

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN VIETNAM AND LAOS

FRED SIEBERT'S COMMUNIST MEDIA THEORY RE-EXAMINED



Prof. Tjipta Lesmana

Tjipta Lesmana is a graduate of APCSS' Advanced Security Cooperation course (TSC 16-1). He is a social communication advisor to the Indonesia Ministry of Defense. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of APCSS, the U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

Abstract

Two major world events have left created a significant impact on how the media operates in Southeast Asia.

The end of 20-year Vietnam War in 1975 drastically changed the political landmark of Indo-China. The two Vietnams – North and South Vietnam emerged as one communist country. Likewise, Laos became a communist country. South Vietnam as a capitalist country and Kingdom regime in Laos disappeared from the global map.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, almost all former communist countries in Eastern Europe and Asia, including Vietnam and Laos, systematically moved toward liberal nations. Uniquely enough, politically, the communist party's grip of power is omnipotent. Economically, however, the countries are opening their door to foreign investors, moving toward a capitalist system.

Vietnam, economically, is progressing rapidly by implementing the open door economic policy. ASEAN and later TPP – Trans Pacific Partnership – render a golden opportunity for Vietnam to push its economic growth and grasp more dollar for its foreign reserve. While Laos has not seen economic gains compared to Vietnam, its economic prospect is also hopeful.

Paddling between the communist and capitalist systems how these “emerging nations” rule their press life? Are the citizens free to express their voices in the press? Both Vietnam and Laos constitution guarantee press freedom and free expressions of their people. How the people in both countries exercise the freedom and how journalists present the news in their newspaper are the focus of this current research.

Based on Fred Siebert, et al, *Soviet Communist Theory of the Press* and McQuale *Development Press Theory*, 52 news articles at four editions of daily *Vietnam News* and 36 news articles at 3 editions of daily *Vientiane News* are carefully examined using quantitative and qualitative methods. Items of news examined are only those related to politics, economy, social and culture. The news characteristic is measured into three variables: supportive, critical, and normative.

Regarding Laotian press freedom, data is also based on in-depth interview with a Laotian journalist, conducted under a special arrangement since Laotian journalists are strictly barred from interacting with foreigners. In addition, data from several previous studies in the area are used to support the research analysis.

Research finds around 70% of the news examined is supportive in nature, meaning it supports the government or ruling party policies, and national “successful” economic program. Whereas 25% of the news is normative, and [mildly] critical in nature.

Laotian press, in general, is more strictly controlled by the government compared to Vietnamese press. News in daily *Vientiane News* is shorter and “less colorful.” Both media

have no editorial pages, and no “letters to the editor”. Seemingly, press in both communist countries close the access for readers’ feedback.

Introduction

Siebert, et al. (1956) in his classic book *Four Theories of the Press*, remains popular by communication students overseas, including Indonesians, stated that there are four press theories in the world, namely authoritarian media theory, libertarian, Soviet communist and social responsibility media theory. A press system in a country always follows the political system in the corresponding country. If a country uses a liberal political system, its press must also be liberal. On the other hand, if the political system is autocratic, its press certainly runs an authoritarian system.

The press in the ex-Soviet Union and all communist countries in East Europe runs communist press system. However, after the communist power fell at the end of 1980s with its climax of the downfall of the Soviet Union on January 1, 1992, the press in the ex-Soviet countries and the entire East Europe area slowly oriented toward a liberal system because their social-political system also experienced a radical change: from communism to liberalism/capitalism.

The Communist press has the following characteristics, (a) its ownership is in the hands of the nation or party, (b) the press is the voice of the party, it is even an integral part of the party, voicing its party and government’s policy, (c) the press main function is as the party’s tool of propaganda, agitation, and indoctrination towards all level of society, (d) the press stirs the people’s active participation in the national development. On the other hand, in the libertarian system the press is (a) the vehicle of a free and open interaction of all level of society to seek the truth, (b) a watchdog agent to supervise the running of the government, besides (c) functioning as information, education, and entertainment.

In the libertarian system, generally the press is privately owned, without any license, censorship, and ban system. Practically, the press may write about anything, including criticizing and condemning the government policy. Its orientation towards profits is unavoidable, considering that the press gradually becomes a giant industry with a capital intensive. On the contrary, in the communist system, the private sector has no possibility to own the press, according to the doctrine of communism which removes all forms of *private property*.

What is interesting to know is how the system and practice of the press in communist countries which undergo radical changes in their economic system. Those countries are Peoples Republic of China, Vietnam, and Laos. Following the downfall of the Soviet Union and East Europe, China is still formally a communist country. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) still clutches the political life, but its economy is systematically heading to capitalist regime inviting huge amount of foreign capitals. Competitive culture is encouraged, even supported maximally to achieve an optimal efficiency at Chinese industry in order to grab maximum profit as well. In such situation how is press operating?

Currently Vietnam and Laos are still pursuing communist system. The economy slowly but surely is moving toward capitalist system, too, although not as radically as the change of the economic system in China. Will there be a significant change in Vietnamese and Laotian media behavior considering the adagium that the press system anywhere always follows its social-political system?

Current research object is media behavior and press system in Vietnam and Laos. Some finding of research on China press system is quoted as comparison only.

Research Questions

1. How is the current press freedom in Vietnam and Laos?
2. Are the media behaviors in both countries' newspapers similar or different from the online journalism?
3. Are the media behaviors in Vietnam and Laos still consistent with Fred Siebert's communist press theory?

Theoretical Framework

Communism and liberal democracy have very different perspectives about freedom of the press. For liberalism it is impossible for a capitalist system to develop if individuals are not given a freedom to think and express opinions (McNair, 2004:16-18). Cited from Bobbio, McNair wrote: "The main concern of liberal democratic society was thus to grant individual civil liberties against the incursion of the state".

Similar standpoint is echoed by Christians, et al (1993:28-29) in their statement that "freedom of the press is a personal and universal prerogative to publish one's view freely, a natural right belonging to anyone who cares or has the wherewithal to establish newspaper, magazine, or broadcasting station". Strengthening the opinion about the relationship between democracy and freedom of the press, Merrill (1989:115) wrote: "a democratic people need information upon which to base their decision, and, second, the basic principle of free press, which is protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution".

How is the communism view on freedom of expression and freedom of the press? Lenin (1977:150-151), the founding father of the Soviet Union, explicitly wrote:

Everyone is free to write and say whatever he likes, without any restrictions. But every voluntary association (including a party) is also free to expel members who use the name of the party to advocate anti-party views. Freedom of speech and the press must be complete. But then freedom of association must be complete too. I am bound to accord you, in the name of free speech, the full right to shout, lie and write to your heart's content. But you are bound to grant me, in the name of freedom of association, the right to enter into, or withdraw from, association with people advocating this or that view. The party is voluntary association, which would inevitably break up, first ideologically and the physically, if it did not cleanse itself of people advocating anti-party view.

Yes, to freedom of expression and freedom of the press! Also, yes to freedom of the party! The communist government will never allow its people to use the freedom of expression, say, to criticize and attack the party such that the party unity will be threatened. The [communist] party unity is everything for communism. Lenin condemns the press freedom in the West version by saying "There can be no real and effective freedom in a society based on the power of money, in a society in which the masses of working people live in poverty and the handful rich live like parasites. Are you free in relation to your bourgeois publisher, Mr. Writer?"

Lenin then stated his vision about freedom of the press to be built in the Soviet Union and other communist countries. "We want to establish, and we shall establish, a free press, free not simply from the police, but also from capital, from coercion, and what is more, free from bourgeois-anarchist individualism".

A sharp distinction on the meaning of freedom of the press conveys a different point of view about the mass media function (including printed media). In the West the mass communication functions as the wide spreading of information, education, entertainment, truth seeking forum, and overseeing the government as a watchdog (McNair, 2003: 21-22; Janda, et

al., 1989:188-189). According to Christians et al. (1993:vi), the main function of [mass] media is “to provide people with an image of the many aspects of the world that they cannot perceive themselves; serve as a forum where big issues are debated until the needed consensus is reached”. The teaching of communist media (Siebert, et al., 1956: 121-122) is to assert that the mass communication functions as (a) a nation and party tool; (b) an instrument to keep the unity of the nation and party; (c) a funnel of the nation and party; (d) and a tool of propaganda and agitation.

The distinction of a sharp perception on the freedom of the press and the mass communication function between 2 (two) sides result in the difference of perceptions and concepts of “news” in the media. For the West, news means “an accurate, unbiased account of the significant facts of a timely happening that is of interest to the readers of the newspaper that prints the account” (Mott, et al, 1958:58), or a more extreme definition: “News is anything that fits to print.” Whatever is eligibly published to the public, according to the followers of the liberal press system, it is news. However, how the news is defined and published, it is a matter of editorial policy.

In a communist country, the main function of the media is to support the party and the government, besides functioning as tools of propaganda and indoctrination. News by itself must expose positive things for the party and the government. The success of the national development becomes the focus of the media reporting, its party’s activities, including activities of party leaders are also the main reporting priority. Seemingly the negative things in the eye of the government or about the development failure, may not be exposed. What is a “must not” publication by the communist media is criticism towards the party leader. As Lenin underlined: “Attacks against [party] leadership are equivalent to treason against the state. Purges are an accepted tool of governing. And the police apparatus must provide whatever control structure is necessary to mobilize and direct the energy of the mass.”

Methodology

This paper attempts just to give a preliminary picture on current press freedom in Vietnam and Laos, using quantitative and qualitative approach. Data are collected using “available sample” technique (Wimmer, et al., 2006: 90-91) from 3 editions of daily *Vietnam News*, and 2 editions of daily *Vientiane Times*. All the papers were purposively picked up during author’s visit to the countries, respectively in December 2015 and July 2013. It is acknowledged that “available samples” do not represent the population and therefore have no external validity” (opcit).

A total of 52 news items at *Vietnam News* and 36 news from *Vientiane Times* were thoroughly examined using quantitative content analysis method. News content was grouped into 6 categories: party activity, government activity, national development (especially success stories), international cooperation, criminal, and social events. The purpose is to examine which items are mostly reported in the two dailies.

The whole 88 (52+36) news is then classified into 3 categories, namely: normative, openness, slightly/moderately critical to find out whether the news reporting covers the following elements (a) openness (bravery to expose failures or negative impacts of development) and (b) critique, or merely (3) norms, meaning only reporting events as it is without any interpretation whatsoever.

A minor comparison is made with several e-news published by the two dailies. “Available sample” technique is, again, used in picking-up the e-news. What is examined is online news containing critique elements, not just normative reporting.

Finding and interpretation

Viet Nam News is published by The Viet Nam News Agency (VNA), a government agency, the official news provider of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Publication permit: 32/GP-BTTTT. ISSN: 0868-3069, website: vietnamnews.com. On top of the front page, it is written:

Viet Nam News

The National English Language Daily.

It publishes daily, except Sunday, with average pages of 27. As the only news agency of the whole country, the state-run VNA is responsible for publishing official information and documents of the party and state, providing information in service of the party leadership and state management, while collecting and providing news via various forms to the mass media agencies, the public and readers of all kinds, both at home and abroad.

Vientiane Times is published by Lao Press in Foreign Languages which is a specialised agency of the Ministry of Information and Culture, since 1994, and normally runs to sixteen pages. *On top of Page 1 it is written:*

Vientiane Times

The First National English Language Newspaper

The articles studied are limited to news related to national, province, and district problems in Vietnam and Laos. World news, sports, health, arts, features and others are not studied. Therefore, the research covers the news printed on page 1 to page 6 at both *Viet Nam News* and *Vientiane Times*.

Out of the 52 news taken from *Viet Nam News* (see Table 1 to 5), 3 of them are about party activities, 8 on government activities, 13 on development progress, 4 on international cooperation, 10 criminal incidents, 4 accidents and 10 social activities. On *Vientiane Times*, none of the news is about party activities, 9 on the government activities, 13 on the development, 5 on international collaborations, 5 on crimes, 2 on accident incidents, and 2 on social activities.

Table 1. Daily Viet Nam News Topical Content, Tuesday, December 22, 2015

	Party activities	Government activities*	National Development**	International cooperation	Crime	Accident	Social	
Page 1	√	√	√					3
Page 2		√	√		√√			4
Page 3					√√√	√		4
Page 4						√	√√	3
Page 5							√	1
Total	1	2	2	0	5	2	3	15

Table 2. Daily Viet Nam News Topical Content, Thursday, December 24, 2015

	Party activities	Government activities*	National Development**	International cooperation	Crime	Accident	Social	
Page 1			√√	√				3
Page 2			√√	√				3
Page 3		√	√√	√	√	√		6
Page 4			√√√	√				4
Page 5							√√	2
Total		1	9	4	1	1	2	18

*National, provincial and district governments

**Especially, success stories about development

Table 3. Daily Viet Nam News Topical Content, Saturday, December 26, 2015

	Party activities	Government activities*	National Development	International cooperation	Crime	Accident	Social	
Page 1		√					√√	3
Page 2		√√			√√		√	5
Page 3	√√				√√	√	√√	7
Page 4		√√	√√				√√	6
Page 5								
Total	2	5	2	0	4	1	5	19

Total news examined: 52

Table 4. Daily Vientiane Times Topical Content, Thursday, July 25, 2013

	Party activities	Government activities*	National Development**	International cooperation	Crime	Accident	Social	
Page 1			√√	√				3
Page 2			√√	√				3
Page 3		√	√√	√	√	√		6
Page 4			√√√	√				4
Page 5							√√	2
Total	0	1	9	4	1	1	2	18

Table 5. Daily Vientiane Times Topical Content, Friday, July 26, 2013

	Party activities	Government activities*	National Development**	International cooperation	Crime	Accident	Social	
Page 1		√√√						3
Page 2		√	√					2
Page 3		√√		√				3
Page 4		√√	√√			√		5
Page 6			√		√√√√			5
Total	0	8	4	1	4	1	0	18

Total news examined at *Vientiane Times* 36

Regarding news characters, out of 52 news articles from *Viet Nam News*, at least 10 of them fulfill the characteristics of critics (though it is moderate) and openness. The open news, is among others (a) the headline on page 3, the edition of 24 December 2015 entitled “Ha Noi to Restore City’s Polluted, Smelly River”¹, (b) page 3 the same edition entitled: “Chemicals used in illegal gold mining hurt environment”² and (3) page 2, the edition of 26 December 2015 entitled “Trade center woes probed”³.

Concerning the variable of critic, this paper on its Dec.r 26, 2015 edition, page 4, publishes the news entitled “Poverty alleviation should be based on a household’s needs”, a critic towards the government arguing incorrect approach in decreasing the level of poverty. Still on the same edition, page 4, there is news entitled “Unemployment among graduates rises in third quarter”. The news asked the government attention on the rise of university graduate joblessness.

The remaining 42 news, all are normative, news as it is, news without any interpretation or elements of critics.

Out of 36 news at *Vientiane Times* daily studied, none contains openness and critics. The news is dominated by information on the development, especially success stories in development. Even small-scaled development is also exposed. For example, on the headline on page 2, the edition of July 26, 2013, “New Computer for Environment Promotion Office”, is only about the German aid to the Ministry of Natural Resources in the form of computer apparatus valued 500 million for the scope of an education project. It seems there is no more significant news placed as the *headline news* on page 2 on that day. Still on the same edition, page 4 of the newspaper the news reported entitled “Resident’s of nine villages in Ganxay district, Attapeu Province will have access to permanent electricity by 2015”. The information on the plan for 9 villages in which the electricity would be built in the year of 2015, at the latest, becomes important news for *Vientiane Times* Daily.

All of the news at English Laos newspapers is normative in nature. The news does not even contain opinion elements. Also, there is no *opinion page* rubric and editorial, the same as at daily *Viet Nam News*. Everywhere in the world newspapers fill with editorial, “corner” and “letters to the editor” (Mott, et al., 1958:258), since “editorial is the mouthpiece of the editor

¹ About pollution to a river at Ha Noi as the impact on a negative development.

² About irresponsible practice of mining companies that contaminates the environment.

³ People against the construction of new trade center at Gia Lau District’s Vinh Hiep Commune. Thousands of people conducted a protest on the trade development center as there is such center nearby.

and his readers where the news and tendencies of the day are discussed,” wrote George Fox Mott et al.

Therefore, both *Viet Nam News* and *Vientiane Times* dailies close their communication access to their readers. By in large, there is no feedback from their readers.

Interestingly, online news behavior is much more dynamic, especially in Vietnam. Apparently they enjoy significant freedom. For example, the E-news *Vietnam Tribune* in the edition of 27 January 2016 wrote about the resignation of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung from the Committee membership of Vietnam Communist Party in January 2016. Dung was reported as “self-recognition” because of his fight against several seniors and influential members of the Central Committee. He was considered too liberal to implement the government policy in the economic sector. Vietnam banking crisis and governmentally owned enterprises in the period of Dung’s leadership becomes a negative note for his leadership, including the membership of Vietnam in commerce in the Pact Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) led by the US in 2014.

Thank Nien News in the edition of Jan. 30, 2016 exposed the smuggling done by a Vietnam diplomat in the UN who just completed his official duty. Hai Pong tax officer confiscated a container full of alcohol drinks smuggled illegally on behalf of “used goods.” The diplomat’s goods as weighed as 1.5 tons were categorized as “illegal,” including 500 whisky bottles, and medical supplement. The container was shipped to the port of Tan Vu on Jan. 11, 2016. The sender and receiver’s name was the same. The tax office was suspicious that the diplomat was doing tax evasion.

At Laos online news, such critical news is not found. Out of all portal news at *Vientiane Times* daily in the edition of January 2016 examined, none of the critical nuance is found.

Analysis and Discussion

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, according to 2013 constitution, “is an independent, sovereign and united country, which in its territorial integrity comprises its mainland, islands, territorial waters and air space.” Article 4.1. underlines the central position of Vietnam Communist Party in the country: “The Communist Party of Vietnam, the vanguard of the Vietnamese working class, simultaneously the vanguard of the toiling people and of the Vietnamese nation, the faithful representative of the interests of the working class, the toiling people, and the whole nation, acting upon the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and Ho Chi Minh’s thought, is the leading force of the State and society. “ Article 4.1 of the Constituion underlines a clear statement that Vietnam is a communist country, with Communist Party of Vietnam as a vanguard of the nation. The word “vanguard” can be defined as the forefront of the nation, or top leader of state organization.

Laos is also a communist country. Unlike Vietnam, however, in the Laos Constitution of 2013, the communist party of the Laos People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP), is almost never mentioned at all. Nevertheless, foreign diplomats in Laos and foreign observers ascertain that LPRP play a crucial role in the political life in Laos. The party truly controls the political power. Laos communist party just recently concluded its congressional session on 22 January 2016. During the session, which is forbidden for foreign media to cover, Mr Bounnhang, who was 78 years old, was elected as the new General Secretary replacing Choummaly Sayasone, who was 79 and resigned after 10 years in power.

Both Vietnam and Laos constitutions guarantee freedom of expressing opinions and press freedom to their peoples. The guarantee was stated on Article 25 of Vietnam Constitution and Article 44 of Laos Constitution stating “Lao citizens have the right and freedom of speech, press and assembly; and have the right to set up associations and to stage demonstrations which

are not contrary to the laws.” However, the aforementioned press freedom format is very different in practice from the conventional concept of freedom of the press. The main function of the press in a communist country is “to contribute to the advance of working class and world communist in the class struggle, and to maintain and advance the power of the Soviets.” (Siebert et al. :122). All forms of criticism frequently echoed in western media against its government will not be tolerated by the communist party as the highest power holder. It even does not justify differing views from the government. In a communist country all problems have only one side, not two. “There are no two sides to every question. There are only focused and unfocused lenses on reality.” On the contrary, the communist press is always required to support the government and its policies. Therefore, news on government activities, especially its success stories, are always exposed by the media.

People who sit in the media leadership in Vietnam and Laos are almost certainly communist party members, even senior members. This fact was obtained when two Indonesian journalists and I visited Soviet Union in 1978 and interviewed the Deputy Chief Editor of *Izvestia*, the Soviet government newspaper at that time (while *Pravda* is a Communist Party organ in the Soviet Union). Nikolai I. Efimov, Deputy Chief Editor, stated that mass media leaders are always party members. Therefore, the news published almost certainly never “deviates” because as the party member he knows exactly the party ideology, and direction of party or government policies, except for certain news which is considered sensitive. In that case, a consultation with the boss of the party should be done before publishing. The popular term was then called D-Notice (Lesmana, 1978:97-101).

My interview with a local journalist in Vientiane when we visited the country gives some interesting insight. First, Laos journalists are prohibited to interact with foreign media. Stern sanctions will be in force towards its violation. Second, surely journalists are not free in writing the news. They are always asked to write facts as they are, and they may not add any opinions. Third, they have to be loyal to the government. Any kind of criticism is not permitted. Fourth, the news source is always government officials. Fifth, they admitted that they often work in oppressive situations..On the one hand they silently follow the development of situation from foreign sources (a number of foreign news offices allowed to be operated in Vientiane). But, on the other hand they are not braved enough to write outside the corridors already determined.

Even so, seemingly there has been a shift of the press life in Vietnam and Laos in the past few years. This is reflected in the online news, more specifically what we have seen in Hanoi. It seems this phenomenon is related to the economic development which is more progressive in Vietnam. A similar phenomenon has been seen in China. In her extensive study on media life, especially the social media in China, Sheila Coronel (2016) expressed that the central government of China no longer has firm grip on the social media. Some freedom is allowed for the media to find advertisements for their survival. Interaction with business community in so doing cannot be avoided. Rich information about business and economy is obtained while interacting with them. Media, then, becomes more critical toward the government especially regarding corruption and red-tape in government institutions. The party and government are forced to give some freedom to media, particularly social media.

Vietnamese press is apparently heading to similar phenomenon due to fast growing and more open to its economy. With significant progress achieved in its national economy content of the media is also undergoing significant change: more open and more critical.

Implication

Press freedom in the former communist regimes seemingly correlate positively with its economic system. When the economy is consistently moving toward capitalist system the press enjoys more freedom. Seen from the economic perspective, Vietnam is more developed than Laos. Consequently, the media has more freedom compared to media in Laos. The press in Laos is still in the hard grip of the government, its economy is much behind Vietnamese economy.

Whether or not freedom of the press in Laos will go hand in hand with its economy development, journalism academicians will have to examine. Reality in China proves that when a nation economic growth is reaching high, more freedom in its media realm cannot be denied. Arnold Ruge, a German philosopher and political writer in mid-19th century, wrote (as quoted by Hook, 1962:131-132): “Without criticism there is no development and without development there is no life.” Free press, along with strong parliament and efficient legal system, is needed for the progress of a nation, wrote Ruge.

Therefore, the Communist Press Theory described by Siebert et al. should be reexamined. The fact is party’s control on its press life is gradually loosing along with the progress and openness of its economic system. The capitalistic economy will find it difficult to repress the media although the communist party still tightly controls the political life.

About the author

Dr. Tjipta Lesmana, M.A., is a Professor of political communication at the Department of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Pelita Harapan, Indonesia. He teaches Media Theory, Introduction to Journalism, Mass Communication, Media Law, and Theory of Communication. A Graduate of University of Chicago, Illinois, USA, and Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta, he served in 2013-2014 as member of Commission of Constitution, attended many seminars and workshops abroad, guest lecturer in 2005 at Yongsei University, Han Nam University, and Kemyung University, Republic of Korea. He writes 10 books, among others “Press Freedom in Indonesia” (1985), “Downfall of Communis Regimes” (1997), “Libel in US and Indonesia” (2005), “Political Communcation of 6 Presidents of Indonesia” (2009), and “Comparative Study Political Communication and Football Communication” (2013).

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