

This document is downloaded from DR-NTU, Nanyang Technological University Library, Singapore.

Title	International Workshop on Social Usage of Internet in Vietnam : Hanoi, Sep 29-Oct 2, 1999 : [opening speech at the workshop internet in Vietnam]
Author(s)	Becker, Joerg
Citation	
Date	1999
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2458
Rights	

Paper No. 2

**OPENING SPEECH AT THE WORKSHOP
"INTERNET IN VIETNAM"**

by Prof. Dr. Joerg Becker

HANOI, Sept. 30, 1999

Dear Mr. President, dear Mr. Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends,

As one of the organisers of this workshop on the Internet in Vietnam, I would like to say a few words. But before I do that, I would like to express my thanks in four cases. First, to Professor Dang Ngoc Dinh for all the work he put into preparing for this event. Second, to the Friedrich Ebert-Foundation in Bonn, who are supporting this workshop financially. Third, to the European Union for financing our research project on the Internet in Vietnam and Malaysia. And fourth, to my project colleagues, who have compiled a lecture for this workshop.

"Education not Bombs" was what was written on a poster I carried as a young student at my first Vietnam protest march in Marburg in Germany in 1966. Two years later, I was studying Politics and Sociology in Bern in Switzerland, and it was there that I took part in probably the largest Swiss Vietnam protest march in the summer of 1968. How heartily we students laughed, when the people of Bern woke up the day after the protest march to discover that socialist Alpine climbers had raised the flag of the Vietnamese Liberation Army on the steeple of their city's cathedral during the night, and the fire-brigade needed a whole day to take down this symbol again, which was regarded as being ugly.

In those years, Vietnam for me was not a normal country, like, for example, Nepal or Korea. Vietnam was a symbol, a political concept for a new departure, for change, for liberation. The name itself had almost nothing to do with the country; separated from the reality of the country, it had become a kind of political slogan in my biography.

My second encounter with your country was in connection with my friend Tran Van Dinh from Washington, whom I got to know and admire in the late 1970s during various conferences in the USA. A diplomat, communications scholar, philosopher, poet, and translator of General Giap's biography "Coming from the People", Tran Van Dinh introduced me to the dialectical thinking of Confucius, Lao Tse, Mao Tse Tung, and Ho Chi Minh, and familiarised me with the genesis of the Non-Alignment Movement and the cultural implications of the North-South Conflict. He very much regrets not being able to take part in this conference, he asked me to greet you on his behalf, and wishes us the best of success.

"Education not Bombs", that was the slogan on my protest march poster in 1966. At first glance, such a message sounds enlightened, reasonable, and morally justified. And if one were to replace the term "education" with "Internet" today, and say "Internet not Bombs", then one would even have a meaningful

message for this workshop. Unfortunately, the links between globalisation and the Internet are a little more complex, and possibly even the sentence "The Internet is a Bomb" could apply. Why not?

In the "New Strategy Paper" drawn up by the White House in 1997, the USA clearly position themselves as the number one leading power worldwide. In doing this, the USA do not just mean their economic and military potential. Their worldwide leadership in the coming 21st century, the "American" century in the information era, will be founded on their domination of the "waves of international communication", as Joseph Nye and William Owens put it in the journal "Foreign Affairs" in spring 1996. Irving Kristol was even more concrete in "The Wall Street Journal" (18 August 1997): It is about laying down the global rules for communication in the electronic age, one-sidedly, and to America's advantage, through mastery of the global networks.

As early as the 1950s, an eminently important American politician had already recognised that information was superior to the traditional munitions store of the military: "If I were to be granted one point of foreign policy and no other, I would make it the free flow of information." That was the view of the then foreign minister John Foster Dulles. Information, and of course the neo-liberal "free flow of information", and not tanks and bombs. In recent times, the commodity "information" has assumed a central role in any definition of war. John Arquile and David Ronfeldt of the RAND Corporation provide the following definition in their classical work on the cyberwar: "Cyberwar refers to conducting military operations according to information-related principles. It means disrupting, if not destroying information and communications systems."

I am not saying that the Internet is something war-like. Instead, I wish to draw attention to the ambiguities of technology. Not only in Asia, in Europe too, there are traditions of dialectical thought. For example, in the first century before Christ, the Roman poet Lucretius said that there was no technical progress without simultaneous regression. The American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson formulated this thought in the most concrete of terms in his essay "Self-Reliance" (1841): "For everything that is given, something is taken. The harm of the improved machinery may compensate its good."

The Congress of Oppressed Nationalities took place in Brussels in 1927. The leading intellectuals of the so-called Third World took part in this conference: Krishna Menon and Jawaharlal Nehru from India, W. E. DuBois as an African-American, Felix Houphouet-Boigny from Ivory Coast, Jomo Kenyatta from Kenya, Kwame Nkrumah from Ghana, Aimé Césaire from Martinique, and Ho Chi Minh from Vietnam. Mahatma Ghandi did not participate in the conference, but he was surely present in spirit. After all, he had written the following in the magazine "Young India" in 1926 on the ambivalence of the media and technology, and on the interaction between inside and outside:

"I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any, I refuse to live in other people's homes as an interloper, a beggar or a slave. I refuse to put the unnecessary strain of learning English upon my sisters for the sake of false pride or questionable social advantage. I would have our young men and young women with literary tastes to learn as much English and other world languages as they like, and then expect them to give the benefits of their learning to India and to the world. But I would not have a single Indian forget, neglect or be ashamed of his mother-tongue, or to feel that he or she cannot think or express the best thoughts in his or her vernacular. Mine is not a religion of the prison-house."

With these words of Mahatma Gandhi's in mind, I would now also like to declare this workshop on the Internet in Vietnam open. Ambivalences need not be resolved, of course, and the economy, like culture, has its own laws. So let us jointly and cautiously seek fluid balances between inside and outside, the old and the new, the conservative and the progressive. And, above all, let us learn to listen to one another.

This, my third encounter with Vietnam, is actually my first real encounter. On arriving in Vietnam another European once wrote that the people of this country were "the friendliest of all Asian peoples". That was the Italian Jesuit Cristoforo Borro, in 1618. I hope he was right. I am looking forward to visiting your country, and I would like to thank you for allowing me to be here.