

Communication Development in Vietnam: The Politics of Planning¹

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Abstract. Vietnam's communication policies since the 1980s have shown a curious dualism in their treatment of the mass communications and telecommunications sectors. While the development of telecommunications has been undertaken with increasing participation from foreign firms operating under liberalized investment policies, the mass media experienced limited freedoms from state controls for only a short period, followed by rapid retrenchment by the Vietnamese Communist Party. This study describes the historical development of the two communication sectors and documents policy trends affecting each over the last five years. The study then explores Vietnam's shifting political economy during the same period, finding that the country's efforts simultaneously to maintain its Communist political ideology and to develop its economy through free-market mechanisms and foreign investment explain the tenuous dualism in communications policy.

Introduction

The communications sector has come to be recognized for its significant role in promoting national development and economic growth. The mass media have been viewed since the 1950s as important tools of social change and political development, while telecommunications is understood to be a key social service as well as a critical component of infrastructure, supporting both commerce and industry. In many countries, of both the North and the South, telecommunications itself has become a pillar of industry, employing a large labor force and often surpassing other manufactured goods in contribution to Gross National Product and foreign exchange earnings.

Despite its importance, the development of the communications sector in many countries has received relatively little attention, either from government policy-makers or from scholars. The literature on the development of

communications suggests that there are few countries, and in particular few developing countries, which engage in integrated and systematic planning for the development of the communications sector – a task made increasingly daunting by the rapid developments in, and convergence of, communications technologies. A second very general conclusion is that we know little about the kinds of influences that guide and inform policy decisions in communications in different national settings.

Most analyses of the policy-making process focus on Western industrialized countries, in which, there can be no doubt, the information and communications sector is seen as critically important to growth and international competitiveness. But these works have limited application to the conditions in less economically advanced countries, which face in their communications sectors constraints and needs of a completely different order of magnitude.

Those writers who have addressed the development of communications in the less developed countries have often adopted one of two approaches, both of which are helpful but again limited. The first, administrative in orientation, includes those who see policy-making as a politically-neutral, bureaucratic process best conceived in normative terms, wherein a universal set of procedures and protocols can be superimposed for successful sectoral development. According to Snow (1988), an extensive review of the literature in telecommunications policy found such works to dominate. The second group (Schiller, 1976; Hamelink, 1983; Mattelart, 1979) employs global analyses grounded in Marxian assumptions about the role of communications in establishing an international division of labor. Problematically, neither approach explains the diversity of experiences of developing countries nor explores the role of the unique national and international political-economic forces which largely determine the outcomes we find in any given nation's communications policy.

Criticizing scholarship which ignores such differences in political systems and political traditions, Fejes claims that instead

emphasis should be placed on trying to understand the specific historical and political conditions behind the development of specific policies and how such policies reflect the specific configuration of political forces. (Fejes, 1986: 250)

A number of works have taken up this charge and attempt to place developing countries' communications policies into a political-economic perspective encompassing both domestic and international influences (see Fregoso, 1988; Sussman, 1981, 1989; Sussman & Lent, 1991). The research

reported here continues this pursuit by examining policy in Vietnam, the communications sector of which has not received scholarly attention.

Vietnam represents an important case for analysis since it stands in 1993 as one of the last bastions of socialism – an increasingly difficult ideological and economic structure to maintain. Further, the timing of the study is auspicious, since Vietnam's communications policies have moved along some surprising, and ultimately divergent, trajectories in the last five years. Development of the telecommunications sector has been liberalized to a dramatic extent, and increasingly placed in the hands of external suppliers and users, while the media have zig-zagged between policies of openness and restriction with, at first glance, surprising speed.

The recent history of Vietnamese communications policy in these two subsectors suggests the extent to which political-economic forces drive policy, and also illuminates the nature of those forces in a developing socialist state confronting a much-altered global landscape. This paper poses three questions: What policy changes have occurred? What forces appear to be driving such change? And what accounts for the differences between policy in mass media and in telecommunications?

Communication Structures in Vietnam

Mass Media

Until very recently, all Vietnamese mass media were official organs of the state – virtually indistinguishable from the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) – and all continue to be closely controlled by the government. This coalescence of the media and the state, which is typical of socialist countries, was largely completed by the 1950s, through a process that continues to influence press policy.

During the 1930s and 1940s, many Vietnamese opposed to French domination found a voice in the press.² According to David Marr,

public journalism and publishing had developed far enough in the 1920s and 1930s to present the ICP [Indochinese Communist Party] and the Viet Minh with considerable mass communications potential when they seized power in August 1945. (Marr, 1981: 44)

Jamieson (1991) also suggests that the reemergence of the fragmented Indochinese Communist Party was largely effected through the written word:

Historical and philosophical writing flourished, as did literary scholarship and criticisms ... Newspapers printed historical essays on ancient Vietnamese heroes – all of whom successfully led Vietnamese troops into battle against foreign aggressors. (Jamieson, 1991: 19)

Jamieson identifies among the revolutionaries of the period a 'lost generation' of literary critics and poets. The despair these writers had felt over Vietnam's inability to free itself of foreign domination turned in the 1930s to a celebration of Vietnam's resilience as resistance was mobilized. The writers perceived a clear role for themselves in using their talents to generate support for the nationalist movement, and began to write for Viet Minh newspapers and magazines like the *Cuu Quoc* (*National Salvation*). That the early roots of the current Vietnamese Communist Party can be traced to these oppositional uses of the media does not escape the Vietnamese state today.

Much of the current philosophy towards the media was articulated in the late 1940s and 1950s. During that period, the VCP and its successor, the Vietnamese Workers' Party, asserted its cultural hegemony upon the literary community. In January 1958, the political section of the Central Committee formally addressed the issue of the role of the writer, and limited to one the acceptable forms of cultural content: that which promoted the goals of socialism as prescribed by the Party (Jamieson, 1991). This vision was consistent with the Leninist model of mass communications, which assigns to media the functions of propagandist, agitator, and organizer in the Party-led struggle to achieve socialism (Lenin, 1927).

As the adversaries of the Viet Minh changed from the French to the Americans, the electronic media were called into service by both sides. In the North, fearing that centralization would produce an easy target, the Viet Minh established hundreds of 'cell' radio stations, each operated by a cell of the Party and used exclusively for military communications (McDaniel, 1991). These stations supplemented the operation of state-controlled Radio Hanoi, which employed transmitters funded and acquired by the Soviet Union. In the South, the government of Vietnam was assisted by its American allies in establishing a two-channel television system to supplement its already expanded radio services. One channel was programmed with U.S. programming to entertain American troops and the second, programmed for shorter broadcast days, provided Vietnamese fare 'to relieve the rural boredom for the population on the government side' (Pool, 1979: 142).

At the time of reunification, Vietnam was faced with the task of integrat-

ing this array of broadcasting services into a coherent state institution. That effort has met with only partial success. Today in Vietnam, the mass media consist of Radio Voice of Vietnam and Television Vietnam, whose services are broadcast on provincial radio and television stations throughout the country. In 1991 there were 288 FM stations in Vietnam, and 8,365 radio-relay stations. With approximately seven million receivers in use, radio penetration is estimated at 70–80% of Vietnam's population of 65 million ('Vietnam', 1993). The national radio service offers a mix of music, both Vietnamese and Western (classical and Country & Western are said to be popular) and news and commentary.

Television is broadcast on 37 provincial stations and 77 relays, reaching some two and one-half million receivers. The single national television service has limited hours, broadcasting only from about 6:30 pm, when it follows either a local Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City newscast, until about 10:30. The service airs a heavy component of educational programming, some imported children's programming such as cartoons from former East Germany or the former Soviet Union, and imported Eastern European dramas or traditional Vietnamese operettas. The national service airs advertisements for domestically produced goods. Recently, the Ho Chi Minh Television Station has placed ads in magazines geared to foreign investors announcing its plans to air advertisements for foreign firms on a second, local television service which has not yet commenced.

In addition to the national radio and television services, there are some 500 district radio stations – no one knows the exact number as many are former 'cell' stations which operate on irregular schedules – and some 10,000 wired-radio systems serving factories and villages. The last of these are rumored to be used with loudspeakers in rural villages and reeducation camps to disseminate, at high volume, socialist slogans and Party directives virtually around the clock.

It is in the press that the state's policies have most evidently changed. By 1985 there were only a few dozen newspapers operating, and these functioned under close control of the Ministry of Culture and Information, which licensed the publications of selected organizations, such as workers' organizations or socialist women's groups. Despite licensing, the government monitored their publications, frequently censoring articles or seizing publications on their way to distribution. Today there are reportedly over 350 newsletters and newspapers in publication. The most widely read, of course, are the major dailies, the combined circulation of which was estimated in 1988 at 545,000 copies per issue. In addition to these,

however, are periodicals published by official organizations recognized by the state – the publications of the Writers Association and the Journalists Association each have circulations of 15,000 – and increasingly by independent groups.

Much of this expansion was sparked by the call, made during the 1986 Sixth Communist Party Congress, for the media to move beyond their role as organs of the Party to greater independence in reporting:

The task of the mass media is to spread the Party's lines and policies, keep close contacts with reality, give timely information and intensive analysis of new events, find out and truthfully depict good typical examples, wholeheartedly support and encourage new factors, bravely struggle against backwardness and sluggishness and other negative manifestations, deal with and have a good approach to essential problems of concern to society ... Literature and art must ... keenly grasp the reality that is going on in a complicated way, discover in good time and commend the new, create vivid models, assert the young talents in life, bravely criticize the negative aspects that hamper social renewal (Sixth National Congress, 1987: 157)

The media openness which the Party seemed to be encouraging in 1986 was a significant departure from the past. A newspaper editor described, late in 1987, the situation confronting journalists: 'There has been a struggle between two points of view: to serve the masses or to serve the mandarins. Being a government tool, just printing declarations, is always the easier way. We wanted to add commentary, criticism, real reporting' (Crossette, 1987). The press responded to the Party's encouragement to 'bravely criticize' by investigating charges of corruption in government, examining the implications of Vietnamese economic policy, and exploring wide ranging problems of the government bureaucracy. Although such criticism was unorthodox, the commitment of the party – or at least its newly elected chief, Nguyen Van Linh – was affirmed when Linh intervened on behalf of a documentary to permit its airing on the national television service. The documentary, 'Kindness,' was sharply critical of socialism and included scenes of poverty and despairing citizens in Hanoi (Crossette, 1988).

The policy of media openness met increasing resistance within the Party, however. In September 1987, a party unit described on domestic Vietnamese radio as 'the committee of the bloc of central mass motivation organs' urged journalists to temper their criticism ('Criticism,' 1987). According to Cung (1991), the Vietnamese by 1988 had begun to restrict the circulation of liberal Soviet publications in Vietnam. In September of that year police confiscated all available copies of a journal, *Tradition of*

Resistance, printed by former members of the Viet Cong, and later seized the printing plates for a subsequent issue (Chanda, 1989).

By 1989, the retrenchment was nearly complete, with Radio Hanoi calling upon the press '[to] create healthy public opinion to help the nation ... do away with difficulties, thereby guaranteeing victory for the renovation cause under the VCP's leadership' (quoted in Cung, 1991: 194). This announcement was followed by the closing of two literary journals, the forced retirement or resignation of two editors, and the removal of Party officials from posts in which they had supported cultural freedoms (Hiebert, 1989).

Ho Chi Minh is remembered for his warning that when the door was opened to let in fresh air, the flies would come in as well. It appears that when the Party cracked open the door of press freedom, it decided only belatedly that it did not want to contend with the flies that would inevitably enter, and pressed the door closed once again. The same retrenchment from liberalization, however, has not been found in the other significant communications service sector, telecommunications.

Telecommunications

Just as Vietnam's mass communications system includes a complex of largely uncoordinated media systems, the country's peculiar history left it in 1975 with a tangle of telecommunications systems of varying age, technical specifications, and degree of interconnection with others. In the north, where commercial development had been more limited and foreign occupation curtailed early, telecommunications development remained minimal. Between 1960 and 1975, there was virtually no investment in civil communications infrastructure in the North and much of what existed was heavily damaged by bombings. By contrast, in the South of Vietnam, a commercial and residential system had been constructed prior to the war. Alongside this, the U.S. military had installed very sophisticated telecommunications technology during the war (Joint Development Group, 1970). Even in the south, however, these systems were not interconnected, and again there was extensive damage as a result of bombings. In 1975, the Vietnamese were faced with the challenge of converting military equipment for civil use, rebuilding war-damaged segments, and then interconnecting these various systems into a single national network.

This was a task for which Vietnam was poorly equipped, both economically and in terms of human resources. In the early months after the

reunification of North and South Vietnam, the country signed a variety of agreements with the Soviet Union for long-term loans and economic aid and technical assistance. None, however, addressed the needs of telecommunications reconstruction, which was not viewed as a priority. In 1978, when the first agreement affecting the sector was signed, it addressed only international telecommunications, through Soviet construction of an earth station for use with the Intersputnik satellite system (Pike, 1987). By the end of the 1970s, the Chinese had begun an aid project installing telegraph lines throughout the country, but as relations between the two countries soured, the Chinese abandoned the project and it remained uncompleted until Hungary, as an Eastern-bloc ally, resumed its progress. By the mid-1980s, despite a Soviet commitment to increased assistance in telecommunications systems maintenance and modernization, the system remained disjointed, antiquated, limited in both services and reliability, and requiring far more capital investment than Vietnam or its benefactors could or would commit.

By the end of the 1980s, however, a new dedication to telecommunications development emerged, and the same commitment to liberalization seen briefly in the mass media appeared to take hold. Vietnam entered a variety of joint venture and other contractual agreements with telecommunications companies in Australia, France, Italy, Germany and South Korea to speed development of its infrastructure (Hiebert, 1992). Improvements have included the construction of digital microwave links between Ho Chi Minh City and 15 provincial centers and between Hanoi and two northern regions; the installation of digital switching systems in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and the upgrading of international links (Westlake, 1991).

In order to lure foreign investment in telecommunications, Vietnam made some atypical concessions. After the Australian Overseas Telecommunications International (OTCI) volunteered to install and operate a small earth station outside Ho Chi Minh City – a venture on which it recovered its US\$700,000 costs in the first year – it undertook a 10-year, US\$80 million contract to construct and operate two large satellite earth stations. Despite the demonstrated promise of profitability, the company was nonetheless given an unusual exemption from Vietnam's standard prohibition on the use of off-shore bank accounts. In this case, OTCI is permitted to collect international telephone charges in an off-shore account, facilitating its repayment of loans from Australian banks.

The promise of such profits quickly caught the attention of the French

firm Alcatel and the German Siemens, which have now installed digital switching systems in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Along the way, Vietnam has gained facsimile service and international direct dial, and soon will offer data-packet switching. These services will be utilized primarily by international businesses and by those wealthy enough to place overseas calls through a system with far higher rates than found in most other Asian countries. The profits to be made prompted all three of the major U.S. long-distance carriers to sign service agreements with the government of Vietnam despite the impediment of the U.S. trade embargo on the country. Hard lobbying by AT&T eventually succeeded, in 1992, in winning telecommunications providers, a rare exemption to the embargo. In the telecommunications sector, then, the Vietnamese have permitted foreign partners from the West to operate the most lucrative segments of the telecommunications system, and to operate under unusual and certainly concessionary terms. Further, the services that are being most rapidly developed are clearly not 'people's telephone' services, but are of peculiar value to international business and those with economic resources.

Thus policy in telecommunications reflects a very different set of concerns and priorities than we find in mass communications. The remaining task of the paper is to locate the origins of these differences between the policies of Vietnam's two communications services subsectors. The differences are to be found in Vietnam's recent political-economic history.

Vietnam in the 1980s and 1990s

The path toward economic development upon which Vietnam embarked in 1975 has been neither straight nor free of obstacles. Although this history is well documented elsewhere (see, for example, Chanda, 1986; Olson & Roberts, 1991), some critical passages bear attention in the context of this analysis.

Throughout the war against the Americans, the Vietnamese received assistance from both the Soviet Union and from China. Those relationships continued in the period immediately following the war. After literally centuries of expansionary attempts by their neighbors however, particularly the Chinese, the Vietnamese sought to limit the closeness of their bonds to China. Their actions ultimately caused the Chinese to break their ties and later to undertake hostilities against Vietnam. The loss of the Chinese alliance had economic implications as well as political ones, however,

including the termination of uncompleted projects undertaken by the Chinese, such as the construction of telegraph lines mentioned earlier.

Very much in need of development assistance and reluctant to become wholly dependent on the Soviet Union, Vietnam joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, comprised of Eastern bloc countries, and sought to expand its links to the West. Vietnam soon received promises of economic aid from the U.S. as well as from Japan, France, Sweden, Norway, and Australia, as well as the promise of an International Monetary Fund loan of US\$ 28 million. Vietnam adopted a development strategy relying upon export-oriented industry and stressing the role of multinational corporations as a source of technology transfer (Thayer, 1978).

Throughout the late months of 1978, however, Vietnam experienced a series of border incursions along its southwest side, by the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia. Funded by the Chinese – who were carrying out their own border warfare in the north – the regime led by Pol Pot was well along in its well-known program of genocide, causing many Cambodians to flee into Vietnam. In December of 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and established a puppet government. International reaction against the Vietnamese was swift under the direction of the United States, which had not forgotten the sting of its own defeat. The U.S. stepped up its trade embargo against Vietnam, lobbied allies to impose similar sanctions, and used its weight in multilateral institutions like the World Bank, the IMF, and the Asian Development Bank to block loans to Vietnam. Relying upon the allegiance of its allies, the U.S. effectively isolated Vietnam from trade or aid links with most Western, industrialized countries. After 1978, Vietnam became locked into economic dependence upon the Eastern-bloc countries and most especially upon the Soviet Union.

Throughout the late 1970s, Vietnam maintained its strategic importance to the Soviet Union by providing access to Cam Ranh Bay military base. The Soviets responded by offering significant aid, as well as favorable trade provisions. By 1986, the Soviets had underwritten the production of 47% of Vietnam's electricity, 54% of its lead, 86% of its coal, 30% of its cement, 100% of its machine tools and a number of its minerals, and much of the development of the Vietnamese petroleum industry (Hoan, 1991). By 1987, some 60% of Vietnam's trade, and 80% of its CMEA trade, was with the Soviet Union (Hoan, 1991). Further, trade with the Soviets was conducted at 'friendly' prices and on credit terms wherein Vietnam paid for its goods through barter rather than with hard currency. By the end of the decade, Vietnam received on such terms virtually all its fuel and steel as well as

80% of its fertilizer and cotton (Erlanger, 1991).

But by the middle 1980s, the Soviet Union's economic resources were dwindling and its desires for stronger Western alliances prompted a careful reexamination of its costly relations with Vietnam. By the late 1980s, the Eastern bloc was in disarray, as *perestroika* and *glasnost* became uncontrollable and self-propelled forces. The Soviet Union's economic assistance to Vietnam evaporated. By early 1991, as many as 60% of USSR-Vietnamese trade contracts had been cut by the Soviets, and in August the Vietnamese Minister of Trade announced that Soviet trade was at 15% of its 1990 level.

The net effect of these events has been to throw Vietnam into an economic tail-spin. Forced quite suddenly to sell its goods on the world market, where its often poor quality goods will not be accepted as they were by the CMEA countries, Vietnam is in a dire predicament. This is further exacerbated by the drop in prices for goods which Vietnam can produce, such as rice, coffee, seafood, and vegetable oil. Even Vietnam's oil reserves cannot save it, since without a refinery Vietnam pays more to re-import its oil than it earns in the sale of its crude (Erlanger, 1991). And there are few easy solutions. Vietnam has stepped up the efficiency of its factories and reduced its military expenditures, but lay-offs of workers and troops have added some 950,000 to the ranks of the unemployed, which were already substantial (Erlanger, 1991).

The loss of the Eastern bloc as a source of aid and partner in trade forced Vietnam into a difficult choice between two very different alternatives. One was rapprochement with China, which has both the necessary resources and the ideological commitment to communism which Vietnam sought – but also the history of expansionism that has caused conflict between the two countries since about 400 BC. The second alternative was adoption of the capitalist route which has become increasingly commonplace among Vietnam's former Eastern-bloc allies. This would involve closer ties with the nations of Southeast Asia, Japan, and the West, in particular the United States.

It is Vietnam's response to this dilemma that solves the puzzle of the apparently contradictory policies described in the communications sector above. Vietnam is trying to cut a middle path between the alternatives of China and the West. According to Premier Muoi, Vietnam wants to reach out to both simultaneously (Chanda, 1991). The nature of this dualistic approach is evident in a brief examination of Vietnam's current economic and political policies.

Beginning quietly in 1979 (see Duiker, 1991) and then rapidly accelerating in 1986, a variety of reformist economic policies have been put into place. Struggling to overcome its economic isolation and encourage foreign investment, Vietnam has repeatedly modified its foreign investment policies until they have become 'one of the most liberal foreign investment codes of any developing country' (Schwarz & Matthews, 1991). Foreigners are permitted to own up to 99% of equity in joint ventures, and in some cases may own 100%. Tax breaks are permitted for projects which generate exports, employment, hard-currency earnings or technology transfers (Hiebert, 1991b). The Vietnamese constitution has been modified to include two articles directly relating to foreign investment, and which protect foreign firms' capital, profits and assets from nationalization (Cyphers, 1991). A law passed late in 1991 opened special export processing zones in which investors, either local or foreign, could invest with tax exemptions for periods of two to four years ('Vietnam's Economic Zones', 1991). These policies had produced by November 1991 some US\$ 2.5 billion in 330 projects ('Foreign Capital', 1991), and involved Canada, Australia, Western Europe, with the largest investment being made by Hong Kong and Taiwan (Lehner, 1991).

The greatest difficulty Vietnam has faced in luring foreign investment, which it obviously deems critical, has been its lack of infrastructure. With its narrow, dirt roads, its outmoded port facilities, and its antiquated communications system, even attractive investment terms cannot overcome the high costs of doing business. Further, investment in public works is directly hampered by the U.S.-led embargo, through which America restricts the exportation to Vietnam of products employing U.S.-patented parts, and blocks not just hard currency loans but also soft loans made by IMF members to Vietnam. Thus, for example, a contract won by an Italian telecommunications firm to construct a fiber-optic link between North and South Vietnam was stalled for nearly two years because the Italians, as members of the IMF, could not make the necessary soft loans to Vietnam (Westlake, 1991; Hiebert, 1992).

The result, then, has been an unusual willingness on the part of the Vietnamese to court foreign firms which have the resources and interest in developing Vietnam's infrastructure. These firms' greatest interest is in developing the most profitable services – international and value-added services in the case of telecommunications – and Vietnam, correctly or not, perceives that it has little leverage in dictating the terms of such contracts to include less lucrative services such as basic telephone service. Liberaliza-

tion, then, has become a policy over which the Vietnamese seem to have few options if they want to attract the foreign investment that may be their sole route to survival.

The political sphere, however, suggests rather different priorities. Here, the state has insisted on retaining its goal of achieving a socialist state through a proletariat dictatorship and democratic centralism. At risk, in their eyes, is the political stability which is surely essential to overcoming the economic crisis they face. And indeed, the last five years in Eastern Europe offer compelling evidence of just how destructive the 'flies' of economic liberalization can be when the proverbial door has been opened.

In this regard then, there is, according to Cung (1991), 'increasing ideological affinity between the regimes of Beijing and Hanoi':

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the rise of pluralism in the Soviet Union, and the emergence of a democracy movement in China and of greater dissent in Vietnam have thrown the Chinese and Vietnamese communist parties closer together as each tries to stave off the possible collapse of its system. (Cung, 1991: 185)

Vietnam's brief experiment with a more independent press, modelled in part on the *glasnost* of the Soviet Union, suggested that the disintegration of communism also could be exported to Vietnam. According to Cung,

Encouraged by the prevalence of disaffection in Vietnam, the media became more outspoken than the Party establishment had wanted. After 1986, newspapers and journals began attacking almost all aspects of life under Vietnam's communist system. Topics frequently appearing included the corruption and brutality of the cadres, the Kafkaesque situation citizens find themselves in when dealing with the regime's regulations and bureaucracy, and the overall harshness of life in Vietnam. (Cung, 1991: 193)

As the crumbling of communism in Eastern Europe accelerated, so did Vietnam's conviction grow, that political pluralism was not only unhealthy for Vietnam, but that it was part of a Western plot to undermine communism.

An internal Party document produced sometime late in 1991 called for 'strengthening the role of the party, army and security apparatus in an 'uncompromising fight' against opposition and dissent' (Hiebert, 1991a: 17). The media, according to the documents of the Seventh Communist Party Congress, held in June of 1991, would be held in close check to ensure that they chose the right side in this battle:

[The Party must] encourage freedom of literary and artistic creation for the perfection of man, to nurture his noble soul and feelings, to highlight our sense of national pride, strong will and self-reliance, to strive for the country's prosperity and the people's well-being, to

criticize the evil, the cruel and the debased [The Party must] impose severe punishment on those engaged in disseminating and trading in reactionary and decadent culture, to fight alien, unwholesome culture [The Party must] strictly control operations in the fields of publication, information, the press and cinematography. (Seventh National Congress, 1991: 129–130)

The media, then, were and are seen as an important tool in upholding and strengthening communist ideology in Vietnam, the eradication of which will bring Vietnam once again to its knees before foreign powers. The fact that so many of Vietnam's top leaders are men in their eighties implies that many of them fought most of their lives to break foreign domination, and they are reluctant to be humbled now, whatever mistakes they have made. And, recognizing that the forces that swept Eastern Europe had already achieved their full strength before they had even been properly recognized, the Vietnamese are going to be vigilant in holding such ideological forces at bay.

Conclusion

The apparently contradictory nature of communication policy in Vietnam, wherein the telecommunications subsector is being opened to a degree of liberalization and foreign involvement found unacceptable in the mass media, can be explained by a complex of historical and political economic forces. The power of the mass media is well understood by those who themselves employed it to fight colonialism, just as the necessity of offering modern infrastructure of foreign investors is well understood by those who are fighting to salvage the Vietnamese economy.

The most important issue that arises is whether such dualism is sustainable. There are several good reasons to be skeptical. First, there are few models of success in such an approach, and numerous examples of failure. While it is true that the Vietnamese have abandoned the media liberalization policy that was adopted in Eastern Europe shortly before those systems collapsed, liberalization of the economic sector will bring with it cultural and political influences. With a growing foreign presence in the economy, the availability of goods which reflect a consumerist lifestyle and the daily contacts with Westerners may alone be a more powerful force than the state-run media can overcome.

Second, with the convergence of communications technology, distinct lines between the subsectors of the industry blur. This was well

demonstrated in China by the widespread use of fax machines to spread news during the Tiananmen incident. There is a growing array of technologies available for communication, and the distinction that the Vietnamese have made may increasingly become an arbitrary one.

Thus the supportability of two disparate sets of policies for the communications sector, while grounded in logic and a strong commitment to Vietnam's communist ideology, may require policy controls and regulatory mechanisms more sophisticated than any now seen in Vietnam. Given the challenges of technological change, however, and Vietnam's perception that it holds limited bargaining power (an assessment that, whether realistic or not, is undoubtedly encouraged by the West), maintaining these contradictory policies may be virtually impossible.

Notes

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Denison University Research Foundation for support for travel to Vietnam in January 1992.
2. For extensive treatment of the role of journalism in colonial Vietnam and in the struggle against colonialism, see Marr (1981) and Tai (1992).

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