Asia's Media Innovators
by Stephen Quinn
and Kim Kierans

July 2010 – Chapter Four

Blogging as an alternative media in Vietnam

Social networking and social media, especially blogs, have blossomed in Vietnam in the past few years. The country has many famous bloggers but some remain anonymous; they fear their opinions will result in jail or reprisal from authorities. A December 2008 edict from the Ministry of Information requires bloggers to restrict their postings to personal content, and bans postings about politics or issues the government considers state secrets, subversive, or threats to national security and social order. All IP addresses in Vietnam are owned and controlled by state-owned Internet Service Providers.

The monitoring of Internet blogs and forums is a big job. By the end of 2009 the Internet penetration rate was 25.7 per cent, according to the Vietnam Internet Network Information Center (VNNIC). That is well above Asia's average of 20 per cent. While Vietnam's Internet penetration is similar to countries like China, the Philippines and Thailand, it has experienced more rapid growth than most other countries in the region.

In 2008, Vietnam (population 88.6 million) had about 20 million Internet users, according to the World Bank's world development indicators. A little over a year later, by the end of 2009, the number of users had jumped to 22.7 million, according to the Internet World Statistics. Between 2000-2009 the number of Vietnamese using the Internet grew by a phenomenal 10,882 per cent. Details can be found at (www.internetworld stats.com/stats3.htm).

Of those 22.7 million Internet users, the "Vietnam NetCitizen Report: Internet Usage and Development in Vietnam" released in March 2010 by Cimigo, an independent marketing research company based in HCMC, found that most users went online

from home (75 per cent) and work (25 per cent). Homeowners pay from $13 to $15 dollars a month (250,000-300,000 VND) for a package.

Younger age groups (21 per cent) tend to use Internet cafes, though their popularity is waning as more people have their own computers and Wi-Fi is widely available in major cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Prices to go online at Internet cafes in Vietnam have fallen dramatically in the past four years. In early 2006 it cost 10 cents (2000 VND) per minute. By mid 2010 it was 15 cents (3000 VND) for an hour of computer time.

The Cimigo survey of 3,000 Internet users in six Vietnamese cities (conducted in October and November 2009) found that most people went online to get information or read the news (90 per cent), followed by entertainment such as music, movies, gaming (76 per cent), chatting and email (70 per cent), and forums, blogs and social network sites (40-45 per cent).

Google was the favoured website for search and research activities, followed by Zing (a Vietnamese site) for online entertainment and Yahoo for email, instant message and chatting. About 15-20 per cent of those surveyed went to online to read newspapers such as DanTri (http://dantri.com.vn), VnExpress (www.vnexpress.net/GL/Home/) and Tuoitre (http://tuoitre.com.vn).

The level of interest in the Internet continues to grow because the vast majority (91 per cent) of those Cimigo surveyed consider it an important source for news and information. This is despite the fact that many (58 per cent) do not generally trust online information and consider television and newspapers more reliable. Vietnamese are drawn to the Internet for chat, email, blogs

Asia's Media Innovators
by Stephen Quinn
and Kim Kierans

July 2010 – Chapter Four

and social networks; the survey showed that four in five people believed the Internet helped them connect with friends and new people. The NetCitizens Report can be downloaded at http://cimigo.vn/.

Despite the presence of 174 newspapers and 470 magazines in the country, blogs have made huge inroads in Vietnam. The number exploded in late 2005 with the introduction of Yahoo 360°. "Everyone was using Yahoo Messenger, then Yahoo added the 360° blogging thing to Messenger. That's when it just exploded," explained Joe Ruelle, a Canadian who lives in Hanoi. Ruelle became a national personality because of the huge audience who followed his quirky blog about life in Hanoi and written in Vietnamese. Joe's blog, as it is called, became a nationally syndicated newspaper column and led to Ruelle hosting entertainment programs on Vietnamese TV.

"It was like the Wild West. There was like the whole Billy the Kid bloggers being bad and naughty and all that stuff. It was kind of seen as a teen phenomenon," Ruelle recalled. A teen phenomenon, with two million people in Vietnam all using the same service. "And it was all blogs. It wasn't Facebook, it wasn't Twitter, it was all blogs at the same time," Ruelle said.

Yahoo 360° closed in July 2009. But the social networking door had opened to Internet savvy Vietnamese. Bloggers lost the critical mass available at Yahoo 360° and they scattered, moving to other websites including Multiply, Zing, Wordpress, Yahoo Plus, Facebook and Blogspot.

"Forums and blogs are the most important category and the most influential in terms of social media in Vietnam, rather than Facebook and some of the social networking," said Vu Thi Hai Anh, a public affairs officer at the Embassy of Canada in Hanoi.

The NetCitizen Report (March 2010) found that people younger than 25 are three times more likely to post to online forums and write blogs compared with users over the age of 25. Several reasons can be found for this phenomenon, including a need to express personal opinions, and a desire to speak out about perceived corruption at various levels of government.

Joe Ruelle noted the widespread adoption of the Internet among young people. "Television is just not in the equation," he said. "Newspapers cannot compete with online. And television does not have any shows that capture the imagination of that age group. Teenagers are constantly online with Yahoo messenger. So the online newspapers tend to link to blogs and chat sites."

He said in Canada if someone hosted a television show and ran a blog aimed at teenagers they would get more attention and fame from the television show. In Vietnam it is the reverse. Teenagers respond to blogs. "I get street cred[ibility] from my blog in Vietnam."

The Vietnam NetCitizens Report also found the number of people writing blogs dropped from 27 to 20 per cent after 2007 and surmised "the main reason for this might be the closing of Yahoo 360° in 2009, which had been by far the most popular blogging application". It might also have something to do with increased government monitoring and censoring of activities on the Internet.

On 26 May 2010 the Human Rights Watch, the non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in New York said that the Vietnamese government had launched a sophisticated and sustained two-pronged attack against online dissent. The government was detaining and intimidating independent Vietnamese bloggers while also permitting cyber attacks from Vietnam to disable websites critical of the government, the NGO said.

"In the past two months [since May 2010], Vietnamese authorities detained at least seven independent bloggers, subjecting them to extended interrogations and, in some instances, physical abuse. This intensified harassment has coincided with systematic cyber attacks targeting websites operated by some of these bloggers and other activists in Vietnam and abroad."

The NGO said the most damaging attacks deployed "botnets". These consist of "malware" disguised as software to support a Vietnamese-language keyboard that caused crippling denial-of-service attacks against websites. Hackers switched a popular software for inputting Vietnamese-characters written by the California-based Vietnamese Professionals Society (VPS), called VPSKeys,

with a "malware" version that took over people's computers, according to McAfee, an Internet security firm. To get users to download the "malware", given the name W32/Vulcanbot by McAfee, a fake email from VPS was sent to specific recipients informing them about an "updated software of VPS" and asking them to download the "new" [fake] version of VPSKeys. Because of the cyber attacks some bloggers moved their blogs to servers outside the country.

Google as well as McAfee confirmed and then condemned the attacks. "The government targets these Internet writers simply because they voice independent opinions, criticise government policies, and expose wrongdoing," said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "Evidently the government is worried these bloggers will reveal the inside story of government abuse and corruption, and report on incidents and issues it prevents from appearing in the state controlled media."

In a blog entry on 30 March 2010 McAfee's chief technical officer, George Kurtz, wrote: "The rogue keyboard driver … connected the infected machines to a network of compromised computers. During our investigation into the 'botnet' we found about a dozen command and control systems for the network of hijacked PCs. The command and control servers were predominantly being accessed from IP [Internet Protocol] addresses in Vietnam." Kurtz said he believed that the perpetrators may have had political motivations and may have some allegiance to the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. "This incident underscores that not every attack is motivated by data theft or money."

Neel Mehta from Google's security team wrote in his blog: "This particular 'malware' broadly targeted Vietnamese computer users around the world. The 'malware' infected the computers of potentially tens of thousands of users who downloaded Vietnamese keyboard language software. These infected machines have been used both to spy on their owners as well as participate in distributed denial-of-service attacks against blogs containing messages of political dissent. Specifically, these attacks have tried to squelch opposition to bauxite mining in Vietnam, an important and emotionally charged issue in the country."

A Vietnamese government spokesperson dismissed Google and McAfee's allegations as "groundless". But Human Rights Watch said it had evidence that challenged the government's claims. Websites that have been bombarded by hundreds of attacks – including the political commentary website Thong Luan and a Catholic website, Dong Chua Cuu The Viet Nam (www.dcctvn.net) – traced some of the attacks to the IP address for Viettel, a state-owned telecommunication company operated by Vietnam's Ministry of Defence.

The Vietnam Express site in May 2010 published the transcript of an interview with Pham Quoc Ban, director of the Hanoi Department of Information and Communications. The story's headline was "Hanoi to control Internet café users". The interview concerned a decision by the Hanoi People's Committee on 26 April 2010 to regulate Internet cafes. Part of the translated transcript is shown below:

Pham Quoc Ban: *Hanoi presently has around 4,000 Internet agents. … we will use technology to manage Internet shops. Specifically, competent agencies will install specialized software designed by National University. This software will oversee the activities of users and the owners of Internet shops to know whether or not they are obeying the law.*

Vietnam Express: *It is said that controlling the users at Internet shops will violate their right to privacy. How do you respond?*

Ban: *At present, control of users at Internet shops is very poor. People of less than 18 years old can freely visit websites with bad content. If we continue the loose management of these shops, Vietnam will have corrupted youth infected with bad thoughts. Their personalities will be harmed because they easily see porn and violent materials. Security also worsens because some people become addicted to online games and, to have money for games, they become robbers. This is a pressing matter for society and citizens have asked the People's Council several times to crackdown on this situation. Therefore, controlling the behaviour of users at Internet shops is a popular move.*

The full interview can be found at
www.vnexpress.net/GL/Vi-tinh/2010/05/3BA1B8EC/

Vietnamese officials have admitted the government has shut down websites. Human Rights Watch reported that at a national news conference on 5 May 2010 Lieutenant general Vu Hai Trieu, deputy director of the General Department 2 of the Public Security Ministry, told several hundred Vietnamese media representatives that the department had "destroyed 300 bad Internet web pages and individual blogs".

On 10 June 2010 Google policy analyst Dorothy Chou wrote on the Google policy blog: "Internet users in Hanoi will soon find that they can't reach certain sites when browsing the Web at local Internet cafés. A regulation enacted in April requires that all retail Internet locations install a server-side application by 2011. The application will likely allow the Vietnamese government to block access to websites, as well as to track user activities.

"The implementation of an application like this one would choke off access to information for many in Hanoi – given how popular Internet cafés are among Internet users in Vietnam. If the regulation spreads beyond Hanoi, it will impose these vague and non-transparent restrictions on users all over the country. Together with the security attacks we detected on Vietnamese human rights activists earlier this year (see our security blog post on 'The chilling effects of malware') and intermittent blockages of Facebook and other social networks, this regulation is a troubling example of a government threatening free expression online and an open Internet."

The US State Department has made Internet censorship a key pillar of its foreign policy and now factors the issue into its diplomatic relations with every nation. In every meeting with foreign dignitaries the issue was "on the table," Alec Ross, senior advisor for innovation to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, told an event hosted by the Media Access Project, a non-profit law firm and advocacy group, in Washington on 11 June 2010.

On 27 April 2010 the Viet Tan advocacy group released a report blaming the Hanoi government for illegal computer attacks. Based on the Internet Protocol (IP) addresses it obtained, Viet Tan said it determined that the attacks originated from Vietnam. The full report can be downloaded at www.viettan.org/en. Viet Tan has launched an Internet Freedom Campaign to support Vietnam's citizen journalists and digital activists.

Detention of Bloggers

Human Rights Watch in New York has documented some of the recent incidents in which bloggers were detained:

On **8 May 2010** provincial authorities terminated the telephone and Internet service at the home of Ha Si Phu, one of Vietnam's best-known dissident bloggers. Ha Si Phu's telephone service was disconnected at the written instructions of the Bureau of Information and Media, based on a police investigation alleging that he had used his telephone lines to transmit "anti-government" information. Since the beginning of 2010, Ha Si Phu's blog and website have been plagued by periodic cyber attacks.

On **1 May 2010** police detained two bloggers, Vu Quoc Tu (also known as Uyen Vu) and Ho Diep (also known as Trang Dem), at Tan Son Nhat airport in Ho Chi Minh City as the couple was boarding a plane to Bangkok for their honeymoon. The police interrogated them for hours and forbade them from travelling abroad, contending the restriction was based on reasons of national security.

On **28 April 2010** Lu Thi Thu Trang, an Internet activist associated with the pro-democracy group Block 8406, was beaten by police officers in front of her 5-year-old son. The police then took her to the police station and detained her for seven hours, interrogating her and repeatedly hitting her on the neck and face.

Another blogger, Ta Phong Tan, was detained at least three times during April and May 2010. On **April 20 2010**, police forced their way into her home in Ho Chi Minh City, took her to the police station for interrogation, and later released her. Ta Phong Tan is a former policewoman who blogs about corruption and injustice in the Vietnamese legal system.

On **3 April 2010** hackers broke into the Internet accounts of the blogger Bui Thanh Hieu (who writes as Nguoi Buon Gio, or "Wind Merchant"). Ho Chi Minh City police also detained and interrogated him for a week in early March and for 10 days in August 2009, after he posted blogs criticising the government's policies toward China, bauxite mining in the Central Highlands, and disputes with Catholics over church properties.

In **January 2010** human rights activists Le Cong Dinh, Tran Huynh Duy Thuc and Le Thang Long were convicted on charges of attempting to "overthrow the government" for supporting the formation of an opposition party. They were sentenced to prison terms ranging from five to 16 years. All opposition political groups are banned in Vietnam.

Protests over bauxite mine

Vietnam's largest civil action to date relates to the mining of bauxite, a mineral used to produce aluminium. Vietnam holds the third largest bauxite resources in the world –somewhere between 5.4 and 8.3 billion tons. Most of the bauxite is found in the country's ecologically sensitive Central Highlands.

In January 2009, bauxite mining suddenly became a national issue when General Vo Nguyen Giap, a hero from Vietnam's war with America in the 1970s, issued the first of three open letters. The general, then aged 98, argued that bauxite mining would ruin the environment, displace indigenous ethnic minorities and, most significantly, threaten national security because of the high numbers of Chinese workers in the strategic Central Highland. The last would provide China with economic leverage, he wrote. General Giap's photograph featured prominently on the bauxite web site. Suspicion of China runs deep in Vietnam because of a long history of conflict: The two countries fought a border war in 1979 and they have ongoing disputes about two archipelagos in the South China Sea, the Spratlys and the Paracels.

In March 2009, leading academics initiated a petition calling on the government to reconsider its bauxite policy, especially its involvement with a Chinese state-owned company not known for its environmental stewardship. The China Aluminum Company, or CHALCO, had won the bid for the contract in partnership with the Vietnam National Coal Mineral Industries Group (VINACOMIN). In 2008 small numbers of Vietnamese environmentalists and scientists protested against the development in the absence of an environmental impact study. They were mostly ignored.

Three men who opposed the government's plans to open the bauxite mine founded a website in 2009 named Bauxite Vietnam (http://bauxitevietnam.info/) and hosted it on a server in France. The site attracted millions of hits. Faced with this new challenge, Vietnamese authorities sought to shut the site down and intimidate the organisers. The site's manager, Nguyen Hue Chi, said when the site was first blocked in 2009, he played an online cat-and-mouse game with unknown hackers. He moved it to a new web address, but it was hacked again. From the time it opened until it was closed in January 2010, the Bauxite site had more than 20 million hits from readers concerned about the government's mining plans. Vietnamese authorities denied any involvement in the demise of the Bauxite Vietnam site.

Chi told AFP the founders established the site because Vietnam's state-controlled media had ignored the dispute over the bauxite mine. Chi said he wanted to work with the Communist Party, not replace it. He expressed confidence that the government would gradually ease restrictions on expression. "The right to independent thought and free expression is enshrined in the Vietnamese constitution," Chi said.

Dr Carlyle Thayer is a professor of politics in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University College, at The University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Australia's capital city, Canberra. In 2009 he published a long article about the mine controversy in the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*. "The anti-bauxite controversy of 2009 presented a new public challenge to state authority. For the first time the competency of the government to decide on large-scale development projects was called into question by a broad national coalition of mainstream elites including environmentalists, scientists, economists, social scientists, and retired officials," he wrote.

On 17 May 2010 an Australian Member of Parliament, Christopher Pyne, wrote to the prime minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Nguyen Tan Dung, to remind authorities that Vietnam was a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The covenant expects government to respect and uphold the civil and political rights of individuals, including the right to freedom of speech. Yet Article 88 of Vietnam's criminal code, which criminalises "propaganda" against the government, contradicted the ICCPR and has been used to arrest and deter peaceful democratic activists. "Vietnam has immense potential in furthering its progress and I believe that this will be achieved only if freedom of expression and political belief are upheld and respected," Pyne wrote.

On 27 August 2009 Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security distributed an official dispatch to prominent Internet providers in Vietnam ordering them to halt their users' access to eight websites, including Facebook. The dispatch said: "For security reasons and to fight against propagative activities that oppose the Party and the government, Department of Professional Technology – Office of Security Administration – Ministry of Public Security suggests that the addressed companies to apply technical methods to block thoroughly these following websites."

Vietnam Internet Service Providers (ISPs) followed orders from government authorities have put up firewalls and have intermittently blocked the popular social networking site Facebook since November 2009. On 1 December 2009 the BBC quoted foreign ministry spokeswoman Nguyen Phuong Nga as saying the government was blocking some websites "which were being used to provide information damaging to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam". At the time Facebook had more than one million users in Vietnam, and the number increased after Facebook added a Vietnamese language version. Most Facebookers use the site to communicate with friends and family, and to expand their social networks by sharing photos, Internet links and blogs. Alexa.com lists it as the seventh top site in Vietnam, after Google.vn, Yahoo.com, VnExpress, Zing.vn, Google.com and Dantri.com.vn. See: www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/vn.

Some analysts said Facebook opened up communication between Vietnamese citizens and overseas Vietnamese who fled after the American-Vietnamese war. The government views the latter group with suspicion. China has blocked Facebook since July 2009 and has also shut down Twitter and YouTube. Vietnam's largest Internet service providers said they had been swamped with calls from customers in November 2009 complaining they could not access Facebook.

Some tech-savvy Facebook fans have found ways around the problem by adjusting their web browsers to a different configuration or accessing Facebook through another (proxy) server. The instructions are posted online. It should be noted that using proxy servers and other "tools" to circumvent the government's efforts at regulating the Internet is illegal in Vietnam.

Zing Me: "The Vietnamese Way of Social Network Service"
The problems at Yahoo 360° and more recently with Facebook opened a window for Vietnamese companies to fill the social network service (SNS) void. VNG Corporation, an online business based in Ho Chi Minh City, started in 2005 with the online gaming business with interactive games such as Swordman Online. It has generated healthy profits and a cabinet full of awards. In 2007 the company added the portal Zing.vn, a door to social networks, music, news and online games.

The company's philosophy is splashed on its boardroom wall. VNG's mission is to "Make Internet change Vietnamese lives"; its vision characterized by the number 4114 -"41 million customers in 2014"; and its values include passion, improvement, resourcefulness, responsibility, team work and user focus.

In 2009 two weeks after Yahoo 360° closed, VNG added Zing Me (www.zing.vn), which

is often referred to as the Vietnamese version of Facebook. As of June 2010 it had 5.1 million daily visitors, outpacing Facebook's 2.1 million. (Source: Google Ad planner). Cimigo's survey found Zing had the second largest penetration, second to Google, with one in four Internet users in Vietnam using one or more of Zing's various websites between October and November 2009.

"We began with content [gaming] and moved into social media and relationships," explained company vice-president Vuong Quang Kai, a 30-year old entrepreneur who studied Computer Science at Columbia University in the United States but was lured back home to VNG by the vision of being a leader in online technology.

He said Zing.vn tries to blend the egocentric aspects of VietSpace and MySpace, the relationship aspects of Twitter and Facebook, and the content centric aspects of some of its site and rivals such as Tamtay.vn, Yahoo 360PlusVietnam and the newly launched government supported Go.vn.

Do The Nghia, Strategy Manager, VNG Corporation (left) and Vuong Quang Khai, Vice-President, VNG Corporation, in VNG boardroom. Photo by Kim Kierans

Vuong Quang Kai said Zing targets a young audience rather than trying to compete with well-established online newspapers such as Vn.Express that cater to older audiences. The untapped potential is great. Internal tracking (Dec 2009) found that 65 per cent of users were male and 35 percent female. "Women go to Internet sites for connections. Men prefer content in they like to play games," Vuong Quang Kai explained. The company is working to attract more young women with social networking sites such as Miss Online or Super teen model contests and applications such as "Hot Or Not".

"We want to become the second (or virtual) home of Vietnam's netizens," he said. All Zing's applications are localised or devel-

oped for Vietnamese cultural because "Vietnamese is the first priority".

The strategy seem to be effective because Zing Me has become the biggest website in the VNG portfolio. The company employs more than 1,200 people. The average age of the employees is 26. Unlike some of its rivals, Zing has a 30 person editorial team based in Hanoi. They generate 70 per cent of the site's news – mostly entertainment and feature stories – and they steer clear of politics. But Zing does have moderators and software filters to deal with offensive or politically incorrect content on the blogs.

"Two years ago there was no talk about religion or politics allowed on our blogs. Now we're mainstream and we can't avoid people talking about religion or politics," Vuong Quang Kai said.

Challenge for mainstream media
On 19 January 2010 the VietNamNet Bridge web site reported that Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung told the annual conference of the Ministry of Information and Communications that "Vietnam must build powerful media groups." But the press "should not report information that harms the country's interests," he was quoted as saying.

Nguyen Tan Dung said the ministry needed to work closely with the Central Propaganda and Education Committee to guide the press: "Directing and managing the press and media doesn't mean restriction, but assistance in the development of our revolutionary press in terms of content, form and skills," the PM claimed. Vietnam's more than 17,000 journalists must be "loyal soldiers serving the nation".

"The truth is always the truth, but we must choose the suitable time to tell the truth to ensure the country's interests," he explained. The ministry is promoting a project to establish an Information and Communication University, working with the Central Propaganda and Education Committee to hold training courses for journalists. The full story can be found at http://english.vietnamnet.vn/politics/201001/Minister-confirms-a-social-network-for-VN-890430.

The explosion of the Internet has presented challenges for the government owned and controlled mainstream print and broadcast

media. "We have the agenda of the government to consider. That means we have to abide by their agenda," said the managing editor of the *Saigon Times*, Nguyen Van Thang.

There is also pressure from online citizen newspapers, blogs and forums. For example, Ngyyen Van Thang credits the work of online media Bauxite Vietnam http://bauxitevietnam.info/bixutvn.net for breaking the story about widespread leasing of more than 300,00 hectares of watershed forests to foreign investors. Ngyyen Van Thang said in February 2010 two retired military officers Major General Nguyen Trong Vinh and Lieutenant General Dong Si Nguyena approached the mainstream media with their concerns over the leases and the effects of such extensive logging.

"None of us would print the stories, none of us would publish it. Only after it's published on a website, only then mainstream newspapers interviewed the two generals and after that the government had to stop those contracts. So that is direct impact."

He said this showed that mainstream press in Vietnam were discovering they no longer had the monopoly of producing news. In 2009 Nugyen Van Thang said he suggested that major dailies open up their websites and publish some of the popular bloggers and invite readers to comment freely, but the idea was shot down. "Because there is the dilemma if you are a famous blogger you have your own forum, your own medium, you don't need another news organization. But when you work for a news organization you have to abide by its rules and censor yourself. No blogger would like to do that," he explained.

Nugyen Van Thang said if the media wants to develop it has to move to private ownership, but that is not happening. So within the confines of government control, Nugyen Van Thang wants the *Saigon Times* to focus more on the grassroots. "They [the government] need to listen to the voice of the people, whether they are faring well, what the people are thinking. We can play that kind of a role. It also coincides with what the government wants us to do."

And the mission of mainstream media in Vietnam depends on the audience. "The English language press [in Vietnam] is more like a tourism brochure. Its role is not to provide news, but to make Vietnam look good. Vietnamese do not necessarily want to be airing their dirty laundry in the English language press to the world. But Vietnamese people definitely want to air things to other Vietnamese in their own language," observed blogger Joe Ruelle. One could argue that the local language press in Vietnam operates in a tiny sphere of influence relative to the impact of the English language press because English is the world language. Ruelle said Vietnamese people demand news and are reading the Vietnamese-language press.

"There is a saying in Vietnamese that translated says: 'The King's edict is nothing against the village's will'. It is difficult for the federal government to tell people at the local level what to do. Local people are extremely stubborn and self-reliant. They would not let their local press get away with ignoring stories."

Mainstream press recently were given a window to report more freely in both languages when the elected members of the National Assembly debated the government proposal to spend $56 billion on a high-speed rail link between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. In the June 2010 sitting of the National Assembly a majority of members refused to rubber-stamp the decision from the prime minister's office to proceed with the 1,550-kilometre rail line. Because this story was happening in the National Assembly, the newspapers were allowed to report the debate and the vote that rejected the proposal. Proceedings were also broadcast widely on television. Observers called this a rare show of independence and maintained that it should not been seen as a repudiation of the ruling Communist Party.

The UN and donors like the World Bank have put a lot of energy into the development of the National Assembly, and local governments such as people's councils now mirror the processes. As the National Assembly grows in power it is likely the local people's councils will grow in power. That could help to open up the flow of information. In the meantime, mainstream broadcast and print media remains under the firm control of government and bloggers continue to flout restrictions placed on their freedom of expression and the Internet. ❑