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Social media, activist movements, and state power in Southeast Asia

Su-Ann OH

In this section, members of the Media, Technology and Society Programme at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute address the question: how is the formal sphere of politics being shaped by social media and activist groups in Southeast Asia?

Pauline Leong provides amusing anecdotes of how politicians in Malaysia use social media, some with more success than others, to influence public opinion, create policy change, and boost their standing. In Vietnam, however, Dien Nguyen An Luong shows that the state is still trying to censor what it deems to be anti-state content on the internet, even though it is slowly realizing that this is an impossible task.

On the other side of the coin, the general public has found innovative and humour-filled ways to use social media as a tool against state power. Yatun Sastramidjaja describes the uniqueness of youth digital protest in Indonesia and across the region, while Quinton Temby examines the pan-Asian activist network the "Milk Tea Alliance" and its influence on pro-democracy activism in the countries in Southeast Asia.

Together, these articles provide insights into the rapidly evolving impact of social media on government, politics, and everyday life in Southeast Asia, a sphere in which memes, humour, and diffusiveness challenge established forms of power.

Su-Ann OH, Visiting Fellow at ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Managing Editor of SOJOURN, and Regional Editor for The Newsletter, oh_su_ann@iseas.edu.sg

How Vietnam's online censorship revolves around crackdown on anti-state content

Dien Nguyen An Luong

Vietnamese authorities have never ceased to fret over "toxic contents", whose definition has been applied in varying degrees.[1] In the 1990s, "toxic contents" were associated with pornography—so much so that in December 1996, to vouch for the arrival of the internet in Vietnam a year later, its crusaders reportedly had to prove to Vietnam's top leaders that pornographic websites could be blocked effectively.[2] The need to censor pornographic content, however, masked a greater concern of the powers that be: that the internet would unleash the floodgates of anti-government propaganda and facilitate a freer flow of information, which would end up posing major threats to the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party.[3]

A fixation on anti-state content has shaped the way Vietnamese authorities have deployed various censorship strategies to achieve the dual goal of creating a superficial openness while maintaining their grip on online discourse.

The crackdown on what was perceived as anti-state content started in the early 2000s, when the authorities formulated a number of broadly-worded and vague regulations on internet controls. During the 2001-2007 period, Vietnamese authorities publicly pointed their fingers at pornography and other sexually explicit content as a legitimate rationale for reining in the internet. But according to an in-depth report[4] by the *OpenNet Initiative*, despite their public platitudes about curbing it, Vietnamese authorities virtually did not block any pornographic content between 2005 to 2006. The censors focused instead on what they perceived to be politically and religiously sensitive sites hosting anti-state content: corruption, ethnic unrest, and political opposition. In fact, an analysis of all of Vietnam's laws and regulations on internet controls during the 2001-2005 period shows that legal terms that fell under the category of "fine tradition and custom", including pornography-related ones, were eclipsed by those under the "national security" category (see Chart 1).

Since 2006, several critical junctures have shaped the censorship-circumvention tug-of-war in the online sphere and are emblematic of how Vietnam has constantly taken a leaf from China's censorship playbook. A pattern emerged: the authorities first harped on what they perceived as threats posed to social stability by the internet and social media, both outside and inside Vietnam. Then they used those threats exhaustively as a pretext to enforce tougher measures that had already been afoot or implemented in China.

For example, between 2005-2008, to many Vietnamese, the blogosphere provided useful alternatives to state propaganda. At the same time, between 2005-2006, China's internet regulators started reining in blogs and websites. Under the crackdown, bloggers and website owners were required to register their complete identities[5] and block content deemed "unlawful" or "immoral."[6] This move was not lost on Vietnam's censors. In August 2008, the Vietnamese government enacted Decree 98 on internet controls.[7] This, along with subsequent circulars, required blogs to only publish personal content; blogging platforms, too, were asked to maintain records of their users to provide to the authorities.

2008 was a pivotal year for Facebook when it rolled out its Vietnamese site.[8] Against that backdrop, China continued to provide Vietnam with a handy case study. In July 2009, China blacked out Facebook in the wake of the Ürümqi riots, in which Xinjiang activists used the social media platform to communicate and spread their messages.[9] Just a month later, a supposedly draft regulation requiring internet service providers to block Facebook in Vietnam was leaked.[10] Its authenticity remained in question, but access to Facebook, which boasted around 1 million users in Vietnam at that time, was indeed blocked later that year.[11]

Perhaps the most prominent exhibit of the Vietnamese control model with Chinese characteristics is the 2018 Cybersecurity Law. This law appears to be dominantly dictated by the "Seven Bottom Lines," a list of online behaviour guidelines Beijing coined in 2013 to govern internet usage. The Vietnamese state's formulation spells out seven barriers that social media posts must not transgress:

- the rules and laws of the country
- the socialist system
- the country's national interests
- the legitimate interests of the citizens
- public order
- morality
- authentic information

Those broad and vague dictums serve a dual purpose: to enable the authorities to bend the implementation of the law to their will and to perpetuate self-censorship among internet users. It would be overly simplistic, however, to frame the crackdown on high-profile and influential bloggers and activists as a sign of Vietnam tolerating little public criticism even in the online sphere. Vietnamese authorities have handled public political criticism, both online and in real life, with a calibrated mixture of

Chart 1 (left): Legal terms on national security versus those on fine tradition and custom in Vietnam's regulations during the 2001-2005 period. Chart 2 (right): How anti-state content dominated vietnam's internet regulations between 2001 and 2020. Both charts compiled by the author.