On Thursday 26 February, CDI, in cooperation with the Office of National Assembly of Vietnam (ONA), organised a discussion between Canberra and Hanoi conducted through the video conferencing facilities of the World Bank’s Global Distance Learning Network (GDLN). The format took the shape of an interview of journalist Graeme Dobell, presenter of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s weekly TV parliamentary reporting program Order in the House conducted by Roland Rich with the audience in Hanoi adding questions and comments at various stages, facilitated by Andrew Scyner and Nguyen Si Dung. Participants in Hanoi comprised officials of the ONA as well as working journalists who report on the National Assembly (list below). One feature of the session was the illustration of various points being made by showing clips of the ABC program and the Vietnamese TV program Thoi Su.

The two-hour discussion ranged over many issues. It began with the comment that an initial choice had to be made between the concept of a ‘for the record’ broadcast under which all aspects of parliamentary work were broadcast to the public and the journalistic role was restricted to identifying speakers and subjects on the one hand and an edited version on the other. Modern technology allowed all aspects of parliament to be broadcast on the web, but this did not lend itself to mass media where the public would soon be bored by long debates on issues of technical or marginal interest. Once a decision was made on editing the proceedings, the journalist needed to compress a large volume of information into a limited time. This was ultimately the challenge in broadcasting parliamentary work.

In the case of Order in the House, 50 hours had to be summarised in 50 minutes. Choices needed to be made between speakers and between subject matters. What influenced these choices? The subject matters needed to be of interest to the public and accordingly the journalistic judgement in this regard was part of the political agenda setting process. The coverage had to lend itself to ‘good television viewing’ and this often meant giving considerable time to criticism of government actions. Order in the House thus gave time to the Opposition as well as to the Government and the lead item on the Thoi Su clip was a question asking why officials should not be sacked for lax enforcement of road rules.

The other difficult editorial decision was how to make a coherent short story out of a lengthy debate on a complicated issue. One way was to slide from one key statement to the next in a speech and leave out the linking parts. This put the onus on the journalist to fill in any blanks with brief linking comments. Another means was by way of a journalistic narrative that put together a story often illustrated with clips from speeches and debates. A clip of Ken Randell performing this task on Order in the House was
shown. This aspect led to discussion of the difficulty of editing down a Minister’s long answer to a question and the difficulty of even giving a parliamentary comment priority over other pieces of news. One question put to Graeme was how the ABC reported its own Minister. Graeme replied that eventually, all Ministers of Communications, of either side of politics, either at the commencement of their term or at its conclusion, came to hate the ABC!

Another difficult issue concerned the independence of the journalist. Even though Order in the House did not give an editorial opinion as happens in the print media, the very choices of stories and the way they were presented were a type of editorialising. Graeme saw his independence resting on three hundred years of journalistic practice in reporting on government activities in the English-speaking world. It was a practice that was accepted by the public and (often grudgingly) by the government. The parliament building in Australia was designed to allow the people to walk over the building and thus stand on top of the heads of the parliamentarians, exemplifying the true relationship between them. It had been codified in the American Constitution, which said, “Congress shall make no laws …abridging the freedom of speech or of the press…” And it had been strengthened by many decades of journalists practicing their craft and insisting on their independence. Participants in Hanoi noted that they did not enjoy the same history of freedom of the press. In response at the Canberra end it was noted that a good idea could be borrowed. Edison invented the light bulb after centuries of candlelight; others need not wait three hundred years before borrowing Edison’s invention.

The discussion then turned to the rules applied by parliament to regulate the broadcast of its proceedings. Graeme noted that it was only relatively recently, in the 1980s, that television coverage of parliament was permitted in Australia after many years of relying on radio broadcasts. The rules devised by the parliament were fairly straightforward and did not substantively hinder the journalist. They covered issues such as not ridiculing parliamentarians and not allowing commercial or partisan advertising. The Australian Senate Standing Orders are available on the web and copies were translated for the Vietnamese participants.


In the questions following this point the Vietnamese journalists pointed out that they faced far more restrictive rules concerning sedition and revealing state secrets that brought criminal prosecutions. Roland Rich noted in response that journalists in every country had to struggle for their right to practice their craft. In Australia in the 1950s, the Australian Parliament threw two journalists in prison. The way laws were framed put the pressure on the individual journalist to determine how best to bring the information to the public. Sometimes journalists had to face the consequences of their decisions, but this did not change the principle that journalism had to provide full and fair reporting.

The session turned to the issue of feedback and means available to bring the viewer into the picture. This could be done through televised interview methods, reading out letters to the producers, internet chat rooms, commissioning polls, running electronic polls and broadcasting phone comments. The medium to be used depended on issues of
technology and the mass media culture in which the program was taking place. There was considerable discussion of this point in Hanoi where the importance of the individual citizen was seen as a critical factor in the reporting process.

The final issue dealt with in the interview was the atmosphere of the reporting program and whether there was room for humour even when dealing with serious subjects. Graeme argued that it was important to engage the viewer and humour was an important element in that. This was illustrated in a clip from *Order in the House* dealing with the issue of protecting the parliamentary precincts against possible terrorist attacks. The temporary solution was to erect a massive wall around the building to restrict what has previously been unhindered access. *Order in the House* showed the fence with the background music of *West of the Wall*, a song about the Berlin wall! The clip also demonstrated certain editorial methods as sound bites from different speakers were presented giving their opinion on the wall as well as doorstop interviews conducted with other parliamentarians as they entered the building.

In the concluding discussion with Hanoi, a number of important issues arose. How could a journalist report on proceedings that took place behind closed doors? Graeme noted that much of government and even some parliamentary activity take place behind closed doors. These political discussions usually have a public presentation, which is what journalists are expected to report on. But good journalism often tries to get behind the public face of a decision and seek to speak to people who were in the room about some of the discussion that took place behind closed doors.

There was a question on reporting on internal divisions within political parties. This was often an important part of the story. Divisions within the ruling party were of particular significance but even division of political opinion within the Opposition was the subject of reporting. Another question concerned the consequences of making an error in reporting. This could well lead to the need for a public correction.

Lenni Montiel of UNDP asked about how the GDLN medium could be used for civic education purposes. This is a difficult question as the medium is relatively new and the facilities are not widespread. But one method is to record discussions such as the one held between CDI and ONA and put it on the web for others to tune into.

LIST OF VIETNAMESE PARTICIPANTS

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