

Asia Pacific Media Educator

| Issue 1

Article 10

9-1996

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Recommended Citation

Smollar, D. J., The dilemma of change in Vietnamese journalism, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 1, 1996, 90-95.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss1/10>

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Media Commentary

The Dilemma Of Change In Vietnamese Journalism

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Two steps forward, one step back? Or one step forward, two steps back? That's the dilemma in trying to judge changes in Vietnamese journalism today. The nation's media, even though still government-owned, are in a state of flux under *doi moi* (market renovation policy). Take a few examples of the parry-and-thrust between reporters, editors and Party overseers.

A glossy, full-colour monthly called *Thoi Trang Tre* (*New Fashion*) proves wildly popular among Vietnamese youth with fashion and make-up tips, and bikini-clad photos of shapely Western and Vietnamese models. Yet its staff frets over each Cindy Crawford or Elle MacPherson photo lest a cultural official decry the corruption of a Western lifestyle.

The editor, Vu Quang Vinh, a former art director and playwright for the state's Youth Theatre, steers clear of political issues. But the magazine's contents crystallize the cultural pitfalls that top-level Party conservatives fear as Vietnam opens at often-breakneck speed to the outside world, especially since the two-year-old magazine already exceeds 60,000 circulation, despite a princely US\$1 price when most Vietnamese periodicals go for US15 cents or less. So, when prominent leaders exhort the media to promote "good deeds" and to avoid "British tabloid" style stories on love, sex, and other cultural debasements, the media take heed.

Or consider the decision by Ly Qui Chung, managing editor of the paper *Thanh Nien Thoi Dai* (*Youth of Current Era*), to test media limits in the summer of 1995 by printing, ahead of an official Party communique, details of an upcoming state visit to Australia and New Zealand by Party General Secretary Do Muoi. The trip was an open secret among Vietnamese journalists, and had been reported in various Asian newspapers that circulate in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

When Chung received no calls from authorities after breaking with tradition, he concluded that the permissive space

for Vietnam's media had been enlarged a tad. But half a year later, a commentary from President Le Duc Anh warned journalists against reporting details concerning the travels of top Party and government officials.

Vietnamese newspapers now print full-color ads from *Panasonic* and *Pepsi*, and ambitious young reporters want to write of official government misdeeds, growing prostitution and environmental degradation. But editors-in-chief must meet weekly with Party ideology chiefs, many of them trained in Soviet-style propaganda, who encourage caution for reporters and, if need be, insist on it.

With the ever-expanding nature of *doi moi*, the media have flexed their wings, enough to develop what one sympathetic Party official called "freedom of information" as contrasted to "freedom of the press."

Nguyen Tri Dung, deputy editor-in-chief of the English-language *Vietnam Investment Review* and a former press officer in the Ministry of Culture, said information now flows two ways. "Before, we just had one-way information, top to bottom, from the government to the people. Now we also have information to the government from the people."

Cultural historian Huu Ngoc observes: "Now there is talk of democracy, and a debate over what constitutes freedom of the press. Is democracy different between the West and East? Must freedom of the press be adapted to national conditions and culture? Is it relative and dependent on the level of public maturity? These are the polemics we now hear."

Ngoc, a Hanoi scholar in his 80s, traces his roots back to French-language Communist Party revolutionary journals at the end of World War II. "The press now reflects more the preoccupations of the people rather than those of the Party, and those preoccupations are trending toward materialism after almost 30 years of deprivation. People now would like to enjoy life more for themselves, rather than always sacrificing for the community. You see this in the struggle between conservative and progressive elements in the Party, and in the commercialization of the media."

Readership potential is high in Vietnam, where 95% of adults have basic literacy. Residents in major cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City devour magazines and newspapers, especially with the greater variety of titles and breadth of information available under *doi moi*. Newspapers and magazines have ballooned to more than 350 today, from less than 50 in the 1970s.

Supporters of this new found freedom of information acknowledge that Party officials, not journalists, remain the ultimate arbiter of what passes muster in the press. "You can change the limbs, but you cannot yet talk about removal of the

trunk or roots," a Ho Chi Minh City writer said, meaning that criticism of an individual or social problems cannot be directly linked with criticism of overall party policies.

Freedom of information, however, is still a novelty so that most editors interviewed for this article noted with awe stories criticizing high-level officials. They cited the example of the Minister of Energy, lambasted by the media for ineptness in carrying out construction of a major 500 kilovolt transmission line. While such criticism proceeds only after a cue from the leadership, editors nevertheless view it as a positive development and say that exposure of lower-level corruption or inefficiency no longer must wait for a Party-approved campaign.

"Journalists can now use their eyes as well as their ears," said Huynh Chieu Duong, a Belgian citizen who directs *Vietnam Scoop*, a French-language joint venture monthly magazine on investment opportunities in Vietnam. "Journalists were traditionally trained in the Socialist ideology just to 'hear,' to transmit what top party and government people wanted to have printed."

All Vietnamese media are officially owned and licensed by the government. The 1989 press law specifically states that the media is to serve the party. Ongoing changes in Vietnam revolve around how to interpret and how fast to stretch those terms under liberalizing pressures from citizens now tasting a bit of economic freedom. Periodicals are being weaned from subsidies and forced to court advertisers and readers in order to survive, a trend that de-emphasizes lockstep ideology. Readers slowly are beginning to understand the concept of a press free to discuss matters of everyday concern, whether crime or culture or politics, which Western journalists and readers would consider bread-and-butter issues.

There exists little or no direct censorship, beyond clear prohibitions against direct criticism of the Party, of the General Secretary, of the Premier and Politburo members, and against publication of overseas Vietnamese opposition to the government. The preference is for self-censorship, charging the editor of each publication with responsibility for contents. Should an editor fail to exercise adequate control over more-eager reporters overstepping the bounds, he will soon be on the carpet before party monitors and chastised, demoted or dismissed.

Editors are usually party officials appointed by the particular government or party agency administering a paper. But some prove more daring than others, precisely because the limits are often vague and keep shifting.

As a Party official noted, there is often at least one editor nowadays willing to test the limits, a trend which has contributed

much to the new vitality of Vietnamese media under *doi moi*.

Vietnamese journalists do not equate press censorship with so-called Asian values, nor do they necessarily see press censorship as a prerequisite for economic growth. They do, however, see press limits as perhaps necessary for nation-building. Their experiences illustrate the twists and turns on the path toward more expansive journalism.

Ly Qui Chung tries to "get as close to the limit as possible, but not to get offside." Chung was a non-Communist opposition newspaper editor under the South Vietnam regime and told to shut down his operation several times. Since unification in 1975, he has pushed for what he calls "newspapers of information for the people."

"You can gradually move the line back little by little, to create new political traditions and explain your ideas and give a point of view," he said, adding that "if you go too far, you run a very big risk. But I think the same thing would happen in Indonesia and Singapore, indeed in most of Asia."

Yet the risks remain particularly high for journalists in Vietnam compared to the rest of Southeast Asia, in large measure because there are no citizen groups which can yet function independently of authorities and pressure them for a multiplicity of voices. It's true that South Vietnam authorities would often yank opposition papers from newstands or suspend their publication. But opposition broadsheets did exist.

Vietnam today has not yet reached that point of allowing non-government media whose content can openly challenge fundamental policies and actions. Senior editor, Vu Son Thuy, of *Tuan Bao Quoc Te* (*World Affairs Weekly*) tiptoes along the offside line in his journal, but points with pride to publication of excerpts of Alvin Toffler's "*The Third Wave*" and other controversial topics previously verboten in the Vietnamese media.

Thuy studied 10 years in the former Soviet Union, but recently received media internships in Thailand and Japan where he "unlearned" what a colleague called the Soviet predilection to "write but not think." His publication, under the aegis of the Foreign Ministry, attempts to be provocative, to try and mold new thinking among Vietnamese toward the rest of the world.

"Our readers, who are the key decision-makers in Vietnam, must understand that we do not agree with all that we print; we pursue the notion of objectivity, and that is new for people in Vietnam," Thuy said.

Reporter Le Quoc Vinh graduated in journalism from the University of Hanoi, the nation's first non-Party media training program, and is a rising star on the Vietnam Investment Review.

"We know in Vietnam that a journalist has the freedom to

write within certain limits, not the U.S. practice to write anything or advocate anything," Vinh said. "Freedom of the press in Vietnam includes direction from the government and ruling Party. But our news people are quite happy with the freedom they have now. We have opened the doors but not yet too wide because that might create problems. Even when greater freedoms come, we will avoid private matters and personal criticisms. Our culture mitigates against writing about them; we wish to keep our sense of privacy."

Another reporter, Nguyen Minh Tuan, not only writes for the national paper *Dai Doan Ket* (*Great Solidarity*) but won election as a non-party independent candidate last year to the Hanoi People's Council, the legislative counterpart to the People's Committee that runs local government. He is among the breed of young journalists who see their role "to do a job for the people and for the country" but who interpret the national interest more broadly than older party officials, now that national survival is no longer at stake.

"My role as a journalist is to promote the desires of the people and at times to criticize the government, but not to bring down a government," Tuan said, echoing many of his colleagues who value national stability after so many years of war and deprivation.

He finds no contradiction between his position as a journalist and that of council member, saying that Vietnamese journalists have historically held an educational role within society. "My views are in line with those in the Party and government whose policies have expanded [the parameters] of media coverage."

General Secretary Muoi periodically speaks to journalist gatherings to warn against "irresponsible" reporting, which editors privately interpret as signs of disquiet among more conservative party members regarding media trends.

Dung, deputy editor-in-chief of the *Vietnam Investment Review*, reflects the ideological tug-and-pull in his own comments. He uses the same terms as would his counterparts in America: "The principles of democracy are based on the freedom of the press, and the right to inform and to be informed are democratic rights." But his words come with important qualifications, certainly not unique to Vietnam, but complicated by Communist Party ideology.

"Liberty of the press is not just for journalists but also for the liberty of the people," adds Dung, who served as the Radio Voice of Vietnam in Cuba during the 1970s. "Above all, the interests of the whole nation must be respected by all journalists."

In the view of longtime editor Nguyen Khuyen, the role of a Vietnamese journalist "is as a 'fellow traveler' with the

government," showing no sense of shame that the term would bring for a Western journalist. "We cooperated on the road to independence and it's too soon to say when we will part company," said Khuyen, editor-in-chief of *Vietnam News*, an English daily begun in 1990 by the official Vietnam News Agency. "But so far, so good. The media supports the policy of the government, and the government needs the media to realize its objectives."

It is fair to say that Vietnamese journalists have positioned themselves as an advance party for "civil society", where non-government organizations and structures can play significant roles in shaping lives and policies. Of course, these notions, and particularly those of a free press, remain quite different between Vietnam and Western democracies.

The liberalization of Vietnamese media seems certain to continue but at a measured pace alongside economic reform and internationalization. The ingrained notions of press control from years of Soviet and Chinese influence, overlaid on an authoritarian Socialist ideology, cannot and will not be shed overnight.

The optimists among Vietnamese journalists see a gradual trend toward a Western, if not American-style, press, hoping for more room to shape political and policy issues as has occurred in the South Korea and Taiwan press, but not necessarily for the license to delve into personality and private-related matters.

More cautious Vietnamese argue for a unique Vietnam model, however ill-defined at present, reflecting what they say are Asian and Vietnamese cultural and historical patterns that tilt toward national stability and the primacy of family and group consensus over individual desires. Similar patterns manifest themselves even in the media of other Southeast Asian nations now free of government control. No one, however, expects a return to the sterile pre-reform days.

"The clock cannot be turned back," a Party official sympathetic to more press freedoms insisted. "Renovation and press liberalization go together and there are not enough conservatives for a return to the past. But we will follow a slow pace at times because we are still a poor nation and journalists want to consider carefully how their work will contribute to development and stability."

David Smollar was a journalist with the *Los Angeles Times* for some 10 years before taking up studies at the Graduate School of International Relations and Pacific Studies, University of California, San Diego. He received a grant from the UC San Diego Southeast Asia Studies Program to study media in Vietnam in 1995. Email contact: dsmollar@ucsd.edu
