

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CB-19

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VIETNAMESE MEDIA RIDE AN ECONOMIC BOOM  
and the censors take the back seat

Peter Bird Martin  
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Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter,

News reporting in Vietnam can cause headaches. Vietnamese journalists must determine the limits of their freedoms and report accordingly. Such freedoms are severely tested when events occur that reveal the crimes of some of the country's powerful. This February, former Vietnamese Minister of Energy Vu Ngoc Hai was on trial for corruption. Many wondered if they should "cover or not." "Our HoChiMinh City editors were against it," recalls Pham Huy Hoan, Hanoi-based deputy editor-in-chief of Lao Dong, the country's most popular newspaper, owned by the Confederation of Trade Unions and published three times a week. "They were worried Hai would come after them if he was found not guilty. I wanted to go front page."

Hoan won the day and copies of Lao Dong were bought up off the street faster than vendors could untie the bundles. "The economic liberalization has brought profound changes in the media," says Singaporean journalist Russell Heng, head of the Indochina Unit of the Singapore based South-East Asian Studies Institute. "There is a liveliness in the press environment as newspapers fight for a piece of the market and resourceful Vietnamese find ways around restrictions in the name of profit."

Stodgy newspapers, mandated in the late 80's to close or become profitable, began to improve content and design. Business celebrities and pop stars jumped to the front page, rubbing elbows with party officials and their speeches. Coverage extended to problems of everyday life. Sex and murder sold and the State began to grumble about "sensationalism and bad taste". But the process moved on. Lay-outs were modernized; classified ads and advertisements were introduced; new colorful Sunday supplements hit the newsstands. In their rush to attract readers newsmen and women began to test previous notions of what "news" is supposed to be.

According to the law, there is no censorship in Vietnam. In fact, everyone knows there is. But the line keeps moving and, except on issues such as the multiparty system, censors have taken the back

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One of Hanoi's numerous newsstands.

seat. "It is like a dance, one step forward, one step sideways, another step backward," says a talented and controversial Saigon-based journalist writing for Tuoi Tre, the youth newspaper, the biggest muck-raker in the South. "Our margin of freedom has expanded but we keep testing it."

Between 1986 and 1993, over 200 new publications were launched. By the end of 1993, Vietnam had about 365 newspapers, magazines and reviews with an estimated total circulation of 400 millions. Every single ministry and government organization seemed to be discovering the wonders of publishing.

Even foreigners are trying to cash in on the boom. Ringier, the powerful Swiss media group, is revamping a Vietnamese-language economic weekly and planning a fashion magazine. A Thai group is getting ready to upgrade a Vietnamese English-language daily. An Australian group is behind what has become Vietnam's best English-language business weekly, Vietnam Investment Review (VIR). Granted, it is a risky market. Private ownership of the media is forbidden and foreigners must enter in joint-ventures with a Vietnamese partner. In the case of VIR, for example, the partner is the State Committee on Cooperation and Investment (SCCI).

Foreign investors tend to be optimistic about the future of the industry. Australian newsman Ross Dunkley, managing editor of VIR, says the Vietnamese press is "more liberal-minded" than many others in Southeast Asia. "You find a level of debate in the Vietnamese press not easily found in places like Singapore, Indonesia or Malaysia," says Dunkley, who first came to Vietnam in 1990 to launch VIR. While Lao Dong ran the Hai trial front page, VIR was unable to do so. The SCCI "censor" could only be persuaded to run the story inside the paper.

Dunkley admits a lot of self-censorship goes on at the paper. "We know where the line is," he says. "We are not political scientists. We are willing to play along with the rules. What we are trying to do is publish a profitable newspaper not change the country."

With 20,000 copies, and an estimate 85,000 readers, VIR is the most successful English-language paper in Vietnam. Management admits though that the real future of the industry is in Vietnamese-language newspapers. VIR is preparing to turn its bi-weekly Vietnamese version into a daily. Long-term plans are for VIR to be mainly staffed by Vietnamese journalists trained on the job to produce an informative business newspaper in both English and Vietnamese. Most of the editing is still the work of expatriates. While Dunkley never talks of such things as "freedom of the press," he does say that convincing his Vietnamese counterpart of the need for a "balanced coverage" has been and is still an important battle. And Dunkley does not shy away from battles. After waiting weeks for the authorization to paste the town with promotional posters of VIR's front page, Dunkley finally decided to go ahead without the permit. "We have some very good young Vietnamese journalists on staff," says Dunkley. "They adapt well to new methods."

## A STRONG PRESS TRADITION

The Vietnamese have certainly a strong press tradition to draw from. Today's journalists are often the grandsons and granddaughters of those who risked their lives to write under pen names in the fiery French-language opposition newspapers of the French colonial times. Some were led by figures as prestigious as Ho Chi Minh himself who directed a weekly called Le Paria. Others are proud to say their parents knew some of the founding members of Thanh Nien, the clandestine organ of the Revolutionary Youth League, founded in 1925 to denounce French imperialism in Indochina and promote national liberation.

"In 1939, there were 400 newspapers in Vietnam," recalls Professor Ha Minh Duc, director of the Journalism Department of Hanoi University. "The current period is also a boom time but we lack resources to study it."

Some of today's journalists are also the sons and daughters of those who went to the front during the American war while their editors in the South went to jail for exposing the corruption of the Diem regime. "When I was young, we fought censorship from Thieu," recalls another southern journalist working for a Mekong delta paper. "After that, we fought communist censorship. Now, things are getting better but it is not freedom yet."

Some say there is less political debate in today's media than there was during the first few years of *doi moi*, the renovation process.

In 1988, the President of Vietnam Journalist Association (VJA), complained that "certain papers attacked Party leadership and slang mud at the socialist regime."

In his 1989 report on the renovation of the media, the VJA executive committee praised the media for giving up the old ways of



The January Hanoi Press Fair:  
thousands of visitors.

always presenting "rosy pictures" but also complained about the "rise of crime and sex stories," and the "emergence of commercialism to the detriment of educational and aesthetical interests." According to VJA, the "liberation of information had to be based on a correct concept of revolutionary journalism."(1)

#### TOUGH LAWS PROMOTE REVOLUTIONARY JOURNALISM

The two pieces of legislation relating to the press certainly support that. One wonders how Vietnamese journalists and publishers manage to stay out of trouble. If applied in Canada, the Press Law and the Publishing Law, would send most journalists to jail.

Take Article 22 of the 1993 Publishing Law, for example. The article forbids the publication of works bearing the following:

1. Opposition to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, thereby sabotaging the people's solidarity;
2. Advocacy of violence or wars of aggression, inciting hostility amongst nations and people, propagation of reactionary ideas and culture, perverse and obscene ways of living, criminal acts, social vices, superstitions and destruction of traditional customs and culture;
3. Disclosing secrets of the Communist Party and the State, secrets concerning the military, security, economy, foreign affairs and private lives of all people, and all others secrets covered by Vietnamese laws;
4. Distorting history, refuting revolutionary achievements, defaming great persons and national heroes; maligning and harming the reputation of organizations, or the honor and dignity of individuals.

"Vietnam has many laws and they are always broad enough for anyone to hang himself," explains a HCMCity editor. "It provides us with exciting lives."

Some of the Vietnamese journalists I meet remind me of a Polish colleague I befriended in Paris seven years ago. Witold worked for Polytika, the well-known Polish newspaper. I was astonished to find out how well Witold knew the personal life of his censor. If the censor was in a bad mood, Witold would hold on to a story until a more promising day. Sometimes, the censor would tell him: "Wait a few days. The situation is not quite favorable now." They would make deals: "I run this story but you forget about this one." Witold would also go out of his way to help solve the censor's personal problems.

The Poles thought they were lucky to have censors. Their neighbors, the Czechs, did not have any and ended up self-censoring themselves much more. Many Vietnamese feel the same way. "I write everything I believe is important," says 24-year-old Vinh who works for an economic weekly. "The editor-in-chief decides to run it or not. Last week, I submitted a story that was refused. The next day, I tried again, with a different editor. The story was published."

(1). Renovation of the Media for National Renovation, report of the Executive Committee to the Fifth VJA Congress, Hanoi Oct.16-18, 1989

## THE FINE LINE OF SELF-CENSORSHIP

Even though none of the thirty journalists and editors I spoke too would tell me "where the line is", there is clearly a line. It seems to vary from paper to paper, and from province to province. One topic is entirely off-limit: the multiparty system. One simply does not question the merits of the single-party system and the historic role of the Communist Party. Another dangerous topic is the private life of President HoChiMinh. (The last time someone ran a story about HoChiMinh's mistress - about three years ago - the newspaper editor lost her job. She now works for a children's book publishing house, impatiently waiting for an opportunity to get back to news reporting.) Some other issues, like human rights, are shaky ground. "Ours is a developing society, and a socialist one " says editor Hoan. "We need political stability to develop. Investors will not come if we have chaos like in Russia. The Vietnamese people are more preoccupied with economic development than politics. Our newspapers reflect that." No one I spoke to advocated absolute openness. Although some intellectuals do chafe at the curb on political debate, I must say that almost all the Vietnamese I have met do not seem to care.

Article 2 of the 1989 Press Law says "The press is not censored before going to print or on the air." But editors-in-chief know they are responsible for everything they publish. Pham Huy Hoan, the Hanoi editor of Lao Dong, has a fax machine at home. Each line of new copy must have his signature on it before it goes to press. "I work long hours," he says smiling.

Criticism of government policy - especially corruption and economic mismanagement - is allowed. "It all depends how you do it," says a Hanoi-based journalist. "You have to be balanced, and constructive, and not insult anyone."

Some journalists worry though that they are being used to fight other people's political battles. "Take the privatization of Legamex [a southern garment maker]," says a HCMCity-based journalist. "At first Legamex was a star of the privatization program. Suddenly, authorities were leaking all sorts of information on corruption within the company."

For some journalists, the change of heart signalled an end to broad based support within the Party for the privatization program. Opponents, not wanting to publicly confront the reformers, were using the media to fight back. "Stories like those show that politics are getting more complex in Vietnam," says researcher Russell Heng. "And the media is playing an increasing role in the power struggle."

Article 28 of the Press Law lays out the penalties news organizations are liable to incur for contravening the law. They may be subjected to "warning, cash fine, withdrawal from circulation, confiscation of publications or tapes, temporary suspensions and withdrawal of license as stipulated by the law."

"If a newspaper does not mend its way, we close it," says Ministry of Information official, Mai Linh.





Reading Nhân Dân, the People's Daily.

#### MEETING THE CONTROLLER

Linh is an odd character. With his jeans' jacket and designer glasses, he could be one of the Hanoi's young racers who nightly ride their motorbikes at death-defying speeds around the capital's deserted streets. But he is not. When asked to define his job, 42-year-old Linh, who joined the Communist Party six months ago "to have a better future," says he is the "controller" of the 30 or so foreign-language newspapers and magazines published in Vietnam. (Most of them are in English, French and Chinese.) "Vietnam is not well known abroad," explains ambitious Linh. "We hope to reach a foreign audience and maybe export our publications."

Linh's job is to read those publications and inform their editors, in writing, of any "mistakes" they may have made. "Especially articles against our party," he says. A copy of the letter is sent to the Minister of Information. The paper can then make amends or risk further trouble. Linh will not say how often he writes letters but he hints that he is happy with Vietnam's production. As for Vietnamese newspapers, Linh says Lao Dong is a good paper but not the best. "They often do not comply with the law," he says. (The paper often does not send the ministry its five required copies.)

"Controllers" are not the only control mechanisms still in place. All Vietnamese publications have to be licensed. Print shops incur heavy penalties for printing unlicensed material. Publications can also not increase their number of pages without State permission. (Printing samizdats has not been the Vietnamese way of spreading dissent. Writing fiction has been. But that is another story.) Journalists also have to be licensed. The procedure does not seem

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**Công an**  
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**QUỐC TẾ**  
World Affairs Weekly

NĂM THỨ NĂM  
Số 1 (52)  
Bộ mới  
TỪ 6/1 ĐẾN 12/1/1994

TRONG SỐ NÀY

- Trước phiên họp đầu tiên 11/2 của Viện Dân Ngã (tr. 2)
- Nhảy cóc 6 từ cái bắt tay (tr. 3)
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THỨ SÁU 11-3-1994

SỐ 27 (467) • THỨ NĂM NGÀY 10 - 3 - 1994



to be very tight though. I personally know some who work as journalists without a permit, especially in foreign-language publications.

In spite of all this, print media is booming. The countries five dailies,(2) despite their government subsidies, are losing ground to a tougher and bolder competition.

Lao Dong, despite its high price of 1200 dong (US\$1.20), is fast approaching the 100,000 copies of Nhan Dan, the Communist Party Daily which sells for only 500 dong but is reported to be losing US\$200 a day. (Sounds small? Not for a cash-strapped government such as Vietnam's)

Among city dailies, Saigon Giaphong (Liberated Saigon, property of the HCM City People's Committee) is adjusting faster than Hanoi Moi (New Hanoi, owned by Hanoi People's Committee). Most front page stories in Hanoi Moi are editorials. Editor-in-chief Ho Xuan Son says the paper's role is to "educate" the public. He admits to having a problem attracting young readers. (As a sign of change, maybe, the paper's special Tet edition featured a voluptuous blonde model holding on to her bathing suit.)

Cong An, the tabloid police newspaper, the closest Vietnam has to a sex and crime popular press, is already circulating over 100,000 copies, often read by more than one person. Tuoi Tre, the Youth Paper, is the most popular newspaper in the south, with five issues a week and a Sunday magazine, but copies are almost impossible to find on northern newsstands. "We have been complaining about the distribution for months," admits a Tuoi Tre staff member. "It's not the authorities's fault, it is our fault. We are unable to set up a good distribution network." (Lao Dong, in comparison, relies on a private nation-wide distribution network)

Some new publications are also faring well, like Thoi Bao Kinh Te Saigon, the Ho Chi Minh City-based weekly newsmagazine (not to be confused with Thoi bao Kinh Te Vietnam, another new publication supported by a Swiss group and published in Hanoi.) Launched in 1991, the newsmagazine has an English and a French counterpart, Saigon Times and SaigonEco.

Other English-language publications such as Vietnam Business or Vietnam Economic News, published by the Ministry of Trade, are far from reaching international standards. The State-run Vietnam News Agency re-launched last year a French and English edition of Vietnam Courier, a weekly newspaper with content never steering away from official policy. Many Vietnamese newspapers, such as Than Nien (Youth), Phap Luat (The Law), and Phu Nu (Women) often publish good investigative pieces on environment protection, social problems and economic management. Others, like Tien Phong, attract a lot of young readers with strong coverage of the arts, both local and foreign. Tuoi Tre's humorous magazine, Cuoi (Smile), tends to

(2). Two of the dailies are national: Nhan Dan, the Communist Party newspaper, and Quan Doi Nhan Dan, the Army paper. The three others are regional: Saigon Giaphong, (Liberated Saigon), Hanoi Moi (New Hanoi) and Haiphong.

run out of characters to caricature (politicians are not a possibility) but does a good job of laughing at well-known Vietnamese attitudes like careless driving.

#### RENOVATION COMES SLOWLY TO THE AIRWAVES

Compared to the boom in the print industry, the electronic media clearly lags. "The government is scared of the power of radio and television," says a Vietnamese broadcaster. "They keep a much tighter control."

A short visit to the Voice of Vietnam (VOV) headquartered on Quang Su Street is enough to tell that "renovation" is slow in coming to the airwaves. "I cannot tell you the budget of the station. It is a secret," says international relations director, Dinh The Loc. The fact that Vietnamese Television had willingly provided me with its budget (US\$1.8 million), did not shake loose any additional information. "The Voice of Vietnam is still very bureaucratic," admits a young radio announcer working for the English-language service. "They see their main audience in the countryside people who are very conservative."

The Voice of Vietnam, the State-run and only radio network in the country, has 53 provincial stations, one for each province. It also has 250 district stations, some broadcasting in ethnic languages, and a foreign service broadcasting in 11 languages. VOV has two channels, one for music and news, the other for educational programs. "No one listens to Voice of Vietnam," says Voan, a 29-year-old woman working for the Peasant's Union in Hanoi. "There is nothing interesting, except the music and the weather forecast. Even for news, we listen to the BBC, VOA, or RFI [French radio]."

Apart from music, news and theater, VOV programs are targeted to specific audiences: the women program, the children program, the old people program, etc. "For old people, they have some good advice on staying healthy and resolving family quarrels, especially with uncaring children," says 65-year-old Mai Lan, a retired library employee who lives alone in Hanoi.

Many urban dwellers complain of the conservative format. "They are always telling us what to do," says 20-year-old Thanh, who studies at Hanoi Conservatory. "Sometimes I do not want to be educated, to be preached too. I want to relax and be entertained."

Vietnamese radio has not yet heard of "phone-in" shows or dynamic disc-jockeys. "The men in the street" type of surveys are never conducted, partly for lack of equipment but also for fear of what citizens might say. "They do not trust their own people," says Sri-Lankan broadcaster Wijayananda Jayaweera.

In late 1993, Jayaweera conducted a Canadian-funded rural broadcasting seminar in Vietnam. A veteran broadcaster who has travelled extensively in other Southeast Asian developing countries, Jayaweera was surprised to discover that Socialist Vietnam never broadcasted the voices of peasants. Instead, a journalist writes down the information and reads the piece on the air. "They told me peasants were ignorant, only officials knew

enough to get on the air," recalls a shocked Jayaweera. "Their problem is not only lack of skills or of equipment. It is a problem of mind set." (Lack of equipment is a real problem, however. Often, radio stations do not own a tape recorder!)

The twelve-day training session, held at the Hanoi National Training Center for Radio and Television did not go very well. The trainers were expecting 15 students and got 50 instead. None of them spoke any English. The hands-on approach Jayaweera had planned for, with students handling recorders and learning their full potential, could not be used. Instead, he had to revert to straight presentations, which were translated phrase by phrase.

While some believe in seminars, others say organizations interested in improving Vietnamese broadcasting should instead support one or two pilot radio stations. "The best trainers can only be Vietnamese broadcasters," insists Jayaweera.

This has been the approach of European-based Association des Radios Communautaires, an international grouping of community radio stations, whose trainers have focused, in Vietnam, on setting up four rural radio stations. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation has begun a long-term training program as well. "In many poor countries, radio is a thriving dynamic medium people use to talk to one another, to gain knowledge and take part in their country's development," says Jayaweera. "Not in Vietnam."

There is very little advertisement on radio now even though the station is allowed to broadcast 5%. "We have only a little advertising," says Loc, who will not tell me exactly how much. Some ads are bought by families trying to find relatives lost during past conflicts, including the Cambodian, the Chinese, and the American war. Those cost 20,000 dong (US\$2) a minute. Prime time rates for foreign businesses are US\$90 a minute, US\$72 for joint-ventures, and US\$48 for Vietnamese companies. But the station has no sales force and little incentive to sell air time. "We must pay 40% tax on all ads we sell," complains Loc. "We can not keep the money to upgrade our equipment."

Progress is on the way though. With the help of a BBC expert, the station just completed a Swedish-funded audience survey in Hue and Hanoi, with the help of a BBC expert. Results are under analysis in London. The ensuing report should help the station devise a marketing strategy. At the VOV headquarter, Loc confesses the station is thinking about setting a "commercial station" in the future but does not know how. "Maybe Canada could send over some experts in running commercial stations?" he asks.

#### VIETNAM CONSUMERS WEARY OF PUBLICITY

Advertising is a tricky issue. Nguyen Huy Hung, director of the Television Service Center, Vietnam TV's advertising branch, recalls how he was flooded with complaints when the station began to broadcast commercials a few years ago. "I received hundred of letters from angry listeners," he says. "They complained the adds interrupted the movie. Some did not like to see feminine hygiene products on television during dinner."

Cuban-trained Hung says listeners have now gotten used to commercials. Businessmen themselves were skeptical at first but now "they are convinced their business will not grow without advertising," says 52-year old Hung. The station is now so swamped with requests for paid air time that it is unable to fulfill them all. "The law allows us only 5% advertisement," he says. "We are asking the government for more."

In the meantime, Hung admits to occasionally "circumventing" the rule. "We show scenes of parties with people drinking a certain brand of alcohol or smoking a certain brand of cigarette, and we get paid for that."

Hung has few qualms about the move because the money thus earned is used to improve the station's equipment. (Moreover, he says, authorities themselves make exception with the law when they ask the station to promote for free one or another State-owned company)

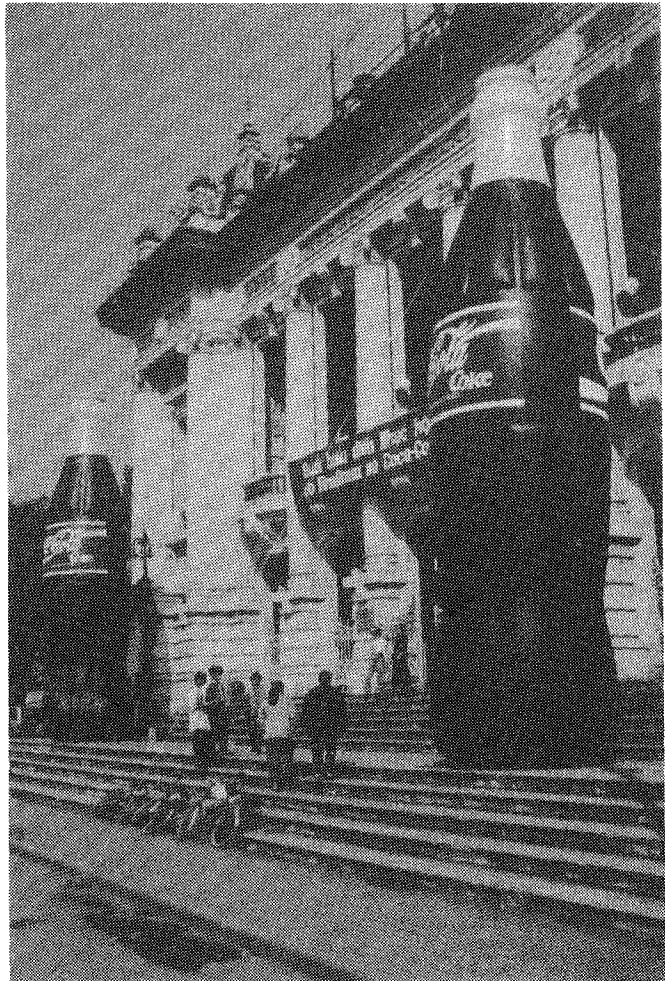
Television is powerful in Vietnam. Much more than radio. Authorities estimate that over 50% of the population watches television, if not on their own set, than on some coffee shop's or neighbor's TV. Stores selling the latest model sets on Hanoi's Hai Ba Trung Street are mobbed with customers. Middlemen often buy here to resell in the suburbs or in more isolated areas. At night, outside some of Hanoi's coffee shops, sidewalks fill with people sitting in rows to watch the night's movie. Even in tiny run down flats, the blue glare of the television screen beams out in the night. "The television set has become the family's cultural center," says a Hanoi primary school teacher who spent Tet eve watching television with her in-laws. "There is little other entertainment. So everyone watches." Dubbed foreign movies, famous foreign soap operas and sport events, attract millions of viewers.

Vietnamese television jumped aboard the renovation juggernaut much faster than radio. So fast in fact, that in the summer of 1993, the government moved to restore order in television broadcasting. Local stations had been dumping Vietnam TV's programming in favor of pirated Thai movies or Japanese cartoons dubbed in Vietnamese. Some were replaced advertising broadcasted from Hanoi with local advertising, thus eroding the network's ability to raise revenues and improve national programming. A new director was named with a mandate to consolidate Hanoi's authority over the network but it is too early to tell how successfully he will be.

A good example of "renovated" programming was the special International Women's Day broadcasted on the eve of March 8th. The highlights of the special were a fashion show with Western models, an aerobic demonstration given by Westerners and a documentary on aesthetic surgery and good use of make-up. VTV has also announced it would soon put to tender a first commercial channel.

Generally speaking, Hanoi television news tends to be of better quality than the HCMCity program. Journalists and technicians have been trained by French, Japanese and Australian broadcasters and it shows. (Southern journalists still have a harder time receiving permission to go on training programs abroad.)

There is little advertising industry to speak of in Vietnam. In the early 1990's, billboards were the most common advertising vehicle. Ads now appear frequently in print and on television. Foreign companies provide their own taped ads. Most Vietnamese ads are produced by the staff of Vietnam TV. About 150 were produced last year. "Our advertising staff used to produce scientific programs, they have had no training in commercials," admits Hung. "They are learning but the advertisers are often too ambitious. They want to show everything in 30 seconds: their factory, themselves, their family ... It is not easy to tell them to show their products instead." Vietnam TV charges between US\$150 and US\$2000 to produce an ad. The most expensive one was produced for Sony and starred Miss Vietnam 1993.



Giant Coke bottles  
in front of the Hanoi Opera.  
New advertising practices.

Foreign companies pay US\$900 a minute to have their commercials aired on prime time. (In the case of Vietnam, prime time would be the evening news) The rate is US\$450 for joint-ventures, and US\$250 for Vietnamese. A long way from the 12,000 dong (US\$1.20) per minute of the first ads VTV broadcasted! "But do not tell anyone," giggles Hung. "Sometimes we charge more when a company is richer." On the lapel of his jacket, he proudly wears a promotion pin shaped in replica of a bottle of J&B scotch.

An embryo of an advertising industry is developing in HoChiMinh City where the City's Communist Youth Union has been acting as a broker between stations and the advertisers and as a producer of ads. A Chicago-based advertising company, Leo Burnett Inc, has just signed a joint-venture with Vietnam Advertising Ltd, a breakaway from the Youth Advertising House Union, and could become a leader in the field. VINAVideo, an affiliate of the Filmmakers Association, also leases facilities to companies wishing to shoot commercials.

Publicity is now a major part of the media scene. Authorities became alarmed in early November 1993 by what they perceived as an onslaught of tasteless and sometimes fraudulent advertising. (Some companies, for example, advertised products they did not have in stock or did not honor the guarantee they promised in their advertisement) "We do not know how to protect consumers," says an official from the Ministry of Information. "We have asked many countries to give us advice on that subject."

False advertising was not the only government worry. While Communist Party media were losing readers, other previously obscure publications seemed to be gaining influence because they had a wide circulation and earned large advertising revenues.

Hanoi tried to fight back by restricting advertising to 10% of a publication's total page space. Actually, decree 133 setting that limit had been issued in 1988 but authorities suddenly dusted it off in late 1993. Australian joint-venture Vietnam Investment Review, to name only one, could not survive under those new stringent rules. "Those were not the terms under which we had invested in the project," says Ross Dunkley. The paper's Vietnamese partner, the powerful State Committee for Cooperation and Investment, backed the Australians. And the rule was never applied. Nor was it elsewhere. Lao Dong, for example, publishes 30% advertisement, most of it though on a separate page. "The rule was only meant for newspapers receiving State subsidies," now explain Ministry of Information official, Mai Linh.

But who gets subsidies? A year ago, I was told no one did except radio and television. Now, it turns out, some newspapers are still on the State pay-roll. They are the five dailies and some party magazines such as Tap Chi Cong San, the Communist Party theoretical magazine. In theory, all other publications earn their own revenues. But it is not that clear either.

Lao Dong's editor says the paper has no subsidies. But he also says advertisement only account for 15% of the paper's revenues. The amount seems low for a paper now claiming to be making profits, paying its best journalists US\$500 a month - the highest salary in the profession - and managing to subscribe to about fifteen foreign newspapers. But then, Pham Huy Hoan has millions of good reasons not to tell me, or anyone else, especially not the Vietnamese tax department, how much money his newspaper is really making.

A full page color ad in Lao Dong costs 24 million dong (US\$2400). Most issues of the 12-page newspaper, contain at least two full page color ads, and some smaller ones. The paper has been selling ads since 1990. Over 70% of the clients are from South Vietnam.

#### FLEDGLING MEDIA EMPIRES

Some publishers, such as the Australian group behind Vietnam Investment Review, have announced plans to diversify their activities. VIR has signed an agreement with Vietnam Television and a French production company to create Vietnam's first pay-TV. Called Magic TV, the station would broadcast mainly entertainment programs in French and in English with Vietnamese subtitles. Vietnamese programs would be broadcasted in a second phase.



Lao Dong is also planning to diversify. The company will soon own a printing shop in HoChiMinh City, and another one in Hanoi. Presently the paper is printed in HCMCity, where quality is better. But the cost of flowing in thousands of copies up to Hanoi is weighing on the paper's finances. While in France, last month, Pham Huy Hoan, met with Hersant, the powerful French media group and says he got "some good ideas from them." He would not discuss them with me. Hoan also brought back reporting manuals and brochures which will be translated in Vietnamese and used in staff training sessions.

Training is a big problem. Until 1990, most journalists were trained in Eastern Europe and had to complete their studies at what was then called the Hanoi "propaganda school" now called the Journalist and Publishing Sub-Institute of HoChiMinh National Political Institute. The School still exists, somewhere in the outskirts of the capital. But there are few recruits now. "No one wants to hire journalists from that school," says Nguyen Van Vinh, editor-in-chief of World Affairs Review, the magazine of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "They are not employable, they were not trained for modern journalism."

#### A NEW JOURNALISM FACULTY IN HANOI

Students flock to the new Journalism Department of the Hanoi National University. Opened in 1991, the school has 200 full-time students and 250 part-time ones. Over 70% of the full-time students are women, many young men having failed the entrance exams and joined the ranks of the part-timers. Oddly enough, only 33% of today's 7,000 registered Vietnamese journalists are women.

The six students I meet are introduced as the best of their promotion. They are shy and reserved. They worry about the "dangers" of the profession and want to know if I ever find myself in "dangerous" situations. Some say they have chosen journalism because they see it as "glamorous". All students must study a second language. The Faculty offers only one option: English.

Ha Minh Duc, the director of the Faculty, is a writer and a literary critic who was trained in Eastern Europe and speaks no English. The faculty has only 10 teachers, none of which speak English or French. The school's library has no journalism textbook and receives no foreign assistance. Duc is looking for some foreign expertise to help redesign the curriculum and make it more in touch with the new needs of the "industry." Foreign journalists based in Hanoi are welcome to speak at the school but the Faculty does not actively seek them out.

The school's students may not fare well in the job market. "The curriculum is very abstract," says a Hanoi editor. "They learn nothing about the trade." Students study Vietnamese literature, philosophy, history, English and another course called "practices of the press." Duc wants to include economics, basic computer skills and more practical training but does not have either the human or material resource to do it. "None of our professors have ever visited journalism schools abroad," he says.

Most editors have no time to wait for these graduates and have opted instead for on the job training. The Vietnamese Journalist Association (VJA) has recently organized a few foreign-sponsored seminars on various aspects of the profession, the most recent one on business journalism. "Vietnamese journalists have very poor economic training," complains the president of the association. "Many also lack investigative skills and are unaware of the ethics of the profession."

An empty shell for many years, despite its 6000 members, VJA found new impetus in 1989 when government reduced funding to the Association. The Union found new sources of income by offering services to foreign journalists. It also signed a joint-venture with a Korean company to renovate what used to be the Association Culture House and turn it into a "hotel, office and entertainment center." The first floor of the building, will house a restaurant and a bar VJA hopes will become a favorite with local and foreign journalists.

VJA has also begun more actively to "protect" its members. The Union will not give details but says it has acted to protect journalists in "known case of repression." (According to the Press Law, no one is to try to stop journalists from performing their job but many do.) In HoChiMinh City, the local wing of the association wants to establish a Press Center where journalists could meet to exchange experiences, as well as take part in journalism and English classes.

Nguyen Duy Cung, deputy chief of Vietnam News Agency, a State-run news agency with bureaus in the country's 53 provinces, says his agency has a pressing need for computer and photo-journalism training. He hopes that help can come from abroad.

At the Ministry of Education, Director of International Cooperation Tran Van Nhung, is most interested in establishing relations with journalism schools abroad. "Journalism is a very difficult science," he says. "As the role of the press increases in Vietnam, we must learn from other traditions."

For three months, in early 1993, I volunteered to help an English-language publication put out by the Ministry of Trade and I can certainly appreciate some of the qualms authorities have with Vietnamese journalism. Most of the stories I edited were badly organized and fraught with factual errors. Some confused styles and verged on the editorial, always concluding with some piece of advice for the government. No one in the newsroom ever thought of checking information with the source. Quotes were sometimes fabricated. In those days of transition to a market-economy, the publication attracted pages and pages of well-paid advertising. "The editors do not care much about the content," a staff worker once told me. "They are not interested in training us. All they want is the money."

Most journalists I speak to agree they face an uphill battle to regain the confidence of the public. "For many years, the newspapers published rosy stories people knew were false," says a HCMCity editor. "Why would they trust us now?" In Lao Dong's office, Hoan argues "confidence" was the main reason he argued in

favor of publishing the Hai trial story. "We owed that story to our readers," he says.

Confidence is growing. Since Party General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh, opened a syndicated column in May 1987, titled "Things to do", and denounced cases of abuse of power, miscarriages of justice and repression, the Vietnamese people have found a new confidence in their media. "I do not trust everything I read," admits Vinh, a 40-year-old government worker. "But I have seen the media expose corrupt officials and help the people. That is very good."



Hanoians reading the latest news.

Recently, newspapers have become involved in fund raising campaigns for humanitarian causes and have also co-sponsored cultural events. Many also feature columns which address people's daily concerns, from consumers problems to personal, legal or medical advice. Readers have responded well. Circulation is on the rise.

Near my house, an almost 24-hour newspaper kiosk caters to night birds. The rickety wooden table, dimly lit by a bare light bulb is the closest Hanoi has to the 24-hour Montreal "Maison de la Presse" I used to love to browse through. Now, I am beginning to like browsing there even though any paper I buy translates into a fight with my Vietnamese dictionary. I often look for one writer's byline.

I met him in HoChiMinh City two or three weeks after my arrival in Vietnam, in the fall of 1992. He worked as a journalist for the muck-racking Tuoi Tre, covering the city beat, sleeping in the make-shift dorms where out of town cyclo-drivers overnight, stalking the street corners where new labor markets were emerging,

documenting the city's growing pains and social misery, wondering how to write about corrupt policemen without getting beaten up. He was a rookie compared to me and my 15 years in the trade. But I felt like the rookie. I could not get lost in the crowd, could not do what he was doing now.

We had been introduced by a university student and had arranged to meet at a sidewalk coffee shop, the student acting as an interpreter. The interview was not going well. The young journalist could not figure out how I could work as a reporter in Vietnam without speaking Vietnamese. "You do not speak Vietnamese," he told me right away, with obvious disgust. "The authorities will always fool you. And the people too. You cannot be a journalist without knowing a society, its language, its traditions."

His words hit the part of me that knew he was right. I agreed but also argued my case. I probably spoke a lot about learning, and about needing to begin somewhere before one became an expert... I am not sure I convinced him. But I never forgot his face, his halting words, his nervous demeanor and his passion for his job. Vietnamese journalism will endure because of people like him.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Carole Beaulieu". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid, with a large, stylized 'C' at the beginning.

Carole Beaulieu  
Hanoi, March 14th, 1994

## MAKING LAO DONG THE BEST PAPER IN TOWN

Pham Huy Hoan often receives phone calls from unhappy Communist Party officials. Topics vary. One day, it is the new Coca-Cola ad that appeared in the top left corner of his newspaper front page; another day it is a speech from the secretary general of the Party which was not given prominent play. "It is all very polite," says Hoan. "I listen carefully, we talk, and I remind them that we do not get any money from the State, that we have to be profitable, producing an interesting newspaper for our readers to buy. Only this way can we attract advertisers."

At fifty-two years, Hoan is an unlikely editor. A mechanical engineer, he rose slowly through the ranks of his Union and began in the late 70's to write scientific articles for its newspaper.

Recently, he was elected deputy editor by 80% of the Hanoi newsroom. (The editor-in-chief, his boss, is chosen by the owner, in this case the Confederation of Trade Unions.)

A few years ago, Lao Dong was not much different from the country's other publications. The paper was drab, colorless, written in a flowery style. All of this changed in the late 80's when subsidies were cut off. To survive, Lao Dong hired some new staff, veterans who had worked for Saigon-based newspapers before 1975 and had been exposed to western-style news tradition. Among those, Ly Quy Trung, once Minister of Information in the previous anti-communist South. Today, Trung is the paper's editorial secretary, the key player who runs the daily affairs of the newspaper.

Old staffers who could not adapt were offered retirement packages. Younger ones were hired to replace them. The average age of Lao Dong's journalists is 32. New rules were established such as "no old stories only new ones," "stop the press for major breaking news," "provide information people need in an accessible format." The paper created its own training center where staffers learned how to write news stories, how to develop a "beat" and how to conduct interviews. Differences between news, features and editorials were defined and rules enforced. Hoan says he really got the "newsbug" during that period and now enjoys the thrill of "getting it first, getting it right."

(\*\*) Cartoon strip published in a special Tet issue of Lao Dong. Mouthing the directive to have "small" (nhỏ) celebration, the man gets smaller and smaller, as he advises "small firecrackers, small peach blossom branches, small meals". The woman asks him what he will do in his own life to show restraint, the man says he will take a "small wife", the equivalent of a mistress.

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The paper has offices in five cities and correspondents in 30 provinces. It also employs a talented cartoonist. On the eve of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, the cartoonist managed to express extraordinarily well the feeling of most Vietnamese at being told by their leaders they should restrain in their celebrations even though they had worked hard and achieved a lot. Titled "nhỏ" (small), the strip walked the fine line of criticism, the cartoonist's well-known female character expressing street wisdom while the male character voiced the official point of view.

Lao Dong is popular and is not to be confused with Lao Dong Xa Hoi, Ngươi Lao Dong, and Lao Dong Hanoi respectively the organs of the Ministry of Labor, the HCM City Labor Union, and the Hanoi Labor Union, which are trying to ride on Lao Dong's popularity. Copies of Lao Dong move fast and street sellers often answer "het roi" (already finished) when I try to buy one from them. Some even hide copies for clients willing to pay as high as 6000 dong an issue.

Lao Dong now sells 80,000 copies and plans to reach 100,000 by the end of this year. The paper wants to become a daily, and the Ministry of Communication has agreed to the request but the Ideology Committee of the Communist Party is stalling. Hoan says the paper will get the authorization once it reaches a certain number of copies sold but street wisdom has it the Party is worried that Lao Dong's popularity will deal the final blow to Nhan Dan, the Party's weekly whose press runs would be much smaller if government offices were not bound to buy copies every day.

Not that everything is perfect at Lao Dong. Journalists are allowed to sell advertisements and get commissions when they do. Hoan insists the procedure is closely supervised. One journalist, however, was fired for writing false information about a company he had also sold advertisements to. And Hoan did not manage to save the ad in the left corner of the newspaper's front page. A phone call from the Ministry of Culture announced last week such practices were forbidden. VIR though still publishes the same ad at the same place. "No one ever said life was fair," responds Hoan.