Vietnamese Media Going Social: Connectivism, Collectivism, and Conservatism

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INTRODUCTION

June 2018 was an intense time in Vietnam when one saw the role of social media in revealing and facilitating the (dis)congruity between connectivism, collectivism, and conservatism. On June 12, the National Assembly of Vietnam passed the controversial Cybersecurity Law by a landslide of 86 percent agreement despite widespread public dissent, including an online petition signed by more than sixty-five thousand people. The new Cybersecurity Law was said to further restrict the already limited freedom of expression in Vietnam and grant too much power to the police in surveying and punishing online citizens.

The adoption of the Cybersecurity Law happened just three days after the Assembly postponed its vote for the Special Economic Zone Law, another contentious bill that would allow foreign investors to obtain up to ninety-nine-year land leases in selected areas. This delay appeared to be an effort to soothe public anger, which had been fervidly manifested on Facebook in the previous weeks, that the Special Economic Zone Law would only enable China to encroach on Vietnamese land in the name of economic development.

Despite the postponement, protests driven by an anti-China sentiment erupted across the nation on June 10 and 11, including a violent riot in the southern province of Binh Thuan. Mainstream media in Vietnam provided minimal information on these events, using carefully selected terms such as "gathering" or "traffic congestion" to downplay any significant social instability. Censorship over the mass media, however, could no longer prevent people from knowing what was happening. The protests were covered on a real-time basis on Facebook thanks to constant updating of statuses, photos, and livestream videos. Anyone connected to social media during these days could feel as if they were witnessing the event live and irresistibly engaged in a collective mixture of anger, anxiety, curiosity, and enthusiasm. Thanks to the facilitating role of social media, political disruptions in Vietnam were literally a few clicks away.

The passing of the Cybersecurity Law on June 12, right after the ebbing of the demonstrations, provided a pessimistic end to a cascade of spirited online and offline public

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activism. While some activists continued to lament about the intensified restrictions on freedom of expression, most Facebook users gradually returned to their banal routines. The World Cup, opened on June 14, soon marginalized political debates, reminding us how Facebook has been first and foremost a part of ordinary pleasure and concerns. But on June 25, when the graduation examinations for high school students commenced, Facebook postings again erupted, albeit with less intensity, when people took the opportunity to share their views on the quality of the tests while cleverly mocking the state's consistent failure to make any meaningful change in the educational system. The constant coming and going of Facebook-based public debates remind us that counterpolitical discussion on social media, whether subtly invested in a sarcastic tone or frankly manifested in an activist message, never completely disappears, but is always latent in the banality of the everydayness, where ordinary people constantly surf through the trending information endlessly fed to their digital "walls."

There are several things one can learn about the Vietnamese media landscape from the unfolding of multiple Facebook-based social movements in June 2018. Most clearly, social media increasingly play an essential role in driving public opinions in Vietnam. The case of collective resistance against controversial legislation in June 2018 was just one among multiple examples in which Facebook served as a platform to defend the perceived public good. But the adoption of a restrictive and conservative Cybersecurity Law in June 2018 indicates how the Internet and social media have become urgent concerns for the Vietnamese party-state, allowing it to justify the escalation of political oppression in the name of national security. The fact that the Special Economic Zone Law was postponed under intense public pressure while the Cybersecurity Law was adopted despite significant dissent reminds us that the party-state regards this as a crucial battleground. Whatever social media means to the public and the party-state, it is an undeniable fact that the Vietnamese media landscape is complicated, if not significantly transformed, by the surging expansion of social media in the last ten years.

This article provides a broader context to help understand the current dynamics of the Vietnamese media. This task requires a review of how the Vietnamese media system operates, including its censorship mechanisms, its commercial impulse, and its struggle to balance between the state, the market, and the public demand for quality information. Against this background, I provide a short history of social media (predominantly Facebook) in Vietnam and how it is driven by an escalating sense of political and social precarity. In so doing, I hope to engage readers in a more nuanced description of mediated activities in Vietnam beyond the state-centric view and to diagnose the governing rationality of the party-state behind the adoption of the Cybersecurity Law.

THE "TRADITIONAL" MEDIA LANDSCAPE

In Vietnam, the mass media are state institutions by law, meaning that there is strictly no private ownership of newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting services. The media system is regulated by two main regulatory bodies: the Ministry of Information and Communication (*Bộ Thông Tin và Truyền Thông*) and the Central Propaganda and Education Commission (*Ban Tuyên Giáo Trung Ương*). The former mainly governs legal, technical, and economic aspects of the media industries, while the latter deals exclusively with

ideological gatekeeping. Operating directly under the Communist Party, the Central Propaganda and Education Commission is the top media censor, working hard to ensure that despite extensive changes in media technology and economy, media practitioners remain committed to the party's agenda.

Although censorship, by nature, operates in secrecy, there is at least one publicly known censoring mechanism in Vietnam: the weekly and mandatory meetings in Hanoi between the Central Propaganda and Education Commission and leaders of all media institutions. These meetings provide a review of media activities in the previous week and deliver specific guidance on what should and should not be published in the coming week. The most visible effect of these weekly closed-door meetings is the concerted and uniform coverage of many politically important events. For example, in March 2018, after decades of collective silence, all major newspapers in Vietnam promulgated extended features with elaborate infographics to commemorate the fallen soldiers in the naval battle between Vietnam and China at Gạc Ma Island thirty years before. In the context of heated territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the fact that this topic returned so boldly in mainstream media after a few years of simmering Facebook-based commemoration indicated that the state had finally given a green light for a public review of this muted trauma. But the boundary of what can be said was also clearly indicated. All mainstream stories honored the forgotten martyrs without any critical discussion of contemporary Vietnam-China relations, showing how the stories about Gạc Ma Island were permitted but should not get too hot to fan the latent anti-Chinese flames, which were commonly coupled with an anti-state sentiment.

A more hidden and possibly more thorough mechanism of media governance in Vietnam is self-censorship. Silently embedded in journalistic anecdotes, editorial processes, and lessons at journalism schools, political censorship is a naturalized part of media production. Very early in their career, journalists learn to imagine and anticipate the censor's reaction for almost everything they produce. The taboos for mainstream media are well remembered: no critical review of socialist history, no defaming of national heroes and socialist leaders, no encouragement of political plurality, no promotion of democracy, and no criticism of human rights. Grey areas include, for example, stories about major corruption cases, environmental pollution, and land disputes, as well as critical reviews of important policies. This does not mean that Vietnamese journalists only write what they are told to, but that an essential part of their job is to identify risk, to avoid being negatively listed, and to be creative in the grey area that is expanding or shrinking depending on different political situations. Crossing the censorship boundary requires strategic calculation and in many ways exposing oneself to the risk of being punished. Taking this risk, however, is necessary for maintaining a media outlet's professional pride and public credibility. Working with and against censorship is thus an art, resulting in a constant tension between journalists, editorial teams, and the governing system.

Regarding media reception, one of the key consequences of blunt political propaganda is that it could never fully convince the audiences. An average reader in Vietnam would know that most news stories are politically monitored. Instead of being passive receivers of propagandist messages, many readers master the skill of reading between the lines. Mocking mainstream narratives is highly common, being a pervasive form of cultural intimacy from urban to rural areas. Readers or viewers today often share their political concerns on Facebook, comparing news sources, highlighting their

skeptical interpretation of official information, and many times inventing their own conspiracy theories based on inputs from both the state-run media and alternative sources.

It would be misleading, however, to talk about media governance in Vietnam with a sole focus on political restrictions, a topic that is central to most international discussions of Vietnamese media. Extensive commercialization is another key feature that significantly shapes the post-Reform media landscape. Since the 1990s, the market has steadily permeated all aspects of the media system and fundamentally transformed the way practitioners conduct their professional life. Journalists certainly feel disappointed by restrictive rules imposed from above, but what makes them most anxious is actually the market. Top-down surveillance, after all, is relatively stable and in many ways predictable. The market, on the contrary, is volatile and getting more competitive each year. Turning to the market as a source of funding and agency, media practitioners are inevitably trapped between their profitmaking duty and their political obligations.

Regarding its the relationship with the market, the party-state is more responsive than repressive. Soon after the Reform, the party-state actively outsourced the burden of funding the media to the market. In the television industry, for example, producers started providing viewers with a daily dose of popular entertainment in the 1990s after decades of cultural hunger. Soon these programs generated a stable source of income from advertisements, creating a strong inducement to produce more. Within less than a decade, foreign and domestic dramas, game shows, talk shows, and reality programs quickly saturated broadcasting time, turning the television industry into a major profitmaking platform. Producers are encouraged, if not forced, to make self-funded shows, almost entirely for entertainment purposes, without much restraint from above. In 2009, the state officially allowed television stations to collaborate with private partners in production activities, with the exception of news and current affairs (Ministry of Information and Communication 2009; Vietnamese Government 2016). The result is that private ownership of television is strictly banned, but private production of television content is highly common. A similar process also happens in the production of lifestyle magazines and many newspapers. In 2018, advertisement and commercial sponsorship serve as key sources of funding for many free-to-air television stations, and all major newspapers and lifestyle magazines, putting media practitioners in an intense race of money-making. The defining characteristic of the contemporary Vietnamese media is thus not just political censorship, but the raw combination of political surveillance and commercializing pressure.

Businesspeople increasingly have influence over the media, many times acting as hidden censors of nonpolitical content. Market-based power relies on an intricate and flexible network of financial incentives, collaborative partnership, informal friendship, and political investment. Commercial sponsorship is extremely common in the television industry, which is easily detected by pop-up logos on the backdrops of almost all popular shows, sometimes even in news and current affairs. Securing a commercial sponsor is one of the key criteria to grant permission for a new program, and rewriting the content to fit the taste of the sponsor has become a norm. Consider, for example, the case of Oppo, a Chinese smartphone brand recently gaining a significant presence in Vietnam. Since 2015, the green logo of Oppo has pervaded many top-rated game shows, comedy shows, and reality shows on the national airwaves, where participating celebrities are intentionally chosen to be the brand's ambassadors. VOV, the national radio system,

also regularly announces its "partnership" with major businesses, such as a major milk company or a giant real estate group (Lưu 2016; Phương 2017). It is now a public secret that the media in Vietnam relies on its relationship with businesspeople for funding, either through direct sponsorship or more concealed forms of public relations.

Drawn into a rapid process of marketization, Vietnamese media practitioners increasingly choose to detour from "sensitive" topics to focus on commercially rewarding but politically benign content. Soon the commercialized content gained more popularity than politically laden messages, inevitably lessening the dominance of political propaganda. The market thus adds more distraction and fragmentation than significant reformation to the Vietnamese media landscape. Overall, the media remains committed to the political interest of the party-state, while is also inclined to provide a voice for rising business elites and to represent the tastes of the middle class. In many ways, the combination of state and the market further marginalizes radical voices and genuine political debates, redirecting the audience away from critical awareness of structural oppression in both political and economic aspects.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE NEW DYNAMICS OF VIETNAMESE MEDIA

In 2009, when Yahoo! 360 officially closed, Vietnamese bloggers flooded into Facebook, then an unfamiliar medium of digital connectivity, to continue their online interactions. It took a couple of years until users could access Facebook without expecting technical hindrances, although the Vietnamese government never admitted to establishing a firewall targeting this global social network. In 2012, Facebook experienced a major surge with an increase of nearly 300 percent from 2.9 million to 8.2 million users within just a year, officially surpassing Zing Me, the largest indigenous social media platform in Vietnam (Mueller 2013). In early 2015, when the number of Facebook users reached 30 million, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng declared that "it is impossible to ban or prevent people from posting information on the Internet," urging the government to provide timely and accurate information for the public on social media (Hoàng 2015). This announcement was delivered at a time when there had been a widespread rumor in the blogosphere and on social media that Nguyễn Bá Thanh, the former party secretary of Đà Nẵng City, was poisoned to death by his political rivals. By July 2018, Vietnam had about 64 million active Facebook users, serving as one of the most thriving digital markets in the world (Hà 2017). Within less than a decade, Facebook has become a ubiquitous digital platform in a country with strict censorship over the media.

In the first few years since its arrival in Vietnam, Facebook was mainly used for benign online interactions, but since around 2015, when it became a dominant platform, Facebook has increasingly acted as a dynamic and disruptive element in the Vietnamese media system, significantly destabilizing and undermining the traditional forces from the party-state and the market. Proving itself to be a potent medium for agenda setting, Facebook directly competes with mainstream media outlets in attracting public attention and framing a salient perspective to social and political controversies. The most valued transformation from the perspective of civil society has been the emergence of multiple counterpolitical movements that were previously marginalized by both the state and the

market. In the wake of social media's surging popularity, as Thiem Hai Bui (2016) argues, the space of civil society in Vietnam is much thickened by more critical voices with stronger influence over elite politics. A culture of protest was formed, against which the party-state felt compelled to respond or repress. There have been a number of cases in which social media provided a public forum for collective resistance against government policies and directives. The successful campaign to protect 6,700 trees from being chopped down on the order by Hanoi's authorities in March 2015 was one of the earliest and most discussed examples (Bui 2016; Le et al. 2015). Another well-known event was the "I choose fish" movement in June 2016 in response to the environmental crisis caused by Formosa, the Taiwanese steel company based in the central province of Ha Tinh. In July 2017, Facebook continued to serve as a vital channel for publicizing a political scandal related to a land dispute, something the party-state would certainly have concealed in the past. In the Dong Tam commune of Hanoi, dozens of policemen and officials were taken hostage for more than a week by a group of villagers, who risked their lives to protect their land from being appropriated by Viettel, a military telecommunications group. As the hostage crisis escalated, leaked information, mainstream news, and casual commentaries were liberally shared on Facebook, connecting social media users into an acute imagined community of witnessing citizenship. The case was resolved peacefully when the villagers reached a satisfactory settlement with Hanoi's authorities. This relieving "happy ending" largely resulted from intense public pressure for a nonviolent solution, which was collectively expressed on social media by activists and common people alike. In June 2018, as mentioned earlier, Facebook once more set the nation on fire when the proposals for the Special Economic Zone Law and the Cybersecurity Law sparked widespread opposition. After the disappointing adoption of the Cybersecurity Law, Facebook users continued to update their walls, knowing that their online activities were officially regulated. In this context of a contested digital future, social media users curiously wait for a new political scandal to test the waters and assess the oppressive intention of the government.

Narrowly focusing on political dissent, however, risks overlooking the dispersed and amorphous power of Facebook, driven more by a techno-economic mechanism than a shared political rationality. Facebook operates in a far more complex way than being an automatic and organized instrument of political resistance. Its algorithm gives prominence to all trending messages, politically driven or not. On a daily basis, Facebook constantly facilitates public awareness and social interpretation of numerous economic, social, and cultural issues without an explicit political implication. The repertoire of meanings, feelings, and tensions within which Vietnamese people navigate is broadened and thickened, ceaselessly drawing its symbols, myths, significance, and contradictions from the contemporary landscape of globalization and the historical depth of collective glories, yearnings, and sufferings. This expanding repertoire is archived, indexed, categorized, and disseminated in a many-to-many model, interwoven into and contaminating the traditional one-to-many model of the mass media. Almost unnoticeably, citizens have become more alert, more informed, and less cautious in raising their critical voice and in expressing their sentiments about virtually all aspects of collective and private living. As a result, the space for civil society expands with Facebook, but uncivility, mere banality, blatant sentimentality, viral populist messages, and the hegemonic power of the market are also on the rise. At the micropolitical intervention of Facebook, public

life becomes more observable, political criticism seems more synchronized, but living itself becomes more tangled, overwhelming, constantly changing, and filled with precarity.

There are plenty of examples of how Facebook stirs up social life and amplifies collective sentiments at the level of ordinary living. Consider, for instance, the story of the Vietnamese football team U23, who made history by winning second place at the Asian Football Confederation Youth Championships in January 2018. Vietnamese people have always been ardent football lovers, but this time, Facebook added much more emotional intensity and symbolic substance to existing sports fandom. Each match was turned into a striking collective event, where watching was inseparable from Facebooking. The contagion of popular nationalist sentiments was unprecedented for a sports event when the U23 team was welcomed home by massive traffic congestion right from the airport and by more than forty thousand people waiting at the national stadium to meet their overnight idols. Possibly all Facebook walls in Vietnam during those days were flooded by images of the young team, news and editorials, memes and comics, flags and quotations, and, many times, clever ambush advertising messages. Facebook's principles of connectivity, narrativity, and intimacy had allowed this platform to exceedingly amplify the youthful spirit of the team, helping to elevate the whole country, at least for a few days, at a time of pervasive social pessimism. Similar cases of Facebook-based social events are countless: a housewife-led boycott against a top singer for her love affair with a married man, the problematic deaths of vaccinated infants, a food safety crisis related to arsenic-laced fish sauce, a #MeToo story of celebrity sexual abuse, a multi-million-dollar divorce between the owners of a national coffee brand, a British royal wedding, the World Cup, and so on. People increasingly make use of Facebook as a place to express their emotions, most predominantly the feelings of anxiety and disappointment, while also to cultivate new hopes and fantasies commonly driven by a neoliberal impulse.

Predictably, the power of social media in framing the public agenda in Vietnam creates an escalating pressure on the party-state, not only when there is a radical political event but also at the level of daily regulation. For the first time, the party-state completely lost its ownership and direct control over a media platform. The prolific, borderless, and technologically sophisticated nature of social media increasingly eluded existing mechanisms of media governance. Already busy with the task of monitoring the mass media, which never fully obey the rules, the government now spends even more time responding to viral events on Facebook. In the first six months of 2018, there have been multiple cases where public debates on social media directly shaped the outcome or impact of a social event, forcing the authorities to join the discussion. In March 2018, for example, the Ministry of Health had to spend a week of intense investigation just to confirm that the widely shared story of a young woman dying at home after giving "natural" birth to her child was just a pure hoax. In May, a clip of an English teacher verbally abusing an adult student fueled heated debates about educational ethics in Vietnam, forcing the Department of Education and Training in Hanoi to comment on the case and then to permanently close the teacher's English center. Also in May, Facebookers were outraged when a child molester managed to gain a reduction of his sentence from three years in jail to eighteen months of suspension. What infuriated the public even more was that this shortened sentence was justified by the man's old age, his previous

position as a director of a bank, and, most ironically, his Communist Party membership. An online petition to demand a review of the case was launched and immediately went viral, gaining fifty thousand signatures within a week. In an effort to calm public anger, the Supreme Court in Ho Chi Minh City revoked the commutation and reinstated the original sentence.

Media practitioners and journalists tend to add more fuel to the fire, seeing social media as an essential source of information, but also a key rival. Mainstream outlets often follow up and elaborate on viral content on Facebook in order to attract more viewing traffic and to assert their relevance to public life, significantly participating in and intensifying the debates on social media, and consequently increasing the coordination of information circulated online. Anytime it is possible, the mainstream media relies on the public momentum facilitated by social media to expand the boundaries of political discussion, pushing the authorities to comment on the case and take responsibility. Many journalists also choose to directly express their views, often nonorthodox ones, on Facebook to boost their personal brands or to draw more attention to their official stories on mainstream outlets. The practice of writing for mainstream media in one voice and explaining the same story in another voice on Facebook with more nuances and criticism is now quite common among media workers.

The rise of Facebook has added new dynamics to the existing blogosphere that has long served as alternative sources of political news and opinion in Vietnam.[1] In comparison to previous forms of non-mainstream discourses, Facebook is the only medium that can effectively mobilize and mass-customize public sentiments at the capillary level of ordinary life. While counterpolitical blogs and alternative publishing mainly rely on the aura of unique political voices to claim their influence over the Vietnamese public sphere, hence promoting the logic of rarity, Facebook works by synchronizing elite voices with the abundance of mass political dissatisfaction embedded in the ordinary sphere of daily life. Facebook thus generates an unprecedented amount of banal social debates, putting an end to the scarcity of engaged political and social discussions in Vietnam. Precisely thanks to the voluntary formation of more plural, alert, and vocal publics through Facebook's constant and contingent feeds of the quotidian, intimate, and controversial stories of a common life, the collective momentum of political disruption is greatly strengthened. In other words, what is important about the impact of social media in Vietnam is not just the will to resist, but that social media has enabled an organic connection between the radical political agendas and the mass grievances. Such a connection was significantly missing in the former blogosphere occupied mainly by a few high-profile activist writers. Facebook and the blogosphere thus well complement each other, albeit with different political functions and effects. In the age of social media, the greatest challenge in censoring digital discourses, if that is the party-state's ambition, is thus no longer about punishing a few activists or settling specific political protests but about distracting and diluting the negative sentiments over a range of issues that have become much thicker and more articulable due to the thorough penetration of social media into everyday life.

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[1] For a review of the Vietnamese blogosphere, see Duong (2017).

THE CYBERSECURITY LAW AND THE PROBLEM OF FEAR-BASED CENSORSHIP

The adoption of the Cybersecurity Law in June 2018 was the culmination of the party-state's escalating campaign against social media. In the preceding year, different strategies to cope with new digital challenges were announced in preparation for the passing of the bill. In early 2017, the government banned major Vietnamese firms from advertising on YouTube in an effort to pressure Google to remove "toxic content" from its global video-sharing platform. This campaign was considered successful, as the Ministry of Information and Communication later claimed that Google had removed 6,423 videos and Facebook had terminated 159 accounts for "defaming Vietnamese leaders" (Luân 2017; Trần 2018). In December 2017, the Ministry of Defence declared its "cyberwarfare" against the negative impact of the Internet, proudly introducing a unit of ten thousand members entitled "Force 47" that works "every hour, every minute, every second" to fight against "erroneous views" online (Mai 2017). In this increasingly hostile discourse against social media and the Internet, terms such as "fake news," "trash information," "toxic content," "erroneous views," and "hostile voices" are used interchangeably without any clear definition or differentiation. It is quite obvious, however, that the party-state simply equates these terms with any content that violates the censorship taboos traditionally applied to the mass media.

There are two points in the Cybersecurity Law that activists find particularly worrisome. First, the law requires online citizens to comply with an ambiguous and lengthy list of forbidden behaviors, many of which directly restrict the right to raise a critical voice. People are banned from using online platforms to, for instance, "insult great men, national leaders, historical figures, and national heroes," to "distort history, negate revolutionary achievements, and undermine the national solidarity," or to disseminate "untrue information that stirs obfuscation among the people" (Ministry of Defence 2018). Second, all digital platforms must store Vietnamese users' data within the country, provide users' data upon request, and remove all content that violates the law. The police, the military, and other authorities are invested with the power to audit, collect data, block, terminate, and prosecute any online platform that poses a danger to national security. The Cybersecurity Law demonstrates that ideologically, the party-state wants to control social media by relying on the same political restrictions long imposed on the mass media. Technically, the party-state aims at turning global platforms into more or less subordinate units under its command, trying to use the "carrot and stick" strategy similar to the way it treats domestic media outlets. Overall, the Cybersecurity Law manifests un unconcealed thirst for digital sovereignty, highlighting the party-state's key concerns and strategies in the digital age.

But it is precisely because the Cybersecurity Law is so absolute in its protection of digital sovereignty that this new bill allows us to identify a major problem of Internet governance in Vietnam: the party-state does not seem to understand the difference between mass media and social media. There is no paradigmatic shift in the ideological and technical vocabulary that the party-state uses to talk about social media. In other words, the "what" and the "how" of digital control in Vietnam still adhere to the old model of mass media discipline, which is performed primarily through direct determination between right and wrong, and immediate punishment upon detectable faults.

A comparative view from the case of China will be useful to explore the implication of the Vietnamese Cybersecurity Law. In her study of the Chinese censorship system,

Margaret E. Roberts (2018) convincingly demonstrates that the resilience of authoritarianism in the digital age relies on the capacity to govern online data beyond the traditional mechanism of punishment-based censorship. Internet control requires a clever amalgamation of ideological ambition and technological sophistication. Regarding China's desire for digital sovereignty, the "what" of authoritarian censorship remains, but the "how" has significantly grown out of the old model. In addition to its fear-based control, China has systematically and effectively deployed two new forms of digital control: friction and flooding, resulting in a model of "porous censorship" that allows the government to eschew the wholesale application of visible oppression (Roberts 2018, 1).

The strategy of friction involves the extensive blockage by the Great Firewall. In the last ten years, one by one, China has blocked almost all major online platforms from the West: Google, Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia, Instagram, and Pinterest. Almost all international news sources are banned, and many take an extremely long time to load. The strategy of friction can be easily circumvented by tech-savvy users and politically concerned citizens—hence it is incomplete—but it works well upon "the impatience and indifference" of the majority, who are generally too busy to sacrifice their time and energy to be informed about what is missing from mainstream media (Roberts 2018, 224). The key impact of the friction strategy is that it intensifies the disconnection between the dispersed momentum of the masses and the politically active elites in China, and consequently "prevents coordination of the core and the periphery, known to be an essential component in successful collective action" (Roberts 2018, 8). It is only when a wedge is driven between the masses and the elites that the targeted punishment of a few high-profile activists becomes effective. At the heart of Chinese Internet censorship is thus the capacity to customize its digital control over different political segments of the population.

The strategy of flooding is performed by the constant production and circulation of hundreds of millions of politically neutral and misleading messages to mold the results of algorithm-based information flows. It is estimated that the Chinese government employed as many as two million people, the so-called "50-cent-party," to post a massive amount of distracting and confusing messages, about 448 million social media comments a year (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017). This results in a diluted online environment without strong coordination of politically controversial information, making it less likely for the algorithm to identify and amplify collective grievance or negative voices. The flooding strategy also makes it more time-consuming for readers to differentiate between valuable information and spam, which again discourages impatient readers and further disconnects the few politically sophisticated people from the politically inactive masses.

Most importantly, the two techniques of friction and flooding are applied in a thriving and self-sustaining nationalized world of Chinese apps and platforms, which provides sufficient online services for a population of 1.4 billion people without having to rely on any Western platform. Internet control in China has thus significantly grown out of the traditional model that seeks merely to threaten, remove, or punish violators. This system uses multiple clever and costly methods of data manipulation and digital nationalization that aim to alter the very condition of possibility for data production and coordination. Such power to govern at the environment-setting level demonstrates how digital control in China has structurally departed from traditional forms of media censorship.

The Vietnamese Cybersecurity Law is commonly criticized as a duplicate of its Chinese counterpart. Indeed, this is a valid argument if one looks at the party-state's *ambition* to impose ideological discipline on online discourses. But this might be a misleading diagnosis if we consider the technological reality on the Vietnamese side. The key strategy of digital governance in Vietnam is still punishment-based. Punishment can only be performed upon detectable targets, which is useful to terminate radical resistance and high-profile dissenters. But given the daily production and coordination of an immense amount of data online, it is impossible for this strategy to alter the formation and amplification of collective grievance and ordinary dissent. Blatant fear-based censorship can actually backfire in the age of digital freedom because it only intensifies the desire to resist and to circumvent the concealing techniques, which is precisely what has been happening in Vietnam. The more the government tries to block and punish specific cases of dissenting voices, the more people become curious to find out what actually happened, and come up with conspiracy theories that cast the party-state in an unflattering light.

Regarding the flooding strategy, the so-called "Force 47" in Vietnam is hardly comparable to its Chinese counterpart. The Vietnamese team (ten thousand members compared to two million in China) seems to work by engaging in polemics to defend the party-state, rather than by diluting the information environment using neutral or misleading comments. As far as Facebook's algorithms work, the more engagement on a certain topic, regardless of its ideological tendency, the more likely the topic starts trending. The strategy of directly fighting against "toxic content" by Force 47 might backfire and fuel the anti-state flames by thickening the information flows into the debates. The fact that Facebook still powerfully frames public discourse in Vietnam in an anti-state tendency in the last few years, despite the expansion of Force 47, indicates that this team is far from being able to distract Vietnamese users from public discussions of politically sensitive topics.

Regarding the friction strategy, the Vietnamese party-state is much less likely to block all global platforms due to a severe lack of domestic alternatives. Whereas Baidu and Weibo, the most dominant and still thriving search engine and social media platform in China, were launched in 2000 and 2009 respectively, as of 2017, the Vietnamese authorities only promised that they would build indigenous platforms to replace Google and Facebook "in the next five or seven years" (Nguyen 2017). Currently, Vietnam blocks many dissent blogs, particularly the ones using the Vietnamese language, but major global platforms with a significant role in promoting knowledge, entertainment, and social and economic connectivity, such as Google, Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, are accessed freely. The young and tech-savvy population in Vietnam has enjoyed the benefits of global communication since the inception of the Internet in the country in 1997, and are keen on fighting for these benefits. The economic, social, and developmental cost of blocking Vietnam from the global world of digital flows is too high because it can undermine economic growth, social stability, and global engagement—all key indexes to maintain the party-state's already shaky legitimacy. A technologically weak country like Vietnam is not in the position to resist digital globalization in the same ways as China has been doing. The passing of the Cybersecurity Law thus indicates an oppressive tendency in the ways the party-state handles online discourses, but this does not mean that the party-state is actually capable of preventing online platforms from dispersedly mobilizing social dynamics.

CONCLUSION

The immense world of big data appears as mysterious as the concealed world of authoritarian censorship. It is thus difficult to predict the future of both, in Vietnam or elsewhere. But there are several things we can conclude about the Vietnamese case by drawing from our understanding of the post-Reform media settings, as well as the unfolding of public discourses related to social media in Vietnam and the recent adoption of the Vietnamese Cybersecurity Law. First, the media landscape in Vietnam has long been destabilized by market forces, and in recent years, further transfigured by new pressure from the Internet and social media. In order to grasp the nuances of mediated activities in Vietnam, it is important to go beyond the simplistic view that tends to reduce the complexity of the Vietnamese media landscape to a simple problem of direct political antagonism. Second, while the party-state is responsive to the market and the Internet, it stays committed to its centralized model of censorship, and is getting more repressive toward online discourses. The adoption of the Cybersecurity Law demonstrates the determination of the party-state to govern the digital world through the application of direct surveillance and punishment. This worrying fact confirms recent international concerns regarding the intensification of the party-state's discipline of political dissenters (Reuters 2018; Washington Post Editorial Board 2018). But the persistence of fear-based censorship also indicates that the party-state largely fails to recognize the sheer impossibility of monitoring online data by direct punishment. The party-state performs no significant effort, at least as evinced in the content of the Cybersecurity Law and its recent history of digital control, to governmentalize its traditional mechanism of censorship, as seen in the case of China.

During the first week of July 2018, when these concluding remarks were being written, about one hundred thousand Vietnamese registered their new accounts on Minds, a self-acclaimed "decentralized" social network, in fear of Facebook's collaboration with the party-state (Giang 2018). Within less than a month, Facebook had lost a bit of its symbolic valence as a liberating tool of bottom-up activism in Vietnam, while Minds emerged as a new trend among those with an activist agenda, at least for a couple of weeks. While the party-state has done nothing particularly threatening to the future of Facebook since its adoption of the Cybersecurity Law, online Vietnamese citizens are already prepared for negative effects by looking around for other online platforms as alternatives to Facebook. As we are all waiting to witness the unfolding future of social media in Vietnam, there are two things that we are sure about: first, the speed of technological change is much faster than legislative and political adjustment in Vietnam, and second, Vietnamese Internet users are keen on surfing new technological trends and are eager to use their tech savvy-skills to circumvent the party-state's ambition to turn Vietnam into a land of digital isolation. Failing to alter the conditions for the production and coordination of digital content, the party-state is trapped between its technological and financial inadequacy and its ideological ambition to build its world of digital sovereignty.

Acknowledgments

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