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How the Party-State Retains Controls over Vietnam's Blossoming Media Landscape

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Of the top ten most-read online news sites in Vietnam, VnExpress has been the most popular. Picture: Facebook Page of Vn Express, <https://www.facebook.com/congdongvnexpress>, accessed on 4 August 2022.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Most of the popular news sites in Vietnam are currently run by three private tech conglomerates, namely FPT, Zalo/VNG and VCCorp. On the face of it, this situation poses a challenge to the Vietnamese party-state. But in fact, there are no signs that these tech companies have ventured into editorial independence.
- The nexus between tech conglomerates and the Vietnamese party-state has augmented, not curtailed, new constraints on the media, with the former being subject to market pressures while remaining answerable to and at the mercy of propaganda officials.
- Vietnamese authorities have justified the controversial Press Shakeup Blueprint 2025 as a much-needed move to overhaul the bloated bureaucracy and overlapping ownership that have plagued the news industry. While legitimate to some extent, critics of the blueprint point out that it is a testament to how the Vietnamese party-state has constantly looked to weaponize regulations to induce news uniformity and instill self-censorship across the board.
- The façade of innovation of Vietnamese news outlets should not be interpreted as a harbinger of a more independent press. In fact, its continued strong control over mainstream media is emblematic of how the Vietnamese party-state has sought to engineer a superficial openness to camouflage a tighter grip on public discourse.

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to give a sense of the biggest and most influential media outlets in Vietnam, who owns and controls them, and what sorts of tools, methods and policies are employed to ensure the regime's control over the information ecosystem. It addresses these questions: What are the vested interests behind private conglomerates that run newly emerging news outlets? Do these media entities exhibit a particular editorial slant that challenges the party line? How have the authorities sought to keep exerting control and influence on the press in this new media landscape at a time when they are struggling to rein in online discourse?

The vast majority of the most popular news sites in Vietnam are currently run by three private tech conglomerates, namely FPT Corporation, Zalo/VNG and VCCorp. On the face of it, this situation poses a potential challenge for the Vietnamese party-state, which does not allow private media ownership and has always sought to control public discourse. This paper argues that, in fact, there are no signs that these tech companies have exhibited any editorial independence; rather, they seem to be adopting a pragmatic stance and consulting closely with the government.

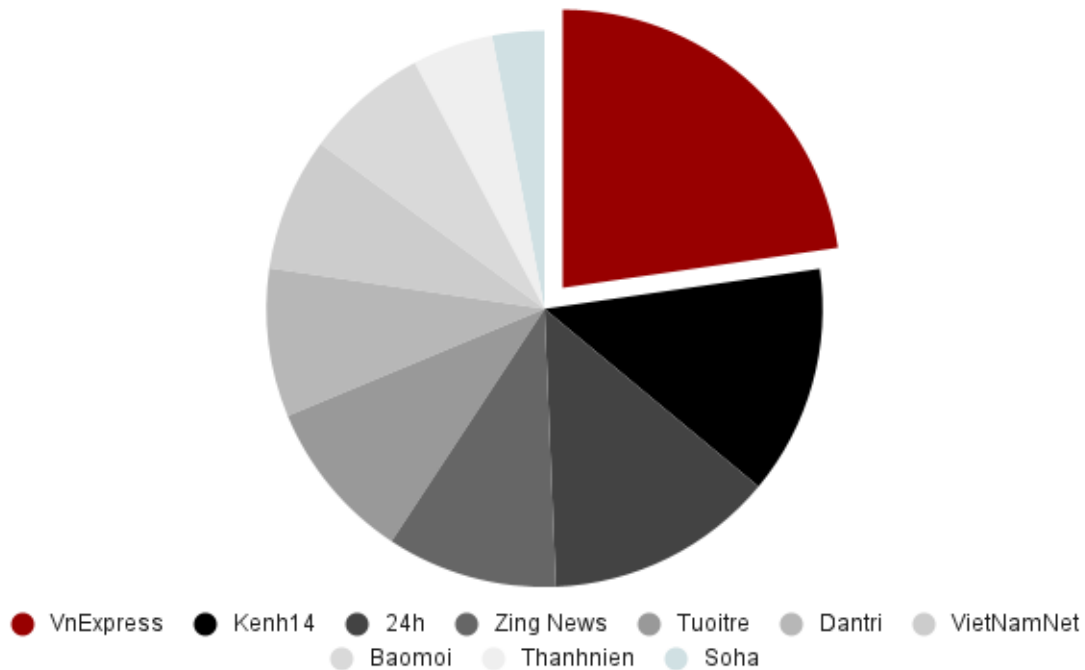
THE NEXUS BETWEEN TECH FIRMS AND THE PARTY-STATE

Internet growth in Vietnam got off to a rather low start. The Internet arrived in Vietnam only in 1997 and three years later, a mere 203,000 Vietnamese (or 0.25 per cent of the then total population) were online.¹ But due to growing demands from the business community and consumers for cheaper, faster and better Internet access², as well as the need to boost e-commerce as Vietnam opened up to the global economy³, the authorities allowed for more competition from the private sector and the development of online media. As of January 2022, around 72 million Vietnamese, or 70 per cent of the population, were online.⁴ In the early 2000s, established newspapers, including the mouthpiece of the Communist party, started to launch their online versions. Major tech companies entered the fray in the mid-2000s, accelerating the development of Vietnam's online media space with prominent entrants that remain the most popular and most read today.⁵ Since Vietnam ushered in economic liberalisation policies known as "Doi Moi" (renovation) in 1986, the party-state has "actively outsourced the burden of funding media to the market."⁶ All this attests to a rat race for readers' attention and advertising dollars in an increasingly commercialised and growing media industry.

Just like everywhere else, Vietnam's print newspapers have been haemorrhaging readers to online news sites. Of the top ten most-read online news sites in Vietnam, VnExpress has been the most popular. Among state-run sites that cracked the list, Tuoi Tre (Youth) and Thanh Nien (Young People), which also launched their online versions in the early 2000s, have remained the most influential established print newspapers in the country. Tuoi Tre operates under the remit of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union and Thanh Nien under the Vietnam Youth Federation. Considered the most progressive newspapers in Vietnam in the 2000s, both were

at the forefront of pushing the envelope in their coverage of endemic corruption, government malfeasance and social injustice. The other two state-run news outlets that are on the list are VietNamNet, owned by the Ministry of Information and Communications, and Dan Tri (Public Intellectual), which is under the Central Association for Education Promoting.

FIGURE 1. THE TOP 10 MOST-READ ONLINE NEWS SITES IN VIETNAM



(Sources: SimilarWeb and Semrush, February 2022⁷)

The other news sites on the list centre on three tech conglomerates: FPT Corporation (the Corporation for Financing and Promoting Technology), Zalo Group, and VCCorp (Vietnam Communication Corporation). FPT Corporation owns VnExpress. Zalo Group, owned by VNG, runs Zing News and baomoi.com. VCCorp owns Kenh14.vn and Soha.vn. Closer scrutiny of the profiles of those corporations, how they are beholden to the authorities and what shapes the editorial line of their news outlets offer a glimpse of the nexus between tech conglomerates and the Vietnamese party-state.

What are their profiles?

FPT: Starting out as a food processing technology company in 1988, FPT Corporation is currently the largest IT group in Vietnam.⁸ Its core business revolves around three sectors: information technology, telecommunications and education.

Zalo/VNG: VNG, the parent company of Zalo, has been billed as Vietnam’s first ever unicorn startup specialising in online gaming, e-commerce, music streaming and messaging application.⁹ Zalo owns the eponymous premier chatting app in Vietnam, boasting more than 70 million users.¹⁰

VCCorp: The conglomerate brands itself as a leading technology and Internet player in Vietnam.¹¹ Its core business models focus on e-commerce, online content, online advertising and mobile content.

How beholden are these tech conglomerates to the Vietnamese government?

Of note, the interests of the Vietnamese party-state and those of such tech conglomerates have become increasingly aligned and intertwined.

FPT: According to Nikkei Asia, the government holds a 5.9 per cent stake in FPT Corporation while foreign investors own 48.75 per cent.¹² The conglomerate has been a major Internet Service Provider (ISP) that has been a part of the country's Internet filtering regime, blocking sites at the behest of Vietnamese censors.¹³

Zalo/VNG: A major communication channel between the Vietnamese government and its citizens, Zalo has also been utilised as part of the e-government infrastructure across the country.¹⁴ Vietnamese authorities have tapped into patriotic nationalism to talk the public into using the app.¹⁵ Since 2018, Zalo/VNG, along with VCCorp and another Vietnamese tech firm, has been at the vanguard of what amounts to a national mission. The government has tasked those tech firms with jacking up the number of social media customers that use domestic platforms, a move designed to rival Meta's Facebook and Google's YouTube.¹⁶

VCCorp: VCCorp bankrolled and developed Lotus, a Vietnamese social network that was launched in 2019 to much fanfare and with wholehearted support from the government.¹⁷

What dictates their editorial line?

News outlets run by the private tech companies tailor their content to a young, Internet-savvy audience, a growing middle class, and the business community. Their topics of coverage are diverse, ranging from politics to society, world affairs to education, business to urban life, technology to youth, and entertainment to sports. But when it comes to politics, their editorial line has revolved chiefly around amplifying official sources and state-sanctioned narratives under the banner of innovative online journalism that embraces long form, visual and interactive storytelling. The treatment of any contentious issues is well within the boundaries of the permissible, serving mostly as a useful local-level overview. Coverage of governance malfeasance and corruption at the central level has been dictated by the political consensus and elite framing of the Vietnamese party-state. In sum, news outlets run by private tech conglomerates have never seemed intent on adopting any editorial slant that challenges the party line. As Nguyen-Thu (2018) observes, the growing clout of businesspeople in the media industry only means that they are likely to be inclined to shun "sensitive" topics and to focus instead on "commercially rewarding but politically benign content."¹⁸ The nexus between tech conglomerates and the Vietnamese party-state has augmented, not curtailed, new constraints on the media, with the former being subject to market pressures while remaining answerable

to and at the mercy of propaganda officials. As Nguyen-Thu (2018) encapsulates, “the defining characteristics of the contemporary Vietnamese media is thus not just political censorship, but the raw combination of political surveillance and commercializing pressure.”¹⁹

“UNPREDICTABLE AND ARBITRARY” CENSORSHIP

Under the Press Law 2016, all press agencies in Vietnam, including those run by private tech companies, must be placed under the remit of the party, the government or various political, social, professional or religious associations and organizations.²⁰ Private participation in news organizations and television is allowed, but their editorial content must not be related to political and current news events.²¹ In practice, private production of content has taken place for years. Many outlets have produced TV shows, hosted online news portals and published local versions of foreign magazines and publications. The same dynamic can also be observed in the television industry, where state-run stations are allowed to privatise their shows, apart from those on news and current affairs.²²

Still, the bottom line is that in order to operate in Vietnam, private companies are required to partner with a state entity. FPT’s VnExpress is concurrently under the ownership of the Ministry of Science and Technology and Zalo’s Zing News under the remit of the Vietnam Publishing Association. The case of VCCorp is a bit trickier, however. All news sites run by the conglomerate, including the two on the most-read list, are technically licensed as “aggregated information websites”, not online newspapers. This means that these sites are obliged to operate effectively as news aggregators²³; they are allowed to only republish news information from a state-approved whitelist. But in practice, many such aggregated information websites have had their own staff produce original content. Their technical workaround has been to publish such information in the name of citing from certain state-affiliated online newspapers, with the latter’s consent.²⁴ In that spirit, the VCCorp-run aggregated information websites are affiliated with news outlets that are owned by the Young Intellectuals and Scientists Association, and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

The Central Commission of Propaganda and Education and the Ministry of Information and Communications have been at the helm in controlling the press, dictating over all state-run print, broadcast, online, and electronic media.²⁵ The Central Commission of Propaganda and Education acts as an ideological gatekeeper, advising the Communist party of Vietnam on how to keep tabs on the press. The Ministry of Information and Communications is mainly charged with regulating Vietnamese media through the licensing system and overseeing other legal, technical and economic aspects of the industry.²⁶ All editors-in-chief of those press agencies are Communist party members; this requirement has extended to those who hold senior editorial positions at established newspapers. Senior editors, including those of private-run ones, are summoned to weekly meetings with propaganda officials either every Tuesday in Hanoi, the capital, or every Wednesday in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam’s economic hub. In those meetings, published articles are reviewed and news outlets are subject to dressing-down or even fines if they are deemed not subservient enough to the party line. Propaganda officials

also set the boundaries of what is publishable for upcoming topics of importance and public interests.

But such out-of-bounds markers have never been straightforward and have in fact become increasingly fuzzy. As Cain (2013, 3) observes, Vietnam's media controls are "purposefully unpredictable and arbitrary"²⁷ in a bid to induce and perpetuate self-censorship among journalists and their editors in particular. Indeed, it is the Vietnamese party-state's deployment of vagueness and uncertainty that plays a crucial role in enabling the authorities to keep the media on their toes. Thanks to a conflicting array of laws, decrees, and even the Constitution as far as it provides for press freedom, Vietnamese authorities on the one hand allow for criticism of the party-state but on the other can make such practices an offense.²⁸ All this puts the media in an ironic position: It is tasked with serving as a "forum for the people" while at the same time serving as a "mouthpiece of the Party."

KILL THE CHICKEN TO SCARE THE MONKEY

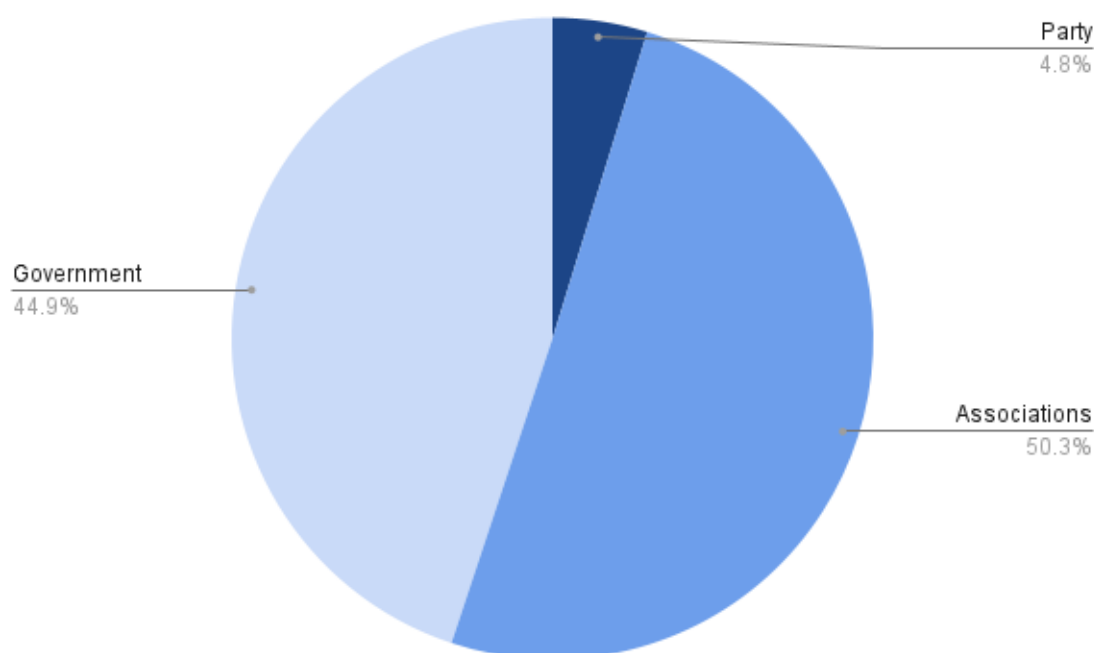
The heyday of Vietnam's critical journalism in the 2000s was short-lived. In mid-2008, after forcing a minister of transport to step down and exposing graft that sent scores of high-ranking officials to jail, two prominent Vietnamese journalists from the two most influential established newspapers, Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien, were arrested.²⁹ Later that year, the editors-in-chief of the same newspapers were also fired. The authorities never clearly articulated their rationale for their dismissal, but it was not difficult to fathom: Their corruption coverage crossed the line. The concurrent dismissal of the top editors of Vietnam's legacy news organisations was an unprecedented move in the history of the country's journalism. This crackdown has since upended the country's media landscape, perpetuating a climate of fear and self-censorship that only appears to exacerbate day by day.

A decade later, Tuoi Tre became the casualty to another unprecedented move. In 2018, its online version was suspended for three months after being accused of misquoting the then-Vietnamese president and publishing readers' comments deemed by the authorities as undermining "national unity".³⁰ The incident was likely to bring about a sense of *déjà vu* for VnExpress. The site was also on the brink of shutdown in 2004, three years into its operation, due to readers' comments that were critical of the government policy on car imports.³¹ VnExpress narrowly escaped the closure but since then, critical and investigative journalism has effectively been off its editorial agenda. Those cases are likely to have served as cautionary tales for the rest of the media landscape: Any editorial slant that crosses the party line risks imperilling the very survival of any news organisation, let alone private-run ones. Such tactics are in line with how the Vietnamese party-state controls the media. As Cain (2013) observes, because the authorities lack the wherewithal to punish every single transgressor, their strategy of choice is to kill the chicken to scare the monkey, or to go after "a handful of exemplars to keep the rest in line."³²

The 2018 punishment against Tuoi Tre has also appeared to further embolden Vietnamese authorities to dangle the no-holds-barred threat of withdrawing the license of any news outlet

they consider straying from the party line. Nowhere is this strategy of choice more manifest than in what has been referred to as the Press Shakeup Blueprint 2025.³³ The blueprint, which was announced in 2015, seeks, among other things, to increase and centralise state control over the media by axing or merging hundreds of press organisations. The authorities have justified this move as being essential to the revamping of the bloated bureaucracy and overlapping ownership that have plagued the news industry.³⁴ While this justification is legitimate to some extent, critics of the blueprint point out that one of its key aims is to rein in media organisations deemed decamping from ideology. Most notably, the authorities seem intent on explicitly prohibiting news outlets from covering topics that are not aligned with the *raison d'être* of the agencies or associations they belong to.³⁵ For instance, judging by the tenor of the plan, Zing News would be allowed to run articles mostly on publishing activities since it falls under the remit of the Vietnam Publishing Association. If the outlet ventures into coverage of other topics deemed editorially sensitive or slanted by the censors, that could be considered in contravention of the stated aims of the license, which could lead to its withdrawal. This scenario is poised to affect almost half of all press organisations in Vietnam, which technically belong to various socio-political-professional associations (See Figure 2). The press overhaul has been enforced unevenly since 2019 and it remains to be seen what will become of Vietnam's media landscape by 2025. But for now, the prospect of the blueprint appears to add another layer of uncertainty and suspense for a press that has already been cowed into submission. It is also a testament to how Vietnamese authorities have constantly looked to weaponise regulations to induce news uniformity and instill self-censorship across the board.

FIGURE 2. OWNERSHIP STRUCTURE OF PRESS ORGANISATIONS



(Source: Ministry of Information and Communications)

APPETITE FOR ALTERNATIVE NEWS SOURCES REMAINS HIGH

Vietnamese authorities have repeatedly urged the mainstream media to get out of the rut to enhance professional practices and embrace digital technology at what they call a make-or-break juncture for Vietnamese journalism. But as we have seen, the façade of innovation in Vietnam’s media landscape should not be understood as a harbinger of a more independent press.³⁶ In fact, its continued strong controls over mainstream media is emblematic of how the Vietnamese party-state has sought to engineer a superficial openness to camouflage a tighter grip on public discourse.

The era of swelling social media activism seems to have elicited a policy response aimed at further constraining traditional media in their coverage of contentious issues that cast the regime in an unflattering light. The fact that the privately-owned media outlets have also toed the Party’s line suggests that the appetite for alternative news sources will remain high.

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