



FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Vietnam (2006)

Although the 1992 constitution recognizes the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, and 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 be charged under the criminal code and antidefamation provisions. In January, Nguyen Thi Lan Anh, a staff reporter of *Tuoi Tre*, was indicted on the charge of "appropriating state secrets" after her investigations into leaked allegations of manipulations of the drug market by the multinational pharmaceutical company Zuellig Pharma, which had a contract with the Ministry of Health. However, after Lan Anh received unprecedented support from major media outlets, the charges against her were dropped in April.

The party's general secretary, Nong Duc Manh, called on the media to help fight corruption and facilitate economic reforms during the party's Ninth Congress in January. However, on January 10 the government closed down Tintucvietnam.com, a website dealing primarily with economic and cultural issues, for publishing readers' letters that alleged corruption among high officials. Instances of harassment or assaults against reporters attempting to cover the news by police or other assailants have increased in recent years. Trang Dung, a reporter for *An Ninh The Gioi*, was beaten by security guards and had his camera destroyed even after he displayed his press credentials. The story of the incident along with a photograph of his wounds was later published in the paper to call attention to the brutality and systematic nature of violence toward the media. Although journalists cannot cover sensitive political or economic matters or openly question the CPV's single-party rule without fear of such violent reprisals, they are allowed to report on crime and official corruption, and such reports have become increasingly common. Foreign journalists based in Vietnam are monitored closely, and their

movements within the country are restricted. Internet dissidents such as Pham Hong Son and Nguyen Vu Binh continue to remain in jail on charges of espionage. Although authorities did release prominent writer Nguyen Dan Que in February, he remained under strict surveillance and was subject to some harassment.

All print and broadcast media outlets are owned by or are under the effective control of the CPV, government organs, or the army. As in other Communist systems, the party and the government fund most of the publications in Vietnam, although 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. Local journalists are generally optimistic that private ownership of the media will improve sooner rather than later, particularly with regard to the internet, though competition for advertising among the more than 500 newspapers and 200 digital news sites remains stiff. Foreign periodicals, although widely available, are sometimes censored, and the broadcasts of stations such as Radio Free Asia are periodically jammed. However, access to satellite television broadcasts and the internet is growing. The first online news site, vietnamnet.vn, publishes in Vietnamese and English, while vietnamjournalism.com, a blog run by a local journalist, discusses professional and ethical issues. Use of the internet has grown sharply, with more than 5 million new users in the last five years. Website operators continue to go through internet service providers that are either public or part public 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. It is required by law that service providers block access to designated websites that the government considers politically unacceptable. Radio Free Asia reported in December that Tieng Noi Dan Chu, a website founded by dissident writer Tran Khue to lobby for democratic reform in Vietnam, was hacked into 19 days after it launched.