The CPV, of course, used its power to manipulate media coverage of the case to balance between criticism of state-owned enterprise (SOE) managers and the importance of preserving the party's legitimacy. The Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC) ordered the journalists to "find a solution for the party" when writing about the Vinashin case. In addition to this, the official party journal, *Tap chi Cong San (Communist Review)*, also emphasized the

party's press strategy was "Finding effective solution for restructuring" by punishing those who are responsible as a way of preserving party legitimacy (Cain, 2014). As Vuong (2010) stated:

While public attention has been given in particular to the arrest of a number of Vinashin's senior managers and the appointment of new top managers for the Group, there has been insufficient critical review and analysis of the causes of Vinashin's difficult situation, the evidence of corporate revitalization or of the work done by the members of the group in the last few months to restore confidence in the "brand" of one of Vietnam's biggest companies (p.43).

Regarding reports of top-level corruption, a completely different approach was used as online newspapers and websites were given opportunities to connect the prime minister to said corruption during his self-criticism instead of directly accusing him. Nguyen Tan Dung took responsibility for "the government's shortcoming and weaknesses" that caused Vinashin's near-collapse on national television (Ruwitch, 2010). Subsequent news coverage shifted from reporting arrested managers of Vinashin towards Nguyen Tan Dung's role in supporting the SOE model and his self-criticism, however, did not relate it to the bigger political manoeuvre. This implied that the CPV was cautious not to let the media further spoil the PMU-18 structure which could seriously damage the leadership transition and the Eleventh Party Congress result in 2011. As a result, Nguyen Tan Dung was re-elected to a second term as prime minister (Cain, 2014). The Vinashin case is only one among many cases demonstrating the power of state censorship over the media. Thus, it can be seen that the media coverage of corruption in Vietnam is limited to a certain extent to balance between the interest of people of hearing the truth and maintaining party legitimacy.

4.2.4 A Change in Ownership Structure: The Case of VnExpress

VnExpress is an online publication that was established in 2001. Interestingly, it is the most successful online newspaper to dominate the electronic newspaper market in Vietnam, a country in which the media is regulated and controlled by the government (Eek, 2007; Wagstaff, 2010). Though the law for media in Vietnam is strictly and heavily controlled by the government, the case of VnExpress shows that there could be a brighter future for press freedom in Vietnam.

Eek (2007) explained three main reasons that VnExpress become the most successful online newspaper in the Vietnamese media landscape. Firstly, it is the policy of VnExpress to report only news written from an objective viewpoint. So, it has gradually gained the trust of its audience. Under Vietnamese Press Law, the press must provide information that is in the interests of the people and the country and conforms with the CPV's agenda (Eek, 2017). Most newspapers before the VnExpress were considered propaganda. For example, Intellasia was shut down for “distorted and reactionary content” in August 2007. Some overseas Vietnamese sites were blocked for publishing content offensive to the Vietnamese government (Wagstaff, 2010). All access to the Internet must be through a local ISP, all of which must store 15 days of data and provide public security agents with assistance and workspaces to allow them to monitor online activities (Wagstaff, 2010). However, VnExpress has distinguished and differentiated itself from propaganda by reporting news from diverse perspectives. Evidence shows that VnExpress only uses news from reliable and direct sources, which prevents all possible distortion of data.

Secondly, it is VnExpress' close connections with the public that helps them engage with their audience in forming opinions about society. Audiences would prefer reading news

and creating their own opinions rather than reading news that tells them what to think. The newspaper interacts with its audience through email or an editorial hotline, and sometimes post reader opinions in the newspaper. However, interactions with readers are shown sparingly on the VnExpress website because of the government's control over media content (Eek, 2007).

Lastly, it is their unique ownership that allows them to work freely and overcome imposed limits in such a restricted media environment (Eek, 2007). Even though the law requires all media to be affiliated under the government's permission, VnExpress is owned by FPT Telecommunications, the largest telecom company in Vietnam which is owned partly by the state and partly by private owners (Wagstaff, 2010). Eek (2007) explained that such ownership is exclusive. In an interview, a VnExpress staffer revealed that it is owned by the government only on paper:

"We have no limits or no directions from the government and can work as free as is possible in a country like Vietnam" (Eek, 2007, p.29).

In order to be free from propaganda, the newspaper must keep the state at a distance. Therefore, they use the future stock of the company as a shield to produce news content on their own terms. Eek (2007) indicated that the Internet and online newspaper have had great impacts on the media environment in Vietnam. By the time VnExpress grew popular and gained trust from its readers, it was too late for the government to impose any further restrictions over the newspaper. Even should it choose to do so, it could face backlash from the readers who support VnExpress.

All in all, professional journalism in Vietnam faces a lot of challenges from the government, the public, peer journalists, and other new online actors. Challenges from the government are probably the most significant obstacle to freedom of expression, which restricts

professional journalism from performing its role of reporting to and informing society. Nevertheless, technological advancements have been the driving force in the gradual success of online newspapers promoting the free flow of information in Vietnam, as seen in the case of VnExpress.

4.3 Social Media Networks and Their Role in Stimulating Changes in Freedom of Speech in Vietnam

Unlike traditional media such as print and broadcast media, which are controlled by the state, social media plays a role of de-facto independent expression and becoming a new arena for political activities. Social media has significantly changed the media environment in Vietnam since it was first introduced. It has engaged citizens in political discussions and social activism. The third section of this chapter will demonstrate the role of Social Media in changing the Vietnamese media landscape. It is the future of freedom of speech in Vietnam since it provides Vietnamese netizens wider political spaces and draws them into political discussions as well as social activism.

4.3.1 The Social Media Landscape - Emerging Platforms for Political Discussion and Social Activism

In 2010, Vietnamese authorities set out a plan for Vietnam to be "a country strong in information and communication technologies" (Hoang, 2015). More specifically, the goal for 2020 is to have the broadband internet cover 50%-60% of households and 95% of population user broadband mobile coverage. According to Hoang (2015), Facebook, YouTube, and Google are the dominant social media platforms in Vietnam. By March 2015, there were over 30 million

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monthly active users on Facebook, while the estimated number of Internet users was 39 million. Meanwhile, Google is the dominant search engine overtaking Bing and Yahoo with a steady market share of 90%.

In addition to the blogosphere previously discussed, social media also plays a determining role in organizing protests and promoting freedom of expression. Since information is strictly censored, and the media is tightly monitored by the government and authorities, blogs and social media seem to be the only ways of broadcasting dissenting information and announcements for Vietnamese Netizens (Parker, 2014). For example, Facebook was the essential platform for the anti-China protest in Vietnam during the East Sea disputes in 2014. The Viet Tan, which is an opposition party empowering Vietnamese citizens and supporting freedom of expression in Vietnam, had more than 35,000 likes on Facebook when they updated an announcement of an anti-China protest (Parker, 2014).

Not only limited to a tool for organizing protests and social activism, social media is also a powerful weapon for Vietnamese citizens to report on officials' accountability. Even if there is an incident not covered by mainstream media, it can be covered on social media through live streaming or video-posting from social media users. The 2012 incident, in which farmers were pushed away from their land for a luxury housing construction, was live-blogged because there was a ban on media coverage of the incident. However, it was later covered by news organizations due to the fact that it was pushed by readers who had heard of the issue from online and social media (Hussan, 2013; Parker, 2014). Clearly, it can be seen that social media has become an incentive for social activism and a tool for Vietnamese netizens to express their own opinions.

4.3.2 Restrictions on Facebook and YouTube

The Vietnamese government boycotted multinational companies advertising on channels such as YouTube and Facebook to force digital companies to censor political content (Peel, 2017). Unilever, Ford, and Yamaha Motor operations in Vietnam have agreed to the advertising boycott. While Facebook has not yet replied, other domestic companies such as Vinamilk and Vietnam Airlines have suspended advertising on YouTube. However, advertising restrictions on social media companies would limit multinational companies' ability to reach their target audiences effectively, since 70% of digital spending comes from YouTube and Facebook. Undeterred by this, the government still wants to expand its censorship to advertising media and exert its control over what citizens can see.

The Vietnamese government has intermittently tried to block Facebook several times (Hoang, 2015; Parker, 2014). The government has passed a new law for tightening freedom of speech online (Plus Media Solutions, 2018). This new cyber law forces foreign internet companies to set a local office and store user information in Vietnam. Asia Internet Coalition (AIC) fears this would be a threat to digital developments within the country:

"The provisions for data localization, controls on content that affect free speech, and local office requirements will undoubtedly hinder the nation's fourth Industrial Revolution ambitions to achieve GDP and job growth," AIC wrote in a statement (Plus Media Solutions, 2018).

4.3.3 The Government's Failure to Create a Press System in China's Image

Social activists and bloggers are facing big challenges against the police and the Vietnamese government. Many activists and bloggers have been arrested for posting articles and personal views that criticize the Vietnamese government and CPV's policies and actions. However, it is undeniable that Facebook has been playing a vital role in promoting freedom of speech in Vietnamese media since the government could not shut it down, even with presidential support. The Vietnamese government could neither take full control of the social media platforms nor have enough resources to build a Great Firewall such as the Chinese government (Bevins, 2017). So even though the government wants to exert its power to control the media, its ability is limited due to inferior economic resources.

Despite the government's attempts to control and restrict social media platforms, it is demonstrably unable to overpower giant corporations such as Facebook and Google. The Vietnamese government does not have enough economic resources to impose its will on them. For instance, ZingMe is a locally operated social media network that was once expected to overtake Facebook and other social media networks (Hoang, 2015). However, it has failed since it only serves a niche market of users, mainly from 14-21 years old, who use the social media platform for music and games but not social networking. Compared to its neighbour China, Vietnam could not replace Google like China's Baidu, given the high entry costs and already established market requisite for such an endeavour (Hoang, 2015).

Generally, social media platforms are potentially the most effective tools for Vietnamese netizens to raise their voice and promote the free flow of information. The

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Vietnamese government's failure to block or restrict SNSs are evidence of social media networks' emerging position in the Vietnamese mediascape.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

All in all, digital media and technological developments are playing significant roles in changing the Vietnamese mediascape which has been under strict control and censorship of the Vietnamese government. Given that digital media has set the ball rolling for digital democracy and new political practices, as discussed in chapter two, Internet advancements and digital media in Vietnam have influenced the Vietnamese political system in terms of optimizing the free flow of information, the exchange of ideas, and freedom of speech to a certain extent. However, these developments can also consolidate political power, encourage surveillance by the state, and allow political actors to shape digital democracy. In this research, three types of new media that have shaped the Vietnamese media environment and politics are discussed: blogosphere, electronic/online newspapers, and social media.

Firstly, the blogosphere has become a political playground for not only politicians to exercise their power, but also for political/activist bloggers to express their ideas and opinions. Political and activist bloggers who expose the truth about government policies and actions have been in danger of political detainment, harassment, and physical attacks. Despite government pressure and censorship, political/activist bloggers still use blogosphere as a tool to express their political agendas and contribute to promoting freedom of expression in the new media.

Secondly, electronic/online newspapers have gradually transformed from state-owned to partially private funding, which is a significant improvement contributing to freedom of expression in Vietnam. Nowadays, the online press gains more influence by separating themselves from state ownership, engaging audiences in discussions, and objectively distributing information. Even so, the press cannot yet eliminate government censorship, but it

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is getting further away from the state's excessive control through garnered trust and support from its audience.

Finally, social media networks have developed as an emerging tool for political discussion, social activism, and public opinions. Despite several attempts from the Vietnamese government to suppress these social networking sites, SNSs still develop since the Vietnamese government does not have enough resources to replace international corporations (such as Facebook and Google) with nationally developed social networks. Therefore, though it is a newly emerging tool, social media is expected to be the future of freedom of expression in Vietnam as it will progressively revolutionize the Vietnamese mediascape.

Because Vietnam does not embrace liberal democratic principles in its governing, the government has excessive power to monitor and censor both traditional and online media, especially when it comes to politically sensitive content and content that is against the interests of the Vietnamese authorities. The Internet and digital media have not yet been able to fully transform political practices in Vietnam. Instead, digital media and online democracy in Vietnam are under the control and regulation of the Vietnamese government. The future of digital media and online democracy is also determined by Internet users. To that end, the Internet and digital media have become the battleground for the government to reinforce its power and for Vietnamese netizens to raise their voice. Incremental changes will continue to support and expand freedom of expression in Vietnam. The future of online democracy in Vietnam, based on the Internet and supported by digital media, is possible. To conclude, even though media in Vietnam is still immensely restricted by the Vietnamese government, Vietnamese netizens still seek ways to fight for freedom of expressions and claim their rights

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to free speech with such digital tools available to them as the blogosphere, electronic/online newspapers, and social media networks.

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