

COAL AND RENEWABLE ENERGY REPORTING IN VIETNAM

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Executive Summary

Southeast Asia is a fast-developing region, and its energy decisions are critical to the next decade's global effort to reduce carbon-emitting fossil fuels. Yet little is known about the specific media narratives that shape the national debates on an energy transition in each country. For stakeholders wishing to influence such narratives and increase the quality of energy reporting, lessons from the past are crucial for future success. This knowledge gap is what Climate Tracker and the Stanley Center for Peace and Security wished to fill with an analysis of energy-related media coverage in five countries across Southeast Asia. This report on Vietnam is the second in a series commissioned by the Stanley Center and produced by Climate Tracker that will be copublished as part of *Fueling the Tiger Cubs: How Southeast Asia's Media Is Covering Coal's Last Frontier*, a multicountry media analysis led by young journalists from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Each of the Southeast Asian countries in our study has a unique media landscape with different challenges and opportunities for energy reporting. For Vietnam, a one-party Communist country with state-owned entities dominating both the **energy** and the **media** sectors, change is slow and subtle. Absent are stories about citizens demanding an energy shift and protesting environmental degradation, as reporters shy away from extensively quoting "nonofficial" sources such as local residents and community organizations. All media, even privately funded ones, are **under the editorial management of the Communist Party**. A journalist's indiscretion could easily result in an entire online news site's temporary suspension for "posting fake news"—as happened to *Tuoi Tre Online* in 2018.

Despite the government's emphasis on coal development, however, negative frames dominate coal reporting. This could be due, in part, to environmental experts affiliated with state-accredited universities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

highlighting coal's harmful environmental impact. In addition, as coal projects struggle because of financing difficulties, the prime minister has passed a series of policies on Feed-in-Tariff (FiT) schemes that spurred solar power investment and, in turn, media coverage.

Overall, our two Vietnamese researchers examined more than 300 articles across 16 news outlets. Here are their key takeaways:

- More than 70 percent of energy stories appeared in the economy/business section—a fact that three journalists attributed to energy being under the purview of the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT).
- Sixty-eight percent of coal articles examined viewed the energy source in a negative light. The policy-focused news site *Saigon Times* and magazine *Nguoi Do Thi* led the way in highlighting coal's environmental impact, producing half the stories that framed coal plants as environmental hazards.
- A small group of energy and environment experts were quoted in 93 percent of all coal stories that adopted an environmental frame, while journalists rarely quoted local community leaders. *Nguoi Do Thi* broke this trend as the only media outlet that extensively featured the voices of local residents surrounding coal plants.
- Dan Tri news site published all but one article that framed coal as responsible for raising Vietnam's energy dependency as a net coal importer. However, this outlet also stood out for running the most articles that seemed to promote coal's continued growth, citing improved filtration technology to neutralize environmental concerns.
- From interviewing the authors of various energy articles, we found that journalists' personal viewpoints could influence the choice of energy frame. Some editors and journalists view it as their duty to advocate for a clean energy transition in

Vietnam through reporting more frequently on the negative impacts of coal.

- Beyond that, editorial priorities affect how much time journalists spend on energy articles and how in-depth their products are. Journalists at Zing and VnExpress are paid based on the number of online views and comments per article; hence, their priority is to quickly churn out simple articles about trendy topics in energy development. On the other hand, *Nguoi Do Thi* and the *Saigon Times*, both with a more niche readership, featured more well-researched analytical pieces, especially on coal and solar policy.
- Solar energy has attracted more media attention since 2017, when the prime minister introduced Vietnam's first solar FiT scheme, which enabled solar investors to sell electricity to the state-owned Electricity of Vietnam (EVN) at a high price. Since then, solar has been framed as a lucrative investment for energy companies and an affordable option for individual households.
- Twenty-seven percent of all solar stories, however, highlighted barriers that prevented further development, such as unclear regulations, lack of transmission lines, and a tight FiT deadline. After 14 stories about unclear regulations appeared in all top media outlets, the MOIT released a [document](#) providing more details on solar-project types and tariffs applied for different cases—perhaps in direct response to media pressure.
- Vietnam's installed wind capacity is a twelfth of its installed solar capacity, and wind energy received one-fifth the amount of coverage solar did. This despite Vietnam ranking as [a top destination for wind potential in Southeast Asia](#). An energy expert interviewed believes the media should give more attention to the wind power story to generate more interest and favorable policies for this energy source's development.
- Hydropower is typically not included in articles about renewable energy, except for small hydropower projects. Journalists explain that since big hydropower causes environmental damage to freshwater ecologies and is regarded as a traditional energy form, it should not be in the same category as solar and wind energy.

While this report does not offer specific recommendations for improving clean energy media narratives in Vietnam, the research can be used to inform the development of effective interventions and actions.

Research for this report was carried out under the guidance of Climate Tracker, a network of 12,000+ young climate journalists around the globe. Research methods included sampling, content analysis, framing analysis, and interviews with reporters and editors, and the time frame examined was January 2019 to August 2020.

This report is part of a regional media analysis commissioned by the Stanley Center for Peace and Security and produced by Climate Tracker.



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