MEDIA

Press-ganging the press gang

The Media Gets the Message

Vietnam's transition to a market economy has spurred a freer press in a country where it has been little more than a mouthpiece of the ruling communist party. But, the line between truth and government propaganda remains thin as the state continues to own most of the media.

by Jeff Heinrich in Ho Chi Minh City

THE press in Vietnam is freer than before the country's move to a market economy in 1987. But there is no press freedom.

All domestic media are fully or partly owned by the government. All media must be licensed by Hanoi.

"The government is right to control the press. It has to be strict because our country is still emerging from the old system, the old (communist) way of doing things," says 45-year-old Tran Ngoc Chau, editor of the English-language weekly business magazine *Saigon Times*.

The publication is owned by the city administration but controlled by Tran and other shareholders. "It's the same in all of southeast Asia, but the difference here is that all journalists are considered public servants. Nevertheless, most reporters feel free to write. They are very brave and very knowledgeable. In my opinion, journalists are intellectuals; they have to feel free in order to write. Otherwise they will stop being journalists."

Taboo subjects die hard. In a country where one political party is supreme and only a handful of token independents sit in opposition, talk of bringing back multi-party democracy is forbidden. Criticising the government is one thing — anything decrying corruption and the slow pace of reforms is especially encouraged — but calling for its radical transformation is quite another.

"Now the press is more progressive, is freer to write what it likes, publish letters from its readers, criticise the governments, help it to change," Tran says. "But a multi-party system — that's something people don't feel is necessary here. People don't care about the communist party except for what it can do for them."

And what it can do for them, in the worst case, is shut them up. When Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien raised the issue of human rights with his Vietnamese counterpart in Hanoi last year, the government-owned French-language daily *Le Courrier du Vietnam* squelched a transcript of Chretien's comments which one of its more industrious journalists had gone to the trouble to translate.

When a US journalist working for the weekly *Vietnam Investment Review* in Hanoi wrote a story last year on a new casino opening in the northern port city of Haiphong, with state approval, government editors banned the story, saying it was premature.

Sometimes censorship is heavy; sometimes it is petty. Government recently shut down a metallurgy magazine because it was running too few stories on the metals industry and too many on more enticing subjects, such as cannibalism and polygamy.

The closure came on the heels of another: a weekly shut down for running an article criticising a government ban on firecrackers.

Foreign publications printed in Vietnamese do not fare much better: in November censors impounded 17,000 copies of the inaugural Vietnamese issue of *Femme*, a women's magazine published in Singapore, because of photos showing richly clad models posing with poor Vietnamese peasants.

Foreign journalists — restricted to having offices only in Hanoi, where the government can watch them — routinely speak of being leaned on by the government after critical stories appear under their byline.

"A comment here, a self-evident truth there — they let you know in a sly way, but you get the message," says Agence France Presse bureau chief Philippe Agret.

This year, the Vietnamese ratcheted up the criticism a notch. Vietnam and France had a major falling-out after French Culture Minister Jacques Toubon awarded a top French award to dissident fiction writer Duong Thu Huong.

For his reports on the award, Agret found himself attacked in the press by the country's highest-ranking official journalist, Do Phunong, a member of the communist party's central committee and director of the Vietnam News Agency.

In the aftermath of the award, Vietnam cancelled a series of official invitations to French dignitaries and in retaliation France froze aid projects and threatened to pull out funding for the Francophone summit to be held in Vietnam in 1997.

Such open attacks are rare, however. Most censorship reflects a Vietnamese cultural axiom: do not say directly what you can say indirectly. It is usually considered rude to address a point baldly and flatly. And when information is not direct, it is not fast.

"In Germany, you call up a company like Sony for a story, and it's no problem — you get the information and the cooperation you need," says *Times* journalist Huynh Can Tung, just back from a two-months journalism course in Berlin.

"But here, when you call up a company, nobody wants to talks, certainly not over the phone. Take a look at articles in the Vietnamese press: what they consistently lack are facts and figures. Nobody likes to give out numbers in this country. They consider everything private, not for the eyes of competitors or the government."

Despite their troubles gathering information, journalists generally enjoy their status in Vietnamese society. A press card gives them access to people and places as good or better than that granted to visiting foreigners.

"I love being a journalist," says 40-year-old Nguyen Kim Bao a senior reporter with a prominent provincial newspaper, *Bao Daklak*, in the poverty-ridden central highlands.

"I can write what I like. I can take foreign fellowships" — he was just back from three months in Sweden on an exchange — "and my press card gets me out of trouble, not into it."

But what the government gives it can also take away. That goes for press cards, and for licences.

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The Writing on the Wall Gets Clearer and Clearer

Defending Hong Kong's freedoms in the face of claims by some Asian leaders that authoritarian governments are better at making tough economic decisions, Governor Chris Patten said he did not subscribe to arguments that democracy and a free press were Western ideals. But as they count the days to the British colony's reversion to Chinese control, many journalists are concerned about how they will be allowed to operate under communist rule.

by Jeff Heinrich in Hong Kong

THE bulletin board in the cramped, dusty offices of the Hong Kong Journalists Association is festooned with letters from foreign reporters asking for interviews.

"You know something must be wrong here," sighs Association president Daisy Li. "Otherwise, why would journalists want to interview other journalists?"

The letters want to know one thing: what is the future of press freedom in Hong Kong when the Chinese take over? No-one knows, but people in the news business are preparing for the transition as best they can.

Some are covering the news. Many more are simply covering their jobs. They do not want, as the saying goes, to offend the sovereign, even if that sovereign is not yet on his throne.

This is not a new concept in this British colony which for 154 years has been ruled by foreign governors. "We don't have a democratic system of government here, quite frankly," said a Hong Kong government official. And as in any other less-than-democratic state, the press cannot be called truly free, partly because its proprietors and journalists do not always act freely.

If they offend, they make sure to offend other sovereigns: they attack outside and next door. Until now: that has meant supporting the British admipistration in general, as well as Taiwan, against China. That, however, is changing.

On 1 July 1997 Hong Kong will revert to Chinese control: Beijing intends to run it as a special economic zone where unfettered capitalism will continue to flourish. As for freedom of the press — it is anyone's guess.

"Increasingly, people here are second-guessing what China will and will not accept," says Christine Loh, a councillor in Hong Kong's legislature. "The question they ask themselves is — why should we offend the sovereign? The result is — they don't."

As Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten condescendingly put it in another context last November: "Much of life is about accepting the good and not the best in order not to settle for the worst."

The pattern of placation in Hong Kong's media, shifted now to China after years of deference to Britain's representatives in the territory, is already evident. Hong Kong Chinese reporters are under pressure, sometime self-imposed, not to write controversial stories about the motherland.

"Our reporters, especially the local ones, ask themselves: after 1997, is there going to be a midnight knock on their door?" says Ann Quon, deputy editor of *The South China Morning Post*, one of Hong Kong's three English dailies. "Will what they wrote four, five, years ago come back to haunt them?"

Proprietors are spreading their money on investments on the mainland and thinning out their expatriate staff back home.

"Businessmen who own the press or other forms of the media are like any other businessmen in their search for business opportunities, and many see the Chinese market as an attractive source of profit in the longer term," says George Shen, editor of the *Hong Kong Economic Journal*. "And it doesn't pay to offend the future master of Hong Kong."

A clampdown on journalists who dare to offend the Chinese has also generated fears. The jails are full of them: people like Xi Yang, sentenced to 12 years hard labour for "espionage regarding state financial secrets" — namely, "stealing" the Bank of China's unpublished plans to change interest rates and buy gold on foreign markets.

"China is sending a message that it won't tolerate an aggressive, inquisitive, independent press in Hong Kong," says John Schidlovsky, Asian director of Freedom Forum, a US pressure group. "The punishment is severe because information is considered secret."

Pro-China journalists in Hong Kong — and there are many — beg to differ. "No matter how much of an evil empire you think China is, it is not fruitful to compare how they do things there and how they do things here," says T S Lo, chairman of the English-language magazine *Window*.

"We have a more objective view of what's going on." Lo counters, "and it doesn't do us any good to do Western-style investigative journalism. There are specific rules for doing things in China and I think we should stick to them."

The creeping repression is evident at the *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong's premier English daily by reputation, circulation and revenue.

With only 110,000 copies a day, the *Post* boasts the highest operating margins of any daily newspaper in the world, more than 50 per cent, a performance that helped the company make a profit of $335 million last year.

There may be another reason for the *Post*'s wealth. Like every business in Hong Kong's media industry, it has prepared for the transfer of power to China with an eye on its bottom line and has covered its political bases brilliantly. Less than two years ago it was owned by Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch. Now it belongs to an outspoken supporter of communist China, Malaysian businessman Robert Kuok.

"There will be no bloodshed, and journalists won't be thrown in jail here in 1997", predicts Hong Kong Journalists Association deputy president Fong So.

"It will be far more effective for China if it can influence and control the media bosses. That will be the scenario after 1997, and in five to 10 years we'll turn into a kind of Singapore: on the surface, no problems, but underneath, the government will be present at every level, starting with the press."

Fears over return to Chinese rule are most pronounced in the Chinese-language press, read by the bulk of the colony's six million highly literate readers.

If things get rough, native reporters and editors will not have the luxury of fleeing "home," unlike expatriate journalists. The dilemma for the *Post* is that half its staff is Chinese. And increasingly they are getting promotions, partly because they speak the language and are generally more in the know about events in the colony.

As they are promoted, however, Chinese reporters are more likely to feel exposed to the gaze of media-watchers from the mainland. Observers from Beijing, especially at the official Xinhua News Agency, are keeping their eyes on the Hong Kong media to see who is friendly and who is not.

The *Post* got an early warning last year when one of its journalists was kicked out of China after she tried to cover a mining disaster in a northern province. She had entered China without a journalist's visa.

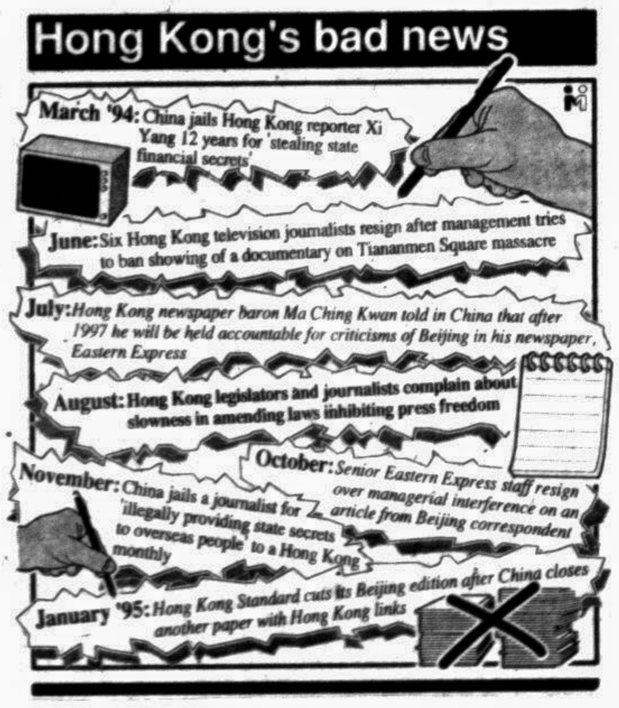
Other reporters have been dealt with much more harshly. But the *Post* was an unusual target, for it enjoys good favour in Beijing. If the *Post* is not immune to intimidation, people in the industry wondered, who is?

The paper tried to send the same reporter back in, this time after applying for a regular journalist's visa. The request was refused.

"The lesson is that the mainland is not as accessible as we might want to think," explains Quon. "And after 1997 Hong Kong will be like the mainland."

Journalists like Quon are optimistic. But the writing on the wall is getting more and more legible.

"I don't think anything is going to change radically after 1997," she says. "But after the turn of the century, the international spotlight will be off Hong Kong and all it could take is one little hiccup to start things off."



Gingrich Wants to Clean up US Media

by Nupu Chaudhuri

UPON celebrating his one hundred days at the United States Congress, Speaker of the House Republican Newt Gingrich announced his plans for a public campaign to "clean up" the American media and entertainment. He talked of reducing federal funding for PBS, the public television channel, and monitoring the values endorsed in current films. Citing Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* for their impiety and excess violence, Gingrich accused "the elite" of deciding for the public which morals are significant and for portraying corrupt values. As Gingrich tends to a moral apotheosis, America is beginning to resemble a totalitarian nation rather than a democratic one.

PBS is one of the few, if not the only, national television broadcast that presents unbiased international coverage and intelligent educational programmes for children, and relies on information rather than sensation (as the major networks usually favour) to appeal to its viewers. Terminating this access to uncommercial viewing is likely to result in a larger audience for the privately owned networks and syndicated channels which prefer the blatantly high entertainment/low intellectual broadcasting. Gingrich should be aware of the last time the Republicans attacked the media, when George Bush and Dan Quayle in 1992 criticised the portrayal of single motherhood in the situation comedy *Murphy Brown* and family values in the cartoon series *The Simpsons*, it was Bush and Quayle who found themselves under attack. Comedian Dennis Miller aptly noted that it was understandable why the American government was inactive: its leaders were too busy watching television.

The Hollywood studios who release trailers of their movies to commercial television are oddly discriminating in what they think is acceptable to the public. For example, in the interest of attracting a mainstream audience, the makers of the 1992 film *The Bodyguard* deleted an interracial kiss from the trailer, for fear of offending the average viewer; yet numerous images of men being hit in the face with metal bars and falling three storeys passed without muster in the trailers for children's films *Home Alone* and *Home Alone 2*. The ethics of the grossly lucrative entertainment business certainly do require evaluation, but Gingrich is foolish to blindly attack filmmakers Tarantino and Stone without viewing their work. These filmmakers, who have broken away from standard Hollywood formulas, are neither condoning nor are responsible for the crimes on American streets; instead, their work is reflecting and reacting to the casual violence of real-life situations. Stone, and certainly Tarantino, rarely give their criminal protagonists free reign: the killers usually die or purge their sins. If there are any fingers to be pointed, let them point at the Hollywood blockbusters that glorify and justify endless body counts and excessive violence in the name of America. The popular hero of these bloody action films, which depict the slaying of Communists or Arabs to the cheer of a bloodthirsty audience, is Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Schwarzenegger, despite being married to a member of the most prominent family of Democrats, the Kennedys, is a staunch Republican and a very public supporter of Gingrich, which explains why the latter has remained suspiciously mute to this obvious point of attack.

When Gingrich announced his plans to terminate the liberal politics imbedded in Hollywood in the 1960s, he must have realised that this will cause deeper divisions between the conservative right and the recently unexcitable liberal left. Gingrich is inviting a renewal of the very anti-Establishment measures he considers himself responsible for removing. The very labelling of Hollywood as liberal is more a joke in itself: it is considered to be as conservative as the Republicans that run it. Most politically progressive films are by independent filmmakers who do not receive federal funding and are therefore more at liberty to be critical of the government.

Gingrich's accusing the elite of speaking for the public is also a misstatement. No artist claims to be doing this, and no artist has any professional obligation to, either. Gingrich, on the other hand, does, and he has made the mistake of underestimating the public's intelligence. Watching *Reservoir Dogs* will not encourage anyone to cut off a person's ear (unless the culprit already has psychological problems), any more than watching *Forrest Gump* will convince the viewer that the ticket to becoming a national hero is through complaisance. The American media has proven that even if the government chooses to ignore the problems faced by the people in their nation, they, the media, is responding by at least acknowledging the realities. Disapproving this acknowledgement on the television or in films will not erase the crimes on the streets. It is not the media's responsibility to correct these problems, but the government's, and it appears that the government has decided to attempt this by blaming the country's predicament in the other direction.

Lowering the crime rate requires more than "cleaning up" the entertainment business. As this is, however, a chosen target, how does Gingrich intend to fructify his vows? There already exists a censorship board which designates ratings for films according to their violence or sexually explicit content. How can Gingrich or the government restrict individual filmmakers from speaking their minds without violating their rights? Who will decide what is acceptable and what is not? How will artists be penalised? Free speech is in the American constitution, and free speech without impunity defeats the purpose. Gingrich's us-against-them stance brings to mind *Hair*, Miles Foreman's screen version of the Broadway musical about protestors of the Vietnam war. One scene shows a group of anti-war anti-government youths trying to talk to an Army officer. The officer keeps interrupting them and resolutely states: "You listen to me, I'm not listening to you." This attitude seems to be as prevalent today as it was twenty years ago.

Another Report

Media Honeymoon is Cut Short

Sri Lanka's new government started out with the support and sympathy of many journalists because of its strong stand in favour of media independence. But several incidents, reports Gemini News Service, have caused relations to cool.

Vilma Wimaladasa writes from Colombo

IT does not usually take long for opposition parties championing the cause of a free press to turn against the media when they get into office. Just a few months in the case of Sri Lanka.

Chandrika Kumaratunga and the People's Alliance she led to election victory last year spoke eloquently and frequently about ushering in an era of democratic ideals and values. But as the pressures of office mount, relations with the media are already under strain.

The press here fought against media oppression during the right-wing United National Party's 17-year tenure.

One of the worst incidents was the murder of broadcaster, playwright and art critic Richard De Soysa, a prolific writer who spotlighted the government's human rights atrocities for the outside world. That may have led to his death.

He was taken from his home at night by security forces. His body was found the next day on a beach with two bullet wounds in the head, bearing traces of torture.

The head of the Asian section of the Paris-based *Reporters sans Frontieres* (Reporters without Frontiers), Gils Forrester, recently visited Colombo to urge the new government to open a judicial inquiry into De Soysa's murder.

The organisation rightly expected a sympathetic hearing because during the last election campaign the People's Alliance referred almost every day to the importance of a free and unfettered media. Many Alliance politicians rode to office on the backs of free media crusaders.

But within six months, the Free Media Movement (FMM) has denounced the government for reneging on its pledge to ensure the freedom of the media. A packed protest rally was held on the theme, "Where is the free press you promised?"

In February, *Sunday Leader* editor Lassantha Wickremetunga and his journalist wife Raine were assaulted by unknown thugs, one of them masked, within a few yards of their Colombo suburb home.

Wickremetunga has been critical of the government's spending spree on personal items such as luxury cars for MPs, and also on the President's wining and dining in five-star hotels, and said it was improper for the President to indulge in such luxury when she had called on the public to accept a three-year wage freeze because of the island's severe economic problems.

The police are probing the incident, but journalists alleged that the police have been dragging their feet.

Another straw in the wind came when *Sunday Times* editor Simha Ratnatunga was interviewed by Criminal Investigation Department (CID) officers acting on a complaint by the President over a reference to her in a gossip column: it said she attended a five-star party and she says she did not. She alleged the report was criminally defamatory.

Ratnatunga said he was prepared to give his statement in his office, but was asked to go to the CID's notorious "fourth floor".

The fourth floor is a feared symbol rather than a mere location as a result of an incident in 1965 when two suspects in a so-called "coup case" plummeted to the ground from the office, and were widely believed to have been pushed.

Most of the CID interrogation of Ratnatunga concentrated on establishing authorship of the allegedly defamatory article and the source of the information, neither of which were given. Yet during the election campaign the People's Alliance had come out strongly for protection for sources of information.

Journalists are further alarmed by the government's advocacy of a journalistic code of ethics. A Cabinet sub-committee has been set up to do the job.

Many journalists see the move as the first step to the muzzling of the media, though the media — even the state-owned Lake House group of publications — still enjoys a greater sense of freedom than under the previous government.

Kumaratunga told a meeting organised by the foreign correspondents group: "We don't see why the press in this country should have a wild ass's freedom and we shall bring it in line with the kind of regulations that exist in other democratic countries. We think that the media freedom we have given is being abused in an unacceptable manner. ... There is utterly irresponsible journalism going on in some parts of the press."


President Chandrika Kumaratunga: Attacks 'utterly irresponsible journalism'

Journalists say that if there is any kind of code of ethics for their tribe it should come from them, not from government. They also argue that politicians should have a code, too.

One factor behind the deterioration of relations between the Alliance and the media is the difficulty the government is experiencing in tackling urgent issues such as unemployment and the rising cost of living. It is coming in for criticism and its reaction has been to blame and target the media.

Commented FMM spokesman Lucien Rajakarunayake: "I dare say that journalists in this country could do much to improve the standards of their own craft. The rise of the vulgar, the mud-slinging and muck-raking is a reality today. Yet those who complain about all this forget the simple truth that mud could be baked only where it exists and in such large quantities."

The government's good intentions were encapsulated by the affable and friendly media Minister Dhamasini Senanyake when he presented a draft media policy to the Cabinet.

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