

# Vietnamese Model of Journalism in the Age of Integration and its Effects to the Civil Society and Democracy in Vietnam

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**Abstract.** The Economic Renovation launched by the Vietnamese Government in 1986 - as a transformation from the model of centralised economy to a model of socialist market economy - has made vital impacts on Vietnamese journalism. In addition, it was the slogans of the Communist Party - which were “face the fact, analyse exactly the truth, speak the truth” and “criticism and self-criticism” - that inspired the journalism. Having investigated the changes in Vietnamese journalism after 1986, this paper will not only explore the new characteristics of Vietnamese journalism but more importantly, their effects to the civil society and democracy in Vietnam. It should be noted that due to these new characteristics, the Vietnamese journalism currently cannot be conceptualised by the well-known Schramm’s “Communist theory of Press”, and therefore, needs a new theoretical model to investigate.

*Key words:* Model of journalism, Vietnamese renovation, state journalism, market journalism.

## 1. Multi Functions Press vs. “Single Purpose” Press

For decades, Wilburn Schramm’s “Soviet Communist theory of Press” [1] was widely used as the general theoretical framework to examine press systems in the communist world in general [2,3], and Vietnam in particular. It is noted that prior to the economic renovation, the ideology of Vietnamese journalism was similar to that of the Soviet Union and other communist countries, where mass media were used instrumentally by the state for various political purposes, particularly as propaganda

tools. Schramm [4] argued that the communist communication system had only “a single purpose” which served party and state policies. According to Schramm (ibid), the consequences of such a “single purpose” communication included: “a great deal of sameness about the content of Soviet media on any day”.

However, after the Economic Renovation, the model of media ideology used by Western scholars to examine communist media has been no longer adequate in addressing changes in Vietnamese journalism as the new media expanded their functions from propagating to providing news, general information, knowledge and entertainment, expressing public opinions, criticising the daily working of government and the wrongdoing of officials.

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For example, in the newspaper sector, not only many new established news outlets were originally designed as reader-oriented presses, but also traditional Party newspaper have been becoming increasingly reader-oriented through increasing their coverage of news, entertainment and commercial advertisements.

The research subject of Schramm's [4] study was the Soviet press, which was based on a centralised command economy or state socialism system, where, according to Siebert [1, p.5] "the profit motive [of the press] has been removed". However, Vietnamese journalism reforms have, to date, followed a mixed market socialism model in which journalism is state owned yet market oriented. In this model, there is press competition, the operation of diverse business ventures by the news media and limited government subsidy, leading to a concomitant increasing growth of the country's advertising industry. New competition, commercial advertising, human-interest stories, and even tabloid publications containing sensationalised stories appear in Vietnamese journalism. Rather than being a "great deal of sameness about the content of media on any day" (Schramm's (1963) description) and propaganda-oriented, a number of Vietnamese newspapers have been criticised as over-sensational and profit-driven [5].

As a result, mass media have expanded their functions from propagandising to providing news, general information, knowledge, and entertainment, facilitating the expression of public opinion, and criticising the daily workings of government, particularly the wrongdoing of officials [6, p.147-153]. In short, after more than 25 years of renovation, Vietnamese journalism has now been largely transformed into a multi-structured media industry with multiple functions rather than being pure propaganda tools.

## **2. State Journalism vs. Market Journalism**

Before 1986, the journalism system that emerged in Vietnam was operated according to

the guidelines and directives of the Propaganda and Training Committee, without concern for revenues, benefits or losses (as is the case in commercial journalism in Western countries). As a result, journalistic productions were published without regard for the audiences' interests or needs, and journalism organisations did not have to compete with each other to increase their audience or attract advertisers to gain additional financial resources.

In addition, another difference between journalism in Western countries, particularly the US, and Vietnam before the Economic Renovation was the attitude toward advertising. Journalism in Western countries, with the exception of a small number of public service broadcasting such as the BBC, are primarily commercial enterprises driven by profit motives, and therefore, advertising becomes an important factor. However, in Vietnam, during the 30 years of conflicts, and the following 10 years of the subsidised period, advertising was perceived negatively, regarded as a product of capitalism [7, p.13].

Nevertheless, in an open-market economy, where the costs of inputs and outputs were subject to market conditions, journalism organisations were required to become commercially aware and operate according to a different economic model. At this time, the available budgets for journalists' salaries, including royalties and benefits, were provided not only governing bodies, but also generated by advertising and subscriptions.

It is worth noting that, during the monopoly of the state sector economy, the living standards of journalists were relatively low. It was a number of newspapers in HoChiMinh city, which took the initiative in exploring new ways to improve newspaper revenue in the mid 1980s. According to Tran Huu Quang [8, p.81], the "Sai Gon Liberty Daily" was one of the first Vietnamese newspapers to accept advertisements on July 1<sup>st</sup> 1981.

By 1989, the Journalism Law stipulated for the first time that journalism and media should

be allowed to advertise or broadcast advertisements and raise revenue from advertising (Article 25 op. cit.) [9]. Ten years later, in the Amended Journalism Law (1999) [10], the regulations for advertising were amended. In addition, a number of acceptable sources of revenue for journalism organisations also were clarified thus:

*Journalism organisations are permitted to operate business activities and services which are appropriate to their professions according to Government regulations and rules in order to create further sources of revenue to invest to the development of journalism.*

(The Amended Journalism Law 1999, Article 17c) [10]

According to the Government (Resolution No.219/2005/QĐ-TTg 2005) [11], it has become common in Vietnamese media for journalism organisations to provide more than one publication and offer more than one service, whereas during the subsidised period this was not the case.

Gradually, revenue from advertising became more important, and in 2001, it represented a proportion of between 40% and 60% of newspaper revenue [8, p.81]. Significantly, a number of newspapers rely totally on advertising revenue, including VNExpress, one of the largest Vietnamese online-newspapers.

However, the competition between mass media in Vietnam is affected by the fact that the Government continues to control journalism activities, consequently, competition between mass media in Vietnam differs significantly from that in Western countries. Even though journalism organisations have to operate commercially in order to improve the quality of their services, reduce the price of journalist products and improve the working and living standards of journalists, as Do Muoi, the then General Secretary stated at the National Journalism Meeting in January 1992 [12, p.26]; political and educational missions are regarded

as the most important duties of Vietnamese journalism. Huu Tho [5, p.86-87], the then Head of the Central Ideology and Culture Committee stated:

Vietnamese journalism is not allowed to run after just profits but has to be a fundamental tool for thought, politics and culture.

It is a hard and fast rule that 'Journalism operation is under the Party direction and Government control', this obligation is stated in a number of decrees, instructions and decisions of the Vietnamese Party and the Government, including Instruction No.08/CT-TW (1992) [13], Instruction No.22/CT-TW (1997) [14] and The Resolution No 219/2005/QĐ-TTg (2005) [11], etc. In Vietnam, private journalism is not allowed.

One of the most important missions of Vietnamese journalism is:

*To propagandise, inform, construct and protect the Party policies and Government Laws... Construct and improve the socialist democracy, enhance the great national unity, construct and protect the Fatherland of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.*

(Article 6, The Amended Journalism Law 1999) [10]

In other words, in the current market-driven environment, the situation for journalism has changed dramatically. In terms of financial support, journalism's revenue has changed from government-funded sources to, chiefly, advertising, circulation, and financial investment in other ventures [15, p.9]. The role of journalism also changed from the single function of the Party's mouthpiece as an organ of ideological indoctrination to a multi-functional system, including resources for advertising with higher circulations and wider audiences. The nature of journalism products is no longer only that of political and ideological propaganda, they are also market commodities [16]. In addition, content in newspapers, and in radio-television programmes comprises not only official government news, but also public interest news, entertainment, advertising and increasingly, foreign programmes [6, p.55-56].

Certainly, official propaganda still visibly and firmly remains in most Party organs' daily practices, but propaganda itself has been significantly changed in terms of its content and method.

Although journalism is still defined as a non-profit undertaking of the state, it is now undertaken as a commercial operation. Advertising, allowed from the 1980s (The 1989 Law of Journalism) [9], has begun to impact on the entire journalism system. Whilst retaining ultimate discretion over content, the Government also encourages the journalism organisations to raise funds, in particular from advertising, consequently, the audience/consumer has now to be taken into account. Concomitant renovations of personnel and budgetary procedures have conferred new powers and duties on editors and programme producers. These powers and duties require journalistic producers, in turn, to be more responsive, both to their audiences and advertisers [17], by enabling them to allocate funding to production offices according to ratings, and to recruit employees in a (relatively) open market.

The commercialisation of the journalism dramatically influenced Vietnam's journalism landscape with regard to journalism ownership and financial support. With journalism commercialisation, the 'Party and government' organs became business entities, similar - to some extent - to the Western capitalist system, adopting advertising, subscription and capital investment practices.

In other words, Vietnamese journalism currently plays a dual role simultaneously, as commodities in the market and apparatuses of ideologies. In this sense, journalism must cater to two masters with two distinct prerequisites. Despite the fact that officially and principally the journalism's role is still defined as the voice of the government [18, p.76-77], the new economic structure means they have also to accommodate the interests of their advertisers and audiences. Due to the fierce competition between mass media after the Economic

Renovation 1986, the latter may be more significant and urgent for journalism managers, but the former still affects journalism content.

However, as a result of Party initiatives, the journalism system operates with a greater degree of openness and freedom, where constructive criticism and suggestions about Government policies can be discussed, although, the nature and role of the journalism remains fundamentally unchanged. Consequently, journalism in Vietnam are functioning within a 'regulated marketisation' system. However, it is important to note that a journalism organisation cannot be established as an independent business; they are assigned an official rank and must be registered under a recognised institutional publisher or government organisation [9,10].

At present, even though the Vietnamese journalism system has undergone significant changes, the government continues to operate control of the journalism. As it was the Government that initiated such commercialisation, journalism control - with the emergent convergence of the state and the market - may even be strengthened in the context of commercialisation: authoritarianism in the Vietnamese journalism system may persist through government control. In the Vietnamese system, journalism is restricted from communicating messages that would undermine the established authority or negatively affect the country's political values.

The Western model of the journalism-defined by such characteristics as an independent news media with legally sanctioned press freedoms and formalised institutional independence from the state [1] - cannot develop in Vietnam. In other words, a new theoretical model, which requires further investigation, is necessary in the case of Vietnamese journalism in its transitional phases, a model integrating both political and economic dimensions, in which a market/authoritarian based understanding of the journalism, should be considered.

### 3. The Relationship Between State - Journalism and the Audience: Democratising Trends in the Vietnamese Journalism after the Renovation

The transformation from a monopoly state sector economy to a multi-sector economy ushered a new period of development for journalism in Vietnam, but it was not until May-June 1987 that Vietnamese journalism reached its turning point, with a series of articles, namely *Things That Must Be Done Immediately*, carrying the by-line N.V.L.<sup>(1)</sup> (Nhan Dan 1987).

The series of articles titled *Things That Must Be Done Immediately* (ibid) instanced various improprieties of state agencies, especially “acts of bullying the masses and violating the people’s rights” [19, p.90] [20]. Demanding that such wrongdoing be exposed and corrected, N.V.L exhorted the citizenry to “inspect and examine” governmental activities (Nhan Dan 1987). In addition to the previous year’s “criticism and self-criticism” campaigns, N.V.L was encouraging the general population to engage in a new campaign against bureaucratic centralism. After three months, the N.V.L. articles generated approximately 600 letters denouncing various agencies and bureaucrats [19, p.90].

According to Huu Tho<sup>(2)</sup> [20], it was N.V.L who set up a new function for Vietnamese journalism - a people’s forum - which was later institutionalised by Laws and Instructions, including the Journalism Law (1989). According to Huu Tho’s (ibid) recollections of events at that time, he asked the General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh why he wrote under the name N.V.L, and Nguyen Van Linh replied that, although as a General Secretary of

the Communist Party he could instruct various levels of society to take precautions against bureaucrats: when writing the newspaper articles, he wanted to create a popular opinion in fighting bureaucratic conservatism, inviting all citizens to respond [20]. In other words, the then General Secretary highly appreciated the role of journalism - and its influence on public opinion - in fighting the negative aspects of the transition of Vietnam’s society towards a socialist model. Two years after the *Things That Must Be Done Immediately* articles were published, the Law of Journalism (1989) was enacted which stated that:

*Journalism in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is essential mass media in society. It acts as an organ of the Party, Governmental and other social organisations as well as public fora.*

(The 1<sup>st</sup> Article of the Journalism Law 1989) [9]

The functions of journalism are also clarified in the 6<sup>th</sup> article of this Legislation as follows:

“... ”

3. *To Reflect and Instruct Public Opinion; be a Public Forum for People to Exercise their Freedom of Speech.*

4. *To discover and honour “good people and good factors”; to fight illegal activities and negative phenomena in society...”*

(The Journalism Law 1989) [9]

At this point, it should be noted that the concept of human rights, the idea of civil society and democracy conceived in the Western adversarial democratic tradition have no exact equivalent in East Asia in general and in Vietnam in particular [21, p.3] [22, p.205], where the Communist central Government and the importance of Confucian values influence the values of social life. The holistic, consensual and communal values of the Orient have changed the scope of human rights to include an affirmative obligation on the state to advance the economic, social, cultural well-being of their peoples. As a result, due to differences in political systems, local circumstances, history, culture, and Orientalist

<sup>(1)</sup> This pseudonym was found later to be a shortened version of the name, Nguyen Van Linh, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, recognised as having revitalised Vietnam's economy by reducing state control and introducing elements of a free market system.

<sup>(2)</sup> The ex-Head of the Central Ideology and Culture Committee and former Editor-in-Chief of Nhan Dan.

behaviours<sup>(3)</sup> - these issues often are regarded as main factors in shaping various journalistic models and roles worldwide [23] [24, p.154-157] [22], - Vietnamese journalism differs to that in Western countries.

It should be noted that journalism in a number of developing countries, including those in Asia and Southeast Asia, promotes a distinct type of journalism, focusing directly on society, activating a sense of collectivity. Journalism adhering to Asian values was regarded as one of the contributors to Asian economic success, in which there is a twinning of press freedom and responsibility: the privileging of national interests over individual ones, harnessing the aims of national betterment [16] [22, p.207]. These are the principle reasons for harmony between the press and the government in Asia [22, p.205].

Whilst, Vietnam and a number of ASEAN countries proposed an Asian model of journalism, in terms of the press working with government to build a national consensus [16], the model of Vietnamese journalism continues to differ from that of its ASEAN neighbours. Whilst Thailand and the Philippines have opted for the so-called Western model, and Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia apply a semi-controlled press [15, p.9] [22, p.208], in Vietnam, journalism enterprises are state-owned and controlled, and members of the Communist Party occupy most management positions in media organisations [15] [25] [26]. Vietnamese journalism, as an instrument of nation building, is mandated to support the state's development

efforts [6, p.19-20] [27]. Furthermore, Vietnamese journalists must respect, embrace and voice the authenticity of Vietnam. Therefore, the notion, introduced during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, that journalism constituted a Fourth Estate of government, a system of checks and balances of the other three forms of power - executive, judicial and legislative - [28, p.744], is not relevant in Vietnam [27]. Moreover, as the global media market has come under the domination of a plutocracy of mega-media conglomerates [29, p.348], according to Vietnamese scholars, the power of media in Western countries, in fact is in the hands of a small number of capitalists, not that of the general population [27, p.253].

In Vietnam, the fundamental tenets of journalism are to propagandise, agitate and organise the masses. With the influence of the Renovation, journalism in Vietnam does not only act as an instrument used by government to shape public opinion, but also fora for people to raise their voices [6, p.147]. Soon after journalism became accepted as a public forum, audience opinions, suggestions, and comments towards Government policies were gradually published. The slogan: "People [have a right to] know, discuss, inspect and examine" was placed in a prominent position in a number of newspapers, including *The People* (Nhan Dan Newspaper). New columns for reader's opinions, such as "The People's Forum", "People's Opinion" and "People's Talk" emerged in a significant number of newspapers. The effectiveness of this endeavour is a possible area for further investigation; however, at this point it should be noted that the emergence of this phenomenon has created a new landscape for Vietnamese journalism.

The content of journalism also became more diversified, for example, investigating pressing issues in society in order to satisfy its audience. After 1986, *Tuoi tre* (The Youth Newspaper), *Sai Gon Giai Phong* (The Saigon Liberation Newspaper) and a number of newspapers in HoChiMinh City pioneered the renovation of journalistic content. Interestingly,

<sup>(3)</sup> As the official perception of democracy in Vietnam is strongly influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideologies of centralised democracy, and the Confucian beliefs, there are some aspects that can be seen as contrasting Western perceptions. For instance, Confucianism sees the importance of the society over the family, and the family over the individual, where as self-realisation can be seen as one of the highest values in Western societies. In addition, there is a wide consensus amongst the population that economic growth and political stability are more important than democratic development [21]. This may be a part of the explanation why a one-party political system exists and why this system is broadly seen as advantageous.

HoChiMinh City was the vanguard of the economic renovation and gained significant benefits after the renovation policy was applied. According to Tran Huu Quang [8, p.81], changing the style of delivering information via 'The Youth Newspapers' and other newspapers in HoChiMinh City has broken through the limitations of the conservative thinking which previously limited journalism in the bureaucratic, administrative and traditional system that had historically operated. Journalists explored, investigated and broadcast urgent issues and events that occurred during the transitional period, for which there was no existing model. Amongst these pressing issues, corruption, social problems, bureaucratic conservatism, and the negative aspects of an open-market society were the subjects that most concerned the general population (ibid). The more pressing issues in society were reflected in newspapers, the greater attention from the audience newspapers could attract.

It is important to reiterate that since the renovation, the Government began to cease subsidies, and allowed journalistic organisations to seek other financial resources, including those from advertisers and subscribers. In order to attract more advertisers, the key for journalism organisations, is to capture larger audiences. Commercial competition - a new phenomenon, which did not exist in Vietnamese journalism during the subsidised period - emerged amongst journalism organisations. For the first time, Vietnamese journalism had to serve two masters, the Party and the audience. The flow of information was no longer one way, from central government to the people, as it was during the subsidised period, but influenced by advertisers and audiences themselves.

The institutional arrangements of the Communist Party Press system and the current market-based Party Press system show clearly that Vietnam's journalism has evolved from a one-way to a two-way communication system. The masses are no longer merely the followers and subjects of an information system, but

consumers and commodities in the marketplace: audiences. Consequently, capturing larger audiences becomes an essential imperative for any journalism organisation, as it is the only way to fulfil both the political and commercial demands of the current condition.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Economic Renovation, as a switch from the subsidised period to a socialist market economy, has not only improved the economic situation, and the living standards of the general population in Vietnam, but also provided significant impacts on media development, and consequently, the civil society and democracy in this country. However, as mentioned previously, the assessment of the quality of democracy always depends on the point of view and the Western idea of democracy does not fit well the circumstances in Vietnam. Therefore, in terms of the role of journalism in strengthening the civil society and democracy, in the specific context of Vietnam at the transitional period toward a socialist market economy, a new theoretical model of journalism, a model integrating both political and economic dimensions should be considered.

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