

Communication Technology and the Media Ethics in the Digital Age

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Abstract: Journalism is a special profession, because the information given by journalists has great effects to audiences and journalism can shape the public opinion. We live in a society that depends on information and communications to keep moving in the right direction and do our daily activities like work, entertainment, education, even personal relationships. Many people voted based on what the media conveys to them about the candidates, and live their lives according to what they believe as reported by journalists. Journalism is inherently powerful and the civil democracy is only able to set up when its citizens are able to receive all precise, impartial information from the media to help them to raise the voices, and make their well-informed decisions. Journalism is the information conveyors, the bridge between people and the policy makers. Therefore, there is a common point in the codes of ethics of journalism in different countries: journalism must respect the truths, be precise, impartial, balance and responsible. In the digital age, the internet is an effective medium to convey massive information to audiences. The internet has changed the ways people receive and transfer information, and soon becomes the most attractive medium for audiences. This is an opportunity, and also a challenge for journalists, because digital media ethics have to deal with a number of distinct ethical problems, including *plagiarism*, using anonymous sources, information overload, *digital manipulation*, *invading privacy*, etc. This paper will discuss the ethical problems of media in the digital age, in order to propose solutions for Vietnamese journalism in the future.

1. The power of mass media and requirements for code of journalism ethics

Mass media was born and has developed due to the need of human being for communication in the society, associating with the socio - economic conditions, as well as the development of science and technology. Mass

media connects us to the world and the widespread and multidimensional social realities beyond our daily surroundings. Mass media plays an important role in our self-improvement, in the sense that contributing the knowledge about ourselves and the world.

Mass media is a special type of communication in the history of human being - whereby a message can be widely sent by a

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communicator to a large amount of people in a large area geographically, which has not existed ever before. According to Lerner (1957, as quoted in Tran Huu Quang, 2002) [1], it is the transformation from the oral communication system to the mass communication system that is amongst the conditions and characteristics in the process of transforming from traditional society to modern society.

At present, it is difficult to imagine our modern life without mass media, especially the journalism - the central element of mass communication, which has a fundamental role in deciding the characteristics and tendency, as well as the effectiveness of mass communication. Due to the ability to affect strongly, widely and quickly to the whole society, the journalism has a great power on shaping the ideology, spirit and public morality. Journalism was born to meet and satisfy the communication need of people and the society. The basic and original function of journalism is to inform. However, journalism informs people in order to train the ideology and to educate people, as well as to play the role in managing, controlling the society and to perform as the tool of entertainment for people. On the other hand, journalism plays an important role in making and shaping the public opinion in the society, meets the demand of people to be informed - one of the issues legalized by law. With a system of 812 newspapers and magazines providing 1084 publications, 64 local radio - television stations and 3 national television stations, broadcasting 172 channels; the system of journalism in Vietnam nowadays is quite rich, and has implemented well as a bridge between government and people.

It is because the journalism has an important role in society that from its inception

in 17th century, there was already a code of professional journalism ethics [2]. Up to now, most journalism agencies in the world have had codes of ethics approved by the professional conferences and recognized by all journalists. However, there are certain journalism organizations having their own code of ethics for their journalists, such as BBC (Great Britain), New York Times (USA). Organization of international journalism (OIJ) passed the international rules and professional journalism code of ethics, recognized by UNESCO, and implemented by many international journalism organizations who represent hundreds of thousands of journalists working all over the world. Although the professional journalism code of ethics depends on each period of history in each country, as well as each kind of journalism, there is a common issue in all of the code of ethics that is to affirm that the objectivity, the truth, and fairness in reporting is the highest moral criterion of journalists.

Declaration of professional journalism ethics passed by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in 1954 (amended in 1986) firstly affirmed that: "Respecting the truth and the right of people to know the truth is the first objective of journalism."

ASEAN professional moral ethics also affirms the first criterion of journalism in ASEAN is to: "Keep steadily principles of publicization, democracy, accuracy and honesty in collecting and researching information, documentary and pictures ..."

Code of professional journalism ethics of Vietnamese journalists also affirms the requirement of "*characteristics of honesty, objectivity and respect for the truth*" from journalists.

The professional moral ethics of the Union of Russian journalist (passed on 23/06/1994)

also clearly notes that: “Journalists report news and current affairs only when the information resources are believable and deeply understood. To avoid the loss caused by inadequate, inaccurate and wrong information... Journalists need to consider the conscious information manipulation, false accusation, bribe to publish wrong information or hide information in any ways as a serious breach of professional morality.”

Journalists’ professional morality is “what can not be written down in any kind of law, but is recognized by journalism and maintained by the strength of social public opinions and the professional organizations. Those are rules, principles, regulations and the codes of moral journalism activities” [3, p.294]. In the book “Terminology of Journalism and Media”, Pham Thanh Hung [4] says that journalism morality is “A concept of qualified -being, professionally conscientious in journalism activities which is revealed in behavior and moral rules of journalists”.

Morality is required in every occupation in the society, but is much more highly appreciated in the journalism. Keeping journalism professional morality not only affirms the public belief in the journalism, more importantly, guarantees and commits the people’s right to know in a democratic society. Therefore, if journalists and publishers break these principles and lose the public belief, they should be closed or stop publishing; the News of World is a typical example. The News of World belonged to News Corporation, the second largest media company in the world, with a weekly audience of 2.5 million in England and the long history of 168 years in print. The phone hacking scandal, which was investigated, made Mr Rupert Murdoch, a media tycoon, to announce closure of the publisher on July 10th 2011 in order to save the

face of the whole group. The scandal strongly affected the belief of people so that David Cameron, the Prime minister of United Kingdom announced an investigation on culture and morality of journalism beside the investigation of the News of World with the aim to reinforce the Information committee in the UK parliament.

Journalism Morality is one of the essences in professional journalism activities, however, the principles and moral ethics in journalism nowadays face challenges in the setting of modern media, multimedia in intergration and convergence.

2. The development of communication technology and its effect to the society

In recent decades, the tremendous development of media technologies is one of the phenomena, which strongly influences the social life. Besides the non-stop improvement in speed, capacity and diversity, media technologies achieve a sharp increase in both ability of transferring information and its technological quality of the message. These improvements make media technologies extended and absorbed; as well as change the nature of social, psychological life, the culture standard and people’s habit.

Easily access to mobile phones and computers globally connected to the internet helps people to send messages, sayings, static and dynamic pictures to the farthest places in the world just in a wink: an impossible action in the past. Amongst “Making - the - world - flat” elements mentioned by T. Friedman [5], the digitalisation, mobility, personality, unreality are considered as the most important and direct elements to change social cultural life in the world, that set the trend of personalization,

democratization, diversification in the form of communication and entertainment, as well as start an unreal life.

With the arise of the Internet, users have a lot of utilities such as email, online chat, documentary research, file transfer protocol, widespread information service... Besides, there are a lot of other high qualified services such as voice transfer technology on the internet, video-conference, and wireless application protocol. The Internet, which is a utility to transfer a large amount of information with the highest speed to a large number of people, does not face any barriers or geographical borders. At the same time, the convergence of communication technologies happens and enables other types of communication to co-exist, support and improve each other on the Internet environment. Media convergence not only technologically changes the media landscape but also has an enormous influence on economic activities, social structure and human's cultural formation.

The occurrence and development of the internet takes precedence over the formation and development of online journalism. Online journalism overcomes the barrier which other traditional journalism faces; that content of information is limited in the frame of newspapers or linear time on radio - television programs. Because of the simple and easy process of production, online journalism can update and amend information any time. There are certain characteristics of online journalism which none of the traditional journalism can compete against, that are the multimedia, high interactivity, unlimited transfer of information, update and non-periodical, which makes the information on online journalism most alive, hottest, freshest, as updated every hour, every minute and even every second.

As the result of research by Net Index 2011[6], Internet surpasses radio and television to become the most popular daily media at the rate of 42%, the most popular online activities of Vietnamese users are reading news (97%), accessing into portal services (96%). The number of people who use the internet to access social networking sites increased from 41% in 2010 to 55% in 2011. The young generation also uses the internet to update information on social networking sites (52%), watch video clips and pictures online (45%). Utilities and trend of using internet significantly increases.

The other internet's benefit is the formation of social networking sites, connecting members with similar hobbies on the internet by the utilities such as chat, email, movies, voice chat, file sharing, blog ... In 2010, the prestige appellation "Person of Year" voted by The Times was given to Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of social networking site Facebook. The Times evaluates Facebook as the third world on earth. As a result of a survey made by Dr. Nguyen Thanh Loi [7], there are over 60% of journalists finding blogs and social networks as an initial source of information. Even there are many articles written with ideas suggested by information from the social networks and blogs,... According to an investigation of articles on VNExpress (a famous online newspapers in Vietnam) in 2012, there are 1751 articles using source from social networks, especially from Youtube, Facebook, Zing Me and Twitter. There are scandals starting from social networks, quickly becoming hot topics in online journalism such as the scandal with nickname "Keo Mut Choi Boi" showing off to cause accidents and challenging public opinion (August 2011), the scandal "Lieutenant Tran Dai Phuc attacked traffic police" (July 28th 2011), the scandal of cheating in examination

in Doi Ngo high school (in Bac Giang province) (May 2012)...

3. Challenges in journalism code of ethics in the digital age

The issue of professional journalism ethics in the digital media environment is a “hot” and controversial issue nowadays. A huge amount of information which is transferred instantly each minute on the internet makes people unable to control information. The phenomenon of the conscious information manipulation, false accusation in bad intentions occurs everywhere. The scatter of messy and false information makes people lose their belief in the information sources. The new social evils appear, including the phishing, prostitute brokering, people trading, drug trading, illegal trading, scattering of sexual pictures, violent games... available on the Internet. In addition, there is information available on the Internet, which disparages and sullies one’s reputation and purity, but is impossible to censor...

In the previous centuries, journalist was a clearly named profession. In people’s opinion, journalists were professional people who specialized in collecting and reporting news on newspapers and radio - television stations. Normal people were hard to be considered as a part of journalist group - those who are working as a social communicator. Nowadays, digital media opens a multidimensional world in which everyone can write and publish any messages. Without being trained to be a journalist or working in an official journalist organisation, any normal person now can recognize themselves as a real journalist and write about social issues for a lot of readers. It is the fact that one can share ideas, opinion, information on the internet, but not all of them

can understand and follows the code of ethics of a journalist.

The remarkable development in information technology gives birth to a lot of new media converging on the internet which makes modern information environment throughout national borders. Everyone can receive information as well as become an information giver. In this modern and ‘free’ information environment, it is really difficult to check “right” or “wrong”. In addition, people can hide their real names and their real characteristics on the Internet, so it makes information via the Internet more difficult to be controlled. The personal life of each person is continuously disturbed by the media. Some evils take advantage of the internet to trespass other personal lives, especially that of the celebrities...

There are a lot of rumours, uncensored information from social networks which are scattered on internet, to be gathered and made official by a number of ‘facile’ journalists. The untrue information causes bad influence, sullies reputation and honor of a person or/and an organization, messes up information, and makes social public opinion burdensome. The malicious rumour that the President of the Bank for Investment and Development of Vietnam (BIDV) was arrested made the stock market to panic on January 21st 2013. As estimated by economic experts, the stock market lost nearly 34.000 billion VND just in one day [8].

On the Internet, plagiarism also becomes a serious problem, as it is too easy to do with simple actions, just “Ctrl a”, “Ctrl c” and “Ctrl v”. The most common phenomenon of plagiarism in Vietnamese online newspapers is to copy the whole article with some changes in its title. Secondly, editing the article without giving any new information. Thirdly, plagiarising the idea, and finally, using major parts of the original article. In 2012, Vietnamese journalists shocked

and felt ashamed when a journalist namely Nguyen Chu Trinh made up a story about an affair between a father-in-law and a daughter-in-law in Tien Giang province in VOVNews online newspaper. After the truth was exposed, Nguyen Chu Trinh was fired; however, reputation of VOVNews was dramatically declined.

Besides, rumours about one's privacy, especially those of celebrities also are numerous via the Internet. A number of online newspapers attract readers by shocking news about violence, sex and superstition. This is a

serious problem affecting the journalism ethics.

In addition, photoshop is also a controversial issue in the digital age. A number of journalistic photographs lost their truthfulness due to the technic and the ability of photoshop. Readers have raised their voices to protest the newspapers and journalists that used photoshop to change the journalistic photographs and cheat the people's belief in newspapers.



This is a fake photograph (up) published in the article namely “Assads armee rollt mit Panzern zur Mutter aller Schlachten” on ‘The Kronen Zeitung newspaper’ in 28.7.2012, using photoshop the original photograph from the European Pressphoto Agency (EPA) 2 days ago. ‘The Kronen Zeitung newspaper’ with a 3 million readers lost a number of readers after this scandal. Previously, in 2006, Reuters also

had a scandal with fake photograph from Adnan Haji.

Another example is the photograph of the missile weapon test of Iran, available in a number of famous newspapers including Los Angeles, Times and Financial Times.



In the real photograph, only 3 missiles were successfully launched



The Al-Ahram newspaper, one of the most popular newspapers in Egypt also had a scandal of cheating readers by using photoshop when bringing the President Hosni Mubarak from the behind to the front of the picture to make him more important in leading the group of international leaders.

A number of photograph journalists are fired due to cheating readers by photoshop, however, the phenomenon of photoshop is still available in the digital age.

4. Solutions for improving the quality of journalism ethics in the digital age

In the market economy with the opening and extensive interaction with the world, many newspapers have to worry about their finance. Working in an environment of fierce competition to sell newspapers, a number of journalist organizations are busy in chasing tastes of audiences, focusing on cheap and shocking information. Along with the explosion of information technology, the pressure to have quick information for readers

pushes the journalists and newspaper to the fierce competition with each others. A number of infringements of the journalism ethics occur, especially in online journalism, intentionally or accidentally.

In 2012, the Central Propaganda Department and the Ministry of Information and Communications received, handled 300 complaints and accusations for more than 100 cases, which were believed to publish incorrect information on the newspapers. As of December 12/2012, the Inspection of Ministry of Information and Communications has handled 58 infringement cases of newspaper organisations, and imposed a pecuniary penalty of totaling 771 million VND (nearly double compared to the year of 2011). Of these, there are 25 cases punished due to false information (more 6 cases compared to the previous year) (Report of the Ministry of Information and Communications at the National Journalism Conference 2013).

According to the latest statistics, in Vietnam there are 74 online newspapers, 336 online social networks and 1174 websites providing news. The strong development of the communication systems via the Internet make it is more difficult to control the media in the digital age, especially at the present time, the legal system of media control in Vietnam is still incompleting. So, in order to manage and control the media activities in Vietnam, we need to improve the journalism law and regulations, especially the law on online journalism.

The Central Propaganda Department, the Ministry of Information and Communications, and the Vietnam Journalists Association should work more closely with the related parties to strengthen the cooperation to guide, supervise and correct the journalism activities,

especially regarding the reporting the internal and external issues.

One of the most important factors to prevent the infringements of the journalism ethics is that the media organisations must constantly monitor and regulate the activities of journalists in accordance with the journalism code of ethics, in accordance with Vietnamese law and regulations. In addition, the editorial board should be very conscious in selecting articles to be published, pay more attention to discover errors in each article, especially the plagiarism. Besides, the media organisations should pay more attentions in training, evaluating and promoting their staff, in accordance with the principles of journalism code of ethics.

The journalists need to improve their social responsibilities and duties, ethics and professional skills because they are central elements to help journalists do their jobs effectively and correctively. The writers should be the first filter, and the media organisations should become the gatekeepers for society. The ethics of those who work in the field of media industry have great effects to society, therefore, it is important to educate, to train journalists and improve the responsibilities of journalists in applying the code of ethics.

The training of the code of journalism ethics needs to be tightened not only in journalistic training institutions, and but also in the media organisations. Moreover, the code of journalism ethics should be educated and trained not only for the journalist community but more importantly, for the whole society, especially in the age of citizen journalism available on the Internet.

Journalism has a great capability to disseminate information for the whole society; consequently, journalism has a special power to society and great impacts to every member

in the society. Journalism should not be simply a job to earn money. Journalism does not exist by itself but of society and for society. Therefore, the journalists must carry out their careers for the benefit of the majority in society, and should always pursue towards the truth, the balance and the impartiality in reporting news. In other words, in the digital age, the code of journalism ethics should be enhanced and implemented in an effective manner than ever before.

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