

The Media in Vietnam: Burning Truth

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Vietnam rarely makes the news these days, but there was a recent item about a journalist who died after being doused in his sleep with a chemical, then set on fire. The BBC implied that he may have been retaliated against for reporting on official misconduct.

Investigating corruption and abuse of power, Hoang Hung made plenty of enemies in high places. His best know article is about how officials in Long An, after receiving bribes from developers, kicked hundreds of farmers off their lands to make way for golf courses. After his death, a colleague quoted Hoang Hung, "We're soldiers on the media battlefield. We must dare to speak the truth, dare to fight for social justice in spite of harassment from many quarters." Fifty years old at his death, Hoang Hung was too young to participate in the Vietnam War. His father, however, was a Vietcong who died in battle.

In a bitter twist, the Vietnamese "Communists" won the war so they could eventually open the country to Capitalist sweat shops and golf courses. To make room for a rich man's game, hundreds of Vietnamese became landless. Though Vietnam is smaller than California, it has more than twice the population. The deltas and coastline are packed with people. There, even a lawn is an alien concept, and as popular as soccer is, there are few grass fields. Vietnamese grow rice and vegetables, not grass. The last thing Vietnam needs is golf courses, but of course they aren't built for the locals.

According to George Carlin, America doesn't need these vast, high maintenance fields either. From a 1992 skit, "It is time to reclaim the golf courses from the wealthy and turn them over to the homeless [...] Think of how big a golf course is. The ball is that fucking big! What do these pinheaded pricks need with all that land? There are over 17,000 golf courses in America. They average over 150 acres apiece. That's 3 million plus acres, 4,820 square miles. You could build two Rhode Islands and a Delaware for the homeless on the land currently being wasted on this meaningless, mindless, arrogant, elitist, racist [...] and a boring game."

In any case, whoever killed Hoang Hung was a pro. The assassin knew that he tended to work late and often slept in his second floor home office. Waiting until the lights were out, the killer managed to climb onto the balcony without being detected just after midnight. He then entered the darkened room where his target was sound asleep inside the mosquito netting. After the attack, there were photos published in the Vietnamese press of the scorched bed and the near-naked victim lying in the hospital, where he suffered for ten days before dying. Make no mistake about this: Hoang Hung was killed as a warning to other journalists. Make too much noise and you will be roasted alive like this man.

In the 60's, South Vietnamese monks immolated themselves to protest against the

government. Their action was effective because it was a horrendous spectacle. It was visual. At the same time, South Vietnam's best novelist, Nhat Linh, also committed suicide in protest, but he did it by ingesting poison in private. Whereas the image of a burning monk has become iconic, Nhat Linh's death caused no international ripple whatsoever. It wasn't visual. There is nothing to show.

Everywhere now, not least America, writers are becoming more invisible by the day, in any case. With so much mass media all the time, it would not matter if an American writer became a living torch in Times Square. They'd just hose his ashes into the gutter and point the camera at the naked cowboy. The Vietnamese Communists have also figured out that serious writers are mostly irrelevant in this cultural climate. They used to lock up poets—one, Nguyen Chi Thien, was imprisoned for a total of twenty-seven years—but now they pretty much leave poets alone. Though many are still blocked from publishing, poets are no longer jailed. To imprison a poet is to shine a spotlight on him. No one pays attention to poets anyway, no matter what they write. From the perspective of tyranny, it would be foolish to flesh out this nothingness.

Journalists, however, are a different story. They can still reach the masses. America has solved this problem by consolidating her media outlets. There are countless newspapers and TV stations here, there seems to be many voices speaking, but nearly all are manipulated by the same puppet master. As everyone sits in the dark, the spotlight is fixed on a tiny ring where there's much flailing over next to nothing. Should anyone still manages to get out of line, however, America can always snuff him out, just like the Vietnamese did. Invading Iraq, we bombed the office of Al Jazeera and shelled the Palestine Hotel, killing three journalists. We also arrested Al Jazeera's al Sami al-Hajj and kept him in Guantanamo for six years without charge. In 2005, an American tank shot at a car carrying Italian journalist, Giuliana Sgrena, injuring her and killing intel agent, Nicola Calipari.

On the American fringe, independent voices are free to write as they please, but even the best among them can only appear in little read webzines. Many write almost exclusively on their own blogs. Needless to say, they have almost no impact on the general public. In too late late capitalism, those who seek to tell the truth don't need to be burnt. They are already being drown out by nonsense.

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