

Vietnam's press comes of age By David Brown



Thanks to Nguyễn Thế Anh JJR 56

For the past five weeks, the Vietnamese public has debated the implications of a shootout between a family of fish farmers and a police posse that was sent to dispossess them in the Haiphong city's still-rural Tien Lang district. The event has underscored a widespread belief that a flawed land tenure system leaves farmers at the mercy of greedy and corrupt local Communist Party officials.

The media's coverage of the incident doubtless encouraged Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to wade into the controversy. After a three-hour meeting, Dung's principal assistant, chief cabinet secretary Vu Duc Dam, emerged to tell reporters that several layers of culpable officials – not the fish farmers – would be punished and that a serious new effort would be made to fix the land law.

Before detailing those high level decisions, however, Dam said he had a special message for Vietnam's media. The prime minister had asked him to express his appreciation for the role reporters played during the crisis and hoped that the media would continue its good work in "serving the nation" and "orienting public opinion". The press had "provided plenty of timely reports covering many aspects of the incident, analysis from various perspectives and in a major way helped central government agencies to see the matter clearly and proceed to deal with it in an appropriate way", Dam said.

This unusual top-level commendation was well-earned. After the Tien Lang ruckus, reporters with Vietnam's national newspapers kept the story boiling, digging up facts that remarkably eluded Haiphong city officials responsible for oversight of district and village affairs. Within days of the shootout, the press had discredited the district government's version of events by quoting local villagers who described the farmer involved in the shootout, Vuon, as a bold visionary and upstanding citizen.

Reporters also relayed villagers' anger when officials said, untruthfully, that "Vuong's neighbors" had spontaneously decided to punish him by wrecking his family's homes and stealing a large load of market-ready fish and shrimp. Other reporters tracked down local fish farmers who recounted how they had tried and failed to reach an accommodation with the village officials intent on repossessing their farms, and how the district officials had reneged on an agreement reached in a court-supervised arbitration process.

Enterprising reporters persuaded a bulldozer operator to recount how, for the dong equivalent of US\$70, he had been hired by village leaders to level the three houses on Vuon's fish farm. Vietnam's newspapers also drummed up a blizzard of op-eds (often by retired senior officials) that itemized procedural and legal faults in the local officials' campaign to reclaim the land leased to Vuon and other fish farmers, analyzed a rising tide of land law complaints, and propagated the notion that if left unfixed the Tien Lang incident could presage rural upheaval on a national scale.

The quality of the news-gathering and sting of the editorials supported blogger accounts that the central government did not intervene or give guidance to the media on how to cover the Tien Lang incident. Global newswires regularly dismiss Vietnamese newspapers as "state-controlled media", a convenient tag that falls way short in accurately describing what is a complex relationship. Although still subject to state "guidance", Vietnam's sanctioned press has become a more autonomous force over the past decade and is arguably Vietnam's leading "civil society" institution.

There are currently several hundred newspapers in circulation, all licensed to publish under the nominal sponsorship of provinces, state-controlled organizations and central government agencies. To be sure, most are just house organs. As many as three dozen, however, write for a general audience and are distributed throughout Vietnam. These papers compete fiercely for news and regularly earn a profit from advertising and paid circulation.

In addition to print and online newspapers, there is an unsanctioned press, including blogs of all sorts, that publish from offshore servers and out of reach of state censors. Some blogs are quite professional and make a serious effort

to present objective reports and commentary on issues of the day; others – as elsewhere in the world – are just a venue for vitriolic rants.

Vietnam's sanctioned and unsanctioned press are in a dynamic relationship. Quite a few state mainstream reporters moonlight as bloggers; many more certainly read and react regularly to blogs. A major difference between bloggers and those who work for the sanctioned media is that twice as many bloggers are currently in prison for their writings – six versus three – according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a global press freedom advocacy group.

Media as morality

This correspondent worked as a copy editor for the online English language edition of a Vietnamese newspaper generally thought to reflect the views of the ruling Communist Party's liberal wing. For the "English page", stories harvested from the mother paper and other leading dailies were translated and posted to the website.

The managing editor and publisher trooped off to a meeting with the Ministry of Information and the Party's Central Propaganda and Education Committee every Tuesday where they and their peers from other papers were alerted to "sensitive issues". Periodically the paper expressed unorthodox opinions and sometimes these drew an admonition at the weekly meeting or, on graver occasions, a reprimand conveyed directly and in private.

Editorial no-go zones included the internal activities and debates of the party; stories that questioned the correctness of central government policy, the party line or the benevolence of top central officials; calls for political pluralism and allusions to "color revolutions" in formerly communist countries; rousing the masses against China; any suggestion of inherent differences between Vietnamese in the north and south of the country; or implying that problems at lower levels were expressions of a systemic disorder rather than the consequence of peripheral failures to follow the policies and guidance of the center.

Those off-limits topics notwithstanding, Vietnam's leading newspapers are by no means docile instruments of the party and state. To maintain their readerships, they aggressively pursue scandals, investigate "social evils" and champion the downtrodden. Corruption of all kinds, at least at a local level, is also fair game. Moral themes are regular fare in Vietnam's daily papers and are usually more social commentary than pro-Party propaganda. For instance, one paper may feature a series on the hard lives of young women working long hours in export-gearred factories, who scrimp to send half of their meager pay home to their families. Another may expose racketeers who deploy teams of child beggars in the big cities. Yet another could wring pathos from the struggle of a disabled young man from a rural village to earn a university degree. Titillating counterpoint is provided by reportage on the "aimless lives" and depraved conspicuous consumption of the children of the nation's nouveau riche.

These are stories of a society that is struggling to understand and deal with the complexities of rapid modernization and economic development. Social phenomena long familiar in the West are reported as though they were just discovered in Vietnam – including a recent bemused account of Vietnamese 20-somethings who prefer to explore the back country by motorcycle on weekends rather than putting in a couple more days at the office. Yet the lens through which these accounts are refracted is not Western; the perspective is Confucian, a philosophy that exalts "appropriate behavior".

Vietnam's newspapers have become important political players because Hanoi's capacity to supervise lower levels of government and state-owned enterprises has failed to keep pace with the growing complexity of the country's economy and society. Perceptibly over the past decade, the party and government leaders have relied increasingly on the national media to provide them with timely intelligence on what is happening at the local level, information that it cannot count on receiving from local administrative or party structures. For this reason, newspapers and magazines are generally not answerable to any but central authorities.

That said, newspapers' relationship with Hanoi is not trouble-free. In 2006, with the apparent approval of top leaders, the mainstream press energetically pursued a story of malfeasance that reached into top levels of the Ministry of Transport, and were applauded for doing so.

Subsequently, however, two journalists who refused to reveal their sources to police were arrested, tried and sentenced to prison terms for "abusing democratic freedoms" and propagating "false information". The consequence, many felt at the time, was a marked reduction in reporters' zeal to uncover scandal.

Nonetheless, as the recent Tien Lang story unfolded, political leaders once again relied on journalists to ferret out the facts and mirror public opinion. Perhaps more vigorously than ever, Vietnam's national press was again speaking truth to power. Media reporting daringly shaped a consensus that if the state and Party do not take resolute and effective action to subdue corruption and bully-boy behavior by village officials across the country, they run the risk of losing the loyalty of the rural population.

That dire message seems to have resonated with Vietnam's leaders, who are said to consider "renovation" of the lower ranks of the party "a matter of life and death for the regime". If a sweeping housecleaning is indeed their aim, the public debate over the Tien Lang shootout that played out in Vietnam's daily papers has clearly strengthened

their hand and in the process reinvigorated the country's whistle-blowing reporters.

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