

# Blogging Three Ways in Vietnam's Political Blogosphere

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*This article discusses the dynamism of Vietnam's social media landscape by identifying three kinds of blogging and the different political views espoused by Vietnamese bloggers. This classification is based on a thematic analysis of blog postings, media discussions and semi-structured interviews conducted in 2013–15. The author's mapping of Vietnam's blogosphere demonstrates four features: first, the growth of political blogs; second, how the blogosphere has become an arena for competing political ideologies; third, the utilization of blogs by various factions within the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) to serve their own interests; and fourth, blogs as an important source of independent news and information. Understanding political blogs in Vietnam today helps us understand how Vietnamese bloggers maximize online freedom of speech, the zigzagging attitude of the CPV in managing the Internet in an attempt to reinforce its legitimacy and the challenges blogs pose to the state-run media's monopoly in the digital age.*

**Keywords:** Vietnamese bloggers, political blogs, online freedom, propaganda press.

In global rankings on Internet freedom, international watchdogs consistently rate Vietnam very low<sup>1</sup> due to the fact that the government has increased its control of the Internet using various monitoring methods and because it detains journalists, bloggers and netizens for espousing their political views.<sup>2</sup> However, these surveys do not capture the complexity of the

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ongoing changes in Vietnam brought about by the Internet. Vietnam's cyber environment has experienced remarkable changes since the late 2000s when the effects of the Internet started to reach beyond the economic sector and began to influence public discourse and civil society as a whole. After a decade — from 1997 to 2007 — of being delayed due to the political and economic calculations of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV),<sup>3</sup> the government relaxed its monopoly over, and management of, the Internet as a tool of economic development.<sup>4</sup>

The spread of the Internet in Vietnam since 2007 has brought a new dimension to the everyday lives of the Vietnamese people other than its use in pursuit of economic goals and opportunities. Internet usage is not only measured by the mushrooming number of users, but also by the range of online activities. Together with the growing online community — which numbered nearly 50 million by July 2016<sup>5</sup> — Internet usage has expanded from providing access to “Western entertainment” to being “a forum for free, fair and unrestricted public debates”.<sup>6</sup> The Internet has also helped bring about “freedom of connection”<sup>7</sup> and facilitated freedom of expression via many different forms of social media as more users than ever can express their opinions concerning important national issues.

The CPV understands that the Internet plays a key role in national economic development, but remains suspicious of its power, particularly the rise of social media and its ability to attract and mobilize people, especially young people. The “soft” blocking rule which is applied to Facebook, the largest social network platform in Vietnam, is a typical example of the CPV's carrot-and-stick management policy.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, Vietnamese leaders have publicly praised Facebook as “an essential and unprohibited need” that offers “sharper communication tools than conventional methods”.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, to manage Facebook content, the Party employs tactics such as limiting Facebook usage by state-run agencies and companies, hacking and making false claims of spam anonymously on activists' pages.

Government regulations, such as Decree No. 97<sup>10</sup> and Decree No. 72<sup>11</sup> are used to surveil the online community. Any blog or website that contains comments critical of CPV policies are labelled by the authorities as “toxic” websites created by “evil forces”.<sup>12</sup> The Committee to Protect Journalists reports that six Vietnamese bloggers served custodial sentences in 2015.<sup>13</sup> In cyberspace's heavily censored environment, Vietnamese bloggers have been tirelessly trying to attract more readers, challenging the mainstream media and debating the changing dynamics of Vietnamese politics.

This article discusses the dynamism of Vietnam's social media landscape by identifying three groups of bloggers and the different political views they espouse. The author's classification of blogs is the latest mapping of Vietnam's burgeoning political blogosphere. Understanding the country's blogosphere today helps illuminate the efforts of Vietnamese bloggers to push the boundaries of online freedom of speech, the zigzagging attitude of the CPV in managing the Internet in an attempt to reinforce its legitimacy and the challenges that the Internet poses to the state's monopoly of the media in the digital age.

### **The Rising Influence of Vietnamese Bloggers**

Blogs are perceived to offer a "cross-section of media, politics and discourse".<sup>14</sup> In the United States, scholars have demonstrated the power of blogs to shape political tactics and strategies, affect legal outcomes and even influence foreign and domestic policies.<sup>15</sup> Outside the United States, Internet users have used blogs to campaign for democracy, exert political pressure on the authorities and express alternative political viewpoints.<sup>16</sup> The blogs studied in this article are political blogs written by bloggers in Vietnam which target Vietnamese readers. In explaining the rapid rise of blogs, Stephen Coleman, one of the UK's leading scholars of political communication argues that some people "prefer to trust their own judgement" rather than depend on the "usual sources" such as the mainstream media.<sup>17</sup>

The history of Vietnamese blogging is generally thought to have started in 2006, when the word "blog" became common currency among young Vietnamese.<sup>18</sup> With three million Yahoo! 360° blogs<sup>19</sup> recorded in 2007, the growth of the Vietnamese blogosphere has been described as a "social phenomenon" or "a new sort of freedom".<sup>20</sup> The first blogs were mainly used to facilitate communication among friends and discuss uncontroversial social issues such as fashion and celebrities — the number of blogs devoted to politics and sensitive issues was relatively small.<sup>21</sup> This was also the time when bloggers in Vietnam began witnessing moves by the CPV to intensify its censorship of Internet activities through the enforcement of legal regulations, application of firewalls, distribution of malware and the harassment and detention of political bloggers.<sup>22</sup> The collapse of Yahoo! 360° in 2009 marked a setback for blogging in Vietnam, as the number of Internet users who read blogs fell from 46 per cent to less than 40 per cent.<sup>23</sup>

The declining readership of Vietnamese blogs continued after 2009, with the rate of blog writing among Internet users falling from 16 per cent

in 2009 to 11 per cent in 2011.<sup>24</sup> This drop can be attributed to the rising popularity of other social networks, such as Facebook, Zing Me or Google Plus which offered Internet users more choices than blog posts. Blog traffic declined, but the influence of social media began to rise as “alternative viewpoints”<sup>25</sup> to the state media, and became a “powerful tool”<sup>26</sup> for ordinary citizens to promote political discussion. The arrival of Facebook in 2009 created an important shortcut between blog readers and blog writers; political blogs became linked to Vietnam’s Facebook community which multiplied about twenty-two times over five years — from 1.4 million users in 2011 to 31.3 million in 2015.<sup>27</sup>

The rapidly increasing influence of the Internet on social life in Vietnam became apparent in 2001 when the government relaxed its management of the Internet by granting more licenses to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and producing more Internet Exchange Points (IXPs).<sup>28</sup> This was also the time when Vietnamese political blogs diverged into different groups. Nina E.N. Vennevold was the first researcher to categorize Vietnamese bloggers into two groups: those who blogged about topics well within the boundaries set by the government; and those who challenged those boundaries. However, while Vennevold observed the “political space”<sup>29</sup> created by Vietnamese bloggers, she did not believe that the blogosphere would have a major impact on the wider community because bloggers had a “deeply rooted culture of fear” and self-censored on matters concerning “sensitive content”.<sup>30</sup>

Other researchers have concluded that since 2012, the rise of social media and social networks in Vietnam has led to the opening of an “active online public sphere”<sup>31</sup> and that blogs and Facebook have become influential enough “to provide alternative viewpoints from state-controlled official media outlets”.<sup>32</sup> Together with the expanding online community, Vietnam’s blogs and social media are viewed as spaces for promoting petitions,<sup>33</sup> social movements,<sup>34</sup> the country’s growing civil society<sup>35</sup> and a “political arena” for netizens to express their views on current social issues.<sup>36</sup>

This article contributes to the discussion on the dynamism of Vietnam’s social media by identifying three categories of blogs based on their political motivations and viewpoints. The author applies the concept of online freedom of expression of the Internet as discussed by Dutton et al.<sup>37</sup> to discuss what is behind the three types of blogging in Vietnam’s political blogosphere. Since freedom of expression is a basic human right, Dutton et al. highlights the role of the Internet in adding more dimensions

to this freedom, it being “a primary interface between individuals and the world” and a source of news and information for individuals and groups.<sup>38</sup> Given the unprecedented freedom that the Internet has created, individuals can voice their ideas on political issues on a more regular and unfettered basis. Even as more governments are applying methods to block or regulate Internet access or content,<sup>39</sup> Internet freedom is still an essential and effective way of empowering citizens across the world. As the Internet in some countries, including Vietnam, is under tight control, Internet users in those countries are at the stage of trying to pursue the “values”<sup>40</sup> which underpin Internet-based freedom of expression so that they can use the Internet to disseminate their political opinions and ideas via blogs.

The classification of Vietnamese political blogs is based on the analysis of postings by twelve popular political bloggers who have gained a large number of followers in Vietnam. The data includes nearly 100 news stories and editorials collected from online newspapers and international media sources analyzing the development of the Internet, social media, the online community and the media in Vietnam from 2013 to 2015. Although the author began collecting data in January 2013, the main period of data collection was from mid-2014 to December 2015. During this period, the author followed a daily routine of checking five popular online newspapers and four out of the twelve blogs (each selected blog was checked every three days as some blogs were not updated daily).<sup>41</sup> The author copied the links and captured screenshots of any data relating to her research topic.

In addition to this source of “naturally occurring data”,<sup>42</sup> the author also conducted semi-structured interviews with nine participants including two political activists, two freelance bloggers and five Vietnamese journalists working for state-run newspapers who also have their own blogs or closely monitor the blogosphere. The interviews were completed during two field trips to Vietnam in 2012 and 2015. The topic was sensitive enough to require the approval of some participants, especially journalists currently working for state-run news agencies. Accordingly, some participants have been provided with pseudonyms to protect their identities. Audiotapes, transcriptions and translations of the interviews are protected with passwords to ensure their safety. The author subsequently coded the collected data using NVivo qualitative data analysis software after which final themes were categorized for analysis.

### Three Groups of Vietnam's Political Bloggers

#### *Group 1: Activist Bloggers*

Blogs in this group are created and managed by individuals or by groups who criticize government policies and actions or raise issues of public concern. Bloggers in this group include ordinary citizens, musicians, information technology specialists, journalists, lawyers and scholars, and their blogs are well known among the online community. Popular activist blogs include: *Bauxite Vietnam*, *Anh Ba Sàm* (Brother Ba Sam), *Điếu Cày* (Farmer's Pipe), *Đoan Trang*, *Mẹ Nấm* (Mama Nam), *Tuần Khanh*, *Quê Choa* (My Motherland) and *Huỳnh Ngọc Chênh*. The majority of these bloggers live in Vietnam, but some reside overseas either through choice or because they have been forced into exile. They are often identified in reports by international human right organizations as activists and dissidents.

Several notable features characterize activist blogs. The first common feature is that the postings on these blogs focus on issues of public concern that are either not mentioned at all, or only mentioned briefly, in the mainstream media. Activist bloggers write their critiques and opinions on such topics as Vietnam's territorial and maritime boundary disputes with China in the South China Sea, unfair sentences — including the death sentence — imposed by the courts, and the failure of government reform policies, resulting in, for example, lower than expected economic growth rates. Some activist bloggers have pushed the boundaries even further by discussing sensitive topics such as human rights, freedom and democracy. Their activities have been described as attempts to “fill the void left by the state-run media”.<sup>43</sup>

As social media activities have expanded, discussion of “sensitive content” has become broader and deeper. More activist bloggers have revealed their previously concealed identities and publicly questioned the legitimacy of the CPV, criticized Marxist ideology and expressed their dissatisfaction with senior leaders in the ruling Party. One important example of such “fence-breaking” blogging was a posting on 25 February 2013 by journalist Nguyen Dac Kien which criticized a speech by CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong.<sup>44</sup> This case was unprecedented because it involved a journalist working for a state-run newspaper, *Gia đình và Xã hội* (*Family and Society*), who directly challenged the Party chief. Kien was immediately dismissed from the newspaper, but his blog posting exemplifies the trend that some Vietnamese bloggers have moved beyond the “culture of fear”<sup>45</sup> to express their criticism of the CPV.

The second feature of activist blogs is the increasingly influential role of some bloggers who have acquired the status of “blogging gods”<sup>46</sup> among Vietnamese netizens. Activist bloggers have gradually increased the influence of their blogs because more users want to read about “forbidden issues” and sharp critiques which are forbidden in the mainstream media. Some political blogs, such as the *Anh Ba Sàm* blog written by Nguyen Huu Vinh, are regarded as a source of news and political commentary. Readers use the blog to obtain news, share comments and are even encouraged to get involved in the production process by sending information, comments and analyses.<sup>47</sup> Some famous bloggers have attracted so many followers that their page views exceeded those of state-run websites. The *Quê Choa* (My Homeland) blog of Nguyen Quang Lap, which is characterized by bitter and ironic comments mixed with humour, reached a milestone in 2012 when it achieved 100 million views.<sup>48</sup> The influential eponymous blogger Huynh Ngoc Chanh attracted an average of 15,000 visits per day according to Reporters Without Borders when awarding Chanh its “Netizen of the Year” in 2013.<sup>49</sup>

Although activist bloggers have gained more influence and public recognition, they constantly face risks in the form of being sent malware, being subjected to verbal and/or physical abuse and even being sent to prison. According to *Freedom on the net*, in 2015, twenty-nine netizens in Vietnam were imprisoned and eight bloggers were arrested, thereby highlighting the country’s record as one of the world’s worst jailers of bloggers.<sup>50</sup> The safety of political bloggers in this group has been closely monitored by international organizations as part of their assessments of the level of democracy and freedom in Vietnam.<sup>51</sup> In the past, harassment and arrests of bloggers often took place quietly, but Benedict Kerkvliet has shown that these incidents have become more openly discussed in the mainstream media.<sup>52</sup>

Recently, activist bloggers have networked with one another so that their voices can be heard by a larger number of people, both domestically and internationally. *The Network of Vietnamese Bloggers* and *Bauxite Vietnam* are typical of these joint activist blogs. Created in December 2013, *The Network of Vietnamese Bloggers* gathers individual bloggers across the country to criticize human rights violations in Vietnam. It was the first-ever organized network of Vietnamese bloggers which posted in English and sent representatives to visit Western embassies and the offices of human rights organizations in Vietnam to mobilize international support. Founded by three intellectuals, *Bauxite Vietnam* gained national prominence in 2009 when it published the provocative views of Vietnamese intellectuals who

opposed the government's plan to allow companies from China to exploit bauxite in the Central Highlands. Although it started with only ten postings in 2009, the entries increased more than 300-fold to 3,109 in 2010. In January 2015 alone, 156 entries were published on *Bauxite Vietnam*, at a rate of five new posts a day. While the blog's output is not on par with a news website, it is still very impressive as the topics it covers includes a broad range of social and political issues. In an interview with the BBC's Vietnamese news service, *Bauxite Vietnam* founder Nguyen Hue Chi suggested that the blog had "stirred up a civil movement" and that it was one of the few democratic voices in Vietnam.<sup>53</sup>

### *Group 2: Pro-CPV Bloggers*<sup>54</sup>

Blogs listed in this group are located at the other end of the political spectrum from the activist blogs in Group 1. Bloggers of the pro-CPV group often introduce themselves as retired officials, researchers, writers, soldiers or journalists working for state-owned media organizations, institutions, agencies or companies. For instance, pro-CPV blogger Nguyen Van Minh's message on his blog is "On the way of journalism and against wrong doings and reactionaries", while Nguyen Bien Cuong's blog is named *I am a soldier*.

Bloggers in this group voice their support for CPV leaders and their policies. They also fight back against comments by individuals and organizations advocating action against the CPV leadership or calling for democratization. These bloggers often refer to activist bloggers dismissively by using ironic nicknames such as "Mr and Mrs Democracy", the "Reactionary", or the "Betrayed" and accuse them of undermining the stability of the country. Pro-CPV bloggers also highlight the negative aspects of democracy. For example, blogger Nguyen Bien Cuong used the Charlie Hebdo shooting incident in Paris in January 2015 as an example of the need to "set limits against someone who has been boasting and encouraging freedom of expression in an extreme way".<sup>55</sup> In a posting published on 10 November 2015, the same blogger disparaged the victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy in the general election held in Myanmar in November 2015, stating that it was only under the leadership of the CPV that Vietnam could develop peacefully.<sup>56</sup>

It is widely believed that pro-CPV bloggers are not independent bloggers but are employed by the CPV to praise the Party and its policies. The phrase *Dư luận viên*<sup>57</sup> has been widely used in recent years to describe the people who are believed to work for the CPV and who



support the regime on social media. There are several ways to translate the phrase *Dư luận viên* into English, including propaganda agents, pro-government Internet commentators, Internet polemicists and pro-regime bloggers.<sup>58</sup> In a rare interview on the role of *Dư luận viên*, an official from the government's Propaganda and Education Department revealed that his department employed 900 Internet polemicists and managed some 400 online accounts and 20 microblogs "to monitor and direct online discussions on everything from foreign policy to land rights".<sup>59</sup> They are believed to be part of a network of an estimated 80,000 political propagandists, according to a story on a CPV news website.<sup>60</sup>

In fact, the task of these bloggers is more than just shaping public opinion on government policies. They are also paid to defend the leaders of various factions within the CPV. According to a post written by a former propaganda official, the Internet polemicists are required to protect CPV leaders against criticism posted by other bloggers working for other leaders. This has created a situation in which propaganda agents work in different groups for different senior leaders from the city to the central levels or for different departments of the CPV. Bloggers are willing to join in tit-for-tat arguments — known as "pen fighting" — with activist bloggers or even other propagandists to defend their respective factions.<sup>61</sup>

### *Group 3: Anonymous Bloggers*

The third group, anonymous blogs, is classified separately because little is known about the identity of these bloggers or the unexpected rise and fall of their blogs. Despite being anonymous and far less numerous than bloggers in the other two groups, their blogs can attract millions of viewers within a short space of time and become a magnet for public political discourse. The rapid rise in the popularity of these blogs can be explained in large part by their tendency to release WikiLeaks-style information targeting senior CPV leaders and their families. Usually, Vietnamese readers do not have access to such content in the mainstream media and so the postings of some anonymous bloggers have unsurprisingly gone viral.

One notable feature of the anonymous blogs is their intentional publication of information to either promote or discredit certain individuals. Anonymous bloggers are often highly active before a key national political event, but then fall silent immediately after the event. Typical anonymous bloggers are *Quan Làm Báo* (Officials Doing Journalism) or *Chân Dung Quyền Lực* (Portrait of Power). *Quan Làm Báo* first appeared in June 2012 but soon topped the page-view ratings among Vietnamese

weblogs with 15 million views within two months of the blog's launch. Postings written on this blog were all signed QLB, the first initials of *Quan Làm Báo*. While claiming to target corruption and support the cause of democracy in Vietnam, the majority of QLB's postings attacked Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and his family and supporters.<sup>62</sup>

Readers believe the sources published on anonymous blogs to be highly credible because subsequent events often demonstrate that the information they had posted was correct. The arrest of one of the richest bankers in Vietnam on 21 August 2012 was first posted on the QLB blog hours before the news was released on the mainstream media.<sup>63</sup> Many of QLB's postings exposed the million-dollar assets and business transactions of Prime Minister Dung and his close associates, accusing them of abusing power and mismanaging the economy. Within four months — from May to September 2012 — QLB published nearly 900 stories, including 150 stories copied from other opposition blogs and websites. This was the most productive period for this blog, just ahead of the Sixth Plenum of the 11th CPV Central Committee, at which Prime Minister Dung was openly challenged by his political rivals. Dung ultimately prevailed in the political confrontation,<sup>64</sup> and after the plenum ended QLB's blog was rarely updated.

In December 2014, Vietnamese netizens were attracted to another political blog, *Chân Dung Quyền Lực* (Portrait of Power) (see Figure 1), which used the same style of *Quan Làm Báo* but generated even more controversy. Once again, an unknown political blog quickly caught the public's attention with a series of posts alleging a plot to poison a popular senior anti-corruption official, Nguyen Ba Thanh, sometimes referred to as Vietnam's Alexander Litvinenko (a former Russian spy who was poisoned by radioactive-laced tea in London in November 2006, allegedly by members of the Russian security services).<sup>65</sup> While the state press was characteristically silent on this story, netizens talked about the *Chân Dung Quyền Lực* blog on and offline. This blog was the only space where readers were updated with daily news and photos detailing the health of Thanh who was said to have been diagnosed with myelodysplasia (a type of bone marrow cancer) and was receiving medical treatment in the United States.

Public interest forced the mainstream media to question officials regarding allegations that Thanh had been poisoned, and to request updates on his situation. Under increasing public pressure, senior health officials finally held a press conference during which they provided information about the politician's health and return to Vietnam.<sup>66</sup> Interestingly most

of the information they released concerning Thanh's health was released by the *Chân Dung Quyền Lực* blog. By then, it was too late for the Vietnamese mainstream media to convince the public that these blog postings were “bad and toxic” online rumours.

Figure 1  
**Front Page of *Chân Dung Quyền Lực*'s Blog**



Source: <<http://chandungquyenluc.blogspot.com.au/>>. The screen shot was captured on 25 February 2015.

Netizens made their own judgements on the information regularly updated on *Chân Dung Quyền Lực* and the blog attracted a record number of hits every day. By December 2014, hits on the *Chân Dung Quyền Lực* blog had jumped to nearly 16 million. However, the blog did not survive long. It was intensively updated daily for two months only — between December 2014 and January 2015 — which coincided with the 10th plenum of the 11th CPV Central Committee, a key political event at which the nominees for the leading positions in the country were selected. The blog stopped adding new posts on 29 January 2015. Table 1 summarizes the blog's coverage targeting the top four CPV leaders during this period. Some

leaders were heavily targeted in a series of strongly critical posts that accused CPV officials and their families of owning luxury assets such as houses and yachts, and generally using their positions to exploit the economy for their own personal gain. By contrast, other senior leaders at that time, such as the Vice Chairperson of the National Assembly Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam, were not targeted. Posts devoted to these officials were mainly positive or contained little information.

Table 1  
**Summary of Posts about Four Senior CPV Leaders on *Chân Dung Quyền Lực*'s Blog, November 2012 to January 2015**

<i>Name of Politician</i>	<i>Headlines</i>	<i>Date Range</i>	<i>Viewpoints</i>
1. Nguyễn Phú Trọng (CPV Party Chief)	9 headlines	04/07/2014 – 24/01/2015	Critical
2. Trần Đức Lương (State President)	8 headlines	24/03/2014 – 10/12/2014	Critical
3. Nguyễn Sinh Hùng (National Assembly Chairman)	10 headlines	11/11/2014 – 08/12/2014	Critical
4. Nguyễn Tấn Dũng (Prime Minister)	4 headlines	18/11/2012 – 25/01/2015	Supportive

*Source:* Author.

In a final surprise, the bloggers behind the group of anonymous blogs have never been identified despite the sensation they created. At the height of its popularity, the mainstream media repeatedly published news stories and interviews with media administrative officials urging the public to “boycott” *Chân Dung Quyền Lực* and “throw the bad and poisonous information in the rubbish bin”.<sup>67</sup> It is unclear how the anonymous bloggers managed to get away with criticizing some of the CPV’s top leaders without being shut down or having their identities revealed. Some observers have speculated that a high-level political figure may have been disseminating this information and had guaranteed the safety of these bloggers in order to gain political advantage.<sup>68</sup> However, others argue that these blogs were used as political weapons by the various CPV factions<sup>69</sup> and that they were indicative of internal power struggles within the Party.<sup>70</sup>

### **The Growing Influence of Political Blogs in Vietnam**

The categorization of the three groups of blogs demonstrates that Vietnam's community of bloggers is not only composed of activists and dissidents but also those who are employed by the CPV, or factions within it. The rising number and technical skills of these bloggers have made political blogs extremely influential in Vietnam. In contrast to the mainstream media, blogs appear to be a better way to inform the public of events which can reach millions of Internet users within a short space of time. With the involvement of pro-CPV bloggers and anonymous bloggers, political blogs are being utilized as tools to expose political scandals and infighting among political elites. These three categories of blogs support the notion that fighting among factions within the CPV continues and antagonists have reached out to the blogosphere.<sup>71</sup>

The existence of different kinds of blog groups reveals the disingenuous policy of Vietnamese officials in managing the blogosphere. On the one hand, the CPV refuses to recognize blogs as a journalistic activity and continues to crackdown on activist bloggers. On the other hand, blogs have been used by government officials to influence public opinion, expose political scandals and publicize sensationalist news. On the surface, the three kinds of blogging activities in Vietnam illustrate the beginning of online freedom of expression where bloggers can express their political viewpoints for or against the authorities. However, the rise of pro-CPV and anonymous bloggers — who seem to have had their safety guaranteed in contrast to the risks facing activist bloggers — proves that this kind of freedom is limited. Instead, online freedom has been distorted and used by Vietnamese leaders for their own political purposes. The politics of blogging is particularly risky for known activist bloggers who criticize the CPV.

The diversity of different political blogs also raises questions about blog readers in Vietnam. Vietnam's content consumers have benefitted from the evolution of the political blogosphere as they now have more choices of news sources other than the state-run press.<sup>72</sup> However, while readers are interested to read blogs, it is necessary to question the "truth or truthiness"<sup>73</sup> of the political information published on political blogs. The facts, figures and photos published on anonymous blogs generate a lot of political discourse among the online community, but the sources of this information are seldom revealed. This reality challenges the quality of blog-based arguments resulting in readers having to face the risk of being driven into a matrix of information where propaganda, truth, truthiness and lies are all mixed up together.

At this point, a key question is worth asking: can political blogs become a source of information capable of competing with Vietnam's state-run press? A survey by researcher Duong Thuy Nguyen in 2014 concluded that blogs and Facebook "promote grassroots reporting of 'untouched' issues" in Vietnam, provide "alternative viewpoints" other than that of the state media and "bolster critical discussions" on national issues.<sup>74</sup> The three groups of political bloggers in Vietnam represent a rising trend that the blogosphere is evolving towards becoming an "active online public sphere"<sup>75</sup> which has the potential to replace the state-owned press. The label *báo lề trái*<sup>76</sup> (left side press) has become a popular title for political blogs and other non-mainstream information sources, positioning such blogs in opposition to *báo lề phải* (right side press) or the mainstream press. The left side press and the right side press are not linked with the left-right political spectrum but is simply a way of referring to the two opposite streams of journalism in Vietnam. While the right side press is backed by the authorities, the left side press has been thriving thanks to the rapid development of the Internet and the support of audiences who crave more sources of information and critical viewpoints rather than the monotonous messages provided by the mainstream media.

The recent growth of political blogs has made *báo lề trái* (left side press) more popular among Vietnamese readers. Seen in the context where Vietnamese news media continue to be censored and barred from freely discussing sensitive topics, the mainstream media is likely to continue gradually losing readers and influence to political blogs. Some journalists who work for the state-run media realize that they cannot compete with the coverage of certain news topics on blogs because they are not provided with enough information or they are not allowed to write about these topics. As one former senior Vietnamese journalist commented, Vietnamese bloggers have the most important weapon on hand: information, something which mainstream media journalists are often denied.<sup>77</sup> Cyber technology has affected different social sectors in Vietnam, including the media which is typically seen through the development of online newspapers described as the "most popular", "most influential" and a "pro-reform voice" of Vietnam's state press.<sup>78</sup> However, this development is put under tight control through various layers of Vietnam's censorship system to keep online newspapers as a propaganda tool. Significantly, political blogs have been able to overcome the state controlled state media albeit with great difficulty in moving towards an Internet-based freedom of speech.

## Conclusion

This article has analyzed political blogging in Vietnam by examining the rise of three kinds of blogging, with each group representing different political targets and their influential role in contemporary Vietnamese society. The rising influence of political blogs in Vietnam shows the impressive transformation of the blogosphere, which has passed the stage of pushing the boundaries or “fence-breaking” to evolve into independent news sources with more professional quality writing, uncensored opinions and richer information. The blogosphere has become a battleground for ideologies, where activists argue for reform, supporters of the CPV praise its performance and political factions manipulate the public for their own purposes. Seen this way, political blogs show signals of growing to provide online freedom of expression as outlined by Dutton et al. for various voices openly supporting and even attacking the CPV. With this viewpoint, political blogs have made significant progress to circumvent the heavily censored mainstream media in Vietnam.

Vietnam’s cyber space is expanding quickly, so further academic study is required to continue monitoring the impact and future development of the blogosphere as it becomes more deeply involved in the political, economic and social life of the country. Three decades after economic reforms were first instituted in 1986, the Vietnamese people are demanding other reforms which go beyond economic restructuring. The Internet has blurred the lines previously drawn by the Vietnamese authorities, and political blogs, taking advantage of online freedom of expression, are likely to continue playing an important role in facilitating fundamental changes in Vietnamese politics and society.

## NOTES

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- <sup>31</sup> Sharbaugh, Robert and Brown, “How Social Networks Breathe Life into Vietnam's Public Sphere”, op. cit.
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- <sup>36</sup> Thiem Hai Bui, “The Influence of Social Media in Vietnam's Elite Politics”, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 2 (August 2016): 89–112.

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- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 33.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 18.
- <sup>41</sup> The twelve political blogs were selected based on their focus on political topics and popularity among blog readers (high number of Facebook followers and frequently mentioned on domestic and international media). The following blogs were listed in alphabetical order: Ba Sàm (Brother Ba Sam), Huỳnh Ngọc Chênh, Bauxite Vietnam, Mạng lưới Bloggers Việt Nam (The Network of Vietnamese Bloggers), Blog Osin, Quan Lâm Báo, Blog Nguyễn Văn Minh, Tôi là một người lính (I Am a Soldier), Chân Dung Quyền Lực, Tre Làng (Village Bamboo), Đoàn Trang, Tuấn Khanh’s blog.
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