STATE MANAGEMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN VIETNAM

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Abstract. The development of Internet in Vietnam since late 2000s represents an unprecedented opportunity for economic growth; it also poses a major challenge to political stability insofar as its development has coincided with the emergence of civil society and the rise of the social media. Vietnamese social media has been studied by many scholars from different point of views. Yet, the organisational side of Internet gouvernance and its inherent vulnerability remain obscure in the literature. Our paper will scrutinize the state management dilemma of social media. We will overview the two-pronged strategy which alternates development with control vis-à-vis social media; then we will examine how several management and control measures are combined and how the boundaries may blur between the political and online public spheres, making the state's digital governance vulnerable and uncertain. Our analysis is based on the state's regulations and information published online by official and social media, and foreign news services.

Keywords: social media, Internet development, state control, pluralistic authoritarianism, civil society, citizen journalism.

Introduction

Since the Internet came into use in Vietnam in 1997, the country has experienced a rapid growth in the number of Internet users. While there were only 204,000 Internet users in 2000 (0.3% of the total population), this number increased to 68 million in January 2020 (70%), among which 65 million were social media users; Facebook remained the most used social network at 61 million users [Digital 2020: Vietnam]. Vietnam was the third most-funded internet economy in the Southeast Asia after Indonesia and Singapore [The Digital Landscape 2020].

While the Internet represents an unprecedented opportunity for economic growth, it also poses a major challenge to political stability insofar as its development has coincided with the emergence of civil society since late 2000s, and the transformation of the public space by expansive social media uses. Like its Chinese counterpart, the Vietnamese state is confronted with a great dilemma: "to rely on the Internet as a vector of economic development and national power, while establishing a control system effective enough to dismantle the most serious political risks" [Arsène 2012: 291]. But unlike Xi Jinping's China, which by way of the Internet censorship system, called the "Great Firewall", has taken a proactive approach and implemented an ideological warfare firmly blocking Western social media platforms [Creemers 2017], Vietnam takes a rather ambivalent stance, combining control with pragmatic use of the Internet as a political resource [Bui Thiem Hai 2016]. Instead of blocking media platforms, the Vietnamese government tends to make them align with local rules.

The rise of the social media in Vietnam has been studied from different angles, such as the repression of the social media by the state [Abuza 2015], the social media's empowerment through collective action and social movement [Kurfürst 2015], its influences on Vietnam's elite politics [Bui Thiem Hai 2016], its counter-discourse in ongoing land struggles [Labbé 2015], and its role under

the light of civil society [Marston 2012; Morris-Jung 2015; Vu Ngoc Anh 2017]. Some authors focus on political or ordinary practices of the social media [Mai Duong 2017; Nguyen-Thu 2018].

Yet, the organisational side of Internet gouvernance and its inherent vulnerability remain obscure in this literature. The social media is often considered separately from the sphere of the state and not as a whole that encompasses the political and civil society spheres. This analysis fails to diagnose the state's frailty arising from its own contradiction and the porosity of social media. The social media is sometimes criticized for spreading rumors [Abuza 2015; Bui Thiem Hai 2016] while these are essentially part of the social media game which involves both civil actors and the state players and/or their allies. Therefore, our paper will scrutinize the paradox inherent to the state management of social media. We will overview the two-pronged strategy which alternates development with control vis-à-vis social media; then we will examine how several management and control measures are combined and how the boundaries may blur between the political and online public spheres, making the state's digital governance vulnerable and uncertain. Our analysis is based on the state's regulations and information published online by official and social media, and foreign news services.

Development and control of the Internet in Vietnam

Socioeconomic and technological backgrounds

On 19 November 1997, the Internet officially came into use in Vietnam after six years of connection and email testing [The Internet turns 20: 23.10.2017]. Initially, The National Administration Posts (now the Vietnam Posts and Telecommunications Group VNPT) was temporarily in charge of the Internet. Since 2000, Vietnam Internet Network Information Center (VNNIC) has taken over the management. Affiliated to the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC), VNNIC takes charge of allocating resources, supervising, promoting Internet use, and developing national digital infrastructure. It is managing 18 private and state-owned Internet Service Providers (ISPs)[1], among which VNPT, Viettel and FPT hold over 90% market share [Hé lộ về "làn gió mới": 22.9.2020].

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) gained recognition very early during the *Đổi Mới* reforms starting from 1986. Government Resolution No. 49, released on 4 August 1993, was the first official document specific to ICT, which set objectives for its development by the year 2000 and recommended a national program with a steering committee to be established by Decision No. 221 on 7 April 1995. ICT has been developed through the training of ICT workers and accelerated applications in public services and state bodies to establish a backbone of e-government.

ICT is today a cutting-edge industry, contributing 14.3% to national GDP and 33.7% to total export value in 2019 [20 năm phát triển: 25.12.2020]. According to *Nhân dân* [Internet au Vietnam: 21.12.2020], "Vietnam has 45 000 ITC companies. The country's Internet economy has recorded a turnover of 14 billion US dollars this year, half of which is due to online commerce."

Regulation and control

For the authorities, "cyber-security policy is inseparable from the concept of information security" [Trân Dai 2015: 134]. Cyber threats are not only related to cybercrime but also to the flow of information ICT helps circulate: "The understanding about cyber-security issue thus goes beyond mere technology" [Ibid.]. According to Mai Liêm Trực, Head of the National Administration of Posts

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[1] www.vnnic.vn/en/dns-vnix/vnix-member-isp?lang=en

overseeing the installation of the Internet, high-ranking officials were concerned that the rapid development of this new technology might spiral out of the state control: "We met with tremendous hurdles because of high-ranking officials' reluctance" [The Internet turns 20: 23.10.2017].

Since the beginning of the Internet, the government has been deploying measures to regulate and control its use. Decree No. 21 of 1997 gives the state absolute power in management and control and brings all information production and dissemination activities under the Press and the Publishing Laws. Furthermore, Articles 10 and 22 of these laws prohibit information that incites citizens to act against the state; to propagate violence, hate speech, promiscuous life, and superstition, etc.; to reveal the secrets pertaining to the party, the state, defense, and international relations, etc.; to distort history by rejecting the achievements of the revolution and national heroes, etc.

Still according to Mai Liêm Trực, it was from the year 2000 onwards that "senior leaders have begun to change their mind and adopt the credo that 'management must closely monitor development" [Tiến sĩ Mai Liêm Trực: 19.11.2012]. This change was reflected in a two-pronged strategy about ICT. On the one hand, the VCP gave the green light to ICT development by enacting Directive No. 58 on 17 October 2000, paving the way for numerous government decisions in this direction.

On the other hand, the VCP requested the state to "closely monitor ICT development" by implementing immediate measures of regulation and control. This principle is put forward in Decree No. 55 (22 August 2001), with a view to "preventing activities that take advantage of the use of Internet to undermine the national security and violate beautiful customs and morals". It consists in identifying all actors in ICT as well as making them accountable for their activities through administrative and legal constraints. Decree No. 55 regulates the "state-owned" status of IXPs (Internet Exchange Points) – these companies manage the digital infrastructure and provide traffic between ISPs; but also, ISPs, OSPs (Online Service Providers), and ICPs (Internet Content Providers). Because ICPs provide online information (e.g., electronic newspapers, information website), they are subject to the Press and the Publishing Laws. All providers must have a valid license, granted, and renewed by the National Administration of Posts, and later by the MIC.

Decree No. 97 (28 August 2008) goes further requiring that ISPs and OSPs deny access to users who violate the prohibitions; and Internet access points (hotels, cybercafés, and airports) provide dedicated state bodies with users' data if they violate rules. IXPs must work with the authorities to investigate and deter violations of Internet use rules.

On 17 July 2013, Decree No. 72 replaced Decree No. 97 and stipulated that "Aggregated news coming from various information websites now cannot be relayed on personal pages" (Art. 20) which means tighter government control over personal uses. The Decree details several categories of websites and especially makes a problematic distinction between news websites and personal websites. It requires companies which use the Internet to maintain their servers in Vietnam (Arts. 24 and 25).

The control strategy was increasingly oriented towards monitoring the production and dissemination of information. This obviously required a joint management in information and technology. Therefore, the MIC was created in 2007 after the National Administration of Posts had merged with the Press and Publishing departments of the former Ministry of Culture and Information. The MIC now provides centralized management in the field of ICT.

The expansion of social media: a turning point in state management

For ten years after its launch, Internet use was slow to develop and remained within small circles of intellectuals, artists, and pro-democracy activists. Intellectuals and senior state officials, such as Phan Đình Diệu[2], found new ways to relay their recommendations for reform outside traditional channels, especially on websites held by the intellectual Vietnamese diaspora[3] and their personal blogs. Overseas literary websites[4] breathed new life into the Vietnamese literature with artists and works of art that fail to or refuse to take part in mainstream spaces. The social media landscape would be incomplete without mentioning underground journals and blogs[5] published by dissident groups (Bloc 8406, Democracy Movement, Democratic and Pluralistic Party, Vietnam Path Movement…) and well-known political dissidents (Hà Sĩ Phu, Nguyễn Thanh Giang, Trần Khải Thanh Thủy, Lê Quốc Quân or Trần Huỳnh Duy Thức, among others). From the mid-2000s, websites, blogs and forums have exploded[6]; some have become very influential (Huy Đức, Nguyễn Ngọc Như Quỳnh, Phạm Đoan Trang, Nguyễn Quang Lập, Phạm Chí Thành, Tuấn Khanh, etc.). Since anti-Chinese demonstrations in 2007, some historical studies websites have gained popularity[7].

Social media developed rapidly during the 2010s due to the widespread use of the Smartphone (97% of Internet users in 2020). *Facebook* and *YouTube* are the most popular social networks, attracting about 90% of internet users; the VNG Corporation's home network *Zalo* comes third with 74% [Digital 2020: Vietnam].

Beyond impressive figures economically speaking, it is worth noting a profound transformation of the online public sphere that has given rise to civil society. At the turn of the year 2009–2010, many information websites were created at the same time as several civil society organizations[8]: *Bauxite Việt Nam* (2009), *Dân làm báo* (2010), *Luật khoa tạp chí* (2014), *Tiếng Dân* (2017), *Văn Việt* (2014), *Việt nam thời báo* (2014), or *Dân quyền* (2013)[9], to name but a few. These websites have been shaking up the media landscape by developing a citizen journalism that has come to compete with the official media. They actively participate in constructing "public issues" that are at the heart of civil society, for example controversies and demonstrations around the state requisitioning of land in Tiên Lãng (Hải Phòng) in 2012, constitutional reforms in 2013, Chinese oil rig installation in 2014, massive tree felling in Hanoi in 2015, Formosa steel factory environmental disaster in 2016, and the state requisitioning of land in the commune of Đồng Tâm from 2017 to 2020. With the new digital media, the censured voices of the "helpless victims" and democracy and human rights activists have been heard. Digital media use is no longer a mode of action specific to political groups or restricted circles of intellectuals but has become an autonomous information practice

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[2] Founder of the Vietnam Computer Association and vice-chairman of the ICT national program's steering committee between 1993 and 1997. His personal blog: phandinhdieu.net

[3] *Thời đại* (1997), become *Thời đại mới* (tapchithoidai.org) since 2004, *talawas.org* (2000), *diendan.org* (2006) or *viet-studies.net* (2004).

[4] *gio-o.com* (2001), *tienve.or*g (2002), *hopluu.net* (2002) or *damau.org* (2006)

[5] *Tự do Ngôn luận* (tdngonluan.com), *Tự do dân chủ* (tudodanchuvn.com), *Tổ quốc* (to-quoc.blogspot.com), *Khối 8406 Việt Nam* (khoi8406vn.blogspot.com) and *Con đường Việt Nam* (conduongvietnam.wordpress.com).

[6] Anhbasam.wordpress.com,danluan.org, ttx.vanganh.org, caulacbonhabaotudo.wordpress.com, x-cafevn.org, etc.

[7] trungtamdulieuhoangsa.blogspot.com, chepsuvietblog.blogspot.com, vietsuky.blogspot.com and nghiencuulichsu.com.

[8] Free Journalists Club (2012), Network of Vietnamese Bloggers (2013), League of Independent Vietnamese Writers (2014), and Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam (2014), among others.

[9] boxitvn.blogspot.com, danlambaovn.blogspot.com, luatkhoa.org, baotiengdan.com, vanviet.info, vietnamthoibao.org and danquyenvn.blogspot.com

separate from the state and connected to social movements insofar as it has reframed existing networks and elite allies. Rooted in the dynamics of civil society, this information practice seems to allow to form a coalition of different methods of struggle, which could be party-led, confrontational, engagement and civil society approaches [Kerkvliet 2009]. The Bauxite movement is a significant example in this respect. Dissenting social media and some foreign Vietnamese-language news services (RFA, BBC, and VOA) are firewalled, but "many users employ circumvention tools like virtual private networks (VPNs) to access blocked content" [Abuza 2015: 7–8].

Dealing with the social media, Lê Doãn Hợp, on arriving at his office of the minister of Information and Communication in 2007, stated that "like commuters, if the press keeps to the right side, it will be safe and free [Báo chí cần đi đúng: 13.8.2007]. The line between the right side and the left side seemed to blur after the Tiên Lãng case and the arrest of journalist Hoàng Khương of the *Tuổi trẻ* newspaper in 2012 [Tiên Lãng: 9.2.2012]. Instead of that opposition, *Dân làm báo* suggested another between "party side" and "people side", meanwhile independent journalist Phạm Chí Dũng [2013] noted changes of sides within the official media system.

Although the blurring boundary reflects a more complex reality of the media landscape, the state tends to criminalize offenses arising from the practice of information by introducing new crimes to the penal code such as its Articles 117, 258, 263, and 264. The Cyber-Security Law of 2018 places all "national" virtual spaces under the control of the Ministries of Public Security and Defense; information crimes are considered as serious as security crimes (cyber-attack, cyber-terrorism, or cyber-espionage).

Simultaneously, the state and the VCP consolidate self-censorship by enforcing rules of conduct such as "Prohibitions for Party Members" (Central Committee Regulation No. 47 of 2011), "Rules for the Use of Social Networks by Vietnamese Journalists" (Vietnamese Journalists Association in December 2019) or the "Social Media Code of Conduct" issued by the MIC on 17 June 2021.

Combination of multifaceted apparatus

The control of social media is not the sole responsibility of the MIC, but largely involves the role of the Ministries of Public Security (MPS) and Defense (MOD). These Ministries coordinate their actions by deploying a combination of multiform measures on three levels: administrative and technical control, deterrence, and propaganda.

Administrative and technical control

Theoretically, the MIC manages electronic media which are part of the media system and subject to press management rules [Nguyen-Pochan 2021]. According to MIC statistics of 2011 [Danh sách các Báo điện tử: 6.10.2011], there are 25 so-called "pure" electronic media which bear no link to traditional media. These include 9 newspapers and 16 magazines, except *zingnews.vn*[10]. In addition, there are about 43 "hybrid" media[11] which exist both in their traditional version (print, radio, television, news agency) and the electronic version (*Nhân dân Online, Lao động Online, Tuổi trẻ Online, VOV News, Vietnam Plus*, etc.).

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[10] Born in 2013, *Zing News* quickly overtook *vnexpress.net* to become the most viewed website in Vietnam. These two sites have a common point consisting in their public affiliation (Vietnam Publishers Association in the case of *Zing News* and the Ministry of Science and Technology in the case of *vnexpress.net*) and their *de facto* private ownership (VNG and FPT respectively).

[11] Two listed media outlets cease to operate: *Sài gòn tiếp thị* (sgtt.com.vn) in 2014 and *E-info.vn* in 2017.

The MIC also takes charge of the two information services that are required to obtain a license: aggregated information website and social network. The MIC's statistics from 2008 to 2011 [Danh sách các trang: 6.10.2011] and from 2015 to 2020 [Danh sách cấp phép trang: 28.02.2021] counted about 1200 aggregated information websites; and statistics from 2010 to 2011 [Danh sách Mạng xã hội: 6.10.2011] and from 2014 to 2020 [Danh sách Giấy phép: 31.12.2020] counted about 800 social networks. The actual figures[12] are higher because of a lack of statistics from 2012 to 2014.

Aggregated information websites can relay "public" information with the obligation to quote sources, and to inform about the internal and institutional activities, but they are forbidden from producing information. They include three categories: the official websites of public or private institutions, organizations, or sectors of activity; the electronic version of traditional media which must remain faithful to its original version; and the *news aggregators*[13], newcomers to the market, most of which belong to private companies. Social networks are regulated as platforms which provide web applications, services, discussion forums and information sharing. Most of them are created and owned by private companies for commercial purposes.

The state management of websites and social networks quickly grew out of step with the latter's rapid evolution. In 2019, the Central Department of Instruction and Propaganda pointed out the problem of "journalization" of websites [Khắc phục tình trạng: 25.4.2019] which produce information while they are not allowed to do so. Consequently, the MIC ordered its provincial offices to temporarily stop issuing licenses to aggregated information websites [Tạm dừng cấp giấy phép: 3.11.2019]. 18 news media including *Zing News* are forced to switch into a magazine format [Báo điện tử Zing.vn: 28.2.2020]. Sticking to the "Plan for the development and management of the national press by 2025" (Government Decision No. 362 on 3 April 2019), the administrative measures seem to fail to keep up with the development of social media. In enforcing the same methods of management as with traditional media, the state largely neglects the specificities of the internet-based social media and networks.

However, the real challenge comes from the use of foreign platforms including *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *WordPress* and *Blogspot*. The MIC's role then is limited to monitoring them and issuing warnings. In case of violation, "necessary technical measures" will be applied in order to neutralize the "poisonous" sites, for example by deleting undesirable content, blocking sites via Intrusion Prevention System or firewall, and cyber-attacking via advanced malwares or other cyber-espionage tools. In 2018, the minister of Information and Communication, Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng, mentioned a MIC's National Cyberspace Monitoring Center which is capable of constantly tracking about 100 million pieces of content per day [Mạng xã hội Việt Nam: 15.8.2019]. *Thanh Niên* [Gỡ bỏ 283 tài khoản: 26.10.2020] reports that about 3000 websites and blogs are listed by ISPs as sites of the greatest concern, 283 fake *Facebook* accounts, 1,888 entries, 154 fan pages, 24 *YouTube* accounts, and 15,115 videos were deleted between 2018 and 2020 for "disseminating fake news and distorted propaganda".

In combating "toxic" websites, the MIC's Information Security Office works with the MOD's Command of Virtual Space Operations or Command 86 as well as the MPS's Department of Cyber Security and Hi-tech Crime Prevention. Internet surveillance is carried out partly with the complicity of the two internet giants, *Facebook* [Facebook's Transparency Report] and *Google* [Google's Transparency Report], who are forced to remove anti-state contents or block access to user posts.

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[12] The White Book of Vietnam ICT of 2020 (p. 16) indicates the number of 1,760 information websites.

[13] baomoi.com, soha.vn, kenh14.vn, cafef.vn, tinmoi.vn, tintuconline.com, etc.

Harassment, intimidation, detention, and imprisonment

Deterrent measures against political opponents are not new. In recent years, they have increasingly targeted bloggers, independent journalists, demonstrators, land rights activists, and defenders of human rights. Many international NGOs' reports [Amnesty International 2020; FIHD 2013; CPJ 2013; RSF 2013] describe how the police collaborate with the judiciary to deploy measures ranging from harassment, intimidation, threat of arrest to detention and imprisonment.

Struggling to regain control over public opinion

In 2013, Hồ Quang Lợi, Head of the Department of Instruction and Propaganda of Hanoi City, announced that the city had "900 public opinion shapers" who focused on "fighting the enemy's distorted propaganda" [Tổ chức nhóm chuyên gia: 9.1.2013]. Four years later, Lieutenant General Nguyễn Trọng Nghĩa, deputy head of MOD's General Political Department, revealed "Force 47", a cyberspace military battalion made up of 10 000 state agents [Hơn 10 000 người: 25.12.2017]. Public opinion shapers (*dư luận viên*) are recruited by the state with a view to supporting the regime's policies, trolling and fighting criticisms, participating in online discussions, using false profiles in order to manipulate opinions and monitor active Internet users, and threatening or abusing cyber-activists.

Drawn from the Chinese model of Internet moderators or "50-cent-troop" ["Chuyên nghiệp hóa": 11.6.2011], opinion shapers can be identified by their rhetoric inspired by columns from pivot media such as "Fighting against Peaceful Evolution" (*Quân đội nhân dân* and *Công an nhân dân*) or "Protecting the foundations of the VCP's thoughts" (*Tuyên giáo* and *Báo điện tử Đảng Cộng sản*); cyber-activists call them "red cows" as opposed to "yellow cows"[14]. Some state journalists are also involved in social media like Colonel Nguyễn Văn Minh [Đại tá Nguyễn Văn Minh: 17.6.2021], head of *Quân đội nhân dân Online*. Opinion shapers proudly define themselves as soldiers and patriots fighting against the traitors of the nation and the people and protecting democracy [DLV là ai?: 25.4.2015]. They sometimes overstep their bounds and thus embarrass the authorities. For example, on March 14, 2015, a group of opinion shapers disrupted the commemoration of the Gạc Ma naval battle[15] in Hanoi. Facing the anger from the participants, the city authority refuted its connection with this group which it described as "a spontaneous group" [Nhóm tự xưng "dư luận viên": 17.3.2015]. Caught up in internal power struggles, opinion shapers are also divided into opposing clans [Trần Mạnh Trung 2014] and sometimes end up in rejection even punishment by the authorities [Nguyễn Tường Thuy 2015; Phạm Đình Trọng 2020].

Vulnerable state management of social media

In 2017, Võ Văn Thưởng, Head of Department of Instruction and Propaganda, created a buzz on the Internet with the following statement: "We are not afraid of dialogue and discussion […] because discussion forms the foundation of truth" [Ông Võ Văn Thưởng: 18.5.2017]. His words provoked numerous comments mixing disbelief, distrust, and hope. Two years later, he made another statement that marked the return of authoritarian thinking: "Internet is an information superhighway. It's in our power to allow for 4, 6 or 20 lanes, and 4-, 6- or 8-wheel vehicles" [Không cần phải lo lắng: 5.7.2019]. This about-face seems to show that the Department struggles to combine a repressive

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[14] "Cow" refers to a person unable to think by himself; "red" refers to the pro-communist position and "yellow" to extremist anticommunist one. See Nguyễn Tường Thuy [2020] and Dương Quốc Chính [2019].

[15] This naval battle which opposed the Vietnamese naval force to the Chinese one in 1988 remained for a long time a sensitive subject in the political agenda of the VCP.

approach with an attitude that is more responsive to popular demands. Nowhere is its hurdle more dramatically in evidence than in the deletion of online articles. The official media outlets have difficulties anticipating the leadership's reaction and confidently discerning the red line that should not be crossed. For example, *Tuổi Trẻ Online* was suspended for "misinformation" in the article "The president of the socialist republic of Vietnam agrees on the need to approve of the law on demonstration", published on 19 June 2018; in fact, the outlet reported honestly and so quickly the words of Trần Đại Quang were censored [Tuổi trẻ Online: 16.7.2018].

Essentially, the vulnerability of state management stems from political factionalism which finds a strong echo on social media. The Vietnamese regime has long been plagued by factionalism which makes it a pluralistic authoritarianism or a cohabitation of the four major currents (conservatives, modernizers, moderates, and rent-seekers) described by Vuving [2017]. From 2012 to 2016, the Internet particularly exposed the rivalry between Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng and VCP General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng in their struggle for power [Bui Thiem Hai 2016]. It also reveals a vulnerable regime seeking to conceal this divide.

Conclusion

As an extremely porous space for interactions between civil society and politics, social media thus raise multifaceted challenges and make state control mechanisms uncertain. How to ensure Internet economic growth while coping with these new challenges would be a major issue for state management of social media.

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