

Vietnam Press Still Hampered by Ideology

Templer, Robert

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FULL TEXT

When Secretary of State Warren % JL J Christopher came to Hanoi to establish diplomatic relations with Vietnam, he took the opportunity to hand down some advice on the merits of democracy. "A powerful revolution of ideas has swept the world," he told students at the Institute of International Relations. Free markets and open societies were in the ascendency; isolation and repression brought only poverty and despair. "Governments cannot control the movement of ideas in the Information Age even if they want to," he warned.

Well, some of them still can and still do. Christopher is not known for rousing the masses to the barricades but Vietnam would not allow its 72 million people to hear his cautious and tactful speech. Satellites may have sent his words around the world and computers sped them through the Internet but not one Vietnamese newspaper printed them.

Market reforms have brought dramatic changes to Vietnam since the Communist Party began to move away from a planned economy in 1986. An entrepreneurial spirit has been freed, economic growth has averaged more than 8 percent annually for the last five years and a new vigor has returned to a country broken by war and a bleak, harsh Marxism. The media has reflected many of these changes—supermodels have edged aside Stakhanov, color has infused pages that were once filled with leaden propaganda and newspapers now print stories of real interest to real people. This year 350 publications will fight for circulation and advertising, their ranks swelled by 90 newcomers since 1990. Editors outline plans for sports weeklies, economic dailies, special supplements and co-operation projects with foreign publishing giants. Suddenly the language is more multimedia than Marx. But underlying all the change is a government policy that can be summed up in one word—"control."

The Vietnamese media, which is entirely owned by government or Communist Party institutions, no longer serves up the monolithic view of society it did until 1986. But neither will it push debate beyond the boundaries set by a party that feels itself beset by opposition from overseas and unsure of its ideology at home.

In the late 1980's, the government briefly unleashed a powerful force—its own people. Party General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh encouraged writers "not to bend the nibs of their pens" with propaganda but to write the truth about a country weighed down with economic and political problems. Like long-caged birds, writers emerged cautiously as many had been purged in the 1950's after being similarly encouraged to criticize the Party. But as their confidence grew, sharper articles appeared in the press, journalists began to tackle the policies that plunged Vietnam into poverty after 1975 and editorialists railed at a government veined through with corruption. Novels and short stories that shed the heroic tone of Socialist Realism were published and officially applauded, even such untouchable icons as Ho Chi Minh were subject to veiled examination. A group of ex-Vietcong and North Vietnamese soldiers grouped together in the Club of Former Resistance Fighters and published a journal that was intensely critical of the government. "Doi Moi"—the Vietnamese words for "renovation" that are used as shorthand for the reforms had reached the media.

It didn't last long. Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe and Vietnamese leaders shuddered at the killing of the Ceausescu and the indignities heaped on their close friend Erich Honecker. Writers were jailed, those who called for political reforms, even former soldiers, were branded "reactionaries" and several prominent figures in the media left the country or retired. A pendulum weighted with fear had once again swung back on its path between liberalism

and repression, between a fear of being left behind by the world and the knowledge that openness could widen the cracks.

Since then the Communist Party has seen an increasing decentralization of power and an inevitable ideological deflation that has made it even more reluctant to cede any more control over the media. Indeed it has been tightening restrictions in recent years, replacing independent-minded editors and urging greater attention to the party's authority. At the Sixth Congress of the Association of Vietnamese Journalists in March, Communist Party General Secretary Do Muoi reminded the audience that they were there "to serve the government and the people." "In Vietnam, press freedom is meant to serve the interests of the entire people, the whole country and the new political system," Muoi said, serving up the argument of collective rights taking priority over the individual that is often used by authoritarian Asian governments to justify their tight hand on the press. "We will not allow the abuse of press freedom by people who seek to destabilize the socio-political situation in our country and impede us in our development and our integration into the world community."

Reforms have brought many improvements but the press is still one of the most tightly restricted in the world, operating in an environment where publications can be closed overnight by government fiat. Nguoi Hanoi (The Hanoian), a weekly owned by the capital's Arts and Literature Association, was shut down earlier this year after it said people were "worried and sad" about a government ban on firecrackers that are much enjoyed during the Tet lunar new year holidays. The magazine's editor and others responsible for the article were ordered to write "selfcriticisms" after being accused of violating "press laws." Other newspapers had also written about the ban in critical terms but their coverage swiftly and unsurprisingly turned to the government's success in ridding Vietnam of such a wasteful and dangerous tradition.

The control of the media by the Brezhnevian ideological bureaucracy is most evident in the two main national dailies-Nhan Dan (The People) and Quan Doi Nhan Dan (The People's Army), where the chill winds of the 1950's still blow. Marxist-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought provide the vocabulary although the ideas are grounded more in the rich vein of nationalism that the party has always mined. Much is made of Vietnam's many enemies, although exactly who these might be nowadays is never spelled out. Foreigners are always up to no good, always undermining national security or subverting the traditional culture of Vietnam. Pornography and state secrets seem to be particular obsessions of the editorial writers, a selfappointed vanguard of those fighting the spread of these by pernicious foreign forces. In these gray pages, Vietnamese are still lantern-jawed heroes, peasants, workers and members of the intellectual class toiling together under the guidance of an omniscient leadership. It is here the party and the army remind themselves of their glory days, their victories at war and their once formidable capacity to unite the country.

The inside workings of these newspapers are mostly hidden from view although many interesting insights into the Vietnamese press were given by Bui Tin, an eminent journalist and former deputy editor of Nhan Dan who now lives in Paris. After years working as a war correspondent for Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Bui Tin ran the party daily in the late 1980's. Journalists at Nhan Dan had begun a debate on whether the paper genuinely served "the people," or was merely an official gazette for government announcements and speeches by members of the Politburo. For a while the newspaper began to adopt a more critical tone but this did not last long. When in August 1989 the Solidarity trade union won elections in Poland, the party daily ran a furious editorial written by the head of the party's ideological committee, urging Poles to close ranks and fight this counter-revolutionary coup by reactionary forces. This earned a rebuke from the Polish Embassy and, according to Bui Tin, made the newspaper "a laughing stock" among Hanoians.

As Communist parties crumbled across Europe, Nhan Dan increasingly reverted to its earlier tone and a more compliant editor was chosen. Bui Tin's articles on the arrogance of the Communist leadership after their victory over South Vietnam in 1975 and the corruption that had become central to the political system were censored or not published and he grew increasingly disillusioned that the changes that had swept the world would not reach Vietnam. He left in 1990 to attend a conference organized by the French Communist Party newspaper L'Humanité in Paris and remains there, stripped of his party membership and often viciously denounced by the newspapers that

once employed him.

In his book "Following Ho Chi Minh," Bui Tin described the Vietnamese press as "antediluvian" and journalists as "suppressed and annihilated" by the system of party and government control. "There is a whole range of bureaucratic journalists who specialize in hectoring and intimidating their readers. In the spirit of class warfare, they learned mechanistically about the power of the press to make propaganda, although it is really distorting the truth and is altogether wrong," he wrote. In the book, he describes a system where bureaucracy has paralyzed imagination, where the demands of a tiny elite outweigh everything else and life is dominated by the purges, the factionalism and the corruption that are essential themes of Vietnamese politics. In one incident that sounds as though it comes from a play by Vaclav Havel, editors at a newspaper were rebuked for innocently placing a picture of an anti-aircraft brigade so that the gun pointed across the page at a photograph of Ho Chi Minh. After 1990, the list of taboo subjects-political pluralism, the notion of open political debate, even the crimes of Stalingrew and a number of hardliners were appointed to key posts. The party appointed eight hard-line journalists to the Central Committee, the largest number ever, indicating the importance that has been attached to the media and propaganda as the leadership increasingly feels itself under siege from what it calls the "forces of peaceful evolution."

"Do not look unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not listen unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not speak unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not move unless it is in accordance with the rites." Confucius. The Analects. XII. 1

For most of those who work in the media, the machinery of control is almost frictionless, requiring little input of energy from the party or the security system. People do not become journalists unless they know the rules and are aware that self-censorship is a key to survival. "It isn't much different from life before 1975," said a prominent journalist in Ho Chi Minh City who easily made the change from editing newspapers in Saigon to running one in Hanoi. "You weren't allowed to question the leadership back then and you aren't allowed to question the leadership now." Few journalists seem to chafe at the restrictions they work under, although many privately express boredom at the more ideological aspects of their work. Questioning the system is obviously discouraged. A young journalist who asked a top official at a press conference if journalists would still have to refer all stories on the United States to the Foreign Ministry for censorship after President Bill Clinton announced diplomatic ties, met with a savage look and an evasive answer. He was later rebuked for publicly remarking on the system and breaching the pretense of press freedoms.

There is little questioning of the press by readers either; to many people its repetition and stock phrases seem familiar, rather than relentlessly dull. They are part of the political culture and owe as much to Confucianism as they do to the country's professed adherence to Marxism. The Vietnamese generally dislike the Chinese-they have been rivals for about two millennia and while the Chinese may have named the country "An Nam" or "Pacified South" that was more a reflection of wishful thinking than reality. With this history of enmity, most Vietnamese refuse to acknowledge the Confucianist tradition in their political thinking but it remains strong and explains how political leaders and journalists are able to repeat formulations that seem so distant from reality. Confucianism lays great stress on "correct thinking" which comes from strict adherence to proper behavior, i.e. carrying out the correct political rites. Western political thinking tends to see "correct thinking" as producing, rather than being produced by, proper behavior. In the political ritual of Confucianist societies repeating certain phrases, even those that bear little relationship with the real situation, is seen as socially responsible.

Outside the realm of politics, journalists have been able to express their views more openly and without such heavy constraints of tradition, releasing significant amounts of pressure on the government. Issues such as corruption, poverty, prostitution, the labor movement and abuses in the workplace have come under scrutiny by newspapers that increasingly see themselves as responsible to a readership. Lao Dong (Labor), the trade union newspaper, has been foremost among a new breed of campaigning publications that have taken on key social issues without pushing beyond the boundaries. "Vietnamese workers are interested in the fight against problems that afflict the country," said Editor-in-Chief Pham Huy Hoan. "Our writers are very active investigating cases of corruption as these are of great interest to our readership. Another important issue for us is the conflict between employers and

workers."

While this newspaper and others such as *Nguoi Lao Dong* (The Worker), *Thanh Nien* and *Tuoi Tre* (both mean Youth) have had some success in keeping corruption and labor issues on the agenda, a little freedom has occasionally been a dangerous thing. These newspapers have waged remorseless campaigns against foreigners that owe much more to sheer xenophobia than concern about workers' rights. In a few cases, they have become arenas for vendettas and an apparent need to vent steam building up in society over growing inequalities. A senior union official acknowledged that newspapers singled out foreigners in cases of labor abuses because the unions felt they had no other way of dealing with the problem. Vietnamese management could be subjected to self-criticism or the sanction of the law, but the easiest way to deal with managers from overseas was by vilification in the press. In almost all cases involving foreigners, the reporters neglect to speak to the person being accused of wrongdoing in their newspaper. There are no libel laws, no right to reply and no avenues for redress if one is wronged by the media. Journalists earn little money with salaries as low as \$30 a month. This leaves them open to the temptations of bribes and payments for attending news conferences or giving interviews, temptations that are commonplace. Editors often brush off such complaints by pointing to their young, inexperienced staff and say while they want to improve ethics and writing, their priority has had to be bringing in younger people. "To improve the newspaper we had to replace older journalists," said *Lao Dong's* Hoan. "That generation were too used to the old system and they bored the readership. They didn't speak foreign languages so they couldn't use foreign news sources. We had to give people more room for creativity, to do things by themselves." Editors have used better design and photography to spruce up pages-USA Today has been a big, and openly acknowledged influence-and have improved their coverage of foreign news. An end to government subsidies has meant a fight for advertising revenues and recognition of the importance of winning over a readership. The Thanh, editor of *Phu Nu* (Woman) magazine in Ho Chi Minh City, led her publication in the shift from ideological correctness to entertainment. "When we started to write about clothes and make-up, we were condemned for being 'bourgeois.' Now even newspapers that belong to party organizations have fashion sections. They see it as a natural need for people." Some publications have survived by renting property to foreign businesses or by hooking up with publishing companies such as the Swiss firm Ringier AG. These changes have produced a glossier, more entertaining and essentially trivial press where the bottom rung of the market is prospering because its readership is interested only in politically safe, uncontroversial coverage of movie stars and soccer.

The experience of foreign media companies entering the Vietnamese market illustrates the fears that still abound. A Singaporean company launched a Vietnamese-language women's monthly called *Femme* that never made it on to the newsstands after the editor of a rival magazine denounced it as anti-Vietnamese. "Vietnamese would be unable to recognize the depiction of their society in this magazine," Nguyen Thi Van Anh, Editor of the version of *Phu* published in Hanoi, wrote in an opinion piece published on the front page of *Nhan Dan*. "Beauty has been presented as something reserved for foreigners and women and children have been presented in an ugly, distorted way." What had allegedly disturbed Anh was a fashion photospread of an elegantly dressed Eurasian model posing in a rundown but picturesque village outside Hanoi. Anh denied that her attacks were aimed at squelching the competition but they certainly had this effect. Nearly 30,000 copies of the first edition of *Femme* were held at the docks and none were ever sold.

Ringier and an Australian company called VIR Ltd, which is owned in part by media magnate Kerry Packer have broken into the market with business and fashion publications but have spent their time creeping through a minefield of political and cultural sensitivities.

The party, aware of the role of lipstick and jeans in the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, sees the need for entertainment as well as the release of public tensions on issues such as corruption. But a combative press that in any way stands in opposition to the government, that questions its policies or personalities, is a long way off. The press may be able to attack corruption, but it cannot examine the causes of graft or the moral bankruptcy of the Marxist bureaucratic system. The press can entertain but cannot inform too deeply. Debate will remain constrained as revolutionary changes in the political system in Vietnam are unlikely and an evolution towards a more open and

just society will be marked by many false turns, blind alleys and periods of regression. The Vietnamese press will follow those changes, not lead them, for survival is the priority of most newspapers and those that survive will be those that do not stand out.

Author Affiliation

Robert Templer is a New Zealander who works as a Hanoi-based correspondent for Agence France-Presse. He has worked for APP in Hong Kong Paris Afghanistan and for the last two years in Indochina. He began working as a journalist in Taipei after studying in Britain China and Taiwan.

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