The status and relevance of Vietnamese journalism education: An empirical analysis

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Based primarily on data from indepth interviews with senior journalists and journalism educators as well as a content analysis of journalism curricula, this paper sets out to provide an overview of the demand, overall provision structure, teaching materials and methods of Vietnamese journalism education. It first shows that with a fast expansion in both size and substance, the Vietnamese media system is beginning to feel the urgent need for formal journalism education. However, the country’s major journalism programs have been criticised for producing hundreds of unqualified journalism graduates a year. In general, the most deplorable aspects of Vietnamese journalism education include its body of outdated and awkward teaching material, its undue focus on theories and politics at the expense of practical training, its lack of qualified teaching staff and its inadequate teaching resources.
Introduction

This paper is based on three main sets of data. The first consists of those obtained from a search of relevant material from the Vietnamese media. The second was collected from indepth interviews with 12 senior journalists from seven major news organisations in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and four senior journalism educators representing the country’s four major journalism departments or programs. The news organisations were chosen to encompass all major media platforms: magazines, daily newspapers, radio and television. Eventually, 16 interviews were conducted in February 2006.  

Of the 16 interviews, four were conducted via email, one via telephone and others face-to-face.

The third set of data are documents related to teaching methods, curricula, facilities and other aspects of journalism education at the Institute of Journalism and Propaganda (IJP), Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCMC), Vietnam National University in Hanoi (VNU-HN) and Hue University. These documents were either supplied by the interviewees or collected from their websites as well as from Edunet – an intensive information website of Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) – and other sources.

Overview of Vietnamese Journalism Education

Journalism first gained its status as an academic discipline in Southern Vietnam, then the Republic of Vietnam. After the Vietnam War, tertiary journalism education was disbanded until the 1990s, when the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), as a response to the rising need for well-trained journalism and communication cadres to serve the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV)’s economic reform (doi moi), licensed the establishment of journalism departments/programs at the four institutions mentioned earlier.

Currently, these journalism programs offer three different types of Bachelor degrees: (a) regular intensive degrees (mainly for school leavers); (b) in-service degrees (mainly for those who are in the labour force and want to obtain a university degree), and (c) second degrees (for those who hold university degree and want to obtain another in a different discipline). IJP and VNU-HN also offer journalism studies at Master and/or PhD levels.

Of the three undergraduate education types, regular graduates are credited to be the best because regular education requires students to pass a competitive entrance examination and then to go through a strict assessment system during their university years. In contrast, in-service and second-degree education is often not as stringent in its entrance requirements and graduate attributes. This paper focuses on the regular journalism programs.

In a country where there were only 118 tertiary students for every 10,000 people in 2000 (MoET, 2003a), obtaining a place in a regular university program is always tough. For journalism students, it might be even tougher. To be admitted into a university, Vietnamese school-leavers have to take an examination centrally
controlled by MoET. In recent years, the number of school-leavers registering for journalism programs has been high while the total intake remains quite stable at around 400, leading to tight competition. According to MoET (2005) data, the standard scores to enter journalism programs were always the highest of all the social sciences and humanities (SS&H) disciplines at all four universities with regular journalism education. A more telling indicator of this is the “competitive exclusion indices” (the ratios showing the number of exam participants from which one is chosen for admission) of journalism. At IJP, for example, there was a big jump from 1:6 (i.e. one in six students sitting for the exam was successful) in 1992 to 1:21 in 2003 (Dinh Thuy Hang, 2004). At VNU-HCMC, the journalism index was 1:22 in 2005 (Nguyen Van Ha, interview). At Hue, the index has been between 1:17 and 1:27 in the past three years (Nguyen Thanh, interview).

All this indicates that journalism is an appealing career for young Vietnamese. Two major recent changes in the Vietnamese media landscape could be attributed to this. First, the public image of the Vietnamese journalist seems to have been raised to a certain degree of prestige since doi moi. With the CPV’s more tolerant and receptive press control approach, the performance of the press has changed from a mere “dry” propaganda system to a more active and responsive social-monitoring and civic participation mechanism, marked by a more public-oriented service, an increasing diversity of perspectives, and a somewhat aggressive and daring move towards investigative journalism. Second, there has been a steep increase in the number and diversity of media outlets in the past 20 years. In the print sector, for example, the country had 553 organisations publishing 713 publications with a total circulation of 600 million in 2005 (Vietnamese Government, 2005) – compared with 450, 563 and 565 respectively in 2000 (Vietnamese Journalists’ Association [VJA], 2000). The demand for well-trained journalists, therefore, has become quite critical, especially in areas with a high concentration of newsrooms like HCMC and Hanoi. This is particularly pressing at fast-growing organisations like Tuoi Tre, which too often hears complaints about work overload and sometimes even feels incapable to keep up with its own development rate (Do Dinh Tan, interview).

The stringent entrance requirements also indicate that journalism students are the best of all university students in SS&H. But what comes out from their four-year journalism degrees does not seem to please an industry in dire need of well-trained personnel. None of the senior journalists interviewed was happy with what they receive from the journalism schools. Some – namely Ngoc My and Hoai Nam VoH, Quang Thong of Thanh Nien, Duc Quang of Sai Gon Giai Phong, and Trong Thanh of The Gioi Moi –admitted that journalism graduates have obtained some knowledge base and/or built a passion for the job. But, in Duc Quang’s words, “there is a big gap between what they have and what we need”. The particular flaws shared by the interviewees can be summed up in the following comment by Vu Trong Thanh:

They are good at catching new technological trends, particularly in using the Internet. But they lack a general social knowledge base. They do not have good news sense and sufficient skills to find news, to gather information and to handle information. Their English-language level is too low. Even the use of their mother tongue is disappointing. Almost all journalism graduates have at least some Vietnamese writing problems and their grammar and spelling
are seriously flawed. You can find these errors in any medium these days.
Journalism schools look down on this frustrating reality.

That is, they have almost nothing to practise journalism. Vu Mai Nam of *Khao Hoc & Doi Song* was “bitterer” in his tone:

They learn everything but have an understanding of nothing. How can’t a journalism student even handle a headline or distinguish one journalistic genre from another? Worse, their general understanding of the surrounding world is terrible and it seems to me that they are not used to the reading culture. They simply don’t read. When interviewing a journalism student some time ago, I was shocked when he couldn’t explain how the political system works in Vietnam and how government organisations are different from non-government ones.

Comments like these are not difficult to find in the materials obtained for this project. Even journalism educators acknowledged the problem. “Of journalism graduates, about 50%-60% are good enough for the job and only about 20% can advance well in their career,” said A/Prof Nguyen Van Dung – former deputy head of IJP’s Print Journalism Department in an interview with VietnamNet (2005). That is, about half are unqualified after their four intensive years of formal journalism education. Still, these figures might appear “too self-confident” to some people in the industry, such as Dinh Phong (2003) – former Vice President of the VJA, who said that only about 10% of journalism graduates could do the job.

As a result, the ball is thrown from universities back to the industry: to save themselves from lagging behind new market and technological demands, some newsrooms have to set up their own systems to recruit cadets from different disciplines, including journalism, and train them from scratch. Even within these programs, the success rate of journalism graduates remains limited. For instance, according to Nguyen Quang Thong, in its most recent recruitment round, from more than 100 applications, *Thanh Nien* selected ten candidates for probation, at the end of which three were given a full contract – none of these three was a journalism graduate. At *Thoi Bao Kinh Te Sai Gon* of the Saigon Times Group, a leading economic news review, two experiments have been tried – the first was to recruit only journalism graduates and the second was to recruit only graduates from economics-related disciplines. Both failed – no candidate was selected after attending its retraining program. The group finally decided to fill the gap by employing people from its existing network of contributors (Quoc Vinh, interview).

The danger of all this is that in their desperate search for well-trained journalism graduates, journalists and media executives come to look down on the role of universities. As Tran Quoc Toan of *The Gioi Moi* commented: “The common mentality in the industry now is that they don’t need and don’t want journalism education. Most working journalists themselves learn from the job, the best ones are not often formally educated, and journalism graduates are unbearably incompetent in their eyes; so why should they rely on universities?” This view was shared by an anonymous interviewee, who said that the contempt on academia has led to an unstandardised news profession. Showing a copy of his daily paper, he said:
They (media executives) simply don’t care about academia. They think they have all the practical experience and that’s enough for the job. Indeed, the so-called training systems in many newsrooms today are not systemic in any sense. They are more informal networks of experience sharing than formal approaches to professionalism. As a result, there is no professional standard – even a stylebook is still non-existent in a very big newsroom like ours. Can you see the chaos in this front page? There are no principles in the design and layout, the use of types and fonts which have been researched for years.

The young Vietnamese tertiary journalism schools, in short, are facing a real image crisis which, if not handled, might become a crisis of legitimacy. To justify their existence, they have to seriously look at what has gone wrong and to act accordingly. In order to find out their current problems, I conducted an analysis of the curricula, teaching methods and other pedagogical aspects at the country’s four journalism programs, with two research questions in mind: “What is being taught?” and “How are things being taught?”.

What’s Being Taught?

Tertiary journalism education in Vietnam is controlled by MoET in many aspects, from educational aims and admission requirements to student quotas and teaching agenda. This analysis of Vietnamese journalism curricula, therefore, started with what journalism education is supposed to do in the national framework, one which universities have to follow, depending on their specific capacities. In a rather lengthy and confusing statement, the frame curriculum states that Vietnamese journalism graduates are expected to “(1) have a (high) level of political enlightenment and a firm class standpoint; (2) have a deep level of patriotism; (3) “have a professional journalism capacity to equally integrate into professional activities in the region and the world; (4) have an immaculate ethical standard, a healthy lifestyle and a courageous attitude to participate in the struggle to protect the policies and guidelines of the Communist Party and the State of Vietnam, to fight against anti-regime conspiracies and activities and to mobilise and guide the mass in building and protecting the socialist Vietnam fatherland; and (5) have a high sense of discipline and responsibility, a professional passion, a serious, scientific and self-development-oriented working style on the basis of a full and voluntary awareness of the role and social status of journalism and mass communication” (MoET, 2003b, p. 1; numbers added by the author for clarity).

In short, two major graduate attributes are expected for journalism education: (1) a clear and strong loyalty and commitment to the revolutionary cause of the CPV and the “socialist fatherland” (items 1, and 4); and (2) a mastery of professional practices and a sense of professional responsibility and duty based on a thorough understanding of journalism and mass communication theories (items 3 and 5).

This overall aim is well-reflected in the structural composition of the three journalism programs at IJP, VNU-HN and VNU-HCMC. In accordance with MoET’s curriculum, all the three curricula contain two major blocks of courses: the general-education block (taught in the first two years) and the professional-education block (the last two years). The general block consists of a range of SS&H subjects along with courses that are compulsory for any Vietnamese student, including physical
and military training, foreign languages and five political courses (Marxist-Leninist Philosophy, Political Economy, Scientific Socialism, the CPV’s History, and Ho Chi Minh’s Thoughts). The professional education block contains subjects that cover different historical, theoretical and practical aspects of journalism. This is subdivided into four modules: foundational knowledge for journalism, practical training, internship, and graduation thesis or exam. In this analysis, however, this structural composition is not followed for three reasons. First, different universities have different ways of classifying their subjects. For example, design and layout is under the foundational module at IJP but is a practical subject at VNU-HCMC. Second, some of the general education subjects – particularly the physical and military components – are given academic weights (in terms of learning units) at one university but listed only as a compulsory requirement for graduation at another. Third, for the purpose of analysing what is being taught in relation to what is needed for a professional journalist, a classification system utilising journalism as the central referent will provide more telling information. For example, some of the SS&H courses – such as Vietnamese grammar – might have a direct influence on the outcome of daily journalistic works and thus should not be seen as “general education” subjects.

With this in mind, my detailed reading of the three curricula (with particular attention to the aims, content and assessment items of courses) resulted in a classification of seven mutually exclusive modules.

Table 1 presents the number of courses, academic weight and contribution of each of these modules to the whole compulsory program at the three institutions. Before a detailed analysis, two methodological issues must be mentioned.

First, only compulsory courses were taken into account in this table because (a) it makes it easier to figure out the minimal amount of knowledge and skills that a standard journalism graduate of a particular program possesses and (b) it simplifies the data analysis because elective subjects might contain many journalism subjects at one institution (VNU-HN) but only few at another (VNU-HCMC).

Second, because of the aforementioned inconsistency in assigning academic weights to the military and physical training and of their fairly remote relationships with journalism, these components were excluded from the analysis. The VNU-HCMC’s journalism program, for example, would be seen as requiring 186, rather than 202, compulsory units because it contains five units for physical training and 11 for military training. With this in mind, we can see the following structural composition of the three analysed journalism curricula from Table 1:

- The political module consists of subjects that directly train journalism students to be ‘committed to the CPV’s ideologies and policies’, including the above five common political courses along with subjects like Party Building (IJP) or The CPV’s Standpoint on Journalism (VNU-HCMC and VNU-HN). This module’s contribution is almost identical in the three institutions: six courses with 26-27 learning units (1 unit = 15 periods; 1 period = 45 minutes), accounting for around 13% of the total compulsory academic weight.
### Table 1: Structural composition of three typical Vietnamese journalism curricula

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Analysis items</th>
<th>VNU-HCMC Program</th>
<th>VNU-HN Program</th>
<th>IJP Print Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Number of courses</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic weight (units)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic contribution (%)</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-journalism social sciences &amp; humanities</td>
<td>Number of courses</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic weight (units)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic contribution (%)</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism background</td>
<td>Number of courses</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic weight (units)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic contribution (%)</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism skill</td>
<td>Number of courses</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic weight (units)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic contribution (%)</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism-complementary skills</td>
<td>Number of courses</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic weight (units)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic contribution (%)</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship</td>
<td>Number of courses</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic weight (units)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic contribution (%)</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation</td>
<td>Number of courses</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic weight (units)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic contribution (%)</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total compulsory program</td>
<td>Number of courses</td>
<td>58 plus graduation</td>
<td>51 plus graduation</td>
<td>53 plus graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic weight (units)</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic contribution (%)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) 1 unit = 15 periods; 1 period = 45 minutes  
(b) Excluding military and physical training

- The non-journalism SS&H module consists of subjects that provide journalism students with a ‘general knowledge base to understand their society and culture’. This includes subjects like Introduction to Political Sciences, Economic Principles and Laws, Introduction to Psychology, Introduction to the State and the Law, Sociological Research Methodologies (or Probability and Statistics), History of Civilisations, Introduction to Aesthetics, The Bases of Vietnamese Culture, Foundational Linguistics, Introduction to Logics, Vietnamese Literature, International Literature, Population and Development, and Vietnam’s History. VNU-HN takes the lead in this module, with 17 courses worthy of 50 units (26.3% of the total compulsory weight), followed by VNU-HCMC (15 courses, 39 units and 21% respectively) and then IJP (10, 33 and 17%).
- The journalism background module encompasses theoretical subjects that provide journalism students with “an understanding of (a) general journalism and communication processes in society or (b) of different aspects of their future job and working environment”. Examples of the first block include Communication Theories, Foundational Journalism Theories, Media...
Psychology, Media Sociology, Vietnamese Journalism History and The World’s Journalism History. The second block can be represented by courses like The Journalist’s Labour, Introduction to Print Journalism, Introduction to Online Journalism, Introduction to Radio Journalism, Introduction to TV Journalism, Newsroom Organisation and Management, The Language of Journalism, Introduction to Journalism Works, Media Laws, Journalism Ethics, Advertising and Public Relations and the like. In this module, IJP takes the lead, with a total of 18 courses worthy of 56 units (29.5% of the total compulsory weight), followed by VNU-HCMC (15, 41 and 22% respectively) and then VNU-HN (8, 22 and 11.6%).

• The journalism practice module includes subjects ‘with a certain focus on equipping students with the skills and/or necessary knowledge to conduct some specific task in the news production process’. It must be noted that because courses are classified according to their content, not their teaching methods, not all courses under this module are primarily skill training. Any course that is focused (theoretically and/or practically) on one specific set of journalistic skills (e.g. interviewing, news writing) falls under this umbrella. At VNU-HCMC, this includes 11 subjects (Interviewing, News Writing, Reportage and Other Feature Genres, Media Commentaries, Newspaper Editing Methods, Newspaper Design and Printing, Photography and Photojournalism Techniques, Television Broadcasting Techniques, Television Programs, Creating Television Works, and Radio Broadcasting Techniques). These account for 16.2% of its total compulsory weight (30 units).

At VNU-HN, there are also 11 courses belonging to this module (News Genres, Commentary Genres, Commentary Reportage, Literary and Journalistic Features, Newspaper Design, Theory & Practice of Newspaper and Book Editing, Theory & Practice of Photojournalism, Theory & Practice of Radio Broadcasting, Theory & Practice of Television Broadcasting, Television Production Process, and Theory & Practice of Online Journalism). These make up 20.5% of the total compulsory weight (39 units). In the IJP Print Journalism program, there are 10 subjects within the skill domain: Print News, Reporting for the Print Media, Interviewing for the Print Media, Quick Notes for the Print Media, Descriptive Articles for the Print Media, Reportage for the Print Media, Investigating for the Print Media, Commentaries for the Print Media, Content Organisation & Design for the Print Media, and Editing for Print Publications. They account for 27 units or 14.2% of the whole compulsory weight.

• The journalism-complementary skill module consists of non-journalism subjects that provide students with ‘skills and/or knowledge that are not journalistic but have a direct influence on daily journalistic practices and thus the outcome of journalism works’. They include subjects directly affecting the quality of writing (e.g. Applied Vietnamese, Vietnamese Grammar, Vietnamese Vocabulary) or the quality of news gathering (e.g. IT skills and English for Journalism, which encompasses all English courses from basic to specialised ones throughout the four-year program). This complementary module is not unimportant: 27 units (14.2%) at IJP; 39 units (20.5%) at VNU-HN; and 30 (16.1%) at VNU-HCMC.

• The internship module, which is generally aimed at providing students with an opportunity to (a) learn about the structure, activities and management issues of a news organisation; (b) learn about the news production chain; and (c) to
participate in the news production process and create journalism works as journalists. Usually, a student is required to bring back at least four published articles from this internship. At IJP and VNU-HCMC, this is given a stronger emphasis, being worth 12 units (or around 6.5% of the total weight). At VNU-HN, the internship’s academic value is only six units (3.2%).

- The graduation module can take the form of a thesis or a written exam. Usually, only students with high academic achievements are allowed to conduct the research thesis; the rest have to take the written exam. At all the three institutions, the graduation component is worth 10 units, accounting for around 5.3% of the total compulsory weight.

Two major problems could be identified from this analysis. First, journalism students are forced to learn too much during their eight-semester program. In addition to the military and physical training, journalism students at the three institutions had to accumulate a total of around 190 compulsory units in a total of 51-58 courses (plus the graduation thesis/exam) – that is around 6-7 courses a semester. That has not included elective subjects at the two VNUs (seven at VNU-HN and five at VNU-HCMC). By comparison, a standard journalism program in Australia usually takes three full-time years with a total of no more than 24 courses.

While the workload and diversity of courses in the curricula might suggest that Vietnamese journalism graduates are well-equipped, the problem is that students do not have enough time to effectively and efficiently learn and “digest” the huge amount of obtained knowledge. In reality, this has led many students to learning primarily to cope with the usually harsh and heavily-weighted end-of-term exam rather than to brainstorm, to critically reason and to selectively retain knowledge for later application.

Second, journalism schools are injecting too much theory and politics and too little practice into their students’ toolkits. (In reality, political and ideological content is integrated not only in the subjects under the political module but also in almost every other theoretical journalism or non-journalism course.) When the journalism background module is combined with the graduation module, the total weight of mere theoretical journalism courses goes up to over a third (34.8%) at IJP, 25.4% at VNU-HCMC and nearly 17% at VNU-HN. If all the theoretical journalism and non-journalism components are taken together, the overall contribution of theories (counted by adding the percentages in the first three rows and the graduation one in Table 1) accounts for 55.8%, 61.3% and 65.3% of the total compulsory weight at VNU-HN, VNU-HCMC and IJP respectively.

By comparison, when the internship is taken together with the journalism skill module, the total academic contribution of practice-focused courses does not exceed a quarter: 23.7% at VNU-HN, 20.5% at IJP and 22.6% at VNU-HCMC. In other words, the amount of time allocated for teaching skill-related issues is too little. “With 45 periods for teaching television programming to a crowded class of a few dozen students, I could only go like a jet-plane,” said Tran Xuan Sum about his part-time teaching at VNU-HCMC. It must be noted that the time allocation to practical work in most of the courses classified under the journalism practice module hardly exceeds half of their total workload. As Vu Trong Thanh rightly pointed out, “students more hear about journalism than learn how to do journalism and to become journalists”.

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The in-depth interviews for this project show that both theoretical issues and the tiny proportion of skill training are being provided in a very deplorable manner as discussed in the next section.

**How’re Things Being Taught?**

The first oft-mentioned problem is the lack of a systematic approach in journalism education represented by the shortage of scientific and updated teaching materials. All the journalists interviewed were particularly concerned that many journalism subjects are being taught without standard textbooks. Until very recently, only about 30% of IJP courses had a set textbook while at VNU-HCMC, no journalism course (except English for Journalism) was based on a standard one (Huynh Dung Nhan, 2005). Most courses – especially those about professional skills – rely heavily on self-written lectures.

“They teach what they know and have, not what their students should learn,” said Quang Thong. Further, the knowledge being provided cannot keep up with modern journalism techniques and communication technologies (Dinh Thuy Hang, 2004).

“Some of them still have to use textbooks from the former Soviet and East European system, many of which were written in the 1970s,” said Ngoc My of VoH.

Nguyen Van Ha revealed that research aiming to upgrade and update the body of journalism knowledge is still a luxury at his institution. Vu Mai Nam, who worked for a long time as a senior teacher before starting his journalism career – was particularly worried about this:

They are teaching a hotchpotch of dogmatic, hackneyed and empty theories. While these are from classical doctrines, they are irrelevant in the context of modern realities. They do not even respect what is going in the real world. Much of the provided theory is subjectively constructed rather than accumulated from objective research. Also, everything is servilely presented in a “too proper” machine-like sequence – foundational history, theoretical basis, current status, problems, solutions, so on and so on. The number of listenable lecturers in the ears of students could be counted on their finger tips.

Partly because of their poor and outdated knowledge base and other long-established cultural problems, many journalism lecturers are leaving students with a bulk of puzzling knowledge and no chance to ask questions or discuss. The dominant teaching approach in most theoretical and many practical courses, as admitted by the journalism educators interviewed, is no more than a church minister’s preaching monologue: the teacher talks; the student hastily takes notes and then learns these decisive notes by heart for their final exams.

According to Dinh Thuy Hang, there have been some positive changes in teaching approaches at IJP in recent years because a substantial number of its lecturers have been trained within the Swedish Government-funded project on improving the quality of journalism in Vietnam. However, she said that this is still a minority – and even if someone wants to develop some innovative approach, practical concerns prevent him/her from doing this.
Another problem is that journalism is being taught by those who have little experience in journalism and are kept too far behind its development. “If you go to a journalism department, meeting its staff, you’ll see that the majority of them – the many professors and PhDs out there – have nothing in their background to do with journalism,” said Quoc Vinh. “They are from philosophy, politics, literature, linguistics and so on. How can one teach journalism without knowing what it looks like?”

According to Nguyen Van Ha, only one of the 35 internal journalism staff members at VNU-HCMC has worked as a full-time journalist. Its counterpart at Hue University is zero. To cope with increasing teaching demands, universities have been employing their own students: those who graduate with good academic achievement are asked to join their former teachers. While this might help in the short term, it does not improve quality in the long term because the major – and usually only – real-world experience of these new teachers is the internship during their undergraduate program. It can worsen the situation because the knowledge base they possess is quite inappropriate.

To bridge the theory-practice gap, universities have invited experienced journalists to teach and coordinate some practical courses. In addition to its 35 internal academics, VNU-HCMC has another 15 part-time lecturers from the industry, including senior and well-known journalists and officials from the government’s media management bodies. While these lecturers bring with them some “fresh air from the real world”, this solution is not without criticisms. Particular concerns were about their lack of pedagogical training as well as theoretical foundation for what they teach.

“A good journalism lecturer must have both academic background and professional expertise,” said Ngoc My. But according to Dinh Thuy Hang, attracting good journalists to a full-time academic career is not an easy job due to the lack of effective rewarding mechanisms in universities. Good journalists often earn good money from their usually senior positions and/or well-established reputation while teaching requires too hard work with much less income. “Frankly, we understand that journalism is a theory-hyphenating-practice discipline and we widely open our arms to welcome people from the industry but nobody comes,” said Nguyen Thanh.

Even basic facilities for skills training are not always well supplied. As Vietnam’s most heavily invested and powerful journalism institution, IJP is the best in this aspect, possessing seven Internet-connected computer labs (each containing 50-100 computers), a radio studio and a television studio. This strong teaching and research infrastructure serves its journalism students as well as courses within government-sanctioned journalism training projects funded by international organisations. With these facilities, IJP is the only journalism school able to provide students with the opportunity to produce and publish their own works (via an internal print publication and an internal radio program). In some of the other institutions, however, teaching facilities are almost zero.

Nine years after starting to offer journalism, Hue University is still planning to call for industrial and governmental support to build a journalism lab. At VNU-HCMC, a broadcasting studio was set up in 2003 but this is usually “filled with dust”, said a recent graduate (Nguyen Khanh-Hong Linh, 2004). According to this student, during
her four-year program, she had two opportunities to enter this room, one of which was only to pose for a television story about the then new and “magnificent” lab.

Without real playfields, practical journalism at these institutions has been delivered in a cursory, and potentially dangerous, manner. Interviewing, for example, is often practised via “pseudo-interviews”, in which the teacher acts as a public figure for students to interview. For news writing, the common approach is to supply some hypothetical situations and raw data for students to put together into news stories. An even more pitiable situation is found in the design and layout course at VNU-HCMC: the lecturer teaches theory, then asks students to cut pieces from different publications and manually arrange and paste them together to make their own “news page”. Most of the interviewed journalists voiced their strong concerns over these “pseudo-practice” approaches.

“They don’t even understand what journalism practice is. Teaching in this way does not help students – it can only damage and destroy them,” said Tran Xuan Sum. For Do Dinh Tan of Tuoi Tre, teaching students via hypothetical situations is “extremely dangerous” in that it could produce a generation of “pseudo-journalists” who go out and rely on their imagination than reality exploration:

Journalists have to breathe with their own noses, not with breathing equipment supplied by others; they have to see the world through their own eyes and think about it with their own minds. This habit should be established from their university days. Training future journalists in the current way is not different from killing journalism.

But the result is not just a whole generation of journalism graduates who are quickly driven out of the arena on which they are supposed to be the most active players. It is also a generation of journalists with little or no respect for ethical standards. “Students not only learn little from classes; sometimes, under the pressure to fulfil academic requirements, they become deceitful,” said Tran Xuan Sum. Citing the fact that many of his television students go out and hire commercial video services to do assignments for them, Sum added:

Some pass the course without even knowing where to press the shutter button. Where is the integrity in these future journalists? Many journalism graduates today are irresponsible to themselves, let alone to society. Many enter the media market with the urge to make money from using the power of the mass media.

Meanwhile, the internship – the only well-meaning chance for students to practise journalism – does not always fulfil its promise. As universities have not established any official link with the industry, sending interns to news organisations is not an easy job. “News organisations are not eager to receive interns from universities: it only adds weight to their already heavy workload,” said Dinh Thuy Hang.

According to Dinh Phong (2003) and Nguyen Van Ha (interview), most news organisations receive interns because their bosses have some personal relationships with universities. Even then, as most organisations do not have a formal training system, how and what a student learns from their internship depends largely on the mercy of the journalists he/she works with. The situation is even worse at
broadcasting stations, where expensive technologies and tight security measures often prevent students from touching them, let alone creating some work.

“Doing internship at these stations is like riding a horse to watch flowers and sometimes, students don’t even have flowers to watch,” said Tran Xuan Sum. Thus, according to Le Quoc Minh – Head of the International Affairs Department of Vietnam News Agency, the internship has become a formal procedure that must be accomplished rather than a chance to “get out there” and learn from reality (Thanh Nien, 2005).

Conclusion

This research has shown that 15 years into their existence, tertiary journalism education in Vietnam is undergoing a crisis of image – and even a crisis of legitimacy – in the news industry. By unduly emphasising theory and politics and overlooking practice, the young Vietnamese journalism schools, in the words of Dinh Phong (2003), are producing “too many journalism bachelors but too few journalists”. Not only being incompetent in their capacity to practise journalism, these journalism graduates also display a serious lack of general knowledge as well as the capacity for critical enquiry, despite learning a very large amount of broad and/or indepth knowledge about society, politics, culture and mass communications. They lag behind reality with a bulk of outdated knowledge and are seldom ready to meet the requirement of the job market.

To be fair, not everything is irrelevant or useless, as To Dinh Tuan – the only formally educated journalist participating in this project (a VNU-HCMC journalism graduate) – acknowledged. “For me, the knowledge I learnt from my university … might not have direct values but it forms the background for every of my thoughts. It helps us to be confident in practising journalism and to have a strong journalistic reasoning background”.

But in an industry that has been growing mostly out of hands-on experiences and is desperately seeking well-trained staff to meet its hasty development, such a journalism education is under a serious attack from every side. In order to justify their existence, for the many benefits they generate for society in general and for the news profession in particular, Vietnamese journalism schools have to act – responsively and responsibly – to fix the many problems identified in this research. With a stronger focus on practical training in mind, they might have to think about overhauling current curricula, building up a strong learning material base, changing to the way students are assessed, employing new technologies to create practical opportunities and getting the industry involved in the education process. All must be done as soon as possible, both at individual-institution and national levels.

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Endnote

1 **Newspapers and news magazines:**
   - Mr Nguyen Duc Quang – General Managing Editor and Director of Training, *Sai Gon Giai Phong* (Liberated Saigon).
   - Mr Do Dinh Tan – Deputy General Managing Editor of *Tuoi Tre* (The Youth).
   - Mr Nguyen Quang Thong – General Managing Editor of *Thanh Nien* (Young People).
   - Mr To Dinh Tuan – Deputy Managing Editor, *Sai Gon Giai Phong*.
   - Mr Quoc Vinh – Deputy Editor-in-Chief, the *Saigon Times Group*.
   - The head of research and training of a major daily who requested anonymity.

**General-interest magazines:**
   - Mr Vu Mai Nam – Director, *Khoa Hoc & Doi Song* (Science & Life)’s HCMC Bureau.
   - Mr Tran Quoc Toan – Head of the Domestic Affairs Department, *The Gioi Moi*.

**Broadcasting organisations:**
   - Ms Ngoc My – General Managing Editor, HCMC People’s Voice (VoH).
   - Mr Hoai Nam – Head, Department of Science and Education Affairs, VoH.
   - Mr Tran Xuan Sum – former Deputy Training Manager, HCMC Television (recently retired).

**Journalism departments/programs:**
   - Mr Nguyen Van Ha – Head of Journalism, Department of Linguistics, Literature and Journalism, Vietnam National University in HCMC (VNU-HCMC).
   - Dr Dinh Thi Thuy Hang, Lecturer, Department of Broadcasting Journalism, Institute of Journalism and Propaganda (IJP), Ho Chi Minh Political Academy (Ha Noi).
   - A/Prof Dinh Huong – Head, Department of Journalism, Vietnam National University in Ha Noi (VNU-HN).
   - Dr Nguyen Thanh – Head of Journalism, Department of Linguistics and Literature, Hue University.

References


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