


COAL AND RENEWABLE ENERGY REPORTING IN VIETNAM

By Nguyen Nguyen with Mi Hoang
Climate Tracker Fellows





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.

Containers transporting coal sit at port, Cam Pha, Quang Ninh Province, Vietnam.
Reuters/Kham/Adobestock

Cover: Inauguration of Hong Phong 4 Solar Power Plant, Binh Thuan Province, Vietnam. July 13, 2019. USAID/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.



Methodology

The research was conducted by Nguyen Nguyen and Mi Hoang, who together reviewed 305 energy stories from January 2019 to August 2020. Nguyen focused on a broad examination of coal and general renewable coverage; Mi focused on the coverage surrounding two coal and two renewable projects.

The media research included four key phases:

- Sampling.
- Content analysis.
- Framing analysis.
- Interviews with journalists.

1. Sampling

Nguyen sampled 268 online articles from news outlets that shone a light on various coal, renewable energy, and electricity topics. Those outlets were:

- *Saigon Times*, the digital version of a news outlet owned by Ho Chi Minh City's People's Committee.
- *Tuoi Tre Online*, the digital version of *Tuoi Tre* newspaper, owned by the Ho Chi Minh City Communist Youth Union.
- *Dan Tri*, a web-only news outlet owned by the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs.
- *Nguoi Do Thi*, the digital version of a magazine owned by an institute under the Vietnam Construction Association.
- *VnExpress*, the most-viewed online news site, privately owned by FPT Corporation but managed by the Ministry of Science and Technology.
- *Zing News*, the second-most-viewed online news site, privately owned by VNG Corporation but managed by the Vietnam Publishing Association.

At left: Wind turbines generating electricity on a solar farm at Phan Rang, Ninh Thuan Province, Vietnam. Nguyen Quang Ngoc Tonkin/Adobestock

Tuoi Tre was chosen to represent the digital version of Vietnam's most **widely circulated** broadsheet, while Zing, VnExpress, and Dan Tri are online-only news sites with upward of 50 million views monthly, in the top 15 of all websites in the country, according to Similar Web.

The monthly magazine *Nguoi Do Thi* has the smallest and most-niche pool of readers of all these outlets, publishing fewer stories and favoring quality over quantity. To sample articles, Nguyen used the built-in search function on the news outlets' platforms to look for the keywords *điện than* (coal energy), *nhà máy điện than* (coal-fired power), *năng lượng tái tạo* (renewable energy), *năng lượng sạch* (clean energy), *tương lai năng lượng* (energy future), *phát triển bền vững* (sustainable development), *điện* (electricity), *điện mặt trời/năng lượng mặt trời* (solar energy), and *điện gió/năng lượng gió* (wind energy).

She included all article types—hard news, feature stories, analysis pieces, opinion pieces, interviews, editorials, and letters from readers—as well as potential advertorial and PR stories. The word “potential” is used because Vietnamese media rarely declare content to be sponsored or paid.

In her supplementary research, Mi analyzed a wider array of news outlets in order to examine a narrower topic: media coverage of four specific coal projects in Vietnam. She examined 40 articles from 10 media outlets with different editorial priorities:

- Tuoi Tre Online.
- Dan Tri.
- Nguoi Do Thi.
- VnExpress.
- Thanh Nien, the digital version of Vietnam's second-most widely circulated daily, *Thanh Nien* newspaper, owned by the Vietnam United Youth League.
- Dau Tu, the Vietnamese-language version of English-language news site *Vietnam Investment Review*, owned by the Ministry of Planning and Investment.
- *Nguoi Lao dong*, the digital version of a newspaper owned by the Ho Chi Minh Federation of Labor.
- VietnamNet, an online news site owned by the Ministry of Information and Communications.
- Tien Phong, the digital version of *Tien Phong* newspaper, owned by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union.
- Nhan Dan, the central organ of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the voice of the party.

2. Content Analysis

For the content analysis, Nguyen and Mi utilized a standardized **coding method** developed by Climate Tracker with the researchers' input. Using the coding method, they analyzed articles according to 22 parameters in five categories: Article Type, Thematic Focus, Broader Framing, Energy Literacy, and Sources Used.

3. Framing Analysis

A representative sample of 52 articles was then selected for a framing analysis. The researchers each selected a representative sample of all articles collected—32 of 268 articles for Nguyen and 20 of 40 articles for Mi—to conduct more in-depth framing analysis, which involved asking questions about the articles' choice of sources, source placement, and framing strategies. Our framing analysis template can be found [here](#).

4. Interviews with Journalists

In total, 18 journalists were interviewed throughout this research. Nguyen interviewed 13 journalists, including editors, from the six media outlets she analyzed while Mi interviewed five. The interviewees were chosen based on the frequency of their bylines. Sources were asked about their experiences in writing energy stories and newsroom practices in their respective media outlets.



Nguyen Nguyen | @nguyennthV

Nguyen Nguyen is currently a fellow of the Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET) hosted at the Stockholm Environment Institute in Bangkok, Thailand. Nguyen started out as a TV reporter covering financial and international news for a local channel in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Later, she joined the *Viet Nam News* newspaper as a staff reporter for the business desk.



Introduction

Working with Climate Tracker over three months, my task was to answer the question, “How are Vietnamese media outlets framing the future of energy in the country?” To this end, I examined the energy coverage of six major media outlets in Vietnam via their online portals. Throughout the analysis, my aim was to understand what drives Vietnamese media to report on energy stories and what factors influence the specific frames used for different energy types.

Altogether I sampled 268 energy stories from the six news outlets chosen and found the country’s national media have framed coal negatively more often than not. Nearly 66 percent of coal articles in the past 18 months criticize the energy source for its environmental impact—a trend led by the policy-focused weekly *Saigon Times* and the magazine *Nguoi Do Thi*. *Nguoi Do Thi* was also the only media platform that extensively quoted from communities around coal power plants, which tend to be more critical of coal development.

The other 34 percent of coal stories tried to neutralize these concerns by either citing advanced technology that may limit coal stack emissions or framing coal as indispensable for development. More than half of these “procoal” stories were published by Dan Tri, a news outlet run by the Ministry of Labor, and Zing, one of Vietnam’s two privately owned news sites.

This research occurred in the lead-up to Vietnam’s latest five-year plan, with an expected shift from a heavily coal dependent energy sector to one that gives greater preference to renewable energy. The prime minister of Vietnam is due to **release a new plan for 2021–2030 in late 2020 or early 2021**. The previous master plan in 2011 aimed for coal to account for **46.8 percent of the national energy production by 2020**; according to EVN, that figure is currently only 33.2 percent. Oil and gas contribute 14.8 percent, big hydro contributes 30.1 percent, while small hydro and renewables contribute a surprisingly high 20.3 percent to national capacity—three times the amount expected in 2011.

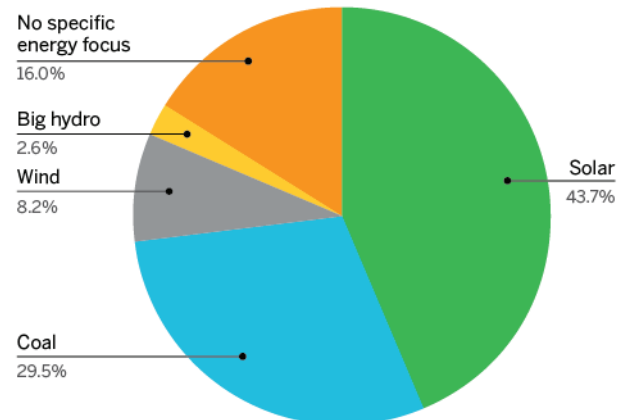
With a recent boom in solar investment, it is not surprising that solar power has gained similarly positive attention across the media. *Nguoi Do Thi* once again stands out as a leader in exploring renewables’ environmental benefits, while other major outlets mainly frame solar as a good investment for power companies and individual households. Other nuanced differences exist in how the six media outlets chose to cover energy, which is further explored in the “Discussion” section below.

Discussion

Quantitative Analysis: Story Types and Prevalence

Story type by content focus: High percentage of solar stories

Topics covered in energy stories in Vietnam from January 2019 to August 2020



Since January 2019, all six media outlets published more articles on solar energy than any other energy form; with 117 articles total, solar made up 44 percent of all stories sampled.

Coal appeared as the main focus for 78 stories (29.5%). Wind energy, at 22 stories, accounted for 8.2 percent, and hydropower came in last with only seven stories (2.6%). The remaining 44 articles (16%) discussed various types of energy in general without any specific focus. I did not include in my sample articles that only discussed electricity prices without mentioning specific energy types.

In an interview with *Tuoi Tre* journalist Ngoc An, she attributed Vietnamese media’s interest in solar to the investment boom and a range of new government policies to assist its expansion. “[Solar energy] is a field that has been growing quickly in the past few years and generates a lot of interest from investors and readers. New policies appear frequently and are supportive of development,” she said.

Story type by section: Energy stories are seen as business stories and not environmental

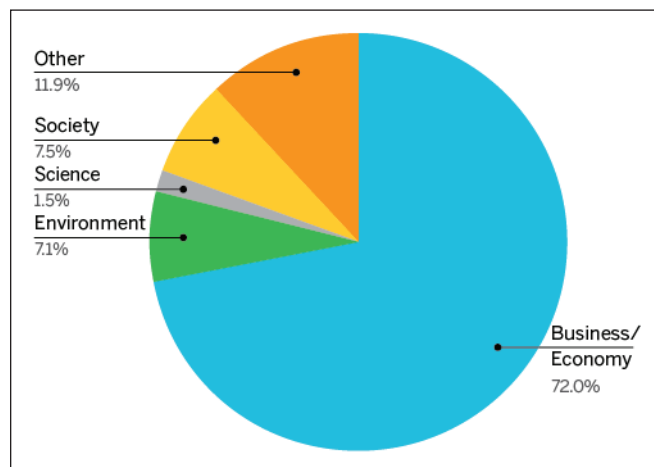
More than 70 percent of the energy articles examined were categorized under the business/economy section, indicating a dominance of the economic frame in energy reporting.

Three journalists, reporter Ngoc An from *Tuoi Tre*, Lan Nhi from the *Saigon Times*, and an anonymous source, connected this to the fact that energy is under the purview of the MOIT, a government agency closely linked to economic development.



A worker loads a truck at a coal port in Hanoi, Vietnam. Reuters/
Kham/Adobestock

Energy stories January 2019 to August 2020 appeared in these sections



Journalist Vien Thong, meanwhile, described the media as a venue for businesses to give feedback to the ministry while executing energy plans; hence, it is natural that energy stories fall under the business category.

Nguoi Do Thi, which categorized 13 of its 14 energy stories under the environment section, was a notable exception from this trend. Freelance journalist and former *Nguoi Do Thi* staffer Le Quynh said *Nguoi Do Thi* was the only media outlet that was open to her pitching investigative articles that focused on the environmental impact of coal. This could be attributed to the magazine's niche readership and prioritization of quality over quantity.

Qualitative Analysis: Common Energy Story Frames

Coal framed as environmental hazard

Just because coal articles appear in the business/economy section for most outlets, however, does not mean they do not highlight coal's environmental impact. Around 68 percent of all 78 coal articles (53 stories) framed coal negatively; of this number, 42 cited environmental concerns to describe it as a major pollutant and human health concern. Aside from *Nguoi Do Thi* magazine, the *Saigon Times* also led in this trend; together, these two outlets ran nearly half of all the articles that highlighted coal's environmental impact (20 stories).

Notably, 93 percent of the 42 stories that framed coal as an environmental hazard quoted environmental experts from public universities and NGOs, particularly representatives from GreenID, a nonprofit organization promoting sustainable energy sector development. The NGO appeared in 22 stories—more than half of those that raised environmental concerns about coal.

Sources quoted in these 42 stories were not limited to only environmental experts; 42 percent of them quote from business

representatives and industry experts, while 69 percent quote from government sources as well. These sources, however, typically do not get the last say.

Environmental experts, whose voices are given more weight via quote placement and framing, emphasize how coal-fired power plants had been causing environmental and health degradation in local communities. Of major concern to experts were the two types of ashes released from the burning of coal: **fly ash**, which could contribute to air pollution, and bottom ash, which could pile up and leak into the water source or be distributed in the air. In a story by Trung Chanh from the *Saigon Times*, GreenID energy expert Tran Dinh Sinh **even raised concerns** that coal bottom ash could contain other residues of the mining process, such as heavy metal or radioactive materials, that may seriously affect the health of locals. In another story by Trung Chanh, Tran argued that **coal is not cheap** if all the environmental and social costs are included. This story—with the headline “With More Coal Plants in Operation, What Are the Risks That Southwestern Provinces Face?”—put the potential impacts of coal at the forefront of the coal development narrative.

In half the stories that opposed coal development, renewables like solar and wind were framed as recommended alternatives to the dirty energy source. This pattern was used in stories calling for a transition to solar and wind energy as a way for Vietnam to protect its citizens' health and environment as well as cut emissions to fight climate change. In the same article where Chanh **quoted GreenID energy expert** Tran in highlighting coal bottom ash risks, he framed coal development as untenable after 2020 and renewable energy as the way of the future.

Coal subtly criticized for causing energy dependency and power shortages

The environmental lens was not the only one through which the media criticized coal: two subtler but highly resonant narratives discussed how coal could contribute to energy dependency and power shortages. Dan Tri news outlet dominated both categories, with five of six articles in the former and three of four articles in the latter.

All of the articles, like **this one**, use headlines that emphasize the high price of coal imports, such as “Vietnam Imports Coked Coal from China at Three Times the Price of Domestic Coal Dust.” Though the articles seem quite neutral at first glance, only quoting numbers from government reports, these articles subtly touch on anti-Chinese sentiments in Vietnam as well as a general desire for energy independence to criticize large coal-fired power plants for requiring expensive coal. **One article by Dan Tri** explicitly points out that EVN and the MOIT made unreasonable coal power development goals without taking into account the country's coal supply. From the comment section, there is evidence that readers interpret these articles as critical of coal import and unreasonably ambitious power plants, with users such as Nguyen An commenting, “**I don't understand why we need to import coal from China given the high price.**”

New coal technology and national development goals are used to neutralize environmental concerns

On the other hand, procoal narratives typically focus on neutralizing the environmental concerns associated with coal, using one or both of these frames: (1) new technology would make coal clean, (2) coal is indispensable for national development. No procoal article examined addressed the argument that coal contributes to energy dependency.

Using the first frame about technological advances, all newspapers except *Nguoi Do Thi* published 14 stories celebrating technology at specific coal projects such as electrostatic precipitator (ESP), low-NOx coal and SOx removal systems, which supposedly eliminate coal's environmental risks. The effectiveness of such technologies, however, were only verified by sources such as coal plant investors and MOIT representatives, raising questions about source partiality and balance of viewpoints.

One story from Dan Tri, for example, which interestingly did not have a byline, provided a host of technical specifications on ESP, which was framed as a high-tech filtration device effective for environmental protection at a coal plant in Quang Tri. While there was no disclaimer that the story was sponsored—as typical of news articles in Vietnam—the writer cited a meeting between Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, local government officials in Quang Tri, and coal plant owners while giving specific information about the plant's filtration systems.

Using the second frame about economic development, five coal stories did not focus on new technology intended to make coal clean. Instead, they acknowledged environmental concerns and went on to emphasize coal's indispensability in the name of meeting power demands. In other words, these stories primarily relied on the national development frame to neutralize coal concerns. The narrative goes: coal-fired power is crucial for meeting power demand, especially when **hydropower has been almost fully exploited** and is dependent on rain's seasonal pattern; hence, coal is inevitable in ensuring the stable supply and affordability of electricity. All of these stories quoted the national government and EVN as the primary source, raising the question of partiality and source diversity.

For example, Dan Tri ran a story with the headline “Deputy Prime Minister: **Risks of Regional Power Shortage in Future Years Are Clear**.” The story, based on EVN's annual meeting in 2019, quoted Deputy Prime Minister Trinh Dinh Dung as saying “we should use [coal power plants] as they are cheap and the electricity produced could be sold at a cheap price. If we only use natural gas and renewables with high prices, who will shoulder the cost? The people will shoulder the cost.” Thus, the writer highlighted the government's benevolent concerns for the people as justification for coal development.

To conclude, news outlets, especially Zing and Dan Tri, use technological and/or economic justifications to neutralize environmental concerns about coal, elevating the view that new

technology will prevent pollution and ensure coal's continuing presence in the country's energy mix.

Journalists' personal views and editorial priorities affect coal story angle

Interviews with journalists whose work is published in the *Saigon Times*, *Nguoi Do Thi*, and Dan Tri show that journalists' personal views and editorial preferences could influence how coal is framed in energy stories.

This is especially true at the *Saigon Times*, where nearly 60 percent of energy articles were written by two veteran journalists, Trung Chanh and Lan Nhi. Chanh, who has been writing about energy for the *Times* since 2012, said he supported sustainable development and wanted to spread the message in his articles. His specific interest in coal is also geographical. “I live in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam,” he said, “and I want to contribute towards the sustainable development of this area. This is part of my responsibility as a citizen to contribute to my region and country.” More provinces in the Mekong Delta are **saying no** to coal directives from the central government, and Chanh has done his part to amplify their voices. He wrote nearly half of the energy stories from the *Saigon Times*, most of which quoted GreenID representatives and local government officials in provinces that oppose coal. Chanh said this position was in line with his news organization's agenda, which prioritizes sustainable development and policy debate. The news outlet published the most analysis pieces (10) among six outlets, because policy analysis and criticism are its focus and a topic of interest to **one of its target audience groups: policymakers**.

Journalist Lan Nhi, who started writing about energy for the *Saigon Times* 14 years ago, echoed her colleague's views. She said the press should put pressure on energy-managing bodies to make positive changes happen. “Journalists have to do something to minimize further development of energy sources that impact the environment and destroy nature,” she said. Because not many Vietnamese journalists specialize in energy beats, Nhi believes the few among them who have extensive knowledge need to write stories that push for change.

Freelance journalist Le Quynh, meanwhile, wrote an **investigative piece** for *Nguoi Do Thi* exploring the fact that more provinces are rejecting coal-fired plants, fearing environmental impact. Quynh went further than Chanh, who only quoted from local government leaders; she thought it was important to feature local people's **voices and** was the only journalist to do so.

Quynh has long been passionate about environmental **justice and** wanted to write the story after joining a field trip for environmental journalists organized by GreenID. But as one field trip did not allow her to gather enough material for a story, she pitched the idea to the **Earth Journalism Network** and got a grant to go back and finish reporting the story. Quynh was supported in this endeavor by *Nguoi Do Thi*, which gave her the time to properly investigate and report the story and did not pressure her to maximize article views—a common practice at Zing and VnExpress, according to their journalists.





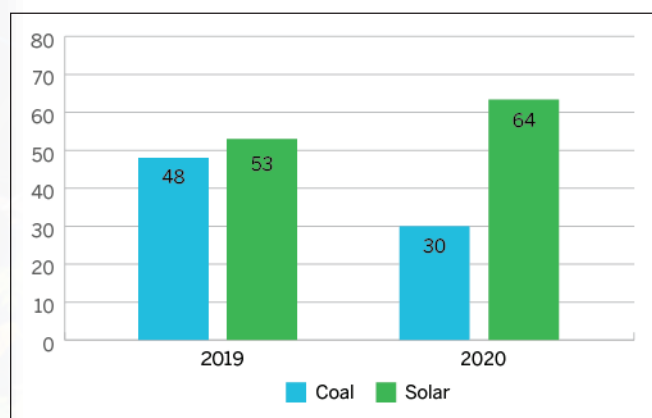
Floating dwelling house with solar batteries at a fish breeding farm in Vietnam. Alexander/Adobestock

Meanwhile, a Dan Tri journalist who wished not to be named said the journalist quoted coal power companies on clean technology to offer a “balanced viewpoint,” which the journalist felt had been lacking in coal reporting. “We [journalists] cannot just write from the perspective of environmental experts and criticizing thermal energy. We need to talk to thermal power companies to understand that the technology has changed,” the journalist said. The journalist believes that a journalist’s job is to “present all sides and perspectives to ensure fairness.”

Renewable Energy Framing

Solar framed as a fast-growing market for large investors

Number of coal and solar stories published in 2019 and 2020



In 2017, the prime minister of Vietnam released [Decision 11](#), a legal instrument on mechanisms for development of solar power in Vietnam, which included an attractive FiT price of 9.35 cents/kWh. All journalists interviewed referenced this decision as the first catalyst for a boom in solar investment and media interest in the energy source. In 2020, the prime minister released [Decision 13](#) with a new, multitiered FiT scheme to replace Decision 11, which reanimated media discourse on solar as a lucrative investment for those who could take advantage of the opportunity.

The impact of these government policies on media framing is clear. In 2019, the number of coal and solar stories were roughly the same, with the former appearing in 48 stories and the latter in 53. However, following the release of the new FiT scheme, 64 solar stories were found in the past eight months, more than double the number of coal-focused stories in the same time. Overall, from January 2019 to August 2020, solar energy got the most coverage of all energy forms with 117 stories, or 46.4 percent of the total sample size. Ninety-three of these 117 stories, classified under the business/economy section, framed solar as a fast-growing market, and 43 stories discussed supportive policy—both the old and new FiT schemes—as catalysts for this growth.

Tuoi Tre published the most solar stories among the six outlets, 37, making up 31.6 percent of total solar articles sampled, most of which adopted the solar-as-lucrative frame. *Tuoi Tre* editor Phi Tuan discussed his newspaper’s interest in this energy source. “Solar energy has developed a reputation for being a lucrative investment that could lead to high returns,” he said. “It is an interesting story that attracts readers’ attention. Major media outlets cannot help participate in the solar boom.”

Energy expert Anh Thi Nguyen echoed this view, saying, “When something is developing fast, it brings a lot of discussions such as policies on investment, the energy grid, transmission challenges, and people taking advantage of solar energy incentives like the feed-in-tariff (FiT) scheme.”

Rooftop solar panels framed as affordable for individual households

Vietnam has more than [45,300 operating rooftop solar systems](#), of which nearly [44 percent were just installed in the first seven months](#) of 2020. Under the new FiT schemes, not only large power investors but individual households can sell extra solar energy to the government at a fixed price. Thus, 46 business stories framed solar as not only a good investment for energy companies but also for average Vietnamese.

Good FiT prices were cited in all 46 stories as a reason why solar is affordable and a good investment for individual households in the long run. Eighteen of 46 articles quoted EVN’s reports on numbers of households installing rooftop solar systems. Ordinary people, meaning individual or household users of rooftop solar energy, were quoted in five of 46 stories—a small number but significant nonetheless given how seldom Vietnamese media quote nonofficial sources. Most quotes were about how the switch to solar helped households reduce electricity bills; for example, [a story](#) by Zing quoted an individual user saying, “My monthly electricity bills have gone down by half. [I] now can save electricity usage and sell back unused [solar] energy to EVN for some extra money.”

According to Thong Nguyen, a business journalist who has covered energy for five years, the story of solar energy in Vietnam is no longer just the business of policymakers or big energy investors. “Solar energy stories had been getting a lot of attention because of the rising trend in investing in rooftop solar,” he said. “As a result, there is a growing demand from readers for information about the market from panels providers, such as dos and don’ts and the pay-back period.” An anonymous *Tuoi Tre* journalist echoed Thong’s words, saying rooftop solar “gets the most media attention out of all renewable energy technologies because individual households can install it for daily use. That is why I write about this topic very often.”

Solar framed as requiring tighter regulations

The need for removing barriers that hinder solar development was also a common frame in solar energy coverage with 32 stories. Of the three barriers discussed (lack of transmission lines, tight FiT deadline, unclear guidance on distinguishing between



Aerial view of a rice field with a wind turbines, Phan Rang, Ninh Thuan Province, Vietnam. Hien Phung Thu/Adobestock

different solar types), the lack of clear guidance on distinguishing rooftop versus grid-connected solar projects in the 2020 FiT scheme garnered the most coverage at 14 stories. *Tuoi Tre* and *VnExpress* each had five stories on this topic, while *Dan Tri* was only one story behind. More specifically, two issues were raised:

- As the tariff applied for rooftop solar projects was the highest among the three types of solar projects (rooftop, ground-mounted, and floating solar energy projects), there were concerns that the scheme was being taken advantage of. For example, a report from *VnExpress* cited some local governments taking measures to deal with agricultural firms installing solar panels in a way that was not in accordance with regulations.
- Small businesses, mostly agricultural farms, that invested in solar power systems could not get a power purchase agreement with EVN because of unclear regulations enabling the power company to decide which type of solar project to put in the contract.

After these stories appeared prominently in all six major news outlets, the MOIT released [a document](#) giving more details on definitions of solar project types and tariffs applied for different cases—perhaps an example of media coverage creating pressure for policy change in the renewable energy sector.

Wind energy receives modest coverage compared to solar

Wind energy was only mentioned in 22 stories over the 20 months, barely one-fifth of the 117 solar energy stories. The disparity between installed wind versus solar capacity in Vietnam is even more pronounced. According to energy expert Anh Thi Nguyen, the country has **500 megawatts** of wind, roughly one-fifth of its solar capacity—a fact Thi attributes to less-attractive FiT policies. This is despite Vietnam's 3,200 kilometers of shoreline and its **ranking among the top Southeast Asian countries in terms of wind energy potential**.

Only nine of the 22 wind stories framed wind energy as a lucrative investment, demonstrating the relative lack of business enthusiasm for this energy form. An anonymous journalist from *Tuoi Tre* said that because energy coverage still followed dominant investment trends, the journalist does not feel confident in writing more wind articles. "Because not many people can even picture a wind power farm, my articles on wind energy only focus on describing the technology and workers' experience," the journalist said. "There will need to be more growth in [wind power development] before journalists can write about topics such as wind energy policy, investments and structural challenges."

Energy expert Anh Thi Nguyen expressed his hope that journalists not just cover solar—the success story of renewable development in Vietnam—but wind as well. Despite having a seven-year head start over solar energy, "wind only contributes 500 megawatts to Vietnam's energy capacity while solar is already contributing

twelve times the number," he said. "The issue lies in less-favorable policies that have not been successful in persuading investors to put in their money. This is a story that needs to be dissected in the media as well."

Exclusion of hydropower in renewable energy discussion

Hydropower was only discussed as the main topic in seven of the 268 stories examined (2.6%). This small percentage of coverage in the six media outlets reflects a perception among journalists **that hydropower** should be excluded from the concept of renewables. Because my keyword search did not specifically include the words "hydropower" or "hydropower dam," I could only find hydropower articles if they contained the term "renewable energy," which was generally understood by journalists to mean solar or wind power. Only **one story**, by *Dan Tri*, included small hydropower as a renewable source, though it did not consider medium and big hydro in the same category.

There are two potential reasons for this perception. The first stems from journalists' reliance on official sources such as **EVN's reports**, which separate big hydro from renewables. The second stems from journalists' personal viewpoints. Two journalists, Trung Chanh and Uyen Nguyen, highlight hydro dams' environmental impacts as reasons why they are not "renewable" or "clean" energy. Chanh said, "I don't consider hydropower to be a clean energy source, because although hydro dams don't cause pollution similarly to the way coal plants do, they destroy biodiversity, alter fish populations and sediment levels in water sources." *Tuoi Tre* editor Phi Tuan and a journalist from *VnExpress* who asked for anonymity said that because hydropower is considered a "traditional" electricity source in Vietnam, it should not be in the same category as solar or wind.

The only media outlet that did not follow this trend was *Nguoi Do Thi*, which produced four of seven hydropower stories that contained the word "renewable energy." However, these stories, which were all part of an investigative series on the proposed Luang Prabang hydropower dam in Laos, also framed hydropower in a negative light because of its potential impacts on the Mekong River.

Quality of Energy Stories

Target audience influences journalists' writing style

All the journalists interviewed admitted that energy was a difficult topic to cover as it required technical knowledge and an ability to translate it. *Saigon Times* journalist Lan Nhi said, "Energy coverage includes the energy market, different energy forms and technical related topics. Each topic requires a different type of knowledge. For example, you need to understand what a power development plan means. This [technicality] is the most challenging thing." *Tuoi Tre* journalist Ngoc Lan added, "Another



challenge is to translate the language policy and development in the energy sector, which is considered a bland topic, into a more reader-friendly language.”

Tuoi Tre stood out as having the most reader-friendly way to simplify energy information. For example, in [a story](#) about the biggest wind farm in Bac Lieu Province in the Mekong Delta, the author described the energy output of a wind turbine by comparing it to the total electricity consumption of all of Bac Lieu City. In the comment section, a reader said the article’s writing style and visualization of wind turbines helped them make sense of energy data.

Energy expert Anh Thi Nguyen, who contributes to several media outlets, said he had to change his style of writing to fit that of each outlet he writes for.

His two most recent perspectives for VnExpress, “[A Train of Coal Bottom Ash](#)” and “[A Thirst for Electricity](#),” got 211 and 92 comments respectively. Anh also said his perspectives on coal were always “hot,” meaning they attracted attention.

VnExpress expects its contributors to include a story that can engage readers. But as Anh explained, “it is not something anyone can do, especially when writing about a technical topic.”

VnExpress, which targets general audiences, has a vibrant comment section. According to one of its reporters, who asked for anonymity, the audience is important for the online news site, which tends to choose stories based on readers’ interests. “The engagement level of readers decides the position of a story on the website,” the reporter said.

From analyzing the VnExpress website, [perspective pieces](#) are always put right in the front page and in a high position, meaning readers will see such a piece quickly without having to scroll down. The VnExpress reporter also said view rates affect journalists’ salaries.

Unlike the other four media outlets, the *Saigon Times* and *Nguoi Do Thi* have more-specific target audiences.

In the case of the *Saigon Times*, whose Vietnamese name literally means Saigon Economic Times (*Thoi bao kinh te Saigon*), the audience is policymakers, business leaders, or readers who are interested in economic-related topics. About 60 percent of *Times* stories were well-structured and readable in terms of clear information and figures. For example, in this story about [the draft Power Development Master Plan 8](#), the author followed a pattern of posing a question and answering it with a series of supporting ideas. This pattern helps readers follow the flow of the story more easily. Having said that, the *Times*’s choice of language in energy stories is more suitable for people who already have a certain level of technical knowledge about the energy sector.

For example in [this Saigon Times story about delayed coal projects](#), the author brought up two different electricity market levels, wholesale and retail, without explaining how they work. For readers who do not have background knowledge about Vietnam’s electricity market, it might be difficult to understand how the wholesale and retail electricity markets could make electricity purchases more transparent. Additionally, in [this story](#) about the upcoming Power Development Master Plan 8, the author casually used technical terms like “pumped-storage hydropower,” “energy storage,” and “absorption of renewable energy” without any explanations.



The online edition of *Tuoi Tre* at the newspaper’s office in Hanoi. Reuters/Kham/Adobestock

A Deep Dive into the Media Coverage of Four Major Power Plants in Vietnam

By Mi Hoang, Climate Tracker Fellow

Energy reporting in Vietnam is clearly divided into two types of articles—those that discuss energy policy and trends in broad strokes, and those that focus on specific projects. To portray a fuller picture of media coverage on energy issues in Vietnam, therefore, this study dives into specific coverage surrounding two coal power plants, one wind energy plant, and one solar energy plant. I decided on the following plants because of the high amount of coverage they generated:

- Vinh Tan Thermal Power Plant in the southern Binh Thuan Province, **one of the two largest coal plant complexes in Vietnam.**
- Vung Ang Thermal Power Plant in the central Ha Tinh Province, **the other of the two largest coal plant complexes in Vietnam.**
- Mui Dinh Wind Power Plant in the southern Ninh Thuan Province, the second of 12 wind farms installed in the province and with the highest wind power capacity.
- Dau Tieng Solar Power Plant in the southern Tay Ninh Province, which was the largest solar plant project in Southeast Asia before being overtaken by another plant in October 2020.

Findings

Qualitative Analysis: How Coverage Differs among the Four Energy Projects

Vinh Tan Thermal Power Plant

Vinh Tan Thermal Power Plant was the site of a skirmish with locals who protested the plant's environmental damage in 2015; four years later, the plant remained a hot topic with 11 articles sampled, nine of which adopted a negative frame. All nine articles highlighted environmental concerns, with the fine dust and ashes released from Vinh Tan portrayed as posing major health risks. Two articles also adopted an environmental justice frame, highlighting how former residents in the plant area have been forced to become environmental migrants because of unbearable living conditions there.

Thanh Nien journalist Que Ha wrote three of the nine articles that highlighted the environmental impact of Vinh Tan. In an email interview, however, Ha denied having any special interest in this angle, simply attributing his coverage to the fact that he was assigned to cover the news in the Binh Thuan area, where the Vinh Tan coal power plant is located. Ha declined to give more details, saying, “Your questions about my Vinh Tan coverage touch upon sensitive issues with political implications. Therefore, I will need permission from *Thanh Nien*’s senior managers to answer them.”

Vung Ang Thermal Power Plant

Six out of the nine stories on this plant are about the bottom ash released and its potential recycling as construction material. This has been a controversial topic between local residents and the government, as the authorities said the ash from Vung Ang Thermal Power Plant is safe for construction use, while the residents don't believe that statement. Seven out of nine stories appeared in early 2020, when local government officials began to use the ash for construction of local stadiums. *Thanh Nien*, for example, ran an article in April 2020 with the headline “Ha Tinh [City]: Residents ‘Ambush’ Stadium to Be Built with Coal Bottom Ash,” highlighting how locals oppose the recycling of Vung Ang's ashes because of environmental concerns. The article, however, only quoted from the local government and did not feature any voices from concerned residents.

Mui Dinh Wind Power Plant

Five of eight stories related to this plant are negative, as it couldn't work at full capacity because of the lack of connection with energy networks. These five stories appeared in four outlets—Dan Tri, *Tien Phong*, *Thanh Nien*, and Dau Tu—from July 2019 to October 2019. During that time, the representative of this plant requested support from the government to help connect with the national energy networks. While covering a specific power project, the authors also linked its failure to operate at full capacity to overall energy development policies, advocating for a more strategic approach to ensure wind energy developed at the same pace as energy transmission facilities.

Dau Tieng Solar Power Plant

Unlike other power plants examined, Dau Tieng solar has received mostly positive coverage, with nine of 12 articles focusing on it and other solar projects being lucrative investments for domestic and foreign companies. The fact that Dau Tieng was the largest solar power plant in Southeast Asia when it went into operation was mentioned in four of these articles, and its contribution to the national energy output as a clean energy source was emphasized. However, solar's clean energy reputation did not go unquestioned, as two articles from *VnExpress* and *VietnamNet* highlighted concerns about the plant's waste treatment. Lam Van, an editor for Ho Chi Minh City's Department of Science and Technology, said that for the past five years, the government has encouraged reporting on renewables and energy efficiency—a trend quickly taken up by the media.



Mi Hoang

Mi Hoang is a lecturer at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, a trainer at the Vietnamese Journalists Association, and a researcher with various projects in the field. Mi previously served as an editor of *Vietnam Science and Technology*, a magazine published by Vietnam's Ministry of Science and Technology, Centre for Science and Technology Information, Ho Chi Minh City. She has special interests in social media and its impact on the youth, climate change and journalism, and service-learning in media education. Her works have been published in the *Journal of Development and Integration* and the *Journal of Communication and Media Studies*.

Conclusion

Overall, an in-depth analysis of coal, solar, wind, and hydro-power coverage in Vietnam highlights how supportive energy development policy and the resulting investment boom—or lack thereof—have driven reporting on these topics.

This is likely the result of a reporting process whereby journalists working at government-linked news outlets often see government officials, EVN, and business representatives as their sole necessary sources. It can be inferred from the research that government ownership of news outlets, a culture of self-regulated censorship, and rapid reporting needs limit the interest of journalists in reaching out to local sources, even on issues with high regional stakes.

Though previously hailed as the future of Vietnam's energy development, coal projects have received more negative coverage in the past two years for their environmental impacts, frequent delays, and financing difficulties. A small group of environment and energy experts, notably from the NGO GreenID, are routinely quoted in framing coal as an environmental hazard. Some journalists, notably from Dan Tri and Zing, try to neutralize these concerns by citing new “clean coal” technologies.

Solar power, with an attractive FiT scheme, has catalyzed growth at a dizzying pace. This has generated the most media attention and is commonly framed as a good investment for power suppliers and investors. Journalists are also keen on highlighting existing barriers to future development, such as unclear regulation and inadequate transmission facilities, with a view to pressuring policymakers to remove them.

Wind power, with a less attractive FiT scheme and much slower development, generates one-fifth the amount of coverage that solar power generates. Meanwhile, hydropower is commonly excluded in renewable energy discourse, except for a few small hydropower projects.

In terms of quality coverage, Tuoi Tre stands out in its clarity and context when covering energy projects and policies.

Nguoi Do Thi, an online magazine publishing fewer articles for a niche readership, is notable for its prioritization of quality over quantity, consistently examining all sides of an energy project—including environmental and social impacts. *Nguoi Do Thi* is also the only media outlet that quotes from local residents around coal-fired power plants, though most of this is the work of a single freelance reporter passionate about energy and the environment.

Zing and VnExpress, the two most-viewed news sites in Vietnam, prioritize publishing articles that bring views and audience engagement. This resulted in well-written expert op-ed pieces on energy, as well as hastily written articles on electricity prices, which provided a one-sided view of coal's indispensability in Vietnam's energy future.

Overall, Vietnamese news outlets frame solar technologies as worthy investments for the future, though there is still disagreement on whether a coal phaseout is feasible.

Research for this report was carried out under the guidance of Climate Tracker, a network of 12,000+ young climate journalists around the globe. This report is part of a regional media analysis commissioned by the Stanley Center for Peace and Security and produced by Climate Tracker.



About Us

The Stanley Center for Peace and Security partners with people, organizations, and the greater global community to drive policy progress in three issue areas—mitigating climate change, avoiding the use of nuclear weapons, and preventing mass violence and atrocities. The center was created in 1956 and maintains its independence while developing forums for diverse perspectives and ideas. To learn more about our recent publications and upcoming events, please visit stanleycenter.org.



About Climate Tracker

Climate Tracker is the largest youth-based climate journalism project in the world. We train and competitively empower young people around the world to influence their national debates about climate change, and publish their ideas in national media. We send the most impressive young people to international conferences where they can have a direct influence on decision makers and get a hands-on experience in shaping national and international policy. ClimateTracker.org.