FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Vietnam (2005)

With its moves to suppress dissent on the Internet, the Vietnamese government intensified its stranglehold on the media in 2004, though the release of several jailed journalists was welcome news. The Vietnamese media remain tightly controlled by the ruling Communist Party (CPV) and the government. Although the constitution guarantees freedom of speech and of the press, both it and the criminal code contain broad national security and antidefamation provisions that are used to restrict the media. 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. The government continues to crack down on online dissent, as Vietnam's *Official Gazette* announced even tighter regulations for Internet cafes.

At least three journalists were freed from prison in 2004. Two elderly dissidents, military historian Pham Que Duong and literature professor Tran Khue, were released in July in response to international pressure, including from the U.S. Congress. The two were set free after 19 months in prison for "taking advantage of democratic rights to infringe upon the interests of the state." One Internet journalist, Le Chi Quang, was released in June after serving more than 19 months of a 4-year jail term for posting essays critical of the government online. At the same time, the practice of jailing journalists continues. A Ho Chi Minh City court sentenced the dissident Nguyen Dan Que to 30 months in prison, and eight other journalists remain behind bars, four of whom are Internet journalists, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

All media outlets are owned by or are under the effective control of the CPV, government organs, or the army, and many journalists practice self-censorship. While journalists cannot cover sensitive political or economic matters or openly question the CPV's single-party rule, they are occasionally allowed to report on crime and official corruption. Still, the exposed officials occasionally fight back. Such was the case of Nguyen Hoang Linh, editor of Doanh Nghiep, who exposed corruption in the customs service, only to be arrested for revealing state secrets. As in other Communist systems, the

party and the government fund most of the publications in Vietnam. Even though all media content is monitored by state agencies, they compete in the emerging free market for advertising and readers.