THE MEDIA* IN VIETNAM: LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

by

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* The term "media" here refers almost exclusively to major mass media, specifically:


CONTENTS

The Media in Vietnam: A National Disgrace....................... page 1
Lesson #1 - Existing Pro-government Bias Should End................ page 4
Lesson #2 - Non-govt. Sources Should Receive More Coverage........ page 7
Lesson #3 - Cultural and Economic Bias Should End................ page 9
Lesson #4 - Pressure on Media Executives is Necessary............... page 12

Note

Fred Branfman has lived in and visited Indochina frequently since 1967. While in Laos from 1969 to 1971 he supported himself by working as a French and Lao-speaking interpreter for visiting Western journalists. As a result, he worked intimately with members of most of the major media on a day-to-day basis.

Branfman also functioned as a journalist in Indochina during this period for Dispatch News Service, making several trips to South Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand. During a five-month trip to Cambodia, South Vietnam and Thailand in the first half of 1973, he had a chance to renew old journalistic acquaintances and make new ones, as well as gather material for several of his own articles.

As Director of Project Air War from 1971-73, and co-director of the Indochina Resource Center from 1973-75, Branfman also had intimate experience with the media back in the United States. His work and former acquaintances brought him into intimate contact with the domestic workings of the major media.

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In analyzing the media's performance in Vietnam, it is important to establish one's point of view. In terms of traditional journalistic norms, media coverage in Vietnam was a high point in journalistic history. Never before has a nation's media presented so complete a story of a war to its citizenry; never before has it reported facts contrasting so starkly to official reality. Many individual reporters, in particular, deserve high marks for sheer physical bravery and, in some cases, moral courage.

From the standpoint of such journalistic ideals as truth and objectivity, however, media coverage of the Vietnam war has been a national disgrace. Vietnam was not a traditional war to be measured by traditional norms. An American government has not acted so at variance with its people's interests in our history. Never before has an American government caused so much carnage with so little regard for international law or common decency.

Although the media reported more of the government's failings than in previous wars, most of its reporting still reflected the official point of view. Although what accurate media coverage did occur eventually led many Americans to turn against the war, such reporting was too little -- too late. Looking back over the past twenty years, it is clear that, overall, distorted media coverage needlessly prolonged American intervention in Vietnam.

The Media in Vietnam: a National Disgrace

A glance back over the past twenty years reveals that Americans widely debated three major Vietnam issues: (1) The effectiveness of our efforts there; (2) the physical and social impact of the war upon the American and Vietnamese people; (3) the morality of our intervention against the PRG and the North Vietnamese.

Such a backward glance also shows that the media failed to give the American people the objective data necessary to reach an informed judgement on these three issues. Essentially, this was because the media presented the war from a pro-government,
middle-class vantage point, instead of objectively reporting on the various contending forces.

(1) Effectiveness- After 1954, the media echoed the official view of the Diem regime as a paradigm of a democratic government supported by its people; it was not until the last year or two that objective coverage was even begun of its widespread corruption and unpopularity. From 1963 to 1968, the media all communicated the government position that the American war effort was succeeding. The more accurate reporting that began after the 1968 Tet offensive still did not give a full picture of the futility of U.S. military efforts. Similarly, the Thieu regime was portrayed as being in effective control of most of Vietnam from January 1973 until March 1975. Only when PRG and North Vietnamese troops were literally marching on Saigon did it finally become apparent that Thieu had lost the country long before.

(2) Impact- To this day, the American people have never received anything like the full picture of the impact of seven million tons of bombs (compared to two million in World War II) and a similar quantity of ground ordnance upon Vietnam.

My Lai was extensively covered after the army brought courtmartial charges against Lt. Calley; hundreds of other My Lais- by U.S., Korean and Thai troops - went unreported or downplayed. The story of the treatment of a few hundred U.S. POWs received infinitely more coverage than the American creation of a pervasive police-state in South Vietnam which, among other things, jailed and tortured tens of thousands of South Vietnamese. Allegations of communist atrocities and bloodbaths were far more widely reported than tens of thousands of substantiated assassinations carried out under the U.S.-created Phoenix program. The national TV news showed guerrillas in Bangladesh murdering former collaborators with the Pakistanis; it is common knowledge that the media refused to use available films and photos showing far more gruesome atrocities by American soldiers in Vietnam.

The U.S. defoliation program, generation of refugees, and widespread bombing
of civilian targets were also inadequately reported. Coverage given to the Tiger Cage story or Harrison Salisbury's reports of U.S. bombing in North Vietnam was the exception proving the rule.

Media reporting of the impact of the Vietnam war on Americans was similarly distorted. Although there was tremendous coverage of the problems facing the U.S. fighting man in combat, the full story of drugs, racial tension and resistance within the military was largely ignored.

At home, peace demonstrators were fully reported only when demonstrating or breaking laws. Thousands of thoughtful, well-researched studies, press statements, speeches, and large meetings by peace activists and other war critics were either ignored or downplayed. The most notorious example was the complete media black-out of the Detroit Winter Soldier Investigation, at which dozens of GIs described publicly for the first time the atrocities they had committed in Vietnam and its destructive impact on themselves.

(3) Morality - The major way the media prolonged the war was by its unprofessional reporting of the PRG and North Vietnamese.

The essence of the U.S. government's case for intervention in Vietnam, after all, was not that everything we did was right, or that successive South Vietnamese governments were models of democracy. It was that whatever our failures, our intervention was preferable to the alternative posed by PRG and North Vietnamese victory.

For 20 years the media referred to- and reported on- the other side as the "enemy". Reports from Americans, foreigners and journalists presenting a favorable or neutral view of the communists were minimized. When an ARVN psychological warfare battalion arranged a media visit to several grave sites near Hue long after the Tet offensive, however, the unsubstantiated allegation that the communists had murdered 3,000 civilians with their hands tied behind their backs received maximum attention.
(See a detailed study by Cornell scholar D. Gareth Porter, available from the Indochina Resource Center, 1322 18th St., NW, Washington, D.C., 20036. The essence of his findings is that there is at least as much reason to believe occupants of the mass graves were killed by American bombing as by any other cause. He categorically establishes that reporters had no evidential basis for concluding that a communist massacre had taken place.)

Most historians now agree that U.S. installation of Diem after 1954, direct U.S. intervention based on SEATO and Tonkin, and U.S. involvement after the January 1973 Peace Agreement, were all in violation of international law. Those presenting this point of view were never given anything like the coverage accorded to government representatives— for whom the legality of our intervention was a given.

Let us now look at the lessons of this unfortunate record for the future.

LESSON # 1 - EXISTING PRO-GOVERNMENT BIAS SHOULD END

Historically, the vast majority of information regarded as "newsworthy" in political and military reporting emanates directly or indirectly from government sources. This works fine when a government is disseminating accurate information. When a government systematically lies, media becomes a conduit of lies to the people it is supposed to serve.

American officials— through public statements, private interviews, and leaks— provided most of the information the media chose to disseminate during the Vietnam war. Most of the "on the spot" reporting was also structured by the U.S. and Vietnamese governments. Journalists were free to follow American troops into battle or interview villagers (who were afraid to speak openly for fear of arrest). They were not allowed to visit prisons freely, interview political prisoners, go out on CIA Phoenix operations, visit CIA-run "interrogation centers", where the worst tortures took place.

By placing such a premium on "official" information, the news business was
structured toward a pro-government bias. Journalists were forced to cultivate government sources and observe unspoken limits for fear of losing them. Henry Kissinger's ability to create a media image of himself as peace-maker, despite his support of the most extensive bombing of civilian targets in history, is only one example of this phenomenon.

The problem lay more in the media home offices than in the field. One of the best-known reporters in this country agreed after a briefing in January 1975 that the Thieu government was primarily responsible for the breakdown of the ceasefire. When asked whether he would write this in his two-year anniversary story of the January 27 signing of the Paris Agreement, he answered that his superiors would not allow it. They wanted "balanced" stories accusing both sides equally for the breakdown of the ceasefire. "I agree with you that such reporting is inherently unfair and unjust in this case" he said, but they simply would not print anything else.

On another occasion, I asked a friend who is news editor of one of the nation's largest newspapers why they had not printed any major stories on South Vietnamese political prisoners. He said that whereas somebody like myself might complain he could always refuse my calls or discard my letters. If they did print such a story, however, the publisher of the newspaper would receive a call and angry argument from Dr. Kissinger—something he neither liked nor found useful.

During the Pathet Lao offensive to retake the Plain of Jars in February, 1970, all major news media had reporters in Laos. Their reports of 20,000 North Vietnamese attacking the Plain, among 50-70,000 North Vietnamese in all of Laos, were based entirely on figures fed them by U.S. officials in USIS, the CIA and military attache's office. When a Time reporter did some checking on his own, he concluded that there were no more than a few thousand North Vietnamese at most attacking the Plain, and far fewer than 50,000 involved in the Laotian war. He sent these figures back to New York. When his story appeared in the next issue, however, Time editors had
removed his figures and substituted those put out by the U.S. government (em­
bellished, to be sure, with large red arrows portraying a North Vietnamese pincer
attack on the Plain from all directions).

If the American people are to get the truth from the media in the future,
eexisting pro-government bias in the media must be removed. One cannot expect the
media to lead a revolution against the government. One can reasonably demand, how­
ever, a more responsible attitude toward government-originated information.

If the government acts, say to begin bombing another coun­try, this should of
be fully reported. When government explains such bombing by allegations of a prior
enemy attack and assurances that it is not bombing civilian targets, such explana­
tions should be downplayed or ignored pending verification of government claims.
Why, for example, should an unsubstantiated government study alleging that the So­
viets and Chinese had greatly increased their aid to North Vietnam— presented at a
time when Congress was about to cut U.S. aid to South Vietnam— have received attention?
The rationale for highlighting Jerry Friedheim's denial that the U.S. had bombed
Bach Mai hospital, contradicted by former Nuremberg Prosecutor Telford Taylor's eye­
witness report, is equally obscure. Unsubstantiated government allegations, in
short, should be given the same short shrift presently accorded to unverified claims
by government critics.

Government attempts to suppress news should also be seen as a regular, ongoing
story. When government refuses week after week to transport journalists to Con Son
for private talks with prisoners, this should be reported week after week to the
American people.

Most importantly, government spokesmen can no longer be allowed to set the
terms of national debate. Time and again during the war, Administration officials
would successfully publicize a secondary issue to the ongoing murder they were
engaged in, in an attempt to defuse opposition.

The major example of this was the extensive coverage given to the POW issue. The result was that attention was diverted from the central question of how to stop the war, end the killing - the only means by which the POWs would actually return. Had the media simply not covered transparent Administration attempts to set off diversionary national debates, the practice would no doubt have stopped.

LESSON # 2 - NON-GOVERNMENT SOURCES SHOULD RECEIVE FAR MORE MEDIA COVERAGE

Vietnam demonstrates that the media gives most coverage to those who are most often wrong, and least coverage to those who are most often right. The present bias against non-government news sources must be changed.

Richard Nixon's and others' charges that the North Vietnamese had brutally mistreated Catholics received immense coverage. In the fall of 1974, Bishop Grutka of Gary, Indiana, became the first U.S. Catholic prelate to visit North Vietnam. Upon his return, he held a press conference to report that he had found Catholics in North Vietnam were far better treated than he had been led to believe. His statements received virtually no national media attention.

Throughout the war, peace activists consistently revealed new and accurate information - from the use of anti-personnel weapons to atrocities to the bombing of civilian targets - which was consistently ignored or downplayed. Such critics were not always right, of course, but their track record was far better than that of government spokesmen.

Their record was also far better than that of former government officials who turned against the war rather late in the game, and then usually on the grounds of its ineffectiveness. What media attention was given to war critics, however, was usually devoted to people like former Defense Secretary Clark Clifford or Senator William Fulbright. Such people deserve credit, of course, for having the courage to admit that they had once been wrong. The notion, however, that the media should
have made their limited perspective the main voice of the opposition is a major example of bias.

If the media were truly to learn the lessons of the Vietnam war, it would give its greatest coverage to non-government spokespeople ranging from Ralph Nader to Noam Chomsky to Cesar Chavez. People like these, with a proven record of accuracy, would set the terms of national debate. Former government officials would receive the next greatest coverage, government officials the least.

Failing such a solution, the least that could be done at this point is for the media to present a better balance of views. Any page 1 announcement of a government action should have, in the second or third paragraph, the response of non-official critics; critics, who are now ignored despite their presenting far more evidence than officials, should have their press conferences and meetings fully reported.

The media has made a subjective judgement that Executive officials are the true representatives of the American people, and thus should be most fully reported. This is why every major media outlet has a full-time reporter at the White House, Pentagon, State Department, etc., and none covering Ralph Nader full-time. Such a notion of the Executive branch, however, is clearly outdated at a time when fewer men have more power than at any time in our history.

The major rationale for whom the media will cover must be to some degree subjective, to be sure. The criterion should not be official position, however, but the degree to which a spokesperson represents large numbers of people, their interests, or possesses expertise in his or her field.

This principle should extend to journalistic sources now ignored. Dispatch news service, for example, was a team of bright, Vietnamese-speaking reporters, who were far better informed about Vietnam than their media counterparts. For nearly five years, Dispatch tried to market dozens of well-documented stories about aspects of the war that
the national media in Saigon were ignoring. Relatively few such stories – My Lai and U.S. intelligence-gathering into China out of Laos come to mind – were ever published in national outlets.

Even more shocking was the non-use of such establishment agencies as Agence France Presse when its stories emanated from Hanoi, despite the fact that AFP was the only western news agency with a full-time reporter there. The most famous example was the report by Jean Thoraval of a dike bombed by U.S. planes as he was standing on it. The story, sent out on the ticker at a crucial point in the dike-bombing controversy, was not printed in any major American media or carried on TV. Only the New York Times, a day later, even mentioned the story. It was referred to on page 3 under a headline and lead stating that the Pentagon had denied a report of dike-bombing by Thoraval.

The media must change its present rule of avoiding material not gathered by its reporters. When a newsworthy, important story appears that cannot be covered by the newspaper or TV station in person – for whatever reason – it should be carried.

LESSON # 3- CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC BIAS SHOULD END

It is too simplistic of course, to ascribe all media failings to government pressure. The fact is that media executives in particular, and many reporters in general, think like many government officials. Media thinking is biased toward middle-class, industrialized, white values.

A New York Times reporter to be posted to Moscow, for example, spends a year studying Russian language and Soviet society. Arriving in Moscow he or she and editors back at home – will naturally identify with the plight of Soviet dissidents. During a two-year stint, dozens of stories will be filed about political repression and government refusal to allow Russians to emigrate freely.
No reporters from the Times or any other major media were trained in Vietnamese language and culture. Newsmen in Saigon lived in villas indistinguishable from those possessed by U.S. officials, and spent most of their leisure hours with such officials or other journalists. Their personal contacts with Vietnamese tended to be limited to their maids, women-friends, Saigon government officials, or middle-class Vietnamese assistants.

As a result, Vietnamese of heroic stature—like student leader Huynh Tan Man or Catholic priest Chan Tin—were largely ignored by the media, who did not move in circles with such Vietnamese or know enough to judge their importance. As a result, the media transmitted fundamentally wrong understandings of the Vietnamese people to the American people.

Vietnamese peasants tended to regard non-Vietnamese speaking U.S. newsmen—descending on their refugee camps with interpreters, cameras, vehicles—as U.S. government officials and soldiers: with suspicion and fear. These peasants would answer newsmen's questions with attitudes ranging from pro-western support to saying they did not like either side and just wished to be left alone. Newsmen then portrayed in film and print a hapless, non-political, indifferent peasantry devoid of such human characteristics as courage, sophistication, or political will. The result, in part, was that the American people naturally concluded that the PRG had no popular support and was some kind of alien force—a conclusion contradicted both by massive evidence not picked up by the national media and common sense.

Americans who chose to live with the Vietnamese people and speak their language developed a far different view. People like the Quakers and many International Voluntary Services (IVS) volunteers accumulated a great store of knowledge about and respect for—the PRG during the war. They not only understood years before the end that we could not win, but why. Had the media objectively presented the facts, the American people might also have understood that the PRG was a popular, mass movement.
representing the nationalistic traditions of the Vietnamese people. The war might have ended years sooner.

One of my most instructive moments about the media occurred during a visit to Cambodia in May 1973. The Khmer Rouge at that point had gone from a few thousand guerrillas in 1970 to a mass movement of millions controlling some 75% of Cambodia, in the face of what we now know was four years of B-52 carpet-bombing which had erased thousands of Cambodian villages from the face of the earth. Their emphasis on revolutionary morality was already well-known at that point.

One morning I visited the front-lines - a Lon Nol unit firing a big gun across the Mekong - with a well-known reporter. We were told we could not cross the river, as we wished (to investigate reports of U.S. bombing of a village on the other bank). The Khmer Rouge were directly opposite.

On the way home, about one o'clock in the afternoon, we decided to attend a party given for reporters in a houseboat about five miles away. I soon found myself at the entrance, where I was instructed to remove my clothes and don a sarong. Entering the room I saw a dozen reporters similarly adorned, paired off with Cambodian prostitutes. As I watched reporters from our national news agencies smoking marihuana, a network TV correspondent lolling on his back and being fed grapes by his companion, a major international reporter disappeared into a back-room behind two women half his age, and two foreign correspondants dragged a squealing young maiden under an American Embassy official doing push-ups; I could hear guns firing off in the distance.

The point here is not to judge morality. It is simply to note that the cultural and class barriers between the western media and Cambodian revolutionaries was far too wide for most newsmen even to begin to understand, let alone transmit the meaning of the Cambodian Revolution.

The suggestion that journalists should be encouraged to live among the ordinary people about whom they are reporting - at home and abroad - will not bridge this gap. It is, however, a beginning.
LESSON # 4 - INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PRESSURE ON MEDIA EXECUTIVES IS NECESSARY

The national media are, of course, large corporations. The present collusion between media executives and Executive branch officials is less conscious conspiracy than shared mentality. The national media heads, therefore, are no more likely to adopt the changes outlined above on their own accord than is President Ford about to come out for full employment. Change can only come from pressure from within the media - from below - coupled with widespread public pressure from without.

The NBC-TV Tomorrow programs on Vietnam, presented in September 1974, provide a case-study of the problem. The show's producers, as was the custom, picked one of their own to go to Vietnam in July to do advance work for host Tom Snyder's visit in August. They were then suddenly informed by NBC-News in New York, which had formal although rarely-exercised authority over the Tomorrow show's political programs, that another producer had been selected to make the advance visit. (NBC News is headed by John Chancellor, formerly head of the U.S. Information Service (USIS).

The new producer went out to Vietnam accompanied by a man described as both an expert and friend. The expert was a former USIS official who had served with the Public Affairs Office of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon for several years. He remained in Vietnam for a month, setting up interviews and planning stories for Snyder to do on his arrival.

The resulting four programs from Vietnam, shown to a viewing audience of some 20 million people, had a noticeable pro-USIS and pro-Thieu stance. There was a long interview with the notoriously corrupt head of the refugee program, Dr. Pham Quang Dan, in a uniquely well-equipped refugee camp set up especially for foreign visitors. His descriptions of fulsome GVN programs for refugees were paralleled by similar distortions from other U.S. and Vietnamese officials.

Although the new producer had been given the name of Father Chan Tin, a Catholic
priest who was the best-informed person in the world on the treatment of political prisoners, Chan Tin and the subject were ignored. The producer also did not choose to interview John Spragens with four other reporters, on the grounds that Spragens - who spoke Vietnamese and knew Vietnam and the PRG as few other Americans - was a "communist".

Tomorrow, which has done several controversial programs, did not consider itself a conscious agent of the American government. But the close ties between top NBC Executives and government officials made it a distinction without a difference.

The story of the media in Vietnam, however, would not be complete without noting the fact that individual reporters did make a difference. One thinks of Gloria Emerson, who not only herself reported the human dimension week after week in the New York Times for two years, but exerted considerable moral pressure on both her colleagues and superiors during that period. One thinks also of the extraordinarily sensitive reporting on the plight of the Cambodian people by Sidney Shanberg.

Such examples demonstrate that the mass media can find sensitive reporters with the ability to reach the American people. That executives choose to employ so few such journalists, however, points to the need for public pressure from without to support internal pressure from within.

Reporters in other countries - those of Le Monde come to mind - have banded together and obtained ownership and editorial input into the papers they write for. The individual reporter can have influence by lobbying colleagues and superiors to demand less pro-government slant in the paper. Such pressure from within, however, can only succeed if paralleled by public pressure.

Vietnam, once again, is instructive. It is inconceivable that the media would have changed its reporting to the limited extent it did without the prior success of publications like Ramparts and the organizing done by the peace movement, which massively changed public consciousness. No one's thinking remained unchanged by the activities of the peace movement during the 1960's, including that of media
executives (less) and normal journalists (more). The peace movement became a force which raised issues that media could no longer cavalierly ignore.

The most important lesson of the media and Vietnam, perhaps, is that it takes considerable public pressure to move media executives, but that such pressure can succeed.

What is needed now is that church, political, and community organizations begin to demand that the media act more responsibly; that, for example, the media cover public representatives more than Executive branch officials. They must demand that reporters be sought whose writing reflects the aspirations and problems of ordinary people around the globe, that at least one columnist be hired to make the case for national liberation movements abroad and attempts at home to wrest control from giant corporations.

It can be said that such notions interfere with the concept of a free press. We are not advocating government control of the press, however. Indeed, we are arguing that we have now far more government control of the press than we can afford— as Vietnam so dramatically illustrates.

In the end we are talking about power. William Simon's views on inflation are more widely known than Ralph Nader's, only because both Simon and media executives have more power than Nader.

Only a growing movement of people who are increasing control over their lives will be able to bring about a substantive change in which information the media chooses to give the American people.