Rape experiences and the limits of women's agency in contemporary post-reform Vietnam
Nguyen, T.T.H.

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CHAPTER 7

A double-edged weapon:

Representations of rape in the print media in modern Vietnam

Cán bộ báo chí cũng là chiến sỹ cách mạng.
Cây bút, trang giấy là vũ khí sắc bén của họ.

[Vn.: Journalism cadres are also revolutionary soldiers; A pen and a piece of paper are their sharp weapons]

Hồ Chí Minh

Introduction

The air was clear and fresh after the early morning downpour heralding the start of the rainy season. In a café in the heart of Hanoi’s Phố cổ [Vn.: the Old Quarter], the guests sat next to their tiny cups of cà phê phin [Vn.: café filtre /filtered coffee], a leftover habit from French colonial days. Most were sitting idly, each with his/her private thoughts. A man across the room was in a boisterous mood, telling his friend of his latest business coup. No one seemed to mind the lady-owner behind the counter shouting orders to her personnel or the noises from chaotic traffic outside. Suddenly a piercing voice from the loudspeaker of the newspaper boy pushing his cart caught everyone’s attention: “Latest news! Gang rape in the middle of the rice fields! Nine offenders all teenagers.” A middle-aged man sitting close to the entrance straightened his back and waved for a copy. Others quickly followed suit. The lady owner exclaimed in her acid voice: “What kind of news is this? Robbery and rape? No way! It’s just a bunch of country kids with nothing to do having a roll in the hay, that’s all.” With a sinking feeling I also asked for a copy. Glancing at the first few lines mentioning the location and the time of the incident, I realized that one of the two victims portrayed in the news item had recently contacted our consultancy office for psychological support.

In this chapter, I try to unpack how the media in Vietnam, specifically the print media, reports on incidents of rape. More precisely, I attempt to highlight the fact that one-sided and insensitive ways of reporting unwittingly exacerbates the suffering of rapees, sometimes turning them into objects of criticism in local opinion. I also wish to point out that misconceptions/misinterpretations of rape-related incidents in the media tend to reinforce existing social prejudices as regards this problematic. In the second part, in order to explain the differences in the ways a rape incident is reported in various newspapers, I shall deal with aspects pertaining to institutional control that allow a certain degree of openness in the media since Đổi Mới was launched in the late 1980s. Taking into account the important role of the press in the fight against social evils, as defined in official discourses, I explore avenues available to rapees to fight for justice and pursue their survival strategies individually.

To illustrate how women are portrayed in the reporting of rape, and how the news coverage reinforces the very myths and stereotypes that many women have internalized thus making it even more difficult for them to heal emotionally, I concentrate on four cases - through in-depth interviews - that involved media exposure. Of these cases, two concern girls aged under sixteen living in low-income neighbourhoods of Hanoi (Thu and Nga), one involves incest of two sisters who migrated to Hanoi (Giang and Minh), and one concerns a gang rape of two adult women in a rural area near Hanoi (Mỹ and Hạnh). As an illustration, I rely on the coverage of these particular cases in four daily newspapers, namely An Ninh Thủ Đô [Vn.: The Capital’s Security], Gia Đình-Xã Hội [Vn.: Family and Society], Tiết Phong [Vn.: Vanguard], and Công An Nhân Dân [Vn.: People’s Public Security]. Indeed, the rape cases were picked up by these four newspapers precisely because they were unusual and loaded with sensational elements such as a gang rape, an old rapist and an underage victim.

It should be stressed that since these cases have received widespread coverage, they could shed light on how the Vietnamese media treat various aspects of rape. Wherever relevant this is supplemented by the reactions from people in the street which were collected during the flyer distribution. Furthermore I will also present statistical data resulting from a general review of three selected newspapers on rape-related cases (in total 687 articles) in the period between 1990 and 2006 - at the height of Đổi Mới - which
may be useful to illustrate how the media transforms rape as a social evil into sensational stories to boost newspaper sales since Đời Mới.

At this stage it would be worthwhile to take a look at the current state of the media in Vietnam.

1. The media since Đời Mới: An overview

It is a well-known fact that the media in Vietnam is under state control and its main task is the propagation of state policies. As such it pays less attention to reporting news than to educating the populace (Thomas and Heng, 2001; Thomas, 2004). Since Đời Mới there has been a dramatic transformation as shown in the growing number of newspapers and magazines in circulation. Journalists have been allowed to investigate matters such as corruption and abuse of power in the bureaucracy. However the media often has to exercise a delicate balancing act between attracting a wide readership for commercial gains and staying clear of sensitive questions for fear of being accused of provoking political instability.

Nowadays the most popular medium in Vietnam is by far the television and its growth has been spectacular. It is estimated that 86.9 percent of households in Vietnam have access to television and practically almost every urban household has a TV set. The rise of the television is accompanied by the demise of the radio which had played a pivotal role as a propaganda tool in the wars against the French and the Americans. And in the age of globalization one also has to mention the growing popularity of the internet. From 2005 to 2009, the number of Internet users reportedly jumped from 9.2 million to 22.7 million, yielding an Internet penetration rate of 26.55% (Trung tâm Internet Việt nam [Vn.: the Vietnam Internet Center], VNNIC for short). A study carried out by the OpenNet Initiative (ONI) points out that most users access the

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98 The Vietnamese telecommunications system is patterned on the French system where postal offices are important providers of services such as telephone (Public Switched Telephone Network, PSTN) and Internet access. Meanwhile, the emerging cable television service is provided by the state-owned VTV (Vietnam Television).
Internet from cybercafés, which is relatively inexpensive. State regulation determines how Internet connectivity in Vietnam is organized and managed, and facilitates Internet content filtering by limiting external access points that must be controlled. What emerges is a complex picture where the State tries to leverage the Internet to provide economic development and benefit, while simultaneously struggling to block citizens from accessing political and religious material that might undermine Vietnam's one-party system. In addition, blogging remains quite limited in Vietnam. It therefore came as little surprise that the print media\textsuperscript{101} is often the main medium for the reader to obtain all the information concerning world affairs and national issues.\textsuperscript{102} Hence the print media has been selected to explore the representations of rape in this study.

A number of studies have been carried out on the media structure in contemporary Vietnam (Marr, 1998; Sidel, 1998; Heng, 1998, 2001, 2004; Pettus, 2003; Surborg, 2007). Historically, the media in Vietnam is based on Marxist-Leninist ideology, and the media system is largely perceived as “a mouthpiece of the state and Party” (London, 2009:392). This explains why each publication unit is called as a \textit{cơ quan báo chí} [Vn.: journalistic “organ”] per se, and operates under the guidance and ownership of the Party and State or a Party-approved mass organisation, which official terminology refers to as the \textit{cơ quan chủ quản} [Vn.: supervisory organization]. In practice, the management style of a supervisory organization often leaves its mark on the quality of its publication. This, as Russell Heng argues, involves “a network of criss-crossing horizontal and vertical lines of control” (1998:34), meaning various government agencies and mass organizations responsible for the media (Surborg, 2008). For example, \textit{Gia Đình Xã Hội} [Vn.: Family and Society] is under the auspices of the National Committee for

\textsuperscript{101} By May 2009, Vietnam’s print media consist of 178 newspapers (76 at central level and 102 at local and regional levels), and 528 magazines (414 at central level, and 114 at local and regional levels). There are 67 TV and radio stations, 88 (official) websites of the printed press. The main provider of national news is the \textit{Thông Tấn Xã Việt Nam} [Vn.: Vietnam News Agency]. Source: Press Department of the Ministry of Information and Communications.

\textsuperscript{102} For further discussion about the popularity of Vietnamese newspapers as the main medium of information, see Thomas and Heng (2001).

\textsuperscript{103} Interestingly, the term \textit{cơ quan} has been widely used to refer to a work unit in the state sector. See Phạm Văn Bình (1999) for a full account of the role of the workplace in the state sector, and especially its direct involvement in spouse selection for its personnel prior to \textit{Đổi Mới}.
Population, Family and Children\textsuperscript{104} (CPFC for short), focussing on children and women’s issues, whereas \textit{An Ninh Thủ Đô} [Vn.: The Capital’s Security] and \textit{Công An Nhân dân} [Vn.: People’s Public Security] sponsored by Hanoi public security authorities and the Ministry of Interior respectively, cover social and public security matters. \textit{Tiền Phong} [Vn.: Vanguard] affiliated with the \textit{Đoàn Thanh niên Cộng sản Hồ Chí Minh} [Vn.: Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League\textsuperscript{105}] focuses on youth-related matters. It is pertinent to note that all media continue to be under the control of two major organs, the Party’s \textit{Ban Văn Hóa Tù Trường Trưng Ưong} [Vn.: Culture and Ideology Department] and the \textit{Bộ Thông Tin và Truyền thông}\textsuperscript{106} [Vn.: Ministry of Information and Communications].

What about the journalists working for these newspapers? Since there is no private ownership in the media, those working for mainstream news organizations are considered as \textit{công chức}, or \textit{viên chức nhà nước} [Vn.: state employee], although most of the news organizations have to look for financial sources in the private sector to pay for their personnel.\textsuperscript{107} This is different from what existed before \texti{Đổi Mới} when all production costs and wages of journalists were subsidized by the state. For reporters, their function as “state employees” means that they are subject to certain code of conduct imposed by \textit{Luật Cán bộ, Công chức năm 2008} [Vn.: The 2008 Law on state cadres and employees], the most important \textit{nghĩa vụ} [Vn.: duty] of which as a state employee is to be loyal to the Party and the state (Article 8.1. of the 2008 Law on state cadres and employees). Inevitably, the association with the government is bound to exert an influence on the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item[104] As noted in Chapter 6, the Commission was dissolved following a decision of the National Assembly; its tasks have been assigned to various ministries (Decree 1001/ QĐ-TTg issued on 8/8/2007 by the Prime Minister).
  \item[105] See Marr and Rosen (1998) for a full account of the core function of this kind of League.
  \item[106] In accordance with \textit{Ngành định số 178/2007/ND-CP ngày 03 tháng 12 năm 2007 về Chính phủ} [Vn.: Decree No 185/2007/ND-CP of 3 December 2007] the Ministry of Culture and Information was restructured and split into two ministries. The press and publishing departments of the former Ministry of Culture and Information (now called Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, MCST) were merged with the former Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications to become the new Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC).
  \item[107] The party’s daily newspaper \textit{Nhân Dân} [Vn.: The People], which has a circulation of about 220,000 is read mainly in the governmental offices all over the country (http://www.nhandan.com.vn/english/about.htm). \textit{Nhân Dân}'s editorial lines reflect the ideological viewpoints of the Party and State.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
journalists’ liability for public disclosure of truth, a topic that will be discussed later in the chapter.

Nonetheless, the media have undergone great changes since Đổi Mới. A newspaper can no longer count on its supervisory organization for financial subsidy (King et al. 2008, cf. Heng 1998). As market forces push news organizations to become profit-making enterprises, there is a need for newspapers to pitch their stories concerning the topics and presentations of tabloid publications to meet popular demands (cf. Marr, 1998; Heng, 2001; Pettus, 2003). In this respect the reporting of sensational news is seen as a deliberate effort to boost newspaper sales. And exploiting the subject of sex, and in particular sex crimes among other forms of sensationalism, is considered as a means to attract readers and viewers (Bennett, 1996; cf. Gamson, 2001).

A breakdown of articles on rape-related incidents collected from several newspapers is set out in Table 6. It shows a rising trend in rape coverage since 1990. This tendency is most apparent in the case of An Ninh Thủ Đô, a báo ngành [Vn.: a “sector”- oriented newspaper] sponsored by the police authorities, having access to the latest incidents and crimes, while the more đại chúng [Vn.: mass-oriented] Tiền Phong shows a rather irregular pattern in its reporting of sexual crimes.

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108 On this subject, Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng, at a conference held by the Ministry of Information and Communications on January 8th, 2010, was quoted as saying: “The truth is always the truth, but we must choose the proper time to tell the truth to ensure the country’s interests…The press should not report information that harms the country’s interests;” and “The 17,000 journalists must be loyal soldiers serving the nation.”

109 This goes the same for Công An Nhân Dân [Vn.: People’s Public Security].
Table 6: Newspaper coverage of rape in An Ninh Thủ Đô, Tiên Phong, and Gia Đình Xã Hội (1990-2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>An Ninh Thủ Đô</th>
<th>Tiên Phong</th>
<th>Gia Đình Xã Hội*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>1995</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
Gia Đình Xã Hội has been in circulation since 1999.

2. Rape incidents as portrayed in the press

First let me look at two cases of rape that were widely reported by the printed media at the time of the incidents. The first concerned the gang rape case mentioned at the start of this chapter (see Figure 4). The second case involved a “Bluebeard”\(^\text{110}\) and his child victim (Figure 5).

\(^{110}\) Bluebeard" (La Barbe bleue) is a folktale written by Charles Perrault first published in Paris in 1697. The story is about French nobleman who murdered his wives until his secrets were discovered by the last wife. In my review of seven popular newspapers, namely Thanh Niên [Vn.: Youth], Tuổi trẻ Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh [Vn.: Youth of HCM City], An Ninh Thủ Đô [Vn.: Capital’s Security], Phú Nhu Thị Thọ [Vn.: Capital’s Women], Pháp Luật [Vn.: Laws], Tiếng Phong [Vn.: Vanguard], and Gia Đình Xã Hội [Vn.: Family and Society] in the 1990 - 2006 period, I found that the term quỷ râu xanh [Vn.: Bluebeard devil] first appeared in Thanh Niên in 1993: Con quỷ râu xanh thời tiểu học [Vn.: The Bluebeard devil of the Cyber Age], then in the An Ninh Thủ Đô in 1995: Bắt 2 quỷ râu xanh [Vn.: Two Bluebeards devils arrested], and in the Tiên Phong in 1996: Con quỷ râu xanh [Vn.: The Bluebeard devil]. Since then, this colloquial expression has been used widely by the press to refer to a male person who has committed either sexual assault or displayed indecent sexual behaviours.
Figure 4: Hà Tây: Victims are robbed then raped

Thứ Tu, 08/08/2007, 17:23

Hà Tây: Cuộp tài sản rồi hãm hiếp nạn nhân

Sau khi lột sạch tài sản của người bị hại, những tên cuộp nhỉ, hầu hết đang còn là học sinh THPT, đã thay nhau giờ tro đối bắt với nạn nhân nữ. Do quá sợ hãi và thường xuyên phải qua lại tuyến đường đó nên các nạn nhân không dám trình báo.

“Bốn thanh niên, trong đó có 2 cô gái đã phải vào bệnh viện cấp cứu trong tình trạng chấn thương toàn thân do bị đánh. Các nạn nhân có tuổi đời còn rất trẻ và chưa lập gia đình.

Chính vì vậy, khi điều tra vụ án này, các trinh sát thuộc Công an huyện Mỹ Đức và Phòng CSTD tội phạm về TTXH Công an tỉnh Hà Tây đã gặp rất nhiều khó khăn khi thu thập chứng cứ, lấy lời khai người bị hại và nạn nhân chứng.”

Source:  

“After robbing the victims of their belongings, the young robbers - mostly high school students - took turns in carrying out odious acts against their female victims. Due to their great fear and the fact that they had to travel daily on that road the victims dared not report (the incident). The victims, including two young girls, were taken to the hospital as emergency cases. They are all very young and unmarried. This is the reason why the investigation (at district and provincial levels) has run into difficulty in collecting evidences and taking statements from the victims and witnesses.” Photo captions: “9 school-age bluebeards”

These are the opening lines of the article that appeared on Tiên Phong newspaper on 8 August 2007, based on information provided earlier by Công An Nhân Dân (See Appendix 6). In fact the first report of what came to be known as the Hà Tây serial robbery/gang rape actually appeared in the daily Công An Nhân Dân [Vn.: People’s Security] on June 30, 2007, a month after the assault took place. It was reported that nine young men from Hà Tây, aged from seventeen to twenty, were indicted on charges of gang rape and robbery of two young women from the same district. The attack took place on the road in the middle of a rice field at night when the victims together with two male
friends, were on their way home from a birthday party. The gang released smoke on the road, making it difficult for the motorbike drivers to keep control, then came out from the roadside to assault them. The two male companions were attacked first. One of them was beaten until he lost consciousness. The other managed to escape, and ran to a house nearby to ask for help. The two females whom I shall call Mĩ and Hạnh were repeatedly raped by the youths for an hour. When the local police came on the scene, the defendants had run away, leaving the two women in tears at the roadside. During the assault, the two rapees recognized three of the nine defendants as people who were familiar to them. All nine were arrested early next day. Three were high school students, the others were dropouts. During preliminary investigations, the police discovered that these youths had committed three other acts of rape and robbery elsewhere in the same district. At the time I was conducting this research, the case was pending and had been taken over by the provincial police.
The case was first exposed in An Ninh Thủ Đô [Vn.: The Capital’s Security] of October 20, 2004. A thirteen-year old girl I shall call Thu was sexually abused by a neighbor aged sixty-six. The case was reported to the local authority two weeks after it had occurred when the mother of the girl realized that her daughter’s private parts were bleeding. At the police station, the man confessed of having had sex with the child. The initial report of the story appeared on one of the inside pages of the newspaper together with the photo of the offender. The report was rather brief but the big headline stressed the fact that the defendant was an old man and the victim was a young girl, mentioning her

111 According to Vietnamese law, sexual relation with a minor under the age of thirteen is considered as statutory rape (liable to a minimum sentence of twelve years imprisonment) even with the minor’s consent, whereas the crime of having sex with a minor aged from thirteen to sixteen carries a minimum sentence of one-year imprisonment. For further a discussion on this subject, see Chapter 6.
precise date of birth. While no picture of the victim was shown, the photo of the perpetrator displayed a rather healthy man - all this conveying an image of imbalance in power and size since the victim was identified as being thirteen. And while the offender was mentioned with his full name complete with home address, the child was identified only by the initials of her real name, with the mention that she lived in the same ward. The story added that the child did not dare to disclose the incident out of fear. Noteworthy was the detail that “her hymen was broken as confirmed by the result of the medical exam at the O.B hospital.”

The above details are important since they highlight the representations of rape in news articles about high-profile cases of sexual assault. With such media attention before the cases went to trial, the public was fed many details - some true and some unsubstantiated. In the section that follows, I will explore the manner in which the media portrays sexual assault victims and how this affect them personally as revealed in the cases of Mỹ, Hạnh and Thu - all subjected to insensitive and stereotyped coverage. I also focus on the media’s treatment of sexual assault that serves to prime and reinforce rape myths in public perceptions, which, in turn, influence popular attitudes about sexual assault and their victims.

2.1. Victim identification: Engendering sympathy or silencing disclosure?

The question as to how the media handle victim identification has been raised by several researchers and opinions vary widely (Black, 1995; Johnson, 1999a; Reidy, 2004), specifically how identifying rapee affects the reader’s perceptions when it manipulates the personalization of the rapees. Some argue that news media may subtly reduce empathy and engender blame for female rapees by including personal information and referring to them by name (Anastasio and Costa, 2004). Others contend that greater personalization may be an indicator of greater importance within the community, whereas few personal references may imply that the rapee is not worthy of much coverage. Perhaps the exclusion of rapees’ names may perpetuate the stigma, suggesting that she has something to be ashamed of (Wiegand, 2001). The withholding of rapees’ names is even attributed to male chauvinism (Denno, 1992), thereby reducing the opportunity of the rapee to present her side of the case. Notwithstanding, many researchers show the
downside of victim identification in the news media (Johnson, 1999b; Reidy, 2004), pointing out that getting publicity as victims of rape may result in feelings of shame, regardless of age or social background. The findings of my research concur with this line of thinking as indicated, for example, in the case of Thu.

Even though Thu’s mother took the initiative to bring the case to media attention in an attempt to enhance the possibility of conviction in an eventual trial - an aspect that will be discussed in the second part of this chapter - she did not allow the reporter to photograph her daughter and told him not to print her full name and exact address. It should be stressed that victim identification in press accounts can serve as a silencing function and the manner in which personal information is revealed may make rapees and their families more cautious about possible repercussions of further disclosure and ultimately opt to remain silent (Ndegeocello, 1999; Wiegand, 2001). Take the case of twelve-year old Linh raped by her uncle who was later found guilty of child molestation. As Linh’s mother explains:

“If I tell it to the reporters, they will come here to get the details. Even if they do not reveal my daughter’s real name, they would make it (the incident) recognizable to the people around here. The news would spread out. She (Linh) is still attending school, I do not want her to be stigmatized among her peers.” (HN-PI2007104)

Apparently Linh’s mother’s concern about the effect of media exposure on her daughter’s case was genuine. Regardless of whether or not the rapee’s name was kept from getting published in the news, people who knew the rapee and her family and the rapee’s direct neighbors might already have been aware of the situation. Given the close-knit character of community life, the mother’s reluctance to go public with the rape story could be seen as an exercise in damage limitation to prevent a “second victimization” that might occur112 (Campbell et al. 1999).

Now I look at the coverage of the incident involving Mỹ and Hạnh in the two papers. Even though the manner in which these two women were identified (“M” and “H” in An Ninh Thủ Đô, or Nguyễn Thị M and Đào Thị H in Tiễn Phong) slightly differed, a reference to their occupations together with their workplace made their chances of being

112 Secondary victimization has been defined as the victim blaming attitudes, behaviours, practices engaged in by multiple community systems, which result in additional trauma for rape victims (Campbell and Raja, 1999; Campbell et al. 1999).
recognizable even greater. For instance, even being a subject of rumour may have detrimental consequences for Mỹ, stigmatizing her in the eye of the people living in her own community.

Like most of the women interviewed in this study, Mỹ initially wished to keep the rape incident away from her family, and more importantly from her local community. Given the fact that she worked as a nurse in a communal medical station situated about 15 kilometres from her home, Mỹ decided to go back to her workplace immediately after receiving emergency treatment at the district hospital. Meanwhile Hạnh, the other victim of the same gang rape incident, had to be hospitalized for two weeks because of the serious injury she had suffered from the attack. During the week following the incident, Mỹ remained at her workplace. The police came to see her and asked for witness accounts. Mỹ thought she had done her best to keep the incident from her family and others. However the news spread quickly. Her younger brother, a seasonal worker in Hanoi at the time, also learned about the incident from the newspapers. As Mỹ described her shock of finding herself at the center of media attention:

“They refer to me as Nguyễn Thị M, adding that I am from Thanh Hà village, An Phú (commune), Mỹ Đức (district), Hà Tây (province). Ironically, there are only two persons with such a name in the village. The other M works as a farmhand in the village, while I work outside. The victim has to be me then. A few days later my family took me to the district hospital for an X-ray check. On the way I heard the newspaper vendor shouting out loud about the incident. I felt so depressed. They (the press) should not report it, this is a very personal stuff. Just imagine if the victim cannot bear it, she might kill herself… The following days I was so depressed that I did not come out of the house.” (HT-PI2007105)

Mỹ felt extremely upset by the news coverage. She feared that others might not only try to find out what happened to her but also look for reasons to blame her for the rape. Rape, after all, is a crime of sexual violation and thus is more personal, traumatic and stigmatizing than other crimes. For this reason, some researchers have argued that both rapees and the perpetrators should be kept anonymous (Wiegand, 2001).

Regarding the question of freedom of the press, news reporters might claim that they are simply providing information the public has a right to know, by reporting events
factually. Furthermore revelation of details such as the location of the crime may be well intentioned in alerting women to potential dangers or warning about a rapist on the loose. However, details involving the rapees’ personal information such as occupation, working place or marital status serve no practical purposes. On ethical grounds it has been argued that journalists should routinely withhold information such as the rapee’s name and address, nor should they disclose the identity of juveniles who are either criminal assailants or rapees (Meyers, 1997). Furthermore, as Gerd Bohner points out (2001), at the time a crime is reported the defendant has not been legally convicted, it is therefore unlawful to reveal his/her true identity, based on the principle everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

In the context of Vietnamese journalism, news reports often reveal the alleged offender’s personal identity in full, complete with name and photo. Some journalists told me that specifics enhance the credibility of their stories. On matters of privacy, Article 10 of the Press Law stipulates that the media is not allowed to publish wrongful information which can damage the honor and professional reputation of agencies, organizations or individuals. The legal statute, however, does not prohibit the media from publishing information pertaining to the identity of victims or perpetrators of various crimes. In actual fact, there is a tendency to protect the identity of victims, rather than the perpetrators, since they are often mentioned only by the initials of their names. Whether this would be of any practical help is another matter since, as noted in the case of Mỹ and Hạnh, by revealing the initials of their names, the reports made them easily recognizable by their fellow villagers. Here, I would argue that the general tendency to identify the offender while showing a “half-hearted” concern to protect the anonymity of the rapees is an attempt to sensationalize stories of rape. Most of the journalists I interviewed told me that such details as name and age would lend credibility to the story, making it more attractive for a wide readership.

2.2. Press reports of rape: Eye catching news or reconstructing popular myths?

Stereotyping of offenders and victims

113 As regards the presumption of innocence, Article 9 of the 2003 Criminal Procedure Code states that a person is presumed innocent until his guilt has been established.
Now I examine the *An Ninh Thủ Đô*\(^{114}\) coverage of Thu’s incident. The headline *66 tuổi còn giở trò đồi bại* [Vn.: Aged 66 but still acting despicably] carried specific aspects of the rape myth. The mention of the offender’s age evoked the cliché of lecherous old men taking advantage of young children sexually - the archetypal child molester. The stereotyping went further in pointing out that the old molester in this case was living in a poor area of Hanoi near a garbage-dumping site. This reinforces the assumption that rape and other sex crimes are prevalent among the poor and less educated, and thus “normal” people may safely distance themselves from these “bad” elements. The image of a “dirty old man” who “still” commits an odious act against a child, suggests uncontrollable male sexual desire, and portrays rape as a phenomenon that has more to do with presumed addictions to sex and other bad habits than with violence. A woman living in the same neighbourhood told me that “Bluebeard” might find the option of going to a whore house unaffordable and therefore grabbed what was available close by. This is in line with a public perception of rape observed during our flyer distribution to the effect that that rape happens less in the city due to due to the availability of commercial sex as compared with the countryside. This reminds us that prostitution can be sometimes be perceived as a means of managing (male) desire while upholding conservative values and protecting the chastity of women (Manderson and Liamputtong, 2002; cf. Corbin and Sheridan, 1996 for an elaborate discourse in nineteenth-century France about the inevitability of prostitution as a social evil that needs to be condoned but controlled).

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\(^{114}\) Following the line of argument, the first *An Ninh Thủ Đô* article serves as a focal point of analysis. The other three articles in *Gia Đình Xã Hội* will be examined in later section.
Table 7: Year of article by rapee-rapist relationship and the rapee’s age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>An Ninh Thủ Đô</th>
<th>Tiền Phong</th>
<th>Gia Đình Xã Hội</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A  B  C  D</td>
<td>A  B  C  D</td>
<td>A  B  C  D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1  11  5  7</td>
<td>2  1   0  3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>2  13  2  13</td>
<td>0  0   0  0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>2  4   0  6</td>
<td>2  2   1  3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>4  11  1  14</td>
<td>2  0   2  0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>2  10  3  9</td>
<td>1  0   0  1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1  9   2  8</td>
<td>0  0   0  0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>6  10  8  8</td>
<td>1  2   0  3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>13  40  17  36</td>
<td>7  4   5  6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>4  17  9  12</td>
<td>0  0   0  0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>13  28  18  23</td>
<td>0  0   0  0</td>
<td>0  8  3  5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>5  12  7  10</td>
<td>13  5  9  9</td>
<td>1  1  1  1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>14  26  20  20</td>
<td>10  11  14  7</td>
<td>2  5  2  5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>10  28  17  21</td>
<td>1  3   2  2</td>
<td>6  2  5  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>18  21  18  21</td>
<td>3  1   3  1</td>
<td>4  5  6  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>19  34  24  27</td>
<td>2  7   5  4</td>
<td>7  7  12  2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>16  27  19  24</td>
<td>16  8  18  8</td>
<td>8  3  11  0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>11  37  17  31</td>
<td>21  10  18  15</td>
<td>18  5  24  5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>141 338 187 290</td>
<td>81 54 77 62</td>
<td>46 36 64 24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
A: Offender well-known or a previous acquaintance  
B: Offender a new acquaintance or a complete stranger  
C: Involving victims aged 16 or under  
D: Involving victims above the age of 16

It is worth noticing that the An Ninh Thủ Đô article in its affirmation of the presence of 
sexual assault mentioned that “little DT suffered a broken hymen.” The popular notion of 
virginity loss is a familiar trope used to refer to young victims of sex crimes, considered 
to be a valid indicator of truth. The case of Thu - an under-age girl raped by a man known 
to the victim and not by a stranger - offers the media an opportunity to exploit the 
titillating potential of acquaintance rape stories, particularly if graphic descriptions of 
sexual acts are added to spice things up. This potential is perhaps best realised in a 
“human interest” story rather than a “horror” story as in the gang rape case, as pointed 
out by Maria Los and Sharon Chamard (1997). The An Ninh Thủ Đô coverage of Thu’s 
case follows closely this type of reporting (see Table 8).

Here I examine the gang rape involving the twenty-four year old Mỹ and the twenty-three year old Hạnh. At the outset, these women were portrayed as “helpless” victims in 
the face of their attackers who were ruthless serial robbers and gang rapists. In general, 
rape stories concerning very old or very young victims often depict them as “innocent”
Mỹ and Hạnh, however, did not belong to this category since they were neither too young nor too old at the time. The rape was described as incidental, as if the two women were unfortunate to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. On the other hand, they were considered as “innocent virgins” rather than “vamps,” sharing some of the characteristics suggested by Helen Benedict (1992): both having good jobs, being young, unmarried and presumably sexually innocent. Following this line of reasoning, since the rapees are respectable persons, their story is bound to be credible. Moreover, taking into account the popular belief that rape mostly happens to “low class” people, this bias makes the rape case involving two professional women in their early 20s a rather sensational incident, therefore deserving good coverage. Another implication is that this tragic event would serve as a reminder that all women - regardless of their social background - are at risk of sexual attack if they deviate from their “normal behaviours” (in this case: being at the wrong place at the wrong time).

Furthermore, the image attributed to the rapees as “good” girls is signified through the lines describing the state of their injuries. As the story unfolds, the reader is told that the two rapees did plead with the attackers and even put up a fight. Here, a woman’s strong physical resistance is interpreted as an important marker of truth, and the injuries she sustained are undeniable material evidence. Above all, it fits the expected behaviour of a “chaste” woman having to endure a wanton sexual assault. The news report thus conforms to the stereotypical myth that respectable women are expected to resist their attacker(s) to protect their honour (Kosse, 2007). It is perhaps for this reason that people in her village had doubts about Mỹ’s behaviour since she seemed to have put up little resistance by the look of her rather normal physical appearance after the ordeal, whereas Hạnh suffered much more with her broken ribs and broken teeth. Moreover, even when the blame attributed to these young women was partially absolved by their ordeal in

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115 In her ground breaking study about the coverage of sex crimes in daily newspapers, Benedict (1992) points out that media rape stories often perpetuate the image of the victim either as a “virgin” or “vamp.” If the woman is either pure or innocent she tends to be squeezed into the category of a “virgin.” Adversely if she is a wanton female who provokes the assailant by her looks, behavior, or generally loose morality she is viewed as a “vamp,” and thus is to be blamed for her own victimization.

116 When asked about the occurrences of rape, most of the journalists I interviewed share the view that women and girls of humble social backgrounds (e.g., migrants, minorities) are more likely to be attacked sexually.

117 Interviews and exchanges with local people who knew about the incident indicated more sympathy for the “innocent” Hạnh, whereas Mỹ - considered as an “experienced” woman - received less sympathy.
the face of sexual violence committed by a notorious gang, they would still be regarded as responsible for their own victimization because they had displayed erratic behaviour or at best, shown a lack of caution, implying that women’s behaviour is subjected to different standards of caution than men’s.

**Shifting the blame: Rapee’s “erratic behaviour”**

Continuing with the case of Mỹ and Hạnh, these myths and assumptions are embedded in the journalistic “when” and “where” of the story. By mentioning the time of the incident (at night), and the victims’ whereabouts prior to the assault (on their way home from a birthday party), the Công An Nhân Dân article for its part makes the behaviour of the rapees look questionable. They were where they should not have been - on a country road and late at night - and since they did not take their own safety seriously, they were at fault. More ominously, the article mentions that these young women were going out in the company of two bạn trai [Vn.: male friends, literally “boyfriends”]. The term bạn trai itself, however, denotes a relationship that - in the context of present day Vietnamese society - can mean something more than a friend who happens to be male. Paradoxically the allusion to romantic love also reinforces the good - bad girl dichotomy. Given the fact that only one of these two males was Hạnh’s genuine “boyfriend” and since the four of them were working in the same unit, they could have been described as colleagues going home after attending a social function, but the article’s use of the term bạn trai [Vn.: boyfriend] rather than đồng nghiệp nam [Vn.: male colleague] to describe the relationship, is bound to create unfavorable impressions with regard to the rapees. This in turn might divert the reader’s attention from what happened to these young women to why they were raped. As Mỹ told me in an interview:

“The villagers exaggerated the story. Some said that after we left the birthday party we headed for the rice fields, just sitting there idly. We were caught and attacked by the youth gang right there.” (HT-PI2007106)

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118 Indeed, đi chơi [Vn.: to go out, go play] on motorbikes in a group or as a pair is a popular pastime for young Vietnamese nowadays (see Marr 1996). While there are plenty of cinemas, karaoke bars, clubs, cà phê việt [Vn.: garden café] and guest houses for young people to meet in urban areas, there are few such places for rural youth who turn to certain public spaces such as deserted rice fields for courtship practices and love making.
In giving the reasons behind the rape incident, the news report hints that the rapees only had themselves to blame, following the traditional line that “good” girls who do not transgress moral and social norms are safe from outside threats. In doing so it reconstructs the world outside as a dangerous place for women and girls (Naylor, 2001). It also infers that if the public sphere for them is unsafe, the private sphere is secure. This, in turn, reiterates social attitudes that are a continuation of traditional perceptions concerning “maleness” and “femaleness,” in which women are usually portrayed in domestic settings, whereas men are seen in the outside world and at work (Rydström, 2004).

It is worth noting that the framing of the story reflects the social expectation that women must uphold propriety and chastity when it comes to sexual matters. Traditionally in a patriarchal society it is expected that marriage is the only channel for women to have sex (Gammeltoft, 2002b), particularly since female sexuality is so closely tied to reproduction, any evidence of premarital sexuality is seen as a form of deviance (Bélanger and Pendakis, 2009). In this connection the chastity of the woman serves not only as the foundation of her dignity and morality, but also as a matter of reputation or, if transgressed, as a humiliation for her extended family (cf. Phạm Vân Bích, 1999; Nguyễn Phượng An, 2005). In the light of more recent research on sexuality in contemporary Vietnam, premarital sexual relations have emerged as a new trend among young people in both urban (Nguyễn Phương An, 2007), and rural (Rydström, 2006) places, but at the same time, it is still considered a transgression of well-established norms. Against this background, the sexual connotations embedded in the language of the news reports only help sustain the myth of the victim’s own contribution to her own rape, reflecting the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and the forms of retribution women can expect for stepping beyond such bounds.

Are victims truly innocent?

Turning back to the case of Thu, it should be mentioned that the ambiguous attitude toward the child rapee as both innocent and consensual ran through the An Ninh Thủ Đô article. On the one hand, it suggested that such an act was opportunistic, the incident occurred when there was no one around, thus it was seen as an individual’s aberrant
behaviour. Thu appeared to be the “ideal victim” on account of her age and because she belonged to the same social class (being poor) as the offender. She was perceived as naïve, childish, and not particularly intelligent, and the reason that she kept silent about the abuse because “she has great fear” (no specific reasons were given). Her social naïveté and infantile emotional state were further highlighted when it was mentioned that she occasionally dropped by the offender’s house, asking for a drink of water, even after she had been molested and given a note of VND 2000. The article further added that the rapee received another VND 5000 after she let the old neighbor perform the act of intercourse a second time.

A reconstruction of the case like this shifts the blame to the child rapee. Implicit in the article is that the rapee was actually having consensual sex with a (much older) man in exchange for a drink of water and therefore sexual assault did not actually occur. Moreover, the reader is told that Thu was living in the same area as the offender; there was a neighbourly relationship between the two (Thu occasionally came to the offender’s house asking for a glass of water). It appears that Thu’s family was even poorer than the offender’s (no availability of drinking water at home). Thus one could assume that she did not take her neighbour’s offensive acts seriously in order to meet her very basic necessities. In this way Thu looked pretty much a willing player in the sexual game rather than a victim of sexual assault.

While the report includes the detail that Thu was given a little money each time the offender “played” with her, the reporter could not have known or chose to ignore the fact that two neighbours had witnessed Thu in tears as she tore up the five thousand dong note that the offender gave her when she left his house.119 It did not come as a surprise that after An Ninh Thủ Đô printed the first report, people in the neighbourhood began to gossip that Thu had let the abuser “do it” her for such little money. Worse yet, a woman living in the same area told me:

“Who would think that dirty little girl is just a whore! At such an age she knows how to do the business for (VND) 5.000! Her mother makes a fuss just because the girl is so young.” (HN-PI2007107)

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119 This detail came up in my interview with the neighbors.
Such a reaction after the appearance of the first *An Ninh Thủ Đô* article reflected the popular attitude attributing the blame to Thu. In doing so the news report downplayed the seriousness of child sexual abuse - a criminal offense under the law. Instead, the hideous act committed by the offender was interpreted as sexual in nature. The thinking was: If the old man could afford a visit to the whorehouse and if the child was not so poor that she agreed to exchange sex for a few thousand **đồng** [Vn.: VND], all of this would not have happened. Thus news report of this kind reinforces the idea that the crime of rape is an isolated and pathological deviance, having little to do with the behaviour of “normal” people in the larger social structure (see Table 9). Again, this allows most people to have a false sense of security, shielded from the idea that they or their loved ones could be victims as well. This image of rape as an individualized matter also obscures the social roots of sexual assault and relieves the larger society of any obligation to end it. A salient feature that emerges from these press reports is the attribution of blame - albeit indirectly - to the rapees and their identification as “others”. Victims of rape are often seen as a group apart because most women do not get raped (Los and Chamard, 1997). Consequently, those who get raped only have themselves to blame (Thanh Lê, 2004). In this line of reasoning, the press often uses “just-world” explanations to make sense of sexual assault, the idea is that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people (Lerner, 1980). By endorsing these rape myths, the print media in its reporting remains profoundly gendered in ways that are unhelpful to the rapees, as shown in the analysis of these two cases.
### Table 8: Myths reinforced or dispelled over the time period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>An Ninh Thủ Đô</th>
<th>Tiền Phong</th>
<th>Gia Đình Xã Hội</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a)  b)  c)  d)</td>
<td>a)  b)  c)  d)</td>
<td>a)  b)  c)  d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>0  2  7  9</td>
<td>1  2  2  1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>1  4  12 15</td>
<td>0  0  0  0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>1  1  5  5</td>
<td>0  2  2  2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1  6  12 13</td>
<td>1  1  1  1</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>1  2  1  2</td>
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<td>1  1  2  3</td>
</tr>
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<td>1  3  15 42</td>
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<td>2  1</td>
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<td>1  0  2  4</td>
<td>2  2  2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>3  6  13 33</td>
<td>0  3  2  7</td>
<td>2  2  4  2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1  1  12 31</td>
<td>0  5  1  5</td>
<td>1  1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>1  3  18 7</td>
<td>12 3  1  1</td>
<td>1  5  0  6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>16  50  16  283</strong></td>
<td><strong>22  37  33  50</strong></td>
<td><strong>5  16  15  17</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**

Myth

a) Rape is motivated by sexual need.
b) Rapists are psychologically abnormal; or under the influence of drugs, alcohol, and porn videos.
c) Women act provocatively or behave irresponsibly (going out at night, provocatively dressed, being sexually attractive, etc.).
d) Rape happens at night in deserted streets in the city, or during daytime in rural or mountainous areas.

### 3. The press in Vietnam: Keep on the right side

While the cases analyzed above do not offer a complete picture of media-conveyed discourse on rape, they do shed some light on the ways in which rape is being represented in the press. Not only do they bring to the fore the social stereotypes and misconceptions related to sexual assault, they also reflect the institutional influences that have a bearing on these print media themselves. It is in this context that I examine how rape scripts vary from one newspaper to another, which should be seen in the larger media environment, which Heng (2001) refers to as “state - media negotiation dynamics” that have emerged from the socio-economic renovation known as Đổi Mới in Vietnam in the late 1980s. The result is an unofficial new role for the Vietnamese media as a civil society actor.
(Salemink, 2006), especially useful in the struggle against “negativism” that includes the publicly designated “social evils” such as rape. It is against this background that I explore how rapees can avail themselves of media exposure for the purpose of seeking justice.

3.1. The topic of rape: A newspaper sales-booster?

I now turn to examine how the four papers An Ninh Thủ Đô, Công An Nhân Dân, Tiền Phong and Gia Đình Xã Hội reported on the cases of Thu, Mỹ and Hạnh. I also try to find out whether increasing competition and tabloidization of the news has influenced the content of their coverage of rape news and if so, to what extent.

As regard the reporting of rape incidents in these papers, a former journalist of the Gia Đình Xã Hội told me:

“Both An Ninh Thủ Đô and Công An Nhân Dân tend to report the incidents factually with minor details such as the exact time of the incident, the descriptions of the criminal act, and the arrest of the offenders. Tiền Phong does almost the same, but offers more relevant information such as the context of the crime and personal motives of the offender. Gia Đình Xã Hội appears to be in line with Tiền Phong in its reporting style; however it focuses less on descriptions of the criminal act itself and pays more attention to the social background of both offenders and victims and particularly the suffering of the victims.” (HN-PI2007108)

This assessment appears to be in line with the views of other journalists working for various newspapers that I interviewed. My analysis shows that 74% of Gia Đình Xã Hội articles related to rape and sexual abuse expressed the paper’s opinions about the incidents and at times leveled criticism at the criminal justice system. The figures for An Ninh Thủ Đô and Tiền Phong were 3% and 11% respectively (see Table 9). In fact An Ninh Thủ Đô devoted around 44% of its crime reporting to rape-related news, presented in special columns entitled Tin Tòa Án [Vn.: Court News], Tin Khắp Nơi [Vn.: News From Everywhere] and Tin Qua Fax [Vn.: News via Fax]. 50% of An Ninh Thủ Đô sensational rape-related stories were marked in bold capital headings in the columns of Chuyên Pháp luật [Vn.: Law Stories], or Cảnh giác [Vn.: Beware]. Similarly, 36% of all the Tiền Phong stories of rape were jammed into a side box called Tin Pháp Luật [Vn.: Law News], and 52% of Tiền Phong sensational stories were shown in a column called Tuổi Trẻ và Pháp Luật [Vn.: Youth and the Law]. By way of comparison, Gia Đình Xã
Hội printed full-page or half-page reports on rape crimes (46% of all coverage) under the theme of Gia Đình, Xã Hội và Pháp Luật [Vn.: Family, Society and the Law]. These variations in format and content might be prompted by commercial and production considerations. The intention of An Ninh Thủ Đô and Tiền Phong in printing titillating rape stories was no doubt to attract readers’ attention with a view to boosting their newspaper sales, rather than educating the public. In this respect, focus on judicial and social issues ranked low in their editorial agenda, as compared to Gia Đình Xã Hội.

Table 9: Type of coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>An Ninh Thủ Đô</th>
<th>Tiền Phong</th>
<th>Gia Đình Xã Hội</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>e) f) g) h)</td>
<td>e) f) g) h)</td>
<td>e) f) g) h)</td>
</tr>
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<td>1992</td>
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<td>0  0  0  0</td>
</tr>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>5  7  0  0</td>
<td>0  1  0  0</td>
<td>0  0  0  0</td>
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<td>54 68 13 3</td>
<td>18 19 52 6</td>
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Note:
Type of coverage
e). Information/court events (columns of court news, general news, cases coming up for trial, fax news, etc.).
f). Crime descriptions (columns of “Legal Talks,” “Beware,” “Stories from the Court,” etc.).
g). Social and legal issues (the thematic-oriented page of society, law, etc.).
h). Others (column “Letters from the Readers,” etc.).

The “Bluebeard” Case

As an illustration, I examine the case of Thu and the Bluebeard. Both An Ninh Thủ Đô and Gia Đình Xã Hội reports began by revealing the offender’s identity with full name, age and address. Interestingly enough, Gia Đình Xã Hội in its three reports on the case did not once mention the fact that the defendant and his victim were living near a
garbage-dumping site. *Gia Đình Xã Hội* only mentioned the ward - an administrative unit - where they both resided. My understanding is that *Gia Đình Xã Hội* tried to avoid being trapped in the archetypal construction of rape wherein the offender was often depicted as belonging to a certain social class, or coming from deprived neighbourhoods (in this case living next to a garbage dumping site). Likewise there was no mention of the rapee’s social background either in these reports. Deliberately or not this attitude seemed to be in line with the established narrative on sexual violence according to which all women are potential victims of rape. In this way, *Gia Đình Xã Hội* tended to portray the incident as a sordid aspect of everyday life, reporting it as a “newspaper of record” (Naylor, 2001) rather than trying to exploit sensational details or highlight other “tabloid” characteristics of the crime. In contrast, *An Ninh Thử Đô* took up the case primarily because it was a sensational topic well-suited to a popular readership taste. For *An Ninh Thử Đô*, it was a singular occasion and the case was treated as quirky with succinct descriptions, without follow-ups or explanations.

After the initial *An Ninh Thử Đô* report, *Gia Đình Xã Hội* published three articles in its weekday numbers of October 23, 2004; November 4, 2004; and January 2, 2005, focusing mainly on the actual court proceedings and the eventual sentencing of the accused. The different approaches of the two papers to the story were evident. The *An Ninh Thử Đô* article with the headline 66 tuổi còn giữ trò đùi bại [Vn.: Aged 66 but still acting despicably] put focus on the offender, a lecherous old man who could not control his desire and was driven to having sex with a child.

The *Gia Đình Xã Hội* for its part focused on the victim rather than the offender. For instance, in its first report, *Gia Đình Xã Hội* used the headlines, Lại một cháu bé là nạn nhân của yêu râu xanh [Vn.: Again a child falls victim to the Bluebeard Devil], thus shifting the attention to the rapee by using the term cháu bé [Vn.: little child], while highlighting the problem of child abuse which has attracted public attention in recent years. Here one can see the unequivocally contrasting images: the offender as an old, scheming “sex maniac,” a true “Bluebeard”, and the rapee as a “little child.” The image of the rapee as a little girl - thus innocent sexually - would serve to raise a certain level of empathy in the reader’s mind. It should be emphasized that none of the three *Gia Đình Xã Hội* articles provided sexual details about the case or the rapee’s behaviour prior to
the incident. Moreover, in the Gia Định Xã Hội coverage there was a strong sense of outrage at the offender and the seriousness of the crime. The paper in its last report on the case expressed dismay at the rather light sentence passed by the court. All in all Gia Định Xã Hội showed a genuine concern about the rising incidence of child sexual abuse, naming it a “social evil” that should dealt with more seriously.

The Gang Rape Case

Now I look at how Công An Nhân Dân and Tiề n Phong handled the gang rape case. As a follow-up to the coverage of the gang rape involving Mỹ and Hạnh in Công An Nhân Dân, Tiề n Phong published an article on the subject on August 8, 2007. While there were certain similar details such as the rape situation, and the police’s initial investigation, the incident was treated differently in both articles, especially with regard to how the victims and perpetrators were identified in these papers. For instance, in its initial coverage of the case, Công An Nhân Dân only identified three main gang leaders while Tiề n Phong revealed the identity of all nine gang members together with their photos, including full names, ages and places of residence. Although the rapees’ identity was referred to by their abbreviated first names only, Tiề n Phong mentioned in its opening paragraph that “these victims are very young and unmarried,” adding that this “makes the police task of statement taking more difficult.” Compared to the initial report in Công An Nhân Dân, Tiề n Phong provided more details about the rapees’ reactions to the youth gang’s vicious assault, ranging from crying, pleading, and resisting which led to further violence that caused serious injuries to them. Tiề n Phong also commented on the serious nature of this particular crime and discussed briefly the problem of juvenile delinquency.

It is worth noting that both articles appeared on the inside pages of their respective newspapers. Tiề n Phong in particular printed a two-page spread, focusing mainly on the perpetrators of the gang rape case. My scrutiny of the files indicates that most articles on “the Bluebeard” scandal and the infamous gang rape case appeared on odd-numbered pages (e.g., page 9 in the case of An Ninh Thủ Đô, page 3 of Công An Nhân Dân and page 7 of Tiề n Phong). As Berns (2004) points out in her study on the American media, these pages normally contain interesting but relatively unimportant news, mainly
concentrating on celebrity gossips and scandal stories. In contrast, even-numbered pages contain important but not so interesting news items, mostly related to politics, business and international affairs because it transcends a basic human desire for human-interest and personal information. With few exceptions this is also the case of Vietnamese newspapers. In this respect, the Gia Đình Xã Hội stands out in covering the stories of Thu on even-numbered pages (e.g., pages 10 and 16, which is the back page). Thus in giving the “Bluebeard” case a prominent place in its editorial layout, Gia Đình Xã Hội wanted to highlight the rising problem of child sexual abuse in the country while other papers paid more attention to sensational aspects of the crime.

A close look at how the rape cases were represented in these four papers revealed the influence of information sources that underlined the differences in their reports. According to Berns (2004) news organizations tend to rely heavily on main news sources, particularly authoritative ones coming from representatives of the courts, the police, and experts in respected institutions, which are either directly or indirectly controlled by the central state. Consequently, as Hill et al. argue, an analysis of the media provides a reliable means of tracking policy pronouncements, with print media linked directly to government sources of legislation and regulation in Vietnam (2009:790). Of the four reports on the rape cases, three (i.e. An Ninh Thủ Đô, Tiền Phong, Công An Nhân Dân) relied exclusively on the information provided by the local police. 120 In the case of the gang rape incident, none of these papers investigated the incidents on the spot. The newspapers relied mainly on the police as the primary, legitimate source of information, without taking into account the fact that the official perspective may be marked by prejudice and sexism as part of a wider social context. As Meyers (1997) has noticed, what gets covered is also a function of what the police think should be covered. As a result one might infer that as long as the police remains the primary source of information in crime reporting, rape-related news continue to reflect the gendered notions prevalent in an essentially patriarchal society. In general, female rapees are portrayed as helpless if

120 For example, during my review of the printed media, I came across a brief item in the column Tin Kháp Nơi [Vn.: News From Everywhere] of An Ninh Thủ Đô, dated on September 29, 2006, regarding the other case of Nghi who was sexually assaulted by a chat friend. As both Nghi and her family members had not found out about the publication of the incident, it was possible that the reporter got the news from the local police station where Nghi initially contacted.
not blameworthy, someone we should have pity for. The *Gia Đình Xã Hội* coverage was remarkable in that it contained relevant information gathered from the rapee and her family. In doing so, *Gia Đình Xã Hội* took the side of the rapees, showing its activism in the fight against the prevalence of “social evils,” defending the weak and the vulnerable in the face of social injustices.

### 3.2. Media: A defender of justice?

As mentioned earlier, in the wake of the Đổi Mới policy, even though the media system still retains the main structural features of state propaganda machinery from the socialist state, the media in recent years have been allowed more editorial space to deal with corruption and social injustice (Pettus, 2003). In other words, while the media appear to assume the role of a public watchdog, at the same time it must continue to be subservient to the state (Heng, 2001; MacKinley, 2008; Surborg, 2008; London, 2009), resulting in neither full autonomy nor complete censorship (Sidel, 1998). A full discussion of the relationship between the media and the state is beyond the scope of this study, but it is important to keep sight of how the media function as a cautionary arbiter as well as a public watchdog in the battle against the range of “social evils” designated as significant or worrisome by the central state. This is best illustrated in the cases of Thu and of the two sisters Giang and Minh as presented below.

**A pro-active journalism on behalf of child rape victim: the case of *Gia Đình Xã Hội***

Concerning Thu’s incident, “the Bluebeard” was released after nine days in temporary detention. According to the law,\(^{121}\) in cases when the accused admits his crime, shows sincerity in volunteering information, has no previous criminal record, or is of an advanced age, he/she may be released but is not allowed to leave the area of residence until the investigating authority has completed the dossier and submitted it to the prosecutor’s office for further decision. As it happened, the early release of the defendant caused a rumor among the local community that Thu and her mother had made

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\(^{121}\) Article 87 (1) of 2003 Cr.P.C discusses at length about the time limit for detention in custody that may not exceed three days. Section 3 of the same article stipulates that during this temporary three-day detention period, if there is no basis for prosecution, the accused must be freed immediately. See Chapter 6 for a further discussion on this aspect.
up the rape story. This rumor was reinforced by the fact that there were no signs of any action on the part of the police working on the case. Depressed by all this and taking the advice from friends, Thu’s mother decided to approach the press to seek justice, and the paper she sought out to help her daughter’s cause was Gia Đình Xã Hội. Befitting its name, Gia Đình Xã Hội [Vn.: Family and Society] often ran reports on violent crimes against women and children. While not averse to occasional sensationalism, Gia Đình Xã Hội often followed up on court cases and raised legal issues about the oft-occurring mistreatment of women and children. Generally speaking Gia Đình Xã Hội made its mark by reporting more honestly and straightforwardly than other papers on these subjects.

If headlines are to summarize particular understandings of the story’s core elements and communicate a commentary to the readership (Peelo and Soothill, 2000) then those displayed by Gia Đình Xã Hội in reporting Thu’s story unambiguously highlight the problem of sexual abuse of children and the urgent necessity to prosecute offenders. The headlines varied, but all reflected the severity of the offender’s crime. Following up on its first report on October 23, 2004 as mentioned above, the Gia Đình Xã Hội’s second report on November 4, 2004 is a good example of this. The heading was quite lengthy: Thông tin thêm vụ “Lại một cháu bé là nạn nhân của yêu râu xanh 66 tuổi”: Đã khởi tố kế hiếp dâm trẻ em [Vn.: More about the case “Another child falls victim to the 66-year old Bluebeard: Prosecution of child rapist has begun]. The message was unwavering and crystal clear, a reminder of the brutality of the crime, only more categorical this time in naming the offender a “child rapist” [Vn.: kế hiếp dâm trẻ em]. The coverage went beyond the rape narrative to largely focus on the prosecution of the case. The second report mainly featured quotes from an interview with the head of the investigation unit of the district public security office. It conveyed a sense of public outrage at the odious act committed by the identified offender, linking this crime to the broader social problem of sexual violence against children. The report also urged the authorities to speed up the legal proceedings to bring the case to a just end.

122 My interviews with local people revealed that the defendant formerly worked as a physician at a provincial hospital. He was fired because of sexual misconduct involving a patient. Soon after the scandal, his wife filed for divorce. The man then fled to Hanoi where he met his current partner, an “old maid.” The two lived together in a small house near the garbage-dumping site in Đồ Đức Da District of Hanoi.
The third and last Gia Đình Xã Hội article on the Bluebeard episode concerned the trial of the defendant on January 2, 2005. Its heading 36 tháng tù cho tên yêu râu xanh [Vn.: 36- month prison sentence for “Bluebeard”] carried a sardonic tone in view of the court ruling based on the lesser charge of giao cấu với trẻ em [Vn.: having sex with a minor] instead of the original prosecution for the crime of child rape, and the light sentence that went with it. While expressing disappointment at the sentence, the article mentioned that the plaintiff would make an appeal to a higher court. Implicit in the article was a criticism of the law enforcement authorities in terms of its effectiveness in delivering justice.

**Journalistic trial balloon in an incest case**

Now I take up the incest case involving the two sisters Giang and Minh that was publicized in the Thù bàn đọc [Vn.: Letters from the readers] column of Tiền Phong. Giang was sexually molested by her own father since early childhood. At the age of sixteen she managed to run away from her hometown of Nam Định, and started life anew in Hanoi. A few months later, her younger sister Minh, came to see her with a confession that she had also been raped by their father. Minh begged Giang to let her stay in Hanoi as she did not want to go back to Nam Định. Terrified by the thought that her father might come to seek them out she asked a journalist friend for help. This journalist put her in touch with a female lawyer. As Giang recalled:

“The lawyer told me that it would be possible to bring the case to court. However the first step I should follow was to send a letter to the column of Thù bàn đọc [Vn.: Letters from the readers] in the newspaper. I put forward an inquiry to see whether I could sue my father for what he had done to my younger sister and myself. I got a very positive response from the commentator, who mentioned the kind of punishment the offender (in this case my father) would get for such a crime. I sent the newspaper clippings to my father.” (HN-PI2007109)

But in the end Giang only used the Tiền Phong’s column to give her father a warning and did not file incest charge against him. As a result, there was no further development of the case in the media. The important point here is that Giang was able to turn to the press for making her case as an incest victim. As Heng (2001) describes in his discussion on Vietnam’s media politics, curiosity about a potential scandal may begin with a reader’s
letter to an editor complaining about some personal injustices or problems. Historically, the existence of letters-to-the-editor columns can be traced back to the early twentieth century; a particular topic would be declared open for discussion by readers, a selection of responses were published and a wrap-up editorial summarizes the expressed opinions (Marr, 1998). At a time when the media show signs of activism in a social environment that has begun to take on certain nascent forms of a civil society (Salemink, 2006), the media can serve as a useful instrument in the fight against social injustice.

Taken all together, the response on the part of social institutions (in this case the print media) in the cases of Thu, Giang and Minh who did report their victimization but decided not to file charges was in itself an encouraging development. On the one hand it shows that taboo-laden subjects such as rape, child sexual abuse and incest are “social evils” that need not be hidden but should be dealt with openly. Because, as Björn Surborg (2008) has pointed out, interwoven into the theme of “social evils” which are often associated with the open door policy since Đổi Mới and attributed to negative western influences is a greater discourse on morals in general and traditional Vietnamese values (cf. Nguyen-vo, 2008). For instance, during the flyer distribution carried out in my current study, a number of respondents blamed the influx of porn videos and magazines - officially banned - for incidence of rape. However one should bear in mind that “the creation of a discourse on social evils by the state should be considered covert strategic action rather than an ethical discourse” (Klein and Huynh Minh, 2004, quoted in Surborg, 2008: 355). Accordingly, the so-called social evils appear to have been only poorly contained in terms of the State regulations. On the other hand, this complex network of criss-crossing horizontal and vertical lines of control between the party and the various government agencies and mass organizations responsible for the media, allows for considerable diversity of positions and perspectives (Heng, 2001; Kerkvliet, 2003). The combination of this official discourse on “social evils” (i.e. including rape) together with the identified role of the press as a vital anti “negativism” tool - albeit within limits as London (2009) observes - as well a wide range of factions in the Party state apparatus (McKinley, 2008; Gainsborough, 2007) indicate the nature of authotarianalism has its nuances. In such a context, the few cases in this study show that rapees can make
decisions and take action to change their personal situations; and in doing so, they are agents of resistance out to change the status quo.

The journalistic manner of *vìa làm vìa ngo*123

The two case studies discussed above illustrate how media practitioners have been able to pursue a form of activism in the aftermath of Đổi Mới. Of particular concern here is the question: do the press in Vietnam really help the weak systematically, or they have to be wary when facing bureaucratic red tape.

Take the case of Nga, who had been raped at the age of thirteen by an acquaintance. Her family considered contacting the press for intervention after having experienced police malpractice during the pre-trial period. Instead of treating the case as *hiệp dâm trẻ em* [Vn.: child rape], the police steered it toward the category of *hành vi dâm ô* [Vn.: lecherous sexual act] thus allowing the accused to plead guilty to the lesser charge of child molestation. As Nga’s mother recalled:

“I turned to several newspapers for help but all in vain. None dared to report the case. They said that they would have to investigate (the case) first and there was no guarantee of getting it covered in the news. So I knew I didn’t have much hope for that. Because if the reporter wanted to report the case he would need to get the police statement about the victim’s bodily injury resulting from the assault. Since the police said no harm was done then who would dare to go on with the investigation?” (HN-PI2007110)

It became clear that the journalists Nga’s mother turned to for help were more than reluctant to report on the case. This might be partly due to the lack of evidence of physical violence inflicted on the rapee; there was no injury beyond the rape itself. Comparing this case to the “Bluebeard” incident, one can see that “Bluebeard” was much easier for the press to handle because of the available evidence of the victim’s “broken hymen” as a result of the assault. Again, this type of reaction mirrors the prevalence of popular beliefs regarding elements of proof (e.g., broken hymen) as markers of truth in a child rape case. Legal considerations notwithstanding, the reporters’ reluctance to take on the investigation might be caused by their apprehension of confronting an entrenched bureaucracy (in this case the police and prosecution network) trying to cover up mistakes

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123 Excerpts from interview with a male journalist working for Tiền Phong newspaper (HN-PI2007111). Roughly translated as “keep a watchful eye (situational awareness) while doing the job.”
of its members. The peculiarities of the situation on the ground explain why no reporters were eager to take on Nga’s case. Interestingly enough, An Ninh Thủ Đô, the paper affiliated with Hanoi police authorities which had remained silent throughout the long legal process, ran a big article on March 3, 2005, virtually endorsing the verdict of the case (See Appendix 6).

A last point I wish to discuss is the existence of reciprocity in the practice of journalism in Vietnam. The subject of media-citizen reciprocity has been discussed elsewhere (see Barger and Barney, 2004 for example), and it takes many forms such as material gifts, cash, and opportunity for secondary employment. Especially in the context of Vietnam, salaries of government workers are so low to keep up with normal costs of living that they have to rely heavily on other sources of income to make ends meet (cf. King et al. 2008). Although I do not intend to engage the question of professional integrity of journalists, it is important to note that there is a custom of bố đùơng [Vn.: “nurture” in cash or in kind for those who do favours] as a common form of reciprocity. In the case of Linh, for example, having been frustrated by the whole legal process, her mother thought about turning to the press for help. But then she faced a financial dilemma as she told me:

“If I rely on the press to seek justice, there is an unwritten code that I am expected to give something back to them (the journalists). That’s what they (journalists) live on.” (HN-PI2007112)

It is common practice for journalists and editors to receive gratuities for favourable reporting (cf. Marr, 1998). This occurs in the form of phong bi [Vn.: envelop] containing a cash gift to repay for favours rendered. Journalists like their counterparts in other state sectors are poorly paid, thus any extra income would be more than welcome. Linh’s mother felt that she could not afford to repay for any service rendered. In the money-oriented society of present-day Vietnam, she did make a point because involvement with the authorities and bureaucrats is often costly in dignity, time and money (Hengehold, 2000).

My findings on media behaviour in dealing with sexual violence are in agreement with the observations made by Heng (2001) that journalists in Vietnam often face the challenge whether or not to report on matters, which certain influential quarters would not want to publicize. This is a dilemma but also a challenge for the media if it is to play
a meaningful role in the fight against injustice and social evils. As a (male) journalist friend half jokingly described to me his professional behaviour: “practising journalism is something like *vìa làm vìa ngó* [Vn.: keeping a watchful eye while doing the job].” This is not surprising considering the current state of the media in Vietnam, which has been described as having neither full autonomy nor complete censorship (Sidel, 1998). In such a situation, journalists and newspaper editors often pick up on government-sanctioned “clues” as to what constitutes a legitimate social issue.

**Summary**

My discussion has indicated that the intersection of assumptions, stereotypes, and social notions embedded within cultural understandings of gender, class, age, and other signifiers of inequality both shapes and delimits how a particular incident of rape is portrayed in the Vietnamese media, specifically in the print media. By focusing on the case studies that involved media exposure I have analyzed the double-edged impact of rape-related news. On the one hand I have found that the media, in this case newspapers, play an important role in shaping public perceptions of the issue of rape, which in turn influences public attitude toward female rapees in particular, and women in general. For example, the good girl/bad girl dichotomy that permeates news coverage of rape reflects patriarchal notions about the ‘proper’ place and the role of women in society. This often reinforces misconceptions about sexual violence as portrayed in the interpretation of rape incidents by the popular press, placing the blame and responsibility on the rapees instead of the offenders. On the other hand, the changes brought about by Đổi Mới have given rise to a more open atmosphere in dealing with basic human rights issues including women’s and children’s rights. In particular, the activism shown by some quarters of the media has had a positive effect in encouraging rapees to use newspapers as a useful channel to air their grievances and seek justice.

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