Functions of Social Supervision and Criticism of Vietnamese Press: Issues and Solutions

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Abstract: *Press is an extremely important form of mass communication in social life. The role and importance of the press is not only to reflect social life by means of fastest and most truthful information on current domestic and international issues and to orient information and public opinions, but also to act as a social supervisor and critic. In the context that our country is vigorously innovating and integrating into the world for development, the role of the press in information, information orientation, social supervision and criticism is more important than ever. The article contributes to clarifying a number of theoretical and practical press issues in performing the functions of supervision and social criticism as a means and method of promoting socialist democracy and ensuring the people's rights to mastery in the new context.*

Keywords: press; function; supervision; social criticism; issue; solution.

1. The functions of social supervision and criticism of the press

Social supervision and social criticism are basic functions of the press. They have become especially significant in the context the country is innovating and constantly expanding democracy in the process of policy-making and implementation of the Party and State.

Supervision is monitoring and checking whether regulations are properly observed[(1)]. Accordingly, social supervision of the press is considered to be the monitoring and inspection of the implementation of the Party and State's policies and laws to promptly detect the right undertakings for encouragement and review as well as to early detect "defects" of policies and institutions, thereby improving the governance quality of the State apparatus. The role and power of social supervision of the press are first and foremost detecting good deeds and mistakes of organizations and individuals. This allows originating and directing public opinion in the direction of supporting or countering; it also creates pressure on public opinion and requests competent authorities to resolve, explain and answer the public and the people. The more society advances, the more democracy expands, the more the people's power is strengthened, especially the right to supervise public agencies, public servants and officials of State administrative agencies in order to limit and control the abuse of power. This is because when political power or State power is not strictly controlled, it will lead to power abuse which results in power alienation.

Criticism, by definition, is the act of giving opinion or judgment about the good or bad qualities of something or someone. It can be understood as the use of evidence and arguments to refute evidence and arguments that have been made

before. If "criticism" is just about the act of giving opinions or judgement, the concept of "social criticism" includes the subject of the criticism, the object, the content, the purpose and the method of the criticism. That is, the nature and scope of the review issue, the object, method of review, etc. are opened up by the public. Thus, in essence, social criticism is the interaction of views, ideas and perceptions among forces (political, economic, and social forces) in a community.(2) To put it another way, "Social criticism is a reflection of public opinions and recommendations of the community on an event related to the common interests of the community on the basis of synthesis, analysis of reality-based scientific evidence, pointing out what is right and wrong in order to meet the requirements of life."(3)

Socially, social criticism is the key to promoting the people's right to mastery and raising their awareness and responsibility to participate in the processes of State management and social management. In our country, during the renovation process, our Party and State have always attached great importance to the promotion of socialist democracy; they have listened to and respected people's criticisms of the Party's guidelines and viewpoints and the State's laws and policies to improve the effectiveness of leadership and management. Therefore, the press both plays the role of one of the important subjects of social criticism and an effective channel through which people exercise their right of social supervision and criticism. When we say the social media of the press as a subject, we mean the views and opinions of the newsrooms and journalists through their journalistic works which perform the functions of social criticism when faced with any economic, political, social and legal issue taking place in our country's social life. Thus, the subject of criticism here belongs to press agencies and journalists as a part of the communication system of the Party, State and our people. Accordingly, the press does not take the reporting as the main thing. As a subject, a socio-political organization, it speaks out and takes responsibility for its views and opinions. In this case, the opinions of the press agency and journalists play a major role. When we say that the press doing social criticism has a means, it emphasizes that the newspaper is the official communication channel to connect the Party, the government, mass organizations and the people to convey the latter's opinions and recommendations to the Party, government and mass organizations on various topics, guidelines and policies related to the interests of the people and the country.

From the perspective of social supervision and criticism, it can be seen that the Vietnamese revolutionary press always has to perform two functions of social supervision and criticism concurrently. The social supervision and criticism of the press is essentially that of the people, from the people, with the people's intelligence and emotions. This process iquecontributes to preventing negative impacts and ensures that all undertakings, guidelines and policies are properly and scientifically planned and implemented for the sake of sustainable development in the country. The purpose of social supervision and criticism of the press is to ensure that the planning and implementation of guidelines, policies and laws are correct, in line

with reality, and contribute to maintaining political stability, boosting national development, expanding democracy, and improving the Party's leadership capacity and State management. The reality shows besides correct and positive decisions which are in line with the practical life of the country, some policies and decisions prove to be subjected to various limitations, subjective impositions, voluntarism or even self-interests. Therefore, to ensure the scientific objectivity and correctness of policies and laws for the common good of the people, the country needs the social supervision and criticism of the press as an agency relatively independent from the State's decisions and decision implementation.

Thus, it can be seen that regarding the press social supervision and criticism, two main issues need to be considered. *Firstly,* during the process of reporting and performing the function of supervising the development of the reality, the press timely detects the positive and reasonable factors as well as inadequacies in building and implementing policies, guidelines and laws, thereby performing its social criticism function. *Secondly,* to exercise the freedom of expression in the press according to the law, the press publishes the opinions and aspirations of the public on burning issues closely related to their interests; from there, the press connects socially and performs their social criticism function on current issues. Approaching from two perspectives, journalism presents its truest nature as a means and mode of social intervention.

2. Some issues posed to the press when performing its functions of social supervision and social criticism

Firstly, the role of the press in performing the social supervision and criticism functions is not yet fully and consistently aware iright among the journalists, leaders, managers and the people are not consistently aware. The essence of the issue of the press social supervision and criticism is the process of implementing democracy and promoting the people's soft power in the cause of national construction and development in a socialist-oriented State institution. At the same time, it is the process of exercising citizens' rights to freedom of the press and freedom of expression in the press as prescribed by law. However, the reality shows that some leaders and managers in the political system are afraid to provide information to the press, or provide incomplete and not objective information because they are "afraid of the press". They tend to avoid the press without knowing that the press is a very effective feedback channel of the thoughts and aspirations of cadres, Party members and the people - the object of leadership and management. Meanwhile, many people do not see the press as a convenient and effective means and method of conveying their opinions and recommendations to the Party, State and public agencies, so they have not known how to rely on and make use of the press. And especially, some journalists and press agencies have even shown that they have not well acknowledged and done in accordance with the nature of the press when performing the social supervision and criticism functions; this is reflected in the bias and one-sidedness in providing information and reporting more false and

negative cases rather than good ones in the sense of "using the good to eliminate the bad". Some even violate professional ethics when working and reporting. The cause of the above phenomena is the lack of awareness about the role and importance of the press when performing the functions of social supervision and criticism.

Secondly, the sense of responsibility and professional ethics of journalists in the process of performing the social supervision and criticism functions of the press has not been effectively promoted to contribute to strengthening democratization in political life and completing guidelines, policies and laws of the Party and State. The journalists' responsibility of social supervision and criticism is to ensure objectivity, speed and timeliness; to mobilize the people's intellectual and emotional resources to the largest extent; and to have a wide impact on many target groups regularly and continuously, via rich, diverse, multidimensional and vivid modes. In the contemporary society, in the age of digital communication and globalization, it can be said that no other means and methods can guarantee such helpfulness. Therefore, the views, attitudes and political culture towards the social supervision and criticism of journalists is one of the criteria for assessing the democratization level of the political mechanism; at the same time, suggesting issues in the lines, policies and laws of the Party and State that need to be improved. Social supervision and criticism via the press is an expression of publicity and transparency, thereby contributing to raising people's knowledge and promoting the guidelines, policies and laws of the Party and State. It is also a process that contributes to the healthiness of social relations, the fight against negativity and corruption, and the cleansing of the Party and State apparatus. Therefore, upon performing this function, journalists must possess standard professional ethics which are rules and standards that regulate their attitudes and conduct professional relations. Without professional ethics, it is easy for journalists to take advantage of their profession to pursue personal interests, doing harm to the interests of the community and society. In fact, there have been some journalists who took advantage of the social supervision and criticism functions of the press to publish news stories or threaten to publish articles with motives of individual or group interest, leading to imprisonment.

Thirdly, the press provides subjective, dishonest and unverified information that affects the reputation and honor of individuals and organizations. We are living in an era of information explosion with the development of the Internet and social networks in the globalization; the country is developing a socialist-oriented market economy. Therefore, the existence of true and false information, positives and negatives, and information competition among press agencies is inevitable. In such a context, it is easy for some journalists and press agencies to take advantage of the role of the press in performing the social supervision and criticism functions to benefit themselves. For that purpose, people can ignore processes and rules in the search for information, information appraisal and evaluation of sources as long as they get the fastest, latest, and even most shocking information to feed the public

and entice them. And that is why, in all types of newspapers, there has been a lot of unverified and inaccurate information being exploited on social networking sites without having their sources checked. This confuses information recipients, creating negative public opinions on issues and events and affecting the reputation and honor of the individuals and organizations involved.

Fourthly, during its implementation of the function of providing information, in some cases the press may provide information that is detrimental to the task of protecting the Party's ideological foundation and fighting against false and hostile views. In order to carry out the functions of social supervision and criticism, the press must provide objective and complete information on the guidelines, policies and laws of the Party and State and cases related, including large cases uncovered. For example, recently, the press promptly provided information on the following cases: "Violations of regulations on bidding cause serious consequences; giving bribes; taking bribes; abusing positions and power while performing duties" which occurred at Viet A Company and a number of agencies and localities; and the case of "receiving bribes" to approve companies to organize flights to bring Vietnamese citizens home from abroad for personal gains that occurred at the Consular Department, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Inspite of still being anunder investigation, the figures of illicit profits from these two cases initially provided by the Ministry of Public Security came up to trillions of Vietnamese *dong*, followed by a series of officials prosecuted for investigation, including senior officials managed by the central government. This showed the seriousness of the problem. Especially, these cases are all related to the prevention and control of the Covid-19 pandemic to protect the lives and health of the people – the struggle that the Party, the whole political system, and the people overcame with a lot of hardships. Public information about cases by the press is both to implement transparency of information and to timely orient public opinion, to build trust of cadres, Party members and people in the Party's political determination in the fight against corruption and negativity, and to show everyone the strictness of the law, thereby deterring and warning the cadres and Party members who are in positions and power in public agencies. However, it is also from the information about these cases that hostile forces and disgruntled people take advantage to distort, attack, and incite the public to lower the Party and the political system's prestige and credibility, causing a crisis of people's trust in the government apparatus and the team of leaders and managers at all levels. Thus, the performance of the social supervision and criticism functions of the press is not simply a matter of providing complete information, but more importantly, of directing and orienting the information to rightly guide social opinions.

Fifthly, the political and legal basis on which the press relies to effectively perform the functions of social supervision and criticism is insufficient or incomplete. In order to promote the important role of social supervision and criticism of the press, a clear and sufficient political and legal basis is needed, as a solid support for journalists and press agencies. Regarding political basis, the document of the 10th National Congress

of the Party clearly states: "All lines and viewpoints of the Party and laws of the State are for the benefit of the people, with the participation of the people", "Promoting the role and creating favorable conditions for the Front and mass organizations to participate in the formulation of the Party and State's guidelines, policies and laws, to fulfill the role of social supervision and criticism", "The State promulgates a mechanism for the Fatherland Front and mass organizations to well perform the role of social supervision and criticism", "Building up regulations on social supervision and criticism done by the Fatherland Front, socio-political organizations and people over the formulation of the Party's major guidelines, viewpoints, policies, and decisions, and their organization and implementation, including the organizational and cadre work."(4) Thus, the political basis is clear, but the legal basis, that is, the specific legal provisions in the laws and sub-law documents on press, information, social networks, etc., are still incomplete and not timely and strict, so it has not yet created a favorable legal environment for the activities of journalists and press agencies when performing the function of social supervision and criticism.

3. Solutions to promote the role of the press in performing the functions of social supervision and criticism in the new context

The Political Report of the 12th Party Central Committee presented at the 13th National Party Congress states that "The situations of the world and of the country present both advantages, opportunities, intertwined difficulties and challenges, posing many new problems, heavier and more complex requirements… that require the whole Party to continuously and strongly renovate thinking, and have high political determination…in order to move the country firmly forward with rapid and sustainable development." Faced with that situation, the Congress determined that it is necessary to "promote the strength of great national unity, socialist democracy and people's right to mastery" by "promoting socialist democracy, ensuring the people's right to mastery", and effectively implementing the motto "The people know, the people discuss, the people do, the people inspect, the people supervise, the people enjoy."(5) Given the above requirement, as the subject representing the people's voice, and at the same time as a means and method for the people to exercise their right to mastery, more than ever, it is necessary to have solutions for the press to promote the role of social supervision and criticism in the new context.

Firstly, it is necessary to raise the awareness of leaders, managers, press agencies and journalists about the importance of promoting the role of the press in performing the functions of social supervision and criticism to enhance democracy and to ensure the people's right to mastery in the process of national construction, protection and development. The leadership and management subjects are the Party committees, authorities, and mass organizations in the political system. If they are not properly aware of the importance of promoting democracy and ensuring the people's right to mastery through the role of social supervision and criticism, it is very difficult to gain support and create favorable conditions for press agencies and journalists to perform their functions and tasks

effectively. On the other hand, if the press agencies and journalists are not properly aware of the role and importance of social supervision and criticism, it is easy for them to abandon the purpose and principles of the newspaper, leading to fear and avoidance of responsibility of social supervision and criticism.

Secondly, it is vital to attach importance to communication and education to raise the sense of responsibility and professional ethics of journalists - the direct combat force to perform the tasks of social supervision and criticism. President Ho Chi Minh considered a journalist to be a revolutionary soldier. From the principles and operational purposes of the Vietnamese revolutionary press and from the position and role of journalists and journalistic activities, he asked journalists to regularly cultivate revolutionary ethics and ideology and to study politics in order to master the guidelines and policies of the Party and State; to understand the reality of the working masses; to constantly improve the cultural level, forge professional skills, and sharpen writing skills; and especially to cultivate a firm political stance: "Therefore, all journalists (writers, printers, editors, distributors, etc.) should have a firm political stance. If the political direction is right, other things will be on the right track. Therefore, all of our newspapers must have the right political line."(6) President Ho Chi Minh repeatedly reminded journalists to answer clearly following questions of "What to write. In any matter, it is important to take a firm stance. Whether being us, friends or enemies, the writing style will be then adapted correctly."(7) Therefore, the writing style must be simple and comprehensible with clear language; if it is to "serve the people", something beneficial to the people and for the revolution should be chosen. We can say that, in order for journalists and press agencies to perform their duties well, they need to be trained in both political stance, sense of responsibility and professional ethics.

Thirdly, the process of verifying and appraising information sources should be strictly implemented, not providing room for biased, misleading information, information of unknown origin, or information that violates cultural and ethical standards. With the development of social media, especially social networks, it is inevitable that some press reporters exploit information on the Internet. However, the exploitation must comply with a strict process and must have the source verified; for press agencies, information must be thoroughly appraised before being published to avoid errors leading to unfortunate consequences. When providing information on sensitive cases that have a great impact on public opinion, it is necessary to consider the possibility of hostile forces taking advantage of it to distort and oppose. Therefore, sensitive cases need to be analyzed and argued closely with clear political and legal arguments to avoid confusing public opinions or being taken advantage of by evil people.

Fourthly, the political, legal and ethical basis should be improved in order to build a revolutionary and professional Vietnamese press as a basis for the press to perform the functions of social supervision and criticism. Ours is a revolutionary press for the people and for the sustainable development of the country in the market economy mechanism; a press that always stands on the side of social

progress and development. Professional journalism is the journalism that adheres to the principles of legal and ethical practice, and performs well the functions of social supervision and criticism. It is the journalism with a team of professional journalists who know how to utilize and select information for the public and for the common cause, for a set of human values, and who know how to criticize policies and focus on building a strong society. At the same time, mechanisms and policies should be established to modernize communication technology and techniques. The Vietnamese press is the mouthpiece of organizations in the political system, so it is necessary to institutionalize by laws the functions of social supervision and criticism of the press, as well as the competent authority to regularly organize and raise issues for the press to supervise and socially critize emphatically and effectively. Legal documents should be developed and completed, forming a legal corridor to rapidly expand the democratization of social life, with emphasis on the right to providing information and the right to accessing information sources. The press should be actively used as a means and method of connecting social resources to contribute to policy criticism. The revised Law on Press is an opportunity to solve issues raised in the process of promoting freedom of the press and freedom of expression in the press for the cause of national renewal.

Fifthly, it is necessary to pay attention to the training, fostering and cultivating of press reporters, leaders and managers of press agencies in terms of political mettle, ethical qualities, professional ethics and social responsibility to create unity and synergy in performing the functions of social supervision and criticim. A journalist who is professionally incompetent may lack political courage and professional ethics, and it is difficult for him to have an accurate and objective perception of the nature of phenomena and events, which makes him unable to evaluate and criticize in a correct and effective way, and even leads to disastrous errors. On the other hand, there is also a need of supervision and education by leading agencies and press managers to promptly correct and strictly handle errors and violations of journalists and press agencies in terms of expertise, knowledge, and professional ethics so that Vietnamese journalism is truly a revolutionary and professional field that adapts to the current context of globalization and international integration./.

(1) *Vietnamese dictionary*, Vietnam Encyclopedia Publishing House, 2010, p.506.

(2) Phan Xuan Son, Nguyen Van Dung: *"Some issues on the social criticism of the press"*, http://lyluanchinhtri.vn/home/index.php/dien-dan/item/1663-may-van-de-ve -bao-chi-phan-bien-xa-hoi.html

(3) *Economic Development Review*, (10), 2007, p.28-31.

(4) Communist Party of Vietnam (2006), Documents of the 10th National Congress of Deputies, National Political Publishing House p.125, 305, 124, 135.

(5) Communist Party of Vietnam (2021), Document of the 13th National Congress of Deputies, National Political Truth Publishing House, p.109, 165, 172, 173.

(6) Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete works*, Vol.12, National Political Truth Publishing House, p.166.

(7) Ho Chi Minh (2011), Ibid., Vol.8, p.205.