

VIETNAM

	2011	2012
INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS	Not Free	Not Free
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	16	16
Limits on Content (0-35)	25	26
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	32	31
Total (0-100)	73	73

* 0=most free, 100=least free

POPULATION: 89 million
INTERNET PENETRATION 2011: 35 percent
WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS BLOCKED: No
NOTABLE POLITICAL CENSORSHIP: Yes
BLOGGERS/ICT USERS ARRESTED: Yes
PRESS FREEDOM STATUS: Not Free

INTRODUCTION

Internet usage in Vietnam has continued to grow steadily, thanks to decreasing costs and the improvement of electricity and telecommunications networks. Nevertheless, since the medium's introduction in 1997, the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) has demonstrated concern that the internet could be used to challenge its monopoly on political power, leading to contradictory policies designed to support or suppress online activities.

On the one hand, the government has invested in expanding citizens' access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), as seen in the so-called Taking-Off Strategy 2011–2020,¹ which aims to raise Vietnam's ICT sector to the level of its regional neighbors. On the other hand, the government has intensified its efforts to monitor and censor online content. After a relative easing of repression from 2004 to 2006 as Vietnam prepared to host an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit and join the World Trade Organization, the environment for free expression has deteriorated, and a growing number of online activists have faced arrest, harassment, and imprisonment.

The space for free expression tightened even further in the months leading to the Communist Party Congress in January 2011, and contrary to expectations that the situation would relax after the Congress, it remained harsh over the year. In 2011, at least nine journalists who primarily work online were jailed—a big jump from only five jailed journalists at the end of 2010—making Vietnam one of the worst jailers of journalists in the

¹ “‘Taking-off Strategy,’ Does it stepping up the development of the ICT industry in Vietnam?,” Business-in-Asia.com, accessed June 22, 2012, http://www.business-in-asia.com/vietnam/vietnam_ict.html.

world.² Cyberattacks on websites critical of the government that began in late 2009 continued throughout 2011, highlighting an additional threat to internet freedom both within and beyond Vietnam's borders.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

Vietnam's internet penetration rate has grown dramatically over the past decade, from 0.3 percent in 2000 to about 35 percent (with 30 million users) at the end of 2011, up from 17.3 percent in 2006, according to International Telecommunication Union (ITU).³ About 14 percent of users are broadband subscribers. Total international connection bandwidth of the country grew 250 percent between 2010 and 2011.⁴ While a few years ago, most users relied on internet cafes for their access, 88 percent of users now access the net from their home. Access via smart phones has also increased significantly to among 30 percent of users, reaching a similar level of access at internet cafes. In the latest ICT Development Index of the ITU, Vietnam moved up ten positions from 91 (out of 152 countries measured) in 2008 to 81 in 2010, placing third in the top ten most dynamic countries in the ranking.⁵

The internet's growth is largely driven by the demands of Vietnam's booming economy and relatively young population; some 60 percent of the country's total population is under 35. Internet access points are easily found in urban areas throughout the country. In most towns, citizens can access the internet in their homes and workplaces. WiFi connections are available free of charge in many semi-public spaces such as airports, cafes, restaurants, and hotels. Cybercafes are affordable for most urban dwellers,⁶ but their importance has decreased, as almost 90 percent of urban users now access the internet from home or work. In large cities, the internet has surpassed newspapers as the most popular source for information.⁷

² "In Vietnam, crackdown on journalists in past six months," Committee to Protect Journalists, October 3, 2011, <http://www.cpj.org/2011/10/in-vietnam-crackdown-on-journalists-in-past-six-mo.php>.

³ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Percentage of individuals using the Internet, fixed (wired) Internet subscriptions, fixed (wired)-broadband subscriptions," 2006 & 2011, accessed July 13, 2012, <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>.

⁴ "Statistics on Internet development up to 12/2011," Report on internet statistics of Vietnam, Vietnam Internet Network Information Center (VNNIC) [in Vietnamese], <http://www.thongkeinternet.vn/jsp/trangchu/index.jsp>.

⁵ "Chỉ số ICT của Việt Nam tăng 10 bậc" [Vietnam ICT Index rose 10 spots], Lao Dong, September 28, 2011, <http://laodong.com.vn/Tin-Tuc/Chi-so-ICT-cua-Viet-Nam-tang-10-bac/60297>.

⁶ "Việt Nam: 20% không tin tưởng thông tin trên Internet" [Vietnam: 20% do not trust the information on the Internet], PA News, April 15, 2010, <http://news.pavietnam.vn/archives/1547>.

⁷ "Tình hình sử dụng Internet tại Việt Nam 2011" [The Situation of Internet Use in Vietnam in 2011], VNNIC.com, August 3, 2011, <http://vnvic.com/tin-tuc-cong-nghe/140-tinh-hinh-su-dung-internet-tai-viet-nam-2011.html>.

Given Vietnam's 92 percent literacy rate, illiteracy does not pose a barrier to access.⁸ The availability of the internet in rural areas remains limited, although programs backed by the government and international donors have increased access in recent years. Ethnic minorities and the poor who live primarily in remote areas are especially at a disadvantage.

The country's General Statistics Office (GSO) gave an estimate of 158 million mobile subscribers by mid-2011, a growth of 28 percent from the previous year.⁹ In 2011, mobile phone penetration stood at 143 percent, according to the latest ITU data.¹⁰ Although the figures exceed the total population, it was estimated in 2010 that some 30 million (nearly one in three) Vietnamese people lacked mobile phones, while others own two mobile devices or multiple SIM cards.¹¹ A third-generation (3G) network, which enables internet access via mobile phones, has been operating since the end of 2009, and the number of users is slowly expanding. As of the end of 2011, there were estimated to be less than ten million 3G users.¹²

YouTube, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available and growing in popularity. However, in September 2009, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) began circulating a mandate instructing internet service providers (ISPs) to block Facebook,¹³ which had roughly a million users in Vietnam at the time.¹⁴ By November 2009, users were reporting difficulty accessing the website. It remained sporadically inaccessible throughout 2011, but the government refused to officially acknowledge its efforts to block the site.¹⁵

While no laws prohibit the use of circumvention tools, a 2008 decree makes it illegal to access blocked websites.¹⁶ Nevertheless, information on circumventing the Facebook block circulated fairly widely, including via videos and blog posts,¹⁷ and Facebook continues to be an important tool among younger internet users. In spite of the block, its membership grew

⁸ UNICEF, "At a Glance: Vietnam," accessed August 25, 2010, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/vietnam_statistics.html.

⁹ "Vietnam subscriber base touches 174.3 millions as of the end of April," Business Times, May 6, 2011, <http://vietnambusiness.asia/vietnam-subscriber-base-touches-174-3m-as-at-the-end-of-april/>.

¹⁰ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions," 2011, accessed July 13, 2012, <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>.

¹¹ "Mobile Subscribers Touch 110 Million in 2009," Business Times, March 7, 2010, <http://vietnambusiness.asia/mobile-subscribers-touch-110-million-in-2009/>.

¹² "3G market eyes 2014 breakthrough," VietnamNet Bridge, December 12, 2011, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/en/science-technology/16502/3g-market-eyes-2014-breakthrough.html>.

¹³ "Decree to Block Facebook in Vietnam," Viet Tan, September 1, 2010, <http://www.viettan.org/spip.php?article9390>.

¹⁴ An Khanh, "Vietnamese Still Using Facebook," Radio Free Asia, April 20, 2010, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/facebook-04202010121723.html>.

¹⁵ "Vietnam to Block Facebook," CNN iReport, November 10, 2009, <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-354181>.

¹⁶ Ministry of Information and Communications, "Regarding the management, provision and use of Internet services and electronic information on the internet," Decree 97/2008/NĐ-CP, issued August 28, 2008, <http://mic.gov.vn/VBQPPL/vn/documentdetail/8769/index.mic>.

¹⁷ Brannon Cullum, "Spotlighting Digital Activism in Vietnam," Movements.org, November 2, 2010, http://allyoumov.3cdn.net/9c97d7925e99e3232d_e5m6b99t7.pdf.

to an estimated four million by the end of 2011.¹⁸ Vietnam has a few local competitors to Facebook, the strongest one being Zing Me with five million users by early 2011.¹⁹ In May 2010, the Ministry of Information and Culture (MIC) also launched a government-backed social network called GoOnline (formerly Go VN), which requires users to register with their real name and government-issued identity number when creating an account. The initial response to the new initiative was limited.²⁰ As of early 2012, GoOnline had a modest user base but was in no position to compete with Facebook and Zing Me.

The three biggest ISPs are the state-owned Vietnam Post and Telecommunications (VNPT), which holds 74 percent of the market, the military owned Viettel (11 percent), and the privately owned FPT (10 percent). VNPT and Viettel also own the three largest mobile phone service providers in the country (MobiFone, VinaPhone, and Viettel), which reportedly serve 90 percent of the country's subscriber base. Four privately-owned companies share the remainder.²¹ While there is no legally imposed monopoly for access providers, informal practices create hurdles for new companies seeking to enter the market, and many find that they lack the political ties or economic clout to do so. Similarly, there is a concentration of internet-exchange providers (IXPs), which serve as gateways to the international internet. Currently there are six IXPs, four of which are state or military-owned.²²

The Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MPT), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), and the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism (MCST) regulate the management, provision, and usage of internet services. The Vietnam Internet Network Information Center (VNNIC), run by the MPT, manages and allocates internet resources such as domain names.²³ On paper, the MCST is charged with regulating sexual or violent content, while the MPS oversees measures related to politically sensitive content. In practice, however, the ruling VCP issues guidelines to all regulatory bodies as it deems appropriate and in a largely nontransparent manner. In October 2008, the MIC created the Administrative Agency for Radio, Television, and Electronic Information. Among other duties, the agency is tasked

¹⁸ Binh Minh, "Facebook's CEO visits Vietnam," VietnamNet Bridge, December 25, 2011, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/en/science-technology/16933/facebook-s-ceo-visits-vietnam.html>.

¹⁹ Huyen Chip, "Vietnam: State of Social Media One Year After Facebook Block," Global Voices, January 25, 2011, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/01/25/vietnam-state-of-social-media-one-year-after-facebook-block/>.

²⁰ James Hookway, "In Vietnam, State 'Friends' You," Wall Street Journal, October 4, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703305004575503561540612900.html>.

²¹ "Năm 2010: Thị trường thông tin di động sẽ ra sao?" [2010: What Will the Mobile Communication Market Be Like?], Hanoimoi Online, March 5, 2010, http://www.hanoimoi.com.vn/newsdetail/Kinh_te/312116/nam-2010-thi-truong-thong-tin-di-dong-se-ra-sao.htm; Vietnam Posts & Telecommunications Group (VNPT), "Vietnam Telecommunication Report," 2010, http://www.vnpt.com.vn/Portals/0/users/host/052011/05/EBCVT_web.pdf.

²² The four are: VNPT, Viettel, Hanoi Telecom, and VTC.

²³ Ministry of Information and Communications, "Regulation on Registrar of Domain Name Dot Vn," Vietnam Internet Network Information Center, March 5, 2007, <http://www.vnnic.vn/english/5-6-300-0-2-01-20071115.htm>.

with regulating online content, which includes drafting guidelines for blogs and managing licenses of online media.²⁴

LIMITS ON CONTENT

While the Vietnamese government has fewer resources to devote to online content control than its counterpart in China, the authorities have nonetheless established an effective and increasingly sophisticated content-filtering system. Censorship of online content is implemented by ISPs rather than at the backbone level or the international gateway. There is no real time filtering based on keywords or deep-packet inspections. Instead, specific URLs are identified in advance as targets for censorship and placed on blacklists; ISPs are legally required to block these URLs. In some instances, when users attempt to access a censored website, a “blocked page” notification will appear, informing them that the page has been deliberately blocked rather than rendered unavailable by a technical failure. However, users sometimes receive a vague error message indicating simply that the browser was unable to locate the server for that website.

Although the censorship system is ostensibly aimed at limiting access to sexually explicit content, in practice it primarily targets sites deemed threatening to the VCP’s monopoly on political power, such as those related to Vietnamese political dissidents, human rights, democracy, and protests against China’s policy in the East Sea dispute. Websites on religious freedom, Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, and the Cao Dai religious group are blocked to a lesser but still significant degree.²⁵ The Vietnamese authorities largely focus their censorship efforts on Vietnamese-language content, blocking English-language sites less often. For example, while the websites of the *New York Times*, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Freedom House, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch are accessible, those of overseas Vietnamese organizations that are critical of the government—such as Talawas.org, Danluan.org, or Danchimviet.com—are blocked. The websites of the Vietnamese-language services of international media, such as the U.S.-funded Radio Free Asia and the BBC, are also frequently and increasingly blocked.

In 2011, online filtering continued to be strict. Facebook remained banned (although not strictly enforced), and websites related to border and sea disputes between China and Vietnam continued to be firewalled and attacked. The unpredictable and nontransparent

²⁴ Geoffrey Cain, “Bloggers the New Rebels in Vietnam,” SFGate.com, December 14, 2008, http://articles.sfgate.com/2008-12-14/news/17131885_1_bloggers-communist-party-vietnam; Xuan Linh, “Watchdog to Regulate Blogs in Vietnam,” VietnamNet Bridge, October 3, 2008, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/politics/2008/10/806781/> (link discontinued).

²⁵ “Vietnamese Government Expands Internet Censorship to Block Catholic Websites,” Catholic News Agency, August 6, 2009, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/vietnamese-government-expands-internet-censorship-to-block-catholic-websites/>.

ways in which topics become forbidden make it difficult for users to know where exactly the “red lines” lie. Due to the worsening climate of restrictions on internet expression, the level of self-censorship has increased significantly. State-owned newspapers, such as *Tuoi Tre* and *Thanh Nien*, formerly known for being bold and edgy, have become tame. Notably, *Tuoi Tre* has not even allowed itself to print a single comment in response to the arrest of their prominent journalist Hoang Khuong, who is known for his investigative reporting on corruption in the police force. One common form of self-censorship is for bloggers to disable the readers’ comment option on their posts. This acts as a precautionary measure to prevent discussion by commentators from taking a more confrontational tone than what was intended by the original posting.

Online media outlets and internet portals are state-owned and therefore subject to censorship by the VCP. The party’s Department for Culture and Ideology and the MPS regularly instruct online newspapers or portals to remove content they perceive as critical of the government. Editors and journalists who post such content risk disciplinary warnings, job loss, or even imprisonment.

In December 2008, the MIC announced a directive requiring blogging platforms to remove “harmful” content, report to the government every six months, and provide information about individual bloggers upon request.²⁶ This has generally resulted in an increase in the censorship of content that is critical of the VCP, but the impact has been less significant on the many blogs hosted outside the country. In late 2008, the Deputy Minister of Information and Communications reportedly said he would contact international companies such as Google and Yahoo to request cooperation on censorship. However, to date there have been no indications that these companies assist the Vietnamese authorities, for instance by self-censoring search results, as is done in China.²⁷

There is no avenue for managers of blocked websites to appeal censorship decisions. Nevertheless, methods to circumvent censorship, such as the use of proxy servers, are relatively well-known among the young and technology-savvy internet users in Vietnam, with some searchable via Google. The authorities have not instituted any major restrictions on content transmitted via email or mobile phone text messages.

Despite government restrictions, Vietnam’s internet is vibrant and offers a diversity of content in the Vietnamese language, though most of it is nonpolitical. In 2006, Vietnamese youth discovered blogging as a means to express themselves, and the blogosphere exploded in the three following years. Yahoo! 360 was the most popular platform; at the height of its

²⁶ Karin Deutsch Karlekar, ed., “Vietnam,” *Freedom of the Press 2009* (New York: Freedom House, 2009).

²⁷ Ann Binlot, “Vietnam’s Bloggers Face Government Crackdown,” *Time*, December 30, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1869130,00.html>.

popularity, the application reportedly had 15 million Vietnamese users.²⁸ However, as the program was not particularly popular outside Vietnam, Yahoo terminated the service in mid-2009, starting the decline of the blogging scene in Vietnam. Since then, Vietnam's blogging community has become much more dispersed, with some bloggers migrating to Blogger.com or WordPress.com, others to Yahoo's 360Plus, Facebook, and local networks such as Zing and YuMe.

Although most blogs address personal and nonpolitical topics, citizen journalism has emerged as an important phenomenon and a source of information for many Vietnamese, particularly given the VCP's tight control over traditional media. People now recognize the parallel existence of official and alternative media, the latter of which is exclusively online. Websites such as AnhBaSam.wordpress.com and QueChoa.vn quickly react to and comment on socio-political events and have established themselves as influential opinion makers. In summer 2011, these websites were instrumental in mobilizing people for a series of demonstrations on the streets of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to protest China's claim on the Paracel and Spratly Islands. The protests lasted several months before the authorities cracked down on them and sent one of the organizers to an education camp.²⁹ In early 2012, blogs played an important role in rallying public opinion and providing evidence against the local government in Hai Phong province after the authorities unlawfully seized the aquacultural land of some farmers, whose violent resistance shocked the country.

VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS

The constitution affirms the right to freedom of expression, but in practice the VCP has strict control over the media. Legislation including internet-related decrees, the penal code, the Publishing Law, and the State Secrets Protection Ordinance has been used to imprison journalists and bloggers. The judiciary is not independent, and many trials related to free expression last only a few hours. When detaining bloggers and online activists, the police routinely fail to follow Vietnamese legal provisions, arresting individuals without a warrant or retaining them in custody beyond the maximum period allowed by law.

In an effort to expand traditional media controls to the blogosphere, the MIC issued Circular 7 in December 2008, which requires blogs to address strictly personal information and refrain from political or social commentary. It also bars internet users from disseminating

²⁸ Aryeh Sternberg, "Vietnam Online: Then and Now," iMedia Connection, January 5, 2010, <http://www.imediaconnection.com/content/25480.asp>.

²⁹ "Người biểu tình Thu Hằng bị đưa vào trại" [Demonstrator Thu Hang sent to camp], BBC Vietnamese, December 9, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2011/12/111209_bui_hang_arrested.shtml.

press articles, literary works, or other publications that are prohibited by the Press Law.³⁰ Furthermore, in January 2011 the government issued a new decree that gives authorities more power to penalize journalists and bloggers by stipulating a series of very vague infractions and by outlining penalties for journalists who publish under pseudonyms or refuse to name their sources. The decree aims to impose the same censorship on online media as on traditional media. In particular, it differentiates sharply between journalists accredited by the government and independent bloggers who have far less rights and protection.³¹

In recent years, the Vietnamese authorities have embarked on several crackdowns against bloggers and online writers, subjecting them to extended interrogations, imprisonment, and in some instances physical abuse.³² In one of the first imprisonment cases of a prominent blogger, Dieu Cay, a vocal critic of the government's human rights record and an advocate for Vietnamese sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, was sentenced in late 2008 to two and a half years in prison on tax evasion charges that most observers viewed as politically motivated.³³ As of April 2012, Dieu Cay was reportedly still behind bars and had been denied access to family and lawyers for 18 months.³⁴

Other bloggers have been prosecuted and convicted for “subversion” or “attempting to overthrow the people’s government.” The authorities have also invoked Articles 79 (“subversion of the people’s administration”) and 88 (“conducting propaganda against the state”) of the penal code to imprison bloggers and online activists.³⁵ In January 2010, a court in Ho Chi Minh City sentenced four prodemocracy activists to a total of 33 years in prison for using the internet to report rights violations or disseminate pro-democracy views.³⁶ In October 2010, blogger Le Nguyen Huong Tra (who uses the penname Do Long Girl) was detained on charges of “misusing democratic rights to violate the state’s and citizens’ interests,” after she reported about the family affairs of a high-ranking official.³⁷ That same

³⁰ Reporters Without Borders, “Internet Enemies: Vietnam,” accessed August 25, 2010, http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-vietnam_36694.html.

³¹ “Regulations on administrative penalties for violation in media and publishing activities,” Decree 02/2011/ND-CP [in Vietnamese], January 6, 2011, <http://cpi.org/Vietnam%20media%20decree.pdf>.

³² “Vietnam’s Internet Crackdown,” CNN Video, June 18, 2010, <http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2010/06/18/stevens.vietnam.internet.crackdown.cnn?iref=allsearch>.

³³ Human Rights Watch, “Banned, Censored, Harassed and Jailed,” news release, October 11, 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/10/11/banned-censored-harassed-and-jailed>.

³⁴ “Three bloggers face 20 years in jail for spreading anti-state propaganda,” IFEX, April 18, 2012, http://www.ifex.org/vietnam/2012/04/18/bloggers_charged/.

³⁵ Reporters Without Borders, “Internet Enemies: Vietnam.”

³⁶ Of the four, Le Cong Dinh and Le Thang Long each received five years, Nguyen Tien Trung received seven years, and Tran Huynh Duy Thuc received 16 years. Reporters Without Borders, “Court Sentences Four Netizens and Pro-Democracy Activists to a Total of 33 Years in Jail,” news release, January 20, 2010, http://en.rsf.org/vietnam-court-sentences-four-netizens-and-20-01-2010_36156.html.

³⁷ Vu Mai and Quoc Thang, “Blogger ‘Cô gái đồ long’ bị bắt khẩn cấp” [Blogger Co Gai Do Long Urgently Arrested], VN Express, October 26, 2010, <http://vnexpress.net/GL/Phap-luat/2010/10/3BA221C2/>.

month, blogger Phan Thanh Hai (who uses the penname Anh Ba Sai Gon) was arrested on charges of distributing false information on his blog.³⁸ Most recently in September 2011, a former police officer turned social justice blogger, Ta Phong Tan, was arrested for blog posts that allegedly “denigrated the state.”³⁹ As of April 2012, Ta Phone Tan was still in detention for an open-ended period on vague charges of anti-state activity, according to the Committee to Project Journalists.⁴⁰

In addition to imprisonment, bloggers and online activists have been subjected to physical attacks, job loss, termination of personal internet services, and travel restrictions. For example, in May 2010, Lu Thi Thu Trang, an online activist associated with the pro-democracy movement Bloc 8406, was beaten by the police in front of her five year-old son and then detained for interrogation.⁴¹ That same month, provincial authorities terminated the telephone and internet service connection at the home of Ha Si Phu, one of Vietnam’s best-known dissident bloggers, alleging that he had used his telephone line to transmit “anti-government” information. The incidents occurred as part of a broader crackdown on free expression in the lead up to the Communist Party Congress in January 2011, which continued beyond the Congress. In February 2011, independent journalist Nguyen Dan Que was arrested for calling the population “to be inspired by the pro-democratic movements in Africa and Middle East”;⁴² he was released few days later on the condition that he would cooperate closely with the authorities. In May 2011, poet Bui Chat, head of the underground publishing house, Recycled Paper (Giay vun), was held and questioned several times for no reason after returning from Argentina, where he received the “Freedom to Publish Prize” from International Publisher’s Association.⁴³

In 2011, the repressive trend against online users has continued with equal severity. According to Reporters Without Borders, a total of 17 bloggers and three journalists are in jail in Vietnam as of August 2011, making Vietnam one of the most repressive countries in the world for bloggers.⁴⁴ In January, the pro-democracy online activist and recipient of the 2009 Human Right Award, Vi Duc Hoi, was sentenced to eight years prison and three years house arrest after release (the sentence was later reduced to five year jail and three years

³⁸ “Another blogger arrested in Vietnam crackdown,” Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), October 28, 2010, <http://cpj.org/2010/10/another-blogger-arrested-in-vietnam-crackdown.php>.

³⁹ “Three Vietnamese journalists given antistate charges,” Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), April 16, 2012, <http://cpj.org/2012/04/three-vietnamese-journalists-given-antistate-charge.php#more>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “Government Suppression of Bloggers and Websites,” VietCatholic News, May 27, 2010, <http://www.vietcatholic.org/News/Clients/ReadArticle.aspx?ID=80607> (link discontinued).

⁴² “Nguyen Dan Que arrested for anti-State activities,” Vietnam Plus, February 27, 2011, <http://en.baomoi.com/Home/society/en.vietnamplus.vn/Nguyen-Dan-Que-arrested-for-antiState-activities/115657.epi>.

⁴³ “Independent publisher freed, but questioned again,” Reporters Without Borders, May 5, 2011, http://en.rsf.org/vietnam-independent-publisher-freed-but-05-05-2011_40209.html.

⁴⁴ “Blogger and poet freed under amnesty, but 17 bloggers and three journalists still held,” Reporters Without Borders, August 30, 2011, http://en.rsf.org/vietnam-eight-bloggers-get-sentences-12-10-2009_34653.html.

house arrest). In March, Cu Ha Huy Vu, one of the most vocal and prominent online dissidents, was sentenced to seven years prison and three years house arrest in a trial that barred access to the public and media.⁴⁵ In August, Catholic blogger, Paulus Le Son, was brutally abducted on the street by the police and is still under arrest with no prospect of a trial. His blog covered the proceedings of Cu Ha Huy Vu's trial in addition to political and religious issues. Also in August, blogger Lu Van Bay was sentenced to four years in prison for anti-government propaganda in a trial which took only few hours, without access to a lawyer,⁴⁶ while French-Vietnamese blogger Pham Minh Hoang was sentenced to three years in prison for attempted subversion.⁴⁷

In November 2011, citizen radio journalists Vu Duc Trung and Le Van Thanh received harsh jail sentences of three years and two years, respectively, for broadcasting Falun Gong programs into China. They were initially accused of illegally operating broadcasting devices, an administrative offence, which was later upgraded into a criminal charge, presumably due to pressure from China.⁴⁸ Then in December 2011, well-known journalist Hoang Khuong of *Tuoi Tre* newspaper and author of a series of articles on corruption among the police was arrested on charges of "indirectly bribing a traffic police officer." He was accused of using a broker to pay US\$700 to a police officer while doing an undercover investigation.

The Vietnamese authorities employ both technology-based and "low-tech" methods for monitoring online communications. The former methods include monitoring web traffic and emails, especially of political activists, while the latter involve shadowing the movements of known online activists. Cybercafe owners are required to install special software to track and store information about their clients' online activities.⁴⁹ In addition, citizens are obliged to provide the details of their government-issued identification documents to register with their ISP when purchasing a home internet connection. In late 2009, the MIC announced that all prepaid mobile phone subscribers would be required to register their details with the operator. Individuals are allowed to register only up to three numbers per carrier.⁵⁰ The government argues that such measures are necessary to counter

⁴⁵ "Prime Minister urged to free all imprisoned bloggers and journalists," Reporters Without Borders, September 1, 2011, http://en.rsf.org/vietnam-prime-minister-urged-to-free-all-01-09-2011_40879.html.

⁴⁶ "Blogger Lu Van Bay Serving Four-Year Sentence," Reporters Without Borders, September 26, 2011, http://en.rsf.org/vietnam-blogger-lu-van-bay-serving-four-26-09-2011_41059.html.

⁴⁷ Pham Minh Hoang's jail sentence was halved to 17 months in November 2011; he was released in January 2012 after being in prison since his arrest in August 2010. "Vietnam cuts jail term of French-Vietnamese blogger," AFP, November 28, 2011, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hk881ZRwZ4upJPxo8KAnDHRM52uQ?docId=CNG.2c6ad4f9d4378459ddb354b53d6aebcb.4a1>.

⁴⁸ "Two citizen journalists jailed for illegal broadcasting into China," Reporters Without Borders, November 10, 2011, http://en.rsf.org/vietnam-two-citizen-journalists-jailed-for-10-11-2011_41377.html.

⁴⁹ "Internet Censorship Tightening in Vietnam," AsiaNews.it, June 22, 2010, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Internet-censorship-tightening-in-Vietnam-18746.html>.

⁵⁰ Phong Quan, "Sim Card Registration Now Required in Vietnam," Vietnam Talking Points, January 16, 2010, <http://talk.onevietnam.org/sim-card-registration-now-required-in-vietnam/>.

mass text message advertisements that plague many Vietnamese phone users. However, the steps also facilitate surveillance, as service providers are required to share information about users with the government upon request. Nevertheless, there is no requirement for real name registration when blogging or posting online comments and many Vietnamese do so anonymously.

The intensified harassment of bloggers in recent years has coincided with systematic cyberattacks targeting individual blogs as well as websites run by other activists in Vietnam and abroad.⁵¹ Since September 2009, dozens of sites have been attacked, including those operated by Catholics who criticize government confiscation of church property, forums featuring political discussions, and the website raising environmental concerns surrounding bauxite mining.⁵² The attackers infected computers with malicious software disguised as a popular keyboard program that allows Microsoft Windows to support the Vietnamese language. Once infected, computers became part of a “botnet” whose command-and-control servers were primarily accessed from internet protocol (IP) addresses inside Vietnam. The network of hijacked computers was then used to carry out the denial-of-service (DoS) attacks described above. Both McAfee, a major internet security firm, and Google reported on the sophisticated attacks, with the latter estimating that “potentially tens of thousands of computers” had been affected, most of which belonged to Vietnamese speakers.⁵³ McAfee stated that “the perpetrators may have political motivations, and may have some allegiance to the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.”⁵⁴ The Vietnamese authorities have not taken measures to find or punish the attackers. On the contrary, during a national conference on media held in May 2010, the MPS announced that it had “destroyed 300 ‘bad’ websites and blogs.”⁵⁵

In 2011 and early 2012, the number of known cases seems to have decreased, although attacks on sites critical of the government still continue. In June 2011, the well-known website Boxitvn.net, which is critical of the government’s pro-Chinese positions and its environmentally-damaging plans to exploit bauxite in the Central Highland, reported several waves of attacks. In August 2011, the U.S.-based organization Viet Tan (or Vietnam Reform Party), accused Vietnam of attacking its website. The attack happened shortly after

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch, “Vietnam: Stop Cyber Attacks Against Online Critics,” news release, May 26, 2010, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2010/05/26/vietnam-stop-cyber-attacks-against-online-critics>.

⁵² “Authorities Crush Online Dissent; Activists Detained Incommunicado,” *Free News Free Speech* (blog), June 2, 2010, <http://freeneewsfreespeech.blogspot.com/2010/06/authorities-crush-online-dissent.html>.

⁵³ George Kurtz, “Vietnamese Speakers Targeted in Cyberattack,” *CTO* (blog), March 30, 2010, <http://siblog.mcafee.com/cto/vietnamese-speakers-targeted-in-cyberattack/>; Neel Mehta, “The Chilling Effect of Malware,” *Google Online Security Blog*, March 30, 2010, <http://googleonlinesecurity.blogspot.com/2010/03/chilling-effects-of-malware.html>.

⁵⁴ Kurtz, “Vietnamese Speakers Targeted in Cyberattack.”

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Vietnam: Stop Cyber Attacks Against Online Critics.”

one of the group's members, the French-Vietnamese blogger Pham Minh Hoang, received a prison sentence of three years for his blogging activities.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ "Activists accuse Vietnam of cyber attack," Bangkok Post, August 22, 2011, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/asia/252944/activists-accuse-vietnam-of-cyber-attack>.