



Empowered lives.  
Resilient nations.



British Embassy  
Hanoi



TOWARDS  
TRANSPARENCY



TRANSPARENCY  
INTERNATIONAL  
the global coalition against corruption

Photo © flickr/ Espen Faugstad

# THE MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF CORRUPTION IN VIETNAM 2006 - 2011

**THE MEDIA PLAYS A CRITICAL ROLE IN ANTI-CORRUPTION.** Through exposing incidences of corruption, monitoring government efforts to combat corruption and providing the public with a forum to discuss corruption, the media serves as an important intermediary in which to keep people informed and the government accountable.

This study was commissioned by Transparency International (TI) and Towards Transparency (TT) in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the British Government in Vietnam to better understand the role played by the media in anti-corruption. Building on a previous piece of research produced in 2009 by UNDP, this study analyses media coverage of corruption across seven major newspapers from 2006 to 2011.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using three key research methods.

**CONTENT ANALYSIS** of quantitative data collected from print and online newspapers (Lao Dong, Nhan Dan, Thanh Nien, Tuoi Tre, Saigon Tiep Thi, VietnamNet and VnExpress) between 1 October 2006 and 30 September 2011. Data was collected from all articles containing the word "corruption" or a key term related to corruption, such as "bribe", "fraud", "informal payment" and "abuse of power" in either the news story's headline or in its first two paragraphs.

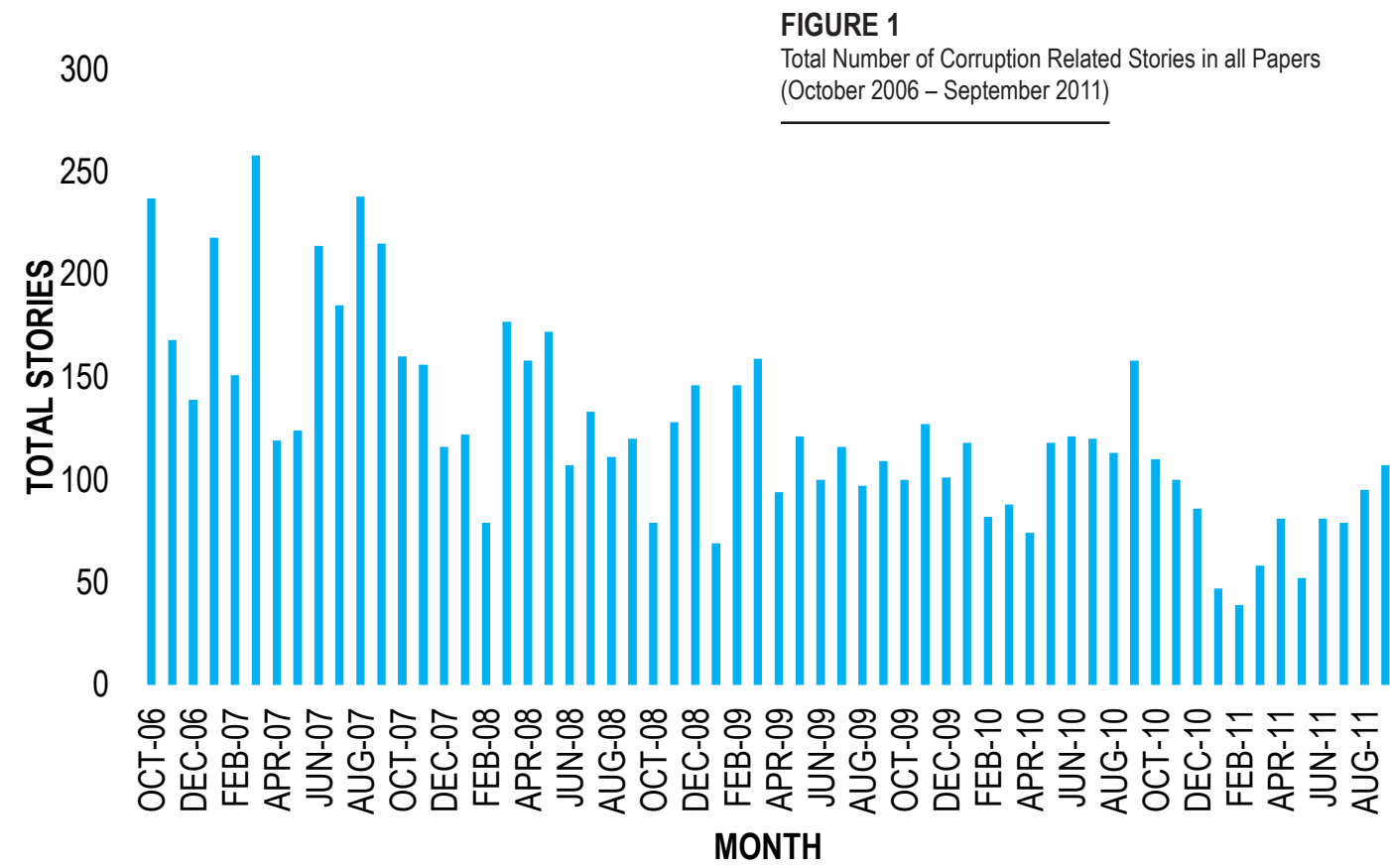
**LITERATURE REVIEW** of legislation, official government documents and other relevant secondary documents covering the operation of the media and anti-corruption in Vietnam.

**SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS** conducted with 20 senior news reporters, editors, managers, and representatives from government ministries charged with overseeing print and online media in Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue and Da Nang.

FINDINGS

FREQUENCY OF COVERAGE

Overall reporting on corruption has decreased over the past five years. Media representatives attributed this to an increasingly restrictive environment, which has seen warnings, dismissals and even arrests of journalists and their editors. In response to such challenges, journalists are increasingly self censoring their own work or becoming disillusioned and moving away from the news industry altogether. This coupled with the dismissal of key senior editorial staff, has reduced the industry’s capacities leaving younger and less experienced writers and editors to cover corruption at a time when the barriers to doing so are increasing.



DEPTH OF COVERAGE

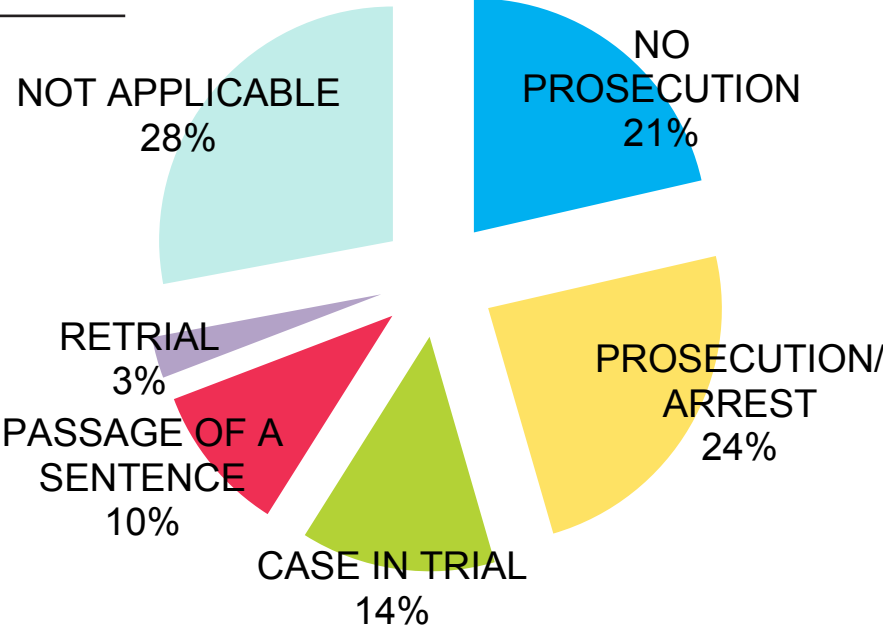
Coverage on the front page or in the “current news” section also fell, as corruption related stories were increasingly covered on inside pages under “law” or “society and politics” sections. An in-depth study of the raw data and discussions with interviewees revealed that articles also became shorter and less investigative in nature.

Over half of all stories (51 per cent) covered the arrest, trial, sentencing or retrial of corruption cases which had already been officially released. The vast majority of these stories were relatively short, with little or no follow-up and usually based on information provided directly by the police. The media failed to pursue almost half of the cases reported once they go to trial.

Out of the trials which were covered, verdicts were reported in only around two thirds of cases. While 21 per cent of stories covered cases where no prosecutions had taken place, the information for most of these cases were again fed directly by the police.

Interviewees explained that a slow but steady reduction in state funding has pushed papers away from resource and staff intensive investigative reporting, towards lower-cost and higher-sale tabloid coverage. In addition, investigative reporting units have been gradually dismantled, leaving remaining staff ill-equipped to investigate corruption related cases outside of those where police directly provide information to the media.

**FIGURE 2**  
Number of Corruption Related Stories Covering Court and Non-Court Cases, All Newspapers  
(October 2006 – September 2011)



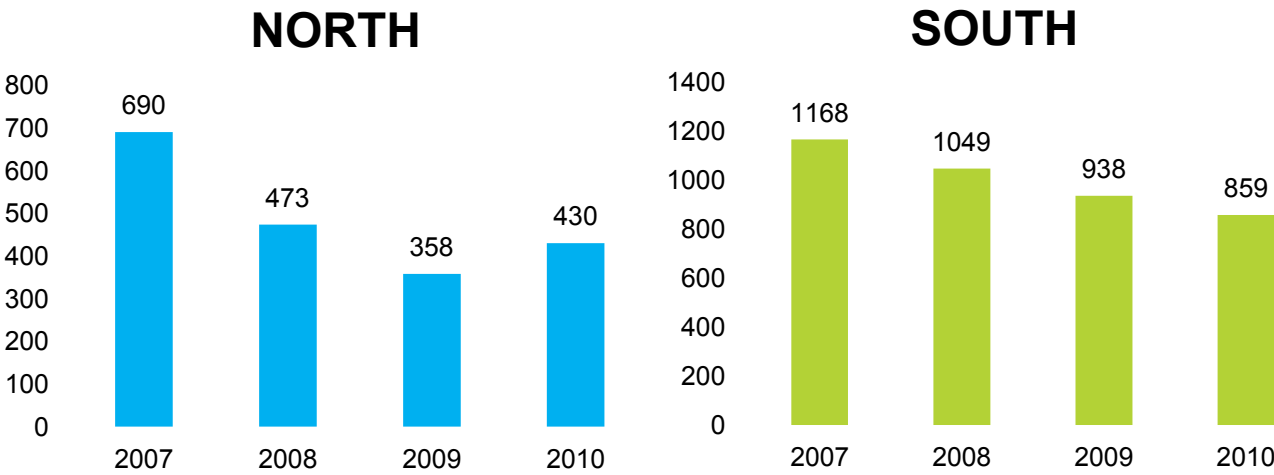
COVERAGE ACROSS GEOGRAPHIC LEVEL

Over half of all stories written about corruption (56 per cent) covered events that took place at the provincial level, while only 17 per cent focused on central level corruption. Interviewees noted that coverage of central-level corruption remains difficult, in terms of both accessing reliable information and attaining official approval for publication.

Coverage on corruption was also substantially higher in southern provinces compared to the north.

This difference has been explained by the fact that journalists in the South are more willing, and better equipped, to cover corruption. Southern papers, not only have access to a larger advertising market, which enables them to pay higher salaries and retain strong journalists. Interviewees also suggested that journalists in the north face greater challenges and are subject to greater external constraints in their work.

**FIGURE 3**  
Total Coverage in Northern and Southern Vietnam, all Newspapers (October 2006 – September 2011)







## DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS IN THE MEDIA

Despite the decline in media coverage over the past five years, there are signs that journalists remain committed to covering corruption in both mainstream and online media.

Coverage of corruption has been cyclical. When one newspaper's coverage falls after the dismissal of its editor-in-chief or staff writer, another paper will rise to take its place.

Online media, particularly unofficial media such as blogs, are increasingly bringing to light news stories that the official media is unable or unwilling to report. In many instances, this is pushing mainstream media to follow, thus forcing events onto the news agenda that may previously have been censored.

Towards Transparency  
TI National Contact in Vietnam  
444 Hoang Hoa Tham  
Ho Tay, Hanoi  
Vietnam

Phone: +84 (04) 3715 4084  
Fax: +84 (04) 3715 4090

[info@towardstransparency.vn](mailto:info@towardstransparency.vn)  
[www.towardstransparency.vn](http://www.towardstransparency.vn)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the media's long-term contribution to anti-corruption, a number of recommendations are made:

For policymakers:

- Clarify, simplify and consistently implement Vietnam's legal framework for the media.
- Improve protection of journalists and access to information
- Develop an independent media ombudsman to strengthen journalistic standards.

For the media:

- Continue to improve journalist skills and ethics to ensure that reportage on corruption is accurate and fair.
- Build journalist networks to institutionalise training, offer advice on the protection of journalists, and monitor media standards.
- Clarify current editorial constraints on corruption related coverage to reduce the risk of self-censorship. Over the longer term, the government and media must work together to remove these limits.
- Develop strong business models to support sustainable growth and investment in strong investigative reporting.

For development partners:

- Support the government to amend its legal system through study trips, forums for discussion of alternative legal systems and the creation of a Vietnamese media ombudsman.
- Support development of local sustainable training centres and systems, particularly for young journalists.
- Work with the government to agree on a new lead donor for the media.
- Encourage greater involvement by South East Asian donors and media development partners.