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**SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF VIETNAMESE JOURNALISM
THROUGH THE “FISH SAUCE WITH ARSENIC” SCANDAL**

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Abstract

Journalism is playing an integral role in socio-economic development. It is believed to be a particular socio-political activity which has an indirect impact on readers and even on the political apparatus of society. Only when journalists are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities will the media perform its functions properly in modern society. Through the "traditional fish sauce with arsenic" scandal, the author examines the role of Vietnamese journalism in providing information and reflecting on hot issues. At the same time, we also consider the social responsibility and professionalism of journalists today. The author studied 48 articles published in the electronic newspaper Danviet.vn from October 12, 2016 (when the scandal began) until November 21, 2016 (when the Ministry of Information and Communications announced the handling of violations for posting wrongful reports. The result of using content analysis of articles shows that this scandal attracted the attention of not only consumers and fish sauce businesses but also the authorities. Although in this affair, many journalists did not fulfill their responsibilities, in general it was found that Vietnamese journalism acts in the interests of the people, their economic, political, social and cultural needs. In the end, newspapers posting inaccurate fish sauce reports were fined, and traditional fish sauce has been vindicated.

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1. Introduction

Since the reforms of 1986, socio-economic life in Vietnam has undergone radical changes while the press has gained more freedom and been subjected to less strict censorship. So, Vietnam's media have shed some of the old ideologically-driven monotonous editorial style and content (Heng, 2003). These days, journalism is the voice, the forum for people, and the place for honest reflection on current affairs (Phan, 2012). If people's earlier concerns were about when the war would end or whether next month they would have rice to eat or not, now, when the quality of life is improved, they begin to care more about their spiritual and ethical life. One of these current concerns is food hygiene.

Fish sauce is considered an indispensable spice in Vietnamese cuisine. But in October 2016, the traditional fish sauce industry was caught in a big scandal and was at risk of being eliminated from the market. On October 11, 2016, the newspaper *thanhnien.vn* published a post "How does Vietnamese fish sauce reach out to the world?" Find clean fish sauce" after buying 106 fish sauce samples on the market and taking them for testing without permission. On the afternoon of 12th October, in the article "Cautious with arsenic content", it is written that "the higher the protein concentration in the fish sauce, the higher the possibility of arsenic infection" and announced that the results of 80/106 samples exceeded the safe limit of the Ministry of Health. In addition, in the afternoon of October 17, Vietnam Standards and Consumer Association (followed by VINATAS) announced the results of the quality survey of 150 fish sauce samples of 88 traditional brands and 1 sample from Thailand. VINATAS claimed that "101/150 survey samples did not meet the safety standards set by the Ministry of Health. At the same time, VINATAS also announced that industrial fish sauce had the permitted level of arsenic content" (Nguyen, & Hong, 2016). The two concepts must be defined clearly: traditional fish sauce is fish sauce created by fermenting fish, salt and water for 8-12 months; Industrial fish sauce is a mixture of fish essence, flavoring, and more than 20 types of preservatives and sweeteners (Tran, 2016).

2. Problem Statement

In the era of globalization, means of mass media have a profound impact on people's social life and awareness (Ndiayea & Ndiayea, 2014). After VINATAS came to a conclusion, a series of press agencies reposted this information; the online community quickly shared the article and spread false information about the quality of traditional fish sauce. Only a few days later, two fish sauce brands of the Masan Group, namely Chinsu and Nam Ngu, were immediately advertised as reaching arsenic safety standards. That caused confusion and anxiety among consumers, and traditional fish sauce was at risk of being boycotted.

3. Research Questions

This paper considers the features of publications on this scandal to find answers to the following questions. First, journalism should provide a true and fairly complete description of significant aspects of current affairs (McQuail, 2014), are there many articles about this scandal? Second, have journalists fulfilled their roles and functions? If the press cannot guarantee the authenticity of a report, this will lead to a loss of the professional value of the journalists (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2014). Third, is this a dishonest

media campaign or a conspiracy involving Thanhnien.vn, VINATAS and the Masan Group? Currently, the media plays a huge role in public opinion (Duong, 2011) and many large economic groups take advantage of press power to carry out propaganda campaigns. In other words, they are spreading information with the aim of manipulating the attitudes, thoughts, psychology and opinions of the public in a way that benefits a movement or group (Nelson, 1996). Fourth, communication ethics is also a field of study that attracts great interest of journalists, public relations experts, scientists worldwide (Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016). So, if this is a media campaign, what is the role and morality of Vietnamese journalists? And who would benefit if this orchestrated defamatory media campaign succeeded?

4. Purpose of the Study

The study examines the characteristics of publications on the scandal "fish sauce containing a high arsenic content" in Viet Nam's online media. The objective of the present work is to examine the interest of readers, consumers, businesses and related agencies on hot issues in society, thereby determining the social responsibility of journalism and the ethics and professionalism of journalists in Vietnam today. Because in the age of media digitization and convergence, there are more and more journalists following the "non-professional ideology" which argues that anyone could become a journalist.

5. Research Methods

There are various research methods available, such as: method of examination, sociometric survey, content analysis method, etc. In this work, the method of content analysis is used, which involves undertaking a variety of tasks: to identify how the ideas of journalists are realized in real life; identify the amount of attention of the authorities and the audience to a specific topic (Fomicheva, 2012). The author uses the method of content analysis to analyze 49 posts on danviet.vn from 12 October, 2016 to 21 November 2016.

Content analysis can be qualitative (for analyzing individual texts) and quantitative (for gaining knowledge about a variety of similar texts). This method was first used by Kuzmichevui in the early 20th century, and then by researchers in the university of Saint-Petersburg and Stockholm in 1995 (Fomicheva, 2012).

The author uses the search engine in the right corner of the website, because every online newspaper stores and arranges all news in a chronological order and based on categories or issues of public interests (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2014) and readers can download anytime. The keywords used to search are "fish sauce", "arsenic-contaminated fish sauce", "industrial fish sauce", "traditional fish sauce" and "VINATAS". However, this search engine sometimes produces duplicate results so the author must use the "filtering" method to get the most accurate results.

Danviet.vn newspaper was chosen for several reasons. First, this is the mouthpiece of the Vietnam Farmers' Association, licensed and put into operation on March 17, 2009. Second, this is one of the electronic newspapers (e-newspapers) that have the largest readership in Vietnam today. Third, e-newspapers have the advantages of high speed and large storage capacity, and are highly interactive

(Cheng, 2010). In addition, e-newspapers have full functions, tasks, roles and types of content like traditional newspapers (Nguyen, 2016a).

6. Findings

From October 12, 2016 to November 21, 2016, there were 48 articles published on the danviet.vn about "fish sauce". Articles were posted in different genres such as reportage, news and analysis, and also arranged in two categories which are economy and news. Using the content analysis methodology, the author divided the publications into groups, namely: regular news, consumer reactions, the reactions of traditional and industrial fish sauce producers, and reactions of experts and authorities. These publications are also reviewed in two periods: before and after the investigation of the Ministry of Public Security into the affair on October 22, 2016. (Table 01).

Table 01. Articles about this scandal

	Number	Percentage (%)
Before the investigation by Ministry of Public Security	25	52
After the investigation by Ministry of Public Security	23	48
Totally	48	100

It can be said that the press fulfilled the function of disseminating information to readers, satisfying their needs for information. Due to the needs for information in society, journalism refers to the "coverage" of the phenomena and problems of the whole society (Prokhorov, 2005). In general, thorny problems like food hygiene and safety, and specifically traditional sauce is suspected to have a high arsenic content. Ha, Shamim, and Pham Do (2019) believe that Vietnamese consumers experienced a high level of anxiety about food safety.

In addition, the arsenic found in fish sauce is a harmless organic form, which is allowed to exist in food. There is no scientific evidence that organic arsenic is harmful to human health. However, arsenic trioxide is a toxic compound of the element. It seems that Thanhnien.vn and VINATAS deliberately avoided explaining these two concepts. Thanhnien.vn has been known as one of the biggest and most prestigious newspapers. Therefore, immediately after publication, a series of newspapers published the news from Thanhnien.vn and VINATAS, creating a wave in the mass media. This threw consumers into a panic and might have caused disastrous consequences. Because the influence of the media is so massive, ensuring the information and psychological safety of consumers can be included in the country's national security system (Sulakshin, Sazonova, & Khvylya-Olinter, 2014). However, out of 25 articles, there is only 1 article concerned with consumer opinion.

The media coverage affected not only readers as consumers but also traditional fish sauce businesses. Many businesses insisted that consumers should pay more attention to highly toxic inorganic arsenic rather than organic arsenic. In this unequal battle, it took quite a long time for traditional fish sauce to regain its position (Pham & Ha, 2016).

Ms. Ho Kim Lien - Chairman of the Phu Quoc Fish Sauce Association said: "Traditional fish sauce is also exported to many countries such as Japan, Korea, China, Europe ... All these markets are

not" complaining about the quality of the product. And organic arsenic is a naturally occurring ingredient in traditional fish sauce at a safe level" (Thuan, 2016). With regard to the industrial fish sauce businesses, there is no article about their opinions and reactions. There is only one article that indirectly refers to the advertising of the Masan Group as mentioned above. The advertisement emphasizes that Masan products are safe and reach arsenic standards and meet the national technical standards QCVN 8-2011 / BYT issued in 2011, which only regulates the metallic composition of the food, not organic arsenic (Thanh, 2016). Consumers justifiably reserve the right to ask whether Masan will take advantage of the media to gain profits or not (Table 02).

Table 02. Analysis of published articles before the investigation by Ministry of Public Security

	Number	Percentage (%)
Regular news	7	28
Consumers' reaction	1	4
The reactions of traditional fish sauce businesses	7	28
The reactions of industrial fish sauce businesses	0	0
The reactions of experts and authorities	10	40
Totally	25	100

Amidst the chaos of information, journalists often look for experts and researchers for consultation (Phan, 2012). There are up to 10 articles mentioning the comments of experts and authorities. Experts here can be lawyers, who work in the health, biology, food safety industries, etc. They are professionals with expertise and explain problems with specific scientific evidence. Lawyer Nguyen The Truyen said that if evidence of damage to prestige and revenue is found, Vietnamese producers and exporters of traditional fish sauce absolutely reserve the right to require VINATAS to compensate for losses according to the laws (Nguyen, 2016b). National Assembly member Nguyen Sy Cuong said that the announcement of Vinatas that 67% of fish sauce samples nationwide did not meet the arsenic target was a violation of law (Ngoc, 2016) because the publication of such information is under the jurisdiction of state administrative agencies, not an organization nor an individual. It should be emphasized that one of the press' roles is to attract the attention of the government, putting pressure on the government to come up with solutions to the existing problems in society. After the newspapers covered all information about this scandal, especially after the associations of seafood processing and domestic fish sauce signed the petition to the Prime Minister to vindicate the traditional fish sauce, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc required the authorities to probe the case (Nguyen, 2016c). (Table 03).

Table 03. Analysis of published articles after the investigation by Ministry of Public Security

	Number	Percentage (%)
Regular news	3	13
Consumers' reaction	0	0
The reactions of traditional fish sauce businesses	5	21,8
The reactions of industrial fish sauce businesses	0	0
The reactions of experts and authorities	15	65,2
Totally	23	100

After the Ministry of Public Security opened the investigation and the Ministry of Health published the test results of 247 fish sauce samples, many media agencies removed their previous posts. Danviet.vn newspaper also removed up to 3 articles and sent apologies to readers. Although Vietnamese consumers have not found a place in the mass media, what readers have received is that the press has timely directions for the government to make reasonable policies (Phan, 2012) and their rights are still protected. Industrial fish sauce lost in this "media battle" so the fact that there is no article about the reaction of the industrial fish sauce businesses is understandable. Meanwhile, traditional fish sauce businesses compiled evidence to initiate the VINATAS lawsuit (Mai, 2016)

15 out of 23 articles reported about the opinions of experts and authorities. After the survey, results are clear, the functions of the authorities are to deal with violations in this "dirty competition", lack of vindication, and all tricks to spread the news to cause negative publicity (The, 2016). This is also clearly stated in the Vietnam Press Law: press agencies, participating in violating press activities, causing damage to legitimate rights and interests of other agencies, organizations and individuals will be handled according to the law (Press Law, 2016). As a result, 50 press agencies, including Danviet.vn newspaper, where nearly 560 news articles were published with false contents from Thanh Nien and Vinatas, received heavy sanctions.

7. Conclusion

As a result of the study, the author comes to the following conclusions:

First, the scandal of arsenic-contaminated fish sauce was of particular interest to the Vietnamese mass media. E-newspaper danviet.vn was one of the sites updating the news on a regular basis throughout the event. This site not only updated regular news, but also published the opinions of consumers, experts, and government representatives so that readers could understand the nature of the problem.

Second, it is imperative that the press respect the truth, because journalists are people who are active in the political-social field, representing the voices of the people and the country. Writing about this scandal, some journalists did not verify the information correctly before making reports, leading to confusion in the public. Such wrongful information not only hurts the economy and social security but also reduces the reputation of the press in general.

Third, media ethics are ethical issues that arise in the process of preparing, storing, receiving, providing and disseminating information on mass media (Drozdek, 2015). Perhaps, some journalists do not comply with professional rules and disseminate misleading information for private benefits, causing great harm to society.

Fourth, although the necessity of training and enriching expertise, political and professional ethics for journalists is clearly stated in the press law, every journalist also needs to cultivate himself and improve his understanding of various life aspects. Additionally, asking for experts' consultation to get the correct information is advisable.

Fifth, in the current social context, the press is regarded as the "fourth power", which exists parallel to other branches of the government namely: legislative, executive and judicial. This shows the importance of journalism in the political and social state of a nation. Therefore, many press agencies have abused their powers, seeking personal gains but forgetting the ethics of journalism. As a result,

Vietnamese lawmakers, as well as the authorities, need to take measures to regulate the operation of press agencies as well as introduce heavy sanctions in the field of journalism in order to satisfy the information needs of people and ensure freedom of the press. This remains a matter of controversy today.

Sixth, newspapers in developing countries like Vietnam are making good use of the global democratization tendencies and technological innovations to fulfill their roles (Krimsky, 2003). In the case of arsenic-contaminated fish sauce, although there was a lot of misleading information, in the end, the Vietnamese mass media, including danviet.vn, clarified the incident, created public pressure and made functioning authorities take steps. As a result, traditional fish sauce has been "vindicated", press agencies having posted false information received heavy sanctions according to the law, and VINATAS is at risk of dissolution.

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