



Original Article

The Fight Against Corruption in Vietnam: The Role of Online Press

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Received 15 April 2020

Revised 17 June 2020; Accepted 16 September 2020

Abstract: Corruption could derail sustainable development of any country, and Vietnam is no exception. Vietnamese government had been taking a variety of anti-corruption policies to tackle corruption issues, of which empowering the role of online press has made notable progress in the last few years. This paper briefly reviewed the legal framework on corruption prevention and examined how online press takes part in curbing corruption and its influence on the fight against corruption in Vietnam. The results show that the online press played a significant role in curbing corruption by being a powerful tool for propaganda as well as an active channel to report about corruption in Vietnam, especially from 2016 to 2019. However, there are still many challenges to overcome in order to strengthen the role of online press in fighting corruption in Vietnam.

Keywords: Vietnam, anti-corruption policy, media, online press, press freedom, corruption perception index.

1. Introduction

Since the adoption of the "open door policy" which transitioned Vietnam from a central planning to a market economy at the second half of the 1980s, the country was able to maintain its high economic growth rate and have now reached the threshold and reclassified as a lower-

middle-income country. However, endemic corruption rooted in the political landscape of the country possess a threat to its sustainable development. According to Transparency International, the Vietnamese Corruption Perception Index (CPI) score [1] stagnated at 31 out of 100 points and ranked between 111 to 123 out of about 160 independent states and

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<https://doi.org/10.25073/2588-1116/vnupam.4230>

territories from 2012 to 2015. While the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the government of Vietnam aim for achieving the goal of "Rich people-strong nation-equitable, democratic and civilized society" [2], corruption is still considered to be a serious obstacle which threatens the country's government effectiveness, economic growth, and stability [3, p. 21].

After 2016, Vietnam's CPI showed an improvement increasing its score to 35 points in 2017 and 37 points in 2019. The government's policy of strengthening its anti-corruption legal framework and prosecuting corrupt individuals, along with the contribution of the press, especially the online press, to the fight against corruption is also crucial. The online press is currently becoming as a new practical tool for holding the government accountable, as well as raising social awareness and a powerful whistleblowing channel for Vietnamese people. Despite its potential, the Vietnamese online press is still immature and face many challenges. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct systemic research to analyze the role of the online press in curbing corruption in Vietnam from 2016 until the end of 2019 and discussing the main dilemma of the online press when writing about sensitive topics such as corruption

2. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

2.1. Concept of online press and its role in curbing corruption

By "press", this research comprises of all types of mass media including print media, audio media, visual media and online media. Online media encompass online personal media (such as email, instant messenger, blogs and photo-sharing services) and online mass media (such as online broadcast, online newspapers). However, this research will focus more on online mass media than personal media since online mass media is considered as the official source that provide truthful information to the public and is recognized by the Vietnamese government. This

research adopts the term "online press" to specify the term of online mass media. This term was defined in Article 3 of Vietnam Press Law [4] as a type of press using text, photos and sound transmitted online, including online newspapers and online magazines. On the other hand, traditional press refers to the non-internet using press including television, radio, and printed newspapers.

In comparison with the traditional press, the online press possesses many technological strong points. According to Opgenhaffen (2011) [5], the online press is advantageous in three main aspects: (i) automation, (ii) interactive and (iii) hypertext. These advantages promote the ability to update news regularly and automatically, and also in connecting and exchanging opinions on social networks. In addition, as proved by Nguyen [6, pp.223–241], the Vietnamese online press has discovered many severe corruption cases because of the advantage of immediacy and diversity on news and views. Corruption scandal revealed by the media investigations often attract high public attention, which urge the authorities to investigate and prosecute faster and promote transparency. In reality, corruption-related information is now opened to access online in Vietnam and receiving multi-dimensional feedbacks with the participation of online press. Moreover, this creates a positive effect on anti-corruption inside of Vietnamese society.

2.2. Methodology and data set

This research applied empirical methods to examine the development of online press in Vietnam from 2000 to 2019 while focusing more on the period from 2016 to 2019. In addition, this research aimed to identify the favorable factors as well as discussing the main dilemma faced by the online press while engaging in the field of anti-corruption in Vietnam.

Both primary and secondary data were used and collected in this research and are listed below.

- Set of primary data: collected via two channels as listed below.

(i) Compilation of corruption-related articles via Google.com: The author utilized the search engine of Google.com to collect corruption-related articles posted online from 2000 until the end of 2019. The language used was Vietnamese with three keywords: "tham nhũng" (corruption), "sai phạm" (wrong-doing), and "hồi lộ" (bribery). The contents of the articles were investigated and verified one by one to determine if it is related to this research's objective and is unique.

(ii) Sociological surveys: The author interviewed journalists and journal editors who are working on the field of anti-corruption during the month of August, 2019 in Hanoi, Vietnam. The survey consists of 3 sections and 40 questions. The questionnaires were sent to the respondents via email. The author received 22 responses out of 31 sent emails, which accounts to 71%. In this paper, the author focused on one part of the survey related to the factors which influenced the participation of the press in fighting corruption in Vietnam. Along with the question of defining the favorable factors, the respondents were asked to rate the influence of each factor from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).

- Set of secondary data: The secondary data were collected from the annual reports of related organizations. Specifically, this paper utilized the annual reports on CPI of Transparency International [1] and the annual report "Digital in Vietnam" of Data Reportal [7].

2.3. Validation and limitation of data set

The first set of primary data was collected on the internet by using the search engine of Google.com. The data collection time is from June 2019 to the end of January 2020 in Kyoto, Japan. Considering the objectives of this paper focuses on analyzing the development of Vietnamese online media as a tool of the Vietnamese government and people in the fight

against corruption, only news posted in Vietnamese are counted.

On the other hand, due to the conflict-sensitivity of anti-corruption works, it is difficult to conduct a large-scale social survey. Furthermore, most journalists were cautious when they answered the questions about corruption and only responded to some specific questions through mobile devices or filled the online survey under anonymity. For that reason, it is necessary to combine the survey results with the secondary data to ensure the validation of the research results.

3. The Emerging of Online Press in Combating Corruption in Vietnam

3.1. Legal framework

The Vietnamese press currently operates under the Press Law [3]. The first version of the Law was Decree No. 29-LCT/HĐNN8, promulgated on 28 December 1989 and revised in 1999. This Decree has been replaced by the Decree No. 103/2016/QH13 which came into effect on 1 January 2017. The Vietnamese current Press Law include six chapters and 61 articles that cover five main areas: 1) rights to freedom of the press and freedom of speech of citizens through the press; 2) definition and requirements to media institutions; 3) definition and requirements to journalists; 4) requirements on media's journalistic activities; and 5) rewards and disciplines. The new law has removed the chapter regarding state management of the press as well as the chapter on the organization of the press and journalists, making the rules on freedom of press and disciplines against ones who violate freedom of the press more precise.

Along with the Press Law, the Vietnamese Criminal code [8] (Decree No. 100/2015/QH13, took effect from 1 June 2016) also includes two articles related to journalistic activities. The Article 117 stipulates the crimes of making, storing, spreading information, materials, and items to oppose the State of Socialist Republic of

Vietnam. On the other hand, the Article 168 relates to crimes of Infringement upon freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right of access to information, and the right to protest of citizens.

The online press is also supervised by the Cybersecurity Law [9] (Decree No. 24/2018/QH14, enacted from 1 September 2019). The Cybersecurity Law consists of 7 chapters and 43 Articles which cover all the activities on the internet. More specifically, Article 16 covers the prevention of and dealing with the information in cyberspace with the contents against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. According to this Article, the system administrators, organizations, and individuals may be required to stop and/or remove information by the request of the Cybersecurity Task Force (CTF) under the Ministry of Public Security.

The Anti-corruption Law 2018 [10] (Decree No. 36/2018/QH14, came into effect from 1 July

2019) added new Articles on public corruption-related information evolving from its precursor (Decree No. 55/2005/QH11, promulgated on 29 November 2005). Article 13 and 15 determine the obligations of public authorities to provide information to the press, while Article 14 promotes the right to request information and governmental accountability. Lastly, Article 75 imposes the responsibilities of media institutions and journalists with regards to writing about corruption-related issues.

3.2. The history of online press in the fight against corruption in Vietnam

Since the first corruption-related news appeared online in 2001 until the end of 2019, the Vietnamese online press in the field of fighting against corruption has gone through 3 periods of development, as demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

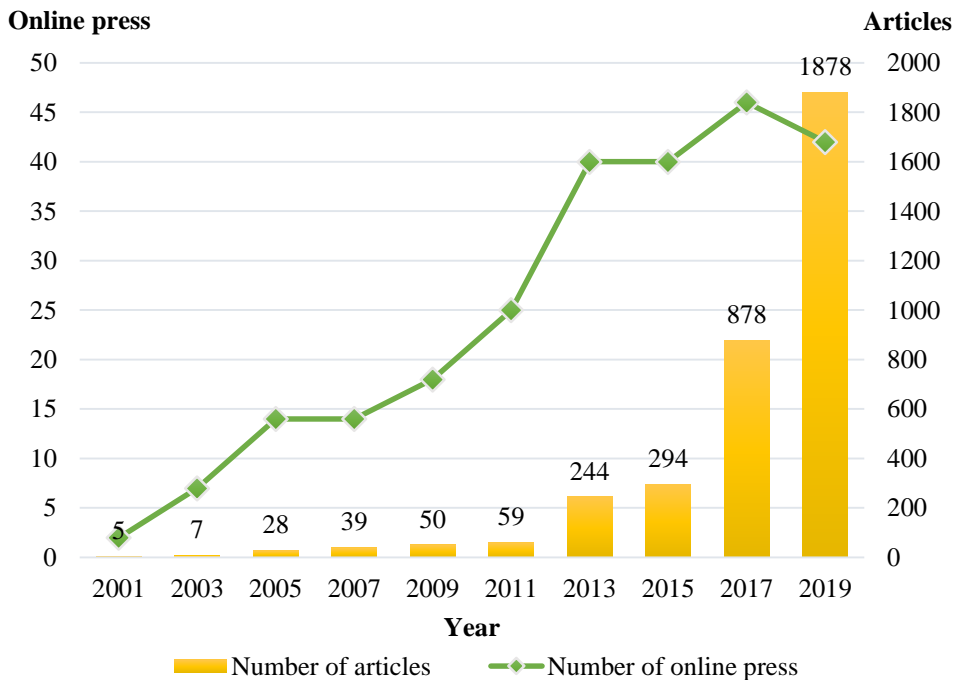


Figure 1. The development of online press in the field of anti-corruption
 Source: Author collected with the search engine of Google.com

3.2.1. First period: The beginning of online press (before 2003)

The first period was the time before Vietnam officially signed the UNCAC on 10 December 2003. During this period, the concept of internet and online newspapers were somewhat new with Vietnamese people. Four years after the legalization of the internet in 1997 until November 2001, there were only about 160,000 people (around 0.2% of the population) had subscribed and used the Internet [11, p.5]. At the same time, majority of online newspapers first started appearing in 2003 and 2004. Consequently, there were not many corruption-related articles online during this time period.

3.2.2. Second period: The development of technology (from 2003 to 2016)

The second period was marked by the internet boom in Vietnam. Figure 2 describes the blooming of internet users from 2011 to 2019.

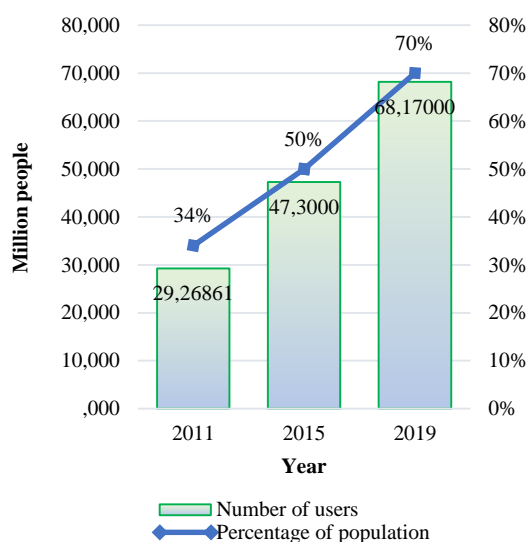


Figure 2. Number of internet users and percentage of population over 2011-2019 period.

Source: Data compiled by author on basis of statistics provided by Data Reportal [7]

From 2011 to 2015, the number of internet users multiplied, covering up to 50% of the total population in 2015. This caused significant

changes in the reading habits of Vietnamese people, especially citizens living in the urban areas. According to annual report of Data Reportal from 2011 to 2015 [7], throughout this period, Vietnamese people logged on more than 6 hours per day on the internet which about 2 hours were used reading contents of the online press. Meanwhile, the number of registered online press had reach 105 pages until 2015 [12]. Furthermore, the total newspaper readership and listenership expanded substantially from 2011 to 2015.

Technological development enabled the Vietnamese government to perform a variety of options and stepped-up its efforts to end corruption by creating anti-corruption agencies to adopt the Anti-Corruption Law in 2005 and the “National Anti-Corruption Strategy Towards 2020” in 2009. These actions created a pool of topics to journalists leading to a surge of online press and articles about corruption and anti-corruption policies from 2005. Although improvements have taken place, corruption and anti-corruption was a sensitive topic during this period. Furthermore, Vietnam was criticized by international community due to a variety of restrictions and regulations on the activities of media institutions [13, p.9]. In this period, there were no specific regulations providing access to information or any mandatory requirements to provide corruption-related information to the press.

In 2012, the PVC's Committee for Internal Affairs was re-established as the Standing Committee of The Central Steering Committee for Anti-Corruption and was directly in charge of corruption and anti-corruption issues. Soon afterwards, the Committee for Internal Affairs paired with the Government Inspectorate and the World Bank to conduct the first large-scale sociological surveys on corruption in 10 provinces and cities across the country. This report was publicly provided, bringing a more comprehensive image of corruption situation in Vietnam for researchers and the press. In reality, the number of corruption-related news has increased three times since 2012 and showed a

slightly growing trend of news about anti-corruption policies. However, reports on the anti-corruption of the authorities were kept confidential and inaccessible to the public. Hence, the involvement of the press in the field was limited. As a result, the development of the online press during this period was characterized by the increasing number of online press that had at least one column about corruption and anti-corruption rather than the changes in the total number of corruption-related news and its contents.

3.2.3. Third period: The boom of online corruption-related news (From 2016 until the end of 2019)

From 2016, the National Assembly of Vietnam started a new five-year term (2016-2021). Starting from the new term, the Vietnamese government launched a high-profile anti-corruption campaign. This anti-corruption campaign is led by the CPV's General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, targeting high-level corruption. Information about the arrests and prosecutions are open to public in this 'no-go zone' anti-corruption campaign. Moreover, reports on corruption were also available to download for free on the Online Portal of Vietnam National Assembly, such as the quarter-report of the Central Steering Committee against Corruption from 2018 and the report of the Supreme People's Court of Vietnam in 2018. Furthermore, in 2019, CPV's General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong published a book which included all the reports of the Central Steering Committee against Corruption between the years of 2013 to 2018. This policy of opening up government data and information on corruption and anti-corruption is a key foundation for enabling citizen engagement by using the press and new technology.

Meanwhile, the new Press Law consisting of 25 Articles more than the old law stated clearly that there should be a right to press freedom as well as the rights of the citizens to express their ideas on the media (Chapter 2). There is another meaningful change of the new law regarding information confidentiality in the Article 38. The requirement to disclose journalistic sources by

request of the chief procurator of a people's procuracy or chief justice of a people's court of the provincial, equivalent or higher level, is now paired with the obligation of chief procurator or chief justice to protect information providers. In addition, Articles on the responsibility of organizations and officials in providing information to the media was included more specifically in the new law. In other words, the 2016 Press Law provided more favorable conditions and tools for the press to participate in the fight against corruption.

Because of these changes, the number of corruption-related news went up two-fold in 2017 and 2018. The growth rate slowed down to a crawl in 2019 and approached its saturation point with no significant change in the number of online press. Generally, the number of online articles of the top 10 proactive online press increased significantly as seen in Table 1.

The most active online press is Dan Tri. It is also the second-highest number of readers in Vietnam after VnExpress [7]. Until the end of 2019, Dan Tri has reported a series of news which described more than 40 grand and petty corruption scandals in Vietnam, in which, the most notable series were about the corruption scandals related to the granting of "red books" (which pertains to the land use rights certificate under the Vietnamese Land Law) in Hanoi. These series of news consisted of more than 30 posts released between May 2014 (when the press received the complaint from citizens) and July 2019 (when the judgment has been issued). In the series, journalists revealed evidences that Hoai Duc District People's Committee officials had illegally issued a red book for a land which does not truly exists in reality, then selling to people. The series were recognized by the Vietnamese government to contribute actively to solving the corruption case.

On the other hand, the content of the news shifted from sharing the government's policies and basic knowledge about corruption and anti-corruption to investigating real corruption cases as shown in the graph below (Figure 3).

Table 1. Top 10 online press which proactively posting corruption-related news

Rank	Online press	Year										Total (a)
		2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
1	dantri.com.vn	13	18	60	116	72	97	97	153	292	426	1344
2	vov.vn	2	1	2	6	9	23	26	104	211	230	614
4	vietnamnet.vn	0	4	13	13	19	20	47	98	158	196	568
5	tienphong.vn	5	5	5	8	17	14	14	58	165	227	518
6	thanhnien.vn	4	3	11	14	11	23	10	78	141	152	447
7	vnexpress.net	6	8	20	14	15	18	23	66	135	119	424
8	tuoitre.vn (*)	5	2	16	13	21	21	38	87	92	140	435
9	Nhandan.com.vn	13	1	0	8	8	10	18	88	154	135	435
10	baodatviet.vn	1	0	1	6	21	28	28	31	65	65	246
Total per year (b)		49	42	128	198	193	254	301	763	1413	1690	

(a) Total number of corruption-related news posted on each online press during the period of 2010-2019

(b) Total number of corruption-related news per year posted on top 10 researched online press sites.

(*) tuoitre.vn was suspend for three months from July 16, 2018 due to misquoting Vietnamese State President Tran Dai Quang in the article posted on June 19.

Source: Author collected with the search engine of Google.com

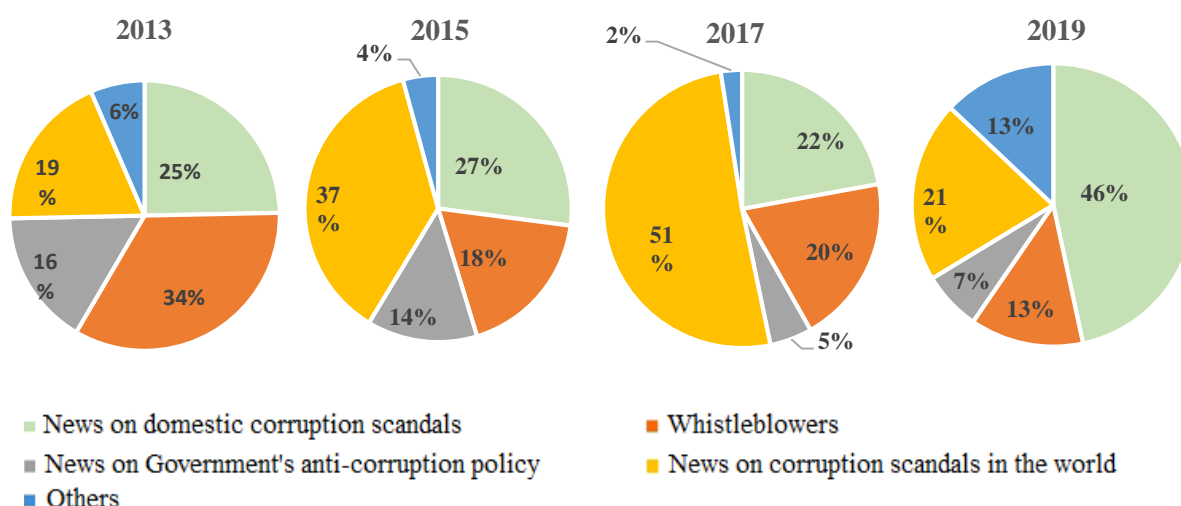


Figure 3. Changing in anti-corruption related news posted on the top 10 online press in Vietnam from 2013 to 2019

Source: Author collected with the search engine of Google.com

Despite the shrunk ratio, the number of whistleblowers articles rose from about 40 articles in 2015 to more than 170 articles in 2017, and more than 230 articles in 2019. Similarly, the ratio of news about the government's anti-corruption policies and propaganda decreased rapidly in 2017 regardless the growth in the actual number of articles (from about 40 articles in 2015 to more than 130 articles in 2019) (Data

compiled by author). In contrast, news on domestic corruption scandals which reflects the investigation of journalists ramped up in terms of both quantity and quality. As an illustration, the significant contribution of Dan Tri online press in investigating the land corruption case mentioned above was recognized by the government in January 2019.

Another important change of the online press during this period was the separation of the online press from the printed press. Until 2016, majority of online news were the online version of the printed press or reposted information of the printed press. However, taking advantage of technology and the faster transmission of information, journalists posted parts of their investigations many times a day before publishing a full version on the printed press. For instance, the news on corruption scandals related to the National High-school Examination of Vietnam were posted twice a day in the online version of Tuoi Tre newspaper before the release of the daily printed version. Presently, news is updated faster and were immediately shared by people via their social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Instagram.

To summarize, Vietnam online press had passed through three broad stages of development in the field of fighting against corruption namely 1) the beginning of online press; 2) the development of technology; and 3) the boom of online corruption-related news. Until the end of 2019, the online press has become a valuable information source as a part of many Vietnamese's daily life especially those living in the urban areas. The online press also proved to be a practical channel to whistle blow the corrupt activities and to expose information related to corruption scandals.

3.3. Factors favorable for the development of online press in the field of anti-corruption activism

In order to determine the factors affecting the participation of the online press in anti-corruption activism, similar questions were asked to 22 journalists participated in the survey conducted by the author in the August 2019. Four main factors emerged based on the responses: (i) the development of technology, (ii) changes in reading habits of Vietnamese people, (iii) change in Press Law, and (iv) changes in the government's policy.

Table 2. Factors contributing to the development of the online press in curbing corruption

Question: Please rate the influence of each factor from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important)					
Point	1	2	3	4	5
Development of technology	6%	18%	6%	24%	41%
Changes in reading habits	6%	6%	24%	35%	29%
Changes in the Press Law	18%	6%	41%	29%	12%
Changes in the government's policy	6%	24%	29%	24%	18%

Source: Author's survey conducted in 2018

3.3.1. The development of technology and changes in reading habits of Vietnamese people

The evolution of the internet and technology in Vietnam is considered to be very important as answered by 41% of the respondents, followed by the change in the reading habits of Vietnamese people.

From the beginning of the official availability of Internet services in the country in December 1997 until the end of 2019, Vietnam has seen drastic growth of internet users over the years. The rapid development of internet access and internet speed created a new multi-dimension platform for journalistic activities providing more freedom compared to the traditional way (Smolarczyk et al. 2015, pp. 7-8 [14]). At present, government agencies dominantly own the majority of the traditional press. For example, the owner of Tuoi Tre newspapers and Tien Phong newspapers (both printed version and online version) is the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, which is the largest social-political organization of the Vietnamese youth under the leadership of the CPV. This kind of ownership resulted in a primary function of the press to support the party and the government. Nonetheless, with technological advancement, the FPT Corporation, which is considered as the most significant information technology service

company in Vietnam, created its own online newspapers, the VnExpress online newspaper in 2001. The establishment of the first privately owned online newspaper opened a new page in the history of Vietnam's online press and encouraged the freedom of the press across the country.

On the other hand, technological advancement changed Vietnamese people's way of obtaining new information for many reasons. First, a printed press is slower than an online press releasing news out to the public. In fact, the online newspapers' platform allows journalists to release news immediately anytime instead of one time a day (in the case of daily newspaper) or one time a month (in the case of monthly newspaper). Second, the diversity of information sources available anytime and anywhere created a more comprehensive image to readers which satisfied their curiosity more. Instead of going out to buy one or a few newspapers, one can access dozens of both domestic and international online presses quickly by using search engines. These merits shifted the reading habits of Vietnamese people in favor of searching for news online. According to the sociological surveys on social networking sites usage habits of Vietnamese people conducted by Vinaresearch in 2018 [15], "reading news" is the second important reason to access to SNS, accounting to 25% of responses which is only 1% less than the most important one. The faster transmission speed, the more curious readers want to reach as quickly and as much information as possible. This phenomenon, in turn, pushes the journalists to produce more news in a shorter amount of time, leading to a boom in the number of newspapers and articles on corruption scandals from 2017 to 2019.

3.3.2. Changes in legal framework and government's policy

The new Press Law enacted from 1 January 2017 created a new favorable legal framework to journalism activities. Forty-one percent of journalists who participated in the author's survey, agree that this is an essential factor which nurtures the development of the online

press, especially in the field of anti-corruption activism. As mentioned in section 3.2.3, the new Press Law eliminated the chapter on state management, while adding a new Article on the freedom of citizens to create and access to the press (Article 10), followed by the Article on the responsibility of the State for citizens' rights to freedom of the press and freedom of speech in the press (Article 13). In fact, Article 12 of the Law specified the right of contributing opinions, criticisms, recommendations, express complaints and denunciations to CPV's organizations, and state agencies. Especially, Article 13 stated that the press should not be censored before printing, transmitting and broadcasting. On the other hand, the Article 38 of the law requires agencies, organizations, and responsible persons to provide information to the press. Moreover, Article 38 allows the press agencies and journalists the right and obligation to not disclose knowledge about informers and states the responsibility of the authorities to protect whistleblowers and to provide information to the press. This Article plays a vital role in helping journalists to protect whistleblowers and their source of information. In essence, the new Press Law presents a legal corridor for press activities in the field of anti-corruption.

In this context, the implementation of a "no-go zone" anti-corruption campaign along with opening up government data and information created a more diverse data pool which encouraged journalism activities. In reality, the role of the press in curbing corruption was brought up in documents of CPV at very early stages of the fight against corruption. Accurately, the Political report of the 7th Central Committee in the 8th National Congress of CVP (held in 1996) mentioned the need to enhance the role of media institutions [16, p.692]. In the conclusion of the National Conference on Anti-corruption (organized on May 5, 2014), CVP's General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong specified the press as a powerful and effective tool in exposing corrupt actions and preventing corruption [17, p.47]. However, at this point, the

overseeing role of the press was not to be central. In 2018, the policy of publicizing information about legal entities prosecuted on corruption charges was introduced in the speech of the General Secretary at the National Conference on Anti-Corruption, which took place on June 25. In the same speech, The General Secretary also stated clearly the policy of proactively unfold the inspection reports, the investigation results, and relevant information about sensitive topics [17, p.112. These changes illustrate the political determination of the Vietnamese government to increase transparency in Party and state activities, underlying the overseeing role of the press.

Furthermore, on November 8, 2018, the Prime Minister approved the “National Information Development Strategy which runs until 2025 with a vision to 2030”. This strategy encourages commercialization or privatization of the press in Vietnam, which can result in the improvement of the quality and ability to provide information to the public. As a result, the press becomes more critical towards the government, especially regarding corruption and red tape in government institutions in 2019.

4. Conclusion Remarks and Discussions

One of the traditional remedies to promote the role of the press in curbing corruption is promoting media advocacy. In Vietnam, the online press is emerging as a new practical stakeholder in the fight against corruption, especially from 2016. Whether as a propaganda tool, an investigator or an oversight of the trial on corrupt scandals, the contribution of online press is undeniable. From the first online press establishment in 1997 until the end of 2019, the online press has passed through a three-stage development. The impressive growth made during the last four years were the results of the increasing penetration of the internet system, changes in reading habits of people, determination of the state, and positive changes in the Press Law. Many cases have been solved

thanks to investigation of journalists such as the corruption scandals at Petrovietnam Construction Joint Stock Corporation, and corruption scandals involving the National High-school Examination. In particular, along with technical advantages namely the ability to rapidly spread information and raise public attention in a shorter time, the online press has more freedom than the printed press making it more critical and effective in holding the government accountable.

However, the high-speed data transmission infrastructure urged journalists to post news as fast as possible. The journalists, then, ought to face the conflict between "journalism ethics" and "the freshness of information". In fact, in the survey conducted by the author, 80% of respondents indicated concerns about inaccurate and inadequate quality articles. Meanwhile, 40% of respondents criticize some of the online press due to snatching the title view and posting misleading news. These problems are causing the decrease of public trust in the online press and are discouraging journalists who proactively participated in the investigation. Hence, further research might be necessary to find out practical remedies to achieve sustainable development.

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