



FREEDOM HOUSE

Freedom Of The Press - Vietnam (2007)

Status: Not Free The year 2006 was marked by increased tension between the government and journalists, as activists pushed for a more open media while the government cracked down on freedom of expression, particularly on the internet. Although the 1992 constitution recognizes the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, and association for all citizens, the propaganda and training departments of the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) control all media and set press guidelines. In addition, a 1999 law requires journalists to pay damages to individuals or groups found to have been harmed by press articles, even if they are true. Reporting considered to be against the national interest can be charged under the criminal code and anti-defamation provisions. On July 1, 2006, in response to increasingly vibrant reporting by both the traditional and internet-based news media, the government passed a decree which defined over 2,000 additional violations of the law in the areas of culture and information and imposed hefty fines for offenders, with a particular focus on protecting "national security." In October, two newspapers were temporarily suspended and a third was banned under the new regulations after publishing articles on sensitive subjects.

Legal Environment: 27

Political Environment: 28

Economic Environment: 22

Total Score: 77

Although journalists cannot cover sensitive political or economic matters or openly question the CPV's single-party rule without fear of legal or violent reprisals, they are more often allowed to report on crime and official corruption, and such reports have become increasingly common. Nevertheless, a number of print journalists were harassed and arrested during the year. Several reporters were beaten in March after covering a high-level corruption case. In April, two journalists departing for a freedom of expression seminar in the Philippines, Duong Phu Cuong and Nguyen Huy Cuong, were detained and interrogated by plainclothes police who claimed the reporters had violated departure laws. They had been under police surveillance for months prior to the arrest. In 2006, the government also cracked down harshly on Vietnam's fledgling community of internet dissidents, making several arrests throughout the year. Foreign journalists are monitored closely, and their movements within the country are restricted.

There is only one national television station in the country, state-owned Vietnam Television, although cable does carry some foreign channels. Radio is mainly controlled by the government-run Voice of Vietnam; only one other national private station operates in the country. All print media outlets are owned by or under the effective control of the CPV, government organs, or the army, although several newspapers, including *Thanh Nien*, *Nguoi Lao Dong*, and *Tuoi Tre* (owned by the Youth Union under the CPV), have attempted to become financially sustainable and to stop relying on state subsidies. According to Human Rights Watch, Vietnamese activists launched an unsanctioned newspaper, *Tu Do Ngon Luan (Free Expression)*, which has published two editions since April 2006. Additionally, reporters and bloggers formed an unofficial media group, the Free Journalists Association of Vietnam. Local journalists are generally optimistic that private ownership of the media will expand sooner rather than later, particularly with regard to the internet, though competition for advertising among the more than 500 newspapers and 200 digital news sites remains stiff. Foreign periodicals, although widely available, are sometimes censored, and the broadcasts of stations such as Radio Free Asia are periodically jammed.

Access to satellite television broadcasts and the internet is growing. Currently, more than 17 percent of Vietnamese have internet access. The first online news site, vietnamnet.vn, publishes in Vietnamese and English, while vietnamjournalism.com, a blog run by a local journalist, discusses professional and ethical issues. Website operators continue to go through internet service providers (ISPs) that are either public or part public owned, like Vietnam Data Communications, which is controlled by the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications and caters to nearly a third of all internet users. It is required by law that ISPs block access to designated websites that the government considers politically unacceptable. In its crackdown against internet opposition, the government arrested three cyberdissidents in September for expressing democratic views; the journalist, Tran Khai Thanh, was interrogated and placed under house arrest in November as a result of his essays published on the internet.