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TABLOIDISATION IN ONLINE NEWSPAPERS IN VIETNAM

**THE FREE DEVELOPMENT OF ENTERTAINMENT NEWS IN ONLINE
NEWSPAPERS IN VIETNAM: BEHIND THE CONFLICT BETWEEN FREEDOM
OF THE PRESS AND THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY AND MORAL VALUES**

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ABSTRACT

This research examines a specific area of the press in Vietnam which at present is developing very fast and freely. That is the entertainment news production in online newspapers. Entertainment news with tabloid contents which goes deeply into topics such as “shock- sex”, “robbery- rape- killing” in online newspapers is very popular. This results in online newspapers are being severely tabloidised. This trend has led to violations to the right to privacy and morality. As a result a conflict between freedom of the press and moral values on the one hand and individuals' privacy on the other hand has arisen. In addition, by ignoring serious news, tabloid news is also undermining the core values of the press, which are important for the development of a democratic society.

Lying behind this phenomenon are complicated relations between actors in the press including both state and private sectors, which have created a very unique and specific model of online newspapers in Vietnam.

In addition to drawing up the development model of online newspapers in Vietnam at present and discussing the conflict between freedom of the press and the right to privacy and morality, this research also tried to figure out elements of how to balance.

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Now when the research is done I just start to believe that I will deliver it within the deadline. I said so because there have been a lot of difficult moments when I thought I would not manage to finish this research on time.

It was when I could not convince journalists to participate in my research; when I just received few survey answer sheets after two months since it was sent out; when the pressure of daily life and studies made me exhausted etc.

So firstly I would like to send my sincere and great thanks to all the interviewees who participated in my research. Those are 6 journalists: NaSon Nguyen, Thu Huong, Cam Nhung, Cao Nhat and two journalists from the *Dan Tri* and *VnExpress*. Thank you so much for the great information you provided me. Without you I could not finish this research with such the valuable news sources.

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ABBREVIATION

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
FPT	Financing Promoting Technology Company
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MIC	Ministry of Information and Communication
MOST	Ministry of Science and Technology
UDHR	Universal Declaration on Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
US	United States
USA	United States of America
VASC	VASC Software and Media Company
VC. Corp.	Vietnam Communication Corporation
VNPT	Vietnam Posts and Telecommunications Group

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1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2012 a big controversy broke out between several newspapers accusing each other of being “*lá cải hóa*” (tabloidised), and the term “*lá cải*” or “*báo lá cải*” (tabloid) became a hot topic in many newspapers and journalism forums. However it was certainly not the first time Vietnamese people got to know about *báo lá cải*, since they had been served those every day by online newspapers and news websites. The website <http://www.lacai.org>, which was established in 2010 by Phan An, a manager of a web design company, aimed to warn newspapers and viewers on the tabloidisation of online newspapers, even found thousands of “*lá cải*” stories each month. Recently Phan An stopped this work, since he found that “it is now more difficult to find serious news stories than “*lá cải*” news”¹.

So what are “*tabloid*” and “*tabloidisation*” that make people so concerned about? One of the well-known theories is that “*tabloid*” was created by Alfred Harmsworth (later Lord Northcliffe) in England in 1896, with the birth of the *Daily Mail*. The aim was to popularise a new type of newspapers which is small-sized, easy to handle, and easy to read². Today, one of the most popular meanings of “tabloid” can refer to newspaper and broadcast journalistic publications that prioritise entertainment, human interest and commercial profitability³. “*Tabloidisation*”, therefore, can be understood as a process, in which the tabloid press is growing and the serious press is changing toward more tabloid contents and appearance⁴.

The free development of the press is one of the most important contents of the right to freedom of expression. The free development of tabloid journalism should be protected as part of this right. However when this development prevails serious journalism or af-

¹ Trung Bao (2013): <http://laodong.com.vn/Van-hoa/Chia-tay-trang-dien-tu-La-cai/109155.blđ>

² Örnebring and Jönsson (2008): 28 and Gripsrud (2008): 37

³ Biressi and Nunn (2008): 7

⁴ Sparks (2000): 3 and Schonback (2000): 63

fect moral values and other rights such as the right to privacy, it comes to another question that requires a balance between freedom of expression and other rights.

According to the Reporters without border, Vietnam has a very humble position in the list of the world press freedom index 2012 (ranks 172/179 countries)⁵. But in fact the tabloidisation in online newspapers in Vietnam at present shows at least one aspect where newspapers are very freely developing. It is certain that tabloidisation is not a new phenomenon in the world but when it comes to Vietnam, there are many different characteristics on the ways tabloid journalism grows.

Doing this research on “*Tabloidisation in online newspapers in Vietnam*” which focuses on “*The free development of entertainment news in online newspapers in Vietnam: behind the conflict between freedom of the press and the right to privacy and moral values*”, I hope to find significant results on an interesting issue which is expected to make the outside world understand more about freedom of expression as well as freedom of the press in Vietnam.

Due to the scope of this thesis, I have only had almost 6 months for doing research (from December til May). Thus, there were certain limitations I had to keep the thesis within. The structure of this research therefore was also affected.

In the first chapter, I have a brief background description of Vietnam concerning geography, economic and political situations which affect very much how the press is developing at present. Also in this part I focus further on the research problem, the objectives and relevance of my research. The second part of the thesis deals with the methods I used to do this research. The third part examines the press in Vietnam, in which I go from the general information to the specific information on online newspapers and its special development model. In this part the press law is also examined. I also assess the role of Facebook as an important resource and reflector of online newspapers to help understand the actual development of online newspapers at present in Vietnam. In the fourth part, I provide the introduction on my case studies, which are four online newspapers and one news website. The fifth part generalises findings and discusses those to

⁵ Reporters Without Border (2012):17

answer the sub-questions. The last part is the Conclusion which summarises the thesis and concludes the answers to the main research questions as well as raises my own viewpoints on the ideal solution to the existing situation.

1.1 Background

Vietnam, officially called the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, is located in South East Asia. It covers an area of about 331000 km² and the population of approximately 87.8 million people⁶. The country shares borders with China in the North, the South China Sea in the East, Laos and Cambodia in the West and the Gulf of Thailand in the South. Hanoi, the second largest city in Vietnam is the capital and also of the biggest cultural, economic and political centres in the country where all the governmental and the Communist party's head-offices are located.

During more than 2000 years of its history, Vietnam has most of the time experienced wars against powerful empires such as China (more than 1000 years), France (91 years: 1858-1940 and 1945-1954), Japan (5 years: 1940-1975) and the USA (21 years: 1954-1975)⁷. Stepping out from the wars, Vietnam had a difficult period to rebuild the country and to find a way to reform the economy.

1.1.1 Economy

According to the Constitution issued in 1992, Vietnam has developed “the socialist-oriented multi-sector commodity economy based on the market mechanism under the state's management”. The basis of this economy is the economic structure of many components with diverse forms of production and business practices, under different forms of ownership including the whole peoples', collective and private ownership, of which the whole peoples' and collective ownership are the basis.⁸

⁶Vietnam's general statistics office (2011): <http://www.gso.gov.vn/default.aspx?tabid=387&idmid=3&ItemID=12875>

⁷Dinh Xuan Lam et al (1997) and Tran Trong Kim (1920) and the government's website <http://chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/NuocCHXHCNVietNam/ThongTinTongHop/lichsu>

⁸ Constitution 1992: art.15

According to the World Bank, Vietnam is a “development success story” for its achievements after the political and economic reforms (Doi moi) in 1986 which pushed the country from one of the poorest countries in the world, with per capita income under \$100, to a lower middle income country, with per capita income of \$1,130 (2010). In 2011, Vietnam reached the GDP of 123.6 million USD, ranked as 62/220 countries in the world. In recent years, though Vietnam is not in the list of the countries, which have the highest annual GDP growth rate, it has, nevertheless, kept being a stable developing economy with an annual GDP growth rate of more than 5% per year (2010: 6.78%, 2011: 5.89%, 2012: 5.3%). However the inflation is still very high (2011: 18.6%) and the gap between the rich and the poor is a big problem of the economy at present⁹.

1.1.2 Politics

Vietnam is one of the 5 remaining communist countries besides China, North Korea, Cuba and Laos¹⁰. According to the Constitution issued in 1992, the Communist Party led by the Party’s general secretary is the only party and the force that leads the state and the society. The National Assembly is the highest representative of Vietnamese citizens and the highest power body of the state which is elected every fifth year through national elections and led by the Chairman of the National Assembly. This legislative organ also has a role to select the President as the Head of the state who represents the state in all internal and external affairs. The government is the highest administrative and executive body led by the Prime Minister who is also selected by the National Assembly among its members. Both the President and the Prime Minister has a 5-year term. In the latest draft for the amendment of the Constitution which is planned to be approved in October 2013, the role of the President is proposed to change in a way that the President has more power to reject the Prime Minister’s documents and to lead the Council of Defence¹¹.

⁹ The World Bank- Vietnam

¹⁰ CIA-the World Fact Book: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vn.html>

¹¹ Linh Thu (2012): <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/chinh-tri/94551/sua-hien-phap--bo-sung-quyen-cua-chu-tich-nuoc.html>

The People's Councils are the state's power bodies at local levels, responsible for deciding the specific policies to develop their local areas and report to the State's central bodies. These councils also take charge in selecting the local people's committees and supervising the activities of these bodies as well as the judicial system at the local levels.

Another major power pillar, the Vietnamese judicial system, includes the Courts, People's Procurates and investigating bodies. The Tribunal president of the Supreme Court, the Director of the people's Procuracy are both selected by the National Assembly.

Besides those main pillars, the Fatherland's Fronts at the central and local levels are also important political bodies, which are established as the political alliances among political and social organizations aimed to mediate and consolidate the solidarity in the state's political system.¹²

These above specific characteristics of the political system in Vietnam affects the way the press develops in the country. If the press is always considered as the fourth estate or the fourth branch of the government in many countries such as the United States¹³, it seems to play an even more important role in an authoritarian state such as Vietnam. It is regulated in the press law that the press "constitutes the voice of the Communist party, the State and social organizations as well as a platform for the expression of the peoples' will"¹⁴. It means that the press plays the role of a representative more than a role of a supervisor of the state. The state's management to the press also forms a special press model in Vietnam, which will be analysed further in the chapter 3 of the thesis.

¹² The information on the political system was generalised from the information in the government's website: <http://chinhphu.vn>

¹³ <http://www.usfca.edu/fac-staff/boaz/pol326/feb12.htm>

¹⁴ Article 1, the press law, English version translated by the copy right office: http://www.cov.gov.vn/cbqen/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=606&Itemid=75

1.2 Objectives and Relevance

When I registered to study the programme “*Theory and Practice of Human Rights*”, I had intended to do my thesis on another topic that I had done some research before. However, during the time taking this programme, there were some reasons that urged me to change the topic to freedom of the press in Vietnam. One of those was to make the outside world understand the real situation in Vietnam, with more comprehensive views rather than being obsessed by what has been focused by foreign media.

When I talked to some new friends about one year ago, some asked me if it was true that we could not use Facebook in Vietnam. Some felt very surprised when I could talk about football with them, since they thought we did not know football and could not access foreign TV channels or receive information about the outside world on TV. I have heard many things similar about freedom of speech in Vietnam, some of which are true but some are not absolutely correct or even inaccurate. This made me feel as if I had come from another planet.

Before I came to Oslo, I worked as a communication coordinator for a Christian Non-governmental organisation, Caritas Switzerland in Vietnam. I managed the Facebook account of the organization in addition to my personal Facebook, which I have had since 2007. Though it did happen sometimes that I could not connect to some websites and Facebook when I was at home, I never had that problem, when I was at my work place. In theory or at least being impressed by many people that anything more or less connecting to religion is “sensitive” to the Vietnamese government, I should have been blocked to access to Facebook at work, but I was not. I certainly heard from people who couldn’t access to Facebook but what I mean here is if there is a limitation or block, it’s not a total shut door as known by the outside world. Similarly, when talking about other media like TV or radio, nowadays we can access most of the world popular channels such as BBC, CNN, EPSN, HBO etc., providing that we pay for cable TV services. Therefore, it seems that foreign media have presented the situation stricter than the reality in relation to freedom of expression in Vietnam.

However, as a Vietnamese citizen living in “the core of the storm”, I see that there are areas where the press is quite free. That happens especially in online newspapers with the explosive growth of entertainment-led stories, which become a quite popular trend nowadays. In many senses, this trend causes a conflict between freedom of the press and the right to privacy and morality. The *Vietnamnet* (vietnamnet.vn), one of the biggest official online newspapers in Vietnam admitted in an article on tabloidisation of newspapers in Vietnam that “[...]if you try to enter any official online newspaper, you will see the most read, most prioritised news items are about “robbery-rape-killing”, “sex-shocking” news”¹⁵. If googling the phrase “Báo chí lá cải hóa tại Việt Nam” (the press is being tabloidised in Vietnam), you will get almost 7 million results after 0.14 seconds. Many articles found from that search result express their concerns about the *tabloidisation* in the Vietnamese press. Some of the top listed are “Thảm họa báo lá cải” (Disaster of tabloids) in the *Sai Gon Giai Phong online*, “Thời của báo lá cải?” (The age of tabloid journalism?) in the *Vietnamnet*, “Sự tò mò dẫn chúng ta đi đâu?” (Where does our curiousness lead us?) in the *Tuoi tre online* etc. This issue has become so disturbing that it caused a big controversy in newspapers in 2012.

Before 21 June 2012 the national journalism’s day, a controversy exploded, rooted in a series of articles published in the *Sai Gon Giai phong* (Saigon’s Liberation) and the *Phu nu thanh pho Ho Chi Minh* (Hochiminh City’s Women) blamed several official newspapers on being tabloidised. Right after that, “tabloid journalism” became a hot topic in most of all online newspapers to retaliate against those two newspapers. At the end of the discussion, after witnessing these newspapers' arguments on which one is more tabloidised, it was seen that tabloidisation became a popular disease of the whole press, especially in online newspapers today.

Remarkably, the Vietnamese version of BBC- BBC Vietnamese, had a long article by Nguyen Hung issued on 30 May 2012 analysing the tabloid journalism in the world in comparison with the situation in Vietnam. The article concluded that in Vietnam tabloid news has all the tabloid distinctions generalised by Stephen Harrington¹⁶, except the

¹⁵ Ky Duyen (2012): <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/chinh-tri/tuanvietnam/74754/thoi-cua-bao-la-cai--.html>.

¹⁶ Harrington 2009: 37

“macro-politics” which exploits private life and hot news on politicians¹⁷. However BBC is one of the very few foreign media which mention this aspect of the Vietnamese journalism. Moreover, it is written in Vietnamese which makes it difficult for foreigners to read and understand.

Therefore, doing this research I hope it can contribute to a more comprehensive view for people living outside Vietnam on what is really happening in the country as regards journalism.

In addition, studying this topic is also an opportunity for me to get to the core of the problem by finding the main reasons, which created the phenomenon in online newspapers in Vietnam. It is also a chance for me to study more about the development of tabloid, freedom of the press and the right to privacy in online newspapers in the world when finding the theory basis for this research.

Another important reason that motivated me to do this research is that there has been no research before focusing on this aspect of the press in Vietnam, except single separate articles in some newspapers. Thus, I expect to contribute a deeper studied document on the issue, so that it can help the local authorities and newspapers have some suggestions to find directions for solving the problem in a way that balances the development of tabloid topics and other serious topics which are more practical and useful. I also hope that this research can be a useful reference for further research projects on the topic in the future.

1.3 Research problem

Doing this research I argue that online newspapers in Vietnam are very free when it comes to entertainment news, which, in many cases, causes a conflict between the freedom of the press, moral values and the right to privacy.

Behind this conflict, I suppose that there are some main reasons that concern readers’ preference, writers’ abilities and ethics and also political obstacles. Readers’ prefer-

¹⁷Nguyen Hung: “Tabloid controversy” http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2012/05/120530_tabloid_controversy.shtml

ences can lead to the competitions for page views between online newspapers, which bring main incomes to them. Limited abilities and lack of professional ethics can make journalists run after short-term profits rather than promote the true values of journalism. At the same time, the risks to write on “sensitive” political and social issues also can push journalists and online newspapers to focus on entertainment news for their safety.

To prove the statement and get to know how correct the hypothesis is, I base the research on two main research questions:

Q1: Does entertainment news in online newspapers affect moral values and violate privacy of individuals?

Q2: What is the balance in the conflict between the right to freedom of expression and the right to privacy as well as moral values in online newspapers?

When I indicate “entertainment news” in these questions, I do not mean to include all entertainment news stories. Obviously not all entertainment news is bad nor useless. The term here has a more general meaning. What I mean in most of all parts in this research put the term “entertainment news” under a meaning of a popular phenomenon where most of entertainment news stories have the same characteristics and effects of tabloid journalism. In addition, the term “online newspapers” I mention here include both official newspapers and unofficial newspapers such as news websites (trang tin) which have the same characteristics of online newspapers concerning the news production, organisational structure, websites' format etc.¹⁸

To find the answer to the first question, it is not easy to measure how much online newspapers affect the right to privacy and morality. In fact, most of the people whose private life is exposed in online newspapers are celebrities. In many cases, though their life is pried into, they accept it as the payment for their fame. In Vietnam, when a tabloid news story is released, especially news on private “secrets” or negative information about a character, often two clear flows of opinions appear in newspapers. One is the public’s opinions and the other is the reactions from the subjected characters. Following these two flows of opinions, especially in special selected cases I had the first

¹⁸ These characteristics will be figured out and analysed in the chapter 3 of this thesis.

source to answer the research question. Additionally I based my conclusions on the interviews with journalists and the survey results. The theory basis applicable was domestic laws and international laws including the Constitution, the press law, laws on personal information protection, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which was ratified by Vietnam in 1982. Theories taken from different documents on the issues were also used as references in my discussion.

To answer the second question, I considered the interaction between online newspapers and different related actors such as journalists, viewers and authorities. These are ones who can affect online newspapers' development and help to create the balance.

To make the research problem clearer, I concretise the two research questions into following sub-questions:

1. How popular is entertainment news in online newspapers today?

To answer this question, I mostly made use of quantitative results by considering the frequencies of news updates of entertainment news in comparison with other types of news. My measurement also partly depended on the survey results I collected from online newspapers' viewers.

2. Does it affect moral values?

It is different from one news story to another on the volume of how it affects moral values. Therefore I answered this question by looking at specific cases and also based on the survey answers and interviews. One important source was the journalistic code of conducts regulated by the press association which was used to consider whether the news (its texts, pictures, title, the ways journalists provide information of the characters etc.) go beyond the limits. Human moral values respected by Vietnamese culture were also considered when analysing cases.

3. Do they violate the right of people to privacy?

Some specific cases were selected to examine this question. The most important basis to answer the question was provisions prescribed by laws. The public opinions, characters'

views, ideas collected from my survey and interviews were used to discuss this question.

4. What led to the tabloidisation of online newspapers today?

There are many reasons that might lead to this trend of online newspapers in Vietnam. However in this research I focused mainly on the relations among three pillars: newspapers, readers and the government to discuss the question. The main elements being considered were newspapers' profits, journalists' conducts, readers' preference and political benefits.

5. What are the reactions and solutions by authorities? Why so?

Newspapers' policies and strategies, court cases' decisions and interviews with authorities published in online newspapers were the main bases for the discussion. Recent changes in policies and law amendments were also referred to in order to answer this question.

In short, in the previous short introduction, I have figured out the basis and general understanding of my research.

As the scope of a master's thesis is limited, the research focused on developments from 2007 till April 2013, which is the period that saw the strong development of online newspapers in Vietnam.

2 CHAPTER 2: METHODS

This research is multidisciplinary which is implemented under the perspectives of political science, media studies, plus the legal approach. Since each method has its own strength and weakness, I combine both the qualitative and quantitative methods to have the most compressive and correct answers to the research questions. I also choose typical and representative samples of online newspapers as case-studies for my research.

2.1 Choosing case-studies

The aim to choose case-studies is to collect quantitative data to answer to the first sub-research question on how popular online newspapers in Vietnam are. The findings however also support the answers to others research questions. The cases studies are online newspapers, both official and unofficial, most read in Vietnam at present.

Five newspapers and news websites were selected. Three typical samples are newspapers writing about general news (*dantri.com.vn*, *vietnamnet.vn* and *vnexpress.net*). Two representative samples include one news website specialising news for teenagers (*kenh14.vn*) and one entertainment-led newspaper (*ngoisao.net*).

The criteria for the typical samples are popular newspapers, which have diverse types of news. The representative samples were chosen based on specific criteria on types of news and target viewers. I based on the statistics provided by *baomoi.com* and *alexa.com*— two domestic and international prestigious web-information collecting websites to choose the case-studies.

Since the case-studies were used mostly to find out how popular entertainment news was, the method I used was to calculate and compare how often entertainment news was updated compared to other types of news. The period was selected from 01.03.2013 to 07.03.2013. I also considered other aspects: which contents the news stories were written about, how they were written etc.

In addition I also chose typical examples known for affecting morals and violating privacy in online newspapers to illustrate my arguments. The criteria to choose such cases were based on their typicality shown on the reasons why they happened and the effects to the victims.

2.2 In-depth interviews

The purpose for interviews was to find significant qualitative findings to answer research questions. I did in-depth interviews with six journalists working both for popular print newspapers, official online newspapers and news websites.

The first interviewee I wish to mention is NaSon Nguyen. He is an experienced journalist and one of the most popular photographers, journalists and Facebookers in Vietnam. He has had articles and photos published in many popular print newspapers such as the *Tuổi trẻ* (Youth), *Thể thao văn hóa* (Sport and Culture), *Phụ nữ thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* (Ho chi Minh City's Women), *Mỹ thuật* (Fine art), *Đẹp* (Beauty), *Vietnam Heritage Magazine* etc. Since 2007, he has been collaborating with AP (Associated Press) and since 2009, has become the main shooter in Vietnam for this news agency. Recently NaSon Nguyen has also been known for his news-letter called “Tin tức...ngực”¹⁹ (News stories which pain your heart) published almost every day in his personal Facebook which is followed by almost 9000 people, 5000 friends and by almost 3000 fans in his fanpage. In this news-letter, NaSon selects and briefs news stories concerning current salient social and political issues which are mostly controversial, published in both prestigious print and online newspapers. His aim is to encourage the intelligentsia and young people to care more about useful and significant news stories rather than being attracted by “useless” entertainment news stories in online newspapers. He is also one of the pioneering journalists participating in the “anti-tabloid news” campaign launched by several prestigious print newspapers such as *Phụ nữ thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*, *Thể thao văn hóa* and appeared in the talkshow “*Văn hóa, Sự kiện và Nhân vật*” (Culture,

¹⁹ The way he entitles the news is a wordplay which takes advantages of the meaning from both “Tin tức” and “Tức ngực“. Tin” or “Tin tức”, both means “News “ but “Tức ngực” means “ heart pain”. His combination of two words with “...” in between shows his ironic attitude to the news because all the news are the negative facts happening in the society but are not of the interest of many online newspapers. NaSon is also one of my interviewees for this research.

Events and Figures) on VTV3- the National Television's Entertainment channel, to talk about this campaign.

The second interviewee who agreed to reveal her personal information in my research is Nguyen Thu Huong, the journalist of two print newspapers *Pháp luật và cuộc sống* (Laws and Life) and *Đang yêu* (In Love). Huong has been working for these newspapers for 3 years but before that, in 2011, she used to be a journalist for the online newspaper *Phunutoday.vn*.

The third interviewee who provided me a lot of interesting information is Cao Nhat who is now a CEO of Vietnam New Media Group, a prestigious communication company in Vietnam which owns a diverse range of communication products such as books, online newspapers, journalism training courses, communication advisory services. However, before that he used to experience almost 4 years working for 3 big online newspapers including *Dan tri* (dantri.com.vn), *Vietnamnet* (vietnamnet.vn), *Tien phong* (tienphong.vn).

The fourth interviewee who provided me an abundant amount of useful information about news websites is Cam Nhung who has had about 3 years working for VC Corporation which owns many popular news websites in Vietnam. Nhung used to work for *Afamily* (afamily.vn) and *Soha news* (soha.vn) and now *Soha video* (video.soha.vn)- a form of video news website.

The two other interviewees who insisted that I did not reveal their personal information are a journalist who has been working for the *Dan tri* for more than two years and the other is PT, the journalist who has had more than 8 years working for the *Vnexpress*.

The interviews were implemented via Skype (4 interviews), Yahoo Messenger (1 interview) and email (1 interview). The interviewees are both young (with 3-5 years of experience) and experienced journalists (more than 8 years of experience). So the interviews also showed me the differences in the way they access and answer to the problems I raised. Though there were different questions depending on each case, there were several common questions that were asked to all journalists. Please refer to the Appendix 1 of this thesis to read the common interview questions.

2.3 Survey

In addition to the interviews, I also sent a survey out to collect opinions from readers on aspects studied in the research. The method was that the survey was first sent to the people within my network and then it was gradually expanded to the people outside. However I tried to group the survey sendees into different groups regarding ages, gender and residence so that the answer sheets could consist of opinions from different age groups, both men and women and ones who live in the north, the centre and the south of the country. Therefore the survey was sent to readers from 18-60 years old in several places in Vietnam, especially in cities such as Ho Chi Minh City in the south, Nha Trang (Khanh Hoa province) in the centre) and Hanoi, Ha Long (Quang Ninh province), Phu Ly (Ha Nam province) in the north where Internet use is popular and people are used to reading online newspapers. I received 81 answer sheets collected from readers at different groups of ages, occupations and genders. However the number of participants in each group finally was not the same. Concerning the age groups, there were 15 participants at the age of 18-25 years old, 47 people from the 25-35 year old group, 12 people from the 35-45 year old group and 7 people from the 45-60 year old group. In fact, the people at the age of 25-35 years old are ones who mostly do office work, so they have more convenient conditions and time to read online newspapers. Concerning the gender group, there are a overwhelming majority of participants who are women with 53 people while there were only 28 people who are men. However 5/7 people at the age of 45-60 years who answered my survey are men. Concerning the resident groups, the survey was sent to mostly people who are living in cities, however the number of people in the north counts for the most with 51 people, while only 23 from the south and 7 from the centre.

Though the number of the answer sheets did not reach my expectation, the contents of the survey contain open questions which allows readers to give comments and detailed explanations. This helped me a lot to collect significant quantitative and qualitative results for this research. The questions of this survey can be found in the Appendix 2 of this thesis.

In short both quantitative and qualitative methods were thoroughly used in the research.

3 CHAPTER 3: THE PRESS

In this chapter, I go through the press law, the special development model of online newspapers in Vietnam and Facebook as both a resource and a reflector of online newspapers.

3.1 Laws on the Press

The Constitution amended in 1992 declares that the State develops the press and all Vietnamese citizens have the right to freedom of speech and freedom of press (article 33 and 69). Those provisions are more detailed in the press law.

The press law (Luật báo chí) was established by the National Assembly in 1989 and amended in 1999. According to this law, the state runs the press. Article 17 concretises that the state has the roles to direct, manage and punish the press through laws, policies, plans and strategies; interfere in the press' information as well as the information provisions by the press when needed and promote professional training for journalists²⁰.

These regulations show that the government has a very comprehensive management over all aspects of the press. Also, according to the amendment in 1999, the state agencies managing the press include the Government, the Ministry of Culture and Information (now it is the Ministry of Information and Communication), ministries and ministerial-level agencies and the People Committees at provincial level. The concrete responsibilities of these state agencies are detailed in the amended article 17a²¹. According to these regulations, the press is managed and supervised by different state agencies at different levels from the centre to the local level but the government has the highest and unified management. This makes the press seem to be managed strictly in terms of the contents published and its activities both in Vietnam and oversea.

²⁰ Please see the detailed descriptions in article 17, “*The amending and supplementing a number of articles of the press law*” attached as Appendix 3 of this document.

²¹ *ibid*

However the article 2 of the law also provides regulations to protect the freedom of the press with the following contents:

“Article 2: Ensuring the freedom of press and the right to free speech in the press.

The State creates favourable conditions for citizens to practice their right to freedom of the press and freedom of speech in the press and for the press to play their roles.

The press and journalists operate and work under the laws and protected by the State; no one nor organization are allowed to restrict and prevent journalists from doing their job. No one is allowed to take advantages of the right to freedom of press and freedom of speech in the press to affect the benefits of the State, the collective and the people.

The press is not censored before being printed and broadcast”

This article makes it confusing to understand how the press in Vietnam, despite being supervised and managed strictly, is not censored by the managing agencies. In addition the article 9 provides rules for the correction in the press of which false information in the press must be corrected with the apologies by both the press agency and the journalist. If the correction is not done by either the press agency or the journalist, the victim about whom the false information was given can send complaints to the press agency or make it to the court.

However the article 10 of the press law also provides cases in which the freedom of press can be restricted:

“Article 10: Types of news that are not allowed to publish in the press

To ensure that the right of freedom of press can be properly used, the press must comply with the following rules:

1. Do not incite people against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and to break the solidarity of the whole Vietnamese people.
2. Do not incite violence, propagandise aggressive wars, cause hatred among nations and their peoples, nor incite salacity, depravation, and evil.
3. Do not reveal the State’s secrets in the following fields: military, security, economy, foreign affairs and other confidential information prescribed by laws.
4. Do not give false information, lies and slander that ruin the reputation of organizations, reputation and dignity of citizens.”

The grounds to restrict the press seem quite broad which include 3 paragraphs on political elements and the last on moral values and privacy. Though the limitation of freedom of the press on morality and privacy is regulated in this article, up till now both Constitution and the press law have not had concrete provisions on sanctions to protect those. However it was proposed to have a concrete regulation to protect the right to privacy in the latest draft of the Constitution amendment. The first paragraph of article 23 in the drafted Constitution regulates:

“Every citizen has the right to the inviolability of their private life, personal secrets and family secrets; reserves the right to protection of their honour and reputation. No one is allowed to collect, store, use and disseminate information about the private life, personal secrets, family secrets of others without consent“.

However this article also raises a worry that it may severely violate the right to freedom of expression, especially in the case of people who want to inform on illegal actions. Nevertheless, this Constitution amendment is still waiting for being approved by the National Assembly in October this year.

In general, both the Constitution and the press law of Vietnam are stated to protect the freedom of the press in the country. However, they also form limitations based on security, public order, privacy right and morality grounds, which are very generally described in laws. That the state runs the press also affects the development of the press in a way that limits the participation of private sectors into the media industry. However, it does not mean that the private sector cannot enter this area. In reality, the law cannot completely control the real situation of how the press goes and the private sector’s role in the press has increased more and more after time, as well as has developed in a way that is very specific to adapt and bend the laws. This issue will be described and discussed in details in the next section of this chapter.

3.2 A complicated press model

The press has been developing in Vietnam with all the four basic types as regulated by the Constitution amended in 1999, including print-newspapers, radios, TVs, and online newspapers.

According to the latest statistics by the Department of Broadcasting Management (Cục quản lý phát thanh truyền hình) up to June 2012, Vietnam has 748 print-newspaper agencies with 1.052 press publications, 184 newspapers, 564 magazines, 25 daily newspapers, 67 radios and televisions, 62 online newspapers and 1024 news web pages (including 300 web pages of press agencies); 191 social network pages; 2 million blogs and 17 thousand journalists working inland and abroad²².

The structure of a newspaper can be a bit different from one to another newspaper. But in general, it consists of a management team including an editor-in-chief, who is responsible for one (or more than one) associate editor(s), a team of journalists working at different divisions who are responsible for different contents of the paper. In addition, there are other administrative divisions. The editor in chief takes the whole responsibility for all the operation of the newspaper. The associate editors assist the editor in chief as appointed and take accountability for their areas and sub-sections. A press agency may have many types of publications (print- or online versions, daily, weekly, quarterly newspapers or magazines etc.) and representative offices in a number of places, providing that they are granted licenses by the Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC). Being responsible for developing the contents of a newspaper, the editorial board and the secretary board consist of many types of editors which include the board's head (trưởng ban biên tập), the general secretary and secretary of the editorial office, the associate editor in chief in charge of the contents, and the editor in chief²³. In fact depending on the size of the newspaper, the structure can be changed in order to fit the situation of the newspaper.

The fast growth of Internet in Vietnam with 30.8 million users (up to the end of February 2012) equal to 35.3% of the population²⁴ has motivated online newspapers to grow faster and faster. Since the birth of the Que Huong, the first online newspaper in 1997, this type of newspapers has developed more and more quickly these days. Most of the online versions of print-newspapers have the same editorial board and have similar contents such as *Dantri.com.vn*- the online version of *Khuyen hoc* newspaper, *Tien-*

²² Thien Van (2012): <http://www.qdnd.vn/qdndsite/vi-vn/61/43/5/5/185795/Default.aspx>

²³ This summary is generalised from the information provided in baochi.edu.vn

²⁴ Thien Van (2012): *ibid*

phong.vn the online version of *Tien phong newspaper* etc. Nevertheless, there are also press agencies, which have separate editorial boards such as *Nhan Dan newspaper* (People's Newspaper) and *Nhandan.com.vn* etc.

In theory, most of the newspapers and press publications, especially print newspapers now still belong to, or are related to state agencies. However, in reality, there are more and more press publications established and produced by private companies. That private communication companies are outsourced for the official press agencies has become very popular at present. There are also those who produce complete press products but have to "buy labels" from the state agencies to legalise their products.

The existence of news websites and the establishment of sub-publications produced by private companies under agreements with official newspapers have created a special model for press development in Vietnam. In a blog entry in 2011, Pham Thanh Son- the director of Ogilvi, one of the well-known communication companies in Vietnam, claims that contrary to the strict opinion by the Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in 2006 who did not encourage the privatisation of the press, MIC in fact has been open for the socialisation of the press' activities, encouraging the participation of private companies in building contents, distributing and marketing for press publications²⁵. This trend has enabled the establishment of many communication companies and their participation in producing and distributing press publications, such as TV and radio programmes, TV and radio channels, online newspapers etc. In theory, to possess a newspaper, the organisation has to be a state agency and the head of the organisation has to satisfy all the strict qualifications that are regulated by laws²⁶. Therefore, many private communication companies who want to own a newspaper have tried to bend the law in several ways.

²⁵ Thanh Son (2012): <http://ta-ogilvy.vn/confession/tu-su-cua-mot-nguoi-lam-pr-ngay-17/#.THIZY-ivIkUY>.

²⁶ According to the article 13 of the press law, the head of a press agency must be a person who has Vietnamese citizenship and a permanent resident address in Vietnam and who has satisfied the political, moral and media professional standards which are regulated by the State. The head of a press agency shall lead and manage the organization in all aspects and ensure observance of its guiding principles and aims and shall be responsible before the head of the press managing body and before the law for all of its activities.

Zing tuyển biên tập viên, CTV mảng kinh tế

Sống trẻViệc làm | Cập nhật chủ nhật, ngày 24/02/13 10:39 sáng

Zing có nhu cầu tuyển biên tập viên, cộng tác viên mảng kinh tế ở Hà Nội, TP.HCM và các địa phương Quảng Ninh, Lạng Sơn, Huế, Đà Nẵng.

ĐỌC NHIỀU NHẤT

5 công việc làm tại nhà tốt nhất

Cách giới thiệu bản thân trong buổi phỏng vấn

12 nhóm ngành nghề hot tại Việt Nam năm 2013

10 nghề dễ vướng tình công sở nhất

Cổ chủ 9X 'triệu phú đất sét'

Để đáp ứng yêu cầu phát triển, Zingnews tuyển nhân sự ở một số vị trí:

- Biên tập Kinh tế (tại Hà Nội, TP.HCM)
- Cộng tác viên mảng kinh tế - xã hội tại các tỉnh

1. Điều kiện dự tuyển:

- Có năng khiếu làm báo và kinh nghiệm làm báo.
- Trình độ đại học trở lên (không nhất thiết phải có bằng đại học chuyên ngành báo chí).
- Sử dụng thành thạo vi tính để làm công việc của phóng viên, biên tập viên.
- Tiếng Anh tốt là một lợi thế
- Ưu tiên có kinh nghiệm theo dõi mảng thị trường hoặc viết báo về kinh tế, đang thường trú ở TP.HCM.
- Đối với cộng tác viên mảng Xã hội: Phụ trách sản xuất tin và bài về các đề tài xã hội, thời sự, pháp luật ở khu vực.
- Ưu tiên phóng viên, cộng tác viên đã làm việc lâu năm trong lĩnh vực báo chí.
- Làm việc ở Hà Nội, TP.HCM (đối với biên tập viên), Huế, Đà Nẵng, Lạng Sơn, Quảng Ninh (đối với cộng tác viên)

? Quyền lợi

Illustration 1: A journalist and editor recruitment advertisement by the news website Zing.vn which gives priorities to experienced journalists and recruits also journalists to work in different provinces in Vietnam

A popular way for a private company to own an online newspaper is to create and “dress up” their news websites. According to one of my interviewee, Cao Nhat, private companies can ask for a license to establish a *trang tin điện tử* (news website), which is only granted the right to collect news from other official newspapers (either print or online). Under this license, these companies buy the news source’s “label” from an official online newspaper. The mechanism is that they reach agreements with one or several official online newspapers in order that they can legalise their products by using the name of these newspapers as the source of their own articles. By this way they can both re-use articles from these official newspapers and produce their own articles but have to “label” them as re-posted products. In fact most of those news websites are not satisfied with just reusing the articles from their partners. So they build their own team of journalists and editors to produce their own news. For example, *24h.com.vn*, one of the most popular news websites at present has a large team of journalists which include many experienced journalists who used to work for governmental print newspapers such as *Đại Đoàn Kết*, or popular online newspapers such as *Vietnamnet*, *Vnexpress* etc. In their ad-

vertisements for journalist recruitment, these news websites tend to clearly state their requirements for candidates which include skills and experience of journalists and editors who can work to produce news and hunt news in different places in the countries. They also give priorities to ones who have long experience in the press (see the illustration 1 above). These requirements are obviously not necessary for a website whose function is only allowed to collect news from newspapers. In fact, many news websites such as *zing.vn*, *kenh14.vn*, *24h.com.vn* have a large number of their own produced articles but they still have to label products as collected from their state partner. In reality it is ironical that many of the official online newspapers are not as popular as the news websites that have them as the news sources, since their existence is just as a mask of their partners.

Take VC Corporation (VC) a private communication corporation as an example. VC possesses quite many popular news websites at present such as *kenh14.vn*, *afamily.vn*, *soha.vn*. These news websites take *ttvn.vn* (*Tri thức trẻ*- Knowledge for Youth)- an official online newspaper, which belongs to Vietnam association of young scientists and engineers- as the source for their news. However many times readers of those news websites cannot find the same articles from the “original” source (*ttvn.vn*). Or if those articles are found, there is no name of the articles’ authors, which are clearly stated on the “re-posted” websites. Instead, in many cases, the articles posted in the “original” newspapers still keep the “copyright” marks by the news websites which are actually the real source of the article. Readers also easily find that those articles are posted just few minutes before the news is launched in the news website partner which is considered as a way to legalise the time of the re-posted news.



Illustration 2: *Soha.vn* (left side) used *ttvn.vn* (right side) as its news source but the “original” article on *ttvn.vn* does not have the name of the author as indicated in the “re-posted” article and the illustrative picture is still marked the copyright owned by *soha.vn*

For example, the news in the illustration 2 was posted in *ttvn.vn* 5 minutes before it was “re-posted” in *Soha news* (*soha.vn*). The “reposted” article in the *Soha news* attached a link to their news’ source, *ttvn.vn*, as usual. However only the “re-posted” article indicated the name of the journalist who wrote it, while the “original” article in *ttvn.vn* did not do so. It was probably because *ttvn.vn* did not have such the journalist in its team. The “original” article even still keeps the copyright mark *soha.vn* on the illustrative picture²⁷. Thus I doubt that the existence of the “original” article in *ttvn.vn* is just the result of the careless copy-paste action by *ttvn.vn* from *soha.vn*, which reveals so many signs of a disguised lie. The similar process also happens to *kenh14.vn* but the following case shows more clearly the ironical truth.

²⁷Follow the link below for a more clear view: <http://soha.vn/phap-luat/phan-hien-phi-cong-tre-va-ban-gai-chet-trong-phong-tro-20130402120544457.htm> and <http://ttvn.vn/24201312719947p0c1002/phan-hien-phi-cong-tre-va-ban-gai-chet-trong-phong-tro.htm>

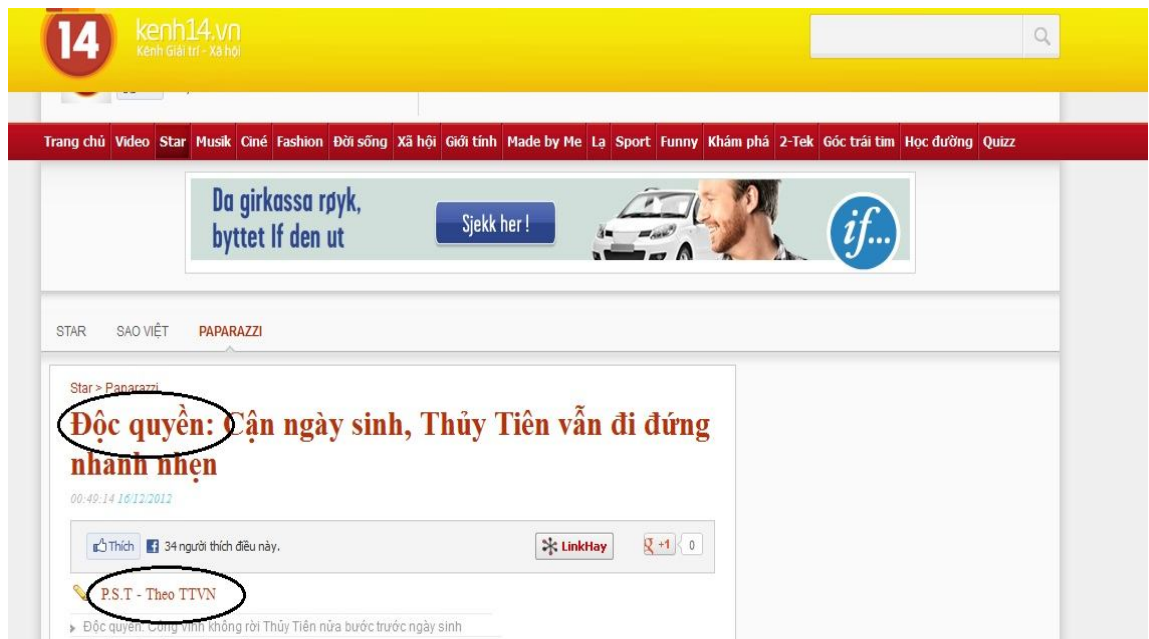


Illustration 3: kenh14.vn labels “Theo TTVN” (according to the Tri thu tre) to indicate its news source, but still marks “Độc quyền” (exclusive) at the title of the news story.

In the above captured article, though *kenh14.vn* marked the news as its “exclusive” news (Độc quyền), it stills has another line under the title which labels the news with the source: “Theo TTVN” (according to TTVN- the initials of the *Tri thức trẻ*) and links to the source’s home page: *ttvn.vn*. However the readers will not be able to find the “original” news in the linked source newspaper. As my observation, all *soha.vn*, *kenh14.vn* and *afamily.vn* produced by VC Corp are using the same source *ttvn.vn* though they concern different types of news. Actually *ttvn.vn* is rarely known in Vietnam while all their news website partners are quite popular.

There are also two other popular ways for communication companies to legalise their online newspapers. Following these manners, their news websites are listed as official online newspapers. The first way is to legalise the newspaper under a state agency. FPT Corporation was very successful to make *vnexpress.net* become the official online newspaper of the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) though from the first days until now it is completely a product by FPT which is a private company. It is not difficult to realise who is the real owner and operator of the newspaper by observing the websites of the two parties. Though *vnexpress.net* is listed in the structure graph of MOST (shown on its website) as the organisation’s official online newspaper, if you

click the link that leads to the information of the newspaper, you will see the newspaper's address is actually FPT's address. Similarly in FPT's website, the company lists several of their online newspapers including *vnexpress.net*²⁸.

The other manner for a private company to legalise their online press products are to buy the right to produce sub-publications for or columns in official online newspapers. In this case, the role of the so-called “*Đầu nậu*”²⁹ is worth mentioned. The mechanism is *Đầu nậu*- a person or a private company who has a great economic power, experience and a wide network with press agencies, will come to an agreement with an official online newspaper so that it gains the right to produce a sub-newspaper or specific news items for that official newspaper. In this case the official newspaper will be the undersigned and *Đầu nậu* is the real owner of the newly launched sub-newspaper or news item. *Đầu nậu* is therefore completely in charge of producing these press publications, providing that they do not invade further into sensitive areas committed with the official newspapers.³⁰ This is considered as one of the reasons that led to the current development of online newspapers in Vietnam in a way that favours entertainment news more than other types. Being a private trading unit, *Đầu nậu* cares first for profits before any other interests and therefore entertainment news is obviously a golden mine.

²⁸ The information on fpt's website <http://fptonline.net/Services/14/Default.aspx> and on the website of the Ministry of Sciences and Technologies: http://www.most.gov.vn/Desktop.aspx/Gioi-thieu/Co-cau-to-chuc/Bao_dien_tu_tin_nhanh_Viet_Nam_VnExpress/

²⁹ “*Đầu nậu*” can be literally translated into English as “tycoon”.

³⁰ Nhật Hòa, “Nhận diện đầu nậu báo lá cải” (Recognition of tabloids' “*Đầu nậu*”): <http://phapluattp.vn/2012053/010396866p0c1015/nhan-dien-dau-nau-bao-la-cai.htm>

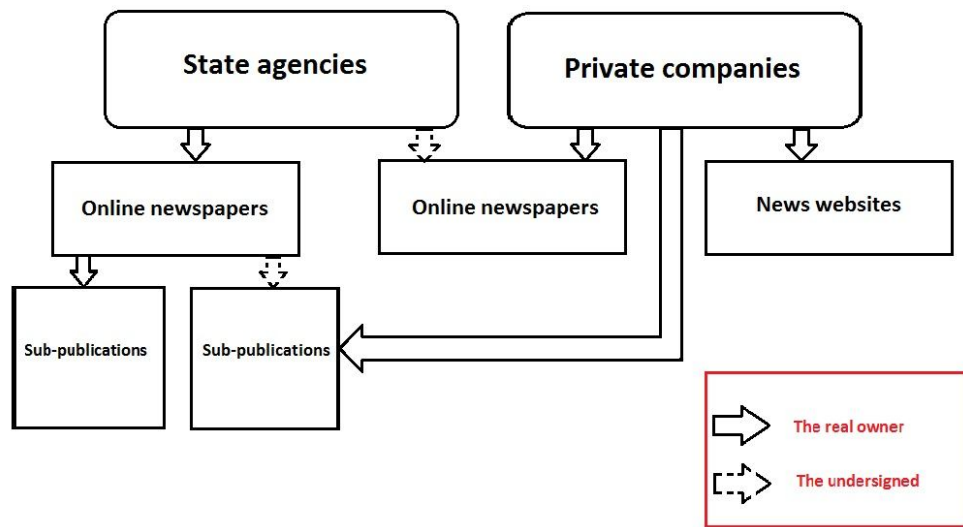


Illustration 4: How online newspapers are operated in Vietnam

From the above analyses we see that the development of online newspapers has special characteristics that are rarely seen elsewhere in the world. The ownership structure of the press in Vietnam is simply not as regulated in laws but expressed through a complicated relation between state agencies and private communication companies or *Đầu nậu*. This relation was generally modelled as the graph above, in which the private sector goes through the online newspaper production by several ways, though this is now allowed by the laws. A result of this process is that news websites have become a form of unofficial online newspapers though they are not admitted and have to disguise to exist.

3.3 Facebook as an important resource and reflector

Studying online newspapers I would like to mention in this part an aspect, which is considered gossip media but affect greatly the current development of online newspapers in Vietnam. That is social media of which Facebook is the most popular.

Facebook started to be used in Vietnam at the end of 2007 when 360° Yahoo!, which then was the most popular social network in Vietnam, was announced to be closed in early 2008. After few years, regardless of the information about the Facebook censor-

ship in Vietnam which I will not go further into in this research, Facebook has become the most popular social network in Vietnam with about 11,221,380 users equal to 12.53% of the population and 46.35% of online population in Vietnam³¹.

The easy, convenient appearance and functions and its high interaction have made Facebook become a forum for many journalists to raise personal views through notes, wall posts, pictures, link shares etc. If blogs, when Yahoo 360! still existed, were considered among the most influential resources for online newspapers, now this role has been changed to Facebook. As a result, many Facebookers have become great “*influencers*”³². It is not rare today when you see some popular online entertainment newspapers such as *ngoisao.net*, *megafun.vn*, *kenh14.vn*, *tintuonline.vn*, *2sao.vn* quickly update news taken from statuses, news posts by journalists, hot bloggers such as Co Gai Do Long, Robbey Le, Meo ac etc shared on their Facebook walls.

Thanks to their wide networks with public figures in many fields, those *influencers* become rich mines of news for tabloidised online newspapers to exploit. There have also been cases when personal Facebook posts by *influencers* about privacy or backstage stories of public figures or celebrities were quickly re-used without examination by online newspapers and then affected the subjected public figures’ life and reputation. Take an example. In 2012 Co Gai Do Long- a popular hot Facebooker and journalist, revealed a news story that Duc Tri, a well-known and influential musician had to close his company due to a great business loss. Duc Tri is well-known for his career of training and promoting new singers which is mostly operated through his company. Thanks to her wide network, Co Gai Do Long is known for the “unique” backstage news sources of the showbiz and public figures. Therefore, this news story was quickly re-posted by a series of online newspapers without editing or any examination for the correctness. However, the news was not correct and it pushed Duc Tri into serious troubles with his

³¹ <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/vietnam>

³² This term is literally formed and translated from Vietnamese to indicate people who have great influences gained from their Facebook posts and shares on their readers. Due to their popularity on Facebook shown through the number of followers and people press “like” on their fan page, most of them then also receive PR contracts for trade brands.

business partners, which was revealed by him in interviews with several newspapers later to correct the news.

In addition, some popular online newspapers such as *ngoisao.net*, *megafun.vn*, *2sao.net*, *24h.com.vn* have also built extra items called “10 daily hot Facebook statuses”, “10 daily hot Facebook-shared pictures”, “VIP Facebooks” etc. which select and re-share interesting statuses, hot pictures, news from different Facebook accounts, mostly from public figures with a great number of followers.

Moreover, Facebook is where many people can find significant and useful remarkable social and political news stories that are not often gathered in a single online newspaper. NaSon and Co Gai Do Long are two of the Facebook *influencers* and journalists who have collected news of diverse types, especially controversial social and political news stories written in different newspapers, both print and online publications. They post these stories on their Facebook, attached with their comments, which attract thousands of people to follow and discuss. As mentioned in the previous part, NaSon even calls his newsletter with a very ironic name “*Tin tức...ngực*” (News which pains your heart) which is generalised by him almost every day.

When trying to search for suitable interviewees for this research, I was introduced by an interviewee, Cao Nhat to the group *Diễn đàn nhà báo trẻ* (Forum for young journalists) on Facebook. This forum is where young journalists including many who work for online newspapers share their experience, views on hot issues, links of online news stories and articles that may create controversial opinions etc. One thing to be noticed from this forum is most of all the posts on the Wall are online articles about hot issues on different aspects, violations by journalists to the code of conducts, which have become more and more popular now in online newspapers. From this forum, I have had a chance to keep contacts with journalists working for my case-study newspapers. This was really helpful for me to do in-depth research. Thus, Facebook is not only a news resource and a reflector of online newspaper but also was a very important information channel for my research.

4 CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDIES

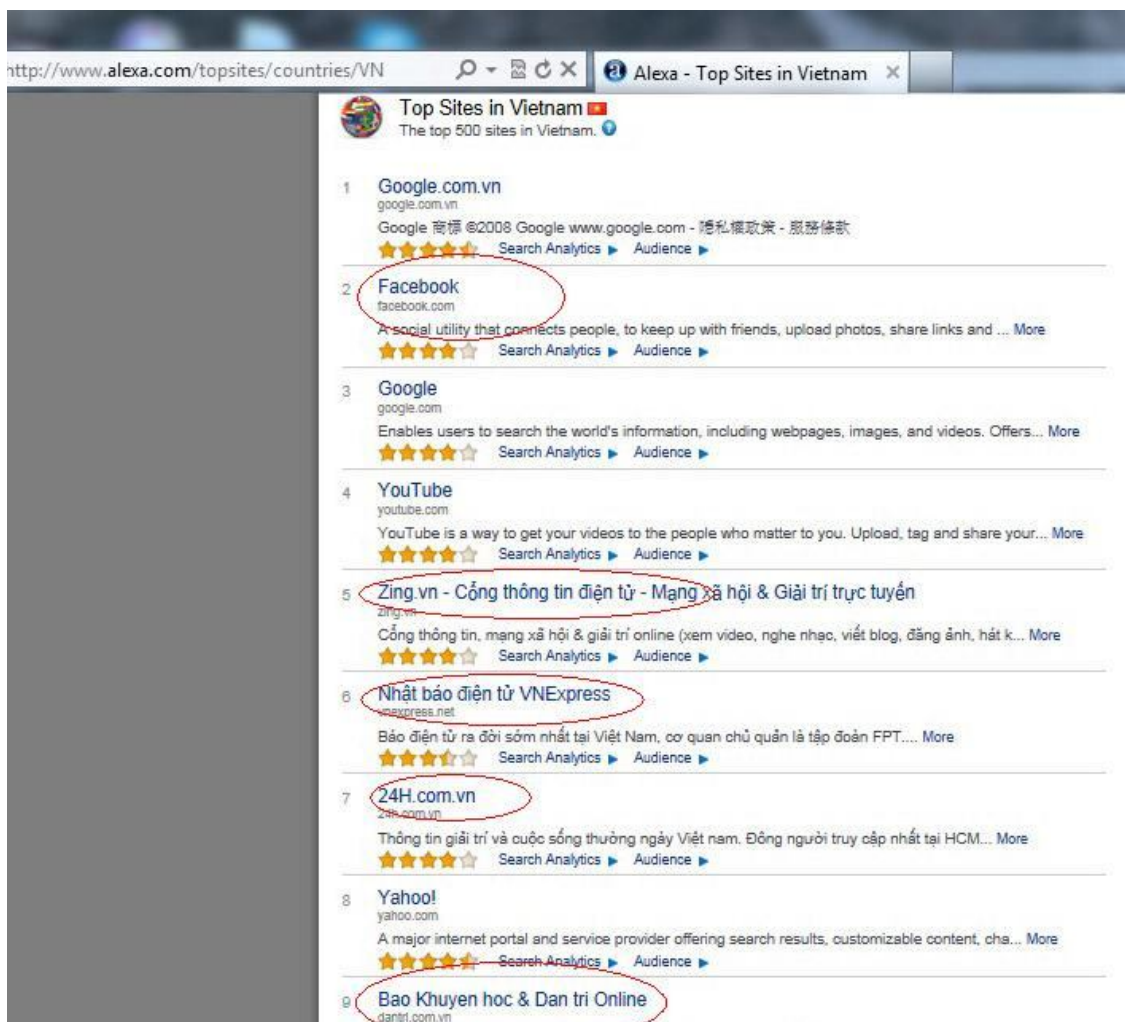


Illustration 5: Most-viewed websites in Vietnam according to alexa.com. The picture was captured on 2nd February 2013. I marked the position of Facebook and online newspapers with red circles.

The cases selected for this research are five online newspapers, which were selected based on their popularity valued by *baomoi.com* and *alexa.com*³³. All the statistics were collected in January 2013. Four of the case studies are newspapers on general news and the *Ngoi sao (ngoisao.net)* is the only selected newspaper that concentrates on entertainment news.

³³Statistics are collected by *baomoi.com* and *alexa.com* in February 2013

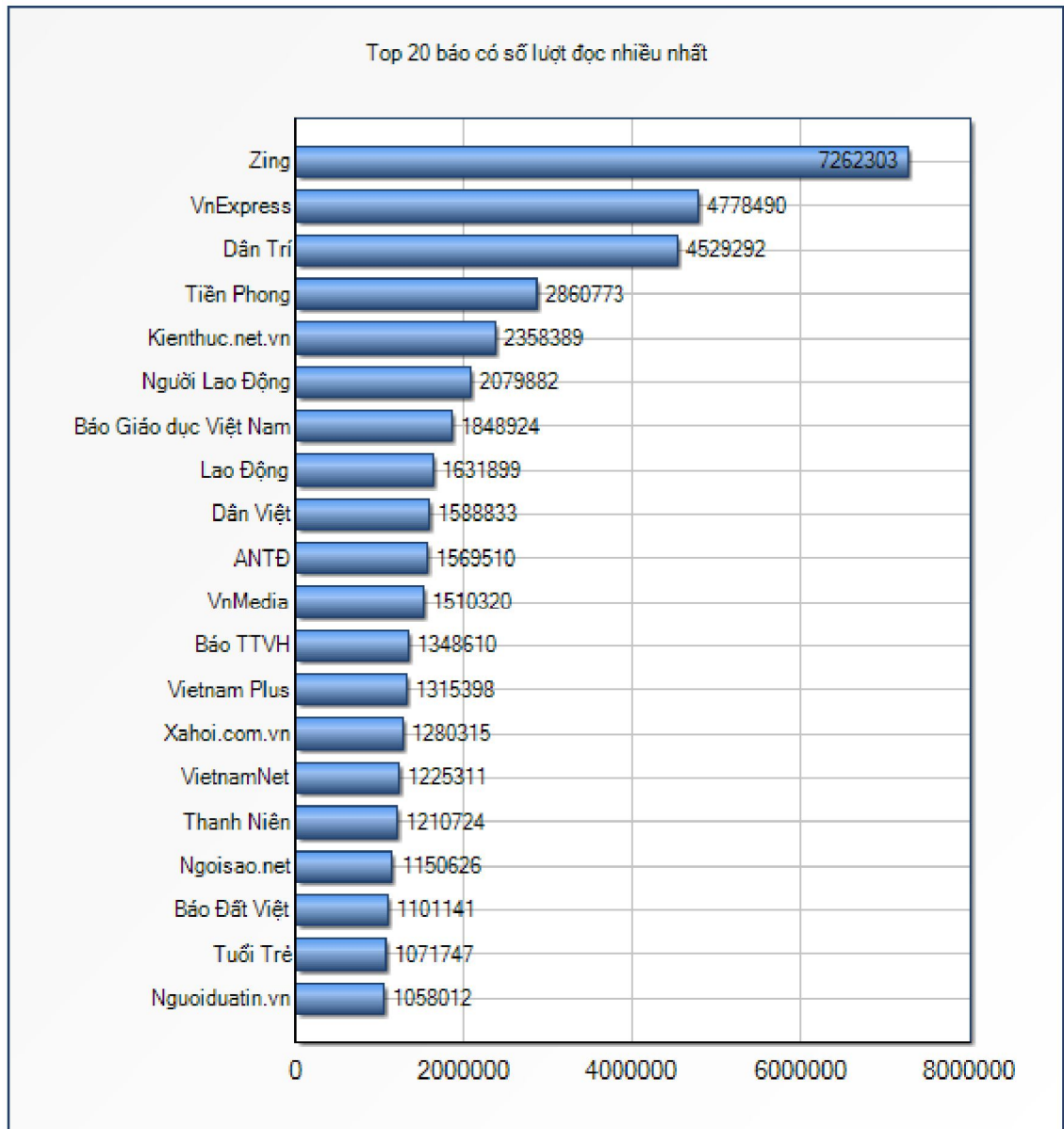


Illustration 6: Most-viewed online newspapers during the recent month (January-February 2013) according to baomoi.com. The picture was captured on 2nd February 2013

4.1 Vietnamnet (vietnamnet.vn)

The *Vietnamnet* is one of the biggest online newspapers in Vietnam. The website was ranked in the top 3 most read online newspapers in Vietnam by *Alexa (alexacom)*- a well-known web information website.

The newspaper is now directly owned and managed by the Ministry of Information and Communication. The history of the newspaper started in 2003 when it was established under the management of Vietnam Posts and Telecommunications group (VNPT) then was separated from VNPT in 2008 to become an independent company named VASC directly managed by MIC. However, according to my interviewee, at present the newspaper is developed under the Vietnamnet Joint Stock Company (Vietnamnet JSC) after separated from VASC in 2009. The *Vietnamnet* is one of the professional units besides the *Vietnamnet TV*. There is an editorial board and a secretary board which are responsible for the contents of press products, both in online newspapers and TV [Decision 57/2008/QĐ-BTTTT]³⁴.

Since its establishment, Vietnamnet JSC has developed more press publications other than the *Vietnamnet* such as the *Tin tức online* (Online news), *2sao*, *Diễn Đàn kinh tế Viet Nam* (Economic Forum), *Tuần Vietnamnet* (Vietnamnet Weekly), *Lãnh đạo* (the Leader). However the *Tin tức online* and *2sao*, which concentrate mostly on entertainment news stories, are the only two publications having banners as official columns on the first pages of the *Vietnamnet*.

The *Vietnamnet* is published in two languages Vietnamese and English and has all the basic items such as *Politics news*, *Economy news*, *Social news*, *Culture news*, *Daily life*, *Education*, International news, Readers' feedback, and Video. However, like many other online newspapers, the English page is quite poorly written.

According to the statistics by *Baomoi*, during January there was about 1,244,369 hits to the newspaper, which ranked among the top 12 online newspapers in Vietnam. Also summed by *Baomoi*, the *Vietnamnet* had 2088 original news and 896 news items were re-posted by other newspapers. It also ranked among the top 10 re-posted newspapers in January.

4.2 The Vnexpress (vnexpress.net)

The *Vnexpress* is the oldest online newspaper in Vietnam. It was established in 1997 by FPT- one of the leading information technology and telecommunication companies in

³⁴ http://www.moj.gov.vn/vbpq/Lists/Vn%20bn%20php%20lut/View_Detail.aspx?ItemID=12491

Vietnam. Established when the concept “online newspapers” was still very new in Vietnam and there was hardly any participation of private companies into the press, the *Vnexpress* was granted the license as an official online newspaper in 2001 thanks to the relationship between FPT and the Ministry of Science and Technology. The *Vnexpress* is now listed in MOST’s website as the official online newspaper of the organisation³⁵. However the newspaper itself is an unit independent of MOST and actually belongs to FPT as shown in the website of this company. The *Vnexpress* office is also located in FPT’s building.

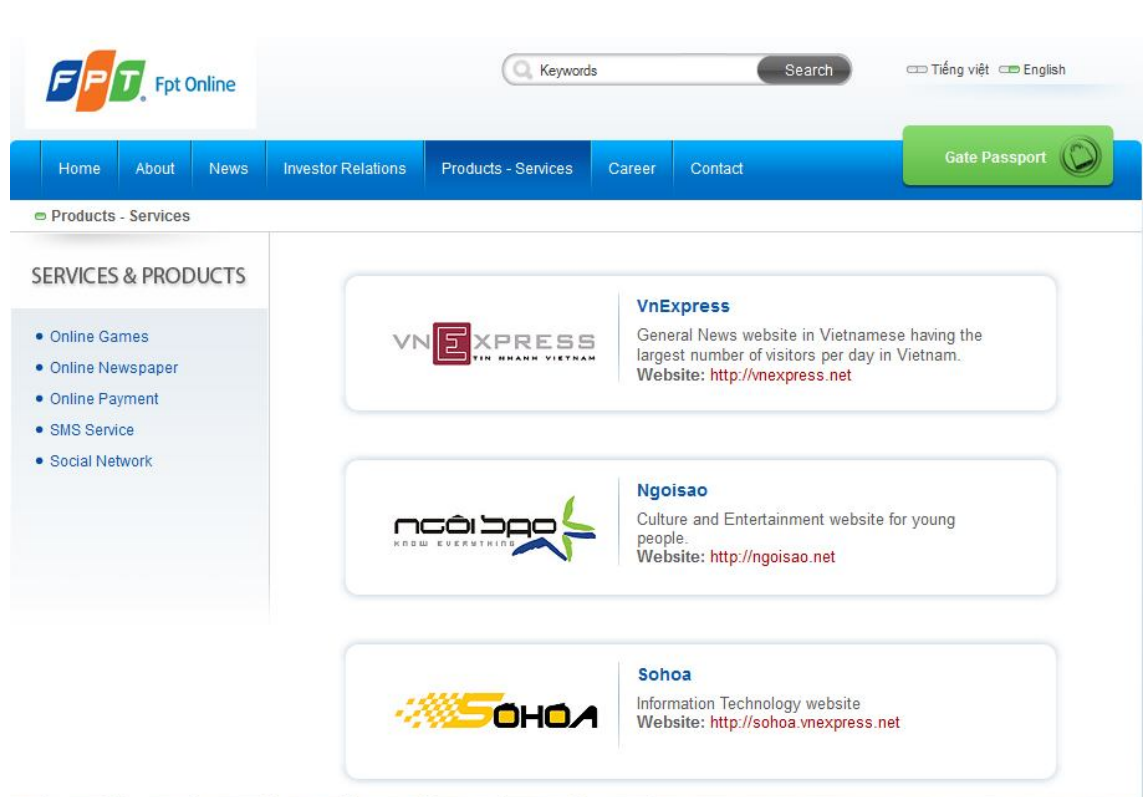


Illustration 7: *vnexpress.net* and *ngoisao.net* are listed on FPT website as two of its online newspapers

On the banner of this newspaper, the *Vnexpress* proudly set the slogan: “*The most read online newspaper in Vietnam*”. This is not far from the judgments by some well-known domestic and foreign web info websites. In January 2013, the *Vnexpress* was ranked by Alexa at the position 446th globally and number 5 in Vietnam, after *google.com.vn*,

³⁵ See MOST’s organizational-chart at http://www.most.gov.vn/Desktop.aspx/Introduction/Organizational-Chart/Organization_chart_of_MOST/

facebook.com, *google.com* and *YouTube*³⁶, which means that it is the online newspaper which got the most traffic in Vietnam in the month.

The *Vnexpress* was also ranked by *baomoi.com* as one of the newspapers, which had the most original news with 3309 news stories during one month³⁷ (January 2013).

As the *Vietnamnet*, the *Vnexpress* writes about most of all kinds of news including social news, entertainment, business, sport, family, law, science etc.

4.3 The Ngoisao (ngoi.net)

As mentioned before, *ngoisao.net* was developed from the item “Cultural news” under *vnexpress.net*. Therefore, it is still under the ownership by FPT. This newspaper is now one of the most well-known online entertainment newspapers in Vietnam and was ranked among the ones which had most original news (2611 news stories in January, 2013). It was also ranked the 17th among online newspapers most read by *baomoi.com* and 14th in Vietnam among most hit websites (including non-Vietnamese websites) by *alexa.com* though its main contents are merely on entertainment.

4.4 The Dan tri (dantri.com.vn)

The newspaper was established in 2008 and is the online version of the print newspaper *Khuyen hoc va Dan tri* (Literature and Knowledge Promotion Newspaper)³⁸.

The online version has been developed with diverse contents displayed in the numbers of news items and with much updated news. The owner of the newspaper– the Khuyen hoc Association (The Association for Education Promotion) is a volunteer association operated based on the supports by different social organisations and individuals. This association is run by the Vietnam Fatherland’s Front which is, as mentioned above, one

³⁶ http://www.alexa.com/search?q=vnexpress.net&r=site_siteinfo&p=bigtop

³⁷ <http://www.baomoi.com/Statistics/Report.aspx>

³⁸ As most of all online newspapers, the *Dan tri* indicates basic information about the newspaper at the bottom of this website

of the most important political bodies established to promote the solidarity of the whole Vietnamese people.

Dantri.com.vn was ranked by *baomoi.com* in January at the top of the three newspapers most read in Vietnam (4636407 hits/ the recent month) while Alexa valued this website at the position 857 globally and number 9 among the most viewed websites in Vietnam. This means that it ranked in the top 5 online newspapers most read in Vietnam in January. According to Alexa, the website is particularly popular among users in the city of Hanoi (where it was ranked number 7 in the list of website most viewed).

The contents of the newspaper also covers all general types of news including such items as *Events, Social news, Sports, Education, Business, Culture, Entertainment, Legal Issues, Health*, etc.

4.5 The Kenh14 (kenh14.vn)

The *Kenh14* is a news website founded in December 2007³⁹. It is a product by VC Corporation, which also possesses several other popular news websites such as the *Soha news (soha.vn)*, *Afamily (afamily.vn)*. Like many of its sister news websites the Kenh 14 uses the newspaper *Tri Thu Tre (ttvn.vn)* as a news source label to legalise its news posts.

I chose the *Kenh14* as one of my case studies since this is the most popular news website for teenagers in Vietnam according to statistics by *Baomoi and Alexa*. According to *Baomoi*, the *Kenh14* was listed in the top 30 online newspapers⁴⁰ most read during January 2013, ranked higher than all other newspapers and news websites for teenagers. The *Kenh14* also ranked in the top 20 online newspapers, which had news stories reposted by other newspapers. At the same period, Alexa also listed this news website in the top 20 websites most visited in Vietnam (at the 12th place). The website stood behind few other online newspapers and websites such as *zing.vn, vnexpress.net, 24h.com.vn, dantri.com.vn*.

³⁹ <http://dantri.com.vn/nghe-nghiep/kenh14vn-tuyen-lap-trinh-vien-net-723617.htm>

⁴⁰ Baomoi calls all news websites in the list as online newspapers.

In fact, my research result shows that *the Kenh 14* is not only popular among teenagers but also well known to readers from 18-35 years old, especially to female readers.

In short the *Kenh 14* and all other case-studies were selected under both representative and typical criteria which make the findings' results as close to the reality as possible.

5 CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

*“Free speech is only truly free speech if it is used responsibly”*⁴¹

Tabloidisation of entertainment news in online newspapers and news websites nowadays in Vietnam is summed up in two groups of words “*sốc và sex*” (shock and sex), “*cướp-hiếp-giết*” (“robbery-rape-killing”). The first term is mostly for news concerning stars, celebrities in the showbiz but not excluding cases of ordinary people. But the second term is mostly for legal cases concerning ordinary people. These terms express the current trend of contents exploited in online newspapers and news website at present which are more on the purpose to attract and entertain readers than provide useful information. Those kinds of entertainment-led contents are not only located in the items labelled “*Entertainment*” but also in other news items such as *Social news*, *Legal news* and even *Education*. We can see it more clearly in the findings I collected from the five case studies. One thing to notice here is that each newspaper may have different criteria to sort out news items. This leads to the fact that the same title news items in different newspapers can contain different news contents. For example, *Social news* item in the *Dan tri* contains *Political news*, *Reports* and the *Environmental news* but in the *Vietnamnet*, *Social news* item consists of legal news contents, news on strange and special phenomena etc.

5.1 How popular is entertainment news in online newspapers and news websites?

5.1.1 The frequencies of entertainment news updates compared to other types of news

In this part, I present the results of my observation on the case studies, which include both official and unofficial online newspapers, both general and entertainment ones. My research for all the newspapers focused on the news stories posted during a week from the 1st of March 2013 to the 7th of March 2013.

⁴¹ Warburton (2009):42

5.1.1.1 The Vietnamnet (vietnamnet.vn)

Items \ Date	01/03/13	02/03/13	03/03/13	04/03/13	05/03/13	06/03/13	07/03/13
Social issues	23	10	11	20	28	17	14
Politics	5	6	2	6	5	8	3
Education	6	1	2	4	6	5	5
Daily life	8	3	3	8	10	11	10
Culture	8	6	6	7	9	9	9

Table 1: Table 1: Comparison on the frequency of news updates between news items in vietnamnet.vn

In my observation on the *Vietnamnet*, I compared the news updates of several main news items including also ones which contained most entertainment news stories though they are not labelled “*Entertainment*”. The examined items consist of “*Social issues*” which include legal news contents, news on strange phenomena, controversial issues; “*Politics*” including domestic political news and foreign political news; “*Daily life*” consisting of mostly of writing on couple life, marriage, love, hot daily issues; “*Culture*” mentioning mostly news on celebrities, music, films, TV-show.

However 87.8% (108/123 posts) of *Social issues* had contents on “shock-sex”, “robbery-rape-killing” with mostly shocking titles such as “*Decided to break up, a girl was shot until her face was ruined*” (01.March), “*Thirsty for love, a teen girl made 3 boys “poisoned” by the Forbidden Fruit*”(02.March) etc. 12.2% (15 posts) of other news in this item had contents on other issues such as strange phenomena, life styles, thrilling stories of well-known persons which are also kind of hot entertainment news.

Examining on the *Education* news, I saw there were fewer news stories on shocking issues, but there are still several such as: “*Mothers stayed nude for their children to get to school by bus*” (posted on 01.March), “*Shocked with a teen girl who swore at her father*”(03.March), “*A teacher got fired for watching sex websites*” (04.March) etc.

Examining the *Daily life* news, there seemed to be many items about daily life to talk about but this item focused mostly on couple life, experiences of how to handle relationships. The *Culture* item contained only 16.6% (9/54 stories) talking about general

issues concerning films, performances, backstage stories etc. and the rest, 84.4%, was stories about daily life of stars and celebrities. The point is the *Vietnamnet* is not an entertainment-led newspaper and also possesses several other entertainment sub-newspapers such as *2sao.net*, *tintuonline.com.vn*. However the examined result shows that the content of this newspaper tends to tabloidised with much of entertainment contents even in news items which are not called “*Entertainment*”.

5.1.1.2 The Vnexpress (vnexpress.net)

According to my interviewees including one who has been working for the *Vnexpress* for 8 years, the *Vnexpress* is a general newspaper, which focuses on many news areas, of which the priority is in order of appearance in the head banner. This order is as follows: *Social news*, *World news*, *Business*, *Entertainment*, *Sport*, *Legal news*, *Family*, *Digital world*, *Car and motorbike*, *Small Ads*, *Readers*, *Videos* and *Laughter*. According to this appearance order, *Social news* is more focused by the newspaper than *Entertainment* news, and *Entertainment* news is more taken care of than *Legal news*.

Items		Date					
		01/03/13	02/03/13	03/03/13	04/03/13	05/03/13	06/03/13
Social news		22	15	7	16	20	12
Stars		9	9	2	8	11	10
Entertainment	Fashion	7	3	1	6	4	7
	Film	4	2	3	5	3	6
	Music	3	2	2	2	2	2
	TV shows	1	1	3	3	1	1
	Books	1	2	1	2	1	2
Legal issues		13	12	6	14	12	11

Table 2: Comparison on the frequency of news updates between news items in vnexpress.net

However, according to the statistics above, it seems entertainment news ranks first for the number of news updates. The *Social news* actually consists of six small items including *Education*, *University entrance exam information*, *Youth Rhythm*, *Life stories*, *Travel*, *Overseas study*. This makes the number of news updates in each item even

smaller. Besides, the number of news on stars' life counts for the most in *Entertainment* news item. *Legal news*, one of the sources for entertainment contents, also counts for a considerable number of news updates. However the content “*shock and sex*”, “*robbery-rape-killing*” with detailed description counts for a majority of the whole contents with 74/81 news stories, equal to 91.36%.

The matter is though the *Vnexpress* has also other sub-newspapers such as *Ngoi sao* (*ngoisao.net*) and *iOne* (*ione.net*), which were separated from the newspaper to specialise in entertainment news, the entertainment content in this online newspaper still counts for a considerable amount.

5.1.1.3 The Ngoisao (*ngoisao.net*)

Items \ Date	01/03/13	02/03/13	03/03/13	04/03/13	05/03/13	06/03/13	07/03/13
Backstage	16	10	9	19	23	13	30
Current days	13	7	6	12	12	16	11

Table 3: Comparison on the frequency of news updates between news items in *ngoisao.net*

As mentioned above, the *Ngoi sao* is an online sub-newspaper separated from the *Vnexpress* to focus on entertainment news. The *Ngoi sao* is also the only online newspaper specialising in entertainment news that I chose as my case study. There are several items in this newspaper including *Backstage*, *Sport*, *Current Days*, *Style*, *Readers and Laughter*.

The item *Backstage* mostly tells stories about the life of celebrities both in Vietnam and internationally.

In addition to the topics concerning celebrities, the news item *Current days* mentions shocking and hot news with details describing concretely the process in which the stories happen. Most of those concern legal issues. However, 15/80 news stories in this item equal to 81.25% describe issues concerning robbery, rape, killing, sex scandals. Other news stories consist of strange things, current controversial social issues.

Additionally there are also items such as *Sports, Styles* specialising in hot news on Sport stars, their partners, what and how stars wear, eat and think etc.

5.1.1.4 The Dan tri (dantri.com.vn)

The *Dan tri* is the online version of the print newspaper *Khuyen hoc va Dan Tri* (Literature and Knowledge Promotion) which focuses mostly on education news. My interviewee, a *Dan Tri* journalist also emphasised that her online newspaper put priority mostly on education content. However, if comparing the number of education content as well as political news in the *Dan tri*, we see that the figure for entertainment news surpasses other categories.

Furthermore the item *Culture* and *Legal news* are also the source for shocking news with contents focusing on “*robbery, rape, killing*”. The number of news updates of these items during the research period, especially *Legal news* seem much more than the item *Education* which was said as the first priority of this newspaper.

5.1.1.5 The Kenh14 (kenh14.vn)

Items \ Date	01/03/13	02/03/13	03/03/13	04/03/13	05/03/13	06/03/13	07/03/13
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Items \ Date	01/03/13	02/03/13	03/03/13	04/03/13	05/03/13	06/03/13
Politics	3	4	1	3	7	6
Social news	1	1	3	0	1	0
Reports and chronicles on social issues	1	1	3	0	1	0
Environment news	0	0	0	0	0	0
Education	9	10	5	8	11	7
Entertainment	15	14	9	22	16	15
Culture	9	6	7	8	4	6
Legal news	19	15	20	19	21	19

Table 5: Comparison on the frequency of news updates between news items in dantri.com.vn

As mentioned before, the *Kenh14* is the most popular online news channel for teenagers in Vietnam. With 17 news items, the *Kenh14* is supposed to provide diverse types of news for its viewers. However just considering the titles of these items we can see the number of entertainment news contents greatly surpasses the contents in other fields. The table 5 shows that in 9 news items selected for comparison *Stars* item contains the most news updates which is twice or even three times more than the number of news stories in other categories updated in the same day. The *Kenh14* has some clear teen-oriented news items which are, in my opinion, useful for teenagers such as the *School news* focusing on education policies, learning methods, interesting stories in schools etc.. The item *Made by me* also provides knowledge and guidance for teenagers to create creative stuff. The item *Social news* and *Daily life* are the two items updated quite often however they coincide in the criteria of many news stories and these two news categories are also the abundant sources of shocking news concerning “robbery-rape-killing-sex”. Besides the 9 selected compared news items, the *Kenh14* has a considerable number of entertainment-oriented news items such as *Funny*, *Sport*, *Quizz*, *Video*, *Heart Corner*. This shows that entertainment news quantitatively dominates this news website. As a result young people as its target viewers are provided with more

tabloid news contents than serious news stories which are more useful to promote their thoughts, morality and lifestyles.

5.1.2 The popularity of entertaining news according to the survey results

No.	Often read websites	Type/ Focusing	Number of readers	%
1	dantri.com.vn	Newspaper/ general news	49	60.49
2	vnexpress.net	Newspaper/ general news	49	60.49
3	vietnamnet.vn	Newspaper/ general news	30	37.04
4	ngoisao.net	Item of Newspaper/ Entertainment	20	24.69
5	kenh14.vn	News website/ News for teenagers	20	24.69
6	afamily.vn	News website/ Family	17	20.99
7	tintuonline.com.vn	News website/ Entertainment	15	18.52
8	2sao.net	News website/ Entertainment	12	14.81
9	giadinh.net	Newspaper/ family	5	6.17
10	tuoitre.vn	Newspaper/ general news	3	3.70

Table 6: Most read online newspapers/ news websites. Statistics calculated from 81 readers

Looking at the table 6, it shows that the most popular online newspapers, both official and unofficial according to the survey are the *Dan tri* and the *Vnexpress* with 60.49% equal to 49/81 survey participants who said that they often read the newspapers. The *Vietnamnet* stands right behind, with 37.04% (30/81 people). The reasons for choosing these two newspapers were mostly explained that those online newspapers and news websites such as *ngoisao.net*, *tintuonline.com.vn*, *2sao.vn* were chosen by quite many readers, both men and women, young and middle-aged people, as their often-read newspapers. The *Ngoi sao* was chosen by 20 viewers equal to 24.69%, while two sub-publications of the *Vietnamnet* which are *tintuonline.com.vn* and *2sao.vn* were chosen by 18.52% and 14.81% of the participants. The explained reasons were mostly because of their hobby, their taste and their habits or simply to satisfy their curiosity. Women tend

to read more information on family life such as cooking, health, baby care etc. in *afamily.vn* and *giadinh.net*. To my surprise *kenh14.vn*, the special for teenagers was chosen by many, not only in the age group of 18-25 years but also from the 25-35 year group. The *Kenh14*, thus, counts for 24.69% of the participants' selection as one of the most read online newspapers. In addition, the online version of some well-known print newspapers such as *Tuổi trẻ*, *Thanh niên*, *Tiền Phong*, *Người lao động* was chosen very few

No.	Type of news group	Number of people	%
1	Entertainment	59	74.68
2	Social/ legal news	27	34.18
3	Political news	25	31.65
4	Economic-financial news	16	20.25
5	Cultural news	15	18.99
6	Hot news	12	15.19
7	Family life- Health	10	12.66
8	World news	10	12.66
9	Sciences and technologies	5	6.33
10	Sport	3	3.80

Table 7: Most read news items according to the survey's result. Statistics calculated from 79 people (2 did not answer)

participants (1 or 2 people) in the survey.

The survey also shows that entertainment news is the most popular among other types of news stories. 74.68% of the participants selected *Entertainment* as their most often read news item. This rate overwhelms the rate of people who chose *Political news* (34.18%), *Social/legal news*(31.65%) and *Cultural news* (20.25%) as their often read news items. However, as analysed in the previous part with five case studies, even *Social news*, *Legal news* and *Culture* items in general online newspapers such as *dantri.com.vn*, *vnexpress.net* or *vietnamnet.vn* are also the great sources of entertainment contents.

In addition, 81.48% of the participants in the survey agreed that there are too many tabloid stories while very few political and social news stories in online newspapers and news websites nowadays but only 2/81 people assessed online newspapers as “interesting, useful, updated and following the current trend in the world”⁴². This shows that viewers are actually aware of the tabloidisation in online newspapers at present.

So from the case studies and the survey results I can conclude that entertainment news is indeed very popular in online newspapers and news websites. This entertainment-led news trend is even invading all biggest general newspapers which are of considered official journalism such as the *Vietnamnet*, the *Vnexpress* and the *Dan tri*. This is also the answer to the first research sub-question on how popular entertainment news is in online newspapers today.

Obviously everyone likes gossip. Human beings instinctively are curious. So they like things that can satisfy their curiosity. However it is also obviously that the purpose and function of the press is not focusing on entertainment contents and viewers who come to newspapers are not just to find tabloid news. The press is part of public sphere where an individual “has a legitimate right to express himself on *every matter* concerning society”⁴³. So the popularity of tabloid journalism in the press, even surpassing the serious journalism, is an abnormal development. In the United States tabloid journalism is considered as a threat to destroy US journalism⁴⁴. According to Colin Sparks, in many European countries, “serious journalists are disgusted by the tabloids” but still forced to concede the existence of tabloid journalists in the same business as themselves⁴⁵. In Vietnam, the reaction of many serious journalists is also strongly against. NaSon Nguyen, my interviewee, stressed that “Don't call tabloid journalists my colleagues”.

So how can the popularity of tabloid news threaten the development of journalism and society? Some main effects discussed in the following part can be part of the answer.

⁴² (Please see the third question in the survey at the Appendix 2)

⁴³ Waldahl (1991): 113. “*every matter*” put in the italic highlight by the writer of this research.

⁴⁴ Sparks (2000):7

⁴⁵ Ibid.

5.2 Does entertainment news in online newspapers and news websites affect moral values?

The “tabloidisation” of newspapers as well as media, which favours entertainment news over other types of news, is not a rare phenomenon in the world. Bob Franklin argues that in contemporary journalism, journalism’ editorial priorities have changed:

“Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more ‘newsworthy’ than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; ‘infotainment is rampant’ ”⁴⁶

In Vietnam entertainment news is developing not so far from what Franklin mentioned. However entertainment stories in online newspapers in Vietnam tend not only to touch much the world of public figures but also ordinary people at the same level when it comes to news on daily triviality, daily legal stories. Therefore the morality matter even needs to be considered more seriously since ordinary people who are not used to appearing in the centre of the public arena will more easily get vulnerable. However this matter not only concerns popular human morality. The ones who create tabloid news are tabloid journalists. So journalists' professional ethics should be the first element to consider.

According to Bob Franklin, since the late 1980s, the pressure on news media to win viewers and readers have made news media become part of entertainment industry where journalist are more concerned to report stories which interest the public than the stories which are in the public interest⁴⁷. As a result instead of following the core purpose of the press aimed at “producing and distributing serious information and debate on central social, political and cultural matters”⁴⁸, journalists run after temporary bene-

⁴⁶ Franklin (2008): 13

⁴⁷ *ibid*

⁴⁸ Gripsrud (2008): 42

fits to create and promote “tabloid culture”⁴⁹. Those benefits include journalists' increasing incomes, amount of advertisement the newspaper can get. These are more important in the journalism dominated by the private sector since their first and foremost interest is profit which can help to maintain and develop their newspaper and pay for their journalists. According to the press model I drafted in chapter 3, the private sector actually bears their hands deeply in the online newspaper production, especially in news websites and sub-newspapers. In addition, many official newspapers which lie under the umbrella of state agencies but actually work independently such as the *Vnexpress*, *Vietnamnet* do not have fewer burdens on creating profits for their development. This pushes journalists to violate their professional ethics when conducting their tasks so that they can produce as more of popularly-read news stories as possible. Due to the high interaction between viewers and journalists, online newspapers actively promote this trend when journalists can easily adjust their writing after changes of viewers' hits and page views. According my interviewees, Cao Nhat and NaSon, the most common professional ethics problem in online newspapers and news websites in Vietnam at present is journalists' carelessness and their disrespect to protection of journalistic sources. To attract viewers and compete on the number of news posts journalists are not afraid to cross their code of conduct regulated by the Vietnam Journalists Association⁵⁰. Nowadays, it is not difficult to find articles in online newspapers which have shocking titles, contain spelling and grammar mistakes or violate the regulation on protecting individuals' personal information. As mentioned in the previous part, all the case-studies including both general and entertainment newspapers of which some are considered

⁴⁹ Biressi and Nunn (2008): 10

⁵⁰ In 2005, the 9 article regulation for journalists' code of conduct was issued by the Vietnam Journalists Association as follows:

1. Loyal attached to the cause of building and defending the country 's socialism under the Party's leadership
2. Attached to and wholeheartedly serving the Vietnamese peoples
3. Honestly and objectively doing journalists' business and respecting the truth
4. Living righteously and transparently without violating laws and regulations
5. Complying with laws, fulfilling the citizens' duties and responsibilities towards the society
6. Protecting the national secrets, news sources and news providers' personal information
7. Respecting, cooperating and assisting colleagues
8. Frequently training political knowledge, professional skills and abilities. Being humble and seeking for progression.
9. Maintaining and promoting the national culture and learning from other cultures.

among the most prestigious such as the *Dan tri*, *Vnexpress*, *Vietnamnet*, possess a great amount of entertainment news with tabloid contents prevailing other types of news.

14.81% of the participators in my survey added comments which show weak points of online newspapers at present. The most mentioned are that articles have loosely-knit literacy composition, contain too much incorrect and unreliable information, too much repeated information and the information which should be brief but deeply exploited etc. In addition tabloid format is also a remarkable feature of many online newspapers. It is characterised with sexy, curiosity-attracting images and shocking titles on the first page. Sometimes the title emphasises on a “hot” celebrity but the content about her counts for a very small part of the article. When writing about a trendy topic which can attract curiosity of viewers such as celebrity secrets, legal court cases on shock-sex, robbery-rape-killing, tabloid journalists can create a series of articles from a short piece of news they know⁵¹ or try to describe very concretely shocking details of the process a crime happens etc. Protection of source is “a key principle of professional journalism”⁵² but many journalists reveal personal information of characters in articles such as names, addresses and even show their clear face pictures. As a result, there have been many pitiful consequences. In march last year, an article in the *Dan Viet* revealed a case of a 13 year teenager in Hue city who got pregnant with her 23 year old boyfriend which might cause the boyfriend an imprisonment sentence. The article let out their names, addresses of school and home. This created much pressures on the couple when they were identified by neighbours and friends. In addition the article got 48,900 results of reposted articles by other online newspapers and forums. Consequently both the girl and the boyfriend tried to burn themselves to death to escape from stress and pressure⁵³. Another typical case also happened last year. The *ngoisao.net* releases an article about a son and his father who beat and broke the neck of the mother which caused strong reactions from viewers. There were hundreds comments under the news post against the father and the son. The article, which revealed the names, address of the characters was

⁵¹ Dinh Bao Trung (2012) <http://phapluattp.vn/2012053012320712p0c1015/tu-thu-cua-mot-phong-vien-viet-bao-la-cai.htm>

⁵² Peters (1998): 63

⁵³ Phap luat thanh pho Ho chi Minh (2012): <http://nld.com.vn/20120529094010130p0c1002/tu-thieu-vi-bao-la-cai.htm>

quickly circulated, reposted and further exploited into a hot series by many other online newspapers. The son then got an anti Facebook page which was pressed “like” by almost 75000 people. People spread his images, links of articles aimed to boycott him. However the truth was then revealed after the investigation by policemen that there was no sign that the mother was beaten and her neck was not broken as the article had described⁵⁴. No crime was formed. The son was even described by his neighbours as a good and kind person. He later answered an interview in *ngoisao.vn* that many people threatened to kill him and he lost his job as the effect of the article⁵⁵. This case shows that the journalist violated two basic principles regulated in the code of conducts (art 3, 4 and 6) and prescribed by the press law (art 6 and art 10): journalistic information protection and correct and honest information provision.

Dinh Bao Trung, a former tabloid journalist admitted that the huge benefits by writing hot news for online newspapers made him become easy when doing his job, unafraid to break rules of professional conducts. He only stopped when he realised his unreliable writing on a “magical” medicaster might indirectly cause death to other people⁵⁶.

From analyses above it can be seen that tabloid news is both the reason for and the result of low professional conducts of journalists. And in any case it affects severely ethical values regulated in the journalistic code of ethics. However this code is not legal binding and only “a matter of self-regulation”⁵⁷. Thus it depends much on the awareness and responsibilities of journalists, which are being blurred by tabloid journalism.

Another aspect of moral values that tabloid news may affect is ordinary human moral values.

59.26% of the participants in my survey agreed that entertainment news in online newspapers and news websites at present affect ordinary moral values. The moral values that

⁵⁴ P. Lan and Anh Tuan: <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/xa-hoi/89365/dau-la-su-that-vu-2-bo-con-danh-me-gay-co-.html>

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Dinh Bao Trung: <http://phapluattp.vn/2012053012320712p0c1015/tu-thu-cua-mot-phong-vien-viet-bao-la-cai.htm>

⁵⁷ Peters (1998): 61

were most listed by the participants are *rotten family ties* and *relationships between people in the society*, *material lifestyles* which run after money at all costs, *ignorance* and *cold-hearted behaviours* etc. Assessing the effects of entertainment news in online newspapers and news websites, experienced journalist Ly Nhan said in an interview with the newspaper *Petrotimes* that tabloid news is encouraging crimes⁵⁸. He argued that detailed descriptions on crimes by tabloid news enhanced curiosity of viewers and in many cases guided them to follow. Agreeing with this point of view, my interviewee from the *Dan tri* said that “shocking news on “*robbery- rape- killing*” in online newspapers is a way to draw up paths for “deer” to run on”. Another interviewee, Cam Nhung from *Soha news* also claimed that when these crimes were deeply exploited and repeated frequently in online newspapers, it made these abnormal phenomena become familiar with readers and finally become normal stories, which do not make people feel offended. That would be very dangerous for the society. In addition information on luxurious and private life, especially “*shock-sex*” stories, which are frequently published in popular newspapers for teenagers such as the *Kenh14*, *Yeah1* can negatively affect young people's thoughts and life style. It may encourage them to run after virtual values and seek for money at all cost to lead a life as their idols’.

NaSon Nguyen, an experienced journalist of many print newspapers, said that what encouraged him to make the newsletter “*Tin tức...ngực*” (News stories that pain your heart) on his Facebook was because he had met and talked to many people who are intelligentsia, students, office workers. To his surprise, they read tabloid news more than serious news. That raised him a worry that it threatened the development of the country when the people who are running and will run the country are rolled after useless entertainment news stories in online newspapers. This thought motivated him to collect daily political and social news stories into a newsletter and post on his Facebook, hoping that his friends and followers will be encouraged to care more about serious and useful information.

⁵⁸ Le Truc (2012): http://petrotimes.vn/news/vn/dam-luan-doi-thoai/nha-bao-ly-nhan-bao-la-cai-dang-vo-tinh-co-xuy-cho-toi-ac_8221.html

In short, saying as Örnebring and Jönsson, “[...] journalists regulate much of what the public gets to know about the world they inhabit”⁵⁹ and so they can affect the way viewers think and behave. News stories in online newspapers, if not written with responsibilities and morality, can lead to severe violations to moral values and affect the formation of new ethical values in the society in away to favour virtual and immoral lifestyles. However I don’t deny a fact that entertainment news on scandal and crimes may also put pressure on stars and the characters mentioned in the stories and make them “[...] finally be held responsible to society’s moral expectations”⁶⁰.

In conclusion, the whole discussion in this section has shown my clear answer to the second research sub-question that entertainment news in online newspapers at present has been affecting quite severely moral values, both journalistic ethics and ordinary human moral values.

5.3 Does entertainment news violate privacy of individuals?

Answering this question, 87.65% of the participants in my survey agreed that entertainment news in online newspapers violated privacy of individuals. 57.75% of those thought that it affected privacy of both public figures and ordinary people and 42.25% thought that it violated only public figures’ privacy. This result is mostly coincident with my interviewees’ viewpoints.

One thing to be noticed is that entertainment news on “*shock-sex*” topics usually exploits stories on public figures especially celebrities while “*robbery-rape-killing*” or crime topics contain more stories on ordinary people. In both cases, most of the time journalists do not follow their code of conduct to protect the personal information and private life of their characters. For exploiting private stories of celebrities, the usual methods of journalists are following “hot” celebrities everywhere they can: on Facebook, blogs to real life, by capturing their activities with photos, videos at events, daily life so that readers can be updated with all kinds of news on the person. Hottest topics are love stories, arguments and disputes with colleagues, backstage stories etc. These

⁵⁹ Örnebring and Jönsson (2008): 24

⁶⁰ Lull and Hinerman (1997): 21

stories normally lie in items *Culture news*, *Entertainment* of general online newspapers or in items such as *Stars*, *Backstage* in entertainment-led newspapers. At the same time *Social news*, *Legal news*, *Daily life* also contains stories on private life of ordinary people. As mentioned before, in these stories, characters' personal information is easily found in one way or another. Either this information is published fully or with initials, much other detailed information including pictures in the articles can make the characters easily identifiable. In news websites such as *kenh14.vn*, *2sao.vn*, video corners, paparazzi items show many clips filming private moments of celebrities with friends, lovers and families and hot clips of ordinary people. Consequently private lives of both celebrities and ordinary people are affected. For example, last year the news series on singer Cao Thai Son's cheating love with a gay expatriate was published in most of all online newspapers with continuous updates including detailed descriptions on several ordinary people related to the singer. This resulted in a big protest against Son, though there was no clear evidence on how correct the story was. More seriously, a married man who was supposed to be the third person in the love story committed suicide for not bearing the pressure by his family and the public. Another famous case was about the musician Do Quang. Quang also killed himself and left a note listing several journalists who pushed him to death for writing incorrect articles on his cheating training service and his sexual harassment to his same-sex student⁶¹.

Article 23 of the Constitution regulates that all Vietnamese citizens have the right to the inviolability of their private life, personal secrets and family secrets. Thus no one is allowed to collect, store and disseminate information about secrets and private life of other people without their consent. Coming back to the case about the teenager who burnt herself for having her personal information revealed, lawyer The Trach argued⁶² that her family could sue those online newspapers for violating the law on *the Right of people to personal information protection* (Quyền nhân thân), if those newspapers did not take off the girl's personal information. Regulations on personal information protection lie in the

⁶¹ <http://giaitri.vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/gioi-sao/trong-nuoc/do-quang-chet-khong-phai-vi-that-co-1882200.html>

⁶² Self-burning to death due to tabloid news: <http://nld.com.vn/20120529094010130p0c1002/tu-thieu-vi-bao-la-cai.htm>

article 24 of the *Civil Law 2005*⁶³. According to this law, all Vietnamese citizens have the full right to their name and personal images as well as the right to have their reputation and private secrets protected. Therefore, once press publications deeply dig into their private life, they are allowed to use laws to protect themselves. In addition the victims can also apply the Decision 97/2008/NĐ-CP by the Government on managing, providing and using internet services regulates that it is not allowed to publish incorrect information which affects reputation and dignity of individuals on Internet⁶⁴.

In 1982 Vietnam also ratified ICCPR in which the freedom of expression is limited when it affects individuals' reputation (article 19) and cause unlawful interference with individuals' privacy (article 17). Furthermore UNICEF, one of the most active UN organizations working in Vietnam also has guidance for Vietnamese journalists to comply with regulations on publishing news on children. According to these regulations, privacy and secrets of children are protected. When journalists contact or publish information on children, they have to get permission from the parents or guardians of the children⁶⁵.

In short I wish to confirm my answer to the third research sub-question that the carelessness and disrespect on the protection of characters' personal information by tabloid journalists have constituted severe violations to the right to privacy of individuals by many online newspapers according to both domestic laws and international human rights laws. These violations happen both to public figures and ordinary people. However there have been very few court cases on this issue. The reason is to some extent celebrities need tabloid news to maintain their fame. Thus, when it comes to violations to privacy, ordinary people seem to be more vulnerable. All court cases seen now are from celebrities (singer Ngan Khanh, actress Dan Le etc.). No ordinary people dared to raise their voice against tabloid journalists when their privacy was violated. The major reasons are they lack confidence and also money to make it to the court⁶⁶. These partly

⁶³ <http://www.ecolaw.vn/vi/node/88>

⁶⁴ Gia Nguyen (2012): <http://phapluattp.vn/20120714112215682p0c1021/nghe-si-kien-trang-tin-ap-luat-nao.htm>

⁶⁵ Nguoi lao dong (2012): <http://nld.com.vn/20120529094010130p0c1002/tu-thieu-vi-bao-la-cai.htm>

⁶⁶ Peters (1998): 68

make the violations by tabloid journalism become more and more severe while tabloidisation in online newspapers grows faster and more popularly.

5.4 What are the reasons for tabloidations?

Assessing the reasons that make online newspapers become tabloidised, 83.95% of the survey participants (68/81) in my survey agreed that this kind of topics was easy to write and quickly bring profits to newspapers' owners and journalists. 54.32% conceded that the reason came from the fact that there was a lack of well-trained journalists who had good professional ethics. 33.33% thought that because it was safe for both journalists and newspapers to write tabloid news. Many of those actually had their choice on all the three above reasons (22.22%). Two participants added other reasons, which I think are also worth to be taken into account. One idea is that authorities' management on news provision and publication in online newspapers is not proper. The other blames on viewers' demand since people are always curious about private life of others. However when it comes to the assessment on the most important and decisive reason that created the tabloidisation tendency in online newspapers, the difference in the number of people who chose the first and the second was not so high. 54.32% agreed *that tabloid news is easy to write and make incomes* is the dominant reason. At the same time, 34.56% assessed the *lack of a proper professional training and abilities* which equip journalists with good professional ethics is the main reason for the current tabloidisation in online newspapers. Only 6.17% thought that *safety* is the dominant reason that makes journalists and online newspapers choose to develop their products into tabloidised publications.

Most of my interviewees also agreed that profit is the reason that dominates the development of online newspapers and news websites at present. This is understandable if they are news websites or sub-newspapers which are actually owned by private companies and get incomes from advertisements, but what about official newspapers which are supported by the government? According to my interviewee from the *Dan tri*, journalists of those newspapers get incomes from a fixed salary and their royalties, of which royalties often decide the main incomes of the journalists. Based on the salary levels regulated by the government, a newly graduated journalist will receive about USD 125/

month and a 21 year experienced journalist can reach the highest level of about USD 622/month⁶⁷. Therefore the royalties definitely become the very important for journalists, and thus motivate journalists to write entertainment topics which are easy to write and quickly make incomes. According to my interviewee, Thu Huong, to be published an online articles, a news story only needs to contain 300- 500 words compared to 1500- 2000 words in print papers as a minimum word count. Many online articles contain mostly pictures and few words as captions. So it's easy to write but also easy to earn money. Dinh Bao Trung, a former tabloid journalists revealed in his article “*Confession of a tabloid journalist*” in the *Phap luat*⁶⁸ that to become a tabloid journalist it did not need training. The process was simple. First, he submitted a 200 word draft on a topic he wanted to write. If the topic was approved, he would be fully paid whether the article would be published or not. For a 2000 word news story he could get VND 1.5 million (USD 75). 95% of his writing was kept, without being edited. Therefore just spending a week to write tabloid news, he could receive from VND 10-15 million (USD 500-750) which is more than the salary granted by the state to a 21-year experienced journalist. High profits, easiness to work on made tabloid news become a magnet irresistible to many journalists and online newspapers. The key is creating stories appealing to page views to attract advertisements. At present, most of online newspapers and news websites live dependent on advertisements. So, as my interviewee Cam Nhung said, all journalists are aware of the negative effects of tabloidisation and many disagree on this trend but still continue write tabloid news, since their boss wants it as advertisement needs it.

However two of my interviewees NaSon and Cao Nhat claimed that the most important reason for tabloidisation is that journalists lacked abilities and proper professional training to write serious news and to resist the trend. As mentioned above, journalists don't need to be trained to write tabloid news but it is too easy for them to have great incomes. If it is not a well-trained journalist who is equipped with professional ethics or

⁶⁷ Can Tho university (2012) http://www.ctu.edu.vn/colleges/tech/bomon/vanphong/luong/bang_xep_he_so_luong_theo_ND_204.htm

⁶⁸ Dinh Bao Trung (2012): <http://phapluattp.vn/2012053012320712p0c1015/tu-thu-cua-mot-phong-vi-en-viet-bao-la-cai.htm>

one who has a good ability to write on difficult topics that need skills and knowledge, then it's easy for journalists to go for tabloid news.

Another problem which can affect the development of tabloid journalism relates to journalists' and newspapers' security. Topics on political and social issues are still considered “sensitive” in Vietnam, especially when it comes to issues on the Party, the government, the economic and political policies. Journalist Nguyen Hung, the *BBC Vietnamese*, argued that though Vietnam “has a quite strict control over political news but it is much looser when it comes to entertainment news”⁶⁹.

There is no regulation which clearly limits writing on such “sensitive” topics, but journalists equip themselves with a self-censored awareness after they are oriented by their leaders or the newspapers' owner. Especially when witnessing typical cases happen, it will remind them of their own security. A recent case on Nguyen Dac Kien- an experienced journalist of the *Gia dinh xa hoi* is an example. Kien had a blog post on 25 February 2013, which objected to a speech by the Party's General Secretary, Nguyen Phu Trong, published on VTV News at the same day. In the speech Mr. Trong criticised people who wanted to eliminate the article 4 of the Constitution on the Communist Party's leading roles and supported pluralism and a multi-party system. A day after Kien's blog entry was posted he got fired by his newspaper for “violation of the newspaper's regulations and the labour contract”⁷⁰. There was no concrete explanation on how Kien violated such regulations, which made him suddenly fired. The fact is though Kien answered numbers of foreign news websites such as BBC Vietnamese, VOA Vietnamese, that he was fired due to the blog entry, there has been no evidence to prove that. However such cases obviously warn all journalists to be more careful on writing “sensitive” issues. And as one of my interviewees said, “[...] when people are not free to do something, they will push all the energy on the things they have freedom to do”. Then tabloids news is obviously what they can enter and go much further as they can.

⁶⁹Nguyen Hung (2012): http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2012/05/120530_tabloid_controversy.shtml

⁷⁰ Announcement by the *Gia dinh xa hoi* on Nguyen Dac Kien:'dismissal <http://giadinh.net.vn/xa-hoi/anh-nguyen-dac-kien-khong-con-tu-cach-la-phong-vien-bao-gia-dinh--xa-hoi-20130226054736172.htm>

In short, entertainment news is like a delicious cake which is easy to make, easy to eat and safe to create and sell. Therefore it's not difficult to understand why it has become the main served item in the bakery!

5.5 What are the authorities' reactions?

When it comes to the authorities' reaction, there are two aspects I want to discuss here. The first is the reactions from the direct managing leaders of the newspapers who are the owners of private press publications and editors in chief and official online newspapers. The second is the governmental authorities who are responsible for managing the press in Vietnam.

Working for a news website which is 100% privately managed, editor Cam Nhung from the Soha news claimed that entertainment news is encouraged by most of leaders of online newspapers and news websites since it is the main source to advertisements which create income for newspapers and news websites. However this point of view seems slightly different from the two others of my interviewees.

Being the online version of a print newspaper focusing on education news, *dantri.com.vn* seems to have fewer shocking news than most of online newspapers at present. The interviewee from this newspaper let me know that her editor in chief consulted his journalists to limit tabloid formats and shocking news shown on the first page. Though readers can reach entertainment news in separate news items inside the newspaper, the editor in chief tried to keep the "house", at least, look clean at the main door. And by signing contracts with 56 other newspapers to repost their news stories by these newspapers, the *Dan tri* has conditions to select the best news stories to publish in its page without being responsible for examining the news source.

Journalist PT from the *Vnexpress* claimed that the development of an online newspaper has different periods. In the first period, when the newspaper is new to readers and has not built a strong team of journalists, it needs shocking news to attract viewers. However when it has built the brand and reputation, the newspaper is more aware of promoting its prestige. As a result, tabloid news stories will be reduced considerably. Also according to PT the *Vnexpress* has come over the first difficult period, so now the editor

in chief oriented the journalists to concentrate more on quality articles than shocking news stories. What journalist PT argued seems quite reasonable but it also raises an interesting question. So, when an online newspaper has built a brand and a certain quantity of loyal viewers thanks to tabloid news, it will push this “child” out of its house to maintain the pure look? At present, the *Vnexpress* has two popular sub-publications focusing on entertainment news including *ngoisao.net* and *iOne.net*. The *Ngoi sao* is marked at the bottom of its page that it is actually *the entertainment news item* separated from the *Vnexpress*. The *iOne*- a news website impressing viewers on both tabloid contents and formats, however, has no explanation on its source, though my interviewee admitted that it belonged to the *Vnexpress*. In any case though the news website is a child admitted or “ignored” by the *Vnexpress*, it cannot be denied that instead of concentrating on an entertainment item inside its format, the *Vnexpress* is developing at least two more entertainment news websites. This is contrary to what PT said about the newspaper's goal oriented by the editor in chief.

Similar to the *Vnexpress*, the *Vietnamnet* though does not have any item in the banner named “Entertainment news”, it has banners attached links to two separate entertainment-led sub-publications including *2sao.net* and *tintuonline.com.vn*. The point is the *Vietnamnet* has several sub-publications but only these two sites got the priority. This shows how the newspaper reacts and support to entertainment news.

The “bending” policies of these three big official online newspapers show that the leaders of official online newspapers which are directly managed by state agencies seem to be more careful in the way to launch tabloid news, though actually the quantity of entertainment news produced by them is of a great amount. Thus, it seems entertainment news can easily go through the first censorial door. What about the upper management level?

Last year, after a number of official newspapers such as the *Sai gon giai phong*, *Phu nu thanh pho Ho Chi Minh*, *Phap luat va doi song* accused each other of being tabloidised, the Communication and Information Minister, Nguyen Bac Son stated that there was no tabloid newspaper in Vietnam. However he admitted that there had been a number of newspapers, which exploited shocking news, dug deeply into private lives and de-

scribed too concretely terrifying details of criminal cases. This could negatively affect young people and the healthy development of the society⁷¹. Mr. Son stated that if any newspaper deliberately violated the press law and tended to tabloidise its content, the newspaper could have its operating license withdrawn. Agreeing with Mr. Son, Mr. Dao Trong Thi – the chairman of the Cultural, Educational, Youth and Children Committee, National Assembly, stated that Vietnam has no tabloid journalism, though he was aware of the fact that there were newspapers which seemed serious but actually produced tabloid news. He conceded that those newspapers did it on purpose to run after profits⁷². Mr. Nguyen Van Khanh, the head of the journalism and publication management office in Ho Chi Minh City also claimed that many editors in chief did not know all of their sub-publications⁷³.

This means that the governmental authorities are clearly aware of the situations, but there have been very few responses to better manage tabloid news in online newspapers. As journalist Ky Duyen said, the authorities are facing their own challenges to fight this phenomenon⁷⁴.

Since 2007, after the court case concerning journalist Huong Tra sued by singer Phuong Thanh⁷⁵ there have been few more court cases on violations by newspapers to celebrity privacy. One of those few is the case of actress Dan Le sued the *Nong nghiep Viet Nam* in 2008. The newspaper lost for having published incorrect news claiming that Dan Le was the female character in a sex clip which was actually extracted from a Korean adult movie⁷⁶. Singer Ngan Khanh also won the court case against the *Vietnamnet*, *VTC news*

⁷¹ Thuy Hang (2012): <http://www.nguoiduatin.vn/o-viet-nam-khong-co-bao-la-cai-a44401.html>

⁷² Ky Duyen (2012): <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/chinh-tri/tuanvietnam/74754/thoi-cua-bao-la-cai-.html>

⁷³ ibid

⁷⁴ ibid

⁷⁵ Singer Phuong Thanh sued Huong Tra for a series of blog posts which insulted her dignity and reputation. However Phuong Thanh lost the case since there was a lack of concrete sanctions to deal with this case.

⁷⁶ See description of the case: <http://phapluattp.vn/214496p0c1021/mc-dan-le-khoi-ki-en-bao-nong-nghiep-viet-nam.htm>

and *Kenh14.vn* last year for the incorrect information published on these newspapers indicating that she was a high-graded call girl⁷⁷.

However there is a common characteristic of all these cases. It is the light punishment to newspapers, which mostly ended up with “apologies” and “amended information”.

The fact is that despite many regulations to limit news stories affecting individuals' reputation and moral values in the press but there are very few concrete sanctions to punish newspapers and journalists, which makes it more difficult for authorities to apply laws. In addition the management of official newspapers are easier than news websites, which are operating like newspapers but not officially admitted as newspapers. So it is difficult to apply the press law to punish them. Then why have the authorities not issued more concrete sanctions?

Journalists NaSon and Cao Nhat claimed that entertainment news actually is inoffensive to the authorities. It does not affect their political benefits, thus it is harmless to let it grow. Vietnam has been blamed by many Western countries for restricting freedom of expression, especially on political and social information. Thus freedom of the press in any form including free development of entertainment news shows a different aspect of freedom of expression in Vietnam. This is new to the outside world. However a press which favours entertainment news over serious news cannot be a comprehensive developed press. It even threatens the democracy. Because the press as part of public sphere enables the formation of public opinions through communicative interaction. Through that individuals can express themselves and their standpoints against others on all matter in the society, of which serious information and debate on central, political, and cultural matters are the core issues⁷⁸. This function of the press holds an important position in all democracies. Therefore tabloidisation will makes the press lose its ability to operate effectively and undermines its ideal functions in liberal democracies⁷⁹.

⁷⁷ See decription of the case: <http://vov.vn/Doi-song/Dien-vien-Ngan-Khanh-kien-Kenh-14/216745.vov>

⁷⁸ Waldahl (1991): 113, 114; Jakubowicz (1998):14; Biressi and Nunn (2008):10

⁷⁹ Gripsrud (2008): 34 and Biressi and Nunn (2008):10

6 CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Freedom of expression is a fundamental element of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has been recognised in domestic laws of many countries including Vietnam.

The press is considered “[...]very crucial to the exercise of freedom of expression because they provide the public platform through which the right is effectively exercised”⁸⁰. Online newspaper is an important part of media in a modern society. Nowadays the development of Internet enables online newspapers to become a vital element in people's daily life. Many suppose that online media is gradually replacing other types of media for its convenience. Therefore the freedom to access information and free speech in online newspapers are playing a more and more important role to promote the practice of freedom of expression which is considered a crucial indicator to all democracies⁸¹. In Vietnam the freest aspect of freedom of expression and freedom of the press can refer to in the production of entertainment news stories in online newspapers. Entertainment topics seem to dominate online newspapers where the quantity of tabloid stories surpasses any other type of news. The contents of those news stories tend to favour “*shock-sex*” and “*robbery-rape-killing*” topics. From all the discussions in the previous parts I can come to a conclusion as an answer to the first research question that entertainment news in online newspapers obviously affects moral values and violates privacy of individuals. The violation on moral values both happens in the aspect of journalistic professional ethics and ordinary human morality. At the same time, it also violates both the right to privacy of celebrities and ordinary people according to domestic and international laws. Thus there is an clear conflict between the right to freedom of the press and the right to privacy and moral values existing in online newspapers. What is the balance for this conflict?

⁸⁰ UNESCO (2008): 3

⁸¹ Rozenberg (2004): 85

The current situation shows that tabloid news is still taking the winning chair. What can stop journalists from running after this tendency has to come first from their awareness on their professional ethics and responsibilities to the society. Dinh Bao Trung, a former tabloid journalist stopped his tabloid career when he realised that his work, though brought him a great income, would harm the health and even the life of many people. Another important element, which can help to balance the conflict, is authorities' reactions expressed in two aspects: newspapers' policies and laws by the government. Though there is still a great amount of entertainment news compared to serious stories, several online newspapers such as the *Dan tri*, *Vnexpress*, *Vietnamnet* seem more successful than many other counterparts in balancing the *Entertainment* items with other news items on their main web page. This is due to their own specific policies and strategies. At the same time, regulations and laws are certainly of the best tools to keep tabloid journalism from violating privacy and morality. The case of actress Dan Le and singer Ngan Khanh who were successful to use laws to fight online newspapers showed that though the current legal sanctions cannot be expectedly effective, they still can be the most applicable method to balance the conflict. Moreover as mentioned in chapter 3 the Constitution amendment, if approved in October 2013, may provide more sanctions to protect privacy of individuals. But this limitation, like any restriction to freedom of expression, is a double-edged sword. Since it may also increase self-censorship of journalists and people which prevents them from informing and speaking out truths when it comes to sensitive issues. Therefore the government should consider it very carefully. Or said by Frederik Stjernfelt's terms, if there is any restraint to freedom of the press it should be done with "tolerance and respect"⁸² to avoid inverse effects.

In addition, I can see that reactions by the public, here represented by the viewers, play a very important role. It has been long time Vietnamese viewers are not used to criticising newspapers or suing journalists when their right is violated. However, nowadays under news posts in online newspapers, there appear more and more comments by readers to raise their viewpoints against tabloid topics and journalists' careless writing. This opens a hope that the role of the public as the main characters in the public sphere is

⁸²Stjernfelt (2009): 135

coming back and returning influences to the press in general and to online newspaper in particular.

Another element is the self-censorship by journalists and online newspapers and news websites when it comes to sensitive issues. A characteristic can be noticed that violations to privacy of public figures in online newspapers mostly happen to celebrities, not other types of professions. Comparing news posts on the weddings of two hot celebrities Linh Nga and Tang Thang Ha, it is seen that images of Ha's wedding was hunted from small details of her family, friends, her husband's family etc. though Ha tried to limit the press. But Nga's wedding was shown merely with images of the bride and her family, not the bridegroom's which is of a high-ranking governmental officer. There was no clear evidence to show why it happened, but there is a sign that journalists were self-censored when doing their job in this case.

This links back to an element of my hypothesis, in which I supposed that there might be risky threats to write on political and social issues. This pushes journalists and newspapers to focus on entertainment news for their safety. From what I have found, there are still not enough elements to confirm this into a statement, though there have been obvious signs of journalists' self-censorship. However it is clear that creating and maintaining a society, which has equal and comprehensive freedom of expression in all areas is the most effective way to balance the conflict between freedom of the press and privacy and morality. The freedom to publish and access tabloid news is an aspect of the freedom of expression which is a particular value in a democracy⁸³. In theory it, therefore, will promote democracy. However when tabloid journalism dominates the press and prevails serious journalism, it can cause contrary effects. In tabloid journalism cynicism is bred, real political interest and political issues are ignored, then it will lower the standard of public discourse and undermine the ideal function of the press as a public sphere where debates on serious issues for building a developed society happen⁸⁴. As a result, it becomes a threat to a democracy and civilization.

⁸³ Warburton (2009): 3

⁸⁴ Ömerbring and Jönsson (2008): 24 and Sparks (2000): 2

According to UNESCO media development indicators, developed media play important roles as a channel of information and education which allows citizens to have free communication with each other in all issues. Media should also be a facilitator of informed social debates as well as a watch dog of the government⁸⁵. In the press that favours tabloid journalism these elements are underestimated or totally ignored. As a result tabloid journalism makes freedom of the expression lose its position as a particular value of a democracy since the given press freedom is only a one-sided freedom which prioritises a small aspect, but undermines most of the core elements of public opinions that need to be also free.

Above all, the central issue of a developed press is to build a comprehensive developed press in which the core purpose of journalism is respected to produce and distribute serious information and debate on central, political, and cultural matters⁸⁶, not only entertainment news. That is what the Vietnamese press and online newspapers in Vietnam should strictly follow and develop.

⁸⁵ UNESCO (2008): 3

⁸⁶ Gripsrud (2008):34

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Appendix 1: Common interview questions

6. Which are online newspapers you have been working for? And for how long?
7. Which topics do you write most often?
8. How are the news stories and articles processed and published by your newspaper?
9. Do you agree on the view point that there are too many entertainment news stories focusing on topics such as “robbery-rape-killing”, “shock-sex” compared to other social news topics in online newspapers/ news websites at present?
10. What do you think are the reasons for this trend?
11. Which reason is the most dominating?
12. Do you think this trend of news production affect moral values?
13. What are the moral values affected the most?
14. Do think such entertainment news stories violate privacy of individuals?
15. What do you think are the influences of tabloid news on the society today and on the young generation?
16. What are the benefits and difficulties for journalists when writing entertainment news compared to journalists working in other fields?
17. Why have there been very few actions from the authorities to better manage the expansion of the tabloid news in online newspapers at present?

Appendix 2: Survey on online newspapers in Vietnam

- 1 Which online newspapers/ news websites do you read most often? Why?
- 2 Which columns in those newspapers do you read most often? Why?
- 3 What do you think about online newspapers/ news websites at present?
 - a. Too many tabloid stories, few significant social and political news stories
 - b. Interesting, useful, updated and following the current trend in the world
 - c. Useless and poor contents
 - d. Other ideas (please explain in detail)
- 4 Do you think the entertainment news stories in online newspapers/ news websites are negatively affecting moral values?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Other ideas or more comments if any
- 5 If your answer is “a”, please point out three (3) moral values which you think are affected the most.
- 6 Do you think the entertainment news in online newspapers/ news website is violating privacy of individuals?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Other ideas or more comments, if any

7 If your answer is “a”, do you think these violations happen to public figures or normal people?

- a. Public figures
- b. Normal people
- c. Both public figures and normal people

8 What do you think are the reasons for the tabloidisation of entertainment news in online newspapers at present?

- a. This kind of topics is easy to write and quickly bring profits to newspapers’ owners and journalists
- b. There is a lack of well-trained and capable journalists who are equipped with good professional ethics
- c. It’s safe for both journalists and newspapers
- d. Other ideas or more comments if any

9 What do you think is the most dominating reason among the above reasons?

10 How do you think tabloid entertainment news has affected the society? (Please explain the reasons for your choice)

- a. Good
- b. Bad
- c. Both good and bad

Appendix 3: The press law amendment in 1999

THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

No: 12/1999/QH10

SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIET

NAM

Independence - Freedom - Happiness

Ha Noi, day 12 month 06 year 1999

LAW

AMENDING AND SUPPLEMENTING A NUMBER OF ARTICLES OF THE PRESS LAW

(No. 12/1999/QH10 on the 12 of June, 1999)

Pursuant to the 1992 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam;

This Law amends and supplements a number of Articles of the Press Law passed by the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on December 28, 1989.

Article 1. To amend and supplement the Preamble and a number of Articles of the Press Law as follows:

1. The Preamble is amended and supplemented as follows:

"To ensure the citizens right to freedom of the press and freedom of speech in the press in conformity with interests of the State and the people;

To bring into play the press's role in the cause of construction and defense of the Socialist Vietnam Fatherland along the renewal line of the Communist Party of Vietnam;

Pursuant to the 1992 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam;

This Law prescribes the press regime".

2. Article 3 is amended and supplemented as follows:

Article 3.- Types of press

The press referred to in this Law is the Vietnamese press, including: the printed press (newspapers, magazines, news bulletins, newsletters), the voice press (radio programs), the visual press (television programs, audio-visual news programs effected by various technical means) and the electronic press (transmitted on the computerized information network) in Vietnamese language, dialects of different ethnic minority groups of Vietnam and/or foreign languages".

3. Article 6 is amended and supplemented as follows:

"Article 6.- Tasks and powers of the press

The press shall have the following tasks and powers:

1. To convey true information on the domestic and world situation in conformity with the interests of the country and the people;
2. To disseminate, popularize and contribute to the elaboration and protection of, the Party's lines, directions and policies, the State's laws and achievements of the country and the world, according to the guiding principles and objectives of the press bodies; to contribute to the political stabilization, raising the people's knowledge, meeting the people's healthy cultural needs, protecting and bringing into play the nation's fine traditions, building and promoting the socialist democracy, strengthening the entire people's unity bloc, building and defending the Socialist Fatherland Vietnam;
3. To reflect and guide public opinion; to act as a forum for people to exercise the right to freedom of speech;
4. To discover and display examples of good people, good deeds and good factors; to prevent and combat acts of law violations and other negative phenomena in the society;
5. To contribute to preserving the purity and clarity of Vietnamese language and dialects of ethnic minorities of Vietnam;
6. To broaden the mutual understanding between the countries and peoples, take part in the world people's cause for peace, national independence, democracy and social progress."

4. Article 9 is amended and supplemented as follows:

"Article 9.- Corrections on the press

1. If the press conveys untrue or distorted information, slanders or infringes upon the prestige of organizations, the honor or dignity of individuals, it shall have to issue or broadcast a correction or apology of its own or of the press work's author. In cases where there is a conclusion of the competent State agency, the concerned press body shall have to publish or broadcast such conclusion.
2. Organizations and individuals shall have the right to make written speeches on the contents of information on the press if having grounds to believe that the press has given untrue or distorted information, slandered

or infringed upon them. The concerned press body shall have to publish or broadcast such organizations and individuals speeches on the information already carried or transmitted on their own press.

Organizations and individuals speeches must not infringe upon the press bodies, the author's honor and dignity.

After receiving speeches of organizations or individuals, within 5 days for daily newspapers, radio stations and television stations, 10 days for weekly newspapers and in the latest issue for magazines, the press bodies shall have to publish or broadcast such speeches.

3. Corrections or apologies of the press bodies and press works authors as well as speeches of organizations and individuals stipulated in Clauses 1 and 2 of this Article must be published or broadcast corresponding to the information already released by the press under the Government's stipulations.

4. Where the press bodies fail to make corrections or apologies or make corrections or apologies in contravention of this Law; fail to publish or broadcast organizations or individuals speeches, such organizations or individuals shall have the right to lodge complaints to the parent agencies of such press bodies or the State management agencies in charge of the press or initiate a lawsuit at court".

5. Article 12 is amended and supplemented as follows:

"Article 12.- Parent agencies of the press bodies

Parent agencies of the press bodies are organizations applying in their own names for press activity permits and directly managing the press bodies.

Parent agencies of the press bodies shall have the following tasks and powers:

1. To determine and direct the materialization of the guiding principles and objectives; the objects of their service and the main scope of distribution; the broadcasting capacity, time, frequencies and range, and the languages used by the press bodies as prescribed in their permits;

2. To direct the press bodies to fulfill their tasks, orientations and operation plans, organize their apparatus and build the contingent of journalists;

3. To appoint, dismiss or demote the heads of their dependent press bodies after consulting with the State management agencies in charge of the press;

4. To inspect the press bodies activities;
5. To create necessary conditions for operation of the press bodies;
6. To be answerable before law within the ambit of their tasks and powers for violations by their dependent press bodies."

6. Article 15 is amended and supplemented as follows:

"*Article 15.*- Rights and obligations of journalists

1. The journalists shall have the following rights:

a/ To carry out journalistic activities on the territory of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; or overseas according to the Government's stipulations;

b/ To exploit and be provided with information in the journalistic activities in accordance with the provisions of law;

c/ To refuse to compile or to participate in the compilation of the journalistic works in contravention of the provisions of the press legislation;

d/ To enjoy professional training and fostering to raise their journalistic skills; and be entitled to a number of priorities necessary for their journalistic activities according to the Government's stipulations;

e/ To be protected by law in their professional activities. No one is allowed to threaten or menace the journalists life, infringe upon their honor and dignity, destroy, seize or confiscate their means of operation and/or documents or prevent them from carrying out lawful professional activities.

2. The journalists shall have the following obligations:

a/ To convey true information on domestic and world situation in conformity with the interests of the country and the people; to reflect the people's opinions and legitimate aspirations, contributing to the exercise of citizens right to freedom of the press and freedom of speech in the press;

b/ To defend the Party's lines, directions and policies and the State's laws; to discover and defend positive factors; to prevent and combat erroneous ideas and acts;

c/ To regularly study and train themselves in order to raise the political consciousness, moralities and jour-

alistic skills; to refrain from abusing the journalist's title to hassle others and commit acts of law violation;

d/ To make corrections or apologies if giving untrue information, making distortion or slanders or infringing upon the prestige of organizations and/or the honor and dignity of individuals;

e/ To be answerable before law and the heads of the press bodies for the contents of their press works as well as for their acts of violating the press legislation."

7. Article 17 is amended and supplemented as follows:

"Article 17.- Contents of State management over the press

The contents of State management over the press shall include:

1. Elaborating and directing the implementation of the strategy, planning and plans for development of the press;
2. Promulgating and organizing the implementation of legal documents on the press; elaborating the press-related regimes and policies;
3. Organizing the provision of information for the press; managing the press's information;
4. Training, fostering and raising the political and professional skills as well as the professional ethics of the contingent of journalists;
5. Organizing and managing scientific and technological activities in the journalistic field;
6. Granting or withdrawing the press activity permits and journalists cards;
7. Managing international journalistic cooperation as well as the overseas activities of the Vietnamese press and foreign press activities in Vietnam;
8. Inspecting the depositary of the press; managing the press depositary warehouses;
9. Organizing and directing the commendation and reward in the press activities;
10. Guiding, examining and inspecting the implementation of the regimes, policies, planning and plans for development of the press as well as the observance of the press legislation; taking measures to prevent unlawful press activities; settling complaints, denunciations and handling violations in the press activities".

8. To add the following Article 17a:

"Article 17a.- State management agencies in charge of the press

1. The Government shall exercise the unified State management over the press.
2. The Ministry of Culture and Information shall take responsibility before the Government for the State management over the press.
3. The ministries, ministerial-level agencies and agencies attached to the Government shall, within the ambit of their tasks and powers, have to exercise the State management over the press in accordance with the Government's stipulations.

The Government shall specify the responsibilities of ministries, ministerial-level agencies and agencies attached to the Government in the coordination with the Ministry of Culture and Information for the exercise of the unified State management over the press.

4. The People's Committees of the provinces and centrally-run cities shall exercise the State management over the press in their respective localities according to the assignment of responsibilities by the Government".

9. To add the following Article 17b:

"Article 17b.- International relations in the press activities

The State shall expand international relations in the press activities on the principle of respect for each other's national independence and sovereignty, equality and mutual benefit.

The Government shall stipulate in detail international relations in the press activities".

10. To add the following Article 17c:

"Article 17c.- Finance of the press bodies

1. The State shall adopt the policies of budgetary support and create conditions for the press to develop.

The parent agencies of the press bodies shall have to arrange necessary financial resources for the operation of the press bodies.

The press bodies shall be entitled to receive and use for the right purposes and efficiently voluntary aids from organizations and individuals according to the Government's stipulations.

2. The press bodies shall be entitled to organize business and service activities compatible with their professional activities according to the Government's stipulations and other provisions of law so as to create more sources of revenue for investment in the press development. The press bodies shall have to fulfill tax obligations regarding their business and service activities.

The press bodies shall enjoy tax and fee preferences for their publication and press activities as prescribed by law.

3. The press bodies shall have to abide by the accountancy, statistical, financial examination and inspection regimes as prescribed by law."

11. To add the following Article 17d:

"*Article 17d.*- Press publication and distribution in service of a number of objects:

The State shall work out the budgetary support policies to create conditions for the press publication and distribution to people in the areas facing difficult socio-economic conditions and areas meeting with exceptionally difficult socio-economic conditions as well as to the overseas Vietnamese community".

12. To add the following Article 17e:

"*Article 17e.*- Press inspectorate

Press inspectorate is the specialized press inspectorate.

The organization and operation of the specialized press inspectorate shall be defined by the Government".

13. Article 19 is amended and supplemented as follows:

"*Article 19.*- Granting permits for press activities

1. The granting of press activity permits must be based on the conditions defined in Article 18 of the Press Law and conform with the press development planning.

The Ministry of Culture and Information shall grant permits for press activities.

The dossiers of application for press activity permits shall be stipulated by the Ministry of Culture and In-

formation.

2. The press bodies shall operate only after obtaining permits from the State management agencies in charge of the press. In case of refusal to grant the permit, the involved State management agency in charge of the press shall, within 30 days after receiving the dossier of application for press activity permit, have to reply in writing, clearly stating the reasons therefore. The rejected press body may lodge a complaint to the competent agency or initiate a lawsuit at court".

14. To add the following Article 19a:

"Article 19a.- Establishment of representative and permanent offices of the press bodies

1. Press bodies wishing to establish their representative offices or permanent offices inside the country shall have to meet all conditions on personnel, offices and get written consent from the People's Committees of the provinces and centrally-run cities where such representative offices or permanent offices are to be set up and have to notify the Ministry of Culture and Information thereof.

2. The Government shall specify the establishment of the Vietnamese press's representative offices and permanent offices overseas as well as the establishment of foreign press's representative offices and permanent offices in Vietnam".

15. Article 21 is amended and supplemented as follows:

"Article 21.- Performing other types of press, publishing other press publications, broadcasting special programs or additional programs

1. Press bodies shall only be allowed to perform other types of press in conformity with their functions and tasks when they meet all conditions stipulated in Article 18 of the Press Law and are granted permits by the Ministry of Culture and Information.

2. Organizations wishing to publish special issues of their publications or press bodies wishing to publish additional issues, supplements, special issues of their publications or broadcast special programs or additional programs must be granted permits by the Ministry of Culture and Information".

16. Article 22 is amended and supplemented as follows:

"Article 22.- Printing the press, broadcasting radio and television programs, launching electronic press on the computerized information network

Printing houses shall have to execute contracts, ensuring the distribution time of the press; they are not allowed to print press publications without permits or re-print press works which have been banned from circulation by order of the State management agencies in charge of the press.

Technical establishments broadcasting radio and television programs shall have to ensure the broadcasting range as prescribed.

Radio stations, television stations and establishments making audio-visual news programs are not allowed to broadcast the contents of those press works which, by issued orders, have been banned from circulation or confiscated.

The electronic press shall operate on the computerized information network in accordance with the Government's stipulations".

17. Article 28 is amended and supplemented as follows:

"Article 28.- Handling of violations

1. Press agencies violating the regulations on press activity permits; on matters not to be published on the press as stipulated in Article 10 of the Press Law; or corrections on the press and other provisions of the press legislation shall, depending on the nature and seriousness of their violations, be subject to warning, fines, withdrawal or confiscation of publications and audio-visual tapes and/or discs, temporary suspension of publication or withdrawal of permits as prescribed by law.

The parent agencies of the press bodies shall, within their tasks and power, take responsibility before law for violations of their dependent press bodies.

Press bodies, journalists, organizations and/or individuals providing information harmful to the legitimate interests of other organizations and/or individuals shall have to pay compensation for the latter in accordance with the provisions of the civil legislation.

2. Heads of the press bodies, journalists and other persons engaged in press activities, who violate the provisions of Clause 1, this Article, shall, depending on the nature and seriousness of their violations, be disciplined, have their journalists cards withdrawn, be administratively sanctioned or examined for penal liability.

3. Any person violating the regulations on the supply of information, responses on the press, establishment of the press bodies, press distribution, advertisements or press conferences; obstructing press activities; threatening or menacing the life, infringing upon the honor or dignity of journalists; destroying, damaging their means and/or documents, or violating other provisions of the press legislation shall, depending on the nature

and seriousness of their violations be disciplined, administratively sanctioned or examined for penal liability".

Article 2.

1. In the Press Law, phrase "the Council of Ministers" is now replaced by word "the Government", and phrase "the Chairman of the Council of Ministers" is now replaced by word "the Prime Minister".

2. To annul Article 30 of the Press Law.

To change Article 31 of the Press Law into Article 30.

Article 3. This Law takes effect from September 1st, 1999.

The earlier regulations contrary to the provisions of this Law are all now annulled.

The Government shall amend and/or supplement the documents detailing and guiding the implementation of the Press Law in conformity with this Law.

This Law was passed by the 10th National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on June 12, 1999 at its 5th session.

THE NATIONAL

ASSEMBLY

CHAIRMAN

(signed)

Nong Duc Manh

