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**When lack of impartiality makes an impact:
a comparative study of VietCatholic
and the BBC**

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Chapter I: Introduction

1.a. Research question and analytical structure

This paper is an attempt to investigate the phenomenal growth in web traffic to the VietCatholic News websites which came to prominence during the coverage of two Catholic protests in Hanoi in 2008. The BBC Vietnamese Service, an established institution with nearly 60 years of experience in broadcasting impartial and balanced news to Vietnam, has generally assumed that its competition came from government-controlled media. VietCatholic, a previously unknown US-based online news agency was an unexpected rival. Without solid editorial guidelines, but with a newsgathering network of over 200 Catholic volunteers in Vietnam and abroad, VietCatholic's content (news reports mixed with personal commentaries and also overtly religious images and video) attracted over 8 million page impressions in just three months during the demonstrations.¹ It has become a first-hand source of news leads and original images cited and used by many other international organisations, including the BBC. At the same time, it has brought up questions about how organisations wedded to editorial principles of due impartiality, balance and fairness can still make impact in news.

By comparing the BBC Vietnamese and VietCatholic websites, we can explore the ethical issues of reporting when access to politically sensitive situations is limited, and ask questions such as whether and when campaigning for religious freedom can justify partisanship and lack of fairness in news reporting.

This research is organised as follows:

Chapter 1: The overall situation of the Vietnamese online media is described in detail.

Chapter 2: VietCatholic's editorial standards and operational characteristics are examined to explore the relationship between its organisation and its partisan news coverage.

Chapter 3: Most of this chapter is reserved for content analysis of the reports on both websites about the protests in Hanoi (2007-2008), after a brief review of Church-State relations in modern Vietnam.

Chapter 4: Ethical questions of impartiality, fairness and balance in professional journalism are asked in relation to reporting by the two news organisations.

¹ A survey released by the VietCatholic on the site (30th Nov 2008) recorded 8.117.878 page impressions within three months, a significant surge from the previous time, thanks to its coverage of the Catholic protests in Hanoi.

Chapter 5: In this final chapter, leading to the Conclusion, the impact of VietCatholic's web publications and its implications for international news organizations and the Vietnamese opposition media are subject to a thorough examination. The concluding argument is that faith-based media, for now still on the fringe but already a part of a pan-regional religious resurgence, will challenge the mainstream media in Vietnam in the years to come.

1.b. A challenge to emerge

As 2007 drew to an end, a small public Catholic prayer gathering began in central Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam. Initially, it received little attention but kept growing day by day, reaching over 2,000 supporters in January 2008, highlighting an already tense and sensitive relationship between the Catholic Church and the communist government. The petition for the return of the former Vatican Ambassador's residence at 42 Nha Chung Street was eventually turned down and the government sent in anti-riot police to disperse the protesters in September 2008. Throughout this time, another Catholic protest broke out allegedly over the land rights at Thai Ha parish, also in Hanoi, just several kilometers south of the city centre. Eventually, the vigil and public prayers there were also met with a crackdown by security forces. Seven Catholics were then put on trial and jailed for causing 'public disorder'. During the protests no foreign press was allowed in from abroad, and the government media (TV, print press and online newspapers) portrayed the Catholics as 'troublemakers', acting under guidance of 'badly-intentioned priests'.²

For the BBC Vietnamese Service in London, making editorial decisions on these stories without direct access to the news sources was a serious challenge. Reporters had tried their best to balance different viewpoints and just as importantly to show that the coverage was impartial because political and religious incidents of this type are often highly charged with emotions of people involved. One thing they had no problem with was the BBC's principle of keeping a distance from the event. The BBC was not allowed to send reporters into Vietnam at the time. Therefore, all the reports were reliant on the witness accounts retold on the phone from outside. At the same time, there was a phenomenal growth in the number of stories, photographs and video posted by the protesters on the Internet. The BBC's Online News noted: *"Online forums such as the VietCatholic website have been swamped with*

² Police Newspaper 'Cong An Nhan Dan' 28/12/2008: <http://www.cand.com.vn/vi-VN/phapluat/2008/12/105333.cand>

articles and messages saying that only the Catholic Church has rights to the land that they believe was "given to the Church by history".³

As a result of its exclusion from the country, the BBC Vietnamese Service had to use VietCatholic's contacts, story leads and still images for its radio and online programming. While many Catholic websites were reporting the protests, VietCatholic News was the most proactive at work to keep the story alive by providing new materials every hour and in various forms and formats (reports, video, photographs, op-ed letters).

The campaign for religious freedom and the rights to participate in Vietnam's public life was conducted as much on the ground as on the web. Disputes over land rights became a turning point for the Vietnamese Catholic Church to start demanding more space to practise their faith. On the government side, the press and television also used a whole arsenal of tools, including text articles, video, online images and editorials to put the blame on the local clergy, including the Archbishop of Hanoi for 'causing trouble'. A war of arguments and counter-arguments was carried out with an intensity previously unseen in the Vietnamese media.

1.c. Online media and state censorship

To better understand the working environment for the BBC Vietnamese and VietCatholic News, it is necessary first to examine the development of web-based media in Vietnam. This environment is characterised by two factors:

First of all, widespread access to the Internet has made an increasing impact on news production and reporting. Online portals are becoming a widely used source of news for the Vietnamese population.

Secondly, political censorship prevents the local media from reporting on sensitive stories. The restrictions ironically give foreign-based Vietnamese-language media a golden opportunity. They gain attention by reporting on the politically sensitive topics such as human rights, democracy and religious disputes, so long as they have web technologies to bypass the government control.

Since the late 1980s, Vietnam has gradually moved away from the Soviet model of a planned economy while still maintaining a single-party political system. The economic system was described by the Communist Party of Vietnam as a "*socialist-orientated, multi-sectoral commodity economy driven by the state-regulated market system*".⁴ Foreign

³ BBC News Online 26/02/2008: See more at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7262411.stm>

⁴ Draft of the new constitution ratified by the National Assembly on 15 April 1992. Available at [http://home.vnn.vn/english/government/constitution/\(19/08/2008\)](http://home.vnn.vn/english/government/constitution/(19/08/2008))

investments and development aids were welcomed to help the country build an industrial base for further economic reforms and poverty alleviation. A combination of new policies, modern technologies in telecommunications and the deregulation of the private sector in the Vietnamese economy have helped create a new infrastructure for the media to thrive upon. The growth of internet penetration is phenomenal, from the absence of internet facilities until 1997 to over 22 million users in 2009, or 26% of the population.⁵ This figure was hailed by a seasoned Vietnam observer, Carl Thayer, as a evidence that Vietnam is now among "*the world top 20 in terms of online penetration*". More interestingly, Thayer also believed the Internet had made way to "a new social space opened up in reality and virtually".⁶

In a market of over 85 million people, the Internet is widely accessible in urban areas and connection costs are relatively low. This is not purely because of technical progress and economies of scale but also an outcome of government policies to invest in the Internet as "*part of the overall modernisation and global integration strategy*"⁷ Researchers such as Bjorn Surborg, who conducted a survey on the Internet in Vietnam, concluded that as a result of the economic liberalisation process led by the government, since the early 1990s a new set of directives were enacted to regulate the environment of computer networks (Surborg 2007: 347). Until 2007-2008, web space had remained relatively free as the government of Vietnam had deliberately taken a selective approach to Internet control, at least in comparison to China.

After a slow beginning, all mainstream media organisations in Vietnam, including the Communist Party, the Union of Vietnamese Workers, the National broadcaster Voice of Vietnam and most popular print newspapers such as Tuoi-Tre, Thanh-Nien, and Tien Phong developed a significant presence online. In addition, about 70 e-newspapers were licensed between 1997 and 2005 alone, and VnExpress and VietnamNet, two online start-ups became the most-read news without any print background. The late 2000s saw not only the arrival of other new Vietnamese online portals, e.g. Zing.vn, and Bee but also foreign brands such as Yahoo Vietnam and Google.com.vn.

Apart from the public, semi-public and business-oriented web media, there were many personal websites and blogs owned and run by professional journalists, artists, businessmen, students, pensioners and others by social, professional, religious organisations. Vietnamese political dissidents, human

5 Vietnam Media and Information Ministry, Internet data: Available at <http://www.thongkeinternet.vn/jsp/trangchu/index.jsp>

6 Thayer Carlyle in "One-Party Rule and the Challenge of Civil Society in Vietnam" Presentation of Remaking the Vietnamese State: Implications for Vietnam and the Region, Vietnam Workshop, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong August 21-22, 2008 p.13

7 Surborg Bjorn in "On-line with the people in line: Internet development and flexible control of the net in Vietnam", ScienceDirect, Geoforum 39 (2008) 344-357. Available at www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

rights campaigners and social activists also made use of the Internet as a tool to propagate their cause and seek support by connecting with like-minded people across the country, and abroad. By 2009, the web media, and particularly private blogs, have become one of the main ways the Vietnamese communicate and do business. As reported by the Wall Street Journal, the US Ambassador and EU representatives also pointed out the tension between the government control and the need to promote Internet freedom. That is because: "*Vietnam is considering putting price controls on a broad array of products and is cracking down on certain personal and political activity, in a sharp reversal of what has been a move toward more-open markets and a more-open society*".⁸

To understand the restrictions the government has implemented online, we must look at the overall mechanism of media censorship in Vietnam. By and large, the censorship is exercised through an elaborate structure of Party and government agencies but also by the control of media ownership. In short, Vietnam has no private broadcasters and newspapers while foreign press are allowed to operate in the country under strict supervision. The Communist Party of Vietnam also directly owns and manages the Ho Chi Minh's Academy of Journalism and Communication where the elite of Vietnamese press are trained. On top of that, the Propaganda and Education Department in the Party's Central Committee supervises all media outlets by holding weekly editorial meetings for editors (or their deputies) of all television, radio and newspapers to receive instructions on what they should and should not cover. Even this blatant form of direct censorship seems to be not rigid enough. The Ministry of Public Security has a specially authorised branch codenamed A25, ready to intervene whenever a news report is considered in breach of the media regulations. These plain clothes officers can arrest journalists and private bloggers on the spot as well as search offices, Internet cafes and even interrogate foreign reporters without a court order. In 2007, the government issued Directive 97 to further tighten the control over public discussion and research to more than 300 topics.

In spite of all measures mentioned, the control over web space in Vietnam, as Surborg observed, was "*neither absolute nor without effect*" and was exercised in a highly flexible manner. Instead of a total ban on the web or the sites deemed undesirable, the Vietnamese security apparatus often targeted individuals who were then accused and even jailed for "*spreading anti-state propaganda*". While the trials against the so called "*cyber-dissidents*" are often highlighted by international media, millions of web users can still access the contents they want, even from firewalled web pages by using proxy sites.

In the official media, the publication of material considered harmful to national security and stability brings about punitive measures by the central government: reprimanding editors, revoking a journalist's press pass, or

⁸ Wall Street Journal Online 23/12/2009: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB126146313438101283.html>

even financial fines. For example, in early 2009, the government sacked Nguyen Cong Khe and Le Hoang, the editors of the two largest pro-reform newspapers (both men are Communist Party members) over their coverage of a corruption scandal trial. This seems to be a signal that the government has moved towards a more repressive approach to the media overall and online news sites in particular. It is still too early to predict how press freedom would further be suppressed in the run-up to the next Congress of the Communist Party in 2011, but it has become clear that the Internet has changed the dynamic of the media market and state-society relations to an extent that makes it far more difficult for the government to win back its total control over the media, including the web. That is because as the diffusion of media types and the level of sophistication of online productions have gone up significantly, so have the flows of people and information in and out of Vietnam.

Over 20 years of economic reforms, political relaxation, foreign investment and increased trade relations with the ASEAN nations, the European Union, China, South Korea and Japan but most of all, with the United States (US-Vietnam trade rose from just \$451 million in 1995 to \$15.7 billion in 2008) have integrated Vietnam into the global economy.⁹ In media terms, Vietnam, a vibrant market with all types of media: terrestrial, satellite and cable television, SW and FM radio, mobile telephony, and increasingly web-based services, is equally connected to the world. This integration also offered the global Vietnamese communities worldwide (over three million in USA, Australia and Europe) an unprecedented opportunity to interact with the homeland. Their frequent travels back to Vietnam for family visits, marriage, tourism and business were no longer something unimaginable or unaffordable. This is a great contrast with the situation which lasted for many years after the Vietnam War when restrictive visa policies and discriminatory measures specifically aimed at the overseas Vietnamese (Viet-Kieu) from capitalist countries had discouraged them from coming back. Under pressure from the international community and also in order to attract investment and remittances from overseas Vietnamese, these policies have been gradually changed and made way to a more reconciliatory attitude.

For the Vietnamese diaspora in America, Australia and Europe, the Internet was obviously a very useful way to communicate with Vietnam, and to raise the issues their countrymen cannot do from within because of media censorship. The web technologies have also brought about two significant changes to overseas-based Vietnamese-language newspapers, news magazines and discussion forums.

In the first stage, print papers and magazines went online either to reserve some space for their edition in the digital space, or simply to survive after having abandoned their print edition. This is the decision of papers such

⁹ US Trade Representative Office <http://www.ustr.gov/countries-regions/southeast-asia-pacific/vietnam>

as Dien-Dan Forum in Paris, Nguoi-Viet and Viet-Bao in California and many others, including the VietCatholic News Agency. Secondly, the Internet has actually helped online newspapers with new sources of contents coming from Vietnam, either in the form of reportage, photos or reprinting of articles on the national newspapers. Gradually, the content produced by people living in Vietnam have become more and more prominent on the most renowned independent websites such as the Germany-based Talawas, France-based Bauxite Vietnam, X-Café, and the VietCatholic News although the editing staff and the servers stay abroad, out of the Vietnamese government's interference.

We will further explore this phenomenon of global and local interaction in the next chapter to see how much it constitutes the core activities of VietCatholic News whose visitors from Vietnam account for more than 50 percent of all users.

Chapter II

A Catholic news gathering network and forum

In this chapter, I will examine VietCatholic's operational and editorial characteristics by referring to some theoretical definitions of online media, namely the concept of alternative online community and the transnational character of web pages. These concepts, in my view, will further facilitate our comprehension of the site's reporting of the Hanoi's protests.

2.a. Editorial structure

VietCatholic started off as a small website in 1996 to connect Vietnamese Catholic priests in the United States and Europe and to help their colleagues back home in Vietnam with updated news on the Church and religious materials. It had faced many technical difficulties, from finding the right web application for Vietnamese fonts, lack of journalistic content and funding to hacking attempts allegedly by the Vietnamese government. The founder of the site, California-based Father Tran Cong Nghi and two friends worked on the site for several years before a larger number of other enthusiastic priests and lay Catholics joined in.¹⁰ However, its organisational and editorial structure remains very flexible. By 2010, Father Tran Cong Nghi worked with nine other people living in the USA, Europe and Vietnam, of whom seven are ordained priests and two are lay Catholics. They use Skype and emails to keep the communication going and to coordinate the work.

In terms of the editorial structure, in Father Tran Cong Nghi's own words, although all ten members of the editing team are authorised to publish the content, only five people among them can withdraw the already published articles. This happens if those five senior editing managers, including Father Tran Cong Nghi himself, consider the stories '*too controversial*' or '*potentially libellous*', and he is the one to make the final decision. The 64-year-old priest also admitted that they have no editorial guidelines except '*respect for truth*' and adherence to double-checking their reports for accuracy. However, he did not explain how this process of checking takes place in practice.

For security reasons, the same edition of the VietCatholic News is registered under various domain names (VietCatholic.org, VietCatholic.net, VietCatholic.com...), and maintained in different servers outside Vietnam. This is to try to prevent the content from being hacked and damaged. The multiplicity of web addresses also allows the readers to access news even if one site is blocked by the Vietnamese firewall. Boosted by these measures,

¹⁰ Interview with Father Tran Cong Nghi, recorded 08/02/2010.

the traffic flow to VietCatholic reached over 2.5 million monthly visits in 2008, of which 50-60% came from Vietnam.¹¹

The number of regular contributors to the VietCatholic news sites is now estimated at nearly 200 worldwide, including many from Vietnam. Father Tran Cong Nghi confirmed that they also use the existing network of local priests in Vietnam for newsgathering and fact checking. In his own description, *"it is very easy to ask a local priest for a photograph of an event or to check if the sender of web articles and images is actually living in his parish"*. This network of volunteers clearly constitutes the core strength of VietCatholic News Agency and gives it an advantage over all international news organisations in Vietnam. Foreign news agencies (AFP, AP, Reuters and Dow Jones) are present in Vietnam but the breadth of their coverage is limited by numerous factors. Their Hanoi-based representatives face serious movement restrictions: a special permit is requested each time for newsgathering outside major cities. The VietCatholic News Agency however is a network of informal reporters, reaching into almost every province of Vietnam. Because of its underground position, the network does not need any formal permit from the government to do the job, nor to pay staff.

2.b. Connecting with Vietnam

All this could only have happened thanks to the Internet connection between Vietnam and the outside world. The rapid development of the Internet has raised a serious question about online participation and the so-called e-democracy in the political life of developed countries. In some cases, political scientists even notice that the spread of online media coincides with a decline in political participation on the ground by the public in the so-called 'off-line environment'. At the same time, a number of research scientists are intrigued by the fact that the public seems to be *"reconstituting community online, discovering common interests with a potentially huge network of like-minded peers, developing news skills, building alternative deliberate spaces, raising the possibility of a virtual public sphere"*.¹²

It is quite clear that VietCatholic's website, founded in California as one of the first Vietnamese language websites in the United States, is one of those examples of alternative online community of like-minded peers, in this case Vietnamese Catholics in the United States. As its founder, Father Tran Cong Nghi told me in an interview, that double alternativeness constitutes the site's identity: it is neither a mainstream American news site, nor an organisation under Vatican's spiritual tutelage.

The transnational character of the VietCatholic website is developed through its connections with dozens of non-Vietnamese sites in many

11 Internet Data from Alexa website for VietCatholic Network (Feb 2010)

12 Livingstone S. "Critical Debates in Internet Studies: Reflections on an Emerging Field" in Mass Media and Society, Ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, London 2005 p. 17

languages. This transcultural relationship is reflected in VietCatholic's managerial flexibility and editorial creativity.¹³ The editor-in-chief says they have approached Vietnamese contributors with linguistic skills, and conducted discussion with non-Vietnamese priests in different countries to outsource the translation of original stories into English, French, Spanish and Chinese. The team has also linked up with a number of Polish, Italian and Taiwanese news sites to further spread the news to respective markets. This multi-linguistic and multinational method of work sharing and outsourcing has been vital in dissemination of VietCatholic news from Vietnam to the world in a highly efficient manner with minimal costs.

According to media theories of interactionism (Laughley 2007:78), a good way to understand how a specific group of people communicate is to focus on their interaction in specific social environments.¹⁴ The VietCatholic editors do not just communicate with regular contributors but also share a strong sense of community with them. They are either members of the Catholic Church in Vietnam or Vietnamese priests and Catholics living abroad. By sharing a set of religious values, they can interact with each other without a rigid structural body or normative processes of news editing.

However, this religious identity could equally be a weakness. Because the Catholic community accounts for less than 10 percent of the Vietnamese population, their communications may not be able to reach out to the wider audience. The overt emphasise of Catholic values constrains their cooperation with the secular media unless the reports generated by the VietCatholic websites are neutral enough to appeal to the universal public. This is the issue we will spend more time analysing in the next chapters.

¹³ The concept of transnational data flows in global information and world communication has been examined and developed by Hamid Mowlana as those flows across national borders and cultural boundaries have both converging and diverging impacts on the modern world at all three levels, global, societal and individual. The multi-directional flows of information arguably has made the North-South division less important because of an increasing trend from the so called 'developing world' to the industrialised countries. More in Mowlana, H. 1997 "Global Information and World Communication", second edition, Sage Publications London pp. 108-143.

¹⁴ Laughley D. Key Themes in Media Theory, Open University Press 2007 p.78

Chapter III

Catholic protests on the BBC Vietnamese and VietCatholic web sites.

The aim of this chapter is to compare story treatments on the BBC and VietCatholic websites about the Catholic demonstrations in Hanoi between December 2007 and October 2008. In order to better understand why protests over land rights and their coverage in the media have played a significant role in shaping the relationship between the government and the Catholic Church of Vietnam, and equally why the local Catholics desperately did all they could to spread news about their campaign for religious freedom and social justice, it is necessary to look at the historical context of church-state relations.

3.a. Church-State relations in Vietnam today

The government of Vietnam retains strict controls over all religious groups and related activities. In spite of two decades of social and economic liberalisation, atheism is still predominant in state education from primary schools to universities, and Leninist interpretation of Marxism the guiding ideology for national media. All personnel in central and local government, the police, security forces and judiciary are either Communist Party members or those loyal to the Party. Christians are prevented from holding posts in public service. This undoubtedly creates an atmosphere of distrust that could easily turn any minor dispute with religious groups of any denomination into an otherwise manageable conflict with deeper political implications.

Despite having the second largest Catholic community in Southeast Asia (after the Philippines), communist Vietnam has had no diplomatic relations with the Vatican since the last Nuncio, Archbishop John Dooley left Hanoi in 1959, following the North-South partition of Vietnam in 1955. However, unlike China where there is both a government-sanctioned Patriotic Catholic Church with its own clergy ordained by the state, and an underground church secretly loyal to the Pope,¹⁵ the overwhelming number of Vietnamese Catholics have only one representing body, recognized nationwide and loyal to the Holy See.¹⁶ With over four hundred years of tradition, the 7-million-strong Church is now led by a relatively young generation of ambitious bishops and priests, most of whom are just in their

¹⁵ More in Yu C. A., "State and Religion in China: Historical and Textual Perspective", Carus Publishing, Chicago 2005, p141.

¹⁶ The role of Vietnamese Patriotic Catholics, organized and supported by the government is very limited, especially since the unification of Vietnam in 1975, when millions of Southern Catholics joined the nationwide Church which became recognized by the government in 1985.

fifties.¹⁷ Various expectations, demands and interests of local Catholic Church, the Vatican and the communist government could converge or diverge in a triangular relationship, full of dynamism rather than a straightforward intergovernmental one.

Secondly, it should be pointed out that until late 1980s, the Catholic Church in North Vietnam under communist rule had suffered from severe political and religious discrimination. Between 1955 and 1975, a number of priests had died in labour camps, church land and properties were seized, and religious education was banned.¹⁸ By contrast, the Catholics in the South had enjoyed religious freedom and even a privileged position. The first President of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem was a devout Catholic and was said to have tended to appoint people to positions of authority who shared his religious beliefs.¹⁹ When the South of Vietnam came under communist rule in 1975 the Roman Catholic Church lost its rights to run charities and own land.²⁰ Church-state relations have gradually improved thanks to the general relaxation of government control over society since economic and social reforms known as Renovation (Doi-Moi) were launched by the Communist Party in 1986.

By late 1990s, Catholics were being allowed to worship and make pilgrimages to holy places but social and charitable works remained strictly under supervision of the government. At the same time, the government gradually promoted better diplomatic relations with the Holy See and dozens of high-profile visits have been made between the Vatican and Hanoi. A five-day trip to Vietnam in March 1999 by Archbishop Celestino Migliore signalled the intention of Pope John Paul II to exchange views with Hanoi about the appointment of bishops.²¹ The Polish Pope himself had expressed his

17 Vietnamese Catholic Church currently has 30 bishops, 26 dioceses. From 2005 to 2009, the Vatican nominated 11 Vietnamese bishops, many of them were born in the 1950s and have been educated in Europe. Obviously, there is a tension between the older and the younger bishops, as well as a North-South division in the Church but overall, the Catholics are more united than the Buddhists and Protestants in Vietnam.

18 According to documents released by Vietnamese Redemptorists, two priests Thai Ha Parish Church where the protest broke out in early 2008, Fathers Marcel Nguyen Van Tan and Clement Pham Van Dat were jailed by the communist authorities in the 1950s and lost their life in re-education camps of North Vietnam. From 1958 to 1993, the Parish Church was managed by only one priest, Joseph Vu Ngoc Bich.

19 Ngo Dinh Diem Jean Baptiste (1901-1963), a strong nationalist and anti-Communist served as the first President of the Republic of South Vietnam from 1955 to 1963 when his assassination plunged the country into political chaos and direct rule by the military with American backing. His final days in power were marked by growing tensions between the Buddhist majority and the minority of Roman Catholics, many of whom had fled the communist North in 1955, the self-immolation of monk Thich Quang Duc during a series of popular protests. Diem's religion and staunch anti-communism contributed to a suspicious feeling among the Vietnamese left-wingers and communists about the Catholic Church even nowadays.

20 Cardinal Pham Minh Man estimated the Archdiocese of Saigon lost nearly 400 facilities including church and school buildings, charity headquarters after the unification. Interview with Fides quoted in BBC Vietnamese website 11 Dec 2009.

21 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/297085.stm>

willingness to visit Vietnam if invited but that never materialised.²² His successor, Pope Benedict XVI has continued the policy of dialogue and engagement with Hanoi, demonstrated by more frequent visits by Vatican envoys to Vietnam and also reciprocal visits by Vietnamese politicians. Diplomatic efforts on both sides have yielded good results, marked by an official visit to the Vatican by Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung on 25th Jan 2007, the first meeting between a communist leader from Vietnam and the Pope.²³

Although the high-level visits have raised expectations of an imminent decision to normalise relations, until now Vietnam still has no official international agreement with the Vatican to manage the affairs of the Church. This tension is apparent when it comes to the issue of land rights and religious properties. In such a dispute, defiance towards to the government, as shown by Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet in Hanoi, may have gained the support of local Catholics but could have slowed down if not damaged top-level efforts to normalise relations with the Vatican. Archbishop Kiet's resignation in May 2010 prompted comments that he was ousted to please the government in Vietnam so that the full diplomatic relations with the Vatican could be soon established.²⁴ On the government's side, despite the long-term vision by the top leaders to recognize the Vatican in order to engage the Church in social works and provide assistance to the poor and the disabled, Church-State relations are being shaped by local Communist Party's cadres whose personal interests in land management play a crucial role in suppressing any religious demands over land rights.

The complicated structure of party and state governance in Vietnam doesn't help. For example, the Governmental Department of Religious Affairs (Ban Ton giao Chinh phu) is in charge of working relationships with all religious communities. In the case of Catholic Church, this department approves bishop nominations proposed by the Church. It also has a say about the number of candidates to be trained at seminaries. However, the Party Central Committee and its subordinate departments as well as the Fatherland Front, a national umbrella organisation under the Party's leadership, also have their respective responsibilities in religious affairs. At the same time, Ministry of Public Security and Ministry of Media and Communications could act if religious media and public actions raise their concern. Moreover, municipal and provincial authorities in charge of land management and public order at the local level are equally equipped by laws to deal with religious groups. As regards land laws, Vietnam only recognizes

22 The only meeting John Paul II had ever had with a larger group of Vietnamese Catholics in the location nearest to Vietnam took place in the Philippines in January 1995 when he met with Vietnamese refugees.

23 Five years earlier, Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister Vũ Khoan had been the first high-ranking Vietnamese official to meet with Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano at the Vatican in November 2002.

24 Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet was said to have been pressured to step down for his open criticism of Hanoi Municipal Authorities in the land disputes at Nha Chung Street and the parish of Thai Ha. See more at <http://www.catholicreview.org/subpages/storyworldnew-new.aspx?action=8141>

private tenure and private use of public land without ownership. The State also gives the local administration (People's Committee) the right to manage land resources and entitlement to issue land use and home ownership certificates. Religious communities and churches can only request land tenure because under the socialist constitution and the Land Law, there is only nationally collective ownership of land.

3.b. Research questions and analytical criteria:

In this section, we will look at the coverage of VietCatholic News and BBC Vietnamese about two Catholic protests: one at 42 Nha Chung Street over the return of the former apostolic nunciature, and another one at Thai Ha Parish Church in a land dispute with the local authorities. The questions to be asked are

- 1. How much does the use of each form of media (text-based stories, images, forum comments, video reports) conform to our pre-defined notion of impartiality and balanced reporting?*
- 2. How are the government's viewpoints reported by the BBC and the VietCatholic web stories?*

To facilitate this task, the analysis uses the following set of technical criteria:

- Due impartiality is defined in relation to the evidence gathered in news stories that show the reporter not taking sides but is open-minded. The stories reflect the full range of views, interests, beliefs and perspectives.*
- Fairness and balance means controversial reports are checked against due accuracy, and various viewpoints should also be demonstrated in the way language is used in texts, image captions and commentaries.*
25
- To facilitate the examination of the above criteria, a technical typology of web items as regards their contents e.g. news reports, analysis, commentaries, other publications e.g. petitions and legal documents (Table 2) in order to identify how impartial and balanced they are in each category.*

In support of the technical criteria above, the researcher assumes that unlike other media (print newspapers, books), the aspect of online representation, for example the lay-out of a webpage, its arrangement of promotion banners and interactive, clickable functions are as important as

25 Producers' Guidelines, The BBC's Values and standards. Chapter 2.

the content in shaping different modes for the news message. Therefore, a greater attention is paid to those features on both websites against the criteria of balance.

A number of the most relevant VietCatholic and BBC Vietnamese reports were selected for qualitative description. Precisely, out of nearly 50 web articles and image galleries on bbcvietales.com from 27th Dec 2007 to 03rd Oct 2008, only about 10 key articles are chosen for content analysis in pair with a similar number of VietCatholic reports from a selection of over 100 web publications for the same period. A timeline of events is shown (Table 1) to help follow the story development.

Table 1: Timeline of events

<p>23 Dec 2007 First public prayer meeting of local Catholics at 42 Nha Chung Street in Central Hanoi.</p> <p>27 Dec 2007 thousand of Catholics gathered on the site and a cross is planted in front of the building. BBC Vietnamese run first online report about the demonstration.</p> <p>31 Dec 2007 Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung paid a visit to the site with Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet.</p> <p>05 Jan 2008 Protesters at Thai Ha demand the return of the Parish Church's 15 acres of land confronted the security forces. A barbed wired fence and ad-hoc wall were set up to keep the protesters away from the current occupier, a public textile company.</p> <p>14 Jan 2008 Hanoi's Peoples Committee demanded the Catholics remove the cross at Nha Chung and accused the Archbishop of "using religious freedom to provoke protest against the government".</p> <p>25 Jan 2008 Hanoi security personnel clashed with the protesters at Nha Chung Street.</p> <p>29 Jan 2008 local police launched a criminal investigation into the Catholic protests.</p> <p>02 Feb 2008 protest was put on hold on the eve of Vietnamese Lunar New Year one day after Vatican's Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone had sent a letter to the Archbishop of Hanoi, urging them to consider public order in Hanoi.</p> <p>07 Apr 2008 Protest at Thai Ha Church continued.</p> <p>12 May 2008 news reports about planned visit by a Vatican delegation led by an apostolic envoy, Monsignor Pietro Parolin to Vietnam to continue talks with the government about diplomatic relations.</p> <p>22 May 2008 Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet confirmed during a visit to Germany his willingness to keep up the demands for the Nunciatures restitution.</p> <p>9 Jun 2008 the Vatican's delegation led by Mosignore Parolin began the visit to Hanoi, Quang Tri, Da Lat and Ho Chi Minh City.</p>

15 Aug 2008 Police arrested three Thai Ha parishioners after hundreds had torn down a partition fence and set up a holy cross.

28 Aug 2008 First criminal charges brought against Thai Ha protesters.

18 Sept 2008 Police arrested another five Thai Ha protesters.

19 Sept 2008 Security forces blocked Nha Chung Street in order to build a flower park at the disputed site. AP reporter Ben Stocking was beaten up for reporting from the site.

20 Sept 2008 Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet met with Hanoi Municipal Authorities. A quotation from his speech at the meeting about the shame of being a Vietnamese passport holder became subject to a campaign on state media to denounce him.

23 Sept 2008 Local government used mob to disperse the protesters at Thai Ha and turned the disputed plot of land into a green park.

03 Nov 2008 Local government officially opened the new park at Nha Chung Street.

3.c. Reporting contents and language

First, we look at the VietCatholic web stories. After the protest at Nha Chung Street had begun, in just four days (30th Dec 2007 to 02nd Jan 2008) VietCatholic published as many as 30 web articles, of which at least 10 directly called on the Catholic community in Vietnam and worldwide to support the vigils and encouraged the demonstrators to show defiance (Table 2). This opinionated and emotional language remained prominent throughout the series of reports and particularly in the headlines of stories. For example "Dear Hanoi, We are marching with you", "The Campaign at the Apostolic Nunciature must carry on" (31 Dec 2007), and "Hanoi: streets turn to Cathedral" (02 Jan 2008).

Table 2: Number of web publications analysed in categories (27 Dec 2007 to 03 Oct 2008):

	BBC Vietnamese	VietCatholic
News reports by staff	30	20
Reports by volunteers	None	50
Catholic views	10 interviews with Catholic bishops in reports	Protesters and priests
Government views	7 interviews with government officials and experts	No interviews with government officials
Independent views	5	None
Catholic online petitions	None	5
Agency and other media	AP, VietCatholic,	11 republications (BBC,

	Vietnam's state media and newspapers	AFP, La Croix, Catholic News Agency, Asia-News, Zenit...)
Multimedia	Audio and pictures, no video	More than 10 video and picture galleries
Total	47	Over 100

In over 100 online articles, the boundaries between straight reporting by VietCatholic team, attributed to VietCatholic's reporters (phong vien), and the newsgathering works of more than a dozen of local priests and Catholics are blurred.²⁶ Based on the description in the text (*'I have met with a woman...I have seen police officers...'*), and original images taken, it is reasonable to assume that some of field reporters must have been to the site or taken part in the sit-in protests.

There is evidence from the articles that the VietCatholic reporters tried their best to be very descriptive of the situation when it comes to dealing with the facts such as the number of Catholic protesters on site, as well as the time of events. Nonetheless, their personal engagement is also very clear: in a publication on the 29th Jan 2008 (Quyet tam cua cac ban tre Ha Noi), the editing team explicitly called on Catholic youth to participate in the vigils by showing defiance and help VietCatholic in newsgathering work. The article was essentially plus a "protest manual", asking young Catholics in Hanoi if they could use digital camera for taking pictures and to scan government media to detect 'their lies' and help spread the news to other Catholic websites.

The Vietnamese government is negatively portrayed in almost all VietCatholic reporting of the protests. The language used in the texts reveals a strong emotional attachment to the Catholic cause and hostility towards the Communist Party and the State of Vietnam. Catholic views, either expressed by the local clergy or protesters are predominant e.g. a publication by Thach Ha (Hanoi, 29 Dec 2007) mocked state propaganda and asked questions like *"Is there a 'civilisation of robbery' or 'a culture of savages' in the Party's consciousness? Why did the People's State rob people's land like this?"* Official government's viewpoints are either absent or assumed to be anti-Catholic. The religious symbolism and history of the confrontation between the Catholic Church and the Soviet Union under Stalin's dictatorship are evoked to show spiritual determination, for instance in the story *"Rose and Iron Chain"* by Thao Thuc from Hanoi (30th Dec 2007).²⁷ In a New Year story (01 Jan 2008), the headline called Hanoi *'the atheist capital'* which might be offensive to non-Catholic members of the public. Similar language is used in news reports from the parish church at Thai Ha. A web story on 29

26 Some of VietCatholic reporters and writers remained anonymous e.g. 'A Catholic in Hanoi', while some used pennames or real names e.g. Son La, Thach Ha, Gioan Dinh Son, Ngo Xuan Tinh, Thuy Dung, Hoang Duc Trinh to name a few.

27 This particular story reminds the readers of the collapse of the Soviet Union to conclude that "The rose of love will eventually break up the iron chains of tyranny".

Jan 2008 called the protesters "*the suffering Catholics of Hanoi*" and quoting them as commenting about "*the underhand tactics and cruelty of the authorities*" while a story from 23 Sept 2008 claimed the local government had mobilised the mob and a media campaign to disperse the protesters as "*tricks to deceive the public*".

On the VietCatholic's websites there was little coverage of the government viewpoints. In fact, only three analytical pieces about the Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit to the disputed site mentioned the government's arguments and in questions like "*Why and what they think about the issue*".²⁸ The article by Thach Ha from Hanoi on the 29th of December 2007 cited Vietnamese constitution and regulations on religious affairs but just to comment that the government needs to respect the laws and return the disputed land to the Church because they already had "*made mistakes*" and "*turned their back on the people of Vietnam*". However, it's worth noting that VietCatholic had republished several BBC Vietnamese web stories and analytical pieces, dated 03rd Jan and 02nd Feb 2008, in which government's viewpoints were cited in a balanced manner.

In a rather unusual way, VietCatholic News combined text-based stories with still images, video and other web materials such as petitions and open letters and even poetry. The campaigning character of the site is evident in five petitions and open letters by the local priests published by VietCatholic, in which they expressed their views about the dispute and also called for support. Poetry was also used such as a 44-verse poem in Vietnamese by Ngo Van Tinh (31st Dec 2007), "*Peace and Justice*", calling the Catholic struggle "*a mass of boiling magma about to erupt*". Images (web stories by JB Nguyen Huu Vinh 30th Dec 2007 and PV VietCatholic 29th Jan 2008) show Catholic nuns, priests and followers holding candles and singing in spirit of unity and defiance. In these photographs, the police officers were captured negatively, as a group of men standing aloof, watching on sneakily. Four video reports posted by VietCatholic News on YouTube about the protests are footage shot at the scene, mixed with popular religious music like "*Light of Pride*" and "*Prayer for Peace*", to build up a positive attitude for the ongoing struggle.²⁹

As a result of the content analysis represented above and quantified in Table 2, the coverage on the VietCatholic website is characterised by

- *A high degree of editorial engagement of the reporting team in the events and a lack of impartiality, bordering on explicit agitation as shown by the use of religious symbols and language*

²⁸ These are two web articles by VietCatholic Team dated 30 and 31 Dec 2007, and one by contributor Nguyen Song Moi published 03 Jan 2008.

²⁹ Vietnamese 'Kinh Hoa Binh' is direct translation of French 'Prière pour la paix' (1912). Both melody and lyrics are very popular in the Church.

- *A relatively low degree of distinction between news reports and commentaries by the reporters*
- *A lack of efforts to represent the government's viewpoints unless the material is a republication of BBC and agency reports.*

The BBC Vietnamese Team meanwhile had tried their best to cover both protests in an impartial and balanced manner. Overall, from 30th December 2007 to 2nd January 2008, BBC Vietnamese published 13 web articles in which the viewpoints of both sides were represented in full. For example, the web report on the 27th Dec 2007 had a phone interview with Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet embedded as audio link in the text. His arguments about the dispute were transcribed for read-only text version of the report. On 03rd Jan 2008, the BBC Vietnamese interviewed Mr Nguyen The Doanh, Head of Religious Affairs Department of the Vietnamese government to get his views across. The next day, another story summarising the counter-argument of the Catholics on the VietCatholic News website, criticising Mr Nguyen The Doanh was published. On the 25th Jan 2008, the BBC Vietnamese translated an AFP a piece analyzing the protests within the context of religious affairs in modern Vietnam. Two days later, another press review on bbcvietnamese.com took into account both sides' arguments. In that article alone, as many as five state newspapers and media organisations (Thanh Nien, Hanoi Moi, An Ninh Thu Do, Vietnam News Agency, Vietnam Television) were cited together with a long quote of the Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet's open letter stating his viewpoints.

In general, the BBC Vietnamese aimed to get the original voice and views from the scene of the events for news reports and tried to balance them with those who could authoritatively comment from a distance. That is why on the 29th Aug 2008, in relation to the Thai Ha Parish Church protest, the BBC interviewed Father Peter Nguyen Van Khai who had been personally involved in the case but also Mr Pham Xuan Hang, Head of Hanoi's Fatherland Front organization and cited Professor Nguyen Hong Duong, a government specialist on Catholicism, Professor Carlyle Thayer, a seasoned Vietnam expert from Australia and also Father Tran Duc Anh, Director of the Vietnamese Service at Radio Vatican.

Being aware of the controversy around the protests, the BBC Vietnamese Forum also posted emails and comments sent in by online readers. In most cases, this kind of material was put in the Interactivity Space below news reports and kept in short paragraphs. Each story generally received 25-30 comments. There were also longer articles especially for the Forum.³⁰ Overall, pro-Catholic comments and the opinions of those who doubted the righteousness of the protests were equally published. The BBC Forum however, often reflected the view that the protests posed a serious challenge to the government at a time when Hanoi and the Vatican did not have any

30 They are 'Lands, Government and the Catholics of Vietnam' by Hoang Xuan Ba from Saigon, 14 Jan 2008, and 'Why Catholic cause is faced with indifference in Vietnamese society' by Nguoi Ben Nghe, dated 09 Oct 2008.

formal agreements to regulate the affairs of the local Catholic Church. This thinking was shared by a number of experts, both from abroad and from Vietnam.³¹

In terms of web presentation, the BBC Vietnamese tried to separate original reporting by staff from analysis, mostly by commissioned specialists, by putting a disclaimer in the latter. Commentaries and opinions are located in the Forum Index (bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/forum) although they can be linked back to the news and analytical pieces in Vietnam Index at bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam. A special web page aggregating all stories under one topic "*Catholic demands for land in Hanoi*" was published online in Aug 2008, representing as many viewpoints and analytical opinions as possible in two blue banners, surrounded by news reports and Forum stories.³²

The BBC's coverage was marked by a clear editorial understanding of the complicated nature of the story and its development. The BBC Vietnamese team tried their best to balance all viewpoints and to show due impartiality and fairness in story treatments. Nevertheless, because of physical absence from the scene of protests and a conscious decision to keep a clear distance from the controversy, the coverage may be seen as detached and even lacking in engagement with the audience. For the Vietnamese Catholics, this type of reporting might well cause some disappointment because for them this "*life-time protest*" was a turning point in their struggle for religious freedom. But for the BBC this was perhaps just one of the many events in their daily and weekly about Vietnam.

31 BBC published analysis by Dr Chu Thien Lan (Occidental College, Los Angeles) on 5th Oct 2008, and Religious research scientist Peter Hansen (Australia on 29th Sept 2008, and also an interview with sociologist To Duy Hop, Tradition and Development Research Institute in Hanoi in web article on 01 Oct 2008.

32 Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/indepth/cluster/2008/08/080831_church_land_disputes.shtml

Chapter IV

Ethical question of Impartiality and Fairness

Despite a lack of impartiality and balance, VietCatholic's web was highly effective in generating attention for the issue of religious freedom in Vietnam. Their success raises questions about audience impact and also ethical issues regarding its news reporting for organisations like the BBC. It prompts questions like, *"is due impartiality still the right concept in the case of a political strife?"* and *"What expectations we should have in terms of fairness from religious media organisations representing a minority that has no access to the public sphere?"*

To further explore these problematic issues, this chapter compares VietCatholic reports with the position of the churches and dissident *samizdat* press in Eastern Europe in the 1980s. It also puts it in the context of web-based social media of the 21st century. Then, it revisits the concept of impartiality and fairness as it is discussed in relation to the BBC's international news so that a better understanding of both media and their journalistic ethos would come out of this comparative study.

4.a. Religious press in Vietnam today and the former USSR

In the early 2000s, the situation of the Vietnamese Catholic Church bore some similarities to that of Christian churches in the Soviet Union at the time Mikhail Gorbachev came to power (1985). Research by authors like Michael Bourdeaux described this time of hope, but still a struggle for the church:

*"Although it may have seemed, from the outside at least, that vigorous persecution of the church had subsided, persecution on the 'administrative' level became the main tool employed by the state in restricting church activity during this time. Churches found it difficult to register their communities, buildings were closed on the slightest pretext and there were petty restrictions at all levels – for example the refusal to provide electricity to church buildings. Close monitoring of church activity was maintained at all levels".*³³

This was also a time when religious values revived and churches reopened and the clergy, of the Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Lithuanian Catholicism, Baltic Lutheranism and other denominations, began to find a new role in society. Gradually, under Gorbachev's new policy of accepting the presence of faiths and religions in public life, the Soviet authorities abandoned *"the old dogma that religion was a retrogressive force"*. Gorbachev's pragmatic plan to make *perestroika* work would have even engaged people of the faith as a bottom-up force against bureaucratic inertia

³³ Bourdeaux M. in "Gorbachev, Glasnost & the Gospel" Hodder& Stoughton, London 1990 p.8

of the Soviet system. Liberalisation of public life as regards all churches' activity and their publications, like "The Christian Community Bulletin" in July 1987, and "Vybor" (Choice, in the same year) would then follow. Religions also made it to the state media in form of the monthly programme, "Religion and Society", on Soviet television in Spring 1986.

In the case of Vietnam, though, the picture of church activity today seems to be more complex. In Gorbachev's Russia, religious activists and dissident priests were released to bring "*full vigour of their new liberty into the process of church perestroika*" (Bourdeaux 1990: 90), but in Vietnam, a dissident Catholic priest, Father Nguyen Van Ly was given a prison sentence in 2007, following others in 1983, and 2001 for "*opposing the revolution and destroying the people's unity*" by publishing documents, petitions and testimony about religious freedom in Vietnam. If there is any similarity with the tolerance of a religious presence in the public media, it would not be Christian but rather the Vietnamese branch of Buddhism, a church loyal to the state ideology of socialism. In relation to the Catholic Church, the tolerance has another goal which was, first of all, to mend the formal relations with the Vatican. In other words, in spite of a greater degree of religious freedom in practical terms in Viet Nam when compared with the early 2000s, the issue of limited media access for the Catholic and other Christian churches remains.³⁴

In Vietnam the religious press engages in two categories controlled by the state: media and publications, under the Ministry of Media and Communications; and social associations, an area managed by the local administration where the church is registered. Therefore, it is very difficult for independent clergy and international religious communities to make their voice heard, especially in the mainstream media, unless they want to publish on the government-sanctioned news magazine "Catholicism and the Nation" (Công giáo và Dân Tộc). This is the main reason why foreign-based news services like VietCatholic and individual dioceses in Vietnam have gone to the Internet to find a space for their publications. In a sense, what they are doing now is basically a Vietnamese version of the underground 'samizdat', or independent press in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe under communism. Similarly, when human rights activists and dissidents posted independent news to the outside world and at the same time, or to campaign on behalf of the suppressed part of the population, they risked severe punishment. For example, the imprisonment of Vietnamese Catholic dissident Nguyen Van Ly reminds us of Russian priest Gleb Yakunin or human rights activist Alexander Ginzburg (1936-2002)³⁵, or 'Poland's Turbulent Priest', Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski.

³⁴ More on religious freedom in Vietnam in Amnesty International Report at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/vietnam/report-2008>

³⁵ More at <http://home.att.net/~y.fedorov/ginzburg.html>.

4.b. Ethical issues of reporting Catholic news

In this context, it seems not so difficult to make judgements about VietCatholic coverage regarding local protests. To an extent, even the religious language and symbols in the reports could be considered a natural part of the process in which a Catholic community has employed all the tools available to them to call for more social justice. By doing so, they eventually help extend freedom of religion for the whole society. Nonetheless, we should carefully re-examine the context of the protests to fully understand all the nuances accompanying the media coverage about them, especially the VietCatholic reports.

Despite the dramatic language used by several VietCatholic writers and web contributors, the sit-in protests over church land rights in Hanoi in 2008 and later brutal police crackdown should not be considered simplistically an act of state persecution of the Catholics in Vietnam. In fact, it was the Catholic community who began the protest and the Archbishop of Hanoi, Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet who encouraged the protesters to show defiance towards the authorities. VietCatholic web publications had also contributed to keeping up the tension. Their partisanship and bias might not be an issue for Hanoi's Catholics but would potentially undermine the site's impartiality in contributing to a public debate about religious freedom in Vietnam, given the Catholics account for less than 10 percent of the population.

The increase in the number of web publications, sometimes reaching dozens of publications in less than a month (Dec 2007-Jan 2008), also indicates that the site has already become part of the so called '*online fragmentation*' or '*group herding*', characterising social media (Benkler 2006). As the theory suggests, the more a specific web community goes on spreading the type of news they value the most and interacting with like-minded web users, the narrower their interests and perspective become. In the long-term, this may lead to social division and even sectarian fragmentation instead of opening up a cross-sectoral public debate.

At first glance, VietCatholic reports share the same ethical legitimacy as the *samizdat* press in Eastern Europe under communism because of their stance in relation to an authoritarian state. However, the fight for religious freedom in the former Soviet bloc was part of a wider struggle of those societies to gain democracy and independence from the Kremlin. For the Catholic Church in Vietnam, the circumstances in which their protests had occurred are more complex. Given their historically difficult relationship with the Buddhist majority of the population, it is still not very clear how much the Catholic struggle for more public space would help widen the process of democratisation in Vietnam. Theoretically at least, freedom of religion would increase *ad summum* if religious media of any denomination adheres to the

concept of public trust in order to prevent the tensions from growing into a binary confrontation in the future.³⁶

4.c. Impartiality as a specific concept

BBC's impartiality has long been at the heart of its editorial principles, and a core value of the British public media's culture throughout (Murdock and Golding 2005: 60). Nonetheless, the BBC's efforts to uphold impartiality have not always been appreciated by some commentators and part of the public, especially in news reporting and factual programming about military conflicts (Northern Ireland, Iraq and Gaza to name a few). Even in the context of reporting the upcoming London Olympics, a survey commissioned by the BBC into its audience's views on impartiality says that "Sixty-one per cent of people questioned said broadcasters may think they give a fair and informed view but a lot of the time they do not." A further 83% agreed that broadcasters should report on all views and opinions, however unpopular or extreme some of them may be.³⁷

When it comes to reporting on international news, particularly in the 33 languages of the World Service, BBC reporters are always expected to take into account cultural, ethnic and political differences. A high level of sensibility to diverse perceptions of the audience towards many Western concepts and a willingness to balance their different viewpoints are intended to make the principle of impartiality workable. However, when it comes to reporting from closed and semi-closed societies, it has been always difficult to represent different viewpoints. In many cases, for example in China, Burma and Iran, impartiality cannot be achieved in technical terms (interviews with both sides were equally broadcast in length and audio quality), and could only be "*due impartiality*" where quotations from the government press are inserted into an interview with the opposition, or used for background explanation. The BBC's stance on impartiality, as expressed by Orla Guerin, Middle East Correspondent about the news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, could still be seen as problematic to some people:

"There are two competing versions of current events and of history. There are two realities and two tragedies...My job as a journalist here is to capture the lives of two warring peoples who share so much and so little. We are committed to fairness and to balance, but there is no way to satisfy everyone..."

³⁶ Vietnamese Catholics were severely persecuted by Confucian Emperor Minh Mang (1791-1841) but their participation in rebellions against the Vietnamese rulers and overwhelming supports to the French military conquest of the country as well as the clergy's privileged position in French Indochina and in The 1st Republic of South Vietnam under President Ngo Dinh Diem make the relationship still very sensitive. More on Catholicism in the 19th century's Vietnam in Le Thanh Khoi, "Histoire du Vietnam: Des Origines A 1858" p.368-371.

³⁷ More on <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6763205.stm>

For the BBC the Catholic protests in Hanoi are only one of many news stories about social conflicts with political implications for the government of Vietnam. Due impartiality could well have made the BBC reporters appear as if they were lacking the ability to engage, and therefore, to be blamed by the protesters for moral detachment or spiritual relativism. Because the Catholics are a religious minority in Vietnam, to balance their view with the stance of the Buddhist majority and also the views of the non-believers requires a further sensible consideration.

On the whole, due to the embedded principle of impartiality the BBC may have lost some Catholic audience because they may not like to acknowledge that there are as many as "*two truths*" about the Hanoi land protests. But by representing the views of different religious and secular entities in Vietnam, the BBC, in the long run, may well be able to keep the political strife from widening. Presumably, to occupy the middle ground is also a wise decision as far as the audience figures are concerned. That is because the more viewpoints are broadcast on the BBC, the more people are likely come for news and comments provided they value diversity and richness in opinions. In the last five years, online visits to bbcvietnamese.com consistently indicate this pattern, with over 60 percent of the visitors come from Vietnam and about 20 percent from the USA. For being "in between", the BBC Vietnamese can interview the anti-government activists in the States as well as the Vietnamese government's ministers and ambassadors. This means both sides, in spite of their different political viewpoints, need the BBC as a neutral voice and discussion platform.

Chapter V

The implications of the religious media's ascendance for secular news organisations

Largely because of its level of partisanship, the VietCatholic News Agency succeeded in generating millions of page-views for their coverage of the religious demonstrations in Hanoi over three months (Sept-Nov 2008). Their ability to mobilise and utilise a formidable newsgathering network right inside Vietnam has undoubtedly raised a number of serious questions for Vietnamese state media and international broadcasters like the Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Asia (RFA), Radio France International (RFI) and the BBC, but also for the Vietnamese opposition media worldwide. In this chapter, we will examine the advantage of VietCatholic news over its competitors. This comparative assessment should help identify whether the ascendance of VietCatholic is just a phenomenon specific to the media landscape in Vietnam, or it also fits into a pattern of faith-based media on the rise in East Asia.

5.a. Different standards in news reporting

First of all, unlike the major international broadcasters (BBC, VOA, RFA and RFI), the VietCatholic News Agency was founded as a private organisation. It works without any public body's supervision; its editorial standards and journalistic ethos are not rigidly set. Moreover, their adherence to Catholic values has resulted in a specific online presentation where religious contents such as sermons, images of Catholic saints, praying scenes, biblical quotations etc., make up a large part of their web pages, alongside the news. When covering news, VietCatholic journalists have not shied away from showing their sympathy for the local Catholics and also their anger towards Hanoi's authorities. This emotional attachment evidently set VietCatholic news apart from the editorial stance of the mainstream public broadcasters, at least in the case of the BBC, VOA and some others. Not only does this overtly religious standpoint distinguish the site from international broadcasters, it also gives it a unique identity no other independent websites in Vietnamese language based in the Vietnamese community abroad would want to have. All the main socio-political Vietnamese-language news magazines and papers in North America, Europe and Australia, namely *Nguoi Viet*, *Viet Bao*, *Saigon Times*, *Viet Tide*, *Dan Luan*, *Dien Dan*, *Vien Tuong*, *Talawas*, *Dien Dan-Forum* are basically secular³⁸. Similarly to Western media, those Vietnamese news organisations often differ on editorial decisions in news reporting along the main ideological line dividing Left and Right but they are not engaged with any specific religion. Religious identity gives VietCatholic site several advantages over its competitors:

- Free from editorial oversight of the Church, VietCatholic has actually

38 A list of the Vietnamese language websites available at <http://www.saigonbao.com/>

turned religious partisanship and emotional engagement into a media brand that no other secular media can do.

- Based outside Vietnam and away from government censorship, it has become a reference point for the Vietnamese Catholic community worldwide and the media organisation they feel they can trust most. The evidence of this intimate relationship is shown by the readers' contributions to news reports and forum.

The strength of VietCatholic is even more evident in comparison with Vatican Radio whose Vietnamese Service also broadcasts on radio and publishes stories on the web.³⁹ Defined in the motto on its website as "*the voice of the Pope and the Church in dialogue with the world*", Vatican Radio has to follow a more rigid editorial policy and broadcasting standards, takes into account the intergovernmental relations with Hanoi, and cannot campaign for any local protest in Vietnam. Meanwhile, it is exactly the organisational autonomy and editorial independence of VietCatholic from any oversight that makes it unique. As a network it has managed to tap into the core strength of social media which are defined by Internet theorists such as Yonchai Benkler as "*nonmarket, peer-produced alternative sources of filtration and accreditation*".⁴⁰

In addition to its unique position in the Vietnamese-language media landscape, an identifiable brand (Vietnamese Catholicism) and an autonomous network of freelance reporters, the VietCatholic News Agency also says they work to promote human rights and religious freedom in Vietnam. By making a local Vietnamese land rights issue part of the universal struggle for human rights, the site has shown ambitions to connect with global public opinion. In other words, they are not just 'global' in terms of the similarity with other social media networks that have sprung up all over the world in the era of the Internet, but also because they commit to globalise a local issue by appealing to universal values that any media audience around the globe could identify with. Therefore, despite its partisanship, the site now is a competitor established broadcasters have to take into account.

5.b. The Church is a medium

Being an alternative source of news alone doesn't guarantee success. Researchers like Benkler have pointed out that the wealth of information available on the Internet also means "*thousands of social media sites are less visible and read than many others.*" Even during a political struggle, campaigning websites often come and go in waves because their shelf-life is dependent on the current public needs for news. Websites set up to organize anti-government protests (Serbia, Ukraine), or anti-WTO demonstrations

³⁹ See more at <http://vietvatican.net/>

⁴⁰ Benkler Y. in "The Wealth of Networks How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom", p. 12.

(Davos, Hong Kong) have often ended once the events had finished. Only the media of long-lasting opposition organisations (Iran, Burma) have been able to sustain their sites though their survival often depends on organisational skills inside the society and a strong international and diasporic support. For example, faced with the government's cyberwarfare, the Iranian opposition called for "*more help in getting around the government's information roadblocks.*"⁴¹ The experience of several Vietnamese independent websites e.g. Talawas, Bauxite and X-Cafe has indicated that once the authorities began efforts to eliminate them, either by launching hacker attacks on foreign-based online portals, or harassing those editors living in Vietnam, they could effectively paralyze those sites for at least several months.⁴² VietCatholic however enjoys a much more stable position because its activities are reliant upon the local Catholic clergy in Vietnam. Compared to the secular opposition groups, the Catholic Church, with over seven million followers and thousand of priests and nuns, is much more able to endure any repressive measures even if the authorities decide to target them. (Again, it is necessary to emphasise that VietCatholic editorial staff are not an integrated part of the Vietnamese Catholic Church. Its Episcopal Conference of Vietnam and dioceses have their own information websites).⁴³ The availability of the Church's personnel to assist VietCatholic network in news reporting should ensure the site a long-term future. The role of the site may diminish after Catholic protests end in Vietnam, and religious freedom ceases to be an issue. For the time being though, the situation is in favour of the VietCatholic use of the Church as a formidable medium for communications and newsgathering. In July 2009, the Catholics of the Diocese of Vinh in Central Vietnam held prayer vigils and sit-ins to demand a return of the Tam Toa church. And as recently as January 2010, another confrontation with the police occurred in Dong Chiem, near Hanoi in a dispute over the rights to erect a holy cross on a hilltop. In both cases VietCatholic reports played an important role in breaking news as well as in gathering support for the local Church.

5.c. Religious media in Vietnam and East Asia

The resurgence of religion is not unique to Catholicism in Vietnam. As a result of the economic and social reforms which began in 1986, state control over religious practices has gradually been relaxed. Since then, Vietnamese and international sociologists and anthropologists have gathered ample evidence of religious activities after decades of state suppression. As they have pointed out, the new religious phenomena have not been limited to the so-called '*foreign-imported religions*' (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam), but also includes many faiths. These are the Mother Goddesses cult and spirit

41 See more at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/19/world/middleeast/19iran.html>

42 In February 2010, Vietnamese police had interrogated professor Nguyen Hue Chi, the editor-in-chief of the Bauxite for 20 days before releasing him. More at http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2010/03/100304_nguyenhchi_patriot.shtml

43 The Episcopal Conference of Vietnam's official website at <http://hdgmvietnam.org>

possession, the cult of national hero Tran Hung Dao or Saint Tran, an anti-Chinese general in the 13th century, as well as various forms of ancestor worships and shamanism.⁴⁴ A conservative estimate by the Vietnamese government suggests that from 1980 to 2001 alone, some 60 religious cults, sects and new faiths emerged in Vietnam.⁴⁵ Even Ho Chi Minh, the founder of communist state has become a subject of popular cult. In the Dai Nam Temple, Binh Duong province, Ho's gold-plated statue sits next to Buddha and the mystic king of Hung Dynasty.⁴⁶ Vietnamese researchers have concluded that "*the number of people who are 'in sympathy with religion' and practice popular religious activities has increased dramatically to an 'uncountable' level*" (Pham Quynh Huong 2009:11). Geographically, religious practices, including conversion to Catholicism and Protestant faiths are not constrained to the ethnic Vietnamese provinces in the Red River Delta in the North, and the Mekong Delta in the South. They are now spreading to the traditionally non-Vietnamese populations in almost all remote and mountainous areas. The Hmong Protestants in the North and the Dega Montagnards in the Central Highlands and Khmer Theravada Buddhists in the Mekong Delta have now regularly been featured in international reports about religious affairs in Vietnam, often in the context of alleged "*abuses and restrictions*" imposed on them by local authorities. The town of Son-La in Northeast Vietnam (where I was born and went to primary school) had no Christian believers at all in the 1980s. Nowadays the local Catholics are in such sizeable number (several thousand) that they had defied a government ban in order to meet a delegation of US Commission on International Religious Freedom in July 2009.⁴⁷

In reaction to this extremely complex issue, the Vietnamese government has constantly reviewed and updated regulations on religious affairs. For example, Directive 22, enacted in 2005 by the central government, explicitly outlined instructions for the local authorities to manage dozens of religious activities in order to preserve the national security and public order.⁴⁸ They recognize the traditional Vietnamese and world religions (Buddhism, ancestor worship, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam...) but warn against "*superstitious sects*". The regulation also imposed a strict censorship on all types of religious media and publications.

44 Pham Quynh Huong in "Hero and Deity: Tran Hung Dao and the Resurgence of Popular Religion in Vietnam", Mekong Press 2009, p. 11-13

45 Nguyen Duc Lu in "Ton Giao, Quan diem, Chinh sach cua Dang va Nha nuoc Viet Nam hien nay" (Religions: The current viewpoints and Policies of the Party and State of Vietnam) Nha xuất bản chính trị- hành chính, Hanoi 2009 p.84

46 My report about Dai-Nam Temple at

http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/pictures/2009/02/090223_dainam_templevisitc2.shtml

47 More at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,463af2212,469f2f9a2,4855699537,0.html>.

48 (Directive 22 (Nghị Định 22/2005/ND-CP) signed on 01st Mar 2005 by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung clarifies all detailed and updated measures central and local authorities have to implement as regards state regulations of religious practices by which missionary work outside registered location of the church or temple is to be approved in the administration advance and so are all publications of religious materials.

What has happened in Vietnam is no exception in a regional context, particularly if we look at the situation in China. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism in Eastern Europe, Christianity and many other traditional and non-traditional religions and faiths are booming. In 2009, Jane McCartney reported for the Times that "*With 100 million believers, far more than the 74 million-member communist party, Jesus is a force to be reckoned with in the People's Republic*".⁴⁹ However, it is worth mentioning that the post-Tiananmen moral vacuum has been being filled not only by Christianity and the Falun Gong but also some forms of Chinese nationalism. The Chinese government, as Daniel Bell noticed, "*has encouraged the revival of China's most venerable political tradition: Confucianism*".⁵⁰ The motivation behind this strategy and its effectiveness should be subject to further discussion and questioning. For instance, are Confucian values to be used in restoring China's stance in the world? Does it give moral legitimacy to the ruler, or to sooth the income gap by emphasizing the social harmony? Nevertheless, the reality is that the Chinese society is now permeated by various religions, religious ideals and faith-based systems.

Apart from traditional religions, South Korean missionaries of Christian faiths and the Unification Church (the Sun Myung Moon's Sect) have been also very active in the region. In terms of the media presence, as far as we know from the government reports in China and Vietnam, the Taiwan-based Ching Hai sect has a multilingual satellite channel and Falu Dafa owns a network of television and newspapers in Chinese and other languages.⁵¹ As a report on the New York Times in April 2009 indicated, the ten-year campaign by the Chinese government to repress the Falun Gong movement was not successful. In Vietnam the government banned the Ching Hai for being a '*superstitious sect*' very early when it began recruiting followers in the country but so far without success.⁵²

During my numerous trips to the region and beyond over the last 10 years, I have seen a social landscape marked by religious interconnections and evangelical missions that had not been there earlier. This makes me believe that the spiritual revival and religious resurgence in modern Vietnam are caused by the weakening of communist ideology but also are a direct outcome of a pan-regional communications process. For the time being, religious organisations and churches still have limited access to the mainstream media. However, the success of websites such as VietCatholic

49 <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/article5960010.ece>

50 Bell A. D. in "China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in A Changing Society", Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2008, p. 8-9.

51 About Falun Gong's movement and media in Asia: <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=20142> and Chinese government's efforts to firewall Falung Gong's websites: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/05/world/movement-hiding-special-report-sect-clings-web-face-beijing-s-ban.html>

52 The Vietnamese authorities as earlier as 2001 had banned the Ching Hai sect on the ground that it's a 'superstitious sect'. See more: http://www.vietnamhumanrights.net/english/documents/HRW_2001.htm.

News has indicated that alternative religious press, web portals and television have a potential to form the Vietnamese media landscape in the future. In this crowded scene of rivalling ideals and faiths, how much the government-sanctioned new values system (Confucian ethics in China and traditional Buddhism in Vietnam) is able to fulfil its assigned role is still unclear. The competition over media access, ownership and editorial standards by religious organisations will be played out in the years to come.

Conclusion

The religious media in today's Vietnam is one of the topics that so far has not received adequate attention from scholars in the field of mass communication research. As I demonstrated earlier, there has been a general agreement among the sociologists and anthropologists who have studied modern Vietnam that in this changing society religions are competing for the followers. It is then logical to assume that all churches and religious sects need a public space to practise their faiths. That space has not yet been made available to them on the state television, radio and web pages. Moreover, political censorship means they cannot have a share in the media market by legal means, making the religious organisations resort to alternative media.

On the one hand, by utilising the Internet the churches can freely spread their message with less interference from the government. On the other hand, the intensity of social media competition means any religious websites could be able to go beyond their traditional base of readers only if they have some cutting-edge advantages at their disposal. Otherwise, they would lose to the mainstream media in Western countries which have news services in Vietnamese e.g. the BBC, VOA and RFI. This is because alternative news with a global perspective is also part of programming on offer from those broadcasters.

However, the ascendance of the religious media, shown by the example of the VietCatholic website and others has also become a challenge to foreign-based news organisations broadcasting to Vietnam. In the era of Internet news, where it is difficult to stand out in the cacophony of sounds, images and videos, a level of emotional engagement has actually given VietCatholic a unique selling point. In comparison with '*critical engagement*' by the '*witness not actor*' role of the reporter primed by the BBC,⁵³ VietCatholic offers distinctive editorial perspective that is obviously partisan but appealing, at least to the Vietnamese Roman Catholics. The site is by no means an isolated case since biased news has become now almost a global trend. In a case study of Al Jazeera English and Telesur, James Painter has defined "*the path towards biased TV*" and identified a category consisting of Telesur, Russia Today, CCTV-9 and Press TV to name a few.⁵⁴ Although VietCatholic is not a television station, it seems to fit into this category where "news with views" is on demand. Here too, the news agenda is driven and justified by the Vietnamese Catholic desire to hear and see what is close to their heart, at the expense of impartiality and diversity of viewpoints. It is too early to see if VietCatholic will have a significant presence in Vietnam in the long term, but the site's example reveals that the global trend of biased news could soon influence the future media landscape in the near future.

53 Loyn D. in "Witnessing the Truth" at http://www.opendemocracy.net/media-journalismwar/article_993.jsp

54 See more at http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/papers/pmt/exhibits/3020/Counter-Hegemonic_News.pdf

The Vietnamese state media meanwhile could only become truly a network of democratic public service if there are political changes in Vietnam. This is what has happened to the media landscape in post-communist Poland, Hungary and other countries in Eastern Europe about 20 years ago. For Vietnam, it is still unclear what direction the changes will take in the near future. On the other side of the equation, contrary to some expectations, Vietnamese opposition media organisations, mostly in the US and Europe and just a very few websites in Vietnam, remain very weak, fragmented and prone to factional infighting and lack of funding. They cannot yet inspire and mobilise the population. Therefore, in the foreseeable future it is likely that only the Vietnamese-language outlets of various religious media have a chance to become a significant force. Nonetheless the prevailing evidence gathered from the current situation points to a rather worrying situation. It is then not unreasonable to say that a future media competition is likely to play out between the two main religions of Vietnam: Catholics and Buddhists.⁵⁵

While the dissident United Buddhist Church of Vietnam and the more moderate but still oppositional followers of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh face discrimination, a branch of state-approved Buddhism has slowly stepped onto the political scene.⁵⁶ Since 2007 the state media have regularly shown Buddhist monks performing at ceremonial processions attended by the government dignitaries. Moreover, their role is now extended to state diplomacy: a report in 2009 even showed the Vietnamese Buddhist clergy blessing the souls of the Soviet servicemen who died in Cam Ranh, where Moscow had maintained a naval base until 2002.⁵⁷ In terms of the media coverage, the officially recognized Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (Giao hoi Phat giao Viet Nam) has now had access to all state media and its leaders like Venerables Thich Thanh Tu, Thich Minh Tien and others are interviewed regularly on television. The Celebration of the United Nations Day of Vesak (Buddha's birthday, May 2008) in Hanoi marked a turning point in the state-Buddhist Church relations, especially in terms of media coverage. The state broadcasters and print and online media staged an enormous campaign to show top Party and state leaders attending the ceremonial processions alongside thousands of Buddhist delegates and scholars from more than 20 countries. The media also elevated the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha to the position of the single most important officially recognized religion, if not the state religion, and sent out a subtle message suggesting that the role model

55 In February 2008, the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha officially challenged the Catholic Church by publishing a statement that the disputed land plot in Hanoi, including the Saint Joseph's Cathedral "used to be part of the Bao Thien Pagoda" before the French gave it to the Catholics. More at

http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/story/2008/02/080220_ghpgvnlettertopm.shtml

56 More at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8168200.stm>

57 More at http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2009/12/091210_camranh_monument.shtml

for the current leaders are the Enlightened Buddhist emperors of the Ly and Tran dynasties (11th-13th centuries) instead of Marx and Lenin.⁵⁸

At the same time, the Vietnamese Catholic Church has nothing like the same access to the state media and must rely on its own followers, the loyal clergy and a global network of support. For now, the multitude of media outlets outside Vietnam like the VietCatholic News Agency plays a crucial part in the Catholic struggle for more religious freedom. Whether the Catholic media could eventually turn into a massive media network is yet to be seen. However, the reporting on their websites has already posed a direct challenge to the monopoly of state media. The Vietnamese government's favouritism of the loyal Buddhist clergy by giving them a privileged media access to the public has already caused tensions between the two Churches. The question is whether the government will ever treat as equal all religions and beliefs across society and will be willing to accept media pluralism in the long-term and help to develop a more balanced communications environment for in the public interest for Vietnam. Otherwise, in the worst scenario, partial media reporting will deepen the intrinsic bias on both Catholic and Buddhist sides with dangerous consequences.

⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that the only statue of Lenin in Hanoi was erected back in the 1980s when the Soviet-Vietnamese relations were strongest but a new statue of the Buddhist Emperor Ly Cong Uan who ruled Vietnam from 1009 to 1028 now stands in a more central place in Hanoi, next to the town hall. The year 1010 when he issued the Edict on the Transfer of the Capital from Hoa Lu to Thang Long (today's Hanoi) is now celebrated as The Millennium Year (1010-2010) is in all Vietnam.

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This research used online data, quotes and media sources available on the websites of the BBC (news.bbc.co.uk, bbc.co.uk/vietnamese and World Service's web data), New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Times, VietCatholic, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Trade Representative Office as well as Alexa.com, AsiaMedia, Saigonbao.com and the official media in Vietnam including Cong An Nhan Dan, Hanoi Moi, VTV and others.

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