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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. Yaton 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.

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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 report⁴ 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 identities⁵ 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

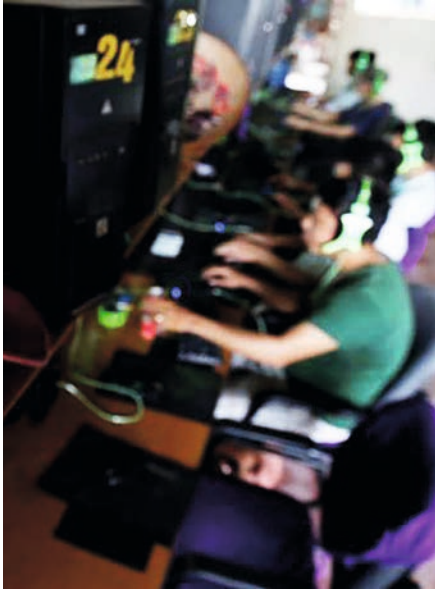
characteristics is the 2018 Cybersecurity Law. This law appears to be dominantly dictated by the “Seven Bottom Lines,” a list of online behaviour guidelines Beijing coined in 2013 to govern internet usage. The Vietnamese state’s formulation spells out seven barriers that social media posts must not transgress:

- 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.



Above: Men use computers at an internet cafe in Hanoi, Vietnam. Photo: Reuters.

a cable car into what is billed as Vietnam's cave kingdom,¹² a plan to fell nearly 7,000 trees in the capital of Hanoi,¹³ or a calamitous fish kill along the country's central coastline.¹⁴

The authorities have tried to appear as responsive to public sentiment online as they could, but not without some caveats: collective action or social unrest, their *bête noire*, could arise from the fact that criticism of the government's policies in a certain area quickly spreads to another, perpetuating a spiralling cycle of public disenchantment. Vietnam's online movements – most of them initiated, coalesced and sustained by youths during the 2014–2016 period – have revolved around that dynamic, which remains relevant today.

More than two decades since the internet's arrival in Vietnam, anti-state content has been exhausted as a pretext for the authorities to rationalize reining in the online sphere (see Chart 2). Since 2008, Facebook has become part and parcel of Vietnam's online censorship regime. At the same time, Vietnam's lack of political and technological wherewithal and limited home-grown social media platforms have throttled its efforts to match China in creating a "national internet" meant for the enforced blocking of Western social media platforms.

Having tried for nearly a decade to exert greater control over information online, the Vietnamese authorities now recognize that they cannot act like China and ban foreign tech giants altogether. But they may have realized that it is a tall order to build a domestic social networking site that could stand shoulder to shoulder with the likes of China's WeChat or

Weibo. In that context, it remains to be seen if Vietnam has the incentive to erect a China-style internet firewall, given that it has been able to somehow co-opt Facebook and YouTube.

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Digital media: an emerging barometer of public opinion in Malaysia

Pauline Pooi Yin Leong

Digital media has become an essential communication channel for both the government and the opposition in Malaysia, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media is the platform that politicians and their parties use to issue press releases and to livestream their press conferences. It has also become a barometer of public opinion as it facilitates reactions from netizens about current socio-political issues. While Facebook dominates the digital landscape, younger Malaysians prefer other social media sites such as Twitter and Reddit. In fact, the Malaysian Twitter community calls itself Twitterjaya, a play on the word *Putrajaya*, which is the name of the seat of government in Malaysia.

Syahredzan Johan, a prominent lawyer who joined Twitter in 2009, wrote that "[t]he social aspects of Twitter have evolved into a socio-political gauge of national sentiments".¹ Indeed, public uproar on social media over certain government initiatives and policies have resulted in reversals and apologies. For example, when the country was under a Movement Control Order (MCO) due to COVID-19 in 2020, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development published a series of posters on Facebook and Instagram advising married women on how to manage their households and avoid domestic arguments. This included dressing well, not nagging, and speaking coyly with a feminine laugh—mimicking the voice of Doraemon, a Japanese cartoon cat.² Public flack over the ministry's statements, especially on social media, led it to apologize and delete the posts. The Higher Education Minister also received public criticism for suggesting a TikTok competition to persuade Malaysian youths to stay at home.³ Netizens pointed out that the minister should have focused on the welfare and learning of undergraduate students instead.

Malaysian politicians are aware that their online reputation has an impact on their political fortunes. For example, the appointment of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin

by the King as the country's eighth prime minister on 1 March 2020 came under a cloud of protest. Muhyiddin had been centrally associated with the "Sheraton Move" that saw more than 30 MPs defecting from the then Pakatan Harapan government, causing its collapse. Social media users vented their frustrations online. The hashtag "#NotMyPM" trended on Twitter with more than 47,000 tweets. However, others disagreed with the sentiment: they felt that it was disrespectful to the King, while Muhyiddin's supporters congratulated him on his appointment.⁴ Realising the damage to his political reputation, Muhyiddin rebranded himself as *abah* ("father"), relying on his easy-going paternal demeanour during press conferences when he marked his hundredth day in office.⁵

Other ministers linked to the Sheraton Move also attempted to reinvent themselves. Women, Family, and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Rina Mohd Harun's recent 2021 Hari Raya fashion photo shoot at her ministerial office to showcase her transformative weight loss did not sit well with Twitterjaya. Netizens criticised her for focusing more on her personal achievements than her role in assisting women and children affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Online political communication requires sophistication and subtlety, as shown by Science, Technology, and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin. When he suffered minor injuries after hitting a pothole while cycling in Banting, Selangor, the newly elected president of the Negeri Sembilan Cycling Association tweeted, "Pothole, ditch, KJ. 2020 keeps giving", together with pictures of his bruised face and the accident area. Many Twitter users commiserated with him, sharing their own personal experiences of being similarly injured.⁶ The Kuala Langat district's Public Works Department (PWD), which is responsible for road conditions in Banting, apologized and immediately filled up the pothole. Critics, however, decried the department's double standards, stating that it should also apologize to other road users who have been similarly injured. In response to the criticisms, Khairy

said that the PWD should not just pay attention to the issue because of his status, but should take pro-active measures to address it. He mooted the idea of a special online complaints portal for potholes, saying he would discuss this with the Works Ministry as soon as possible.⁷ Khairy's ability to deflect criticisms and turn matters into positive publicity shows his finesse in navigating the possible potholes (pun intended) in the online environment.

While public opinion on digital media may not represent the full spectrum and diversity of views in Malaysia, it is, to a significant extent, a barometer of the sentiments of politically aware citizens. These articulate members of the online community may not exemplify the majority, but their discussions may gain sufficient traction and thus influence the direction of mass public opinion. For example, a Twitter campaign #KitaMintaLima (We Ask for Five) urged the King to grant five specific requests from the people to combat the economic and public health issues that emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These requests were compiled from netizens' comments on an Istana Negara Facebook post, which showed the monarch granting Prime Minister Muhyiddin an audience for a pre-Cabinet meeting. If the five requests could not be fulfilled, then the campaign poster urged for a change of government.⁸ More than 48,000 tweets with the hashtag were posted, which made it one of Twitter's top trending topics in Malaysia.

As we can see, there is always the possibility that ideas which emerge online ignite the imagination of the masses and lead to offline ground activism. Politicians from both sides of the divide are conscious of this possibility, and hence actively monitor current trends on digital media. The next general election, which must be held by 2023, is likely to see a highly contested online battle as the politicians and their parties fight for sufficient votes to ensure their survival.

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