



Colouring within the lines

Internet, fence breaking and the
blogosphere in Vietnam

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Abstract

Over the last ten years the Internet's growth has soared in Vietnam, as has the country's economic integration in global trade. At the same time, international media watchdogs continue to place Vietnam near the bottom of the world's press freedom indices and Vietnam is the world's second biggest prison for netizens¹(RSF 2011). Despite having liberalized the economy since 1986, the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) still holds a strong grip on political processes and shows little tolerance toward websites, bloggers and journalists thought to be jeopardizing the government's stability (Nguyen 2009: 160). By Western standards, Vietnam may thus seem as an especially unlikely place to foster any kind of critical debate and blogging about issues of general concern. Still, a huge blogosphere of public discussions and citizen journalism *has* emerged and developed quite vigorously over the last 5 to 6 years. A detailed study of a sample of top bloggers and their everyday experiences is thus essential in order to understand the political impact of the Internet, and the future potential of the blogosphere in Vietnam. My investigations indicate that self-censorship is widespread. Half of my sample of informants is blogging well within the strict laws and regulations set on free speech by the government. The other half, however, has greater courage to challenge the government's tolerance by clearly stepping outside the "fence". By utilizing for instance satire, short stories and other kinds of "survival strategies", they are able to circumvent the government's radar. They report unauthorized stories from the streets and foster critical debates and discussions – especially among the younger generations. In a country where two thirds of the population are under 35, and where social conformity is encouraged by the educational system, such a phenomenon might have far-reaching implications for the future (Nguyen 2009: 156).

Keywords: Vietnam; blogosphere; political space; free speech

Sammendrag

I løpet av det siste tiåret har internettveksten eksplodert i Vietnam – det samme har landets integrasjon i den globale økonomien. Samtidig befinner Vietnam seg i verdens bunnsjikt hva angår presse- og ytringsfrihet, og Vietnams fengsler huser verdens nest største antall nettjournalister, bloggere og aktivister (RSF 2011). Til tross for at kommunistpartiet har gjennomført en rekke reformer de siste 25 årene, har de fremdeles stram regi på den politiske arena. De viser en nulltoleranse overfor nettsider, bloggere og journalister som synes å utfordre myndighetsapparatet og den politiske stabiliteten. Sett med vestlige briller, finnes det lite åpning for et kritisk, offentlig ordskifte i Vietnam eller debattarenaer for viktige samfunnsspørsmål. Likevel *har* en vietnamesisk blogosfære, spekket av kritiske diskusjoner og borgerjournalistikk, vokst frem og utfoldet seg i løpet av de siste 5-6 årene. For å kunne forstå dette fenomenet og de politiske konsekvensene det kan medføre, er det derfor avgjørende å se nærmere på hvordan enkelte profilerte bloggere "overlever" og opererer på internett. Mine undersøkelser viser først og fremst at selvsensur er utbredt. Halvparten av utvalget mitt holder seg langt innenfor de strenge lovene og bestemmelsene som er satt for å regulere borgernes ytringsfrihet. Den øvrige halvparten av utvalget derimot, utfordrer "grensen" i større grad. De beveger seg tydelig utenfor hva myndighetene tillater. Ved å ta i bruk satire, litteratur og andre "overlevelsesstrategier" forsøker de å unngå myndighetenes radar. De publiserer uautoriserte nyheter "fra gata" og skaper grobunn for kritiske diskusjoner og debatter – spesielt blant den yngre generasjonen. Siden to tredeler av befolkningen i Vietnam er under 35 år, vil dette antagelig skape vidstrakte ringvirkninger i fremtiden (Nguyen 2009: 156).

Nøkkelord: Vietnam; blogosfære; politisk rom; ytringsfrihet

Preface

If Le Nguyen Tra – one of Vietnam’s most popular bloggers – went online in her own country, she would not discover that Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has named her country an Internet enemy, or that The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) lists Vietnam as one of the 10 worst countries to be a blogger in (CPJ 2009). She would neither find any information about human rights violations because Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International, and similar human rights websites, are blocked in Vietnam. Neither would she find reports about the arrests of dissidents, Internet censorship, or critics and activists being harassed, tortured and imprisoned. But Tra does not need to look these things up – she knows them all too well. Tra, who used to blog as Co Gai Do Long, was supposed to be a part of my thesis, but was arrested in October 2010. According to recent numbers from RSF and HRW, at least 19 bloggers and activists and 11 journalists are currently detained in Vietnam.

Tra’s influence

I know Vietnam has a bad record in terms of freedom of expression. I have been in Vietnam on several occasions both as a journalist, a tourist and as a trainee at the Norwegian Embassy in Hanoi. I have felt, seen, heard and experienced the paranoia of dissent and the power of free speech. Still, Tra’s imprisonment was like a punch in the stomach. This was for real! So even though Tra hasn’t been directly involved in my thesis, she has influenced it in many aspects. Her imprisonment made me realize the great importance, the potential danger and the profound complexity of my field of study. I had to draw up several scenarios to ensure that all ethical aspects were taken into account, and I had to make some decisions that most likely have affected the results of my research. I’ll get back to this later.

Acknowledgements

It has at times been hard conducting this thesis. It has been both exciting and terrifying at the same time, and I have in many aspects done a pioneering piece of work. Little, if any, research has been done on this particular subject in Vietnam before². With that being said, this thesis could not have been written without the participation, support and insight of a great many people inside and outside Vietnam.

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Last but not least I am eternally grateful for **the bloggers whom dared to participate** in my thesis. Because of them, we can to a greater extent understand the actual impact of Internet in Vietnam, and the potential role and future for social media in authoritarian regimes.

² Several people has confirmed this – among them a head professor from a leading Media and Communication University in Vietnam, during at visit at the NCHR May 23-27.

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Acronyms

AFP	Agence France Press
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
CPV/CP	The Communist Party of Vietnam
DoS/DDos	Denial-of-service attack/Distributed denial-of-service attack
HCMC	Ho Chi Minh City (former Saigon)
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICP	Internet Content Providers
IXP	Internet Exchange Point
IPDC	International Program for the Development of Communication
ISP	Internet Service Provider
MDI	UNESCO's Media Development
MIC	Ministry of Information and Communication
MMC	Military Management Committee
NCHR	Norwegian Centre for Human Rights
NESH	National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities
ONI	The Open Net Initiative
OSP	Online Service Providers
PPSC	The Power, Participation and Social Change group
RSF	Reporters Without Borders/Reporters Sans Frontières
SEAPA	Southeast Asian Press Alliance
USG	User Generated Content
UN	United Nations
VCHR	Vietnam Committee on Human Rights
VGSO	Vietnam General Statistic Office
VSAT	Very Small Aperture Terminal
VNPT	Vietnam Post and Telecommunications
WTO	World Trade Organisation

1.0 Introduction

“History is the sum total of all the things they aren't telling us”

(from Don DeLillo's book *Libra*)

I have repeatedly found myself coming back to this quotation by one of Don DeLillo's main and most frequently para cited characters. Vietnam is surrounded by many myths and paradoxes, and it has been hard to find the “sum total” of Vietnam. The same applies to Vietnam's vibrant blogosphere. What is the everyday life of a blogger in Vietnam really like? Is it possible to understand or even describe that situation? I have made an attempt. I cannot guarantee that my findings and descriptions are accurate in every aspect, only that I have done my best. I have done my best looking at the subject from multiple angles. I have done my best to try to scrutinize my own pre-conceptions and prejudices. I have strived to be as open and transparent as possible – given the circumstances. It has been hard. Especially since I am born, raised and live in a country like Norway. Both society- and culturally wise Norway and Vietnam are so far apart. I have been in Vietnam for several longer periods, but never lived there for more than a year at a time. Norway and Vietnam are about the same size (around 350 000 km²), we both have a long-stretched coastline, and we share the same “geographical fate” as outposts of our respective continents. But that's about it. Vietnam has in the past century fought against four of the world's largest military powers, and has been at the centre-stage of international politics. Vietnam is led by an authoritarian one-party state, and has just received status as a middle-income country. In Norway we tend to portray ourselves as a peace nation. Our political leadership has just declared “more openness, more democracy”³, and we are among the richest countries of the world of today (in terms of GDP per capita). My country of origin, and my country of study thus constitute “outposts” in a broad sense. I have strived but given up on trying to Understand Vietnam with a capital U. I will therefore not present any capital-A-answers in this thesis. I will rather showcase Vietnam as the highly complex,

³ “More openness, more democracy” has been Norway's Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg's mantra after the national tragedy of July 22, 2011.

multilayered and paradoxical country that I find it.

I have tried to capture the state of Vietnam's blogosphere anno 2011, and my findings can both confirm and challenge some of the most common perceptions of Vietnam. First of all, censorship in Vietnam is not only initiated by the government. Self-censorship among individual Internet users is present, and probably widespread. Vietnam *is* hostile regarding freedom of expression, assembly and dissent, but the situation is not as gloomy as many international media watchdogs give the impression of. Even though many bloggers stay put within "government approved" topics, others have adopted different kinds of survival strategies that enable them to circumvent the government's dense regime of laws, restrictions and censorship.

1.1 The rise of the blogosphere in Vietnam

Vietnam is a single-party, authoritarian state where no opposition is allowed. Authoritarian countries such as Vietnam are frequently characterized as having closed political opportunity structures and un-free socio-political systems (Wells-Dang 2010: 93). Despite having liberalized the economy since 1986, the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CVP) still holds a strong grip on all political processes, governmental institutions and the media sector (Nguyen 2009:160). International media watchdogs continue to place Vietnam near the bottom of the world's press freedom indices (number 165 out of 178 on Press Freedom Index 2010) and social networking sites such as Facebook and You Tube has been shut down and banned over the last couple of years. By Western standards, Vietnam thus seems like an especially unlikely place to foster any kind of critical debate or blogging about issues of general concern. Still, a virtual citizen journalism network *has* developed in Vietnam over the last couple of years, and bloggers conduct actual on-site investigations that could not be reported on by the traditional state-owned media (Nguyen 2009:154). This fact – that a huge blogosphere of public discussions and citizen journalism have emerged and developed quite vigorously – makes it all the more interesting for further research.

1.2 The research problem

Research concerning the Internet and democracy in Vietnam and Southeast Asia (especially China), have mostly concentrated on the government's censorship system from a top-down perspective, while few studies focus on the micro-level of collectives, organisations and individual Internet users (Pang 2008: 57; Sinclair 2002:24; Sohmen 2001:21). At the same time many scholars mention that in Vietnam, censorship is not initiated by the government alone, but is in fact self-censorship by individual Internet users themselves (Nguyen 2009; Hayton 2010; Gainsborough 2010). For that reason, a detailed study of bloggers in terms of their attitudes of self-censorship and their implementation of survival strategies is essential in order to understand the political impact of the Internet, and the future potential of the blogosphere in Vietnam. I want to contribute to this understanding by asking the following research questions:

Q1: How do the bloggers conduct themselves within the boundaries and strict limitations on free speech set by the government? Q2: How does this affect the potential of the blogosphere as a political space?

My scope has been wide. I have not intended to form a representative sample of the universe of the 'blogosphere' in Vietnam, but rather a scope of attitudes and concepts. I assume that people directly involved in blogging and public discussion have an awareness of the political opportunities and risks associated with it. Indeed, they are in the best position to know the extent of those opportunities and risks, and their voices and experiences are fundamental to an understanding of political space in Vietnam. To concretize this further, I have asked (some of) the following sub questions:

q1. *What are the bloggers writing about and how are they writing about it?*

q2. *What kind of topics do they consider being off limit?*

q3. *Are the bloggers trying to 'push the envelope' (fence breaking) and if so; what are their motivations for doing so?*

q4. *What kind of strategies are they using in order to "survive" in the blogosphere?*

I plan to discuss the value of bloggers and role and political opportunities the blogosphere in Vietnam represents. That discussion, however, will be presented in the final chapter of this thesis (chapter 6).

1.3 The architecture of the thesis

When assessing the political impact of the Internet in a country, one must always consider the full national context in which that impact occurs (Kalalhil and Boas 2003:6). I will therefore start this thesis (chapter 2) with a quick overview of the basic economic, political and social dynamics of Vietnam's society. I will also present the status of Vietnam's media sector and the demographic characteristics of the population. In chapter 2 I will also provide background on the arrival of the Internet, the birth of the blogosphere, the government's dense net of laws restrictions and the technical filtering regime. Finally my seven chosen respondents will be presented. Only with such contextual factors in mind can I proceed to analyze the actual political impact of Internet use in Vietnam.

In chapter 3 I will present the theoretical approach I have chosen as a frame of reference. Due to the lack of previous research on my field of study, that framework has been challenging to construct. However, given the nature of my research questions, I have kept my analysis at a domestic and personal level. There are other alternatives in place to measure and determine the degree of media autonomy (and the potential power of the blogosphere) in a given country, but for me it became clear quite early on that I had to keep my thesis on a "low" level – meaning on a micro-level of individual Internet users *within* Vietnam and in Vietnam only. Few studies have focused on either the personal level or the meso-level of collectives and organisations in Vietnam before, and it is my understanding that this topic needs to be understood on its own terms before it can be profitably compared to other countries. In order to do that, I had to define some key concepts. How the bloggers conduct themselves within the boundaries and strict limitations set by the government (Q1) is to a great extent determined by the degree of *self-censorship* and *survival strategies*. Understanding these concepts is thus inevitable. My second main research question concerns the potential of the blogosphere as a political space. Defining *political space* is therefore of vital importance. My last key concept is a unique Vietnamese form of civil disobedience called *pha rao* (fence-breaking). An eventual presence of this phenomenon can have a major impact on

the power and future prospects of the blogosphere in Vietnam. It is thus necessary to explain the history and logic behind this “phenomenon”, before examining whether it exists among my bloggers.

In chapter 4 I will present the methods I have used to collect my empirical data. After careful consideration of different alternatives, I decided upon qualitative and quantitative document analyses in combination with qualitative in-depth interviews. By interviewing different bloggers about their aspirations and experiences, and comparing the information gathered from the interviews with the information gathered through the document analysis, the validity of the research design is strengthened. However, I have been constrained both in terms of time, available resources and ethical dilemmas – with the latter as the most prominent. In chapter 4 I have therefore devoted a considerable amount of space on ethical dilemmas I have met along my way.

In chapter 5 I will take a deeper look into my findings. I will do this in a twofold way. First I will simply present my findings. I will do this step by step by answering my sub-research questions. Then I will summarize some of the main and most interesting findings, and try to interpret them in light of my background section on Vietnam’s societal and political context. A broader discussion on my findings and analyses will be presented in the final chapter, chapter 6: Discussion. This discussion will be focused around my main research question⁴ and framed in the theoretical works presented in the introductory chapters.

⁴ *Q1: How do bloggers in Vietnam conduct themselves within the boundaries and strict limitations on free speech set by the government? Q2: How does this affect the potential of the blogosphere as a political space?*

2.0 Background

Vietnam, officially called The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, is one of only five remaining communist countries of the world of today (beside China, Burma, Laos and Cuba). Its soon to be 90 million population is situated in Southeast Asia bordering Laos and Cambodia (West), the South China Sea (East) and the colossus China in North. Vietnam, the little lotus flower-like country that for centuries has either been Chinas “vassal state”, “the jewel in France’s crown”, or the “outpost of the free world” is now stepping out of the shadow, rising like a dragon. The country, generally classified as collectivistic due to prominent Buddhist and Confucian influence, is in rapid development and has recently achieved status as a middle-income country (UN 2010).

When assessing the political impact of the Internet in a country, one must always consider the full national context in which that impact occurs (Kalalhil and Boas 2003:6; UNESCO 2008). For that reason, I find it necessary to give a quick overview of the basic economic, political and social dynamics, Vietnam’s media sector and the demographic characteristics of the population. I will also shortly present the arrival of the Internet, the birth of the blogosphere, the government’s dense net of laws and restrictions, and the technical filtering regime. Finally, my seven chosen respondents will be presented. Only with such contextual factors in mind can I proceed to analyze the actual political impact of Internet use in Vietnam.

2.1 Economic, political and societal overview

Vietnam’s current government grew out of the reunification of the country in 1976, after the Communist-ruled north defeated a U.S-backed regime in the south following more than a decade of fighting (Gainsborough 2009:1, Karnow 1997:636). The collectivization of land and labour that already was adopted in Northern Vietnam was imposed on the defeated South: traditionally Vietnam’s rice bowl. The results were disastrous as southern farmers refused to farm and rice production plummeted, causing famine on a massive scale and forcing the new government to consider alternative forms of economic management (McKinley 2010: 5). That process started in the mid 1980s when Vietnam’s Communist Party (CPV) introduced a series

of economic reforms known as *Doi Moi* – renovation. This transformed the management of the economy from full state control and central planning, to what is now known as a socialist-oriented market economy (ibid). Over the last 20 years, continuing economic reforms have delivered economic growth, jobs, and integration into the world economy, culminating in Vietnam’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007 (Gainsborough 2009:2).

The provision of economic reforms and freedoms has not been accompanied by concomitant political reform. Vietnam has signed and ratified key international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and Vietnam’s constitution protects a range of fundamental rights. The government’s *protection* of civil rights, however, remains highly selective (Gainsborough 2009:1). The CVP maintains hegemonic control over the government, with party members holding almost all top posts in the government, the parliament, the security forces, as well as in many economic entities and social organisations (Gainsborough 2009:2). The constitution does not allow the creation or operation of other political parties, and it is widely assumed that party elections are largely if not entirely staged with decisions made through a process of secret negotiation long before the official vote takes place (McKinley 2010: 6; Thayer 2008: 3-5). The upper echelons of the CPV have allowed a degree of enhanced openness in the face of new demands from society over the last decade, but this space remains within limited and sometimes arbitrary parameters defined by the party leadership (ibid).

Vietnam is a quite young country, with around 28 percent of the population under 15 years old and only 5.5 percent over the age of 65 (CIA 2010). The median age is just 27 years – a consequence of a post-war baby boom. In 1975, after three decades of warfare had ended, the population was only 48 million (McKinley 2010: 7). In less than 40 years the population has thus grown to be almost twice as large. Literacy among men is estimated to be 93.9 percent and 86.9 among women (CIA 2010). The high literacy rate, combined with a policy of distributing newspapers widely via government networks and posting them in public places, means newspapers are available throughout the country for people with limited resources who may otherwise not access them (McKinley 2010: 7). However, it should be noted that the papers that are distributed in this way are often Communist Party affiliated, and recognized as

propaganda (ibid).

2.2 The media sector – the mouthpiece of the Party?

During the subsidized period from 1975 to 1986, the Vietnamese government operated a system of total control of society, including the mass media (Dang 2006: 5). Television was first broadcast experimentally in 1971, and officially launched on June 16, 1976. The number of television sets and consequently their availability in Vietnam, however, was very limited at that time (ibid). According to Dang (2006) there were approximately 100 television sets in Hanoi in the 1970s, but they were primarily available in government institutions. For the majority of Vietnamese people at that time, radio remained the main medium of information and entertainment. In 1997 the government banned satellite dishes except for certain government offices, large hotels and news agencies. Viewers who want to watch international channels such as BBC World or CNN International have to subscribe to cable TV. However, Vietnam transmits these international news channels with a 30-minute delay so they can preview and stop the broadcast in case of politically “offensive” news (VCHR 2010:16). I witnessed this myself during the transmissions of Vietnam’s Universal Periodic Review at the UN in May 2009. Speeches by Canada and other countries criticizing Vietnam’s human rights record were, among other things, cut out.

Since *Doi Moi* there has been an explosion of media outlets in Vietnam and coverage is much livelier and more critical than only a decade ago. However, extensive restrictions on free expression remain (Hayton 2010:144; McKinley 2010:9). The media is still guided by a set of principles laid out by the CPV, which are translated into law by the Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC) and other government bodies. The constitution declares the right to free speech, but other legislation including the Press Law, the Publishing Law, the State Secrets Protection Ordinance, the Penal Code and various Internet-related decrees, are used to penalize and punish journalist, bloggers and free speech activists (ibid). A myriad of regulations thus exist to govern the media and Internet operations (some key media legislations is detailed in Appendix 07) and I will go further into this in chapter 2.5: Along came the government. Vietnam does not exercise prior censorship but a system of controls

emanating from within the party and feeding down to editors in chief through regular weekly editorial meetings, ensure that editorial content is tightly controlled (Hayton 2010:140-141; McKinley 2010:9). The controls consist for instance of lists of topics and stories that may not be covered, and are communicated to the editors in chief who then transmit them to newsroom editors and staff (ibid). Moreover, the party and the MIC will issue occasional edicts to editors informing them of issues that occur between meetings and are deemed urgent enough to require action before the following meeting is held (Hayton 2010:140-141; McKinley 2010:9). Given its one-party political system and strict control over all media outlets, it is no surprise that International organisations, donor countries and Western media has celebrated the Internet in Vietnam – and blogs in particular – as a revolutionary technological counterweight to state control (Nguyen, 2009:158).

2.3 Vietnam's post-war generation is increasingly wired

The Vietnamese government was for a long time very cautious about allowing free access to the Internet, considering it a potential source of harm to the political, social and cultural integrity of the country. As a result, Vietnam came late to the Internet with the first service being offered in 1997 (Internet World Stats 2010). The high cost of access and slow connections subsequently kept the country's total Internet subscriber-base low for some time. But the last 5-6 years Internet growth has soared in Vietnam. The Vietnamese government has come to understand that new technologies are necessary for economic growth and has started to widely support technology development. Internet access has been expanded into schools, public buildings and rural areas (McKinley 2010:16). In cities, people without private or workplace access to the Internet can access the web at one of the thousands of private Internet cafés. The number of Internet users grew from about 10.000 in 1998 to an estimated 10 million by early 2006 (Internet World Stats 2010). This was still around only 12 percent of the population, but the numbers have continuously grown. Today, as of late October 2011, the number of Internet users is estimated to be 28.5 million according to recent government figures from Vietnam's General Statistics Office (VGSO). In other words, about every third of Vietnam's citizens are using the Internet on a daily basis. Several surveys indicate that approximately one in three read one or more blogs during a week, and about 4.5 million run

their own blog (TNS Global 2010; Camigo 2011; Asia Life 2011; ONI 2010).

2.4 The birth, fall and rebirth of Vietnam's blogosphere

While there is a prolific literature on the rise of the blogosphere and citizen journalism in the developed world, little has been written about this phenomenon in developing countries.

Where these countries are concerned, Western media tend to celebrate citizen media as an autonomous counterweight to state censorship (Nguyen, 2009:153). The rise of blogging in the little-known Vietnamese media environment, for example, has been depicted as having “taken the country by storm and spawned an alternative communication universe to dusty state media (AFP 2007 in Nguyen 2009:153).

Blogging became a buzzword and public domain in Vietnam in 2005 and grew with tremendous speed throughout 2006 (Mai 2009). For many cyber citizens, blogging presented a chance to voice one's mind and heart in a culture that traditionally approves of communal consensus and disapproves of individual expression (ibid). Blogging was a new sort of freedom, and it emerged for a unlimited range of purposes; sharing personal observations, thoughts and feelings with others; making new friends; forming new communities; collecting, storing and sharing online materials; trading ideas for work and study purposes; inviting comments on literary and artistic works; promoting products and services; mobilizing others into certain tasks and actions, and many others (Mai 2008; Nguyen 2009:154). The freedom extended to social, economic and even political subjects, which had hardly ever been discussed on any public platform before the arrival of blogs (Nguyen 2009:154). Many of the preferred sites among Vietnam's bloggers was created, owned and run by transnational corporations that operated beyond the control of the CPV. In Vietnam blogs quickly rose the central stage thanks largely to the introduction of the Vietnamese *Yahoo 360* service, which was hosted on a US-based server, run by a Singapore-based team, and owned by a global corporation that had not established a legal presence (i.e. not a registered business) in Vietnam (Nguyen 2009:158). Globalized forces like *Yahoo 360* thus helped Vietnam's fledgling online public sphere to be able to take shape beyond the wishes of the political elite. This online public sphere stretched itself beyond the country's S-shape territory to vertically, horizontally, and diagonally connect different domestic and overseas groups, often with very

different socio-political backgrounds, in near instantaneous deliberation and debate over common affairs (Nguyen 2009: 158). Blogs and social media has become an increasingly important form of communication in Vietnam and, given the country's extremely young demographics, will become even more so in the future (McKinley 2010:16). Most bloggers write about uncontroversial social issues (friendship, fashion, celebrities, etc.), but a small though influential minority – often drawn from within the media – blog about politics, religion, corruption, and other sensitive issues (ONI 2011).

2.5 Along came the government

The rise of the blogosphere in Vietnam did not emerge in the frustrating witness of a powerless state – on the contrary. For years the Internet was relatively free of the government control, but while a growing number of its citizens found their way into cyberspace, the governments stepped up its efforts of controlling the Internet– especially the critical and continuously growing blogosphere (ibid). Under a 2003 law it became illegal for Vietnamese citizens to receive or distribute anti-government e-mail messages. Websites deemed “reactionary” was blocked, and owners of websites with servers based in Vietnam were ordered to submit their content for official approval. In July 2005, a joint circular known as “Circular Number 7” was issued by a number of ministries to increase the regulation of Internet access. Under the circular, the use of circumvention tools to bypass filtering was banned, and every Internet service provider had to register with the state. The circular also required that businesses offering online access, like cyber cafes, installed software to filter “undesirable websites” and record the sites that users visit. It stated that blogs should only provide strictly personal information and that Internet users are not permitted to disseminate press articles, literary works, or other publications prohibited under the Press Law. (ONI 2010; ONI 2011; McKinley 2010; Circular No. 07/2008/TT-BTTTT).

2008 and 2009 saw the most rapid shift in the Vietnam's blogosphere (RFA 2008; Freedom House 2008; RSF 2009). In October 2008, the government set up a new administrative entity called the Department of Radio, Television and Electronic information under the Ministry of Information and Communication. The agency was (and is still is) tasked

with monitoring the Internet. The Information Ministry soon passed an order (in December 2008) aimed at bringing the blogosphere under the same censorship regime imposed on the traditional media (RFA 2008; RSF 2009). The circular broadly banned blogs from posting reactionary information that damaged national security, social safety and the people's solidarity. It also barred bloggers from posting secrets relating to the state, military, security, economy or foreign affairs (CPJ 2009). The circular required ISPs to build databases on individual blogs, and announced the government's desire to require foreign companies to collaborate, mainly on blog platforms.

Another important 2008-incident was the announcement that Yahoo had decided to close Yahoo 360 – the first social networking and blogging platform to enter the Vietnamese market. Much of the initial blog boom in Vietnam was, as mentioned, built on Yahoo 360. But while Yahoo 360 caught on in Vietnam, it was radically eclipsed in the rest of the world by other services such as My Space and Facebook (Asia Life 2009). It was little noticed elsewhere, but the decision had a dramatic impact on the blogging community in Vietnam. A few months later, in April 2009, Yahoo announced that they would create a blog service exclusively for Vietnamese bloggers called *Yahoo Blog 360 Plus* (Yahoo! Việt Nam 2009). However, they also announced that they would move Vietnamese accounts to Vietnam-based servers (apparently due to slow and overloaded Yahoo-servers in the US). The death of Yahoo 360 spawned the annihilation of millions of online journals in Vietnam and a scattered exodus to a plethora of other sites, from Wordpress, Multiply, My Opera to Blogspot. By the end of 2009, the number of Internet users visiting blogs had dropped from 46 to under 40 percent, and blog writers declined from 27 to 20 percent, according to the market research agency Cimigo 2010.

The authorities many attempts to bring the mainstream media and citizens news environment “back into order” (including several crackdowns on prominent bloggers) has been accompanied by a quieter atmosphere in the Vietnamese blogosphere (Nguyen 2009:160). Along the way Vietnam's technical filtering regime has become increasingly sophisticated.

2.6 Controlled access – Vietnam’s technical filtering regime

Online surveillance and censorship are growing in scale, scope and sophistication, not only in Vietnam, but in the world at large (ONI 2010:2). In Asia, China, Burma and Vietnam are frequently singled out as “the worst in class”. They rely on pervasive filtering practices to shape public knowledge and expression by targeting content specific to politically sensitive topics in their own countries, especially websites in local languages (ONI 2010:409). They also block with the greatest breadth and depth in Asia, spanning human rights issues, reform and opposition activities, independent media and news, and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities (ibid). However, Vietnam’s Internet filtering operates within a broader context of legal regulation, technical architecture, and political and social norms.

Vietnam does not have an as extensive firewall as the so-called The Great Firewall of China. China is unique in the world for its system of filtering, targeting Internet connections when triggered by a list of banned keywords. Vietnam rather operates with a ‘blacklist’ with a couple of hundred political and religious-related websites (ONI 2008:423). When either of these blacklisted pages is attempted entered from within Vietnam, the pages “does not exist” or a “service error” has occurred. It is also indicators that Vietnamese censors are increasingly focusing their filtering technology on so-called *anonymizer sites*, which are designed to allow users to bypass state-run filtering systems and remotely access blocked content (ibid). State regulations also determine how Internet connectivity in Vietnam is organized and managed, and facilitate Internet content filtering by limiting external access points that must be controlled (ONI 20110:421). In Vietnam only Internet exchange points (IXPs) can connect to the international Internet, while online service providers (OSPs) and Internet content providers (ICPs) may connect to one of the four state owned Internet Service providers (ISPs) (ONI 2010). At the edge of the network, Internet agents, such as cybercafés, connect to their contracted ISP. ISPs may connect with each other and with IXPs, but private ISPs may not connect with each other in peering arrangements. Thus, connectivity in Vietnam is managed so that only IXPs may maintain connections with the wider Internet. ISPs must obtain upstream access by leasing it from IXPs. This likely makes filtering of Internet content easier for Vietnam (by limiting external access points that must be controlled). Foreign-owned

entities that can purchase VSAT connections⁵ can obtain unfiltered Internet access, but this is relatively rare in Vietnam, and largely irrelevant for Vietnamese Internet users (ONI 2010: 421; Hayton 2010: 77-78). Another and rather new way that Vietnam has reacted to its opponents on the Internet, is by allegedly coordinating hacking and DDoS-attacks on websites they find threatening (McAfee 2010). In 2010, cyber-attacks against websites operated by Vietnamese bloggers inside and outside Vietnam grew tremendously (VCHR 2010:12). In March 2010, Google and the computer security firm McAfee discovered that malicious software was being used to infect potentially tens of thousands of [Vietnamese-language] computers with keyboard software belonging to the Vietnamese Professional's Society (ibid). The infected machines were used to spy on their owners and to attack blogs containing messages of political dissent. According to Google's findings, this cyber-attack was aimed specifically at silencing critics of the controversial Chinese-backed bauxite-mining project in Vietnam (New York Times 2010). McAfee esteemed that this was a "politically motivated cyber attack" adding "the perpetrators may have some alliance to the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam" (ibid; VCHR 2010:12). In October 2010, McAfee named Vietnam's national domain (.vn) as one of the most dangerous domains in the world (ibid). Vietnam's technical filtering regime and surveillance capabilities are thus becoming increasingly sophisticated and it is difficult to describe the situation "on the ground" with completely accuracy. Vietnam's censorship regime is most certainly multilayered, relying not only on threats of legal liability, but also on computing technology, state-based and private monitoring of users' online activities, and informal pressures such as supervision by employees or other users in cybercafés (ONI 2010: 416).

2.7 The bloggers – a brief presentation

As mentioned, I have chosen seven bloggers for closer attention; two male Vietnamese bloggers; two female Vietnamese bloggers; and three foreign-speaking/writing bloggers (one from Canada, one from the UK and one from the U.S.). The bloggers are all living and working in Vietnam on a permanent basis – either in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City (former

⁵ VSAT – Very Small Aperture Device – is a device known as a small private earth station, which is used to transmit and receive data signal through a satellite.

Saigon). They host some of Vietnam's biggest and most famous blogs and are therefore something out of the ordinary. They attract thousands, and in some cases even millions, of views. Due to anonymity considerations, I have given my bloggers pseudonyms.

2.7.1 Mr. Controversial

It has been especially hard to track down this blogger. Actually, I haven't been able to get in contact with him nor find any significant amount of personal data on him – just the way he probably wants it to be. Mr. Controversial is far from a high-profiled blogger. He never reveals his true name, but he is still widely popular. His blog was for a long time one of Vietnam's most visited blogs with an average of 1 millions of visits per day (secret source A). Mr. Controversial rarely writes his own blog posts – meaning that he mostly publishes information from other sources, such as ministerial decrees and decisions, complaints about bauxite mines, recipes on how to get on Facebook, and so on. Due to his division of his blog into different sections such as *Politics, News, Culture, Economy, Law*, he seems to aspire more of being an independent online newspaper than a personal blog. Mr. Controversial joined the Vietnamese blogging community later than many other top bloggers (in 2007), but has risen like a dragon. Due to bits of information in different blog posts, I have reason to believe that Mr. Controversial is living in the capitol, Hanoi.

2.7.2 Mr. Showbiz

Mr. Showbiz is in his twenties and a well-known, long-time blogger in Vietnam. He is known for his wide connections with celebrities in Vietnam's world of show biz', and presence at big entertainment and media events (secret source C). He started his blog in 2006, with reviews of albums and media performances and was one of few bloggers whom survived the fall of Yahoo! 360. When Mr. Showbiz started blogging, he soon acquired a good reputation because of his wide knowledge of music and his access to celebrities. His blog has since then garnered over 4 million views, and he now also host shows with other celebrities for media events in Vietnam. His readers are mostly young adults, with 61 percent of them coming from the age of 18 to 24 years old (secret source B). Today Mr. Showbiz continues to post

controversial critics with review of albums and movies and has frequent updates on Vietnam's entertainment industry. Mr. Showbiz is living in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC)

2.7.3 Ms. Pink

Ms. Pink is also in her twenties and is a famous storyteller in Vietnam's online community. She has a sharp and humorous tone of voice, and has made a factory of contents on various topics (secret source B). Ms. Pink became famous by sharing insight about her daily life, especially about food and restaurants in Ho Chi Minh City. She used to work as a freelance journalist in the entertainment field, but is now self-employed. Ms. Pink says she blog about her own thoughts about common concerns and experiences, and feelings about the entertainment business, food, restaurants, fashion, beauty and music events in which she take part. I have given her the alias "Ms. Pink", because her blog genre corresponds to what we in Norway call "pink bloggers" (weblogs mostly about personal issues like fashion, make-up and shopping). Ms. Pink is living in Ho Chi Minh City.

2.7.4 Ms. Feminist

Ms. Feminist – nor an unknown name in the online community in Vietnam – is repeatedly listed as one of Vietnam's top 10 bloggers. (secret source A and B). She was a famous writer and author before she turned to blogging, and she is now a freelance journalist. Ms. Feminist's writing style has a strong touch on sensual topics – especially for women – said to be both controversial and welcomed at the same time (ibid). Ms. Feminist mostly express herself through short stories, attracting huge numbers of readers. Ms. Feminist also makes room for other young, more unknown voices on her blog. Online literature has been an emerging trend in Vietnam, and Ms. Feminist and some other writer-bloggers initiated the website vanhocmang.net (online literature) as a new cyber turf for more serious writers (secret source A). Ms. Feminist has moved back and forth between Hanoi and HCMC, but is originally from and currently living in Hanoi.

2.7.5 Mr. Vietmerican

Mr. Vietmerican is, as his name suggests, a Vietnamese-American and one of the bloggers I have termed “foreign”. He has been living in Vietnam for almost 5 years, blogging his way through a bustling Ho Chi Minh City. He first started blogging in 2006 because he was interested in developing his thoughts more clearly and having an outlet to improve his writing skills (interview June 3, 2011). He says his blog is about whimsical, satirical, and sometime serious commentary about various things he observes in Vietnam, and further explains this with:

I am especially interested in humour, as I used to do stand-up comedy, and I want to get better at writing jokes. Also, satire is rather renegade here in Vietnam, but also off-the- radar. Since I do not make any serious/direct accusations towards the things I see in the society, it’s still okay to comment on it, I think. And satire is a great roundabout way to talk about issues without talking about the issues (interview June 3, 2011)

Mr. Vietmerican underlines that his favourite poet is Cold Mountain⁶ (interview June 3, 2011).

2.7.6 Mr. Expat

In the early 2000s, after a dozen years working in journalism and PR, Mr. Expat decided to travel to Vietnam as a volunteer for a street kid organisation. After a couple of years in Hanoi, he decided to keep moving and signed himself up for volunteer work in Africa and Latin America. After sporadically moving around for a year or so, he realised it was time to put down roots, and he decided to do that in Hanoi. Children from the street kid organisation he had worked with during his first visit had grown used to foreigners coming and going, and repeatedly asked Mr. Expat “*How long you come back for?*” He told them: “*Forever*” – and he meant it. Mr. Expat is now head of marketing and communications for an international

⁶ Hánshān (literally "Cold Mountain", fl. 9th century) was a legendary figure associated with a collection of poems from the Chinese Tang Dynasty. The poems can be seen to fall into three categories: the biographical poems about his life before he arrived at Cold Mountain; the religious and political poems, generally critical of conventional wisdom and those who embrace it; and the transcendental poems, about his sojourn at Cold Mountain. They are notable for their straightforwardness, which contrasts sharply with the cleverness and intricateness that marked typical Tang Dynasty poetry.

organisation, and says Hanoi will continue to be home for the foreseeable future. Mr. Expat is the second blogger I have termed “foreign”, and he is living in Hanoi on a permanent basis.

2.7.7 Mr. Column

Mr. Column is a non-Vietnamese in his thirties. He is well known in Vietnam for hosting a weekly television show, appearing in comedy stage productions and maintaining a popular blog written in Vietnamese. Mr. Column first endeared himself to the Vietnamese public as a blogger. His quirky effort, the only mainstream blog written by a Westerner in Vietnamese at that time, attracted close to 10 million hits between 2006 and 2008. Mr. Column shares random stories about social issues in Vietnam from a foreigner’s perspective, in combination of arts and entertainment events critics, and parody of controversial topics. Mr. Column says his vision, or “purpose” for the blog is (...) *A sort of philosophical prodding instrument. And a way to express my views to the outside world and thus validate my existence. As with any blogger or renown* (interview July 12, 2011). Mr. Column’s blog was first hosted on the now defunct Yahoo 360 platform, but he moved to Wordpress when Yahoo went down. In April 2010 Mr. Column relocated his blog on a leading online news site. When I asked Mr. Column how this has (if it has) affected his writings, topics, choice of words, etc, he said: *Not too much, they give me almost free reign. Depends on the editor, some get sarcasm and more abstract forms of satire, some don’t. They have their own pressures for topics and sometimes they suggest this or that; I’ll say yes or no.*

3.0 Theoretical approach

“Technology will make it increasingly difficult for the state to control the information its people receive. . . . The Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip”.

– Ronald Reagan, speech at London’s Guildhall, June 14, 1989 –

The world has changed a great deal since Ronald Reagan spoke these words in 1989. To many, subsequent events have borne witness to the truth of his prediction: authoritarian regimes have fallen around the world, while the power of the microchip has risen (Kalathil and Boas 2003:2). The correlation, however, is not that easy to prove and the relationship between the Internet and democracy has thus been a continuing matter of debate. Even after a decline in the general “Information Age” optimism that characterized much of the 1990s, many continue to argue that the Internet is inherently a powerful force for democracy (e.g. Ferdinand 2001; Weare 2002; Morozov 2011:9-17). With examples from the Soviet Union during The Cold War and the Colour Revolution⁷ that swept the former USSR in the early 2000s, cyber-optimists argue that the Internet offers new opportunities for accelerating the democratization process, for consolidating and promoting democratic societies, and for facilitating the collapse of authoritarian regimes (Morozov 2011:9-17; Pang 2008:57). User-generated content (USG) through so-called Web 2.0 technologies⁸, have since 2005 given renewed strength to the optimists’ arguments. The same has the so-called Arab Spring, the revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests that has taken place in Northern Africa and the Middle East during the last 11 to 12 months. Pessimists, however, argue that it takes more than bytes to foster, install, and consolidate a healthy democratic regime, and highlight

⁷ “Colour revolutions” is a term that was widely used by the media to describe related movements that developed in several societies in the former USSR and Balkan states during the early 2000s. The term has also been applied to a number of revolutions elsewhere, including in the Middle East. Some observers have called the events a revolutionary wave. The origins can be traced back to the 1986 People Power Revolution (also known as the “Yellow Revolution”) in the Philippines.

⁸ The term Web 2.0 is associated with web applications that facilitate participatory information sharing, interoperability, user-generated design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web. A Web 2.0 site allows users to interact and collaborate with each other in a social media dialogue as creators of user-generated content, in contrast to websites where users are limited to the passive viewing of content that was created for them (Web 1.0). Examples of Web 2.0 include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video-sharing sites, mash-ups and folksonomies.

arbitrary manipulation of the Internet by political authorities and the widespread surveillance capabilities (Morozov 2011).

Where Vietnam and the blogosphere are concerned, optimism has dominated the discussions. A more or less unison community of international media watchdogs, donor countries and Western media organisations, has celebrated the Internet as an explosive, autonomous counterweight to state censorship (Freedom House 2009; RSF 2010; Human Rights Watch 2010; Nguyen 2009: 1). However, while there is a prolific literature on the rise of citizen journalism in the developed world, little actual research has been done about this phenomenon in developing countries – Vietnam included (Nguyen 2009: 1). Among the research and literature that do exist, The Open Net Initiative (ONI) is at the forefront. ONI is a collaborative partnership between The Citizen Lab at the Munk School of Global Affairs (University of Toronto); The Berkman Centre for Internet & Society at Harvard University; and the SecDev Group (based in Ottawa). Their aim is to investigate, expose and analyze Internet filtering and surveillance practices in chosen countries, and Vietnam was under scrutiny in 2005/2006. Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas have also directed a critical look at Vietnam as a part of a comparative study in 2003. Based on a systematic examination of evidence from eight countries – China, Cuba, Singapore, Vietnam, Burma, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt – they argue that the Internet is not necessarily a threat to authoritarian regimes. Certain types of Internet use do indeed pose political challenges to authoritarian governments, and such use may contribute to political change in the future. Still, other uses of the Internet reinforce authoritarian rule, and many authoritarian regimes are proactively promoting the development of an Internet that serves state-defined interests rather than challenging them (p. 3-4).

3.1 The framework of this study

Given the nature of my research questions, I have kept my analyses at a domestic and personal level. I will soon elaborate on this. There are, however, plenty of alternatives in place in order to determine the degree of media autonomy (and the potential power of the blogosphere) in a given country. At the international level the UNESCO's Media

Development Indicators (MDI) – a framework for assessing media development – would have been a relevant starting point⁹. The MDI was endorsed by the Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) in 2008, and have gained widespread recognition among UN agencies, development partners, media professionals and civil society groups ever since (UNESCO's MDI, 2011). The MDI suggest five major categories of indicators that can be used to analyze the media development of a country. Each category is again broken down into a number of component issues, but they are still too intangible and theoretical for my purpose.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could have been a focus point if I were to look at the regional level. Vietnam pays more attention and energy to its Southeast Asian neighbours regarding discussions of human rights and media development, than "Western" institutions like the UN and WTO¹⁰. I have therefore devoted a considerable amount of time studying ASEAN, but it appears that ASEAN has not yet managed to establish an efficient, overarching, institutionalized human rights mechanism, nor any relevant media development indicators (Tan 2011: 2). To frame my thesis within this institution, thus seemed fairly futile. A comparative study of, for example, other communist countries and their media systems could also have been an option – a highly interesting one too. My supervisor Robert W. Vaagan, has a forthcoming article on media systems Vietnam and China in the *Nordic Journal on Human Rights*. A comparative study of Russia could also be highly relevant. Vietnam more or less adopted the Soviet political system after the communist party came to power in 1954 (in northern Vietnam), and the Soviet/Russia has in many aspects influenced the Vietnamese society. However, it became clear quite early on that I had to keep my thesis on a low level – meaning on a micro-level of individual Internet users *within* Vietnam and in Vietnam only. Few studies have, as mentioned, focused on neither the personal level nor the meso-level of collectives and organisations in Vietnam before, and it is

⁹ The MDI can be seen as a continuation of The New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). NWICO or NWIO is a term that was coined in a debate over media representations of the developing world in UNESCO in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The term was widely used by the MacBride Commission (a UNESCO panel chaired by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Seán MacBride). The commission was charged with creation of a set of recommendations to make global media representation more equitable.

¹⁰This has been expressed by several experts and scholars, among others Nicola Macbean, (Director of the NGO The Rights Practice) at the seminar *Human rights and justice in China – lessons learned and the way forward* at the NCHR August 10, 2011.

my understanding that this topic need to be understood on its own term before it can be profitably compared to other countries. Since I endeavour to understand the everyday life and experiences of bloggers in Vietnam, I have resorted to the *domestic* and *personal level* as my lens and frame of reference.

3.2 The domestic and personal level

An Nguyen (2009) argues that while globalized technological advances allow citizen journalism and the blogosphere to develop beyond the control of the nation state in some aspects, it is also the case that its influence is largely kept within the boundaries of tolerance set down by the state's political elite. This is why I have kept my thesis at a domestic and personal level. Even though the Internet is global, its participants are still subject to at least one local legislative and political system in the offline world (p.153). All of my informants are subjects to Vietnams legislative and political system, and the range of their expressions is to a large extent kept within the boundaries of tolerance set down by Vietnam's political elite (ibid). Legal boundaries, however, do not always watch with the 'mental maps' that people constructs in their head. My informants may or not have knowledge of, interest in, or accurate perceptions concerning macro-level politics in Vietnam, but they do have perceptions and experiences concerning their own operations and the opportunities and risks they face.

3.3 Defining key concepts

In order to get closer to my two main research questions, I have had to define some key concepts. How the bloggers conduct themselves within the boundaries and strict limitations set on free speech (Q1) is to a great extent determined by the degree of self-censorship and survival strategies. Defining self-censorship and survival strategies was thus a necessity. My second main research question reads how this [their online "behaviour"] affects the potential of the blogosphere as a political space (Q2). Defining political space was thus also inevitable. My last key concept is a unique Vietnamese form of civil disobedience called "pha rao" (fence-breaking). An eventual presence of this phenomenon can have a major impact on the power and future prospects of the blogosphere in Vietnam. It is thus important to examine whether this phenomenon exists among my bloggers, or not.

3.3.1 Survival strategies and self-censorship

It is widely acknowledged that censorship in Vietnam is not only initiated by the government alone, but is in fact self-censorship by individual Internet users themselves (Nguyen 2009; Hayton 2010; Gainsborough 2010). What I call *survival strategies* and *self-censorship* are thus intertwined, if not entirely the same – the bloggers need to “self censor” themselves in order to “survive” in the blogosphere. According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus online edition, the definition of self-censorship (noun) is; “*control of what you say or do in order to avoid annoying or offending others, but without being told officially that such control is necessary*”. If I were to apply this definition to Vietnam’s context, I would say “*control of what you say or write in order to avoid offending the government and thus risking legal/physical persecution of you or your family*”. To never write about the government or the government’s policies, is therefore a sort of self-censorship. Survival strategies on the other hand, are a means of circumventing the government’s filtering regime and legal provisions. To write in codes, such as the term “empty chair” for “Liu Xiabo” in China after the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010), use satire, caricatures, political cartoons or another form of “parallel language”, are all examples of different “survival strategies”.

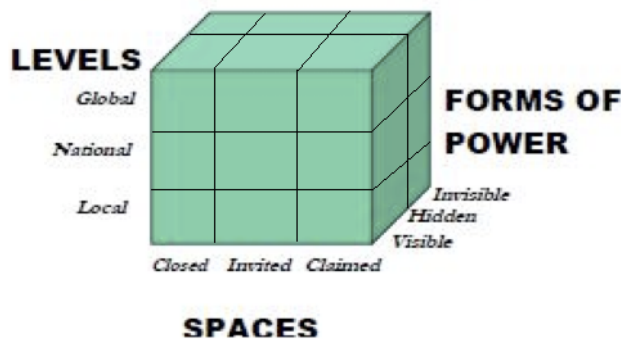
3.3.2 Political space and public sphere

As with related concepts such as civil society and social movements, there are no single accepted definitions of political space. A literal definition taken from political geography would simply be the physical location where political activity takes place (Wells-Dang 2010: 95). Government buildings, universities, public squares and memorials are all public places that may be more or less open to political expression. To the common man in Vietnam all of these places are to a great extent closed for political expressions¹¹. A second category of political space is virtual; the media; academic discourse; and cyberspace (ibid). Thus, *political*

¹¹ Vietnam does not acknowledge freedom of assembly. Freedom of Assembly, sometimes used interchangeably with the Freedom of Association, is internationally recognized as a human right, a political freedom and a civil liberty. Article 69 in the Constitution of 1992 states that “*The citizen shall enjoy freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of the press, the right to be informed, and the right to assemble, form associations and hold demonstrations in accordance with the provisions of the law*” but other legislation including the Penal Code (art. 88) regulate the realization of these freedoms.

space can be plural and examined individually or relationally in linkages to each other (ibid). A risk or limitation inherent in a spatial definition of political space, however, is the so-called territorial trap – to internalize political boundaries and assume that geographical or virtual political spaces are associated with the territorial state (Ferguson and Jones 2002; Wells-Dang 2010: 95). Legal boundaries do not always watch with the mental maps that people construct in their heads. This suggests an alternative definition of political space as the sum of people’s perceptions of the range of political action and expression that is open to them in a particular time and place (Wells-Dang 2010: 95). One such construction is the so-called *power cube* proposed by John Gaventa (2007). The power cube is a framework for analysing levels, spaces and forms of power and their relationship. The *spaces* dimension of the power

Illustration 04 – The power cube: level, spaces and forms of power (Source: Gaventa (2007).



cube refers to the potential arenas for participation and action, including what Gaventa calls *open, closed, invited and claimed spaces*. An individual, activists or a civil society might adopt a mix strategy of opening up or claiming closed spaces, utilising invited spaces or creating spaces that are autonomous of government or corporate control (Gaventa 2007). I’ll elaborate much more on this in chapter 6.

Although the blogosphere in Vietnam is strictly regulated, this space can be seen as the most open space in terms of freedom of expression. Since the scope up my thesis is to find out *how* the bloggers conduct themselves within the strict limitations set on free speech, the power cube is therefore relevant and interesting frame of reference. Does blogs enable them to *create* the blogosphere as a kind of autonomous space of government control? Does the bloggers *utilise* the space blog platforms represent for political participation and action?

3.3.3 Pha Rau – bending the rules

Under the preparations and the process of writing this thesis I read several books on Vietnam. Not only on my specific field of study (media, law, social science) but on as diverse subjects

as prostitution, military history, politics and customs and traditions¹². A concept I continuously stumbled upon was the Vietnamese word *pha rao*. *Pha rao* is usually translated to “fence breaking” – meaning the bending of rules to get things done – and is often used to describe and explain the transition from central planning to marketisation in the late 1980s. Fforde and Vylder (1996) were among the first to document this early experimentation with economic practices outside those prescribed by central planning¹³. Bill Hayton (2010) takes it even further by saying that (...) “it was this practice that allowed the country to escape economic collapse in the late 1980s and create the foundations for today’s rapid growth” (p.2). Hayton adds that *pha rao* is as important in politics as in the society in general, and has in his latest book (*The Rising Dragon*) also applied it to the media sector (...) “*The Party is always playing catch-up. Like most things in the new Vietnam, the media hasn’t evolved through a considered process of policy-making but through pha rao – fence-breaking by entrepreneurial, some might say piratical, business bosses*” (p. 145). I have been curious whether this rarefied Vietnamese form of semi-illegality, can be traced in the blogosphere. Are bloggers trying to push the boundaries for where the line is drawn (by the government) in Vietnam? If so, Vietnam’s history has shown that the government has little choice but to accept the emergence of an autonomous Vietnamese blogosphere.

¹² On prostitution: *The ironies of freedom* (Nguyễn-vô’), military history: *War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution* (Carlyle Thayer), politics: *Vietnam - Rethinking the State* (Martin Gainsborough:) and on general history (among others Steve Karnowski’s classic: *Vietnam – a history*).

¹³ Adam Fford ascribes the first published use of the term to two Vietnamese economists: Dam Van Hue and Le Si Thiep in a 1981 article in *Nghien Cuu Kinh Te*, Vol. 5, no 10.

4.0 Method

The term “method” is derived from the Greek word *methodos*, meaning “the way towards the goal” (Johannesen et al. 2010: 29). In other words, method is a kind of procedure, a means of solving problems and reach new knowledge (Auberts 1972:196). Within the fields of social sciences and humanities, there has for a long time been a discussion about the use of quantitative versus qualitative methods. The discussion has at times been harsh but today it is recognized that both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses (Everett and Furseth 2004: 129). My aspiration has been to draw the best from each of them. The methods I have used to collect the empirical data for this thesis are qualitative interviews and qualitative and quantitative document analyses. By interviewing different bloggers about their aspirations and experiences, and comparing the information gathered from the interviews with the information through the document analysis, the validity of the research design is strengthened.

I have as mentioned in the preliminary chapters been constrained both in terms of time, available resources and ethical dilemmas, with the latter as the most prominent. In this chapter I will elaborate and reflect on the choices I have made along the way – in other words, my methodological scheme. A methodological scheme is a process that is often divided into four different phases: preparations → collection of data → analysis → reporting. My research process has not been conducted in such a clear defined, linear way, but I find it appropriate to present it in that kind of step-by-step manner. Reading this chapter may thus feel somewhat fragmented. Towards the end of the chapter I reflect on some ethical challenges, and acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses in my research design.

4.1 Preparing for research – without any trodden trails

Little – if any – research has been done on my particular field of study in Vietnam before. At times it has felt as though I’ve been hiking through a jungle – without any trodden trails. Luckily I have prepared for journeys to Vietnam before, and my country of study was thus not a completely unknown territory. This has been of critical importance. Nonetheless, when I embarked into Vietnam’s universe of laws and regulations, societal and political context, and not least “unwritten rules”, it soon became clear that my thesis was pampered with ethical

challenges. Ethical considerations have thus been an overarching aspect and it has influenced my thesis in several ways. A huge amount of time was spent on preparations. I took my precautions regarding the choice of respondents, the means of collecting data and material, and I drew up different worst-case scenarios. What if the bloggers, by being in contact with me, were subjected to surveillance by the government? What if my respondents got arrested? What if nobody was willing to participate? I had an overwhelmingly large pile of “what if’s”, and they paralyzed me at times. I searched for guidance and information on ethical challenges, but neither my compulsory literature nor the institute I belong to had a noteworthy amount of information available. In order to safeguard the ethical considerations in my project, I therefore initiated – in consultation with my supervisor – a meeting with the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH). NESH works at policy level by setting guidelines and general statements concerning ethical considerations, but they also evaluate individual research projects. February 21 2011 I was invited to a meeting at NESH. They encouraged me to send them a project description and an application with the ethical considerations I was facing in my thesis. My main concern was whether I should even *try* to carry out my project, or not. The evaluation from NESH was not as extensive as I had hoped for it to be (the application I sent and the evaluation I got in return is attached at the end of the thesis) but the main thing for me was the assurance that I had not overlooked or missed any potential mine fields. One aspect NESH did not touch upon is the requirement of reporting research results to the participants of an investigation, and the potential risk such a disclosure of my findings might lead to. I found this a bit disturbing. The only clear recommendation from NESH was not to put my respondents in any kind of risky position or cause them any undue risk of harm. This is an absolute requirement, and it has been an arbitrate factor in all of my decisions – especially when regards the sample of bloggers.

4.1.1 Extreme or deviant sampling

I have combined extreme (also called *deviant*) sampling and criterion sampling as the strategies for “choosing” my bloggers. The logic and power of extreme sampling lie in selecting information rich cases for study in depth (Patton 2002: 234). Extreme and deviant

cases are information rich because they are unusual or special in some way, such as outstanding success or notable failure (ibid: 234). The former apply to all my chosen bloggers. The bloggers are “extreme” because they host some of Vietnam’s biggest (in terms of hits/views and followers) and most famous blogs. These bloggers are therefore something out of the ordinary. They attracted tens of thousands, and in some cases even hundreds of thousands, views and their blog posts. When they have such a large group of active readers, their blogs are most certainly a part of the public- and potentially also the political sphere. The rationale for choosing these kinds of blogs was also out of ethical concerns. I assume that people directly involved in blogging and public discussion have an awareness of the political opportunities and risks associated with it. Especially when they are as big as those in my sample. I did not want to choose so-called black blogs or dissident blogs (it is too risky in terms of surveillance and DDoS-attacks) but at the same time I wanted the bloggers to be influential. Given their position in the blogosphere in Vietnam, I have good reason to think that my respondents are precisely that.

4.1.2 Whom, size, and strategy

It’s a conventional wisdom that Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and southern Vietnam in general are more open and outspoken than the northern parts of Vietnam (the whole government apparatus is located in Hanoi). Other sources say that the political space for local associations and other forms of civil society, is presently greater in northern Vietnam than in southern, since the government is more concerned about maintaining political control in the South (Wells-Dang 2010: 104). In order to ensure variety and capture potential differences, I chose to look for the following set of criteria (hence criterion sampling):

- One male Vietnamese blogger from Hanoi
- One male Vietnamese blogger from Ho Chi Minh City
- One female Vietnamese blogger from Hanoi
- One female Vietnamese blogger from Ho Chi Minh City
- Two blogs written by foreigners; one living in Hanoi on a permanent basis and one living in HCMC

on a permanent basis.

I chose to include two blogs written by foreigners because I was curious whether or not they were more or less cautious about their writings. In that regard I want to stress that even though bloggers in Vietnam are located in the same country, they don't necessarily interact. Sharing the same *language* is more essential than sharing the same nation state in terms of interaction in cyberspace. It is my understanding that most *Vietnamese* bloggers in Vietnam write in and for Vietnamese, while most *non-Vietnamese* bloggers (English, Japanese, French, German...) are in Vietnam for a short period of time and first and foremost write home to family and friends. My second criterion was thus that the weblog must be in Vietnamese, or bilingual (English and Vietnamese), and be written by an individual coming from or living in Vietnam on a permanent basis. This was important in the sense that I wanted bloggers that (most likely) were aware of the political opportunities and the risks associated with blogging in Vietnam.

My third criterion was that the weblog must be updated with some frequency. Many blogs are "dead", meaning that the person behind it has either grown tired of the blog, lacks time to update it or for some reason neglects it. Others are very active, with new posts on a daily basis. Most blogs fall somewhere in between these two extremes – updated on a weekly or monthly basis, for instance (Adams 2006). When I made the selection of six blogs to receive special attention, I defined a "live" blog as being updated at least four times within the previous month (in other words, once a week). The fourth criterion was that they had blogged for at least 3 years – preferably even longer. I did not want "newcomers" in my sample. The purpose of this criterion was to yet again ensure that my chosen bloggers were aware of the political opportunities and the risks associated with blogging in Vietnam.

I used different media organisation/companies to find Vietnam's top or so-called "hot" bloggers (secret source A, B, C). Organisations like these repeatedly make ratings of Vietnam's most famous bloggers, and I chose the first two Vietnamese female bloggers and the first two Vietnamese male bloggers that fulfilled my set of criteria. The two *foreign* bloggers were chosen in a more creative way. There is a Twitter group I have been following for a while called *VietnamBlogs: The latest blog posts from English language bloggers in*

Vietnam, and I chose the two of the most active bloggers in that group that met my sampling criteria. It should be noted that one of these bloggers chose to shut down his blog in May 2011. For that reason I tried to find another foreign blog to take his place, but none of the bloggers I contacted were willing to participate. I thus decided to keep the initial two foreign English-speaking bloggers I had found. No female English-speaking bloggers fulfilled my criteria.

While I was in the phase of collecting data, I stumbled upon another extraordinary but highly known blogger in Vietnam – perhaps the most famous of them all. The blog is written fluently in Vietnamese, but the person behind it is a North American. His blog is highly unusual – a foreigner writing fluently in Vietnamese is truly one of a kind. After several years as an independent blogger, this blogger has now relocated his blog to a leading online newspaper in Vietnam – as a blog column. I was curious how this has – if it has – changed his style of writing and his perceptions and experiences as a famous long-time blogger in Vietnam. The blogger I have chosen to call “Mr. Column” was thus added to the list. However, since his writings are in the form of a column I did not include his column in the content analysis, but I conducted several interviews with him.

4.2 The data collection period

The methods used for the collection of data must be determined by; the purpose of the study; the resources available; the questions being asked; and the constraints being faced (Patton 2002: 234). Since I am concerned with the everyday experiences of my chosen bloggers, I have followed and collected all the blog posts my chosen respondents have posted from January to June 2011. This turned out to be 350 blog posts in total. I will go into further detail on how I analyzed these blog posts in the next paragraph (3.3 How I analysis the data). I chose to begin with January because the 11th Communist Party Congress – a huge (staged) event in Vietnam, happening every 5th year – was held in mid-January. I assumed that both media content and public discussions during these weeks would prompt more public and political discussions than usual. I chose to end in June because I assumed that this would be closer to a more normal month in terms of blogging and public discussions. It has been widely assumed the government would loosen the tight grip on free speech a few months after the

Party Congress, but the opposite has rather been the case (RSF 2011; Freedom House; 2011; HRW 2011). The situation in Vietnam has been more or less the same – tense! – ever since the lead-up to the Party Congress a year ago. The Arab spring has probably been a decisive factor and an important backdrop since December 18, 2010¹⁴. Moreover, in April and May 2011 several demonstrations by an ethnic minority group called Hmong located in the Dien Bien province – a remote, poor and mountainous area bordering Laos and China – took place in Vietnam. Rebellions among ethnic minorities are a contentious topic in Vietnam and of great concern for the authorities. The authorities try to prevent disclosure about incidents like these both in the national media and the international community – and managed to a great extent to that this spring as well (AFP 2011; HRW 2011; Race and Human Rights 2011). Later, in May and June, several demonstrations against China saw daylight in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi because of rising tension in the South China Sea. One of my respondents got arrested in one of these demonstrations in Hanoi. This fact, that it has been such a tense situation in Vietnam at least the last year or so, has probably affected my respondents and interviewees

4.2.1 In-depth interviews and document analysis

After careful consideration of different alternatives, I decided on in-depth interviews and document analysis as the methods for collecting the empirical data. I considered *observation*, but due to language barrier (among other things) this approach could potentially cause more difficulties than value. Participant-observation involves empathizing with the social unit being studied, preferably for a longer period of time, even a year or more (Østbye et al. 2002: 107). I also considered going to Vietnam to conduct face-to-face interviews, but my respondents preferred to do it via the Internet¹⁵.

¹⁴ Since December 18, 2010 there have been revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt; a civil war in Libya resulting in the fall of its regime; civil uprisings in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen; major protests in Israel, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman, and minor protests in Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Western Sahara.

¹⁵ If one examines the convictions of the 17 bloggers whom have been arrested in Vietnam over the last couple of years, it's evident that almost all of them have had active involvement and meetings with "hostile forces abroad". Active involvement with opposition groups or contact with democracy- and/or human rights organisation overseas is not tolerated by the authorities. Since I am part of the NCHR, a meeting with my respondents could potentially have put them in a risky position.

Quantitative survey interviews, on the other hand, that follow standard procedures with fixed wordings and sequences of questions as well as quantification of answers, have been more frequently used in the social sciences than the open qualitative interview (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009:9). Qualitative methods – ranging from participants observation to interviews to discourse analysis – have first since the 1980s become key methods of social research (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 11). The goal of in-depth interviews and qualitative methods is to improve understanding of social and cultural phenomena and processes rather than to produce objective facts about reality and make generalizations to given populations (Meho 2006: 5). The qualitative research interview therefore attempts to understand the world from the subject’s point of view, to unfold the meanings of their experiences and to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009:1). The research interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation; it is an inter-view, where knowledge is construed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 2). The closeness of the research interview to everyday conversations may thus imply certain simplicity, but as I have learned through my numerous interviews as a journalist; this simplicity is illusory. How to begin an interview? How many subjects will I need? How can I avoid influencing the subjects with leading questions? Can the interview be harmful to the subjects? Will my interpretations only be subjective? Can I be sure that I get to know what the subjects really mean? I was confronted with a myriad of questions like these. If corresponding questions were raised about, for example, a questionnaire survey, several of them would be fairly easy to answer by consulting authoritative textbooks on standard techniques and rules for survey research. The situation for the craft of qualitative interview research, however, is quite the contrary – there are few standard rules or common methodological conventions (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 15). But even though qualitative interviews are often characterized as “un-standardized”, an entire interview investigation has often tended to be a rather standardized affair, going through six different stages: planning, designing, interviewing, transcribing and analyzing. Before I embark on that it should be noted that I did this process twice. I first planned to conduct my interviews “face-to-face” via Skype. I therefore planned and designed my methodological scheme with the benefits and challenges associated with *online* interviewing in mind. But due

to poor conditions, disturbing background noises and a detrimental time difference, it provided more difficulties than value. I thus decided to conduct in-depth e-mail interviews instead. Online synchronous interviews (*Skype*) and online asynchronous interviews (*e-mail*) are two, different qualitative methods and thus need different approaches. I ended up planning for both outcomes, and had an interesting learning process in that regard. I will focus this chapter around my choices, reflections, the benefits and challenges of conducting *e-mail* interviews. But occasionally I will compare my e-mail experiences to what I had planned for and expected as outcome in the online face-to-face interviews.

4.3 Planning for asynchronous in-depth interviewing

In the early 2000s, when a broad spectre of researchers began to use Internet-based qualitative research methods, three different types crystallized (and they still do): online synchronous interviews, online asynchronous interviews and virtual focus groups. I have conducted asynchronous in-depth interviews via e-mail. Asynchronous in-depth interviewing is, unlike e-mail surveys, semi-structured in nature and involves multiple e-mail exchanges between the interviewer and the interviewee over an extended period of time. Online, asynchronous in-depth interviewing is also different from virtual focus groups in that the information volunteered by individual participants is not shared with, viewed, or influenced by other participants (Meho 2006; Schneider et al. 2002). Although e-mail interviewing limits the research to those people with access to the Internet, the method, democratizes and internationalizes research. In contrast to face-to-face and telephone interviewing, e-mail interviewing enables researchers to study individuals difficult or impossible to reach or interview face-to-face, such as those who are geographically dispersed or located in dangerous or politically sensitive places (Meho 2006:1288). The fact that my respondents were located in a politically sensitive place was a decisive factor in terms of my preparations.

4.3.1 Planning and designing for an e-mail interview

A distinctive feature in e-mail interviewing is that it allows participants to take their time in answering questions and to take part in the interview in a familiar environment (e.g. home or

office), which may make them feel more relaxed expressing themselves and in responding when and how they feel comfortable (Meho 2006: 1290). My interviewees expressed that they were quite busy during their work hours and that they preferred to do the interviews at home. When I first planned for an online face-to-face interview, I realized that I would have to do the interviews late at night. There is a 6 to 7 hours time difference between Norway and Vietnam, so when my respondents were home from work around 6 pm, it was midnight in Norway. When I planned for the e-mail interviews, on the other hand, I felt more confident in asking them more sensitive and direct questions, and to ask many *more* questions – probably more than an online face-to-face interview had permitted me to. An interview in writing also gave my interviewees the possibility to answer whenever they had the time to and in a less stressful way.

The key question when I was planning and designing for both kinds of interviews was concerned with *what* and *how*. *What* was I trying to obtain knowledge about, and *how* was I supposed to do this. What I was trying to obtain knowledge about was necessarily how my bloggers conducted themselves within the boundaries and strict limitations set on free speech in Vietnam (Q1). In other words, I was concerned with my respondent's everyday experiences as bloggers in Vietnam, and an eventual presence of survival strategies, self-censorship and fence breaking (*pha rao*). When I was designing the interviews, I used these three 'phenomena' as headings. Although e-mail interviews may generate rich and high qualitative data, it also means that the e-mailed questions must be much more self-explanatory than those posed face-to-face (Meho 2006:1290). Unlike face-to-face interviews, e-mail interviews do not allow direct probing. However, as a journalist I have learned and experienced that the best questions are open and not too leading. I did not want to transfer my concepts or understandings onto my interviewees. Thus, when I for example was trying to learn about their strategies and self-censorship, I never asked them directly if they had any strategies or whether or not they self-censored themselves. I rather used assertions and common perception as a starting point, like:

Q 15: Vietnam is often described as “hostile” when it comes to free speech, blogging, etc. What are your thoughts and experiences in that regard?

Q 16: Have you ever experienced any kind of problems as a blogger in Vietnam? (unpleasant comments, repression of any kind, technical blocks or attacks...?)

Q 20: Several bloggers have been arrested in Vietnam in the last couple of years. Being a blogger yourself, what are your reflections on that? Has it affected your writings in anyway?

When I planned and designed the part of the interview concerning the concept of “pha rao” and topics being off limit [from my sub-research-question no. 3 and 4] I used the same kind of approach:

Q 17: What (if any) kind of topics do you consider being “off limit”?

Q 22: Are you aware of what you’re allowed and not allowed to do/say/store/share as a blogger in Vietnam? (in other words; do you know where “the line is drawn”?)

Q 25: Do you think the blogosphere has or should have “a role” or a function? (friendship, free speech, information sharing...connecting/networking, democracy, business....?)

Q 29: Blogging has been a huge trend in Vietnam for a while now. How would you describe the development?

Q 30: What are your future hopes and prospects for the blogosphere in Vietnam?

The lack of direct probing in e-mail interviews may result in missing some important pieces of data (Meho 2006:1290). I tried to compensate for this by asking for specifics, and test the strength of their expressions through counter questions. I also planned (and conducted) a

“follow up” interview on the respondents if/when there was any uncertainties or mixed messages in their answers. Although this strengthens the reliability and validity, there is always room for miscommunication and misinterpretation. I’ll elaborate more on reliability and validity in chapter 4.3.4 (page 49).

4.3.2 Interviewing and transcribing

Before I sent out the first interview, the respondents and I informally e-mailed back and forth. I gave them a short briefing about the purpose for the interview, and why I had chosen them in particular as a part of my study. I think establishing this kind of “empathy” was crucial – an interviewee will necessarily want to have a grasp of the interviewer before they allows themselves to talk freely and expose their experiences and feelings to a stranger (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 128). By doing this I also got to test their English skills.

One of the most important differences between e-mail interviews and face-to-face or telephone interviews involves *media richness*, meaning the ability of a communication medium to foster interaction and feedback and to permit people to communicate with many kinds of cues, using multiple senses (Panteli, 2002; Meho 2006). As a substitute for nonverbal cues I encouraged my respondents to use acronyms (e.g. *LOL: laughing on the floor; ROFL: rolling on the floor laughing*) emoticons (e.g. *smiley faces*) underlinings or capital letters if they wanted to emphasis something. My hopes were that this would lessen some of the losses in nonverbal cues, and hopefully increase the depth of the data collected. I did not know how literate my respondents were with these communication methods, but both of them chose to use several emoticons, capital letters and exclamation marks.

Overall, e-mail interviewing offers an opportunity to access, in an interactive manner, participants’ thoughts and ideas in their own words (Meho 2006: 1291). E-mail interviews also reduce, if not eliminate, some of the problems associated with telephone or face-to-face interviews, such as the interviewer/ interviewee effects that might result from visual or nonverbal cues or status difference between the two (e.g., race, gender, age, voice tones, dress, shyness, gestures, disabilities). E-mail interviewing is additionally empowering to the participants because it essentially allows them to be in control of the flow of the interview

enabling them to answer at their convenience and in any manner they feel suitable (ibid).

Transcribing the interviews was not necessary. Computer-assisted interviews are self-transcribing in the sense that the written text is basically ready for analysis the minute it has been received (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009:149).

4.3.3 Analyzing the data

When the period of data collecting was over – in the end of June – I had a total of 350 blog posts. In order to get closer to my first main research question Q1: *How do the bloggers conduct themselves within the boundaries and strict limitations on free speech set by the government?* I had to categorize my material. I made a chronological list – month-by-month, blogger-by-blogger – of the different blog posts each of my respondents had written. I also included a separate field with the different tags¹⁶ the bloggers had chosen to attach to their blog posts, such as *music, movies, news, politics, gossip, satire, beauty*, etc. (see Appendix 01 or 02 for an example). However, the material was still quite complex and unmanageable so the next step was to categorise the 350 blog posts down in different categories/variables. I chose to use 6 different variables based on Technorati's different blog categories. Technorati was founded as the first and is now the world's leading blog search engine. Technorati categorises blogs theme-wise and uses seven different categories: *Women, Business, Technology, Entertainment, Sports, Lifestyle, and Politics*. After I had gone through all the 350 blog posts twice, none of them fitted within *Business* (usually about advertising and finance) or *Sports*. All of my respondents are bloggers by virtue of being themselves – none of them do it as part of a business or an organisation. That is probably why for instant *Business* was left empty. However, many of the bloggers wrote about societal issues and I thus replaced *Business* and *Sports* with *Society*. The process of analyzing and labelling the blog posts at this stage, was necessarily done out of my own discretion. To enhance reliability, I did this process twice – a few weeks apart. However, in the interview with Mr.

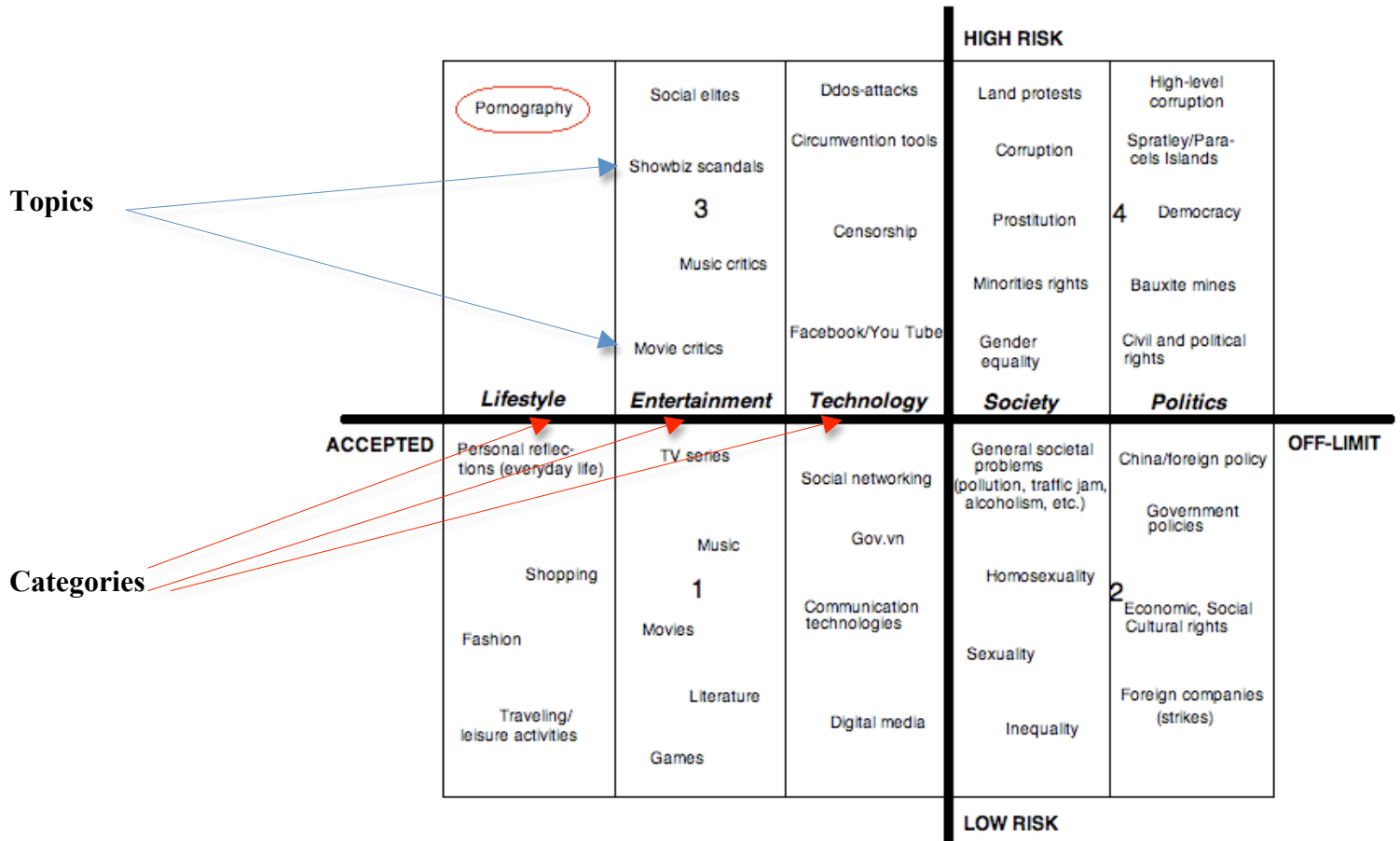
¹⁶ In online computer systems terminology, a tag is a non-hierarchical keyword or term assigned to a piece of information (such as an Internet bookmark, digital image, or computer file). This kind of metadata helps describe an item and allows it to be found again by browsing or searching. Many blog systems allow authors to add free-form tags to a post, along with (or instead of) placing the post into categories. For example, a post may display that it has been tagged with *baseball* and *tickets*. Each of those tags is usually a web link leading to an index page listing of all the posts associated with that tag.

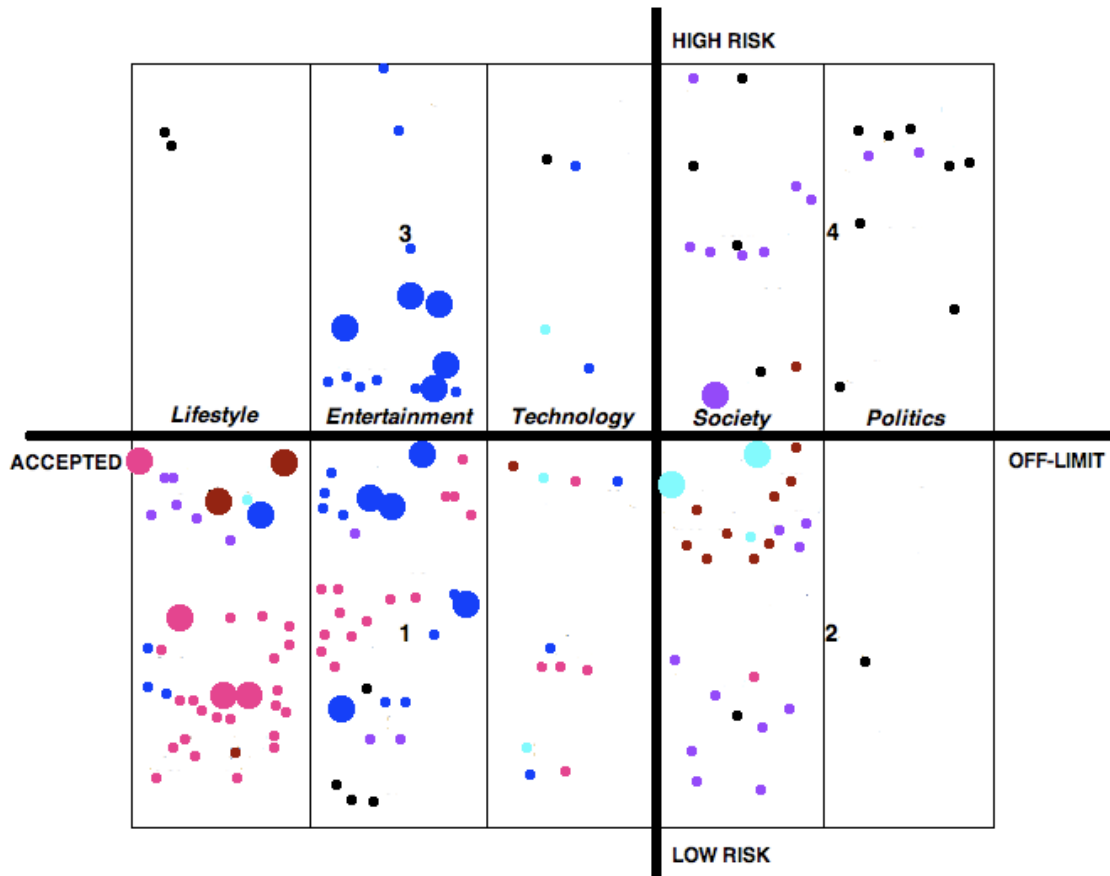
Expat on July 3, I discovered something I yet had not taken into account. When I asked him about what kind of topics he considers being off-limit, he said: “*Direct accusations concerning Vietnamese policy decisions. I never go for that, and if I do it’s framed under “cultural commentary” or “social commentary” and I comment about the people rather than the government.* I therefore went back to my material (350 blog posts) once more, and analyzed them a third time. By doing this the reliability and validity of my research design was strengthened.

After careful consideration of different alternatives, I found it best visually wise to present the findings of the first analysis in a kind of plot chart (see illustration under). I did this because I wanted to visualize *where* my bloggers can be placed within Vietnam’s blogosphere, *what* they are writing about, and *how* they are writing about it. It was hard, however, to find a concrete, suitable model for my purpose, and I have therefore intentionally chosen to call my model number 01, 02 and 03 *illustrations*. I have neither used any mathematical formulas nor a specific theoretical model. I have rather made my own illustrations based on and inspired by Bourdieu’s models of society and social relations. The logic behind the models is as follows (see illustrations on the next page): The horizontal axis displays the different categories. *Lifestyle* and *Entertainment* are the most accepted themes to write about, while *Society* and especially *Politics* are the most non-accepted and thus off limit. Within each category (Politics, Society, Technology...) there are safe and more critical topics to write about. To blog about your new cell phone or the opening of the first Apple Store in Vietnam, for example, is quite harmless and something I thus assume as a ‘low risk’ blog post (within *Technology*). And opposite: to post recipes on how to circumvent firewalls (it is forbidden to do that in Vietnam) or launch a campaign to bring Facebook back to Vietnam (the Government banned Facebook in 2010) is a more critical issue and thus a high-risk blog post (within *Technology*). The vertical axis therefore displays whether a blog post is high-risk or a low-risk one.

When the vertical and horizontal axes intersect, four different fields appears – field 1,2,3 and 4. Within these four fields, I then placed the 350 blog posts I had analyzed – represented as dots. The small dots represent one blog post, while the big dots represents 10 blog posts. The different topics I have written down within each category are concrete

examples of different low-risk or high-risk themes. However, it is not necessarily the case that for instance high-level corruption is a more high-risk theme than bauxite mining. Or that a blog post about China is more low-risk one than one about civil and political rights. The main issue is whether a theme belongs above or below the line (the horizontal axis) – in other words in field 1 or 2, 3 or 4. I will elaborate much more on this when I present my findings in chapter 5.





- (black) = Mr. Controversial
- (blue) = Mr. Showbiz
- (pink) = Ms. Pink
- (turquoise) = Mr. Vietmerican
- (purple) = Ms. Feminist
- (red) = Mr. Expat

The blog posts I placed within field 1 are the ones I assumed as “safest”. They are about lifestyle-, entertainment-, technology and women issues, but under a safe and non-critical topic (TV-shows, fashion, birthday presents, shopping, etcetera.). Field 2 is also a pretty safe field. The blog posts I placed within this field were the ones that were about safe society- and political issues (such as natural disaster, social and economic rights) and thus likely to be tolerated by the government. Field 3 is seemingly a safe field (since it captures lifestyle-, entertainment-, technology and women issues) but I interpret the blog posts I placed here as more “high risking”. They are for instance about circumvention tools, pornography, and gossip about the social elite in Vietnam. Co Dai Do Long, whom I referred to in the beginning of this thesis, was for instant arrested for a blog posts about the social elite. On October 14

2010 she posted a story on her blog about the “womanizing drug user” Nguyen Khanh **Toan**. Toan is a well-known “celebrity” in Vietnam, but also son of the then Deputy Minister of Public Security. Co Dai Do Long also reproduced a letter from an official criticizing the Deputy Minister for giving his son a job at the ministry. The letter alleged that Toan had a drug addiction. 9 days later, Co Dai Do Long was arrested and the indictment read: “posting inaccurate information”, “defaming a senior Communist Party official and his family” and “violating national security” (Reporters Without Borders 2010; Vnexpress 2010). Field 3 is thus most certainly a grey area. Field 4 contains the blog posts that are usually off-limit in terms of government tolerance. This field is the most “high-risking” place to be in terms of surveillance and legal persecution.

In order to find out how the bloggers conduct themselves within the boundaries and strict limitations on free speech set by the government (Q1), I found the blog posts within field 2,3 and 4 as the most relevant and interesting. These are the blog posts that are balancing between what I assumed as “allowed” versus “not tolerated”. A handful of blog posts from each of these three fields, was therefore selected for closer analysis. My main curiosity at this stage was to find out what kind of – if any at all – strategy they were using in order to write about these seemingly more sensitive issues. What I found, are presented in the next chapter 5, the presentation of my findings.

4.3.4 Verifying – ascertain validity and reliability

The most controversial question whereas qualitative methods are concerned, is whether these kind of studies require validity, reliability and generalizing – three values that according to the quantitative research tradition are indispensable methodological requirements with “status as a kind of sacred, scientific trinity” (Kvale 1996:158 in Genticow 2005:56).

The first and may be most obvious limitation when using extreme sampling, is the lack of generalizability (Patton 2002: 234). However, my thesis and the investigations of blogs and bloggers are, as mentioned, not intended to form a representative sample of the universe of the blogosphere in Vietnam, but rather a scope of attitudes and concepts. Reliability and validity on the other hand, are strict scientific principles and regards the quality of the craftsmanship

of me as a researcher. To ensure validity, a research instrument must measure what it is intended to measure (Gray 2009: 155). McBurney (1998) poses an interesting analogy in that regard, of using a measurement of hat size to determine intelligence. You could measure someone's hat size, say, every hour and always come up with the same result. The test, then, is reliable. However, it is not valid, because the hat size has nothing to do with what is being measured. I have strived for high validity by constructing clear-defined research questions and using a mixed research design. In the beginning of the research process, however, I did consider only doing in-depth interviews (due to Vietnam's tense situation) but I later learned that a common problem, and often a significant one, is *bias* on the part of the respondents. It is quite common, for example, for respondents to provide a response they think the researcher is seeking (Gray 2009: 160). Even assurance of confidentiality may not be enough to encourage complete honesty (ibid). Instead, I thus decided to adopt a mixed research design. By conducting interviews, and compare the information gathered from the interviews with the information gathered through the qualitative and quantitative document analyses, the validity of my findings is strengthened.

According to Gray (2009) reliability is an indication of consistency between two measures of the same thing, like the measures of two different instruments; the same instrument applied on two occasions; or the same instrument administrated by two different people (p. 158). In other words, reliability refers to how *consistent* certain results are (ibid; Kvale 1996). There are several ways of ensuring reliability, like measuring the *stability*, the *equivalence*, the *internal consistency*, the *inter-judge reliability* and the *intra-judge reliability* (Gray 2009: 158-160). In my case I consider stability, equivalence and intra-judge reliability as the most relevant. In that regard I chose to follow my bloggers over 6 months, to analyze as much as 350 blog posts (quantitatively) and to repeat the analysis of the blog posts three times a couple of weeks apart. The reliability of the results is thus strengthened. In addition, I have based my blog categories – Politics, Society, Technology, Entertainment and Lifestyle – on Technorati's typology of blog categories. Technorati was founded as the first and is now the world's leading blog search engine. I thus consider my variables (the categories) as fairly reliable.

4.4 Ethical problems of Internet research

Research on the Internet is valuable, not only because it can provide insight into a new and important communication channel, but also because the net opens up the possibility to study known phenomena, like formation of norms, diffusion of information, communication, and formation of groups, in new ways (NESH 2003). But Internet research not only encompasses research into phenomena *on* the net but also research that use the net as *a tool* for research (for example as a channel for making contact with informants). In my thesis I have used the Internet both as an object (the blogs) and a tool (interviews through e-mail and Skype). This has raised several ethical challenges. Ethical problems of Internet research are structurally similar to problems known from more traditional fields of research within the social sciences and the humanities. Still, there are aspects of these ethical issues that are special to Internet research (Elgesem 2009). The main dilemmas I have faced in my thesis have been in connection with subject's consent, the use of direct quotes from the Internet, anonymity/pseudonyms, and the special obligation to report the results of research back to those who participated in it, in a proper and comprehensible form.

4.4.1 Subject's consent

Given the thousands and thousands of readers and the wide reach of my chosen respondent's weblogs, I have, as mentioned, considered them as a part of the public sphere. As a general rule, information that one counts as public can freely be used for research purposes (NESH 2003: §4) and a researcher can freely use material from open Internet forums without obtaining informed consent from the persons who have produced the information or from the persons the information is about (NESH 2003: §4). A complete list of NESH's research ethics guidelines for Internet research can be found in appendix 05. Still, the issue of consent is not that straightforward. Since Vietnam is such a hostile place in terms of blogging and freedom of expression, I decided to ask my respondents for consent. I regard consent as intertwined with the right to integrity and autonomy. At what *time* I was going to ask for consent, was not that obvious. Should I ask for consent prior to my data-collecting period, or after? After careful consideration I decided to do it afterwards since an enquiry about informed consent can be destructive for the interaction the researcher wants to study (NESH 2003). A decisive

factor in that regard, was that I was not actively involved in discussions or in any other way interacting with the bloggers – I was only observing and (...) "observation in public spaces, in streets and squares, can normally be carried out without informing those concerned." (NESH 2003: §7). Another decisive factor was that all of my respondents have one or another form of archive system on their blog, so all the blog posts they have posted for the last couple of years are open and available (for everyone) on the blog.

I contacted the seven bloggers for the first time in primo May 2011. In order to prevent a potential language barrier I emailed the inquiries in both English and Vietnamese. I quite instantly got consent from four of them; Mr. Vietmerican; Mr Column; Mr. Showbiz and Ms Feminist. However, Mr. Showbiz and Ms. Feminist later withdrew themselves from my project. Or, they did not actively withdraw themselves from the project, but suddenly stopped answering my e-mails after several weeks of correspondence. I have later tried to contact them on several occasions – without success. Mr. Expat, Mr. Controversial and Ms. Pink have never answered my e-mails. I have sent them in total 8 e-mails over a period of 3 months, both in English and Vietnamese and through different channels. However, Mr. Expat suddenly “disappeared” from the blogosphere and social media sites. Weeks later, in primo June, he posted a public note on his blog that explained the reason. After several years as one of the most active in the English-speaking blog community, he decided to give social media a complete break for a while. Reportedly he had been publicly badmouthed online and blamed for a setting up a hate site against another expat in Hanoi. To use his own words (somewhat paraphrased): in the end it wasn't the government that shut him down. I considered this incident as a relevant finding – even an interesting one – and I thus decided to keep Mr. Expat as a part of my thesis. Where Mr. Controversial and Ms. Pink are concerned I find their lack of consent as the most critical issue. I have tried to compensate for this by restraining as much personal information about them as possible. This leads me to my next point.

4.4.2 Using quotes from the Internet and pseudonyms

As mentioned, information that one counts as public can freely be used for research purposes (NESH 2003: § 4). However, when using quotes from the Internet in relation to publication of

research results, the researcher must carefully consider the fact that it is possible to trace informants' identity by use of a full quote from the Internet (NESH 2003: § 8). I have decided never to copy or quote anything my bloggers has posted on the Internet. I have also strived to talk about and present my bloggers in a way that does not directly link them to their blog or any identity revealing sources – even though some of them have permitted me to. Not quoting proved to be a huge challenge, especially when I was about to analyse the blog posts and present my findings. Three of the bloggers uses pseudonyms/nicknames. Pseudonyms are an important part of the interaction on the Internet. Such pseudonyms often function as ordinary names and they are often used in different fora and in different connections. The researcher should carefully consider the fact that informants do not necessarily consider personal information anonymized if the researcher uses their pseudonyms (NESH 2003: § 10). I never refer to my bloggers pseudonyms. I have rather anonymized all my bloggers by, among other things, giving them fictitious pseudonyms.

4.4.3 “Information on the results should in any case be made available to whoever has contributed”¹⁷

Many of the most interesting social and cultural movements on the Internet are built on norms of openness, freedom of information, and the sharing of results. In connection to Internet research on such digital communities, a special responsibility thus arises for reporting research results to the participants of an investigation (NESH 2003: § 11). This “special obligation” is far too often neglected – especially when regards researchers from the "wealthy North" on a journey in the "impoverished South". Reporting my research results back has been – and still is – a recommendation I have been struggling with. I found it strange that the evaluation from NESH did not touch upon this. I have strived to exclude or disguise all information that might reveal my blogger's true identity, but I have come to realise that this is impossible. For the knowledgeable netizens, my bloggers identities are probably less than ten clicks away.

¹⁷ NESH's Research ethics guidelines for Internet research §11

5.0 Findings of the Qualitative Analysis

In this chapter I will take a deeper look into my findings. First I will present my findings. I will do this step by step by answering my sub-research questions. Then I will summarize some of the main and most interesting findings, and try to interpret them in light of my background section on Vietnam's societal and political context. A broader discussion on my findings and analysis will be presented in the next and final chapter – the Discussion. That discussion will be focused around my main research question¹⁸ and framed in the theoretical works presented in the introductory chapters. But prior to all of the above mentioned; some explanations to the illustrations I am using as a point of departure.

5.1 Boiling down 350 blog posts

I have, as mentioned, analysed about 350 blog posts and chosen to present them in plot charts (illustration 01, 02 and 03). The plot charts shows *where* my bloggers can be placed within Vietnam's blogosphere, *what* they are writing about, and *how* they are writing about it.

¹⁸ *Q1: How do bloggers in Vietnam conduct themselves within the boundaries and strict limitations on free speech set by the government? Q2: How does this affect the potential of the blogosphere as a political space?*

Illustration 01 – plot chart (themes)

					HIGH RISK
	Pomography Social elites Showbiz scandals 3 Music critics Movie critics Lifestyle	Ddos-attacks Circumvention tools Censorship Facebook/You Tube Entertainment	Ddos-attacks Circumvention tools Censorship Facebook/You Tube Technology	Land protests Corruption Prostitution Minorities rights Gender equality Society	High-level corruption Spratley/Para-cels Islands 4 Democracy Bauxite mines Civil and political rights Politics
ACCEPTED	Personal reflections (everyday life) Shopping Fashion Traveling/leisure activities	TV series Music 1 Movies Literature Games	Social networking Gov.vn Communication technologies Digital media	General societal problems (pollution, traffic jam, alcoholism, etc.) Homosexuality Sexuality Inequality	China/foreign policy Government policies 2 Economic, Social Cultural rights Foreign companies (strikes)
					LOW RISK
					OFF-LIMIT

The horizontal axis displays the different categories. These categories are as mentioned based on Technorati's division of different blogs. *Lifestyle* and *Entertainment* are the most accepted themes to write about, while *Society* and especially *Politics* are the most off-limit. I have based this accepted-off limit-hierarchy (Lifestyle → Entertainment → Technology → Society → Politics) partly on the government's own laws and regulation and partly on the different arrests and sentences of the soon to be 19 convicted bloggers and activists over the last 5 years (RSF 2011; HRW 2011). The same applies to the different topics within the different categories (high-level

corruption, bauxite mining, circumvention tools, DdoS-attacks, etc.). It is widely recognized (at least among international human rights organisation and diplomats) that corruption, foreign policy and sovereignty disputes with China, criticism of bauxite mining, freedom of belief/religious topics, and to some degree contracts with foreign companies, are the “hot button issues” (Freedom House 2011; RSF 2010; Human Rights Watch 2010). Thus, there is, a great variety *within* the different categories – meaning how low-risk or high-risk the topic of a specific blog posts is. Some of the bloggers writes quite critically within the *Entertainment* field – a field that in principle is pretty safe. And opposite, some bloggers write quite harmlessly and safe about the *Society* – a field that could be more sensitive (high-level corruption and land protests is highly risky businesses to blog about versus traffic jam or natural disasters). The vertical axis is therefore emphasising how “low-risk” or “high-risk” a specific blog post is. When the vertical and horizontal axes intersect, four different fields appears – field 1,2,3 and 4. Within these four fields, I placed the 350 blog posts I had analyzed – represented as dots. Illustration 02 shows how and where the different blog posts are placed within the blogosphere. The small dots represent 1 blog post, while the big dots represents 10 blog posts. Illustration 03 is illustration 01 and 02 melted together.

Illustration 02 – plot chart (dots)

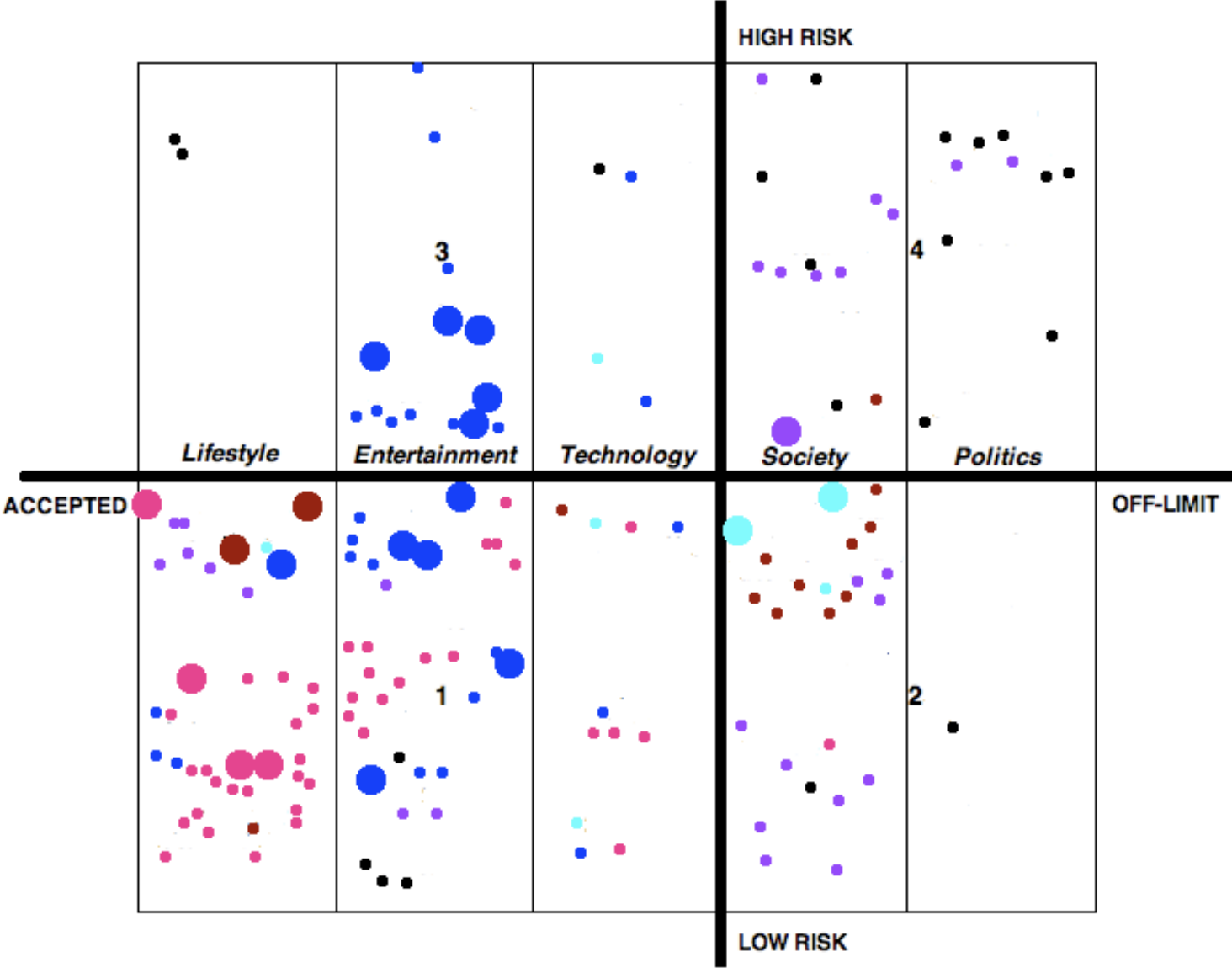
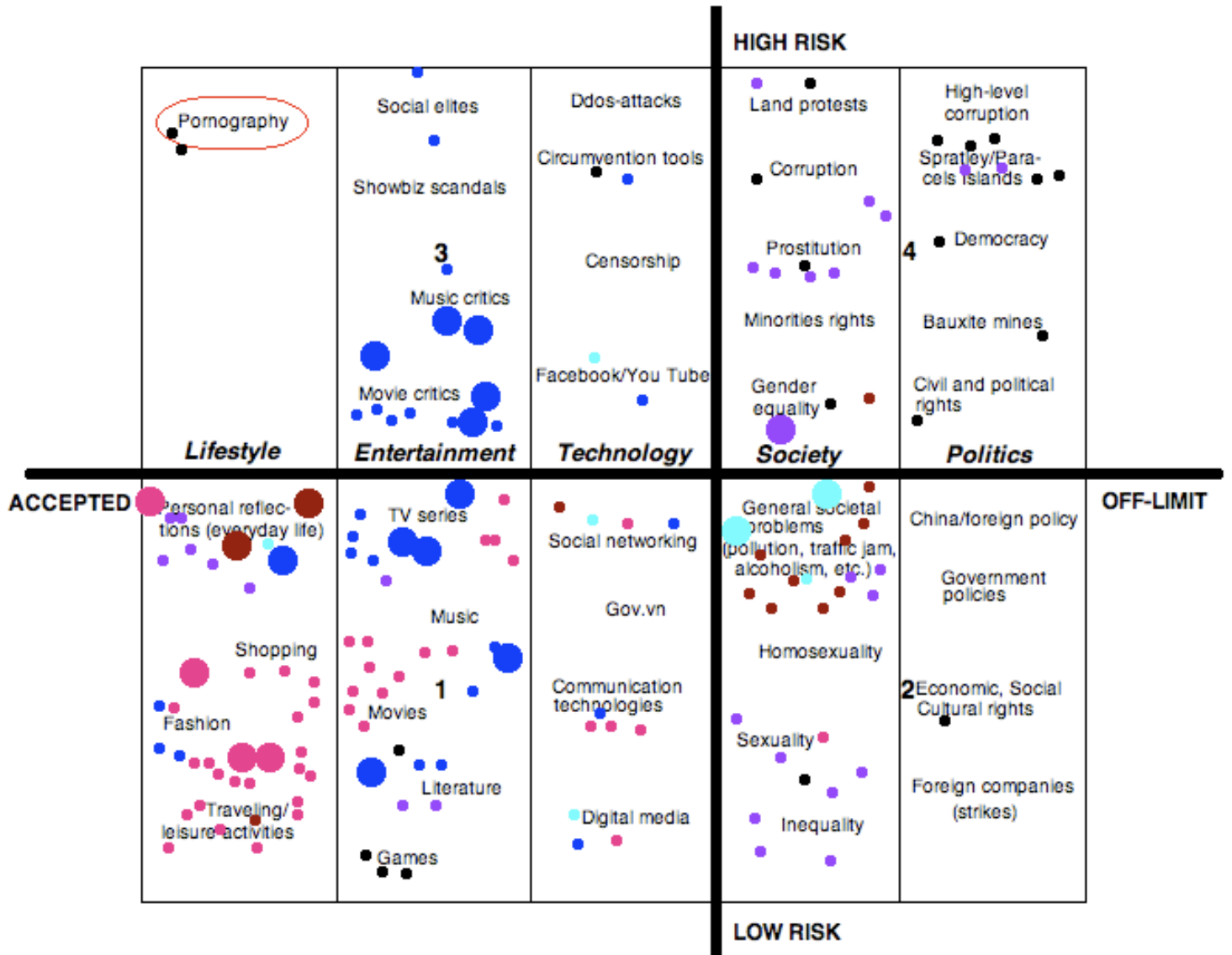


Illustration 03 – plot chart (dots and themes)



The small dots (●) represent one blog posts, while the big dots (●) represents 10 blog posts.

5.1.2 The four different fields

By combining the two axis and the two illustrations, four different fields appear:

Field 1 contains the most accepted themes, written in a "low-risk" way. They are about lifestyle, entertainment and technology issues such as the latest fashion trends, the TV-show Vietnam's next top models or the first (legal) Apple store being opened in Vietnam. I have labelled the blog posts within this field as the safest.

Field 2 is also a safe field, but not as safe as field 1. The blog posts within this field are either about the society or politics issues. These themes might actually be quite sensitive, but the blog posts within this field are the ones that are "non-critical". I have labelled this field as a safe field, but it is most certainly a grey area.

Field 3 is also a so-called grey area. This field is seemingly safe, with blog posts under the umbrella of Lifestyle, Entertainment or Technology. The special feature with the blog posts within this field is that they are critical – some times highly critical – even though the category is pretty safe. Examples might be critical discussions about whether the government's blocking of Facebook can be accepted or not, and reviews of forbidden films with sexual content.

Field 4 is the most controversial field. The blog posts here are both very critical in terms of voice, and the themes are highly sensitive. The blog posts are about bauxite mining, public protests against disputes in the South-China Sea, media propaganda, etc. Several bloggers have been arrested for writings and expressions about these kinds of themes, and they are thus clearly off-the-limit of what the Vietnamese government tolerates and permits (Hayton 2010; VCHR 2010; McKinley 2009).

Before I continue by presenting my concrete findings, I want to underline once again that I have made my illustrations out of my own discernment. I have analysed all the blog posts, and placed them where I think they belong. The exact location of every dot is thus not necessarily completely accurate. The main thing however, is whether they belong in the field 1,2,3 or 4. I feel fairly

confident this has been done in a transparent and precisely manner. This brings me over to the presentation of my first findings: what are the bloggers blogging about?

5.2 What are they writing about and how are they writing about it?

My first sub research questions reads: *(q1) What are the bloggers writing about and how are they writing about it?* The most prevalent finding by looking at the illustrations is that the different bloggers are writing within different *categories* (politics, technology, lifestyle...) and about different *topics* (fashion, gender equality, bauxite mining, etc). Each blogger has in addition a tendency to write within especially one or two categories. This can be highlighted more easily by looking at one blogger at a time (table 04).

Table 04 – what the bloggers are writing about

	Politics	Society	Technology	Entertainment	Lifestyle	TOTAL
Mr. Controversial	9	5	1	3		18
Mr. Showbiz		1	5	120	28	154
Mrs. Pink		3	5	17	60	85
Mrs. Feminist	2	27			8	37
Mr. Vietmerican		22	2		1	25
Mr. Expat		9	1		21	31
TOTAL	11	67	14	140	118	350

By looking at the plot chart 02 and 03 and table 04 (over) it is evident that most of the blog posts are about entertainment and lifestyle issues. Then there's a great leap down to Society (67 blog posts), Technology (14) and at Politics (11) at the very bottom. In other words, the blog posts are quite widely spread within the various categories. However, if we take a look at the bloggers individually, the situation is quite the opposite.

Mr. Controversial is mostly writing about *Politics* (9 blog posts) and most of them are found within field 4 (see illustration 02 or 03). He takes a fairly high risk by writing about non-accepted

issues within non-accepted categories. On his blog he does not have a field for reader's comments under his different blog posts, so his blog is first and foremost a source for (unofficial) news and information. I'll evaluate and discuss this further in chapter 5.5.

Mr. Showbiz is mostly writing about *Entertainment* (120 posts) and *Lifestyle* (28 post). His blog posts mostly belongs within field 1 – meaning that he usually blogs about safe and accepted topics. A very prominent feature of Mr. Showbiz' blog, are the dozens, and in some cases even hundreds, of comments he receives under his different blog posts. His blog is very interactive and open for conversations and discussions on different topics. By analysing the blog, it is very evident that Mr. Showbiz is living in Ho Chi Minh City. He frequently showcases himself on the red carpet enjoying a night out (HCM is known for this compared to Hanoi). He thereby represents the up and coming *Generation Z* in Vietnam – the so-called craving guiltless generation more concerned with indulgence than duty, “me” (individuality) than “we” (collectivism and Confucian traditions), change and choices (Camigo 2011).

Ms. Pink also writes almost without exception within field 1. She is mostly blogging about *Lifestyle* (60) or *Entertainment* (17) and sticks with the kind of information that the government has ordered them [bloggers] to: namely strictly personal issues (Circular No. 02/2005/TTLT-BCVT-VHTT-CA-KHDT). The blog clearly reflects that she lives in HCM, and she is often seen on the same media and entertainment events as Mr. Showbiz. She has comment fields for reader's replies under her blog entries, but they are filled with envy and admiration rather than the debates and discussions as in Mr. Showbiz' case. Clearly, Ms. Pink is a role model for many girls and young women.

Ms. Feminist is mostly writing about “women issues” (25 posts) and mostly within field 3. She seems to have a kind “feminist agenda” with the majority of her blog posts about domestic violence, women's sexuality, prostitution and gender equality. Ms. Feminist is balancing on “the red line”, and is taking a quite high risk. I'll elaborate more on this later. Ms. Feminist also writes

for and *about* women, but she probably has a more mature audience than Ms. Pink. She represents the higher educated, well-read and more independent Vietnamese woman, a growing but yet limited demographic group in Vietnam (UN 2010).

Mr. Vietmerican has an overwhelmingly majority of his blog posts within *Society* – 22 out of a total of 25 blog posts – all of which belongs in field 2. He is fairly safe, but it is most certainly a grey area. I will return to this later. He publishes about one blog posts a week, and usually in the form of a longer satirical, social commentary of things he has experienced or reflected upon. It is mostly fellow foreigners that leave replies in the comment under his commentaries, but he says he has an aspiration of reaching a broader Vietnamese audience. He has therefore hired a translator that helps him to publish his blog entries in Vietnamese as well (interview July 3, 2011).

Mr. Expat is mostly writing within the category *Lifestyle* (21), but has also a significant amount of his blog posts about *Society*. He is staying low in terms of risk, and is therefore (probably) off the government’s radar. He is a typical expat writing mainly for the expat community in Vietnam and family and friends back home. Mr. Vietmerican described this “community” with the following words when I interview him in primo July 2011: “*The English-speaking blogosphere in Vietnam is rather reserved at times, hyper-aware of what Vietnam is going through, very expat-esque in that the perspectives are foreign and sometimes very unsympathetic, but also very in love with Vietnam – whether they admit it or not*”(). Mr. Expat is very representative of this community in that regard.

5.3 What kind of topics do they consider being off limit?

By looking at the plot charts and table 04 it is quite evident that politics and to a certain degree society issues are the categories with the fewest blog posts – at least in field 4. This might indicate that the majority of the bloggers consider political- and highly critical societal entries being off limit. Due to my sample size I cannot regard this as a very solid finding. However, the answers from my interviewees are pointing in the same direction. As mentioned earlier, three of my

bloggers never answered my request for their participation (Mr. Controversial, Ms. Pink and Mr. Expat). Mr. Showbiz and Ms. Feminist were first willing to participate, but withdrew in mid and late June. These four incidents must also be termed as findings – even interesting findings. The two bloggers that *did* dare to participate in my interviews, however, had the following replies when I asked them about what kind of topics – if any –they consider being off-limit, and if they are aware of what they are “allowed” to say/store/share as a blogger in Vietnam (in other words; where the line is drawn).

About what topics being off-limit:

“Direct accusations concerning Vietnamese policy decisions. I never go for that, and if I do it’s framed under “cultural commentary” or “social commentary” and I comment about the people rather than the government” (*interview with Mr. Vietmerican June 3, 2011*)

“Core politics at personal/national level. But for those who concentrate on the poignant and quirky, there is ample creative space, never felt boxed in. You have to look at it subject by subject – it is too complex to be labelled with any single adjective” (*interview with Mr. Column, July 12, 2011*).

About what they are allowed to say/store/share on their blogs:

“The essence [of the laws, decrees and decisions, etc.] is that you cannot blog about falsified information about the government. But basically, it means, we, the government, reserve the right to arrest you by any means necessary if you present facts that accuse us of wrongdoing. The line is drawn at the doorstep of the government” (*interview with Mr. Vietmerican June 3, 2011*)

“Yes, in theory, but again my interest never really carries me too far into that direction so I do have a deep sense of there being a “line”. It’s like asking J.K. Rowling if she knows where the line is as regards graphic depictions or rape. She does, of course, but I would venture she has never been too tempted to approach it” (*interview with Mr. Column, July 12, 2011*).

What Mr. Column says about (...) *my interest never really carries me too far into that direction* [politics, accusations against the government] seems to apply to Mr. Showbiz and Ms. Pink as well. With one exception they never touch upon the category *Society* or *Politics* (see illustration 02 or 03). Ms. Feminist and especially Mr. Controversial are at the other end of the scale – especially Mr. Controversial. They are constantly stepping into the authority's domain –

consciously or not. This takes me to my next sub-research question.

5.4 Are the bloggers trying to ‘push the envelope’ (fence breaking) and if so; what are their motivations for doing so?

It is quite evident that the bloggers *are* trying to push the boundaries – at least some of them. By looking at illustration 02 and 03 it is fairly evident that the bloggers are divided in two. Ms. Pink, Mr. Showbiz and Mr. Expat stays put – almost without exceptions – in field 1. These three are blogging well within what the government “permits” (or simply does not care about). Mr. Vietmerican and Ms. Feminist, however, seem to challenge the boundaries to a greater extent. Mr. Controversial is by far the most controversial. He often writes about politics, the government and its policies and he does it in a highly critical way. Ms Feminist is also balancing on the fence. She is blogging the way for "taboos" from the private sphere over to the public sphere, and agitates for social unrest by calling for a kind of "women's revolution". According to my analysis, about 80 percent of Mr. Expat’s blog posts have the tag *satire*. As the next paragraph (5.5) will reveal, he is carrying out a kind of “silent criticism” and is carefully stepping outside the fence.

5.5 Are the bloggers using a kind of strategy in order to “survive” in the blogosphere?

In order to find out whether the bloggers are using some kind of a survival strategy or not, I found the blog posts within field 2, 3 and 4 as the most relevant and interesting. A handful of blog posts from each of these three fields, was therefore selected for a closer text analysis. However, whether the bloggers are using a clear-cut strategy, is not that easy to find out. My main curiosity at this stage (the text analysis) was therefore to find out if it was some kind of pattern among the blog posts that most clearly was outside “the red line”. For the four that did *not* take part in an interview, I have had to rely on text analysis of their writings in combination with content analysis of their blogs. Most of the findings on the non-interviewed ones thus start with: “*It seems as though...*” This could have been an idle situation for a lot of guessing and assuming, but that was not my priority. I have therefore chosen to only present the most prominent signs of a pattern/strategy – or the lack thereof – with each blogger.

5.5.1 Mr. Controversial

Table 01: Mr. Controversial's blog posts

	Politics	Society	Technology	Entertainment	Lifestyle	TOTAL (per month)
January	2	2	1			5
February	1					1
March	1	2				3
April		1		2		3
May				1		1
June	5					5
TOTAL (per category)	9	5	1	3	0	18

Mr. Controversial's most prominent sign of a strategy is to keep a low profile. He has no personal information or pictures of himself, family or friends on his blog, and he stays "under cover" by writing with a pseudonym. He has a total of 18 blog posts over the period I followed him, but unlike the other bloggers he was most active in January and June – the two months where the political situation in Vietnam was at its most tense. The 11th Party Congress was as mentioned held in January, and June saw several protest against China and the dispute in the South China/North Sea¹⁹. Mr. Controversial has chosen Multiply as his blog hosts, and it seems as though he only distributes his blog posts via this one web page. At first glance his blog resembles an online newspaper, with different sections such as *Politics, News, Culture, Economy*, etc. However, Mr. Controversial rarely writes his own blog posts, but rather circulates pictures, political cartoons, videos, ministerial letters, court decisions and so on. Mr. Controversial has many blog posts outside the "permitted", strictly personal information. Among other controversial topics, Mr. Controversial has distributed a letter to the People Court of Hanoi from Cu Huy Ha

¹⁹ What the Vietnamese call *The North Sea*, is the same territory the Chinese call *The South China Sea*.

Vu's lawyer and a letter from Cu Huy Ha Vu himself to *Voice of America*²⁰. Cu Huy Ha Vu is a lawyer and one of Vietnam's most high-profiled activists. Mr Vu, who was arrested in November 2011, had called for an end to one-party rule, and was sentenced to seven years in jail in December 2011. Through his writing and interviews given to foreign media, Mr. Vu has in recent years advocated for a multi-party system and called for democratic reforms in Vietnam. He has also tried to sue the Vietnamese prime minister twice over a bauxite-mining project he said would harm the environment (BBC 2010, RSF 2010; HRW 2010). It seems as though Mr. Controversial is actively following Cu Huy Ha Vu's case because he is repeatedly posting blog posts with updates on Mr. Vu's health, appeals, etc. During my content gathering period Mr. Controversial also posted recipes on how to access Facebook, a blog posts with over 100 positions to show off one's body for those who want to produce scandals and four blog posts with videos and pictures from the protest against China and the disputes in the North Sea.

I understand Mr. Controversial's "low profile" (hiding his true identity and writing with a pseudonym) as a kind of survival strategy. The same applies to the fact that he rarely writes his own blog posts, but rather circulates pictures, videos, letters, court decisions and so on. Internet users and organisations involved in Internet activities *are* legally responsible for the content they create, upload, store and transmit on the Internet (Article 9 in Law in Information, Article 12 in the Decree No. 97/2008) in Vietnam. Bloggers are additionally responsible for ensuring that even hyperlinks do not contain illegal content (Article 3.1 and 4 in Circular No. 02/2005). However, Vietnam does offer a "safe harbour" of sorts of organisations and individuals who transmit or temporarily or automatically store information created by *others* (ONI 2010:416). Since Mr. Controversial rarely writes his own blog posts, but rather circulates information created by *others*, it seems as though he has found this "loophole" in the governments dense net of laws and restrictions. This kind of "pasquino strategy" is a known phenomenon when regards the history of censorship – at least in Europe. I will get back to this in the next chapter – the discussion.

²⁰ Voice of America (VOA) is an international multimedia broadcaster with service in 44 languages. VOA provides news, information, and cultural programming through the Internet, mobile and social media, radio, and television. VOA is funded by the U.S. Government through the Broadcasting Board of Governors. VOA's Internet pages are on the Vietnamese government's so-called "Blacklists" and are thus blocked in Vietnam (ONI 2010).

5.5.2 Mr. Showbiz

Table 02: Mr. Showbiz' blog posts

	Politics	Society	Technology	Entertainment	Lifestyle	TOTAL (per month)
January				18	12	30
February				21	7	28
March		1	1	29		31
April		1	2	23	4	30
May				28	3	31
June				3	1	4
TOTAL (per category)	0	2	3	122	27	154

Mr. Showbiz is the most high-profiled blogger of my sample. He is often seen on the red carpet of Vietnam's media scene and on the cover of various magazines. He can thus be regarded as a celebrity. During the period I followed Mr. Showbiz he wrote one blog posts every day – except in June. June was also the month Mr. Showbiz withdrew himself from participating in my thesis (but there is not necessarily a correlation between those two incidents). Mr. Showbiz's so-called *Official Blog* is hosted on a server in New Zealand. He also has profiles at at least 20 different social networking sites based in Vietnam, that he distributes his blog posts through. If I have had the time, it would be interesting to investigate whether he distributes the exact same content on the Vietnamese based servers as the foreign based servers.

Mr. Showbiz' most prominent sign of strategy seems to be to keep his business far from any political issue. He never wrote about politics or issues of more general concern for the society at large, during my study period. I never had the chance to interview Mr. Showbiz about this, but he says in an interview in a widely circulated Vietnamese magazine: *“I have no intentions to stir up scandals. I like to make my readers feel secure and not too shocked as many other bloggers”* (interview mid July 2010). He elaborates more on this in a blog posts in primo April 2011:

“Now we have the right to express and share our thoughts, views and feelings on at least particular subjects [my underlining]. We do not just passively receive information through the media like before”. (*Mr. Showbiz' reflections on “The development of blogging and social networking in*

Vietnam” – translated from Vietnamese and slightly paraphrased).

However, Mr. Showbiz does not entirely accept what he calls “the decisions from above”. In a blog post in primo January 2011 –about whether it was right or wrong to block Facebook – he blames the government:

“After many months of deliberately causing difficulties to Facebook users, all Vietnamese ISP now officially block Facebook²¹.

According to AP – an international news organisation – our 2 biggest Internet providers, namely FPT and VNPT, affirm that the Government has instructed them to block this social webpage. Viettel and SPT users also... surrender.) So now we have no way to legally connect with our friends on Facebook.

Having worked with Facebook staff, I see that they are whole-hearted at preventing negative actions on Facebook. So the good news is that Facebook has not fully left the Vietnam market. They are recruiting human resources to work right in Hanoi, who are: fluent at English and Vietnamese, able to “listen and learn”, capable to explain challenges in Vietnam to the Headquarter, and at the same time recommend solutions to these challenges. Besides, the person must own experience in working with Government representatives (the most challenging condition!)”

And then Mr. Showbiz goes on to explain in detail how Vietnamese Internet users can circumvent the firewall.

“Now I will show you the way to access Facebook. I have tried several methods but I realize that network fastidiousness and slow speed still occurs sometimes. Otherwise, the page can only be seen and comments are unavailable. This following method is most simple and effective”...

To summarize, it is hard to point out Mr. Showbiz’ survival strategy since I have not been able to interview him. However, it seems as though he is more or less accept the situation like it is. He does not agitate for greater freedoms, but rather enjoy the ones he does have. As he says: “*Now we have the right to express and share our thoughts, views and feelings on at least particular subjects. We do not just passively receive information through the media like before*” (blog post mid April 2011).

²¹ ISP = Internet Service Provider

5.5.3 Ms. Pink

Table 03: Ms. Pink's blog posts

	Politics	Society	Technology	Entertainment	Lifestyle	TOTAL (per month)
January				3	14	17
February			1	1	7	9
March		2	4	4	9	19
April				5	8	13
May		1		3	11	15
June				1	11	12
TOTAL (per category)	0	3	5	17	60	85

Ms. Pink is also a quite high-profiled blogger. She uses a pseudonym on her blog, but shares a lot of personal information (name, age, education, career, etc.) and pictures of herself. Her use of a pseudonym thus function more like a brand for her blog than an under-cover-strategy. Ms. Pink publishes new blog post about every second day, and has an average of 14 blog posts per month. Her main blog platform is hosted on Wordpress, but she also distributes and promotes her blog posts through at least four other local social networking sites (*Yume, Zing Me, Blog VMC, Any Arena*). Ms. Pink's strategy seems to be to stay far within "the accepted lines". The fact that she has never responded on my e-mails might strengthen that observation (she is apprehensive). However, it might be that Ms. Pink's interests simply never carry her too far into the non-accepted areas [politics and government issues]. On the other hand, Ms. Pink is quite open about her cooperating with different brands and companies (many companies uses influential bloggers as a marketing strategy to popularize their products or services) so it is more likely that blog posts about politics, news, and society issues of more general concern, simply does not "fit" the purpose of her blog. To use Ms. Pink own words from an interview with a PR magazine: (...) *"I often introduce different client's events and products on my blog. I become the "face" for a campaign, or I simply try out companies' products and services and write about my experiences in my entries. In some cases, the content must be sent to the client for their checking and approval"* (paraphrased from secret source B).

5.5.4 Ms. Feminist

Table 04: Ms. Feminist’s blog posts

	Politics	Society	Technology	Entertainment	Lifestyle	TOTAL (per month)
January		6			1	7
February		3			2	5
March		5				5
April		3				3
May		4			3	7
June	2	6			2	10
TOTAL (per category)	2	27	0	0	8	37

Ms. Feminist can be found somewhere in the middle – she is not a high-profiled or a low-profiled blogger. She shares a significant amount of personal pictures and information, and writes under full name. She has only one blog, hosted by Wordpress, and she publishes about one blog post a week. Many of them are about lifestyle issues, promotions of her new book and unknown writers she finds interesting. However, Ms. Feminist seems to have a pretty clear of feminist agenda. Most of her entries are about “taboos” such as women’s sexuality, gender equality, master suppression techniques, domestic violence, and ambivalence between keeping a career and motherhood, etc. Ms. Feminist lifts issues from the private into the public sphere, but she sort of disguises it by using the genre of short stories/fables from her own life. Therefore, Ms. Feminist’s strategy seems to be to “wrap it in” – to use a kind of parallel language in order to write about those kinds of social disturbing issues she finds important. Her short stories are perhaps fictional, but they are about genuine, societal challenges in Vietnam. The life-stories are quite agitating, for instance like the story about choosing love, work or a man:

I strongly believe that a good man will love and respect me for who I am, and never force me to give up anything to prove how much I love him. The most important aspect of love is respect, not sacrifice. So if you are forced to choose between love and career, or between family and career, maybe the thing you should give up is neither of those things...but the man who forced you to do so (*blog post mid March 2011*).

She describes her motivation/strategy for writing for and about women in several blog posts:

Literature for women in foreign countries is often about love. In Vietnam stories for women often focus on their miserable life – the result of a destitute life with most of the burden placed on women. I am acutely aware of the position of women in our society, and that it is in conflict with the interests and expectations of the women themselves. So in late 2008, when I decided to go back to Vietnam, I set myself a goal: Within five years I wanted to build a female audience who were independent from cognitive, traditional perspectives, progressive and informed (*from an interview posted on her blog in mid March 2011*).

And in a later blog posts...

I know that building new values for women is an extremely hard. Promoting new concepts and values of women can be considered to be against women's life in the past. However, I have experienced that my work has influence the views and feelings of my female readers. (...) It feels as though I have chosen the right path. I do not give women power. I only help women to realize their power themselves (*from a blog posts in April 2011*).

Ms. Feminist occasionally also writes about politics and government issues. She both wrote about and took part in the demonstrations against China and the disputes in the South China Sea/North Sea in June 2011. Strategy-wise Ms. Feminist seemed pretty fearless and outspoken up until that time, but in mid June she disappeared from the blogosphere for some weeks. This was also the time our correspondence (via e-mail) suddenly was cut off. Later, I came to learn via one of my other bloggers that Ms. Feminist was arrested and interrogated (supposedly because of the China protests she had taken part in).

5.5.5 Mr. Vietmerican

Table 05: Mr. Vietmerican’s blog posts

	Politics	Society	Technology	Entertainment	Lifestyle	TOTAL (per month)
January		2	1		1	4
February						
March		4				4
April		5	1			6
May		6				6
June		5				5
TOTAL (per category)	0	22	2	0	1	25

Mr. Vietmerican is almost without exceptions writing about societal issues though he labels them cultural commentaries. He writes about one blog post a week – except for February (due to holiday) – and uses Wordpress as his platform. The starting point for Mr. Vietmerican’s commentaries is often a photo or a comic/cartoon, and the expression “a picture can say more than a thousand words” holds true. Vietmerican publishes his blog posts in both English and Vietnamese. His purpose for doing this, he says, is both to build bridges between the insulated Vietnamese and English-speaking blogosphere in Vietnam, and to reach a broader audience.

Mr. Vietmerican was one of the bloggers I *was* able to conduct an in-depth interview with. Though he said he had not really reflected upon what kind of strategy he is using, his answers were pretty revealing:

Satire, satire, satire! It’s the only way to sneak past and yet still be relevant. (...) Pointing fingers at the government, to me, is redundant. I do think that those people who are arrested are certainly movers and shakers, and may be the will create some big good change which I can’t see, but that’s not my bag (Mr. Vietmerican’s answer on the question: *Several bloggers has been arrested in Vietnam in the last couple of years. Being a blogger yourself, what are your reflections on that? Has it affected your writings in any way? Interview June 3, 2011*).

Later, when I asked for elaborations and the purpose of using satire, he said:

Satire is rather renegade here in Vietnam, but also off the radar. Since I don't make any serious/direct accusations towards the things I see in society, it's still okay to comment on it, I think. And satire is a great roundabout to talk about the issues without talking about the issues (*Mr. Vietmerican interview June 3, 2011*).

It is thus fairly evident that Mr. Vietmerican uses satire as his survival strategy. According to him “(...) satire is a great roundabout to talk about the issues without talking about the issues”. Satire, humour and political cartoons are fairly well known “tools” of political expression, and I will place these kinds of expressions in a broader historical context in the final chapter – the discussion.

5.5.6 Mr. Column

At first glance Mr. Vietmerican and Mr. Column looks very much alike. They both label their entries cultural commentaries and they both write about funny, subtle and cheeky observations and anecdotes on their immigrant life in Vietnam. Mr. Vietmerican and Mr. Column both downplay and neutralize quite serious societal problems, by making it humorous and ridiculous. For example when Mr. Column criticizes the governments security strategy in case of a tsunami, or when he salutes scandals:

We ought to thank scandals! It is the need of all people in society. We need to eat, drink, to be loved and to be shocked. (...) Scandal addictions help to change the society. Not too long ago, if a Vietnamese girl dated a foreigner, people would criticize them: “It is ridiculous and bad bad behaviour”. And it would start a lively debate. But then one in every ten of the people against the girl and her foreign boyfriend, would start asking: Why isn't good to date a foreigner? If there are no scandals, there will be no debates and there will be no questioning of things (*blog posts late January 2011*).

Mr. Columns says his blog column is a kind of “philosophical prodding instrument” and that he read a lot of early 20th century satire. However, he clearly expressed that he doesn't have a clear-cut strategy in order to survive. He says he has no interest going into politics and that he is free to say almost whatever he wants (interview July 12, 2011):

They [the editors] give me almost free rein. Depends on the editor, some gets sarcasm and more

abstract forms of satire, some don't. They have their own pressure for topics and sometimes they suggest this or that; I'll say yes or no.

However, even though Mr. Column refused that he had a certain strategy, he acknowledged that there are certain “do’s and don’ts”. When I asked him: “(...) Vietnam is often described as “hostile” when it comes to free speech, blogging, etc. What are your thoughts and experiences on that?” he said:

Overkill. Yes for certain forms of political blogging. But for those of us who focus on the poignant and the quirky, there is ample creative space, never felt boxed in. You have to look at it subject by subject – it’s too complex to be labelled with a single adjective (*interview July 12 2011*).

Unlike Mr. Vietmerican, Mr. Column says he has never felt “boxed in”. This point to fact that political space is not always is not fully limited by the state nor always formally constituted in recognisable institutions. The political is also personal, and political space is nuanced and structured variously for different groups and individuals (Wells-Dang 2010: 96). This is pretty evident for in my next and final blogger’s case.

5.5.7 Mr. Expat

Table 06: Mr. Expats’s blog posts

	Politics	Society	Technology	Entertainment	Lifestyle	TOTAL (per month)
January		3			5	8
February		1			5	6
March		1			4	5
April		3	1		2	6
May		1			5	6
June						0
TOTAL (per category)	0	9	1	0	21	31

Mr. Expat seems to be the male version of Ms. Pink. He is a quite high-profiled blogger in the

English-speaking blogosphere and signs his entries with a pseudonym (the pseudonym is also the name of the blog). He shares a lot of personal information (name, age, education, career, etc.) and pictures of himself and his family, so the use of a pseudonym is most likely not an undercover strategy. Mr. Expat publishes one or two blog posts a week, and his blog platform is hosted on Wordpress. Mr. Expat seems rather reserved and very aware of Vietnam's political situation. Mr. Vietmerican capture Mr. Expat's essence when he describes the English-speaking blogosphere in Vietnam – in general:

Rather reserved at times, hyper aware of what Vietnam is going through, very expat-esque in that the perspectives are foreign and sometimes very unsympathetic, but also very in-love with Vietnam – whether they admit it or not (*interview with Mr. Vietmerican July 3 2011*)

Unlike Ms. Pink, it does not seem that Mr. Expat has a lack of interests in terms of politics and government issues. He seems rather apprehensive – he simply doesn't want/dare to go there. The fact that he did not want to participate in my thesis strengthens this observation.

5.6 Towards the discussion

Before moving on to the discussion it is time for a recap of the main findings. In terms of what the bloggers are writing about (q1), the most prevalent finding is that the different bloggers are writing about very different *categories* (Politics, Technology, Lifestyle...) and about different *themes* (Fashion, Gender equality, Bauxite mining, etc). Most of the blog posts can be placed within field 1 – in other words most of the blog posts are about accepted and safe themes, written in a harmless way. In light of my background section (chapter 2) on Vietnam's historical and political context, I will thus assume that self-censorship is widespread among my bloggers. Moreover, the plot charts reveal that the bloggers are roughly divided in two groups. Ms. Pink, Mr. Showbiz and Mr. Expat stays put – almost without exceptions – in field 1, and are blogging well within what the government “permits”. This can either be understood as a lack of interest in politics and societies issues in general or indicate a quite different perception of political space compared to the remaining three bloggers. Because Mr. Vietmerican, Ms. Feminist and not the least Mr. Controversial seem to challenge the government's boundaries to a greater extent. All of

them have most of their blog posts within *Society* or *Politics* (field 2 or 4). None of them openly criticizes the government or its policy decisions, but rather hide or disguise the criticism by using different strategies. Ms. Feminist strategy seems to be *short stories* and *literature* (both fictional and based on her own life and experiences) with a kind of moral doctrine. Mr. Vietmerican openly expressed to me that he uses *satire*. Mr. Controversial has chosen a kind of *pasquino strategy* that enables anonymous criticism to be expressed in the public sphere. I'll soon discuss this further.

Another finding worth highlighting is the fact that all the bloggers have chosen Wordpress, Blogspot or another foreign-based blog host server as their platform. The explanation might simply be that they prefer Wordpress and Blogspot's simplicity and ease of use, but it can also indicate that the bloggers are trying to flee Vietnam's strict regulations set on blogging and free speech. When a blog host server is based outside of Vietnam, it is not that directly "in the hands of the government" – meaning that Vietnam's laws and legislation doesn't apply to that blog hosting company²². These globalized forces thus help Vietnam's online public sphere to be able to take shape beyond the wishes of the political elite. These online public spheres stretches beyond the country's S-shape territory to vertically, horizontally, and diagonally connect different domestic and overseas groups in deliberation and debate over common affairs (Nguyen, 2009: 15). This does not mean, however, that Vietnam's government has no means of controlling web pages based on servers abroad. They can simply put up firewalls or arrange DDoS-attacks at pages they find "disturbing" or they "do not approve of"²³. An increasing number of evidence demonstrates that the authorities are using these kinds controlling efforts as a power tool (McAfee 2011 RSF 2011).

A last finding worth mentioning is the absence of any prevalent gender based, regional based or nationality based differences. There are controversial, fence-breaking bloggers in both the northern parts of Vietnam (Mr. Controversial and Ms. Feminist) and the southern parts (Mr. Vietmerican). Similar, there are "low-risking" bloggers in the North (Mr. Expat) and in the South (Mr. Showbiz and Ms. Pink). In addition both sexes are represented among the high-risking and low-risking bloggers. That being said, due to the sampling size in my thesis I would never have had grounds to draw any gender based, region based or nationality based conclusions.

²² An off-the-record quote from a hi-tech blogger and expat in Vietnam.

²³ An off-the-record quote from a hi-tech blogger and expat in Vietnam.

Nonetheless, investigation with that kind of a principle as a starting point would without doubt have been interesting. However, what I have grounds to say is that the perception of political space is (also) personal, and political space is probably nuanced and structured variously for different groups and individuals. This leads me to my next and final chapter.

6.0 Discussion

In the previous chapter I visualized what kind of categories and topics my bloggers wrote about and *how* they wrote within these categories. My findings indicated which areas my bloggers regarded as off-limit (politics) and the strategies some of them used to circumvent the government's radar. Since there *was* evidence of use of survival strategies (at least among some of the bloggers), it's conceivable that the phenomenon of *pha rao* – fence-breaking – is present. In this chapter I will use these findings to discuss and eventually come to a conclusion on my two main research questions: *How do the bloggers conduct themselves within the boundaries and strict limitations on free speech set by the government (Q1)?* and *What does this say about the potential of the blogosphere as a political space (Q2)?* Under the first research question (Q1) I will take a deeper look into Mr. Controversial's pasquino strategy, Ms. Feminist's use of literature and short stories, and Mr. Vietmerican's use of satire, and frame these circumvention/survival strategies within a broader historical context. Under the second research question (Q2) I ask myself what "political space" really is? I then apply it to Vietnam's political and 'virtual' context, and finally evaluate the potential of the blogosphere as a political space in Vietnam. My arguments are mainly framed within the theoretical framework and the background chapter presented in the preliminary part of the thesis, but I will occasionally draw upon findings in my material that have not yet been presented.

6.1 How the bloggers conduct themselves within the boundaries and strict limitations on free speech set by the government

When I presented my findings in the previous chapter, it was fairly evident that the different bloggers were writing within different *categories* (Politics, Technology, Lifestyle...) and about different *themes* (fashion, gender equality, bauxite mining, etc). Each blogger had in addition a tendency to write within especially one or two categories. The bloggers are thus conducting themselves quite differently within the boundaries and strict limitations on free speech set by the government (Q1). My sample can roughly be divided in two groups. Ms. Pink, Mr. Showbiz and Mr. Expat stay put – almost without exceptions – within an accepted

area of the blogosphere. Mr. Vietmerican and Ms. Feminist, however challenge the boundaries to a greater extent. Among other things, Ms. Feminist blogs about the Vietnamese media as a propaganda tool for the government (blog post mid May 2011) and writes and takes active part in the street protests against Vietnam's bilateral relations with China, in primo June 2011. Her most evident agenda, however, is women's rights and gender equality. Ms. Feminist lifts "taboos" from the private sphere into the public sphere, and agitates for social unrest by calling for a kind of "women's revolution". As I also noted in the previous chapter, about 80 percent of Mr. Vietmerican's blog posts have the tag *satire*. He is carrying out a kind of silent criticism and is carefully stepping outside "the fence". Mr. Controversial, however, is by far the most controversial blogger in my sample. The vast majority of his entries are about politics, the government and its policies. He rarely writes his own blog posts and has thus chosen a kind of *pasquino strategy*. However, none of the strategies these three bloggers are using, are new phenomena. They have all been important "circumvention tools" in the long history of censorship around the world.

6.1.1 Mr. Controversial's pasquino strategy

Since Mr. Controversial rarely writes his own blog posts, but rather circulates information created by others, he has found a kind of "loophole" in the government's dense net of laws and restrictions. This kind of pasquino strategy is a known phenomenon in the history of censorship – at least in Europe. It began in the late 16th century and continues to the present day. Pasquino was the most famous statue among the so-called "Talking Statues of Rome" (or the Congregation of Wits) in the 16th century. People snuck out at night and attached messages and utterances to Pasquino that they otherwise could not express – at least in public. Pasquino – sort of the editorial essays and political cartoons of the era – thus provided an outlet for anonymous political expression in an era when the regime of censorship was harsh. Some sources suggest that the first postings were little more than schoolboys taunting their teachers, but the statues quickly became a major outlet for critiquing government and religious leaders (Evans 2010; Lindholm 2008). Pasquino became so famous that his name was turned into an English word, *pasquinade*, which means a satirical protest in poetry. Today the tradition is by no means dead. Though Latin is rarely used these days, the pasquino

tradition has evolved into pasted-up computer printouts and scrawls of graffiti on the surrounding walls (ibid). Pasquino and his “talking friends” continue to hold forth on everything from Italian popular culture, political scandals to the European financial crisis.

As far as I know, Vietnam does not have a similar kind of “talking statue” as Pasquino. Vietnam does, however, have a rich culture of urban street art, protest art and even graffiti – sort of the modern day Pasquino strategy. Although the latter is illegal in Vietnam, this urban form of public markings in the forms written words on walls or wall paintings is growing in popularity. Anyone who have strolled the backstreets of Hanoi or HCMC, must have seen them flourish. Graffiti often has a reputation as part of a subculture that rebels against authority, although the considerations of the practitioners often diverge and can relate to a wide range of attitudes (Jakob 2010: 10). In China, graffiti began with Mao Zedong in the 1920s who used revolutionary slogans and paintings in public places to galvanise the country's communist revolution. Mao holds the record for the longest piece of graffiti, which contains 4000 characters criticising his teachers and the state of Chinese society (BBC 2007). In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh also encouraged revolutionary slogans and paintings in public places to encourage resistance against the French and the Americans, and greet communism and the “Soviet solution”²⁴.

6.1.2 Mr. Vietmerican’s use of satire

“Satire, satire, satire! It’s the only way to sneak past and yet still be relevant”
(Interview with Mr. Vietmerican July 3, 2011).

It is fairly evident that Mr. Vietmerican uses satire as his survival strategy. According to him “(...) satire is a great roundabout to talk about the issues without talking about the issues” (Interview with Mr. Vietmerican July 3, 2011). Satire is primarily a literary genre or form (although it can also be found in graphic and performing arts) and can be found in all corners of the world (Feinberg and Nilsen 2008). In satire, vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings are held up to ridicule, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals, and society itself, into

²⁴ Vietnam more or less imported the Soviet political system – the system of government – after Vietnam’s Communist Party came to power in 1954 (in northern Vietnam).

improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be funny, its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism, using wit as a weapon (ibid). To establish the origin of satire is not a simple exercise. Satire probably existed long before it was formalized. In Europe, the Greek playwright Aristophanes is one of the most well known early satirists (Hodgart et al. 2009). His play *The Clouds*, written in 423 BCE, satirized Socrates as the incarnation of atheism and sophistry, whilst *The Wasps* written the year after (in 422 BCE) satirized the Athenian court system. However, it was first during the antiquity, with satirists such as Horace and Juvenal²⁵, satire became an accepted and prevalent form of social commentary (in Europe) (ibid).

The origin of Vietnamese satire is more uncertain. According to Nguyen (2004) most so-called *funny folk stories* or *funny folklore* were created during the Le and Nguyen dynasties in the 18th and 19th centuries (p.15). Satirical folklore criticizing bad customs and practices probably existed long before that period, but materials prior to that period are scarce. Most of the satirical texts and books still existing from that period are in Chinese (Nguyen 2004:14-15). From the 10th to the 19th centuries, funny folklore was entertainment made for and made by the lower classes in society, and scholars did not consider collecting them as an important objective. According to Nguyen (2004) it was first in the decades of the late 19th century and early 20th century (during French colonialism) that the collection and compilation of funny and satirical folklore in the national language, was carried out by Vietnamese intellectuals in a systematic way (p. 15-17). The last 30-40 years, however, have seen an explosion of publications of both historical collections of funny and satirical lyrics, and more contemporary humorous texts (among others; *Humorous stories of An Nam* (Tho An Pham Duy Ton); *New humorous stories* (Lac Sinh); *Funny stories* (Dan Ting printing house); *Vietnam's humorous stories* (Do Nam); *Humorous stories and legends* (Cong Thanh) and *Funny stories of people of*

²⁵ Horace and Juvenal were the two most prominent and influential ancient Roman satirists. Today, satirical literature is often categorized as either Horatian or Juvenalian, although the two are not entirely mutually exclusive. Juvenal's type of satire is often pessimistic, characterized by irony, sarcasm, moral indignation and personal invective, with less emphasis on humour. Strongly polarized political satire is often Juvenalian. Horatian satirists playfully criticize social behaviour through gentle, mild, and light-hearted humour. They use exaggeration, and self-deprecating humour toward what it identifies as folly, rather than evil. Horatian satire's sympathetic tone is common in modern society.

the past (Vuong Hong Sen) *Sense of humour in poetry in Hue* (Hoang Trong Thuoc); *Vietnam's humorous folk stories* (Minh Tam, Nguyen Xuan Kinh and Tang Kim Ngan); *Modern funny stories* (The Literature and Art Association of Nghe An and Ha Tinh province); *Folk funny stories of the South* (Bui Manh Nhi, Nguyen Tan Phat and Tran Tan Vinh) and *Laughter* (Ngoc Chi)). Unfortunately, none of these has been translated to English.

For centuries, satirists have thus shared a common aim: to expose foolishness in all its guises and to effect reform through such exposure (Feinberg and Nilsen 2008; Hodgart et al. 2009). Because satire criticizes in an ironic, essentially indirect way, it frequently escapes censorship in a way more direct criticism might not. Periodically, however, it runs into serious opposition, and people in power who perceive themselves as attacked attempt to censor it or prosecute its practitioners. The very first satirist Aristophanes, for example, was persecuted by the demagogue Cleon (Feinberg and Nilsen 2008).

6.1.3 Ms. Feminist's use of literature and fiction

"When it comes to books, the old Communist machinery of censorship remains in place"
(Matt Steinglass, New York Times' Correspondent, April 1, 2010)

For centuries literature has had an important function in society. For a millennium before the 11th century, Vietnam was dominated by China, and as a result most of the written work from this period is in Classical Chinese. China was the origin of modern papermaking and woodblock printing, and produced one of the world's first print cultures. The expansion of Vietnamese-written literature first accelerated in the early 20th century with profound renovations in form and category (such as novels, new-style poems, short stories and dramas) and with diversity in artistic tendency (Huynh 1971:761). Written literature further accelerated and developed after the August Revolution, when it was directed by the Vietnamese Communist Party's guideline and focused on the peoples fighting and working life (ibid). According to Huyen (1971) The August Revolution of 1945 constituted the most

important turning point in recent Vietnamese history²⁶ (p. 762). It formally marked the end of French colonialism in Vietnam and the beginning of Vietnamese national independence. It also marked the end of the Confucian-oriented monarchy and the beginning of a Communist-oriented republic (ibid). Communistic and nationalistic literature, songs, posters and paintings had an important and deterrent function in the new socialist republic. 30 years later, however, immediately after the change of regimes in April 1975, the most prominent and systematic Vietnamese effort to eradicate books and “neo-colonialist culture” of the South, took place (Denney 1982). On the first day of South Vietnam’s “liberation” (May 1, 1975), the Military Management Committee (MMC) issued a communiqué ordering the temporary suspension of all kinds of books, newspapers, magazines and other printed material owned during the period (Denney 1982:1). The MMC organised youth into teams to confiscate all “reactionary” literature and newspapers and set up a special board in 1975 to scrutinize and rate books circulated under the “puppet regime” (ibid). The MMC divided books, publications and cultural items into five categories. Category A and B were clearly prohibited because they were overtly anti-communist, provocative and poisonous. They encouraged a decadent licentious way of life, and praised crime and racial discrimination²⁷. Category C included romantic poems, romantic novels and ghost stories, while Category D was composed of “wholesome publications not lewd or anti-communists, but also not encouraging struggle or opposition to the U.S. during the war”²⁸ (Denney 1982). Category E contained the most

²⁶ From August 19 onwards, demonstrations and uprisings against French colonial rule broke out in cities and towns throughout Vietnam. This so called August Revolution (*Cách mạng tháng Tám*) was led by the Việt Minh under Hồ Chí Minh (Karnow 1983)

²⁷ **Category A** (anti-communist) included works by foreign authors such as Andre Gide, Boris Pasternak, Arthur Kostler, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Vietnamese writers such as Nguyen Manh Con, Doan Quoc Sy, Nghiem Xuan Hong, Vu Khac Khoan, Nha Ca, Van Quang, among others. **Category B** (decadent works) included works by authors such as Henry Miller, Elia Kazan, Françoise Sagan, D.H. Lawrence, Hermann Hesse and the writers belonging to the Existentialist school in France such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus.

²⁸ **Category C** (romantic works) included the works of authors such as Eric Segal, Somerset Maugham, Han Suyen and Robert Nathan, as well as the works of 19th century authors such as Alexandre Dumas, Lamartine, Chateaubriand, George Sand and Theophile Gautier. Vietnamese writers in this category included people who celebrated the beauties of nature and romantic feelings, like Dong Ho, Bang Ba Lan, Bui Khanh Dan, Mong Tuyet and Nhu Hien. **Category D** mostly included works on philosophy and religion.

accepted and thus permitted books because they had national democratic contents which encourage struggle, and were created by writers and artists in the mass struggle movement (ibid). In addition, all households in the South were instructed to present complete lists of their home libraries to their local party committee. A severe amount of material was confiscated in a short 5-year period (ibid). The abundance of the confiscated material demonstrates on the one hand the intolerant attitude of the Vietnamese rulers, and on the other hand, the desire of millions of Vietnamese to enjoy some alternatives to the government-sponsored culture. It is uncertain whether this ranking system still is in use today, but all books written in Vietnamese must be approved before being published in Vietnam (Decree no. 2 of 2011; Article 19, 2011). However, the effort of the northern Communist leaders to “purify the South of neo-colonialist culture” turned out to be a losing battle. Within few years, confiscated books, recordings and other materials were smuggled up north (Denney 1982). The failure of this campaign was one of the early signs that efforts by the Communist Party leaders to impose a totalitarian model over the entire country would not succeed.

Today, the written word is still deemed too powerful to be left outside government control in Vietnam. Decree No. 2 of 2011 on Administrative Responsibility for Press and Publication Activities, a decision that took effect on February 25th 2011, strictly regulate the responsibilities for press and publication activities. According to the decree, no publication can be published without a decision by a publishing house, director or print permit and all publishers are required to seek approval by the licensing authority of all publications before printing (as it follows from the wording of Article 22). The decree bans using photocopier and other equipment to copy the press, publications or other printing products banned from circulation, to keep or read banned books and to distribute publications by foreign representative offices in Vietnam (Article 19 2011). International media watchdogs have widely criticized the decree arguing that the numerous administrative requirements (in the decree) will have a negative effect on free flow of information, and the requirement to inform state authorities about almost any publication or public activity will have a chilling effect on free expression (Article 19 2011; RSF 2011). It is hard, in other words, getting published in Vietnam – especially if the book contains unaccepted or controversial issues. Nothing can (freely) be circulated

or published without an official stamp. It is therefore possible that Ms. Feminist is rather using blogging as a *platform* to display her literary work, than the other way around (that she is using literature as a survival or circumvention strategy). Ms. Feminist was, as mentioned, an author before she turned to blogging. Nonetheless, Internet and blogging *do* represent a new opportunity, a more open space, for her and her fellow writing colleagues to express themselves to a broader audience.

6.1.4 The importance of history

As the historical contexts of anonymous expressions, satire and banned books illustrate, people have for centuries tried to escape censorship. By posting public notes in public spaces; writing sharp, political folklores; or reading and circulating banned books and literature, people have created a sort of anonymous space – or spaces – beyond (fully manageable) government control. Mr. Controversial, Mr. Vietmerican and Ms. Feminist can thus be said to continue an “old” historical tradition in a new (cyber) space. But *is* the blogosphere a political space, and if so: what does this say about the potential of the blogosphere?

6.2 What is political space?

Before I can answer the above-mentioned questions, I find it necessary to take a deeper look into what a political space really is. As noted in chapter 2, there are no single accepted definitions of political space. A literal definition, taken from political geography, would be the physical location where political activity takes place (Wells-Dang 2010:95). A second category of political space is the virtual: the media, academic discourse and *cyberspace*. Thus, *political space* is plural and can be examined individually or relationally in linkages to each other (ibid). A human rights advocator such as Freedom House for example, operates with legal systems, elections and macro level politics as the forms of political spaces that are required for a population to be considered free – in other words the key procedural arenas of Western liberal democracies (Freedom House 2008). In a survey article on political space in

Southeast Asia, Kevin Hewison (1999) defines expansion of political space as replacing authoritarianism with more representative political regimes. He contrasts Malaysia and Singapore's "illiberal" or "Asian style" approaches to political space and democratisation, with what were at the time emerging democracies in Thailand and Indonesia (p. 224). Vietnam was classified as a "post-socialist authoritarian regime with very limited openings for opposition perspectives" (p.). In Freedom House (and most Western-based human rights organisations) and Hewison's reading, political space is thus equated with moves towards democracy, a public sphere and a civil society. Countries are either *ahead* or *behind* in the (inevitable?) transition to the end point of full-fledged democracy, and political spaces are something that "we" in the liberated world have, and "they" have not (Wells-Dang 2010:96; Goody 2002). *Expanding* or *opening* political space, as they argue and act for, has obvious positive connotations, echoing the opening of the Iron Curtin, as well as China's process of "reform and open up" (*gaige kaifang*) and Vietnam's "renewal" (*doi moi*). Thus, freedom is spatialized in metaphors of autonomy, as in lack of physical constraints to mobility (Dalby 2005 in Wells-Dang 2010: 95).

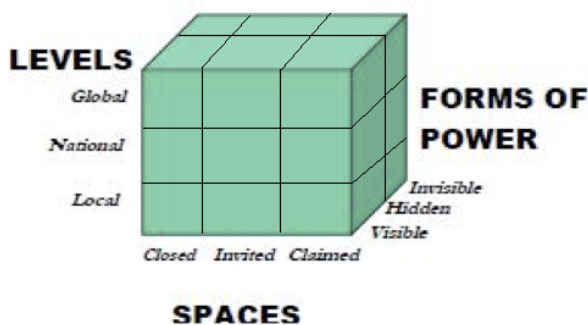
The difficulty with this kind of approach, is the deduction that little to no political space can exist in authoritarian systems, since political space is associated with liberal democracy and opposition politics (Wells-Dang 2010:96). However, South East Asian political reality, especially in recent years, looks far more complex than that. Even though open spaces for political expressions may indeed be fewer or differently structured in an authoritarian regime such as Vietnam, it does not preclude the existence. Political space is not fully limited by the state nor always formally constituted in recognisable institutions. The political is also personal, and political space is nuanced and structured variously for different groups and individuals (Wells-Dang 2010: 96). This is very evident in my material. Legal boundaries do, as mentioned, not always watch with the mental maps that people construct in their heads. Political space can be the sum of people's perceptions of the range of political action and expression that is open to them in a particular time and place (Wells-Dang 2010: 95). The so-called *power cube* proposed by John Gaventa, that I briefly presented in chapter in the theoretical approach, is relevant in this regard. The power cube is a framework for analysing the levels, spaces and forms of power, and their

interrelationship. The *forms* dimension refers to the ways in which power manifests itself, including its visible, hidden and invisible forms. The *levels* dimension of the power cube refers to the differing layers of decision-making and authority held on a vertical scale, including the local, national and global (PPSC 2011:1). In my case, however, it is the *spaces* dimension that is the most relevant and interesting.

6.2.1 Spaces of power

The *spaces* dimension of the power cube refers to the potential arenas for participation and action, including what Gaventa (2006) calls *open, closed, invited and claimed spaces* (p.25). An individual, activists or a civil society might adopt a mix strategy of opening up or claiming

Illustration 04 – The power cube: level, spaces and forms of power



Source: Gaventa 2006: 25

closed spaces, utilising invited spaces or creating spaces that are autonomous of government or corporate control (Gaventa 2006:26). It is my understanding that Mr. Controversial's pasquino strategy and Mr. Vietmerican's use of satire can be regarded as such self-created spaces. The power cube can also build on and be used to further explore the expression of power: power *over*, power *to*, power *with*, and power *within* (Gaventa 2006: 24; PPSC 2011: 3). It grew originally as a way of exploring how powerful actors control the agenda and the ability of less powerful actors to build their awareness and action for change. But it can be also be used to think about the openings, levels and strategies to exercise agency, e.g. to strengthen the power to act. The power cube approach thus draws upon French social theorists (e.g., Foucault and Bourdieu) for whom the concept of power and the concept of space are deeply linked (ibid). According to the Power, Participation and Social Change group (PPSC) at the Institute of Development Studies, most societies and countries throughout the world, especially those with a long history of

authoritarian rule, have many and quite dominant *closed political spaces*. Closed spaces often involve issues like trade, macro economic policies and military policies, and can have a great deal of impact on peoples lives (PPSC 2011:2). In Vietnam, the foreign policy with China, land reform and urban development projects has in recent years been controversial issues considered closed and off-limits for public participation. Strategies to open up closed spaces often focus on (the right to) free flow of information, greater transparency, and accountability for what goes on behind those closed doors. Many international media watchdogs utilize this kind of approach. However, while most emphasis on citizen action and participation has been on how to open up closed spaces, or to participate more effectively with authorities in invited spaces, there are almost always spaces in societies that excluded groups have create for themselves as well – hence the space dimension called *claimed spaces*. These spaces range from ones created by social movements and community associations, to those simply natural places where people gather to debate, discuss and resist, outside of the institutionalized policy arenas. Andrea Cornwall (2002) refers to these spaces as organic spaces which emerge out of sets of common concerns or identifications and may come into being as a result of popular mobilization, such as around identity or issue-based concerns, or may consist of spaces in which like-minded people join together in common pursuits (p. 6). If I analyze my findings in light of the power cube and the historical context of anonymous utterances and satire, Mr. Controversial’s pasquino strategy and Mr. Vietmerican’s use of satire can clearly be seen as claimed or self-created spaces. By utilizing different survival strategies, and creating a kind of “parallel language”, the Internet *does* enable them to create [certain parts of] the blogosphere as a kind of autonomous, political space. The *potential* of the blogosphere in Vietnam, however, is not that straightforward.

6.3 The potential of the blogosphere as a political space in Vietnam

It is important to underline that each dimension of the power cube is constantly interrelating with the other, constantly changing the synergies of power (PPSC 2011:2). In other words, when assessing the political impact of the blogosphere in a given country, one cannot consider only the national context in which that impact occurs (Kalalhil and Boas 2003:6; UNESCO 2008). The global, regional and local level must also be taken

into account (see the power cube p. 85). When regards Vietnam and the *regional* level, one has to take the powerful neighbour China into account as well. For those who know Vietnam, the dichotomy of Vietnam as the “little brother or little dragon”, and China as the “big brother or big dragon” is well known – meaning that the presence of the colossus China in North, has far reaching impact on Vietnam’s (domestic) politics. The consequences occur on several political levels in Vietnam, and Vietnam’s China relations are thus highly criticized throughout the blogosphere (Hayton 2010; Nguyen 2009; Thayer 2008). The government of Vietnam is accused of being the “puppets of China” and political cartoons as those to the right, are flourishing on the Internet. Two of the biggest – and most contentious – anti-china topics among bloggers and activists in the last couple of years, has been Chinese investments in the bauxite mines in Vietnam’s Central Highlands and border issues in the South China Sea, mentioned earlier in this thesis.

At least eight influential bloggers with relation to protests against the bauxite minings have been arrested, and many analysts and Vietnam experts argue that the crackdown



The cartoon above represents the relationship between Vietnam and China. Apparently, China and Vietnam’s relationship is like the tooth and the lip. China is in control and can keep Vietnam quiet at their will. Tooth and lip is a quite common figure of speech in Vietnamese.

“Open lips make the teeth turn cold,” was a quote by Ho Chi Minh, comparing how Vietnam and China went hand in hand. The second line, “Biting the lips... will make them silent,” is a sarcastic ridicule by the author of the cartoon. He mocks the stupidity of Ho Chi Minh, showing how his policies have eroded Vietnam’s sovereignty. **Source:** *freedomforvietnam.wordpress*

The consequences occur on several political levels in Vietnam, and



The Hand: represents China holding on to the General Secretary, a symbol of how much control the Chinese have over the Vietnamese government.

The Protesters: their various signs say, “Protect Hoang Sa and Truong Sa (Paracel and Spratly),” “Spratly and Parcel of Vietnam,” and “China is invading.”

The Puppet General Secretary: “Quit protesting so loudly. You are embarrassing us in front of the Chinese! This is not the peoples’ affairs, this is the governments’ affairs!” **Source:** *freedomforvietnam.wordpress*

against those bloggers in 2008 and 2009 was actually enforced by high-ranking Chinese politicians. It is also assumed that the “controlling hands of China” goes far into Vietnam's press and editorial offices (Hayton 2010; Thayer 2008).

As regards the blogosphere and the *local level* in Vietnam, there are also several aspects that have to be taken into account. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, all of my bloggers have chosen foreign-based blog host servers. Their blogging platforms are thus created, owned and run by transnational corporations that operate beyond the control of national regimes. The blogosphere as an online public sphere, thus stretches itself beyond Vietnam's S-shape territory to vertically, horizontally, and diagonally connect different domestic and overseas groups in deliberation and debate over common affairs (Nguyen, 2009: 15). However, even though globalized technological advances allow blogging and citizen journalism to develop beyond the control of the nation state in some aspects, it is also the case that its influence is largely kept within the boundaries of tolerance set down by the state's political elite (Nguyen, 2009:153). An incident with Ms. Feminist is a good example in that regard. Ms. Feminist seemed pretty fearless and outspoken up and until the beginning of primo June 2011, but in mid June she suddenly disappeared from the blogosphere for several days. This was also the time our contact and correspondence was cut off. Later, I came to learn via one of my other bloggers that Ms. Feminist had been arrested and interrogated, supposedly because of certain China protests she had taken part in. Mr. Controversial also reflects upon a similar kind of offline scare tactic in a blog post in January 2011. Mr. Controversial writes that every other Friday evening, there is a mandatory meeting in his neighborhood. He says 35% of the different neighborhoods/districts share this routine. The remaining 65% hold these mandatory meetings once or twice a week. The content of the meetings is similar to the mandatory meetings every Monday mornings at his office, he writes. The head of the neighborhood/districts, who is sort of a party secretary or party chairman, makes reports on “world news, peaceful progress of the country, hostile forces, national laws and new policies ensuring democracy, freedom and human rights” (blog post late January 2011). The CVP chairman also criticizes people who have “taken advantage of the rules of democracy and propagated hate against the State” (ibid). Mr. Controversial writes that the CVP chairman always concludes the meeting with a speech about how “the youth is

the future of the country, and how young people should remain vigilant against plots of hostile forces” (blog post late January 2011). According to An Nguyen (2009), to generate public fear or stigma using these kinds of methods is still effective and widely propagated via the education system, the media and the party structure (p. 160). A deeply rooted culture of fear – fear for one selves and one’s family – and its consequence of self-censorship, still works in Vietnam and other Asian nations such as China, Burma, Indonesia and Malaysia (ibid). This should not be underestimated as regards the potential of the blogosphere. The Internet might be global, but its participants are still subject to at least one local legislative and political system in the offline world, which can bring to bear the power of the state. Although online technologies allow anonymity, for example, many people are still afraid of their IP-addresses being tracked down by the police, and thus they do not dare to blog, e-mail or read sensitive content on home computers (Nguyen, 2009:160).

As these examples illustrate, the potential of the blogosphere is hard to determine. On one hand, the blogosphere in Vietnam *has* over the last 5-6 years shown potential in terms of breaking important news stories that otherwise would have been held up, undiscovered, or ignored for some time (Nguyen 2009: 155). In 2006 for example, when the respected former Prime Minister Van Kiet died unexpectedly in a Singapore hospital, the news was broken and redistributed throughout the blogosphere. For those who know Vietnam well, this was a remarkable event: for the first time since 1945 this type of news reached ordinary people before the national leaders officially released it. By the time the mainstream media announced the death (36 hours later), the news was no longer news. Instead, it had entered a more substantive phase, when experts and laypeople alike had visited blogs, forums, and news sites operated by expatriate Vietnamese to pay tribute and present multifaceted analyses of Kiet’s 86-year life and 70-year political career (ibid: 155). This is only one of many cases in recent years where blogs have broken important news stories in Vietnam. Another example is from the summer of 2007. When the mainstream press was ignoring a protest by hundreds of farmers from the southern provinces who had gathered in HCMC to challenge the local authorities forcing them to leave their land without adequate compensation, various witnesses to the protest brought news of it to the world by producing and distributing a wide range of eyewitness reports, photos and video clips via blogs and file-sharing networks such as You

Tube and Flickr (ibid). (Nguyen 2009:156).

On the other hand, citizen journalism and blogs with far-reaching political impact still make up a small part of the Vietnamese blogosphere (Nguyen 2009: 156; Camigo 2011). The blogosphere in Vietnam is still largely controlled, although indirectly, by the state. Dozens of bloggers and activists were arrested in the aftermath of the HCMC demonstrations in 2007, campaigns against the bauxite mining projects in 2009 and similar incidents. In the years ahead, unless Vietnam's authorities become tolerant enough to allow certain level of press freedom and freedom of expression, I think it will be difficult for the blogosphere to produce any major impact beyond a relatively small community of socio-politically active and technically savvy Vietnamese netizens. Vietnam's consensus-based political infrastructure is extremely stable, and most of the "reforms" imposed on the business sector, the communication sector, or within the party are designed to maintain this stability. Additionally, there is an unspoken but widely acknowledged understanding between the government and its citizens that single party rule will be accepted as long as the party facilitates rapid wealth creation (McKinley 2010). However, even though there *are* indeed many tacit limits and untouchable issues, the current level of freedom is something nobody would have imagined possible 10 years ago. The need for a (political) civil society, for example, is now openly discussed in the press, the coffee shop, the pub, and in online discussion forums (Nguyen, 2009:160). This is an interesting development. The term civil society has two distinct meanings in Vietnam. The first is an economic meaning that views civil society in terms of service delivery by local development NGOs. In this context the promotion of civil society is viewed as being closely linked to the international benefactors and their agendas²⁹ (Thayer 2008: 12). This is so because in Vietnam's mono-organisational, system there is no domestic civil society sector that is independent or autonomous from the direct control of the state (ibid). The second meaning of civil society in a Vietnamese context, is political. Civil society in this context refers to the creation of public space where

²⁹ When the term civil society is used in discussions with foreigners it generally refers to Vietnamese organisations closely linked to the state. These organisations try to pass themselves off as "genuine" civil society groups out of self-interest. The so-called NGO sector in Vietnam is a site of struggle over normative ideals between foreign donors and the one-party state. International NGO's working in Vietnam have largely taken up the space by Vietnam's receding one-party state (Thayer 2008: 13)

Vietnam's one party state can be challenged by the non-violent political mobilization of ordinary citizens (Thayer 2008: 26). The notion of civil society in its political sense is not held widely in Vietnam, but discussions on the need for it are growing in shape and scope.

I think the most pronounced contribution (and thus the future potential?) of the blogosphere in Vietnam, may be its capacity to bolster critical discussion on public affairs among different groups of the public – especially the young. *“Like many other young Vietnamese, I belong to a very open generation”* one blogger comments. *“We are no longer afraid of and indeed aspire for sharing our thoughts and feelings with others”*. Mr. Showbiz and Ms. Pink are great prototypes in that regard. In a country where $\frac{2}{3}$ of the population are under 35, and where social conformity is encouraged by the educational system, such a phenomenon might have far-reaching implications for the future (Nguyen 2009: 156). Nonetheless, given how recent this domain of web-based activity is, and how rapidly it is changing, it is really impossible to speak with any certainty about its political significance, or the impact it will have on Vietnam's future. It is crucial that the blogosphere and the media sector in Vietnam are subjected to further research.

6.4 Roadmap for future research

Little if any research has, as mentioned, been done on my subject in particular in Vietnam before. For that reason, the Internet and Vietnam's media sector at large are in great need of further research. UNESCO's Media Development Indicators (MDI) mentioned in the preliminary chapters of this thesis is a relevant approach in that regard. This framework developed for assessing media development, has gained widespread recognition in the international research community and is based on existing conventions and treaties that Vietnam already has signed and ratified. The MDI forms a useful benchmark system for cross-national comparisons and better understanding of media, and so far 26 individual country studies have been made, the latest being Nepal. During the last round of discussions in the in the Norwegian-Vietnamese human rights dialogue, held in Oslo in October 2011, agreement was reached to make two country studies – one for Norway and

one for Vietnam – based on the UNESCO’s MDI system (Vaagan 2011). In that regard, I think some of the fields of enquiry identified in this thesis can be addressed further.

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8.0 Appendices

Appendix 01 – Mr. Controversial’s blog posts

Mr. Controversial JANUARY				
Date	Blog title (Vietnamese)	Blog title (English)	Tags/theme	Cat.
Jan X	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	Law, politics, insigt, news	P
Jan X	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	politics, insight, facebook, press, technology, blog, news	P
Jan X	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	insight, facebook, press, technology, blog, news	T
Jan X	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	women, insight, story, relationship, money, humor, sex, men, love	S
Jan X	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	women, nude, scandal, humor, sexy	S

Mr. Controversial FEBRUARY				
Date	Blog title (Vietnamese)	Blog title (English)	Tags/theme	Cat.
Feb X	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	law, politics, insight, press, news	P

Mr. Controversial MARCH				
Date	Blog title (Vietnamese)	Blog title (English)	Tags/theme	Cat.
Mar X	[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	Video, interview	S
Mar X	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]	horror	S
Mar X	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	petrol, video, inflation, humor, economy	P

Mr. Controversial APRIL				
Date	Blog title (Vietnamese)	Blog title (English)	Tags/theme	Cat.
Apr X	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	popcap, strategy, game, action	E
Apr X	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	prose	S
Apr X	[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	video, dvd, music	E

Mr. Controversial MAY				
Date	Blog title (Vietnamese)	Blog title (English)	Tags/theme	
May X	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	funny, video, advert, soccer	E

Mr. Controversial JUNE				
Date	Blog title (Vietnamese)	Blog title (English)	Tags/theme	Cat.
June X	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	hoangsa, insight, china	P
June X	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	hoangsa, video, insight, china	P

June X	████████████████████ ████████████████████ ████████████████████ ████████████████████	████████████████████ ████████████████████ ████████████████████	hoangsa, video, insight, china	P
June X	████████████████████ ████████████████████ ████████████████████	████████████████████ ████████	Hoangsa, insight, chinaq	P

Appendix 02 – Mr. Vietmerican’s blog posts

Mr. Vietmerican JANUARY			
Date	Blog title	Tags/theme	Cat.
Jan X	[REDACTED]	“retweet”	L
Jan X	[REDACTED]	Commentary, culture, Society,	S
Jan X	[REDACTED]	Technology, society, tips	T
Jan X	[REDACTED]	Culture, satire, society	S

Mr. Vietmerican FEBRUARY	
Feb	No blog posts in February

Mr. Vietmerican MARCH			
Date	Blog title	Tags/theme	Cat.
Mar X	[REDACTED]	Photo, satire, society	S
Mar X	[REDACTED]	Language, Society	S
Mar X	[REDACTED]	Photo, satire	S
Mar X	[REDACTED]	Photo, society	S

Mr. Vietmerican APRIL			
Date	Blog title	Tags/theme	Cat.
Apr X	[REDACTED]	Photo, society	S
Apr X	[REDACTED]	Culture, language, society	S
Apr X	[REDACTED]	Photo, satire	S
Apr X	[REDACTED]	society	S
Apr X	[REDACTED]	technolgy	T
Apr X	[REDACTED]	comic	S

Mr. Vietmerican MAY			
Date	Blog title	Tags/theme	Cat.
May X	[REDACTED]	Commentary, culture, society	S
May X	[REDACTED]	Language, society	S
May X	[REDACTED]	Language	S
May X	[REDACTED]	Culture, language	S
May X	[REDACTED]	Culture, Satire, Society	S
May X	[REDACTED]	Commentary, Society	S

Mr. Vietmerican JUNE			
Date	Blog title	Tags/theme	Cat.
June X	[REDACTED]	Photo, society	S
June X	[REDACTED]	Comic	S
June X	[REDACTED]	Commentary, satire, society	S
June X	[REDACTED]	Photo, commentary	S
June X	[REDACTED]	Commentary	S

Appendix 03 – Laws and regulations pertaining to media

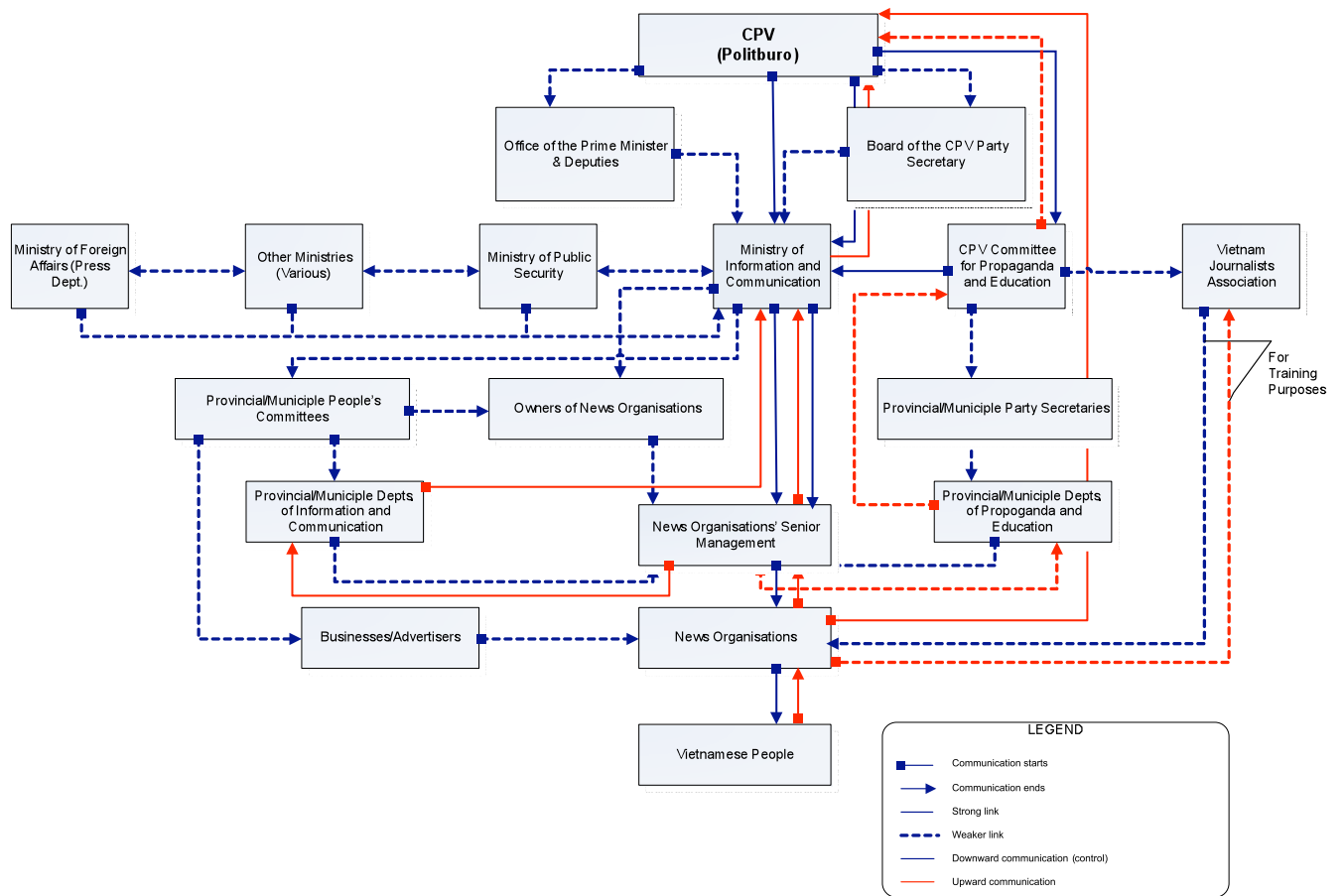
Laws and Regulations Pertaining to Media Operations in Vietnam				
Importance	Document name	Year of Publication	Status	Relevance
High (Direct impact on media)	Constitution	1992 (Amended in 2001)	Current	A formal, symbolic framework within which laws are formed and interpreted
	CPV directives	Various	Current and future	Create policy lens through which laws are interpreted
	Press Law	1989 (Amended in 1999)	Under review: new law anticipated in 2011-12	Main print and broadcast media management law (includes clauses dealing with source/whistleblower protection and access to information)
	Penal Code	1999	Under review	Used to sanction journalists and their sources (criminal sanctions)
	Civil Code	2005	Current	As above (administrative sanctions)
	Law on Preventing and Combating Corruption	2005	Current	Clarifies role of media as an AC tool of the State. Implementing decree 120/2006/ND-CP classifies areas in which information cannot be made secret
	Access to Information Law	Expected in 2011-12	Draft	Should improve access to now-secret information and facilitate better media coverage of corruption
	Law on Information Technology Ordinance on State Secret Protection	2006 2000	Current Current	Covers online journalism, in concert with the Press Law Highlights areas in which information cannot be published. Very vague and can encourage self-censorship
	Law on Associations	Future publication date not known	Draft	May allow creation of non-State media associations, facilitating self-regulation and possibly de-facto privatisation if individuals establish associations then use them to publish newspapers
	Law on Complaints and Denunciations	1998 (Amended in 2004)	Current	Assists access to information, provides whistleblower protection, facilitates media complaints about civil servant failure to provide information
Whistleblower protection	N.A.	None, but may be planned in	Now covered by other laws, but a joint report by the Japanese and	

Laws and Regulations Pertaining to Media Operations in Vietnam				
Importance	Document name	Year of Publication	Status	Relevance
			the future	Vietnamese governments (2009) suggests 'a law to protect witnesses' may be created
Medium (broad media relevance, or relevance to specific groups)	Law on Advertising	Unknown	Current	Controls important source of media revenue and can be used to control media operations though selective application
	Law on Enterprise Income Tax	2008	Current	Guides tax regime under which news Organisations operate, and tax breaks for which they are eligible
	Joint Circular on Internet Advertising	2008	Current	Sets rules relating to the licensing and approval of online advertising
	Decree on the Management, Provision and Use of Internet Services and Electronic Information	2008	Unknown (believed to be current)	Reiterates MIC's management role while adding MPS and other ministries' role in web management Makes it illegal to abuse the Internet to oppose the government, disclose national secrets, or provide distorted information
	Law on public Organisations with income	Unknown	Current	Guides management of State-owned news Organisations with independent sources of income
	Civil Servants law	2005	Current	Guides management of news Organisation staff
	Regulation on Management of, and Permit Granting for, the Provision of Information and Establishment of Websites on the Internet	2003	Unknown	Establishes the MIC as the main state management organisation in charge of the Internet. Clarifies what information could and could not be provided via the web. Outlines requirements and qualifications for ISPs Clarifies handling of violations if Internet misused
	Decision on Regulation on Management and Use of Internet Resources	2003	Unknown	Establishes Viet Nam Internet Network Information Center) as the agency in charge of supervising and promoting the Internet and stipulates fees Lays out list of Vietnamese domain names and IP addresses, and regulations for their use

Laws and Regulations Pertaining to Media Operations in Vietnam				
Importance	Document name	Year of Publication	Status	Relevance
	Law on Organisations of the Government	2001	Current	VTV, VoV and VOA are Organisations of the government and are guided by this law
Low relevance (for news media)	Law on Publishing	2004	Current	May relate to current affairs publications
	Cinematography Law	2006	Under review to comply with WTO requirements	May cover news and current affairs-related documentary films.
	Intellectual Property Rights Law	2005	Current	May be important regarding use of second-hand material by news reporters
	Decree on the Provision, Regulation, Management, Establishment and Use of the Internet	1997	Unknown	Lays out GoV management of the Internet and how the web can and cannot be used in Viet Nam

Source: Catherine McKinley (2009): Developing Financially Viable Media in Emerging Media Markets

Appendix 04 – Systems of Communication and Control of Vietnam’s Media



Source: Catherine McKinley (2009): Developing Financially Viable Media in Emerging Media Markets

Appendix 05 – NESH’s Research ethics guidelines for Internet research

Research ethics guidelines for internet research

Publisert: 26. March 2010. Sist oppdatert: 26. March 2010.

Decided upon and approved by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social sciences and the Humanities (NESH), Norway, 24. September 2003

1. The value of internet research

With internet research is meant both research into phenomena on the net (for example, internet culture) and research which uses the net as a tool for research (for example, as a channel for making contact with informants). These are not necessarily the same. Research on internet culture can be carried out by use of face to face interviews, and research which uses the internet can focus on phenomena that do not occur on the net.

Research on the internet is valuable, not only because it can provide insight into a new and important communication channel, but also because the net opens up the possibility to study known phenomena (for example, the formation of norms, diffusion of information, communication, and the formation of groups) in new ways. This kind of research is also valuable as it provides knowledge about which laws are effective - or ought to be effective - in internet research.

2. The internet’s multiplicity

Communication on the internet takes place through complex technological systems, and there are massive differences within these systems. Research on communication on the internet can occur through e.g. electronic post, text-based multi-user systems, discussion groups, chat rooms, in connection to computer games, internet webpages, search engines, logfiles and other “accounting” systems, e-mails listservs, and newsgroups.

The technological systems vary in different ways. A distinction can be made between channels which constitutes the foundation of synchronous communication (text-based multi-user systems, chat rooms, computer games) and channels of asynchronous communication (e-mail, discussion groups, newsgroups and

internet webpages). Another dimension is to what extent the communication occurs one-on-one (e-mail, private rooms and private channels in text-based multi-user systems and chat rooms), many-to-many (discussion groups, communication within games) or one-to-many (internet webpages, newsgroups). Access to the different channels of the internet also varies from encrypted e-mails to internet webpages which can be read by everybody. A great part of electronic fora are accessible by the interested users, but some fora have restricted access. The rights one has in the forum are often decisive for one's access to the forum's information. Another important difference between the diverse technological systems of the internet is whether data is stored permanently or not.

3. Internet research is subject to the same ethical demands as other research

The general ethical demands which apply to research in social sciences, the humanities, and law also hold for research on the net [1]. Therefore the research-ethical considerations, as expressed in delineations A to F, are relevant in relation to research on the internet. However, the distinctiveness of the net does give rise to a few special considerations the researcher ought to be aware of.

4. The difficulties with distinguishing between public and private information [2]

As a first rule – information that one counts as public can freely be used for research purposes. However, it is difficult to clearly distinguish between what should be counted as private and what should be counted as public information in relation to information gathered from the internet. One reason for this is that information which is accessible for everybody with access to the internet can be of an extremely private character.

Even though information communicated in an open forum is of a private character, a researcher will - as a first rule - freely be able to use that information for research purposes. However, the researcher should carefully take into account the considerations mentioned in article 6 and 8 [3].

As a general rule, researchers can freely use material from open fora without obtaining informed consent from the persons who have produced the information or from the persons the information is about. For example, a researcher can freely use information gathered from the coverage of an event by an online newspaper. The consideration of respect for participants in open fora nonetheless implies that researchers ought to inform participants of any systematic registration (for example, a recording) or reporting of

information when possible.

5. Internet fora with access limitations

Some internet fora have access limitations. Since information conveyed in such fora is not accessible to everyone, the consideration of respect for participants implies that the researcher cannot freely use such information for research purposes. As a general rule, such information should therefore not be used for research purposes without the researcher acquiring the participants' consent.

There is a distinction between whether the researcher simply collects information, or whether he/she actively participates in the forum. The researcher ought to publicly identify him/herself if he/she is participating actively in a forum with limited access. However, there can also be grounds for the researcher to identify him/herself if he/she collects information without actively participating in the forum.

Regardless of the researcher's degree of activity, the researcher must take into account possible rules of behavior that might apply in the forum [4].

The access restrictions for different internet fora can be more or less strict. The stricter the access restrictions of the fora are the stronger will the participants' expectations of protection be. As researcher one ought to be attentive to how strict the demands of access are for the forum under study. The stricter the access limitations, the stronger the requirements of due care.

6. Use of personal and sensitive materials

Interactions in digital fora often have an ephemeral character. This contributes to creating expectations about information being protected. People can be willing to contribute personal and sensitive information to an internet forum, which in principle is accessible for anyone - without thereby having meant that their statements could be spread further.

Persons about whom personal or sensitive information is available in an open forum have a right to be ensured that the information is being used and communicated in a appropriate way in connection to research [5]. Living persons also have a right to control whether sensitive information about themselves may be used in relation to research [6]. The possibilities of tracing the informant's identity are made easier using

digital fora than by use of other information channels (cf. article 8). Researchers must anonymize any sensitive information they use.

7. About obtaining informed consent in digital fora [7]

Article 8 in the NESH guidelines includes a first rule: Research projects which depend on active participation must take place only after the participants' free and informed consent has been obtained. In other words: the researcher must himself assess relevant considerations and decide whether it is necessary to obtain consent to a certain research project - or not. This first rule also applies to internet research.

There are many difficulties in connection with obtaining informed consent in digital fora. First of all, an enquiry about informed consent in relation to participatory observation can be destructive for the interaction the researcher wants to study. Secondly, the participation is ephemeral, which makes it difficult to reach the persons from whom one wishes to obtain the informed consent. Thirdly, people can pretend to be someone else online. This means the researcher cannot be sure that the obtained informed consent derives from the person the researcher wants the consent from.

In the instances where it is necessary to obtain consent the above mentioned practical problems make demands on the planning of the research. Obtaining consent via the internet requires a greater effort in ensuring the quality of the consent. It entails more comprehensive precautions in ensuring no recruiting of persons who should not participate in the research, for example child participation in an adult investigation. It can also be a great challenge to make sure participants in the internet research have an adequate understanding of the information when it solely is communicated in words on the net. In some situations the problems regarding obtaining informed consent mean the researcher ought to refrain from investigating the forum.

8. Use of quotes gathered from the internet [8]

When using quotes from the internet in relation to publication of research results, the researcher should carefully consider the fact that it is possible to trace informants' identity by use of a full text search on the quotes.

9. The child's right to protection

Research on children's and young people's use of the internet contributes to greater understanding of important aspects of their culture and upbringing. This kind of research raises special challenges because it is part of children's activities, which are often outside adult control, and because the boundary between the world of the children and the adult world is not always clear. However, this does not reduce the demands of obtaining parents' consent for children's participation in research, even though it is more difficult as a practical matter. In some instances it can be easier to safeguard the considerations of the child's right to protection by conducting the research offline, for example by interviewing the child about his/her use of the internet, face-to-face.

10. Pseudonyms and confidentiality

Pseudonyms ('nicknames') are an important part of the interaction on the internet. Often such pseudonyms function as ordinary names and they are often used in different fora and in different connections. Many users have an interest in how their digital identity is being treated. The researcher should carefully consider the fact that informants do not necessarily consider personal information anonymized if the researcher uses their pseudonyms.

11. Requirements concerning reporting research results back to participants

Many of the most interesting social and cultural movements on the internet are built on norms of openness, freedom of information, and the sharing of results. In connection to internet research on such digital communities, a special responsibility arises for reporting research results to the participants of an investigation.

Endnotes

[1] The same juridical norms that apply to such research also apply to internet research. When turning the internet into a subject of research it will often involve more than one jurisdiction. In other words: researchers must be aware that other countries' laws can also apply to the net.

[2] The distinction between the use of so-called private and public information is not necessarily the same within research ethics and law. From a juridical perspective a certain work will be regarded as public when accessible on the internet, but from this does not automatically follow that the researcher is ethically free in using the work.

[3] The researcher must also take into consideration that most material published on the internet is protected by copyright laws, which means that it cannot simply be utilized without further ado.

[4] This principle has been established on different web pages. See for example:<http://www.nettnemda.no/>. The limitation of access also represents an explicit assertion of the conditions that the moderator gives for the utilization of the material (see also endnote 2). The limitations do not necessarily need to be stated in comprehensible text on the website but can be stated in other ways, for example as html-code.

[5] See articles 13, 14, and 15 in the NESH guidelines.

[6] See articles 12 in the NESH guidelines.

[7] See also article 8 in the NESH guidelines regarding consent as well as 'Act relating to the processing of personal data' [personsofflysningsloven] §§ 8, 9, and 11. As a juridical point of departure, all handling of information on persons must be based on consent independent of the source of the information.

[8] See also 'Act relating to Copyright in Literary, Scientific and Artistic Works' [åndsverksloven] § 22.

National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social sciences and the Humanities (NESH), Norway

Ragnvald Kalleberg (Leader), Asta Balto, Alexander Cappelen, Anne-Hilde Nagel, Hanne Signe Nymo, Helge Rønning, Jone Salomonsen, Per Schreiner, Anne Julie Semb, Ann Helene B. Skjelbred, Jan Tøssebro, Bjarte Vandvik

----- Micheline Egge Grung Hilde W. Nagell (Leaders of secretariat)

*Translated by Line Gulløv Lundh and Charles Ess, November 2003. English translation approved by NESH
3. December 2003.

Appendix 06 – Application to NESH February 2011

Nina Elisabeth N. Vennevold
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Oslo, 28.02.2011

Forskningsetiske komiteer
v/ Hallvard Fossheim

Søknad om råd angående masteroppgave

Jeg skriver til dere etter et møte med Hallvard Fossheim (23.02.2011), som oppfordret meg til å sende en skriftlig henvendelse til dere. Jeg går for tiden på masterprogrammet i medievitenskap ved Universitet i Oslo, og har fra tidligere av en bachelorgrad fra Journalisthøyskolen i Oslo (HiO). Jeg har et masterstipend fra Norske Senter for Menneskerettigheter og har prof. Robert Vaagan som hovedveileder.

Som prosjektbeskrivelsen min viser (se vedlegg) handler masteroppgaven min om ytringsfrihet i Vietnam. Mer konkret skal jeg ta for meg selvsensur blant bloggere i Vietnam. Jeg har vært i Vietnam flere ganger, både som journalist og turist, og hadde våren 2010 et opphold på seks måneder som trainee på den norske ambassaden i Hanoi (Vietnam). Jeg startet å skrive på masteroppgaven min i januar 2011, og har kommet et lite stykke på vei. Jeg aner for øvrig konturene av flere etiske problemstillinger fremover, og jeg ønsker derfor råd fra dere så tidlig som mulig i prosessen. Jeg er veldig opptatt av å ivareta de etiske aspektene ved oppgaven min, men jeg anbefaler at dere leser igjennom min prosjektbeskrivelse, før jeg går nærmere inn på disse. Prosjektbeskrivelsen min heter: «*Internet revolution or authoritarian solution? Blogging and self-censorship in Vietnam*», og skal ligge vedlagt denne søknaden.

Forskningsetiske utfordringer

Det er flere etiske problemstillinger jeg ser oppgaven min berører. Jeg skal forsøke å fatte meg i korthet.

Internett som objekt og redskap

I masteroppgaven min vil Internett bli brukt både som objekt og redskap. Jeg skal gjøre innholdsanalyser av en håndfull blogger, og kommunisere med (intervjue) bloggerne via e-post og/eller Skype. Bloggene er åpne for alle (ikke passord eller brukerbegrenset) og blogginnleggene blir tilsynelatende liggende permanent (de har en arkivfunksjon). Jeg har ikke kontaktet noen av bloggerne ennå, eller på noen måte vist at jeg følger med på bloggene deres. Jeg har tenkt at dette i utgangspunktet er greit i og med at bloggene er åpne for alle. Bloggerne har mange tusen følgere og opererer således i en offentlig sfære.

Er det noe av dette som er problematisk?

Reiser bruk av e-post , Skype o.l. noen etiske utfordringer?

Fritt informert samtykke?

I de forskningsetiske retningslinjenes punkt 8 er det oppstilt en hovedregel om at forskningsprosjekter som forutsetter aktiv deltakelse skal settes i gang bare etter deltakernes frie og informerte samtykke. Jeg anser ikke min deltakelse som aktiv, i og med at jeg kun registrerer bloggernes daglige blogginnlegg. Jeg deltar verken med kommentarer eller de andre formene for interaktivitet som bloggene åpner for.

Er dette en riktig vurdering?

Noen av bloggerne bruker pseudonym/kallenavn – setter dette avgjørelsen min i et annet lys?

Må jeg innhente informert samtykke fra alle før jeg analyserer blogginnleggene?

Jeg kommer i løpet av våren til å kontakte bloggerne mine, men jeg må planlegge denne fasen nøye i forkant. Jeg kommer da til å opplyse dem om at jeg har fulgt bloggene en stund, og at jeg kommer til å ha en ny innsamlingsperiode.

***Blir jeg etter dette å anse som aktiv deltaker?
Hvor mye av prosjektets fagområde (menneskerettigheter), mål,
konsekvenser, tilhørighet (Norsk Senter for Menneskerettigheter) må jeg
opplyse om?***

Anonymisering?

Bloggerne mine skriver – slik det ser ut nå – om ganske trivielle temaer som visstnok skal være uproblematisk for myndighetene. Flere av bloggerne er for øvrig store og kjente i Vietnam, og øver dermed innflytelse på en stor tilhengerskare. Man skal derfor ikke se bort ifra at bloggerne er på myndighetenes rader, selv om de skriver om nokså ”uskyldige” ting (kjendiser, tv-programmer, musikk, mat, reising, etc.) To av bloggerne skriver muligens om noe mer sensitive temaer, som f.eks. kvinners rolle i familien/samfunnet, gruveindustrien, seksualitet, etc. Siden Vietnam tilsynelatende er et så ”fiendtlig” land å være blogger i, kommer jeg derfor til å anonymisere alle bloggerne mine – uavhengig av hva de selv ønsker.

Er dette et etisk minefelt?

Er det noe jeg må ta spesielt høyde for?

Som en utenlandsk forsker er jeg bare på ”gjennomreise” i det vietnamesiske Internettlandskapet, og jeg har liten eller ingen mulighet til å influere hva som skjer etter at jeg er ferdig med mine undersøkelser?

Utsetter jeg informantene mine for en utilbørlig risiko selv om de måtte gi sitt samtykke til å være med på prosjektet?

Hva gjør jeg med tanke på tilbakeføring av resultater i en slik situasjon?

Hva med direkte sitater fra blogginnlegg?. Er dette noe jeg må vakte meg for i og med at jeg må anonymisere? Hva med gjengivelse av sitater oversatt til engelsk (blogginnleggende opprinnelig var på vietnamesisk)?

Re-kontekstualisering

Forskning i det såkalte fattige sør (versus det rike nord) har ofte vært motivert av et ønske om å avsløre undertrykking, og gi stemme til de som sjelden høres (Harpviken

2009). Jeg ønsker ikke å føye meg inn rekken av utsendte fra nord , som i det 'ressursfattige' sør vil overføre sin kunnskap og måte å forstå verden på. Dette kan bli utfordrende siden de store overskriftene i min oppgave er menneskerettigheter og demokrati.

På hvilken måte er det etisk problematisk å føye resultater fra en vietnamesisk kontekst inn i min norske forskningstradisjon og tankesett?

Den samme utfordringen gjelder også begrepsapparatet mitt – konkrete ord og uttrykk. Jeg kvier meg for å bruke ord som ”democracy”, ”freedom of expression” etc. når jeg kontakter mine informanter, siden dette muligens kan plukkes opp via det vietnamesiske sensursystemet.

Er det etiske forsvarlig å bruke andre synonymer og/eller omformuleringer av f.eks. ”democracy”, ”freedom of expression” etc. når det er dette som ligger til grunnlag for min problemstilling?

Meldeplikt?

Basert på det dere nå vet om mitt prosjekt, er det noen steder jeg må melde i fra om prosjektet mitt? Jeg har forsøkt å rådføre meg med instituttet mitt, men jeg har ikke fått et entydig svar.

Helt til slutt

Summa summarum er det store spørsmålet til dere: Hvordan kan jeg best mulig løse de etiske utfordringene med tanke på Internett som objekt og redskap, fritt og informert samtykke, anonymisering og re-kontekstualisering?

Det er stor sannsynlighet for at dere ser flere etisk problematiske aspekter ved oppgaven min enn de jeg har tatt opp her. Jeg setter derfor stor pris på om dere også kommenterer andre problemområder dere eventuelt måtte se.

På forhånd: takk.

Vennlig hilsen

Nina Elisabeth Nordrum Vennevold

Oslo, 28.02.2011

Tilleggskommentar fra veileder:

Som veileder for Nina Elisabeth N. Vennevold er jeg kjent med hennes prosjektbeskrivelse og imøteser i likhet med henne rådene fra de forskningsetiske komiteer ift de spørsmål om etiske dilemmaer som hun reiser i sin søknad.

Mvh Robert W. Vaagan, f.aman. dr.philos. Oslo, 01.03.2011

Appendix 07 – NESH’s project evaluation



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Angående prosjektet ”Internet revolution or authoritarian solution? Blogging and self-censorship in Vietnam”

Ditt MA-prosjekt, ”Internet revolution or authoritarian solution? Blogging and self-censorship in Vietnam”, går ut på å se på hvordan bloggere i Vietnam praktiserer selvsensur. Prosjektet er fortsatt relativt løst formulert. Det underliggende temaet er ytringsfrihet, i hvilken grad og på hvilke måter ytringsfrihet kan sies å bli truet av en autoritær myndighet, og hvilke strategier bloggere tar i bruk i denne situasjonen.

Detaljer om hvilke tekniske løsninger som er de mest anbefalelsesverdige ligger utenfor NESH’ mandat eller kompetanseområde. Det samme gjelder anbefalinger som fordrer nært kjennskap til undertrykking og overvåking i Vietnams statsapparat. NESH forutsetter i sin vurdering at fagmiljø og veileder besitter denne kompetansen.

Du klassifiserer under fem overskrifter de anliggender du ønsker NESH sin respons på. Komiteen anser enkelte av disse problemstillingene som så pass tett forbundet at de kommenteres best samlet.

Et hensyn som må tas, er at også om en blogger allerede er noenlunde kjent, og til og med kjent som privatperson, kan ekstra oppmerksomhet fra utenlandske forskere bidra til å øke trykket på vedkommende. Dette er det viktig å ta hensyn til både i den fasen av prosjektet da bloggerne kontaktes av deg og intervjues, og i den fasen da resultatene

dissemineres. I begge faser, og kanskje særlig i kontakt- og intervjufasen, kan man bidra til å sette vedkommende i en ubehagelig, kanskje til og med farlig, situasjon.

I utgangspunktet er det som regel juridisk tillatelig å sitere og omtale blogger uten å be om samtykke. Imidlertid er det viktig å tenke gjennom hvorvidt for eksempel en sammenstilling av et sitat med bloggerens øvrige oppfatninger, eller med en tolkning av utsagnetenes politiske potensial, kan få konsekvenser for vedkommende. En utfordring for deg i slike tilfeller vil være å unngå at en som leser din oppgave kan koble et bestemt sitat fra intervju til en bestemt blogger.

Innhenting av fritt informert samtykke bør finne sted før et intervju. I ditt prosjekt byr det frie informerte samtykket på ekstra utfordringer, fordi det i samtykkeskjemaet kan synes rimelig å meddele at prosjektet omhandler demokrati og selvsensur, og slike ”triggerord” kan bidra til å sette myndighetenes søkelys på vedkommende. Hvis det er slik at forespørsel om samtykke kan innebære noen risiko i den grad skrivet spesifiserer prosjektet som angående ”democracy”, ”censorship” osv, gjelder det å finne en forsvarlig måte å formulere samtykket, og dermed forklare prosjektet, på uten å benytte disse termene eller implisere dem tydelig, slik at denne risikoen unngås.

Samlet sett er det ett hensyn som er helt grunnleggende i denne saken: Hensynet til bloggernes sikkerhet. Under ingen omstendigheter bør noe gjøres som kan antas å medføre risiko for dem. I alle disse vurderingene er det avgjørende at du som student får nytte godt av veileders og forskningsmiljøets kompetanse. Ingen valg som kan tenkes å innvirke på bloggernes livssituasjon bør treffes uten i samråd med veileder.

Prosjektet bør meldes til Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste, om det ikke er innmeldt allerede. NSD kan også være behjelpelige med utforming av sider ved prosjektet som angår personvern.

På vegne av NESH—

Bjørn Hvinden, komiteleder NESH

Hallvard J. Fossheim, sekretariatsleder NESH