

# Kill One to Warn One Hundred: The Politics of Press Censorship in Vietnam

The International Journal of Press/Politics

XX(X) 1–23

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1940161213508814

ijpp.sagepub.com



**Geoffrey Cain<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Recent literature on “soft authoritarianism” has called into question the extent to which policy, rather than personality and patronage, sets the direction of elite politics in the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). This strand of thinking argues that the state’s direction toward “reform” is not as coherent as commonly believed, a relevant model for examining the role of the state-owned print and online press as an arm of Vietnam’s post-communist marketization project. It argues that Party leaders, facing a breakdown of consensus across the spectrum of political and business elites, are using the press in an attempt to manage a growing number of voices in the political system, but that reporting on many political and corruption scandals has simply become unmanageable for state leaders. Under this paradigm, policy debates between “reformers” and “conservatives” in Vietnam fall short of explaining press censorship. This semidemocratic concept of the media’s role opens up room for a wider understanding of civil society under transitional regimes in Asia. This paper draws on twenty-nine interviews with Vietnamese journalists, editors, media executives, Vietnamese and foreign journalism trainers, and government officials from 2010 to 2011, as well as an analysis of press coverage and internal newsroom documents.

## **Keywords**

Vietnam, journalism, Internet and media censorship, Communist Party, marketization

---

<sup>1</sup>School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UK

### **Corresponding Author:**

Geoffrey Cain, Gyeonggi-do Yangju-si Baekseok-eub Beokji-ri, Kaya 2cha Apt. 201dong 109ho, South Korea 482-831.

Email: [Geoffrey\\_cain@soas.ac.uk](mailto:Geoffrey_cain@soas.ac.uk)

## Introduction: Press Censorship under the Politics of Marketization

On January 5, 2012, members of fish farmer Doan Van Vuon's family opened fire on more than one hundred police officers and soldiers trying to evict him and others from their homes in the Tien Lang district in the northern port city of Haiphong. He was being pushed off his state-owned plot a year before his lease was set to end (McKinley 2012). Six officers were injured in the fighting, leading Vuon and three relatives to be charged with attempted murder (Marr 2012). In a nation where economic decentralization has lent more political power to local and provincial officials, and where those figures are able to profit through land evictions in the countryside, the story was just like any other and at first did not receive much coverage. Vietnam's state-run press published quick reports based on police sources, which peddled the narrative that Vuon was a criminal who had used illegal firearms. A month later, however, the situation went from a hushed skirmish to a national imbroglio that the Communist Party was unable, and unwilling, to control. Two newspapers, *Nông thôn Ngày Nay* (*Countryside Today*) and *Pháp Luật Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* (*Ho Chi Minh City Law*), unearthed their own findings that district officials broke an earlier agreement reached in court and lied about statements made by witnesses (McKinley 2012).

The Tien Lang affair, as the case was called, released a torrent of popular grievances over corruption in local police departments. Yet rather than attempt to end the controversial and potentially damaging coverage as would be expected in this one-party state, leaders permitted the reporting to continue because, they even admitted publicly, exposing the local government malaise was also in its interests, while on the other hand, officials simply could not command press coverage over an incident that became so enormous. In February, relentless media criticism against district officials prompted Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to issue a rare statement announcing that heads would roll. The prime minister's spokesman publicly praised the two newspapers for providing "timely reports [that had] helped the central government agencies see the matter clearly and proceed to deal with it in an appropriate way." Newspapers, he said, did a good work "serving the nation" and "orienting public opinion" (Brown 2012: 1).

His comments on the Tien Lang affair summed up the tumultuous and often conflicted role of the state-controlled media in Vietnam: that the Party wants the press to be "a tool for managing society" (Hayton 2010: 158), a state-sanctioned watchdog that can keep a check on the growing power of decentralized bureaucrats, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and rival party factions while appeasing popular discontent against the regime itself. Indeed, the Tien Lang case had much power to undermine the party's legitimacy at a time when Vietnamese farmers and laborers complained that widespread corruption and inflation—at the time, the highest in Asia—was cutting sharply into their income. That the party-state correspondingly kept an evenhanded grip on the reporting that suggests this was not an example of complete press "liberalization," but one of partial liberalization when the political elite simply could not keep a lid on an explosion of press reporting, and found it in its interests to go along with popular

grievances. This protected the party's proclaimed status as the benevolent parent of national development.

This episode, however, did not mean that journalists were completely free to pursue hard-hitting investigative stories. Internet journalists and media executives later told the media researcher Catherine McKinley that they continued to be pressured by the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC) to remove critical reader comments from their websites. The government permitted wide publishing on this story because it involved a single farmer in a small district—hardly an example of heavy-weight corruption in the Politburo of Hanoi (McKinley 2012). By allowing for a flowering of controversial coverage, the party fashioned itself as having a popular mandate to address the grievances of the people while reasserting its control on the periphery.

With the Tien Lang model as a starting point, this paper will examine relations between the party-state and the government-supervised media in the contemporary political arena of Vietnam. In this system, the state-sanctioned press was the pragmatic creation out of the necessity to curb corruption, a major block to economic development, during the *Doi Moi* (renovation) marketization project starting in 1986. Because the press holds this task of informal policing, a study of Vietnamese journalism can reveal much about “civil society” in a period of economic growth without corresponding political “liberalization.” Relaxations and crackdowns against the press are purposefully unpredictable and arbitrary, although reporters run a higher risk of reprisals when they publish allegations against high-ranking officials. Because the media hold a political position directly under Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) elites, this pattern of persecution against them reveals much about how the media are used as a tool of enforcement from the political center, even if top leaders in Hanoi cannot keep complete control over the activities of increasingly profit- and justice-driven journalists. Indeed, the media do not always act in tandem with Party interests. They instead attempt to exploit the growing space between the regime’s political censorship of the media and the need to use the media as tools of economic development and of curbing corruption. (I am grateful to an anonymous peer reviewer for this phrasing.)

This paper is divided into four parts. The “Method” section lays out the procedure of and problems inherent in carrying out fieldwork in Vietnam, as well as the reasons for picking the two case studies. The literature review then delves into an examination of “soft authoritarianism” in Vietnam, summarizing institutional, informal, and patronage-based theories of state and civil society. A brief comparison to China, which is experiencing a similar path toward marketization directed by party elites, isolates factors that may explain why Vietnamese bureaucratic mechanisms seek to exploit a state-supervised semiwatchdog press. The background section then analyzes how and why the Party, during and after the *Doi Moi* economic reforms, gives the press the awkward position of state-sponsored watchdog, a role that reinforces the state’s ability to allow for controversial coverage and then halt it if reportage moves too high up the food chain. The paper finishes with two case studies that demonstrate how the press continues to be used in a similar manner today, and concludes on a note with relevance to the broader study of comparative journalism under transitional states.

## Method

This paper makes use of a number of first-person and secondary sources. It draws on ten months of field research in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi carried out from August 2010 to June 2011 on a Fulbright grant. The author interviewed twenty-nine journalists, bloggers, editors, media businesspeople, public relations officers, and government officials, although not all interviews are used in this paper because not all are relevant to the case studies. Of the total, twenty-seven of them wished to remain anonymous due to the politically sensitive nature of this research. This approach is common in Vietnam where McKinley (2009) and Gainsborough (2010) have similarly used anonymous sources when looking into corruption cases, land evictions, and media issues. To corroborate spoken statements, the author made use of internal briefings obtained from one newspaper in Ho Chi Minh City, peer-reviewed journal articles, quantitative counts of the article headlines on newspaper front pages (to measure the public-image priorities of the party, state, and press), *Tap Chi Cong An (Communist Review)* articles that lay out official party strategy, and American government cables published in 2010 by Wikileaks. In the absence of much peer-reviewed material on this topic, the diplomatic cables are a valuable, thorough resource for a topic muddled by rumor. The American embassy in Hanoi and consulate in Ho Chi Minh City take a keen interest in the Vietnamese press and blogosphere, and it is one of the few institutions, to the author's knowledge, that has penned well-referenced analyses of media coverage.

After laying out the literature review and background, the author presents these findings through two case studies: first, the 2010–2011 near-bankruptcy of the state-run shipbuilder Vinashin during preparations for the eleventh National Party Congress; and second, a controversial bauxite mining project in the Central Highlands. The author merged two events—the Vinashin near-collapse and the Congress—into one case study because in the course of research both turned out to be politically inseparable. Both transpired within months of each other: the Vinashin story broke in July 2010, and the eleventh Party Congress convened in January 2011, and the Party's press censorship around the former melded into the coverage of the latter. This first case study shows how the Party uses the press to launch “thrusts” against corruption at subordinate levels, which can also be used to hurt the political prospects of high-ranking rivals who support them. The second case study reveals how the government responded to “elite resistance” against the bauxite mining proposal. This refers to the tendency in Vietnamese politics of the Communist Party to be attuned to pressure from elites rather than from the *body politic*, and when elites flare up against Party policy, it usually relaxes its restrictions on press coverage.

## Literature Review: Vietnamese Civil Society under Soft Authoritarianism

Nonacademic literature, produced by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the international mass media, typically use the moniker “state-run press” to describe the

Vietnamese media, a label that gives an accurate but at times incomplete impression of a highly restricted environment. The three largest censorship watchdog groups place Vietnam near the bottom of their international rankings, often a few spots ahead of China, Iran, and North Korea in terms of media and Internet freedoms. In its 2013 Freedom of the Press rankings, for instance, Freedom House labeled the Vietnamese media “not free” (Freedom House 2013: 1). Reporters without Borders (2013) ranks Vietnam number 172 out of 179 countries, a decline that owes to the five arrests of reporters in 2011 and that has remained steady since then. Finally, in its 2012 Attacks on the Press report, the Committee to Protect Journalists (2013) placed Vietnam as the sixth worst nation for bloggers, behind Myanmar and Saudi Arabia but in front of China. In an earlier report, the organization noted a growing clampdown against the media: in 2007, two reporters were imprisoned, while in 2011, that number more than quadrupled to nine journalists and bloggers imprisoned in a single year (Committee to Protect Journalists 2012).

While the rankings correctly suggest a grim picture, it would be an understatement to conclude that the Vietnamese media bow down to state direction and do not pursue their own controversial coverage, which, in nearly all interviews, respondents said were driven by both profit and egalitarian motives. Such a top-heavy picture overlooks the fervor of Vietnamese investigative journalists, and seeing these reporters as state-employed watchdogs goes contrary to the common framework, popular among academic theorists during the early-1990s, of binary opposition between an independent, nonstate affiliated press and civil society that can uphold checks and balances against the state (Cohen and Arato 1992). The logic of this view, taken at face value without added nuance, can easily lead to a false dichotomy between authoritarian censorship and democratic press freedom; in Vietnam, the state maintains checks and balances within, rather than outside, the one-party system, and the press is one-party-supervised institution used to balance off the power of other groupings. The problematic posturing of the media is evidenced in the fact that authoritarianism has not stopped the country’s fiery newspapers, magazines, and news websites in major cities, many of which focus on uncovering corruption and political gossip partially as a way of turning out a profit from general readers. Given the aggressiveness of this sphere of Vietnam’s “civil society” in the face of a one-party regime, a more pertinent question to ask would be “To what extent can the Party, which views the news media both as a propaganda mouthpiece and a watchdog, be seen as both popular as well as authoritarian?”

The case studies in this paper lend support to the idea that press–state relations, far from being strictly authoritarian, are determined by the breakdown of elite consensus and pluralization of Vietnamese society, as well as the rise of money politics, patronage, and models of “bureaucratic socialism”—the last term defined by Porter as “legal-rational centralization with economic liberalization” (Porter 1993: 128). Under this system, the CPV tolerates some criticism, mostly internal, as an instrument of rule, while occasionally and arbitrarily striking down at detractors who venture outside a hazy red line: that is, the writing of these dissidents directly threatens the party-state’s claim to legitimacy, which it bases on combination of economic performance, revolutionary history and national unification (Abuza 2001: 21). Dixon (2004: 25–31) calls

this system “soft-authoritarian corporatism,” a reference to a fragmented state that delegates some roles to society in a trend toward gradual pluralization, while maintaining overall control over national development. In a wider theoretical context, this academic lineage places Vietnam in the realm not far from Herbert Marcuse’s (1969: 95-137) “repressive tolerance,” the idea that some conditions of tolerance serve domination by the state.

“Repressive tolerance” can elucidate the role of the press in Vietnam’s one-party but increasingly pluralistic system. In the early-1980s, before Vietnam embarked on its marketization project, the press consisted of a handful of sporadically published newspapers whose circulation suffered from a paper shortage and poverty. In a modification of what Romano (2005: 4–5) calls, “development journalism,” or the tendency in some Asian press outlets to support the development goals of the state, the state media advocated for the party line of Marxism–Leninism, and particularly for the state orthodoxy of building national self-reliance through collective efforts following the Second Indochina War. Today, the Party remains in power. However, mainstream newspapers and websites, while diverging regularly on controversial debates over the environment and political corruption, peddle largely homogeneous views that support the legitimacy of the Communist Party and its rightful hold on society—reflecting the trend toward “repressive tolerance” despite a widening media discourse.

One parallel to “repressive tolerance” in the realm of media can be found in the works of Hallin (1989: 116-118), who, in discussing the unrelated topic of American media coverage of the Vietnam War, laid out three “spheres” of discourse: the sphere of consensus, the sphere of legitimate controversy, and the sphere of deviance. The sphere of consensus contains reporting on which there is a widespread agreement, or areas of moral clarity in the United States on topics such as slavery and the equality of all human beings. The sphere of legitimate controversy is a middle ground where reporters feel the need to be objective, balancing several views on which there remains disagreement, such as partisan politics, the use of drone strikes, and universal health coverage in the United States. The sphere of deviance covers outlying views deemed not worthy of consideration, such as tales of alien abductions and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories.

In the more totalitarian Vietnamese media coverage of the late-1970s, the spheres of consensus and deviance steamrolled over the nearly nonexistent sphere of legitimate controversy. This was due to the near-total agreement among conservative elites, led by Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, who commandeered the press and Party journal to promote the 1975 victory over South Vietnam, the collectivization of rice farming, national reconstruction, the 1979 invasion and occupation of Cambodia, and the reeducation of “hostile elements” such as landowners and former government and military officials working for the defunct South Vietnamese state. In other words, Vietnamese journalists, who held trusted party credentials, gave little thought at the time to publishing views lingering in the “sphere of deviance.” Before internal Party debates published in the official Communist Party journal became more heated in the late-1970s, these topics would have included gradual marketization and a relaxation of collectivization.

Because of the pluralization of Vietnamese society in the 1990s and 2000s, the middle “sphere of legitimate controversy” has been enlarged, giving the media far greater publishing space. Today, passionate debates occur in the press over political corruption in the police force and the state, various environmental projects, the overall direction of the Party, and Vietnamese society, to name some examples. At the same time, the state-supervised press continues to have a strong sense of the boundaries of the sphere of deviance and sphere of consensus. Despite the increasingly rambunctious rhetorical battles over the implementation and trends in government policy, the Communist Party remains the sole legitimate hand guiding national development, and any voice diverging from this is an outlier in the sphere of deviance. This dynamic places the press in the ironic position of being a state-sanctioned watchdog under state authority, a form of “repressive tolerance” in which journalists are allowed to push the boundaries in an ever-widening “sphere of legitimate controversy.”

Understanding the growing role of this “sphere of legitimated controversy” also requires examining Vietnam’s semiauthoritarian politics and the expansion of grassroots civil society networks. Andrew Wells-Dang emphasizes informal networks as a benchmark for measuring the changes in state–society relations over the past three decades. He contends that the one-party state does not have the resources to control—and quite often overlooks—the spread of “informal and virtual networks” that have crept into the state-run “civil society,” giving it a more popular mandate outside of state institutions. He argues that the consensus of a civil society based on “corporatist associations or autonomous non-profit organizations” gives the wrongheaded impression that civil society actors report directly to the state apparatus, when they rather comprise an active citizenship contesting the political system over which the Party does not maintain complete domination (Wells-Dang 2012: 4–15). In his examinations of what he calls “rice-roots democracy,” Wells-Dang backs this assertion by pointing to the increasing number of public demonstrations (what he calls the “literal” form of political space) and dissenting media and blogging activity (the “virtual” arm), which are both tolerated as long as they do not attack the rule of the Party itself (Wells-Dang 2010: 96).

Likewise, political elites no longer have control over the potpourri of voices in the state-supervised press, so they work in harmony with newspapers while at other times attempting to restrict them when the coverage moves too high on the political food chain. In other words, this thesis is careful neither to underestimate the agency of the media nor to privilege the omniscience of the Party: Politburo elites sometimes receive compliance from reporters and editors through self-censorship and the threat of arrest, but journalists also push the boundaries in a form of fierce resistance (a collision of “top-down” and “bottom-up” forces) motivated by a search for justice as well as profit. As the case studies will demonstrate, when elite consensus collapses and various party groupings openly fight over key issues such as the environment, corruption, and political direction of the Party, the press can skirt punishment, publishing its most aggressive allegations of corruption and environmental degradation. It is only when the media get too bold that they face government reprisals.

Wells-Dang put forward a compelling model looking at nonelites, but when examining the role of the press, it is also necessary to take into account the Party elites who journalists ultimately report to despite growing pluralization. This paper looks to the writings of Martin Gainsborough, who has advanced the idea that Vietnamese elite politics is based predominantly on personality, money, and patronage—to which questions of policy are secondary. In *Vietnam: Rethinking the State*, Gainsborough (2010: 6) summarizes problems with the orthodox view of “reform,” preferring to use the more neutral word “marketization,” namely, that it overlooks the reality that what people call “policy” is actually “a disparate collection of elite actions and counteractions . . . much less coherent than is thought.” The reform paradigm promotes an illusory division between the CPV’s “reformist” and “conservative” factions, which are constantly changing and not based on policy (Gainsborough 2010: 140). With this paradigm in mind, this paper also uses the word “marketization” except in cases where the author is quoting or summarizing the views expressed in other documents or interviews.

Gainsborough partially frames Vietnamese politics in terms of the logic of decentralization and “recentralization.” He applies this model to explain the rise in corruption cases brought against large businesses since the late-1990s, arguing that these court charges constitute “thrusts toward recentralization” in which “the centre has sought to regain the initiative” after ceding power to decentralized business interests (Gainsborough 2010: 152). However, the “center” brings these and other allegations forward without much coherency or predictability. Gainsborough (2010: 71) thus suggests that the Party (and its loose factions) use “uncertainty” as an “instrument of rule.” What does Gainsborough’s framework mean for an understanding of Vietnamese civil society and more specifically for the state-run press? Kerkvliet, for one, has noted a parallel pattern of vagueness in the jailing of activists. Analyzing the arrests of dissidents since the 1990s, he points out that even a revolutionary family background and strong party credentials do not always protect a critic from imprisonment, and that while many dissidents lose their jobs and are jailed, the Party tolerates criticism with “unevenness” (Kerkvliet 2010: 14–15). Taking this hypothesis further, the system simply lacks the reach and resources to punish every transgressor, preferring to discipline a handful of exemplars to keep the rest in line. (I am thankful to David Brown, a former American diplomat in Vietnam, for raising this point.) In other words, as goes a Chinese proverb, “Kill one to warn a hundred.” The phrase was chosen for the title for this paper because of its parallels with the situation in Vietnam. In China, the axiom gained popularity in March 2009, when the Chinese government shut down a dissident law firm, Yitong, for taking on several controversial cases (Human Rights in China 2009).

McKinley has used Gainsborough’s work to document the rise of the more decentralized, but still state-supervised, mass media (alongside a growing business sector, underlying their profit motive) in correlation with the economic and political growth of Ho Chi Minh City in the 1990s, where the most widely read newspapers are now based (Gainsborough 2003; McKinley 2007). These southern newspapers, such as *Tuoi Tre* and *Thanh Nien*, which are circulated all over the country, are more distant



from the “center” in Hanoi. The expanse is reflected in the greater liberties they take in publishing controversial articles on corruption and environmental degradation, as well as in the relative financial independence of newspapers in Ho Chi Minh City run by youth organizations rather than the Communist Party proper. In her three quantitative studies, McKinley charts out the surfeit of news articles that expose corruption in the south, noting that fewer newspapers expose corruption when they are “close to the sun” (McKinley 2007: 24–26; McKinley 2008: 5–9; McKinley 2009: 18–22).

To finish, a brief comparison with China, which has experienced a similarly boisterous story of economic growth, may help flesh out the factors that lead Vietnam to employ the press in this way. Vietnamese leaders act in the presence of elite institutions that, compared to China, “require construction of broader coalitions of policy-makers, place more constraints on executive decision making, and have more competitive selection processes,” argue Malesky, Abrami, and Zheng (2011, 409). Nonetheless, the broader paradigm of “recentralization” and media as an internal “checks and balances” tool stands in both countries. The use of the Chinese media to discipline corrupt officials became prominent in the 1990s under Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, when China was relaxing its markets and decentralizing its system in a parallel manner to what Vietnam did over the same decade. Parallels are to be found in the work of Peter Lorentzen, who, describing muckraking journalism after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China, pinpoints a remarkably similar pattern in which the Party allowed press coverage that painted a negative picture of corrupt lower level officials, both out of its pragmatic interests of disciplining them, and because the Beijing party center simply could not control newspaper articles about such a catastrophic event. Similar to the situation reported by media research subjects during periods of open reporting in Vietnam, there was also evidence in China of strife at the top level. Both the state-supervised media and civil society groups were given free rein in the disaster zone, even though many admitted in survey by Beijing Normal University that they depended on government connections to get access to the area (Shieh and Deng 2011: 185–87). Lorentzen (2011: 2) writes,

The implicit theory of reformers versus oppressors, while commonplace in discussions both of China and of other authoritarian regimes, does a poor job of explaining the evolution and current state of China’s media environment . . . Instead, the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] is consciously making use of journalists as a check on corruption and poor performance in lower levels of government.

Other China-focused accounts support the model. Liebman contends that judiciary–media relations in China can be characterized by “competitive supervision,” meaning the Party uses the media as an informal mechanism to keep the reins on lower level courts. Media coverage “encourages Communist Party officials to intervene in the courts, reaffirming Party oversight of the judiciary and producing rushed trials in which assuaging populist demands for harsh treatment of defendants is more important than legal standards,” he writes (Liebman 2011: 834).

## Background: *Doi Moi* and the Need for Vietnamese Muckraking

As the literature suggests, the Vietnamese party-state, like in China, sees the press as a tool for managing decentralization and factionalism, even if journalists are partially free in pursuing these stories. This pattern owes to the state's changing political and economic needs during *Doi Moi*, the market reform of the mid-1980s. In 1986, the CPV tasked the media (at the time consisting of five scantily circulated newspapers because of a paper shortage) with addressing popular grievances over low-level corruption, which had contributed to the economic crisis and food shortages under the post-1976 collectivization attempts (Heng 1998: 32–34). This media restructuring, however, put the press in the awkward position: all publications were (as they continue to be) wholly or owned partially by the state, but were suddenly being ordered to locate corruption within it. McKinley points to this development as the first reason why leaders have been able to take an ad hoc attitude toward the media since the early-1990s (McKinley 2009).

The CPV, cautious about the effects of a boisterous press, reinforced its arbitrary capabilities by passing a conflicting juxtaposition of laws, decrees, and constitutional amendments that permitted media criticism while essentially making it a crime. At the height of legislative changes in 1990, the government pushed through the Press Law, which gave reporters the legal right to gather their own information and made it a crime to obstruct their work. In a contrarian fashion, though, the law stipulated that the media must act as a “forum for the people” while being a “mouthpiece of the Party,” opening them to subjective criminal charges (Hayton 2010: 142). In a more widely reaching move in 1992, the government passed a new Constitution that essentially guaranteed freedom of speech while, through various laws, making criticism of the CPV an offense. Under this legal framework, all newspapers were required to legally answer to the MIC and Ministry of Public Security. Today, the MIC continues to hold a weekly meeting with top editors every Tuesday morning to review the previous week's coverage and to discuss the permissibility of the next week's stories (Hayton 2010).

As literacy rose and readership widened, the state quickly ceded to demands for more newspapers that could clean up corruption and aid the nascent marketization project. Throughout the late-1980s and early-1990s, more publications opened, putting out different views representing various orbits outside the administrative center in Hanoi, while the existing ones expanded with new bureaus despite ultimately answering to the Politburo. Those at the periphery today still have more, albeit limited, room to pursue controversial stories (McKinley 2007). These proximities are reflected in the fact that Vietnam's two largest outspoken newspapers are based in Ho Chi Minh City and are run by communist youth unions that are central to the party proper but pursue reformist stories to fulfill their profit role for their respective organizations. To name the most well-known example, *Tuổi Trẻ* (Youth), which operates under the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Organization, is the country's most-read newspaper with a daily circulation of 400,000. Its rival, *Thanh Niên*, is the official paper of the Ho Chi

Minh Youth League and runs 280,000 copies daily. Smaller progressive papers in the city include *Tiền Phong* (Vanguard) and *Sài Gòn Giải Phóng* (Saigon Liberation). The three most progovernment outlets, however, are based in Hanoi. *Nhân Dân* (The People) is the official newspaper of the CPV Central Committee and one of the five newspapers already running at the time *Doi Moi* began in 1986. *Lao Động* (Labor) is the publication of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor, the party's umbrella union organization, and does not publish its circulation numbers. The Vietnam News Agency is the official state wire service, which publishes a progovernment newspaper, *Vietnam News*.

Vietnam was a latecomer to legalize the Internet in 1997, soon allowing the media to reach a wider audience and to include a more diverse set of voices. The mid-2000s, in particular, marked the rapid expansion of Internet journalism that was loosely state-controlled. In 2000, 0.3 percent of the population, or two hundred thousand people, were Internet users; in 2011, that number was 34 percent or 31 million users (Vietnam Internet Network Information Center [VNNIC] 2012). In 2007, the liberal and partially state-owned news site VietNamNet joined the list of the country's most popular online publications, claiming to attract 4 million viewers who generated one hundred million page views per day (Nguyen 2007). The website pushed the limits in uncovering government and business malaise and contributed to the professionalization of Vietnamese journalism by sending its reporters to trainings around the world.

Despite intermittent crackdowns mostly in the late-1990s, the rise of Internet journalism was the last significant development in an overall trajectory toward a strong, party-credentialed press corps that could enforce checks and balances within, rather than from outside, the CPV. In 2003, the central party-state got precisely the victory it wanted out of its growing press, when investigative reporters helped implicate Ho Chi Minh City mafia boss Nam Cam, along with his city government cronies who resisted police investigations. In 2004, Nam Cam and four other gang members were executed (Vasavakul 2003). Quickly, however, the CPV "center" realized it had unleashed a potential threat and had to curb the growing autonomy of the press during Vietnam's largest corruption scandal in the last decade, the Project Management Unit 18 (PMU-18) Affair from 2006 to 2008. The imbroglio revealed that journalists were indeed willing to publish investigations that went as high as the prime minister's office and that increasingly scattered party factions would go to great lengths to leverage the press in their favor during these scandals. The problems began in January 2006, when *Nguoi Lao Dong* revealed that the arrest of a low-level traffic officer, who had bet \$1.8 million in Japanese and World Bank aid money on soccer matches, for petty bribery had led detectives up to the head of a corporation. Digging deeper, reporters found that the chair of the state's best-funded development agency, PMU-18, a body charged with road-building projects for the Ministry of Transport, had overseen the gambling ring. *Thanh Nien* and *Tuoi Tre* ran stories incriminating PMU-18's then-boss, Nguyen Viet Tien, who was quickly arrested for diverting the donor funds (Hayton 2010).

In a rarity, newspapers all over the country published articles and op-eds pummeling the national ministerial leadership—a topic that was almost always off-limits under the *Doi Moi* media model. But in April 2006, the reversal of fortunes started

when *Thanh Nien* went too far, publishing bribery allegations against PMU-18's new director, *Đặng Hoàng Hải*. He was the son-in-law of one of the most powerful men in the country at the time, then-CPV General Secretary Nông Đức Mạnh. Despite being sentenced to thirteen years in prison in 2007, along with seven others, he never served the sentence; the party suspended the investigation against him and then, in August 2008, arrested and sentenced two respected journalists who unearthed the allegations, while *Tuoi Tre* fired two editors who oversaw the coverage (Hayton 2010). This period marked a significant decline in press and online freedoms, with several bloggers also arrested in the mid- and late-2000s. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung has also stepped up censorship by signing the Decree on Cultural and Information Activities, stipulating that reporters could be fined for writing articles that relied on anonymous sources and required articles to be reviewed by the state before publication (Government of Vietnam 2006). Decree No. 2, signed in January 2011, also laid down fines of \$50 to \$2,000 when journalists fail to "provide honest domestic and international news in accordance with the interests of the country and the people" (Human Rights Watch 2011). However, the edicts, like most in Vietnam, are only enforced when political elites decide to punish someone.

### **Case Study I: Vinashin and the Eleventh Party Congress**

The first case study will demonstrate how patronage, factionalism, and personality influenced press coverage of the near-bankruptcy of the state-run shipbuilder Vinashin in 2010 and 2011, and the subsequent eleventh Party Congress to which it is linked. The press became a two-pronged party tool: first, for circumventing the bureaucratic procedures in the Ministry of Public Security to "punish" provincial-level Vinashin executives, and to discredit Prime Minister Dung right before he was up for reelection at the eleventh Party Congress. Vinashin was the crown jewel of Dung's SOEs, and the dependency of these companies was part of a project to model state companies after the South Korean *chaebol* (Malesky, Schuler, et al. 2011), or sprawling conglomerates that drive national development. The government doled out billions of dollars to Vinashin, hoping to turn Vietnam into the world's fourth biggest shipbuilder by 2018. By 2007, the company was taking advantage of its state backing and funding from foreign investors to open one subsidiary every one and half days in noncore areas such as hotels, motorbike manufacturing, and fruit sales (Cheshier 2009), and by 2010, it had branched out inefficiently into 300 noncore units (Hayton 2010).

In August 2010, the company nearly collapsed under \$4.4 billion worth of debt, equivalent to 5 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP), a cataclysm that ignited a press frenzy as reporters blamed the company's poor governance and management practices, and speculated about complacency among political leaders. Large state newspapers and analysts capitalized on a state audit that month that alleged gross negligence on the part of top executives, who signed relationship-based contracts that served little economic value, and who invested in fourteen provinces as a way of diversifying support from the Central Committee (Malesky, Schuler, et al. 2011). In August 2010, Vinashin chairman Pham Thanh Binh was arrested and, in December,

the conglomerate defaulted on the \$400 million Credit Suisse loan. In March 2012, eight executives were sentenced including the CEO, who was handed twenty years in prison (Hookway 2012).

As to be expected in this press model of recentralization driven by elites, coverage at first focused on provincial-level corruption and did not go higher than this informal mandate. Furthermore, because it followed pattern of exposing corruption right before Congresses often to shore up votes (Malesky, Schuler and Tran 2011: 337-339), the conundrum was being treated as a political rather than a law enforcement issue. This is evidenced by the fact that the debt quandary was first brought up to the press through the Party Inspection Committee, the body charged with auditing and disciplining party members, according to three editors in Hanoi (Anonymous Editor 2010a, 2010b; Anonymous Journalist 2010c) and corroborated by Thayer's analysis (Thayer 2010a). This political body reported to Sang as then-head of the Party Secretariat at the time. Usually, such as during the PMU-18 Affair, allegations have been released to the press via the traditional route of the Ministry of Public Security but not this time. As the Vinashin project was advocated by Dung, who as head of government had the power to appoint police leaders, the debacle became the cause célèbre of political rivals seeking a Party, rather than government, solution outside of his immediate grip (Thayer 2010a).

Two editors and one journalist said this oddity was widely noticed and exploited, because the newspapers hoped to cover a corruption scandal that could rival PMU-18 (Anonymous Journalist 2010c, 2010d, 2010e). "When the factions fight, we can write about pretty much anything we want," said one reporter at *Tuoi Tre*, "but only if it will be accepted politically," referring to his rule of thumb of not publishing allegations of wrongdoing too high in the hierarchy.

On the one hand, we felt the pressure to make a profit, because even though we are [sic] doing well on money, we cannot let go of the chance to investigate and expose corrupt officials so we can sell papers. But we also felt a sense of justice. This was a serious problem in Vietnam and most reporters enter this field and criticize the government for justice, not money.

Further supporting Gainsborough's model of media-party relations, another editor added that the government's notion of "politically acceptable" is left purposefully vague, opening newspapers up to harassment should they cross the hazy line. For instance, at one weekly editorial meeting with the MIC, another high-ranking editor said that journalists were repeatedly given orders to "act in the interests of the people" and to "find solutions for the Party" when covering corruption in Vinashin, but that MIC officials would not clarify the precise meaning of this statement.

Their statements appear to be corroborated by the Party's written stance toward news reporting on the scandal, summarized in *Tap chí Cộng Sản* (Communist Review), the official party journal. The publication put forward a press strategy that emphasizes "finding effective solutions for re-structuring," and in an analysis by one professor,

urges the Party to punish those responsible as a way of sowing political legitimacy (Vuong 2010: 43). The author further writes,

While public attention has been given in particular to the arrest of a number of Vinashin's senior managers and the appointment of new top managers for the Group, there has been insufficient critical review and analysis of the causes of Vinashin's difficult situation, the evidence of corporate revitalization or of the work done by the members of the group in the last few months to restore confidence in the "brand" of one of Vietnam's biggest companies. (Vuong 2010: 43)

One mid-level MIC official (Anonymous 2011) backed this position in an interview, although he would not comment on the precise contents of those press meetings. He suggested that the Party was balancing the need to criticize SOE managers against the necessity of protecting its own legitimacy (by, he specified, showing readers that the government was trying to clean up corruption rather than partaking in it).

Although four of the most-read state-run newspapers and websites—*Tuoi Tre*, *Thanh Nien*, VietNamNet, and Nhan Dhan—did not directly incriminate the prime minister, they were given a party-sponsored opportunity to connect him to the debacle during his self-criticism session before the National Assembly on November 24, 2010. On national television, Dung took personal responsibility for the "government's shortcomings and weaknesses" that led to the conglomerate's downfall (Ruwitch 2010). Around the same time, from November 24 to 26, the four main newspapers began shifting their coverage away from the arrested executives and toward the prime minister's role in promoting the SOE model. From November 10 to 23, four out of eleven *Tuoi Tre* front pages surveyed and five out of eleven *Thanh Nien* front pages carried articles on the Vinashin executives, as well as broader SOE inefficiencies pegged to the Vinashin scandal. From November 24 to 29, all four front pages in each newspaper carried stories analyzing Dung's presumed admission of guilt, even though they did not tie it into big-picture political maneuvering before the Congress. This suggests that some Party elites were cautiously gaming the press system to make an example of Dung, but taking care not to unleash a PMU-18-style scandal, an unintended consequence that could upset the leadership transition.

Such a reality is further evidenced by the fact that the pioneering site VietNamNet faced a swift strike. The website took more liberties in writing about state corruption and unspecified leadership than other newspapers (O'Flaherty 2011). On January 4, 2011, one week before the congress was set to begin, the MIC removed Nguyen Anh Tuan, the website's quasi-celebrity founder, from his post, and the website came under a series of hacking attacks from a mysterious origin (O'Flaherty 2011). Press commentators used the label "murky" to describe the situation, because they could not figure out which coverage prompted the attacks and removal, and why other newspapers were not being targeted for similar reporting (O'Flaherty 2011: 2); rather, it seemed the Party was striking strategically before the Congress as a preemption and warning.

Two months after the prime minister's public self-criticism, the eleventh Party Congress commenced from January 11 to 19, 2011. There was a general reluctance, even among *Tuoi Tre* and *Thanh Nien*, to publish bold reporting as they have done on topics like the environment and local-level corruption. A weekly internal briefing from *Tuoi Tre* on January 16, 2011, summarizes the strategy of publishing interviews with top officials who have more freedom to talk openly about the party's problems, but there is no mention of pursuing on-the-ground investigative reporting. It writes,

The stories of those who are the journalists writing about the Party, concerning issues of corruption and waste relevant to Party members and the people are still a serious issue. But . . . the voices of insiders . . . have made the content not as heavy. With current events we're making a focus on "Hope" and "Youth and Great Challenges," with *Tuoi Tre*'s opinions being expressed, though in a composed and subtle manner . . . We've been able to distinguish ourselves from the other newspapers with our exclusives relating to problems within the Party. We've had two consecutive news issues that have pursued such problems, and we are going to organize an interview raising every point of view regarding essential issues that the Party must address. (*Tuoi Tre* 2011: 3)

The briefing goes on to explain some reluctance to take the investigative reporting too far during a sensitive time. It raises a quibble over a front-page story, on January 12, 2011, which made the error of displaying wrinkled voting ballots with Ho Chi Minh's portrait—a sort of blasphemy that could be used as a pretext for punishment.

This is the first time ever that party members have been seen withdrawing voting cards so sloppily, and with a photo of Uncle Ho on the party cards at that! We could be cited for using a photo in this manner. (*Tuoi Tre* 2011: 3)

Such an example shows a cautious and self-censoring press during this period, and with this relative quaintness, the Central Committee delegates continued meeting until January 19 with no significant leadership or policy changes. The Vinashin issue hurt Dung, but leaders did not allow the press to reach as far as PMU-18 once did. Dung resisted attempts to be ousted and was reelected to a second five-year term, while his main rival Sang was elected the president of Vietnam as he retained power in the Politburo rather than government. (It is still unclear precisely how Dung survived this test despite facing low popularity.) More than one year later, the *Communist Review* released a summary praising the press for "continuing to implement the resolutions of the 11th Party Congress," and reinforcing a vague role in helping the party curb economic problems.

Over the past one year, the press and publication services have fulfilled their socio-political functions, contributing to disseminating the Party's political tasks, important solutions of the Government on inflation control, prevention of economic downturn, stabilization of macro economy, and insurance of social security for sustainable development. (Doan 2012: 1)

## **Case Study 2: Bauxite Mining, “Elite Resistance,” and Press Coverage**

This case study demonstrates how, similar to the Vinashin episode, the press can report widely on a provincial-level environmental issue with national market implications. Like Vinashin reporting, this case also reveals more about the responsiveness of the party to other elites and to the press, opening up space for muckraking journalists when “elite resistance” from the top flares up against these local officials. Vietnam is estimated to hold 5.4 billion tons of bauxite ore, thought to be among the largest number of reserves in the world. About 4.4 billion of those reserves are in Dak Nong, one of the poorest provinces in the Central Highlands, while the rest is primarily located in the nearby Lam Dong and Dak Lak provinces (US Consulate General Ho Chi Minh City 2009). The highly valued mineral is strip mined as the raw material for alumina, which in turn can be refined into aluminum (although Vietnam does not have the technological prowess to accomplish this yet). Local officials backed the state-run mining company, Vinacomin, in a plan approved by the prime minister in 2009 that included China’s state-run mining giant, Chalco (Thayer 2010b).

Supporters of the proposal, and especially provincial elites from the Dak Nong People’s Committee, argued that the revenue from tapping into the reserves would greatly enrich living standards among the impoverished population (US Consulate General Ho Chi Minh City 2009). What is revealing from press coverage of the bauxite controversy, however, was how a flood of “elite resistance” suddenly swept across Vietnam, pitting mainly mainstream elites against provincial party elites and affecting media policy in a manner consistent with Gainsborough’s hypothesis. This was an incident that touched on the party’s performance legitimacy, because “for the first time the government to decide on large-scale development projects was called into question by a broad national coalition of mainstream elites” (Thayer 2010b: 52). He adds, “When Vietnam’s one-party state is confronted by challenges from within the party or from the elite, it reacts in a partly responsive manner,” going back to the model of repressive responsiveness that is widely agreed upon in the civil society literature, regardless of the disagreements as to how civil society is structured (Thayer 2010b: 63).

In January 2009, the bauxite issue was suddenly enflamed in the media when the war-era hero General Vo Nguyen Giap issued an open letter (the first of three) to the main state-owned newspapers, arguing that the project would displace minorities, destroy the Dong Nai/Saigon River system, and threaten national security with the arrival of Chinese workers who would give China economic influence (Thayer 2010b). Giap released two more letters up until May 2009, and by that month, it was clear that a loose coalition of antibauxite activists had emerged, consisting of scientists, environmentalists, bloggers, politicians, and intellectuals. Emotions ran high in part because of the revolutionary general’s involvement. In April and May, the government, which officially supported the idea, was forced to make public displays of caution toward the plan. For instance, the prime minister permitted the National Assembly to carry out its own reviews of mining practices (Thayer 2010b).



The bauxite scenario sat at the juncture of three sensitive subjects: the path of economic reform, the resulting environmental degradation, and relations with China. The confluence of these factors, along with elite involvement, led the press to be permitted to report more widely as the Party attempted to manage all these interests. Not all the media commentary was negative; however, a fact that reflects on the media's conflicted role in the state along with the genuine beliefs of some that, with safeguards, the project should go forward. The author's interviews line up with the media account given by the American embassy, commenting on a May 2009 National Assembly debate over the matter:

This "balanced" approach has prevailed in the media's coverage of the National Assembly's debate, particularly after the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT) submitted its May 23 report to the NA, as required by the April 26 Politburo directive announced by Standing Secretary Sang. As usual, VietNamNet's widely circulated e-newspaper provided the most thorough coverage, but other outlets such as Tuoi Tre also sought to contrast statements in favor of bauxite development from Central Highland provinces Dac Nong and Lam Dong with opinions from other deputies who oppose the project on environmental, economic, or "national security" grounds . . . A critical report prepared by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment detailing the potential environmental fallout from bauxite development, was for example, given fairly wide play (U.S. Embassy Hanoi 2009).

For Vietnamese reporters, a number of conflicting initiatives from the top of the Politburo led to a confused and vague situation. When the public debate broke out in 2009, editorial staffers at VietnamNet were told not to cover the more controversial side of the bauxite projects, an order that came from then-propaganda committee chairman To Huy Rua, according to leaked American cables. Less than two weeks later, however, President Truong Tan Sang, who Rua ultimately reported to, reversed the decision, telling editors to cover both sides of the issue (U.S. Embassy Hanoi 2009), and signifying that Rua, a revolutionary ideologue, was subject to his more pragmatic, nonideological overseers. From the author's interviews and one published report, it appears that this decision was classically "soft authoritarian": the press was being utilized to please elite "resistors" hoping for more dialogue (Thayer 2010b: 48), while reining in nonstate blogs that were taking advantage of the issue to advocate multiparty democracy (Nguyen 2012: 1).

Two editors in Ho Chi Minh City affirmed that moderation was intended to offset the growing popularity of antibauxite blogs, particularly *boxit.vn*, while retaining credibility as a factual paper balancing both sides (Anonymous Editor 2011a, 2011b). Two other Hanoi-based journalists (Anonymous Journalist 2011c, 2011d) said they came under pressure from the MIC to label these blogs "reactionary," a label that indeed appeared in the printed press describing blogs (Nguyen 2012). The government antipathy toward these bloggers was evidenced further when, in March 2010, Google published allegations that computers downloading Vietnamese keyboard software were being infected with malware, which was then hijacking host computers to launch denial of service attacks on antibauxite blogs (Mehta 2010).

Around the same time, environmental reporting became a centerpiece of Vietnamese political journalism in relatively liberal news sources such as *Tuoi Tre*, *Thanh Nien*, and VietnamNet. This revealed how newspapers were pushing the boundaries on what is acceptable in taking on their state-sanctioned “anticorruption” role, because environmental issues had attention from elites and the scandals started with local mismanagement more than Hanoi-based stakeholders. In a survey of sixty daily front pages of *Thanh Nien* and *Tuoi Tre* (totaling 168 papers from October 20, 2010, to December 20, 2010), forty-one of their front pages, or 24 percent, carried at least one environmental story. This is compared with approximately 10 percent of front pages surveyed from the same newspapers from June 20 to August 20, 2010, when environmentalism had subsided. One journalist said the rising interest in the environment, and particularly bauxite mining, grew further when, in October 2010, one million cubic meters of “red mud” were accidentally released from an alumina plant in Hungary. The incident killed seven people in what was known as the Ajka alumina plant accident (Kenarov 2011), which became front-page news in most large Hanoi-based and Ho Chi Minh City-based newspapers the next day. Catering to elites who had good standing within the system, state-run papers had to cover the Hungary fiasco in detail to please their tastes, said one reporter (Anonymous Journalist 2011e).

In the end, widespread press coverage as a result of elite resistance did not stop the government from going forward with the economically lucrative plan. In November 2012, the first refinery in Tan Rai was commissioned (Mok 2012). This case study has demonstrated, rather, how a flare-up of press coverage comprised one tool in a debate that forced other elites to make concessions. For example, it prompted the National Assembly to gather powers that allowed it to more directly audit provincial business-minded bureaucrats. The controversy, in essence, was one based on personality, with the involvement of Giap, and that pitted voices from around the nation against mainly local officials who aggressively lobbied for their plan.

## Conclusion

Starting with the Tien Lang affair and weaving through some of Vietnam’s most heated political, economic, and environmental coverage, this paper has demonstrated how the country’s state-sanctioned press operates under a mandate closely linked to patronage and decentralization. This essentially makes newspaper operations partially free, but this study has further clarified why it would make little sense to fall back on a dichotomous framework of a watchdog press versus an authoritarian state. Rather, a more apt approach is to examine the role of “uncertainty” in Party rule as it allows the press to pursue stories that are strategic to its interests. However, it would be unwise to downplay the media’s own agency in pursuing stories outside of elite direction, whether out of the pursuit of profit or a commendable desire to see justice done.

Alongside a literature review, this has been accomplished through a fieldwork approach gathering the views of journalists, editors, mid-level MIC officials, and others. A field-based approach can help clarify and add to the existing literature,

especially on questions over how media pressure is exerted, where censorship comes from, and how journalists react, comply, or resist. In a broader significance, studying the press reveals much about how the Vietnamese political elite sees itself and the role of its civil society, specifically under Dixon's (2004: 31) "soft corporatist-authoritarianism." Such a framework suggests that Party elites see themselves as cautiously but chaotically navigating the new era of markets—but only as long as it has tools to ensure the market project does not threaten the rent-seeking interests of national business-party elites.

What wider implications does this study have for research on nominally communist states experiencing economic growth without corresponding political openings? In Vietnam, it suggests that a strict, top-down institutional model can give the false impression that many of these states hold direct command over their state-run civil societies, when the picture is more complex and includes a variegated number of actors (even if many of them are elites). More often, erratic censorship can be explained through the rise of decentralized economic groups, prompting the party to go on Gainsborough's "thrusts" of recentralization. This model can be applied in future research on the comparative journalism of transitional states, such as in Myanmar, China, and Cuba, where elites, for reasons not always clear, have let down old ways and guided their countries toward the goal of marketization, while attempting to keep a hold on press reporting. This view necessarily goes beyond the orthodox view of "reformers" and "conservatives," opening up greater possibilities for understanding that a sphere of writers, reporters, and intellectuals—one arm of civil society—can be both repressed and raucous.

### **Author's Note**

The views expressed here do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. government.

### **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to thank all the journalists, editors, scholars, media businesspeople, and government officials who agreed to interviews, but who wished to remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of this work. For their insightful comments, gratitude also goes to Tat Yan Kong, Enze Han, Bill Hayton, and David Brown, and a number of Vietnam scholars who also asked not to be named.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This paper is based on a related research project carried out under a Fulbright grant from 2010 to 2011.

## References

- Abuza, Z. 2001. *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam*. London: Lynne Rienner.
- Brown, D. 2012. "Vietnam's Press Comes of Age." *Asia Times Online* [Hong Kong], February 18. [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/NB18Ae02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/NB18Ae02.html) (accessed June 20, 2012).
- Cheshier, S. 2009. "State Corporations, Financial Instability and Industrialisation in Viet Nam." UNDP Vietnam Policy Dialogue Paper, Hanoi.
- Cohen, J., and A. Arato. 1992. *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Committee to Protect Journalists. 2012. "Attacks on the Press in 2011: Vietnam." <http://cpj.org/2012/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2011-vietnam.php> (accessed July 5, 2012).
- Committee to Protect Journalists. 2013. "Attacks on the Press in 2012: Vietnam." <http://www.cpj.org/2013/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2012-vietnam.php> (accessed September 20, 2013).
- Dixon, C. 2004. "State, Party and Political Change in Vietnam." In *Rethinking Vietnam*, ed. Duncan McCargo, 25–31. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Doan, D. Q. 2012. "A Review of the Media Communication and Key Tasks in the Future." *Tạp chí Cộng Sản (Communist Review)* 15 (6/818): 1.
- Freedom House. 2013. "Freedom of the Press 2013. Global Press Freedom Rankings." <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Global%20and%20regional%20tables.pdf> (accessed September 20, 2013).
- Gainsborough, M. 2003. *Changing Political Economy of Vietnam: The Case of Ho Chi Minh City*. London: Routledge.
- Gainsborough, M. 2010. *Vietnam: Rethinking the State*. London: Zed.
- Government of Vietnam. 2006. Decree No. 56/2006/ND-CP of June 6, 2006 on Sanctioning Administrative Violations in Cultural and Information Activities, 5-12.
- Hallin, D.C. 1989. *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hayton, B. 2010. *Vietnam: Rising Dragon*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Heng, R. 1998. "Media in Vietnam and the Structure of its Management." In *Mass Media of Vietnam*, ed. David Marr, 32–34. Canberra: Australian National University.
- Hookway, J. 2012. "Vinashin Executive Gets Prison Sentence." *The Wall Street Journal*, April 2. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303816504577317682973934846.html> (accessed September 30, 2013).
- Human Rights in China. 2009. "Killing One to Warn 100 (杀一儆百): The Shutdown of Yitong Law Firm." <http://www.hrichina.org/content/3696> (accessed May 24, 2013).
- Human Rights Watch. 2011. "Vietnam: New Decree Punishes Press." <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/23/vietnam-new-decree-punishes-press> (accessed September 20, 2013).
- Kenarov, D. 2011. "Recalculating 'Normal' in Hungarian Disaster Zone." *Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting*, June 9. <http://pulitzercenter.org/articles/hungary-toxic-sludge-recalculating-normal-ajka-alumina-disaster> (accessed 9 August, 2012).
- Kerkvliet, B. 2010. "State Authorities' Actions toward Regime Dissidents in Contemporary Vietnam." Paper presented at Southeast Asia Research Center, City University of Hong Kong, June 29.
- Liebman, B.L. 2011. "The Media and the Courts: Towards Competitive Supervision?" *The China Quarterly*, 208: 833–850.
- Lorentzen, P. 2011. "Strategic Censorship." *Social Science Research Network Working Paper Series*. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2101862> (accessed September 30, 2013).

- Malesky, E., R. Abrami, and Y. Zheng. 2011. "Institutions and Inequality in Single-Party Regimes: A Comparative Analysis of Vietnam and China." *Comparative Politics* 43 (4): 409–27.
- Malesky, E., P. Schuler, and A. Tran. 2011. "Vietnam: Familiar Patterns and New Developments Ahead of the 11th Party Congress." *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2011:337–63.
- Marcuse, H. 1969. "Repressive Tolerance." In *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore and Herbert Marcuse. Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 95–137.
- Marr, D. G. 2012. "Vietnam's High-Profile Land Dispute." *Inside Story* [Australia], March 23. <http://inside.org.au/vietnam-high-profile-land-dispute/> (accessed September 30, 2013).
- McKinley, C. 2007. "Can a State-Owned Media Effectively Monitor Corruption? A Study of Vietnam's Printed Press." *Asian Journal of Public Affairs* 2 (1): 12–38.
- McKinley, C. 2008. "A Study of the Vietnamese Press' Coverage of Land Issues As They Relate to Poverty Reduction." Ford Foundation Paper, Hanoi, Vietnam.
- McKinley, C. 2009. "Media and Corruption: How Has Vietnam's Print Media Covered Corruption and How Can Coverage Be Strengthened?" UNDP Vietnam Policy Paper, Hanoi.
- McKinley, C. 2012. "Policy Brief for Donors on the Tien Lang and Hung Yen Ecopark Land Eviction Cases." Vietnam Media Development and Coordination Initiative, Coordinated by Embassy of Switzerland, June 26.
- Mehta, N. 2010. "The Chilling Effects of Malware." *Google Online Security Blog*. <http://googleonlinesecurity.blogspot.co.uk/2010/03/chilling-effects-of-malware.html> (accessed May 15, 2012).
- Mok, Y.C. 2012. "Vietnam Vinacomin commissions country's first alumina refinery." *Platts*, November 28. <http://www.platts.com/latest-news/metals/singapore/vietnam-vinacomin-commissions-countrys-first-7290499> (accessed October 29, 2013).
- Nguyen, A. T. 2007. "From VietNet to VietNamNet: Ten Years of Electronic Media in Vietnam." Discussion Papers Series, No. D-43. Cambridge, MA: Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University [http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/d43\\_nguyen.pdf](http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/d43_nguyen.pdf) (accessed September 30, 2013).
- Nguyen, H. 2012. "Internet Stirs Activism in Vietnam." *YaleGlobal*, May 11. <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/internet-stirs-activism-vietnam> (accessed September 1, 2012).
- O'Flaherty, B. 2011. "Vietnam's Murky Media Picture." *The Diplomat*, March 10. <http://the-diplomat.com/2011/03/10/vietnam%E2%80%99s-murky-media-picture/> (accessed June 25, 2012).
- Porter, G. 1993. *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Reporters without Borders. 2013. "Press Freedom Index 2013." <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013,1054.html> (accessed September 20, 2013).
- Romano, A. 2005. "Asian Journalism: News, Development and the Tides of Liberalization and Technology." In *Journalism and Democracy in Asia*, ed. Angela Romano and Michael Bromley. New York: Routledge, pp. 1–14.
- Ruwitich, J. 2010. "Vietnam PM Takes Some Responsibility for Shipbuilder." *Reuters*, November 24. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/11/24/vietnam-politics-idUSS-GE6AN02Y20101124> (accessed June 25, 2012).
- Shieh, S., and G. Deng. 2011. "An Emerging Civil Society: The Impact of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake on Grassroots Associations in China." *China Journal* 65 (January): 181–94.

- Thayer, C. A. 2010a. "Background Brief: Vinashin's Difficulties and the National Party Congress." Thayer Consultancy <http://www.scribd.com/doc/34555545/Thayer-Vietnam-Vinashin-s-Difficulties-and-the-Party-Congress> (accessed July 18, 2010).
- Thayer, C. A. 2010b. "Political Legitimacy of Vietnam's One-Party State: Challenge and Response." *Politics & Policy* 38 (3): 423–44.
- Tuoi Tre*. 2011. "THÔNG TIN TÒA SOẠN, Từ 10 đến 16/01/2011." Internal Newsroom Weekly Review at *Tuoi Tre*, obtained in January 2011.
- U.S. Embassy Hanoi. 2009. "Bauxite Controversy Produces Leadership Divisions, Vibrant National Assembly Debate, Cable Reference 09HANOI537." <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/06/09HANOI537.html> (accessed September 30, 2013).
- U.S. Consulate General, Ho Chi Minh City. 2009. "Deeper Digging into Vietnam's Bauxite Debate Uncovers As Many New Questions As Answers." Cable Reference Ho Chi Minh City 575." <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/08/09HOCHIMINHCHITY575.html> (accessed September 30, 2013).
- Vasavakul, T. 2003. "Mapping Vietnam's Legal Culture: Reflections on Corruption, Organized Crime, and State Building in the Post-socialist Era." Conference Paper presented at Vietnam Legal Culture Symposium, Centre for Asia Pacific Initiatives, University of Victoria, Canada, March 27–29.
- Vietnam Internet Network Information Center. 2012. "Internet Statistics." <http://en.vnnic.vn> (accessed September 30, 2012).
- Vuong, Q. H. 2010. "Restructuring Vinashin: Symmetric Information on the Enterprise's Business Is Needed." *Tạp chí Cộng Sản (Communist Review)* 81 (12/818): 40–44.
- Wells-Dang, A. 2010. "Political Space in Vietnam: A View from the 'Rice-Roots.'" *Pacific Review* 23 (1): 93–112.
- Wells-Dang, A. 2012. *Civil Society Networks in China and Vietnam: Informal Pathbreakers in Health and the Environment*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

### Interviews with Author

- Anonymous Editor. 2010a. "Interview with the Author." Hanoi: 10 November [Editor works at Nhan Dan, which is closest to the official party line as its official paper].
- Anonymous Editor. 2010b. "Interview with the Author." Hanoi: 18 November [Editor works at Lao Dong, closer to the party line].
- Anonymous Journalist. 2010c. "Interview with the Author." Hanoi: 15 November [Journalist works at Hanoi office of *Tuoi Tre*, a more liberal newspaper].
- Anonymous Mid-level Ministry of Information and Communications Official. 2011. "Interview with the Author." Ho Chi Minh City: 25 January [Official works in the Ministry Press Reaction Unit].
- Anonymous Journalist. 2010d. "Interview with the Author." Ho Chi Minh City: 9 December [Journalist covers politics for *Thanh Nien*, which is more liberal].
- Anonymous Journalist. 2010e. "Interview with the Author." Ho Chi Minh City: 14 December [Journalist works for *Thanh Nien*].
- Anonymous Editor. 2011a. "Interview with the Author." Ho Chi Minh City: 18 May [Works for Nhan Dan].
- Anonymous Editor. 2011b. "Interview with the Author." Ho Chi Minh City: 21 May [Works for VietnamNet].
- Anonymous Journalist. 2011c. "Interview with the Author." Hanoi: 1 June [Works for VietnamNet].

Anonymous Journalist. 2011d. "Interview with the Author." Ho Chi Minh City: 8 June [Works for *Thanh Nien*].

### **Author Biography**

**Geoffrey Cain** is a governance and media consultant for international organizations in Asia and an editor at the New Mandala, the Southeast Asia blog at the Australian National University. He has worked as a journalist in Vietnam, Cambodia, and South Korea, writing for *Time*, *The Economist*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Foreign Policy*, and others. From 2010 to 2011, he was a Fulbright scholar in Vietnam researching press censorship. He has worked as a researcher for the Open Government Partnership, Global Transparency, and a European Union–funded media development project in Cambodia. He holds an MA (Distinction) in Southeast Asian studies from London's School of Oriental and African Studies and a BA in international affairs from the George Washington University.