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Paper No. 13
MEDIA & GOOD GOVERNANCE: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES, PERSPECTIVES FROM GOVERNMENT

By Nguyen Tri Dung
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MEDIA visitors to Vietnam are often astonished by the sheer variety and number of publications the country has to offer. Since the Press Law was introduced in 1990 over 8,000 registered journalists working for 450 press organisations have developed 600 titles nationwide.

Every year on June 21 the country celebrates a National Journalists Day. One of the most popular points of conversation on that day among journalists is, “How often in the past year have we not let the truth get in the way of a good story?” As a Vietnamese saying goes, “One worm is enough to spoil the whole soup pot”, and this day for journalists always proves a fine opportunity for media chiefs to rally their journalistic troops to the call of duty.

So what is that duty? Briefly, we can say it is making the most constructive contribution possible to the national development process.

Vietnam is currently going through one of the most critical periods of its modern history. Since the country began its doi moi economic renovation process in the late eighties there has been an extraordinary wealth of issues for the media to comment on and report on. The government of Vietnam has repeatedly stated that it welcomes constructive criticism.

In March 1995 former Communist Party of Vietnam General Secretary Do Muoi told Vietnamese journalists that their role in combating social evils, such as smuggling, corruption and prostitution, was critical, saying: “You have brought to light many cases which have been acted upon.”
Good governance means fair implementation of new legislation and very often it is the press which ensures that provinces and municipalities are exposed for incorrectly or unfairly interpreting central government laws aimed at improving the socio-economic development of the country.

Again, I quote Muoi: “Press freedom must be attached to discipline and order within the framework of the law. Journalists are free as long as they are virtuous and responsible to the community... Those who try to abuse press freedoms to create chaos and sabotage political stability are blocking the nation’s advance and integration into the global democratic and progressive community.”

So as you may gather, Vietnam’s government has always paid close attention to developing a media which not only helps find the best way forward for the country but ensures that that way is followed by entities of government at all levels.

Current Party General Secretary Le Kha Phieu picked up on this point when, just prior to the New Year, he told a meeting of publishers and media representatives: “Historically the press has played a significant role in disseminating State ideology and Party strategies. Given the current economic situation within and outside the country the responsibilities of journalists are extremely high.”

The people of Vietnam look to their media to give them a fair-minded and highly-principled lead in assessing the direction the nation needs to take. The state has always backed this aspiration by giving the media subsidies. In line with the objective that the media should become more reliant on advertising the state has in recent times been reducing this funding.

This has led to the last thing I wish to address: the danger of over-commercialisation of the press leading to a decline in good reporting on good or bad governance and other such vital issues. Efforts to boost circulation and attract advertisers by appealing to popular demands have in many cases led to a large growth in tabloid style reporting in publications once seen as conservative and reliable in terms of the reporting of major political issues. Vietnam already has a terrible problem with the foreign press often exaggerating negative reports about the nation, taking minor problems right out of proportion. Bearing this in mind, it is doubly important that the country’s proud tradition of having a media that constructively helps to jealously guard and foster national development is securely preserved.

Thank you.