



## Freedom Of The Press - Vietnam (2008)

**Status:** Not Free

**Legal Environment**  
: 27

**Political Environment**  
: 33

**Economic Environment**  
: 22

**Total Score:**  
82

Following a relative easing of restrictions on the press in 2006 as Vietnam prepared for accession to the World Trade Organization, Human Rights Watch in 2007 reported “one of the worst crackdowns on peaceful dissent in 20 years.” Over a dozen journalists and activists who had pushed for more open media or had posted online essays calling for democratic reform were sentenced to long prison terms or house arrest. Nevertheless, several media outlets continued to press the limits of permissible coverage, and internet access increased.

Although the 1992 constitution recognizes the rights to freedom of opinion, of expression, and of association for all citizens, the propaganda and training departments of the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) control all media and set press guidelines. In addition, a 1999 law requires journalists to pay damages to individuals or groups found to have been harmed by press articles, even if they are true. Reporting considered to be against the national interest can bring charges under the criminal code and antidefamation provisions. During 2007, several writers imprisoned for online postings were sentenced under the penal code’s Article 88, which covers antigovernment propaganda. In July 2006, in response to increasingly vibrant reporting by both the traditional and internet-based news media, the government had issued a decree that defined over 2,000 additional violations of the law in the areas of culture and information and imposed hefty fines for offenders, with a particular focus on protecting “national security.”

The CPV generally views the media as a tool for the dissemination of party and state policy. Although journalists cannot cover sensitive political or economic matters or openly question the CPV’s single-party rule without fear of reprisal, they are more often allowed to report on crime and official corruption, and such reports have become increasingly common. Nevertheless, several media outlets suffered retribution for testing the limits of permissible coverage in 2007. According to the U.S. State Department, two deputy chief editors of the *Tuoi Tre* daily were removed from their posts

over a series of 2006 articles on corruption. In addition, the popular online news outlet *VietnamNet* was fined US\$2,000 after publishing an editorial about disputed islands in the South China Sea despite a government order to remain silent on the issue. As part of a broad crackdown on those calling for democratic reforms, staff members of several underground publications were imprisoned during the year. Father Nguyen Van Ly, a Catholic priest and editor of *Tu Do Ngon Luan*, which launched in April 2006, was sentenced in March to eight years in prison. Six other individuals involved in the publication were also sentenced to prison or placed under house arrest during the year. In April, police detained journalist and writer Tran Khai Thanh Thuy, who serves on the editorial board of the dissident newsletter *To Quoc*; she remained in custody at year's end. In 2007, the government also cracked down on Vietnam's fledgling community of online prodemocracy writers, sentencing six cyberdissidents to prison terms within one week in May; one of them was Nguyen Van Dai, a prominent human rights lawyer, who was sentenced to five years in prison as a result of essays published on the internet, including on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)'s Vietnamese-language website. In a more positive development, cyberdissident Nguyen Vu Binh was granted an early release by the president in June, apparently because of bad health. Nguyen had served nearly five years of a seven-year sentence for posting articles about democracy on the internet and maintaining e-mail contact with prodemocracy groups abroad. Though restrictions on the hiring of local journalists by foreign media outlets have reportedly eased somewhat, foreign reporters continue to be monitored closely, and their movements within the country are restricted. In March, the authorities refused to renew the visa of BBC correspondent Bill Hayton, forcing him to leave the country.

There is only one national television station in the country, state-owned Vietnam Television, although cable does carry some foreign channels. Radio is controlled by the government-run Voice of Vietnam or other state entities. While all print media outlets are owned by or under the effective control of the CPV, government organs, or the army, several newspapers—including *Thanh Nien*, *Nguoi Lao Dong*, and *Tuoi Tre* (owned by the Youth Union under the CPV)—have attempted to become financially sustainable and to stop relying on state subsidies. Several underground publications have been launched in recent years, including *Tu Do Ngon Luan*, *To Quoc*, and *Tu Do Dan Chu*; they reportedly continue to circulate despite recent arrests of staff members. Foreign periodicals, although widely available, are sometimes censored, and the broadcasts of stations such as Radio Free Asia are periodically jammed.

Access to satellite television broadcasts and the internet is growing, especially in urban areas. More than 21 percent of Vietnamese reportedly

have internet access. The online news site *VietnamNet* publishes in Vietnamese and English, while *vietnamjournalism.com*, a blog run by a local journalist, discusses professional and ethical issues. Website operators continue to use internet service providers (ISPs) that are either publicly or semipublicly owned, like Vietnam Data Communications, which is controlled by the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications and caters to nearly a third of all internet users. ISPs are required by law to block access to websites that the government considers politically unacceptable, though many foreign news sites remain accessible. Cybercafés are required by law to register the personal information of and record the sites visited by users. In September, the government shut down *Intellasia*, an online news and investment site, blocking access from inside the country and causing the server to crash. Following a raid on the offices and repeated threats from the authorities, *Intellasia's* Australian owner and publisher, Peter Leech, fled the country. The site was operating from Australia at year's end.