

**THE ROLES OF ONLINE NEWS MEDIA IN
COMBATING TRAFFIC POLICE CORRUPTION
IN VIETNAM**

By

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to answer one key research question of "What is (are) the role(s) of the Vietnamese online media in combating traffic police corruption in Vietnam?" Research methods mostly involved content and discourse analyses of online news articles and readers' comments. In addition, interviews with experts, journalists, traffic police officers, and citizens were conducted to provide more insights. The traffic police corruption was chosen as a case study as it is the most common form of corruption in Vietnam. The findings showed that there is media pluralism in Vietnam. The five Vietnamese online platforms under question played diverging roles of propaganda (communication), neutral reporting, and watchdog. Tuổi Trẻ is found to be the most successful example of a Vietnamese online news playing the watchdog role and providing a public sphere for citizens to debate solutions to traffic police corruption. The thesis argues for the possibility of the online media to play an active role in combating corruption in the one-party system and provides practical recommendations at three levels of the government, the media sector, and the individual online outlet on how to effectively tackle bureaucratic corruption by enhancing the role of the online media.

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List of Abbreviations

CAND: Công An Nhân Dân News

MPS: Ministry of Public Security

ND: Nhân Dân News

TN: Thanh Niên News

TT: Tuổi Trẻ News

VCP: The Vietnamese Communist Party

VJA: The Vietnamese Journalist Association

WHO: World Health Organization

Introduction

“What is there on the streets that makes everyone volunteer to work under the heat (to become traffic policemen)?”

The Vice Minister of Public Security once pondered

“Traffic police corruption – more terrifying than organized robbery”

One news headline

“The phenomenon of traffic police corruption is such an “outlier” that citizens of Sai Gon city have handed down each other a “living skill”: when driving, always carry 100.000 VND in the pocket. As soon as traffic policemen blow whistle, just give that 100.000 VND. Anyone will be free to go. Remember not to ask, “what is my mistake?”. Otherwise, you will receive explanation and have to double price.”

A citizen commented

On 19th July 2013, the People’s Court of Thừa Thiên Huế Province proceeded a case, in which a group of six traffic policemen was blackmailed with a video made by a group of four young men. Within a morning shift, the court sentenced Ngô Quốc Bảo – the instigator of the blackmail – to 6-year imprisonment, and 5 years and 6 months, 2 years and 6 months, and 2 years of imprisonment to Đinh Ngọc Trung, Huỳnh Ngọc Thọ, and Trương Ngọc Vũ. All four defendants were charged with extortion of property.¹ Meanwhile, the six traffic policemen were only relocated and required

¹ According to the Court’s report, the group video-recorded activities of the traffic police group while hiding in an abandoned house, which was 50 meters away from the traffic police station, on 19th April 2010. The video was then copied into a USB. On 20th April 2010, Trung and Bảo drove to Phú Lộc town to send the USB in a letter written “Dear traffic police brothers.” Afterwards, they hired a man to deliver this letter to the traffic police unit under management of Lieutenant Colonel Phạm Văn Phong. Mr. Phong then delivered the USB to Mr. Vinh. Mr. Vinh, after watching the video, contacted the phone number written on the letter. Đinh Ngọc Trung picked up the call and

to submit self-criticism and self-evaluation. At the court, Bảo explained that: “I have passed by this traffic police station many times and seen their corrupt behaviors. Therefore, I came up with the idea of recording their bribing activities for blackmail.” When the Court asked: “Why did you agree to pay 120 million VND² to the blackmailers?,” one policeman – Mr. Vinh – answered: “The video recorded images of our mistakes³ in failing to comply with the traffic checking regulations ordained by the Ministry of Public Security. The blackmailers threatened to publish this video on the news and hand it to the Head of the Provincial Traffic Police Unit. We were afraid of being penalized, relocated, and having this written on our CVs, which will affect our reputation as well as our family’s. Therefore, we have agreed to pay the requested money.”⁴

The case made many news headlines in 2013 as well as generated huge public discussions about institutionalization of the traffic police corruption and unwillingness of the Ministry of Public Security to eradicate this issue. Many questions were posed: How could these four young men manage to blackmail a group of traffic policemen with just a video, if it is true that those traffic policemen just missed to comply with the checking regulations, as claimed by Mr. Vinh? Why didn’t the traffic policemen report the case to the Public Security Department from the first phone

demanding the traffic policemen to pay 200 million VND (approximately 10,000 dollars) in exchange for destruction of the video. The two sides negotiated through text messages and reached an agreed price of 120 million VND (about 5,000 dollars). The group of five traffic policemen agreed to contribute 24 million VND each. On 21st April 2010, Mr. Vinh transferred the requested amount of money to the bank account suggested by the blackmailers. However, on the 23rd April 2010, Mr. Vinh received another text message from the blackmailers demanding another 120 million VND, which was rejected. On the same day, Bảo and Thọ delivered the USB to the Head of PC67 – the Road and Railway Traffic Police Department, who then reported the case to the Directorial Board of the Province’s Public Security Department. On 5th August 2012, the Inspectorate unit of the Public Security Department prosecuted and detained the defendants (Tuoi Tre (45) 2013).

² Approximately 5,000 USD dollars

³ The traffic police never admitted having received bribes. Also, they were never charged with corruption.

⁴ One jurist asked: “You are the People’s Police. Apart from keeping traffic safety, you are responsible for preventing and combatting criminals. Why did you easily agree to pay money to the blackmailers?”. Mr. Vinh said: “We knew we are at fault,” then silenced.

call, but agreed to pay the requested money, even for the second time? Why was the video not released to the public?

This is only one of many stories about Vietnamese traffic policemen being blackmailed for having their corrupt activities recorded by citizens. Traffic police corruption is so widespread and normalized in the Vietnamese society that “if you ask anyone, be that an elderly or a child, a man or a woman: for what do traffic policemen stop traffic participants, the immediate response would be: to earn money” (Tuoi Tre (67) 2011). According to the World Bank’s Anticorruption Diagnostic Survey, the traffic police was rated as the most corrupt public sector by more than 80% of the Vietnamese population under the survey (World Bank (b) 2012, 38). The probability of making a bribe while using public service or dealing with agency was also the highest for the traffic police with 47% of citizens reported having done so (World Bank (b) 2012, 51). The prevalence of traffic police corruption resulted in high level of discontent among Vietnamese citizens, which is visible in the increasing number of reported cases of citizens using verbal or physical violence against traffic policemen. Although I could not obtain the most updated statistics, one TN’s article published in 2015 mentioned an approximate number of 250 as provided by the Head of the Traffic Police Department at the Ministerial level (Thanh Nien (89) 2015). The readers, however, showed no sympathy towards traffic policemen: “There must be legitimate reasons why they (traffic policemen) got beaten up.” Given that traffic police corruption is found to be one of the major reasons behind traffic accidents and just a key to enhance road safety (Anbarci, Escaleras and Register 2006; Bodegon, et al. 2017; Hua, Noland and Evans 2010; Lagarde 2007; Nantulya 2002; Wells and Beynon 2011) and that Vietnam is one of the “leading” countries with 8,417 reported traffic deaths, ranking 17th out of 175 countries participating in the WHO 2018 road safety

survey (WHO 2018), it is highly important to study efforts to combat traffic police corruption in Vietnam.

In the fight against corruption, the media with its Fourth Estate power is believed to play a critical role. More than 80% of the Vietnamese citizens (World Bank 2012, 58) believed that the media successfully “discovered many corrupt cases before the authorities commenced their work” and “many corrupt cases which were thought to be ‘dying out in quietness’ were treated.” The media is also found to be the most common source of information on corruption for around 93% of the Vietnamese population (World Bank 2012, 57), which indicates the tantamount influence the media might exert on citizens – bribe suppliers in the case of traffic police corruption. Moreover, the media was rated as the second-most trustworthy anti-corruption institution only after the Communist Party’s Monitoring Committee. Yet, while the role of the media in combating corruption is strongly advocated in Vietnam, there is limited understanding of how the media has been contributing to the anti-corruption campaign in general and addressing traffic police corruption in particular.

Driven by an interest in identifying measures to address traffic police corruption, the most common type of corruption in Vietnam, and a concern for high traffic casualty rate in Vietnam, this research attempted to examine the roles of the Vietnamese media in fighting traffic police corruption from 2004 until now through analyses of the online media coverage and citizens’ opinions on the topic. It also aims to use the online media coverage of traffic police corruption as a case study to investigate mechanisms through which the online media supervises public opinions, advocates for policy changes, and combats corruption in the Vietnamese one-party system. Furthermore, the author wanted to explore whether and how the Vietnamese online media has managed to act as a public space for citizens to raise their voice, address concerns to the government, as well as

contribute to developments of a rule-of-law society in Vietnam. As will be seen, the Vietnamese online news agencies treat traffic police corruption as both an institutional and a multifaceted socio-cultural issue. It aims not only to inform the public of the prevalence of the traffic police corruption, but also encourage public discussions about connections between this seemingly banal, everyday life issue and more structural macro-level problems of rule of law, economic development, degrading social values, and high quantity of traffic accidents. Applying Habermas's theoretical framework of seeing the media as an influential actor in driving public sphere, the thesis seeks to see through the case study of traffic police corruption how the online media in the one-party context can contribute to anti-corruption campaigns and draw policy implications.

Chapter 1

The Role of the Vietnamese Media in Anti-Corruption Campaign

The Vietnamese government has always been emphasizing on the vital role of the media in the fight against corruption in political discourses used in official meetings, visits, and public events. The Vietnamese Communist Party considers fighting corruption as central to fostering good governance under the Party's leadership and establishing a Rule-of-Law government **“of the people, by the people, and for the people”** (the 4th Resolution of the 12th Party Central Committee). The Communist Party believed that commitment to anti-corruption campaigns can help improve government transparency and **“regain the public trust** in the Party's leadership” (Vietnamese Government Portal 2018). Within that context, the Vietnamese government has been calling for enhancing the role and responsibility of the media. On the 25th March 2019, the Vietnam Fatherland Front Central Committee, the Vietnam Journalist Association, and the Vietnam Television co-organized a press conference to announce the 2nd National Press Contest titled *“The Press and the Anti-Corruption Campaign.”* In order to be considered for the competition, candidates need to cover one of the four topics (Ministry of Internal Affairs 2019):

- 1) Identify, condemn, and fight against corrupt behaviors and phenomena;
- 2) Report on the monitoring successes of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front, citizens, and the media in combatting and preventing corruption, especially street-based (petty) corruption, which interferes with citizens' lives and enterprises' businesses;
- 3) Promote good individuals, examples and models in combatting and preventing corruption;
- 4) Reflect on efforts to improve governance to enhance anti-corruption capacity as well as increase democracy and transparency.

Mr. Trần Thanh Mẫn – the President of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front Central Committee – claimed that: “The ultimate goal behind organization of this National Press Contest is to **foster and encourage active participation of the Vietnamese citizens and the Vietnamese society in the fight against corruption**, in which the media plays **a pioneering role**.” The highlighted phrases exhibit how the importance of the media has been contextualized and attached to the Party’s declared desire to stimulate and strengthen efforts to combat corruption from the Vietnamese citizens and the Vietnamese society as a whole. Moreover, it can be interpreted from the political languages that the Party clearly understood substantial impacts of the media on the Vietnamese society and thus strategically displayed public recognition to encourage the media to play its role as a force driving citizens’ participation, motivating social developments, and especially recovering “public trust” in the Party’s leadership.

The first Contest had concluded on the 2nd January 2018 with an official ceremony attended by the President Trần Đại Quang, which was another symbol of the government’s official support and appreciation for the media sector. 31 works out of 1,126 participating candidates were awarded. During the event, the President stressed: “Thousands of media products on the topic of anti-corruption, especially those winning best awards tonight, demonstrate vividly the **indispensable role of the media in the complex and arduous fight against “internal enemies”**. On behalf of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Government, I wholeheartedly congratulate those winning the prizes this time” (The Communist Magazine 2018). The President also congratulated the press force for its achievements in providing social monitoring and criticism, promoting and popularizing anti-corruption guidelines, policies of the Party, and laws of the government, reporting honestly corrupt activities and exemplifying good models fighting against corruption. Moreover, when some reporters and journalists complained about feeling “**left alone in the fight**,”

the Presidents of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front and the Vietnamese Journalist Association declared commitment to accompany and support the media in the fight against corruption.

Official recognition of the Vietnamese government towards the important role of the press in fighting corruption is also expressed in many other occasions. The Chief of the Central Propaganda and Training commission – Võ Văn Thưởng – once said: “There are times when the voice of the media is more powerful than the sound of the gun” (Vietnam Net (1) 2017). In March 2017, top leaders of the Communist Party leadership including the President of the Fatherland Front Central Committee, the Chief and Vice Chief of the Central Propaganda and Training commission, and the Deputy Director of the Political unit of the People’s Army of Vietnam visited Thanh Nien News and the People’s Army Newspaper, which had been leading anti-corruption coverage in the last 3 years. Noticeably, these public visits took place during the self-evaluation and self-criticism period of the Politburo and the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Consequently, these two visits were interpreted as a powerful message of commitment to support the Vietnamese media in the fight against corruption from the highest Party leadership (Vietnam Net (2) 2017).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Whether or not the media can play an active role in combating corruption largely depends on the extent to which the respective government is willing to grant press freedom to the media. The once influential “**Four theories of the Press**,” initiated by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) was the first attempt to systematically draw connections between the role the media can play and the political regime type. Some argued that the Soviet Communist Theory, one of the four theories, has lost its legitimacy after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Vaagan 2011) and after China, the biggest remaining Communist country, had adopted the capitalist market model and the media sector has been commercialized. Since then, there has been various academic efforts (Croteau and Hoynes 2006; C. Hallin and Mancini 2012) to establish new models and theories to account for the media-state relationship in transitioning political systems from the one-party socialist to one-party socialist with market orientation as in the cases of China and Vietnam.

Within the context of assessing the media-state relationship in anti-corruption campaigns, two common trends are visible. One looks at the Communist Party’s supervision over the media from a survival game lens. As such, the media role is believed to be limited to reporting corruption among low-level bureaucrats while avoiding addressing top Party leaders to ensure survival of the regime (Huang, Boranbay-Akan and Huang 2019). Within this trend, scholars often apply game-theory logics to explain why or why not, or even attempt to establish formula to calculate the exact amount of freedom that the Communist Party might allow limited watchdog media, assuming that investigative journalism will inevitably pose an existential threat to the Party’s leadership (Huang, Boranbay-Akan and Huang 2019; Lorentzen 2014; King, Pan and E. Roberts 2013). Besides the

limited watchdog media, limited transparency, and limited government responsiveness to citizens are also common topics of scholar discussions (Malesky and Schuler 2010; 2011) to prove validity of the cooption theory and the assumed zero-sum dilemma for the one-party system when adopting “democratic” factors (watchdog journalism, transparency, government responsiveness). The other trend assesses the role of the media in driving positive institutional developments within the one-party context (Liebman 2005; Mo 2013; YueZhi 2000; Benjamin 2011; Susan 2011). Shifting focus from the survival logic, this group of scholars collected empirical evidence on how the media has successfully played its role in advocating for policy changes in the one-party system.

These two trends reflect two opposite approaches to analyze the role of the media with regards to its relationship with the government. The first sees the media as a passive actor being heavily influenced and supervised by the state, or the Communist Party in this case. Therefore, even though the discussions mentioned the watchdog role of the media, it is in fact a passive supervised watchdog with the propaganda function to be referred to. The second trend, in contrast, views the media as an active player having the power to participate in the decision-making process and impact policy agenda. Chinese scholars have been arguing against the Western tendency to “limit the analysis of the Chinese news media to the dichotomy between ideological control by the Party and the journalists’ struggle for freedom and autonomy” and advocate for a distinct model of “media commercialization with unique Chinese characteristics” since the 1980s (YueZhi (b) 1995). However, it has not been an easy fight as many scholars. In arguing for a Chinese media model, in which the media enjoys “significant autonomy” to represent the people’s voice and drive critical public debates “within the confines of Party supervision,” Liebman (2005) concluded that “measuring the Chinese media in terms of their independence of nonindependence from the state may present a false dichotomy” and that “evaluating the media ... primarily in terms of their

independence from the Party-state risks missing much of the complexity that explains institutional development in China today” (Liebman 2005). So much the influence of the Chinese media has been rising that the concept of “Rule by Media,” which describes the importance of the media in pressuring for the government’s responses to prominent socio-political issues and contributing to rule-of-law developments, has appeared (Mo 2013).

This thesis is interested in finding out which role(s) the Vietnamese media can play, an active or passive one, in the fight against corruption – an assumingly sensitive issue for the Communist Party system. In evaluating the active role of the media in initiating policy changes, Habermas’s model (Habermas (b) 1989) of seeing the media as a public sphere is the most relevant. According to Habermas, the public sphere will “put the state in touch with the needs of society” by stimulating and representing “public opinion” (p. 31). As such, public opinion as represented by the public sphere is itself a “political action” exemplifying a culture of participatory democracy and the public sphere becomes a check-and-balance institution holding the state authority accountable. Underlying the public sphere concept is the ideology that legitimate governments should seriously consider public opinions and formulate laws and policies accordingly (Habermas 2006). With a desire to advocate for a more active role of the media in the Vietnamese one-party system, this thesis pays special attention to assess whether or not the Vietnamese media has managed, to some extent, to provide a Public Sphere as defined by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1989) to address the traffic police corruption issue. Besides the personal desire to advocate for more press freedom in Vietnam as mentioned above, there are legitimate reasons justifying the choice of applying the Habermas model as a benchmark to evaluate the Vietnamese media’s role in the anti-corruption fight. First, the Vietnamese middle income class has been on a rise and is expected to play a pivotal role in advocating for positive socio-political developments within the country

(World Bank 2018), which is the key precondition for the development of Habermas's public sphere model. Secondly, the Vietnamese online media platforms appear to satisfy three "institutional criteria" required for a public sphere to be recognized as one. The two criteria of equality of social status and inclusivity are naturally met for the fact that everyone is supposed to have equal right to participate in online platforms provided by the Vietnamese media. So long as one has access to the Internet and thus website of online news outlets, one cannot be excluded from the public sphere. Moreover, traffic police corruption is widely recognized as one of the most popular sources of distress for the Vietnamese citizens (as shown above), and thus meets the last criterion of being a "common concern" for emergence of a public sphere. Consequently, this research goes deep into investigating the process of how the Vietnamese online media has managed to accentuate its role as an independent and powerful actor to drive public debates and advocate for policies to address the traffic police corruption issue. In addition to the theoretical contribution, the research emphasizes on the applied aspects of making policy recommendations.

Chapter 3

Research questions, Hypotheses, and Methods

3.1. Research questions

This thesis aims to answer one key research question:

“What is (are) the role(s) of the Vietnamese online media in combating traffic police corruption in Vietnam from 2004 to 2019?”

In answering this key research question, there are two three-questions corresponding to three levels of actors, whose interactions and activities are expected to determine the role(s) that the media can play in the fight against traffic police corruption:

1. “How does the Vietnamese government perceive the role of the Vietnamese online media in its Anti-Corruption campaign?”
2. “In what way (s) has the Vietnamese online media contribute to shape public narratives about traffic police corruption?”
3. “How do the Vietnamese citizens respond to the inspected roles of the Vietnamese online media?”

The Vietnamese online media refers to the online news portals allowed to function in Vietnam. In this thesis, while I questioned the role of the Vietnamese online media, I conducted research only on five case studies of the five most influential online news agencies in Vietnam, including Nhân Dân, Công An Nhân Dân, VN Express, Thanh Niên and Tuổi Trẻ.

It is important to note that the traffic police corruption is contextualized for Vietnam. It refers to all forms of corruption covered by the Vietnamese online media: from the mutually-beneficial

street-based corruption of receiving money on from minor violations of traffic participants, to the institutionalized corruption in which the traffic policemen intentionally abuse their power to demand regular bribes from transportation companies, and nepotism-type of corruption, in which people become traffic policemen through relationships or paying money.

3.2. Hypotheses

As guided by the literature, there are two main hypotheses for the role of the Vietnamese online media in combating traffic police corruption:

1. Propaganda role: As Vietnam is still under the Communist Party leadership, it is reasonable to expect that the state-owned media outlets like Nhân Dân and Công An Nhân Dân will serve as the Party's mouthpiece to propagandize the government's policies and guidelines.
2. Watchdog role (which corresponds to the public sphere theory): As the existing literature suggests, commercialization and marketization of the media sector in the one-party system leads to more press freedom. Moreover, as the Party still needs to maintain the legitimacy of its leadership, it will allow more space for people to express their concerns through the supervised media.

Undoubtedly, the watchdog media is expected to be more effective in combating traffic police corruption than the propaganda ones. I also expect a possibility for a neutral approach, in which the news agencies will commit itself to reporting objective news rather than influencing the readers' opinions as in the propaganda or watchdog cases. The major goal of the neutral media is to attract as many readers as possible.

3.3. Research Methods

In order to identify the media's roles in combating traffic police corruption in Vietnam, I provided analyses at three levels: the government, the media, and the citizens. At the government level, I analyzed texts of laws and key official documents mentioning the role of the media in the Anti-Corruption campaign. Moreover, I compared the languages of legal documents with the political discourses of top Party leaders and real policy implementation to see how the role of the media is portrayed differently or similarly. Afterwards is the major part of the thesis – analysis of the Vietnamese online media coverage on the traffic police corruption issue from 2004⁵ to April 2019. I applied content and discourse analyses to see how the traffic police corruption issue is described by different online media outlets. I paid special attention to strategies employed by different outlets and tried to assess which outlet is more effective in providing public sphere to discuss traffic police corruption. Finally, I tried to identify how the role of the media in combating traffic police corruption is perceived by the Vietnamese citizens. To measure this, I analyzed the citizens' comments and conducted interviews with 2 traffic policemen, 30 citizens, and 1 journalist to gain more insights. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed manually.

⁵ The earliest archive was in 2004. There was no available article on the topic of traffic police corruption published earlier than that.

Chapter 4

The role of the media as perceived by the VCP

This section looks at languages of official documents including the Media Law (1989, 1999, 2016), the Anti-Corruption Law 2005, Decree 47/2007/NĐ-CP,⁶ publications on the Party's official websites and state-owned media, as well as quoted speeches of top Party leaders. The goal is to extract through discourse analysis how the Vietnamese government views the role of the media in the state-media-citizens relationship. Specifically, whether it is an equal one in which the media is an independent actor fostering public debates and communication between the government and the people, or an unequal one between master and servant, in which the media is simply a political tool mouth-piecing the Party's guidelines and policies.

At first glance, the Vietnamese government seems to recognize and support the media's role as a **“public sphere”** for citizens to communicate ideas among each other and with the government. All three versions (1989, 1999, and 2016) of the Media Law define the function of the Vietnamese media as “a necessary means of communication, a mouthpiece of the Party, the government, socio-political organizations, as well as a **public sphere for citizens.**”⁷ According to the Law, the third of the six major tasks of the Vietnamese media is to **“reflect and supervise public unions, as well as act as a sphere for citizens to exercise their right to freedom of expression.”**⁸ Moreover,

⁶ On 27th March 2007, the Vietnamese government passed the Decree 47/2007/NĐ-CP, which provides detailed guidelines on implementation of the Anti-corruption law 2005 and expected roles/ responsibilities of the society (government agencies, citizens, the media, and the business sector) in fighting corruption.

⁷ Chapter 1, Article 4, the Media Law 2016

⁸ The other five tasks include: a) honestly report and reflect developments of Vietnam and the world; b) promote, popularize, and contribute to advise and protect guidelines and policies of the Party and laws of the government, Vietnam's accomplishments, and the goal of the press; d) promote good examples and fight bad activities; đ) preserve the pureness and development of the Vietnamese language as well as languages of ethnic minorities; and e) enhance mutual understanding across nations and peoples.

journalists are responsible for “**reflecting opinions and rightful expectations of citizens,**” as ordained in Article 25, Chapter 3 of the Law. In addition, the Decree 47/2007/NĐ-CP, a supplement to the Anti-Corruption Law 2005, emphasizes once again that the first and foremost task of Vietnamese press agencies and journalists is to “**reflect and supervise public opinions in preventing and combatting corruption.**”⁹ Specifically, the media should “**encourage citizens to actively participate in the anti-corruption campaign**” as described in Article 10, Chapter 3. While the Anti-Corruption Law 2005 fails to provide a mandatory schedule for responsible governmental agencies to reply to the media’s request for access to information, the Media Law 2016 imposes a deadline of 30 days.

There is, however, a shift in translation from the Laws to concrete policies and regulations. In coverage of corruption, as mandated by the Anti-Corruption Law 2005, the media is expected to submit request for information to the responsible government agencies and wait for their permission for publication. Any attempt to publish information prior to the government agencies’ responses runs the risk of violating the law on conviction before judgement. Moreover, the existing regulations impose many limitations on the reporting capacity of the media. The media is forbidden from reporting: 1) un-sourced news; 2) fake news; 3) news harmful to national interests, benefits of organizations, individuals, reputation, and ethics of citizens; 4) state secrets. In addition, as published on the government official website of the Anti-Corruption education program, the training materials clarified that **supervising public opinions and encouraging citizens’ participation include three tasks of: 1) promoting good examples in combating corruption, 2) protecting those reporting corrupt activities, and 3) fighting against the corrupt individuals.** The role of the media in providing a “public sphere” for citizens to discuss about

⁹ Chapter 1, Article 2.1

corruption as mentioned in the Media Law, the Anti-Corruption Law, and the Decree 47/2007/NĐ-CP is not at all mentioned. Moreover, a closer look at languages used by the Vietnamese government to describe the role of the media in combating corruption reveals a tendency to impose the master-servant relationship. The most commonly used metaphor when referring to the role of the media is “an **effective and powerful weapon**” to promote the Party’s guidelines and revive citizens’ trust in the Party leadership (The Anti-Corruption Training Department 2019). While the Media Law claims that the media should not be subject to any censorship, the Central Propaganda and Training Commission hosts weekly mandatory meetings with Vietnamese press agencies to supervise publication contents. Although this censorship process is not as tight as in the case of China, which compels the media to submit secret internal reports, it demonstrates the Vietnamese government’s intention to influence the media content before being exposed to the public.

As can be seen, while the Vietnamese government verbally praised the powerful role of the media in fighting corruption, it in fact perceives the media as a political tool to regain citizens’ trust in the Party’s leadership. Thus, it is understandable why Western scholars tend to apply the “mass propaganda” and “persuasion model” (YueZhi (b) 1995) to evaluate functions of the press in one-party contexts of China and Vietnam (McKinley 2008). However, there is quite significant discrepancy between the Party’s intention and the media’s real activities. The following section will offer a detailed analysis of the media coverage on traffic police corruption to discover what role(s) the Vietnamese online media has (have) managed to play or has (have) been trying to play in reality.

Chapter 5

The Vietnamese Online Media – A Content Analysis

5.1. Overall observation

I analyzed contents of articles of Nhân Dân (The People), Công an Nhân Dân (The People's Public Security), Thanh Niên (The Youngsters), Tuổi Trẻ (The Youth), and VN Express (Vietnam Express) with the key word “mã lộ” (traffic police corruption). There are two important observations:

1. There is media pluralism in Vietnam with three approaches to reporting traffic police corruption. Articles on Nhân Dân (ND) and Công An Nhân Dân (CAND) displayed more propaganda role, focusing on reporting good practices of traffic policemen, constructing the policemen's positive images, and explaining the government's regulations and policies. On the other hand, Thanh Niên (TN) and Tuổi Trẻ (TT), especially the latter, demonstrated more watchdog role, concentrating on reporting corrupted behaviors of traffic policemen, providing critical analyses of the legal loopholes allowing prevalent existence of traffic police corruption, and providing a public sphere for citizens to express opinions. Meanwhile, VN Express appears to choose a neutral role of neither propaganda nor watchdog, placing focus on reporting objective news without an urge to dispense analysis or opinion. Currently, VN Express has the largest number of online readers in Vietnam.¹⁰ In other words, whereas ND and CAND aim to convince the readers of integrity and incorruptibility of the majority of the traffic police force, and thus legitimacy of the current government, TN and TT offer spaces for public debates and encourage

¹⁰ According to Journalist Thanh Hang and as shown on the official website of VN Express

citizens' critical assessments of public services provided by the traffic police, VN Express simply targets attracting, rather than influencing, as large the number of audience as possible.

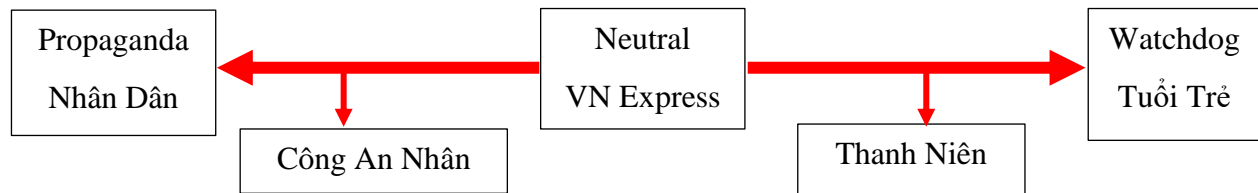


Figure 1: Pluralism of Vietnamese online media

2. There was more press freedom in debating traffic police corruption before 2012.¹¹ This trend is clearly observable in both qualitative and quantitative terms on TN and TT, which are more dedicated to watchdog journalism. Quantitatively, the largest number of online news articles discussing traffic police corruption with the highest number of words per article were published on TN and TT between 2004 and 2008. Qualitatively, the 2004-2008 period observed publications of the highest-quality critical analyses and the most daring investigative reports (as found available with the keyword search). This trend is also confirmed in the interview with Ms. Thanh Hang, who has more than 30 years working as a journalist in Vietnam (Thanh 2019). According to the journalist, 2000-2006 was the “golden age” for press freedom in fighting corruption in the history of the Vietnamese media since 1975. This was possible, said Ms. Thanh Hang, because the national leaders were very committed to the newly initiated anti-corruption campaign and “turned a greenlight” for the media to actively play a watchdog role. As a result, the Vietnamese media

¹¹ There was a time when the Vietnamese press was as critical of the government's policies and activities as the American press. The turning point came in 2008 for TN and 2012 for TT. In 2008, Nguyễn Văn Hải and Nguyễn Việt Chiến, two investigative journalists of TN were prosecuted and imprisoned. One article titled “Phải trả tự do cho các nhà báo chân chính” (Our journalists MUST be released) (Thanh Nien 2008) was published on TN subsequent to the detainment of the journalists. This demonstrated that the level of press freedom in the Vietnamese one-party system during the golden period was comparable to that in multi-party regimes. With regards to the fight against traffic police corruption, in 2012, Hoang Khuong, the author of many investigative reports on the topic was prosecuted and imprisoned. That was the turning point after which TT no longer published as critical analyses about traffic police corruption as it used to before 2012. Since then, TN and TT never managed to regain the “fighting spirits” they used to exemplify (Thanh 2019).

experienced a golden period as can be seen in audacious coverages of PMU 18 and Nam Can, the two biggest corruption scandals in Vietnam at the time. During those days, the media cooperated with the citizens, the Ministry of Public Security and Police departments to combat corruption. Regularly, the Police departments and the Ministry of Public Security would even initiate providing information to the media or immediately provide information when requested. TN and TT, especially the latter, were the most credited news outlets in the watchdog role. According to journalist Thanh Hang, the main reason for tightening the Vietnamese press freedom after 2008-2012 was because many journalists went as far as to interfere into private lives¹² of many leaders, resulting in public defamation and scandals. Had the media managed to stay focused on the mainstream of making constructive criticism on combating corruption, the press freedom would have been preserved (Thanh 2019).

¹² Such as romantic partners, family members, and the likes, as was done to Donald Trump today

5.2. Detailed accounts of the five online news outlets

This sub-section will provide detailed analyses on the traffic police corruption coverage of ND, CAND, VN Express, TN, and TT to elaborate on the diverging differences between propaganda-oriented online news outlets and watchdog-oriented ones.

Category	ND	CAND	VN Express	TN	TT
Number of articles on traffic police corruption	2	25	7	39	140
Number of comments	0	5	330	73	Not visible on the website Published articles mentioned more than 10,000 of responses

Table 1: Comparing traffic police corruption coverage and readers' comments

5.2.1. Nhân Dân – the People News (ND)

Nhân Dân News is the official mouthpiece of the Communist Party of Vietnam. It is 100% owned and financially supported by the Vietnamese government, which is visible in the complete absence of commercial advertisements on ND's website. ND showed 0 found result as I searched for the key word “mãi lộ” on its official website. As I turned to Google to search for “Nhân Dân mãi lộ” (traffic police corruption on ND), only 2 articles (Nhan Dan (2) 2010) (Nhan Dan (1) 2010), the contents of which were copied and re-posted from TT and TN, showed up. It seems that ND refrained from using the term “mãi lộ” as the VCP tends to avoid recognizing existence of corruption in the Party system, which is repeatedly confirmed in the tendency to deny involvement in bribing activities of traffic policemen from Heads of MPS and Police departments as shown on

published articles of TT.¹³ Since there was no article on ND reporting traffic police corruption, I attempted to search for the key words “traffic policemen” to see if there is any description of traffic police corruption and how traffic policemen were portrayed on ND news. Content and discourse analyses of 40 articles found on ND confirmed the anticipation that this state-funded news agency indeed played a full-fledged propaganda role. Majority of the news contents was spent on describing and explaining the government policies and official decrees with very lengthy and technical languages,¹⁴ which demonstrate the political uniformity and quotation journalism style typical for the role of the Party’s mouthpiece that ND is expected to play. Moreover, as it turned out, ND’s news softly referred to traffic police corruption as “misbehaviors” (hành vi tiêu cực) or “misconducts” (hành vi sai quy định).¹⁵

¹³ The most exemplary case for the tendency to deny traffic police corruption is when some traffic policemen were punished for failures to follow traffic checking regulations while one video published on the news clearly recorded images of those traffic policemen receiving banknotes from the traffic violators. Despite such a concrete proof, the traffic policemen blatantly denied having received banknotes as bribes, claiming that those papers might look like banknotes (“vật trông giống tiền”) but were only advertisement leaflets. Moreover, the head of the local Police department supported the claims made by those traffic policemen by saying that “They did not receive bribes. There is no proof for that. But it was clear from the video that they violated the traffic checking regulations.”

¹⁴ Example 1:

“On the 1st of February, Tran Quoc Vuong, one Politburo Member of the Standing Secretariat Committee announced the Conclusion 45-KL/TW of the Secretariat Committee about the Party and the Government’s continued commitment to ensure effective implementation of Direction 18-CT/TW of the Secretariat Committee XI about increasing the Party’s leadership in ameliorating traffic accidents and insecurities.”

Example 2:

“In order to support citizens’ movements and safety during the Spring Festival 2013, the Prime Minister has announced an order requesting the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry of Public Security, the People’s Committee and the National Traffic Safety Committee to implement with high determination comprehensive measures to ensure traffic safety from 16th December 2012 to 15th March 2013. Following the order of the Prime Minister, all responsible authorities have pushed for campaigns raising awareness about traffic safety at all levels.”

¹⁵ Example:

“Policing and monitoring activities are not yet strict. Many cadres (traffic policemen) responsible for managing traffic safety and transportation regulations have not complied with working ethics and standards, many even made administrative violations and negative mistakes.”

ND’s news used ambiguous descriptions of “working ethics and standards” and “administrative violations and negative mistakes” to indirectly refer to the action of receiving bribes of traffic policemen. This language use clearly reflected the Party’s principle to avoid revealing and criticizing corrupted behaviors of traffic policemen, who are also Party members.

As for description of traffic police, ND applied the most beautiful metaphors – “cán bộ” (comrades), “các anh” (big brothers), “chiến sĩ” (warriors), and “người anh hùng thầm lặng” (silent heroes) – to establish a positive frame about traffic policemen. “Cán bộ” (comrades) is a friendly way to address bureaucrats working in the Communist system, especially from the war times. Application of this metaphor can stimulate a warm sentiment, prompting the Vietnamese citizens to consider traffic policemen as trustworthy and friendly bureaucrats, who are willing to sacrifice their lives to protect and serve the people. The metaphor “Các anh” (big brothers), on the other hand, emphasizes the family-like relationship between citizens and traffic policemen by describing the latter as “big brothers” of the formers. The goal is to indicate that traffic policemen will do their utmost to safeguard citizens’ safety on the streets in the same way as big brothers caring for younger siblings in families. “Chiến sĩ” (warriors) is a metaphor triggering a warfare frame, in which citizens are victims suffering from traffic dangers and requiring protection from traffic policemen – courageous warriors. Likewise, the metaphor “người anh hùng thầm lặng” (silent heroes) was employed to not only remind the Vietnamese citizens of heroic accomplishments made by traffic policemen in fostering traffic security but also encourage the citizens to be grateful for traffic policemen’s sacrifices working at nights and during holidays without complaints to ensure the traffic safety.¹⁶

In fact, all these four metaphors recall propaganda campaigns during the wars Vietnam fought for independence and reunification. ND’s regular application of these metaphors apparently aims to persuade the public into perceiving traffic policemen as benign officials, who work diligently and silently for the well-being of citizens as big brothers in families and as soldiers defending the weak.

¹⁶ This paragraph is adapted from a final paper titled “Reporting Traffic Police Corruption – Dilemma for the Vietnamese news media” submitted to the course “The Power of Language in Media and Politics” by Prof. Anna Szilagyi. I intentionally took this course and wrote this paper to prepare for this thesis. I have also discussed with my thesis supervisor on using some contents from the mentioned course paper for the current thesis.

Besides, these metaphors were contextualized in atmospheres of New Year Festivals,¹⁷ which symbolize peace, prosperity, and security in Vietnam. New Year Festival is a special occasion to gather with family members and make celebrations. Therefore, to work away from home is a noteworthy sacrifice deserving thankfulness. Fundamentally, the above-mentioned metaphors suggest citizens should appreciate traffic policemen working overtime to warrant public safety.¹⁸

5.2.2. Công An Nhân Dân – the People’s Public Security News (CAND)

Majority of financial support for Công An Nhân Dân (CAND) news comes from the government. However, CAND still has a small portion of self-finance with a small number of commercial advertisements on its website (Thanh 2019). 25 articles showed up in the search for the traffic corruption keyword. Among these 25 articles, 20 articles reported good examples of traffic policemen refusing to accept bribes. Only 3 articles referred to official charges and punishments against traffic police corruption. The other 2 tried to disprove accusations against traffic police corruption and advised journalists against publishing videos on online platforms before consulting with the MPS or local Police departments. Although it is possible for readers to comment, there were only 5 comments, all of which displayed sympathy for traffic policemen, in total. This clearly demonstrates the propaganda propensity of this news portal.

¹⁷ Example 1:

“A new peaceful spring is covering all Hanoi’s streets. In that collective joy, there is contribution from cadres, warriors – traffic policemen. Our heroes silently work every day to ensure safety and security for the people on every street, preventing criminals from causing harms, obtaining many achievements, which make the images of the Capital police heroes even more beautiful.”

Example 2:

“On the New Year Eve, when everyone gathers side by side to celebrate new year, 15 traffic police units silently work to ensure that capital citizens can welcome the new year with peace and security.”

¹⁸ Same notice as in footnote 19.

5.2.3. VN Express – the most popular online news for the Vietnamese

VN Express, as mentioned above, only focuses on making brief and objective reports of traffic police corruption. Out of the seven articles filtered by the keyword traffic police corruption, one reported good examples of traffic policemen refusing to accept bribes, four provided updates on official charges against traffic police corruption, and the other two articles simply quoted statements made by leaders of the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City. While VN Express did not provide critical analyses about traffic police corruption, this online news platform managed to exhibit the largest number of readers' comments (330), which will be analyzed in detail in the section on citizens' opinions.

5.2.4. Thanh Niên – The Youngsters (TN)

On reporting traffic police corruption, Thanh Niên News published 39 articles, 10 out of which were investigative reports conducted by TN's journalists between 2004 and 2008. TN's watchdog journalism usually featured TN's journalists acting like detectors exposing traffic police corruption cases.¹⁹ During the 2004-2008 period, TN's writing style was mostly critical and readers-friendly.

¹⁹ Example 1:

“Seeing that I (the investigative journalist) was not convinced, the driver said: “Follow me and you will see. If they have not collected enough bribes, they will not let us pass.” Now I (the investigative journalist) understood why all truck drivers have to stop to put money into some documents to give traffic policemen even before traffic policemen signaling them to stop. The traffic policemen did not look down, just ignorantly looked back and forth, putting their hands into the middle of the documents and immediately seized the banknotes into their hands. Without any conversation, the truck drivers continued their trips after giving the money.”

Example 2:

“With our vans, since we (the investigative journalist and the driver) pretended that we did not know the laws (paying the bribe), it took longer time. One traffic official suggested the price “400.000 VND?”. The driver negotiated: “Please pardon me. Please let me give 200.000 VND.” The police official said: “Give 400.000 VND or hand in your documents.” The driver continued to beg: “Please pardon me. I can give you 300.000 VND.” But the traffic policemen did not agree. Finally, the driver had to pay 350k. We recorded the bargaining conversation as followed:

- Traffic policeman: How much are you giving me? (checked the banknote kept in the documents, which is 100,000 VND) This little? What the fuck can I do with this small money? Where is the rationale?
- Driver: My truck only carries small things, which does not worth much money. Moreover, the owners had already locked the trucks. I would give you more if they are expensive goods.
- Policeman: Let me just make an official report for you, leave your vehicle, then we can talk again ...

While ND embraced the Party-supervised languages describing traffic police corruption as misbehaviors and misconducts, TN flexibly employed public-favored metaphors to label traffic police corruption. “Làm luật” (execute laws), for instance, is a homophone. In Vietnamese, “luật” are laws and regulations and “làm luật” refers to the responsibility of traffic policemen to enforce laws and orders. However, “làm luật” in this special occasion denotes the action of traffic policemen blatantly asking traffic participants or drivers for bribes as if giving money to traffic policemen were an official law – “luật.” In addition, to highlight the criminalized nature of traffic police corruption, TN’s news also applied the two metaphors of “luật ngầm” (literally translated as unspoken rules or rules in the gangster world) and “tiền bảo kê” (protection racket/ fees to be paid to gangsters), which set up a negative frame portraying traffic policemen as mafia. “Hụi chết,” which refers to an informal form of making investment in the Vietnamese society, is another alternative for “mãi lộ” (traffic police bribery). To be exact, “hụi chết” refers to monthly payment in huge amount to be paid by transportation companies to traffic policemen. Application of “hụi chết” to designate bribery implies that the action of drivers bribing traffic policemen is a form of long-term business investment.²⁰

Noticeably, TN’s investigative journalists applied first-person pronouns such as “I” and “We.” Frequent use of first-person pronouns demonstrated that TN’s journalists were able to speak up their own opinions instead of promoting guidelines and policies of the Party and the government as in the case of ND. Furthermore, TN’s writers actively used personal pronouns to exemplify their role as an independent regulatory agency monitoring corruption existing in the current government system. Precisely, TN’s writers identified themselves as “us” (chúng tôi) versus “them” (bọn họ)²¹

²⁰ Same notice as in footnote 19.

²¹ “We fight traffic bribes to protect the purity and fame of them - the traffic police system!”

– the traffic police system as a representative of the government – to emphasize that TN’s reports are free from the Party’s interference and can serve as the voice of the people to uncover corruption cases and defend justice. It is important to notice that not only was TN able to publish watchdog journalism, but TN’s journalists were also able to express their own opinions criticizing corrupt behaviors of traffic policemen.²²

With regards to portrayal of traffic policemen, most TN’s news employed negative metaphors. Specifically, traffic policemen were identified as “hung thần” (devils), who are immortal beings with supernatural power to enforce bad deeds on normal human beings without the latter’s capability to retaliate. The fight between “hung thần” and normal citizens is unquestionably an unfair confrontation. The “hung thần” metaphor suggests the public’s association of corrupt traffic policemen with abuse of power to demand bribes against traffic participants’ wills. “Kẻ cướp giữa ban ngày” (daylight robbers) is another metaphor regularly employed in TN’s articles to highlight the shamelessness and criminality in traffic policemen’s action of requiring bribes. One interesting metaphor for traffic policemen with a slightly different shade of meaning is “người đỡ đầu” (godfathers), which stresses on the fact of traffic policemen offering privileges for those transportation companies having already paid bribes by overlooking their violations. Finally, traffic policemen are called “quan”, which means bureaucrats in Mandarin. Employment of this metaphor conveys public discontent towards corrupt traffic policemen for failing to fulfill their entrusted responsibilities as public servants. Specifically, while traffic policemen are expected to protect citizens’ well-beings as “quan”, they have instead abused the granted authority to earn personal profits.²³

²² Same notice as in footnote 19.

²³ Same notice as in footnote 19.

5.2.5. Tuổi Trẻ - the Youth (TT)

Tuổi Trẻ is the most successful example of the Vietnamese online media in playing the watchdog role and providing a public sphere for constructive debates about traffic police corruption. In 2004, TT won the first prize in the categories of reports, investigations, interviews, and documentary movies with the series of coverages on traffic police corruption - “Roads blackened by traffic police corruption” conducted by journalist Vo Huong - in the 22nd Press Contest organized by the Journalist Association of Ho Chi Minh City (Tuoi Tre (110) 2004). On 21st January 2006, the Minister of Public Security – Lê Hồng Anh – paid a visit to TT’s office as an official recognition of TT’s contributions to the anti-corruption campaign as well as the agency’s achievements in fostering constructive public debates on the topic (Tuoi Tre (99) 2006). The Minister’s visit was very important in demonstrating the present Vietnamese government’s support for the media to play an active watchdog role and stimulate a public sphere.

Readers’ opinions on the Minister’s visit:

“The Public Security Minister’s choice to visit and congratulate TT on the New Year is very meaningful for TT’s Editorial Board, TT’s readers as well as the public. In my opinion, besides the aim of celebrating TT’s accomplishments, the Ministry of Public Security and the Minister as an individual want to demonstrate **recognition of TT’s journalists as honest and brave comrades in the battles against the bads and defending the goods.**”

“TT is not simply the Party’s mouthpiece. TT has become **a voice of the people, a public sphere to debate reforms, and a reliable support for readers** like us even at those times when our beliefs in this government have been eroded. **The fact that we still believe in the Party’s leadership is mostly thanks to TT.** On the New Year, I wish TT will maintain its fighting spirit to contribute to this country’s positive developments. Please keep the fire and dedication to the country and the people.”

In combatting traffic police corruption, TT employed six well-designed strategies to stimulate and sustain public debates on the topic.

Strategy 1

First, TT selectively reported the most prominent cases,²⁴ in which a large number of citizens were aware, affected, and agitated by the traffic police corruption practices over years. This is to ensure that publication of facts about the chosen cases would immediately receive public attention and effectively generate strong waves of public reactions demanding for policy changes. By doing so, TT managed to place many cases on tops of the public and political agendas, pressuring the responsible agencies to respond and make concrete actions to deal with the cases. Compared to TN's fragmented reports on small individual cases (and sometimes unevidenced complaints), TT's strategy appeared to have been much more effective and efficient.

Example 1: (Tuoi Tre (135) 2004) TT's journalists made a series of reports on "Roads blackened by corruption" from Hồ Chí Minh City, to Bình Phước, Bình Thuận, Đồng Nai. Dầu Giây was a location in Đồng Nai, notorious for having been a "terrifying nightmare" for drivers from North to South for the last few decades.

Example 2: (Tuoi Tre (141) 2004) TT received many letters from fishermen of Phước Tỉnh town in Bà Rịa Vũng Tàu province complaining about corrupt behaviors of traffic police managing marine transportation. Phước Tỉnh port hosted more than 1.100 big-sized ships but its port has only one gate. Ultimately, all ships had to pass through this gate, creating favorable conditions for the local traffic police force to abuse authority to force ship owners to submit bribes to earn access from land to the sea or vice versa – a form of monopoly. Within 4 days after TT's online report, the Head of the Traffic Police department of Bà Rịa Vũng Tàu province had to suspend jobs of the 2 traffic policemen identified on TT news (Tuoi Tre (140) 2004).

Strategy 2

Secondly, TT was adept at following up traffic police corruption cases until final charges were enforced and solutions were identified. Essentially, TT did not stop at reporting the news or bringing it to the public attention. This online news agency regularly updated developments of the cases and thus successfully preserved the public attention to the traffic police corruption topic.²⁵

²⁴ For other examples, please check (Tuoi Tre (76) 2011), (Tuoi Tre (78) 2011), (Tuoi Tre (79) 2011), (Tuoi Tre (88) 2008), (Tuoi Tre (89) 2008) (On average, 600 trucks passed through this traffic police station each night and were all stopped for bribes), (Tuoi Tre (91) 2008), (Tuoi Tre (130) 2004), (Tuoi Tre (133) 2004).

²⁵ Another example is the traffic police corruption at Phước Tỉnh port, which started on (Tuoi Tre (141) 2004), then continued with (Tuoi Tre (140) 2004), (Tuoi Tre (139) 2004), and ended with (Tuoi Tre (136) 2004), when the Police

The case of “Roads blackened by traffic police corruption,” which won TT many first prizes in the 22nd Press Contest of Hồ Chí Minh City, was reported with monthly updates in 2004 (Tuoi Tre (133) 2004) and follow-ups of final judgements from courts in 2006 (Tuoi Tre (125) 2004). Moreover, TT developed a strategy of creating constant pressure by reporting updated responses from Police departments of different cities and provinces.²⁶ This strategy generated a competition to become the most responsive and the most creative in identifying solutions across Police departments at all levels. In addition, TT sustained the public attention by collecting and publishing readers’ comments as well as interviews with heads of Public Security and Traffic Police departments, which will be elaborated with evidence in the following parts.

Strategy 3

TT is the only (out of the five) online news agency that put efforts to systematically collect, synthesize, and publish readers’ opinions on traffic police corruption and suggestions to solve the issue. This is another unique characteristic demonstrating TT’s dedication to act as a mediator between the citizens and the government, emphasize citizens’ capacities to monitor and provide solutions for traffic police corruption, and provide space for public debates. Specifically, TT organized tens of thousands²⁷ of citizens’ comments into relevant topics such as providing proofs for nationwide existence of traffic police corruption,²⁸ discussing solutions to eradicate traffic

department was forced by TT and the public pressure to conduct investigations to verify information provided by TT and decide on final punishments for corrupt policemen.

²⁶ For examples, please visit (Tuoi Tre (125) 2004), (Tuoi Tre (117) 2004), (Tuoi Tre (95) 2006), (Tuoi Tre (96) 2006), (Tuoi Tre (93) 2006), (Tuoi Tre (88) 2008), (Tuoi Tre (85) 2008), (Tuoi Tre (81) 2008), (Tuoi Tre (80) 2008), (Tuoi Tre (77) 2011), (Tuoi Tre (70) 2011), (Tuoi Tre (63) 2011), (Tuoi Tre (60) 2011), (Tuoi Tre (73) 2011), (Tuoi Tre (64) 2011), (Tuoi Tre (50) 2012), (Tuoi Tre (49) 2012), (Tuoi Tre (48) 2012), (Tuoi Tre (19) 2017), (Tuoi Tre (17) 2017)

²⁷ This is an approximate number based on TT’s published articles mentioning the number of received responses from citizens. It seems TT’s comment section has been closed thus the real number is not visible. This is one of the main limitations in the research methodology of this thesis.

²⁸ See (Tuoi Tre (129) 2004)

police corruption,²⁹ assessing correlation between traffic police corruption and traffic accidents,³⁰ and debating the causes (degrading roads, low public awareness, or traffic police corruption) of traffic accidents.³¹ By doing so, TT has managed to construct its image as a platform defending, representing, and empowering unheard voices.³²

Example 3:

(Tuoi Tre (131) 2004) “Today, I am extremely happy to read the report on “Roads blackened by traffic police corruption – Dầu Giây ... sleepless nights”. I am very happy because realities about sufferings from traffic police corruption among long-way container drivers like us have been finally revealed to the public in detail on the news. Today, as soon as we (container drivers) saw the news headline, we had to stop on the roads to read it. On the long road of the 1A national highway, there is a long line of trucks and containers, not because of traffic jam or accident, but because all drivers, despite not knowing each other before, handed and discussed the report. Some even say: “So from now on, our sufferings have been relieved.”

We all feel touched and grateful for all dangers and life-threats that TT’s journalists had to confront while conducting investigative journalism. On behalf of all long-way drivers from North to South, we want to present gratitude to TT’s journalists, who have used hearts and writings to defend justice for us.”

Even after the arrest of Hoàng Khương, one of TT’s most active reporters on the traffic police corruption topic, in 2012, TT has been attempting to preserve its watchdog role and continue to foster a public sphere for all. Specifically, TT officially called for contributions of readers’ suggestions on how to reform TT as well as strengthen its watchdog journalism as follows:

“Please send all of your suggestions to TT’s editorial department at 60A Hoàng Văn Thụ, P.9, Q.Phú Nhuận, TP.HCM. Phone number: (08) 39971010. Fax: (08) 39973939. Email: gopy@tuoitre.com.vn. In your emails or letters, please write down in detail your address, phone number, bank account number (if available) so that TT can transfer payment to those suggestions

²⁹ TT always specifically requested and encouraged readers to leave their comments and express opinions by ending articles with “Please share with TT Online your opinions through the comment section below.”

Or “Being a traffic participant, in your opinion, which measures could effectively eradicate traffic police corruption? Please share with us your suggestions in the comment section below or to the email tto@tuoitre.com.vn. Thank you!”

See (Tuoi Tre (82) 2008), (Tuoi Tre (74) 2011), (Tuoi Tre (71) 2011), (Tuoi Tre (69) 2011)

³⁰ See (Tuoi Tre (39) 2013)

³¹ See (Tuoi Tre (32) 2015)

³² See (Tuoi Tre (134) 2004), (Tuoi Tre (127) 2004)

selected for publications. At the end of the reform campaign, TT will send gifts to the authors of the best suggestions. TT look forward to receiving suggestions for reform from readers.”³³

In 2016, TT established a new section called “Citizens make orders for leaders of Ho Chi Minh City” to gather constructive suggestions from the public to deliver to leaders of Ho Chi Minh City. The newly established section received 1300 responses just within the first day of publication, reflecting the public demands to communicate concerns with leaders of local governments (Tuoi Tre (21) , 2016).

³³ Another good example of TT’s dedication to develop its watchdog role as well as the public’s expectation of TT playing such a role were expressed in one published suggestion of a reader, titled “To strengthen TT’s Watchdog journalism” (Tuoi Tre (56) 2012):

“For TT to play its watchdog role and become a critical friend of every household, I have a few suggestions: First, TT must follow up till the end all events. TT should not leave a work unfinished. TT should not just stop at reporting news but need to propose solutions and follow up the problems until they are solved and must inform the readers of the final results. For example, we want to know after news reports on low-quality buses, how the problems have been addressed to the responsible agencies and how responsible agencies have implemented solutions. Second, we urge TT to retain its brave spirit in reporting politically sensitive issues, especially corruption, which enrages citizens. Third, TT should strengthen its fighting spirit. Please stop avoiding confrontation. Readers know so please speak with us. Fourth, I suggest TT to open 2 sections on “**Bureaucrats’ ethics**” and “**Citizens’ ethics**” to raise awareness and improve the degrading social values. If everyone’s ethics is improved, social problems like traffic jams, traffic police corruption, nepotism, will be reduced. **Once government officials and bureaucrats understood their roles as public servants, corruption and harassment towards citizens will no longer exist. Once citizens are aware of their rights to be served, they can be empowered and play positive roles in developing this country into a democratic and fair society.** In these two sections, both good and bad examples, praise and criticism, and reform suggestions should be mentioned. Fifth, TT should initiate more debates about social justice. This needs attention and discussion, especially in the market-oriented economy like ours nowadays. It seems as if I am demanding too much from TT. However, **in order for TT to deserve its status as a watchdog media for every household, every citizen, every social class, these demands are the minimum!**”

Example 4:

(Tuoi Tre (139) 2004) “Please send this article to the Ministry of Public Security” is one of many articles published on TT online in a separate section called “Bạn đọc làm báo” (Readers become Journalists). The author explicitly said: “**Through TT News, I request leaders of the Ministry of Public Security, local Public Security Departments of cities, provinces,** to publish on the media a hot line of a specialized investigative agency so that citizens can call and report corruption cases, contributing to purify and improve quality of the government of this country.”

Example 5:

(Tuoi Tre (71) 2011) More than 4.000 suggestions of readers were received by TT within just one day of publication of two articles on “Soring issue of traffic police corruption” (Tuoi Tre (79) 2011) (Tuoi Tre (78) 2011). One said: “**I request TT to establish a forum for citizens to make suggestions to combat traffic police corruption, and invite leaders from the Ministry** of Public Security, Public Security departments of local provinces, heads of traffic police departments to participate and implement solutions based on citizens’ suggestions.”

With all of the above-mentioned measures, TT became a united front and a representative of the Vietnamese citizens, who hesitated to directly confront the government about the traffic corruption issue and did not know how to organize their voice effectively. And as it appears from the citizens’ published comments, TT’s readers really saw TT online news platform as a trustworthy sphere to express their concerns and engage in constructive dialogues with the government.

Strategy 4

The 4th special strategy of TT lies in their boldness in interacting with the government leaders, at both local and ministerial levels. Unlike other news agencies, including TN, TT did not stop at informing citizens of what leaders wanted to say. TT was the only agency, within the examined coverage on traffic police corruption, that constantly pursued interviews with heads of responsible agencies,³⁴ namely Ministry of Public Security, Traffic Police departments, Parliament

³⁴ For example: (Tuoi Tre (138) 2004) Interview with Colonel Vũ Sĩ Doanh, Head of the Traffic Police on Land department, Ministry of Public Security; (Tuoi Tre (126) 2019) Interview with Colonel Nguyễn Xuân Kim, Deputy Director of the Public Security Department of Đồng Nai Province; (Tuoi Tre (115) 2004) interviews with a few Parliament representatives Mr. Trần Đình Thanh, Deputy General Secretary of Đồng Nai Province “Considering the fact that traffic police corruption has been left unchanged, have leaders of the Public Security department of Đồng Nai Province ever been examined or have the leaders ever been held accountable for such a situation, Sir?;” Mrs. Trần Thị Minh Chánh, Deputy Chairwoman of Social issues Committee of the Vietnamese Parliament, Lieutenant-General Nguyễn Khánh Toàn, Permanent Deputy Minister of Public Security, (Tuoi Tre (70) 2011) Colonel Nguyễn Văn Mưu

representatives, Prime Minister, and posed thorny questions, touching very core and sensitive issues. This style of straight-forward dialogue with the government officials on behalf of the public clearly demonstrated TT's commitment to truly become the people's media – a watchdog and public sphere role.

– The Vice director of the on-land traffic police department of Thanh Hoa Province; (Tuoi Tre (61) 2011) Lieutenant-General Phạm Quý Ngọ, Vice Minister of Public Security; (Tuoi Tre (15) 2017) Lieutenant-General Lê Đông Phong, Director of Public Security Department of Hồ Chí Minh City and Colonel Đào Vinh Thắng, Head of the Traffic Police Department of Hanoi City.

Example 6:

(Tuoi Tre (124) 2004) Interview with Deputy Minister of Public Security Lê Thế Tiêm

“Every time the media reported corruption behaviors of traffic policemen; Heads of the Ministry of Public Security always made official commitment to eradicate corruption. But why has nothing changed? Why has none of the case of traffic police corruption received criminal charge?”

“What do you think about the opinion that the Ministry of Public Security should also take responsibilities for failures to enforce stricter punishments? Why can’t we apply harsher measures, for instance in case citizens identify traffic police corruption, the Director of the Public Security Department of the respective municipality has to take responsibilities?”

Example 7:

(Tuoi Tre (83) 2008) Interview with Lieutenant-General Phạm Nam Tào, Deputy Director General of the Police department: “Among many causes leading to traffic corruption, one has to do with recruitment (meaning corruption to purchase traffic police positions) and training process. What is your opinion about this concern?”

Example 8:

(Tuoi Tre (73) 2011) Interview with Major General Lê Ngọc Nam, Deputy Director General of the human resources training department of the Ministry of Public Security: “How has the police department investigated and punished corruption cases, especially those involving relatives and children of colleagues in more senior positions?”

Example 9:

(Tuoi Tre (42) 2013) Interview with Colonel Phạm Văn Đức, the Vice Director and Chief officer of the Inspectorate unit of Public Security Department of Thừa Thiên - Huế Province: “Traffic policemen are law enforcers. They must be aware of the illegal nature of the blackmail action. Nevertheless, they chose to pay money instead of reporting to the seniors. Can that be considered an act of concealing criminals?” (This is the case quoted at the introduction of this thesis)

Example 10:

(Tuoi Tre (11) 2017) Interview with Lieutenant-General Huỳnh Trung Phong – Head of the Traffic Police Department of Ho Chi Minh City: “Considering the continuation of traffic police corruption over years, one question is posed about whether traffic policemen also have to pay bribes internally, from down to up?”

Strategy 5

TT analyzed the traffic police corruption from multiple socio-eco-political lenses. As mentioned above, TT was highly credited by the public for its ability to provide critical analyses. Specifically, TT’s articles associated the problem of traffic police corruption with economic integration and development, culture and education (Tuoi Tre (121) 2004) (Tuoi Tre (10) 2017), traffic accidents, nepotism (Tuoi Tre (119) 2004), government bureaucracy, ethical values, and especially government transparency and developments of rule of law. This means TT’s analyses were often

more insightful and informative than those of ND, CAND, VN Express, and TN. TT, thus, played a better role in providing public sphere and supervising public opinions. Moreover, TT paid careful attention to conducting investigations and providing concrete evidences³⁵ to back up their claims against reported traffic police corruption cases.

³⁵ (Tuoi Tre (109) 2004) TT provided the most detailed estimation of traffic police corruption across 17 traffic police stations (different from tollbooths) from South to North of Vietnam:

- Tiền Giang : 1 station = 20.000đ
- HCM City: 2 stations: 20.000đ/station x 2 = 40.000đ
- Đồng Nai : 2 stations: 40.000đ/station x 2 = 80.000đ
- Bình Thuận : 2 stations: 20.000đ/station x 2 = 40.000đ
- Ninh Thuận : 1 station = 40.000đ
- Khánh Hòa : 2 stations: Lương Sơn (40.000đ)+ Cam Ranh (100.000đ) = 140.000đ
- Phú Yên : 1 station (not regular) = 20.000đ
- Bình Định : 1 trạm (not regular)= 40.000đ
- Quảng Ngãi : 1 trạm (not regular) = 40.000đ
- Quảng Nam : 1 station Thăng Bình = 50.000đ
- Đà Nẵng : 1 station Kim Liên = 50.000đ
- Huế : 2 stations: Phú Gia (20.000đ) + Phong Điền (40.000đ) = 60.000đ
- Quảng Trị : 1 station Đông Hà = 50.000đ
- Quảng Bình : 2 stations: 50.000đ/station x 2 = 100.000đ
- Hà Tĩnh : 1 station = 40.000đ
- Nghệ An : 1 station = 50.000đ
- Thanh Hóa : 1 station = 40.000đ
- Ninh Bình : 2 station: Tam Điệp (20.000đ) + đầu đường 10 (50.000đ)
- Thái Bình : 3 station x 40.000đ/station= 120.000đ
- Hải Phòng : 1 station = 40.000đ
- Quảng Ninh : 3 stations: Tiên Yên (100.000đ) + Móng Cái (200.000đ) + thanh tra giao thông (100.000đ) = 400.000đ

Total: 1.530.000 VND (2004) across 30 traffic police stations

Strategy 6

TT was the most outspoken when it came to discussions about Rule of Law and government accountability. TT brought in in-depth legal analyses and opinions from prominent lawyers,³⁶ laws professors, and parliament representatives, which brought even higher credibility to this online news agency and strengthened its role to provide a public sphere to debate traffic police corruption.

Example 11:

(Tuoi Tre (44) 2013) Lawyer Phan Trung Hoài provided an extensive legal analysis for the case of blackmailing traffic policemen with a video recording taking bribes (quoted in the introduction). He referred to Article 85 and 87 of the Traffic Law 2008, Article 47 of the Resolution 34/2010/NĐ-CP, and Circular 65/2012/TT-BCA to explain the invalidity of the argument that traffic police agreed to comply with the blackmail out of fear and to demand publication of the video to the public

Example 12:

(Tuoi Tre (120) 2004) Pham Duy Nghĩa – Professor at Hanoi Law University

“The police stick is always more powerful than tiny citizens. Managing that stick will contribute to return the master status to citizens, which requires a significant amount of efforts and dedication of many generations. We have theories about social contracts, constitution, and rule-of-law to describe the master-servant relationship between citizens and the government.

It is impossible to end traffic police corruption in one or two days. Vietnam with 80 million citizens needs a large amount of time to transit to a democratic society. The police’s stick, thus, will find it hard to comply with citizens’ mastership as accountability mechanism is still weak. Courts are yet capable of exhibiting its check-and-balance power to protect citizens’ rights. Establishing a rule-of-law mechanism, in which the executive branch also has to abide the laws, is a necessary condition for each individual to protect his or her own freedom and values.”

As can be seen from the above analysis, TT’s success was attributable to its carefully drafted strategies to inform, raise awareness and engage all stakeholders into the discussion on the traffic police corruption issue. Within this specific context of coverage on a single socio-political issue of traffic police corruption, TT online news outlet appeared to have successfully provided the public sphere for those having access to its online platform. All five types of actors mentioned in

³⁶ (Tuoi Tre (54) 2012) Lawyer Ngo Chi Dan – the Lawyer Association of Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu Province; (Tuoi Tre (34) 2014) Lawyer Nguyễn Văn Hậu – the Vice President of the Lawyer Association of Ho Chi Minh City; (Tuoi Tre (72) 2011) Pham Duy Nghĩa – Professor at Hanoi Law University; (Tuoi Tre (66) 2011) Lawyer Nguyễn Hữu Thế Trách, The Lawyer Group of Ho Chi Minh City

Habermas' model of the media as a public sphere (Habermas 2006) were present in TT's traffic corruption coverages, exemplifying how a public sphere for the traffic police corruption case would look like.

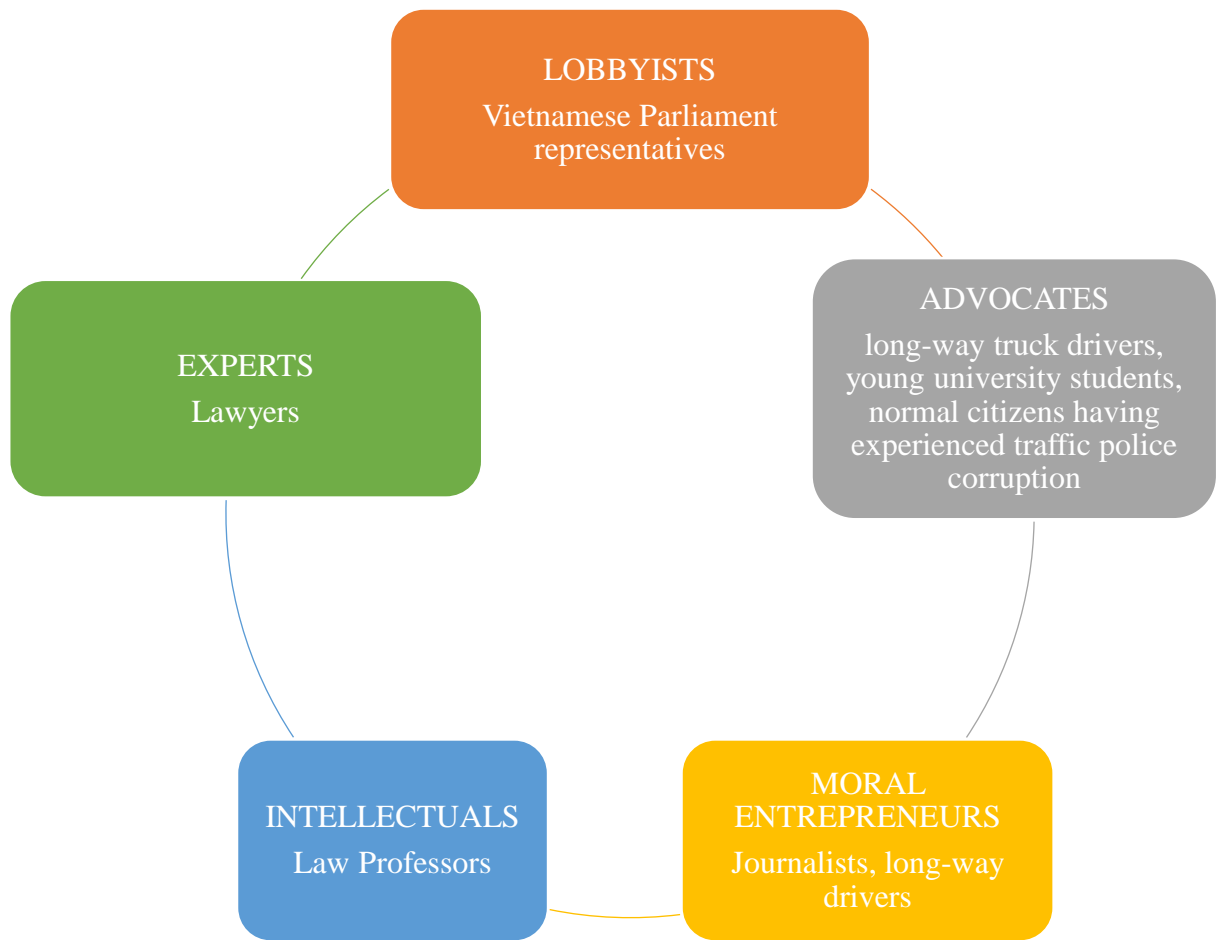


Figure 2: Five actors in Habermas' model of the media as a public sphere

Chapter 6

Citizens' engagement with online media platforms

6.1. Citizens online comments:

Corresponding to diverging approaches of the examined online media platforms, the number of citizens' online comments and their perceptions about the roles of the media in combatting traffic police corruption also varied. VN Express, as the most popular online news for the Vietnamese readers, published the largest number of online responses.³⁷ Nevertheless, as VN Express only focused on providing brief objective reports, there was little space for public debates. Most comments on VN Express' articles simply confirmed either agreement or disagreement with the piece of information provided, rather than engaged in meaningful discussions about causes of traffic police corruption and solutions to this nation-wide problem. For example, in response to one article on the Chief of Secretariat of HCM City's statement that "Traffic policemen receiving bribes are only outliers (minority)" (Vn Express (4) 2017), 97 of 109 comments briefly confirmed disagreement with the claim and shared personal experiences with traffic police bribes. A small number of 12 comments either demanded dismissal instead of demotion of corrupt traffic policemen, provided suggestions to better monitor traffic police corruption, or argued that traffic participants were also at fault for omnipresent existence of traffic police corruption. The situation was similar across all comment sections on VN Express's articles on traffic police corruption. In other words, VN Express did not empower its readers to actively engage in debates about traffic police corruption but simply allowed the readers to publish some sentiments. TN, despite embracing more watchdog role, does not seem to be as dedicated as TT in

³⁷ I do not compare VN Express with TT because TT's comment section was closed.

engaging readers in public debates. Therefore, visible comments on TN’s articles exhibited a similar pattern to that on VN Express. Out of the 73 published comments, 24 demanded further investigation into the reported traffic police corruption cases, 15 requested harsher punishments, and the rest either complained about prevalence of traffic police corruption across Vietnam or debated whether bribes givers – traffic participants – should as well receive criminal charges.

Example 13:

(Tuoi Tre (134) 2004) one citizen said: “I have two questions for Heads of the traffic police departments across the country and of Đồng Nai Province specifically:

- 1) What do you think about the prevalence of traffic police corruption?
- 2) Is traffic police corruption insolvable?

I look forward to hearing answers from Heads of Traffic Police departments on TT.

Another citizen said: “**I am very excited and hopeful that the media as an influential force in this society will make life better.** I highly appreciate and welcome contribution of TT News, journalist Võ Hương, as well as many other journalists, whose names I am unaware of.”

Example 14:

(Tuoi Tre (127) 2004) “Have you (traffic policemen) **realized your mistakes after these series of TT’s reports?** You (traffic policemen) were selected to provide traffic safety and help citizens to correctly follow traffic regulations. But you have disappointed us, who have been volunteering to re-organize traffic flows. **On this article, I would like to earnestly request the Ministry of Public Security to remove** these corrupt individuals to bring back traffic safety and civilized life for this country on the road of industrialization and modernization.

On the other hand, as showed in the above sections, TT was eager to listen to readers’ comments and suggestions. As the contents of TT’s articles were rich in terms of analyses, the readers’ comments (selected for publication) were also engaging and constructive. Although it might be the case that the comment contents on TT’s online platform experienced a pattern similar to that of TN and VN Express,³⁸ the fact that TT actively filtered and used the readers’ opinions as materials for writings articles and mobilizing public debates proves its commitment to become a watchdog media and construct a nurturing public sphere to solve socio-political problems like traffic police corruption. It was only in TT’s case, there were comments demonstrating the readers’

³⁸ I cannot testify this because TT’s comments were not available online

trust in TT's ability to represent and communicate the public concerns to the government leaders as well as defend the people's rights.

From the citizens' comments on TN, VN Express, and TT, the citizens tend to assume omnipresence of traffic police bribery and this seems to have a lot to do with their personal experiences with traffic police corruption. As the academic literature (Weitzer and A. Tuch 2005) (Weitzer 2002) (Intravia, Wolf and Piquero 2018) (J. Callanan and S. Rosenberger 2011) also confirms, the media in fact has limited impacts on citizens' perceptions. The media can exert best influence only in case the readers had been through experiences suggesting opinions and judgements similar to those framed by the media. The next section, therefore, aims to provide insights about the citizens' understanding about the roles of the Vietnamese online media in combatting traffic police corruption and how the online media has had (if any) influence on their perceptions about the traffic police corruption issue.

6.2. Personal interviews

All interviewees confirmed receiving most of information about traffic police corruption from the media. Moreover, they also confirmed the belief that traffic police corruption has been decreasing thanks to the media coverage and thanks to the possibility of recording and publishing videos online. There is a common perception, which is said to originate from the media coverage, among the interviewees that traffic policemen in the North are more likely to demand and accept bribes than those in the South of Vietnam. In fact, the interviewees did buy in both positive and negative images as set by the media about traffic police. One evidence is that the interviewees all believed that traffic police in Đà Nẵng City were kind and uncorrupt because of the large number of news describing good governance and mentioning examples of good behaviors of traffic police in this

city. All the interviewees even recommended that Leaders of other cities should learn from Đà Nẵng's experiences how to train good working ethics to the traffic police force.

What is important to notice from the interviews' analysis is that while the media, and the online media specifically, plays an important role as a reliable source of information, it does not seem to have tangible impacts on influencing readers' behaviors or opinions. In the context of traffic police corruption, all interviewees spoke about the prevalence of traffic police corruption issue from their own personal experiences. Reports on traffic police corruption, especially with the new trends of publishing videos on online news, are viewed more as a source of entertainment for social jokes rather than a source for public debates for policy changes. Thus, as it appears, while the new mechanisms of publishing online videos and pictures are effective in attracting public attention, it does not necessarily have substantial impacts on raising awareness about rule of laws or discussions for solutions to address traffic policemen and traffic accidents. Interview findings also indicated that two effective areas where the media can address to encourage citizens' participation in combatting traffic police corruption. These two areas include legal awareness and awareness about correlation between traffic accidents and traffic police bribes. Most of the current media content on the topic, as seen above, focused on devilizing traffic policemen and victimizing citizens. Yet, interviewed people suggest the media should make documentary or investigative movies about traffic police corruption, traffic policemen, and traffic accidents, which would be a much more effective way to raise people's awareness.

Chapter 7

Research limitations and further discussions

7.1. This research has many limitations.

This thesis has many limitations in terms of research methodology. First, it does not provide a comprehensive review of the Vietnamese online media sector. The findings of the research, therefore, cannot be generalized for all Vietnamese online news platforms, but are limited to 5 case studies. Moreover, due to lack of access to information, the discussion has not managed to account for the impacts of commercialization and marketization of the media sector on the role of the online media in combatting traffic police corruption. Furthermore, there is a technical loophole. I might have left out many related articles using other phrases to describe traffic police corruption by using “mãi lộ” as a search keyword, considering the flexibility of Vietnamese language. Moreover, even though I tried to select the media outlets with the best search function, it seems that the search function does not work efficiently and may leave out many articles. Another technical problem has to do with the censorship in the Vietnamese press system. There might be bias in analysis of readers’ comments as there is government’s sanction on comments. There were cases when online news portals were fined for allowing publications of comments harshly criticizing the government. TT’s articles showed no comments even though contents of the articles mentioned that TT received thousands of responses from readers. TN displayed some comments but whether those are all comments that have been written is questionable. In short, the analysis of the comments of readers may not reflect the reality about the Vietnamese online news’ readers due to lack of access to information

Sample of interviewees is also biased. I can only access the people I know with personal contacts. I should have interviewed more journalists and experts on the Vietnamese media as well as the government officials, and traffic policemen and heads of traffic police departments. But due to time and access constraints, I could not do so. I have sent request emails to TN, VN Express, and TT, but the emails were sent back by Gmail reporting failures of delivery. Finally, the analysis could have been more meaningful if I can compare Vietnam's online media coverage on traffic police corruption to that in China, Singapore, or Western counterparts. That would provide better contextualization and insights.

7.2. Further discussions

Nevertheless, the thesis contributes to answer, or at least pave way for answering, a number of puzzles in the existing literature. It has been a long debate about whether corruption is a cultural or institutional problem. Traffic police corruption represents one of the best examples for this aged-old debate. In the traffic police sector, 58% of citizens reported making voluntary bribes versus 38% paying after being suggested by traffic policemen (World Bank, 2012). Subsequently, there are other debates about where policy interventions should come in first or which side should change first, the bribe suppliers – traffic violators or the bribe takers – traffic policemen. Or, it may be the case that the nature of corruption, traffic police corruption in this case, has more nuances than just the cultural versus institutional dichotomy. As can be seen from the analysis above, traffic rules violations and traffic police corruption survive also thanks to pragmatic reasons like overpopulation, low-quality traffic systems, and challenges in governance in transition period.

The research also contributes to uncover the process of how citizens shape their perceptions or perceive the traffic police corruption issue. The existing literature relies significantly on analyses of survey perceptions. However, these survey-based questions are not helpful in improving knowledge about the process of how perceptions about corruption are shaped and how those perceptions may change or may be influenced. Survey questions simply help to report sample-based realities of what a group of the population might think about corruption, but not necessarily from what sources and how they develop those perceptions. The surveys, for example, can provide very insightful overview about how Vietnamese citizens typically responded to corrupt public officials. But it cannot answer the puzzles of how to improve citizens' actions.

From the current study, it seems the media and personal experiences are very influential in determining what a citizen might perceive traffic police corruption, its magnitude, and its potential solutions. The Vietnamese online media, as shown above, can be very powerful in supervising the public opinion, especially in the case TT, which actively initiated and energized public discussions around the issue. Even in the case of a neutral news agency like VN Express, the supervision impact can still be significant. Without a single analytical word about the statement of the leader about the “outliner-ness” of traffic police corruption, publication of such a video naturally involved readers into the discussions about assessing validity of such a statement as well as hesitance of the government leaders in recognizing prevalence of the issue and their failures in solving the long-standing phenomenon of traffic police corruption.

On the other hand, the research provides preliminary empirical evidence on the importance of the media in addressing the traffic police corruption issue in Vietnam. The media has been successful in bringing the traffic police corruption to the top of policy agenda. Subsequently, the Ministry of Public Security and Provincial Traffic Police departments have to develop the checking

regulations to reduce opportunities of direct interactions between traffic policemen and citizens, and thus traffic police corruption, as well as introduce the system of making payment through the state bank instead of allowing traffic police to receive cash as before.

Chapter 8

Policy recommendations

8.1. For the government

The Vietnamese government should consider the media as an important ally rather than a mere mouthpiece. The government should strengthen the role of the media and empower the mainstream media to limit negative impacts of unfiltered and uncertified information flowing on social media. Because the mainstream media still plays a key role in validating the truth, the Vietnamese government should invest more in professionalizing the journalists so that the media can play its watchdog and popular opinion supervision roles as well as become a true bridge between the government and citizens, as it used to be in the case TT during the 2004-2008 period.

Supervision should not take forms of weekly meetings. It is neither efficient nor effective. The government should consider enabling a self-governance mechanism, empowering the Vietnamese Journalist Association in monitoring the media activities. Moreover, to improve the quality of media reports and fostering its supervising role, the government should consider creating a media index, in which citizens are regularly surveyed about their experiences with the online news agencies and their recommendations for change. Creating a media index would motivate competition across online news agency and subsequently improve the media professionalization. It is also important to reform the media sector. The government can play an important role in cleaning out bad media agencies and merging inefficient ones.

It is also important to professionalize the traffic police force. Instead of encouraging the media to publish news about positive images of traffic policemen in forms of propaganda's quotas, the

Ministry of Public Security should work on professionalizing the traffic police force and make them internalize the working ethics already in existence. Finally, the government should consider developing precedents to punish traffic policemen receiving bribes. This will help reduce the time going through Court's proceeding as well as help speeding up the process of the media communicating informing to citizens.

8.2. For the media sector

The Vietnamese Journalist Association should advocate to enhance its role in monitoring activities of the media sector as well as empowering the role of the media in the Vietnamese political landscape. What the news agency is missing is a coordinated voice, strategy, and platform to advocate for policy changes. TN or TT cannot make policy advocacy individually. Moreover, the media sector should conduct systematic research on the media's influence on the policy making and how to improve media's interactions with citizens through online platforms.

8.3. For the individual media agency

There should be more cooperation across online news agencies in order for the impact of policy advocacy and public opinion supervision to be enlarged. Although TT provides a good model for the media playing communication bridge role, it could have been more effective if TT becomes more strategic in advocating policy recommendations. Specifically, instead of stopping at calling for readers' recommendations about solutions to address traffic police corruption, TT could have organized ideas into a prioritized list and designed strategic campaigns with the readers to advocate for specific policy one by one. In the case of traffic police corruption, for example, Tuoi Tre could have prioritized advocating for three policies:

- 1) Increase transparency in the working procedures of traffic policemen when checking vehicles and traffic participants. The current regulations are still not effective.
- 2) Make the penalizing procedure paperless and cash should not be allowed (even until now, citizens have to go to banks to make the payments, which naturally encourage them to involve in cheaper, faster, and more convenient bribes. The payment should be made available online, by bank transfer, or by bank cards); and
- 3) (As suggested by many citizens) Create a separate website for citizens to submit videos and pictures and make complaints about traffic police corruption and everything should be available to the public. Enhance the citizens' role in monitoring government officials instead of letting them go on social media, which might develop a negative perception about the government institutionalized corruption and inefficiency.

Although these policies have been suggested by citizens since 2000s, it seems none of them has been efficiently implemented. The media is partially at fault for failing to follow up the discussions till solved. Thus, the Vietnamese online media has successfully brought the problem to the table, driven discussions about solutions, but failed to advocate for meaningful policy implementations.

Conclusion

This thesis adds to the discussion about the increasing importance of the media as a check and balance force on the Communist Party's conducts in the absence of opposition party as well as the role of the media in rule-of-law development. The Vietnamese online media (as in the case of TT) has served as a problem identifier and solver, policy advocator, contributing to legal reforms and increasing transparency in Vietnam. If the Vietnamese Communist Party is willing to offer the media such a role, it might prove no less efficient than the system in the West. Probably, freedom from the government should not be the single-most important measurement to evaluate roles and importance of the media as having been advocated by Western scholars. Maybe the media should be measured by its positive impacts on supervising popular opinions against the bads and towards the goods, its capacity in providing public space for the government and citizens to interact and its power in advocating for policy change. If we evaluate the Vietnamese online media, or the Chinese online media from these other criteria, which speak more about the real importance and capacity of the media in the society as argued by Habermas's public sphere model, probably the media in the one-party system is not necessarily doing worse than their Western counterparts. Nevertheless, the Communist leaders could also learn from the Western experiences in giving the media the freedom promised in the existing Constitution and laws, so that they can truly supervise the popular opinions to the benefits of positive social developments.

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