ABSTRACT

The landscape of politics appears to be changing in Vietnam. Social media is narrowing the gap between the ‘everyday politics’ of daily life and the more focused political discourse of dissidents and activists. The state’s long-standing attempt to shape public opinion is crumbling under the reality of a relatively open online environment. While the state actively arrests and harasses blogger activists, dissidents have been using social media to launch increasingly public and brazen protests. As the country prepares for a 2016 leadership change, online spaces will be the place to watch.

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is experiencing an explosion of online activity as ever more of the country’s 90 million people connect to the internet. As in many Asian and developing nations, the growth of online connectivity in Vietnam is changing the social, political and economic landscape at a pace bewilidering for its speed and potential impact. While all nations are grappling with issues like online privacy and security, Vietnam has the added layer of an authoritarian government bent on maintaining political control over an increasingly educated, financially secure and internationally connected population, in a period of slowing economic growth and rampant corruption.

This paper provides an overview of the major trends surrounding internet use in Vietnam, focusing on social media and its current and potential socio-political impact. The vast majority of internet traffic in Vietnam, as elsewhere, is for pedestrian activities like gaming, chatting, and sharing photos of kids, pets and food. However, the overall rise of social media in Vietnam has unleashed a range of social and political exchanges that are outpacing the government’s ability to shape public opinion. Over the past year, social media has empowered a “public voice” that has critiqued government handling of a measles outbreak, pushed
for the construction of a bridge in a remote area, and caused the premature closing of an exhibit on the 1950s land reform at the National Museum of History (see discussion below). In all these examples, social media played a crucial role in forcing a response from state actors. While this suggests some social media ‘wins’ for civil society, the government has also increased its harassment, arrest and physical attacks on bloggers and journalists writing outside state media. These independent voices have not been deterred, however, and the first few days of 2015 brought Vietnam’s first-ever ‘viral’ protest campaign concurrent with a major meeting of the Communist Party Central Committee. The brazen protest campaign may well spark a response from the state.

Social media is forcing the state to be both more responsive and more repressive. The internet has made public some debates previously held behind closed doors, and put state actors in the ambivalent and increasingly hypocritical position of passively relying on independent news sources to verify what they read in the official press. In some cases officials even actively generate material that ends up on non-official media channels and blogs.

Chart 1 - Vietnam internet use in 2013-14

Non-official news websites in Vietnam, in addition to activist and human rights focused blogs, include some ‘semi-state’ or politically connected blogs that, at least in one case, is rumoured to be ‘sponsored’ by particular factions of the upper echelons of the Communist Party. While rumour and innuendo have long been part of the news cycle in Vietnam, the internet and social media offers Vietnamese from all backgrounds the chance to see more dirty laundry washed in public than ever before – sometimes containing the type of inside information that implies a source near the inner circles of power.


Chart 1

This paper argues that social media is narrowing the gap between the ‘everyday politics’ of life in Vietnam and the focused political discourse of dissidents and activists. The state’s long-standing attempt to divide (activists from the general population) and conquer (the court of public opinion) is crumbling around the edges. Social media is a space that offers many potential bridges between the mass of everyday people and their viewpoints, and the more narrow and critical agenda of intellectual dissidents. Greater online contact between writers and readers – content producers and content consumers – may generate in the population-at-large a heightened understanding of the issues and concerns that drive political activists to write and act as they do. This is particularly the case as everyday people post videos and comments that become widely distributed and discussed (including among activists). The line between content producers and consumers is blurring. When this blurring combines over nation-wide issues like corruption and anti-China sentiment, it presents Vietnam’s political leaders with an even greater challenge in controlling open dissent. The bridging and blurring of activists and everyday people engendering significant political change in Vietnam seems inevitable, but not imminent. It is certainly a situation worth monitoring closely as Vietnam prepares for a leadership change at the Party Congress in early 2016 – an event that will likely further curtail political freedoms in 2015.
The growth of internet use in Vietnam is above all the story of social networking – particularly Facebook and its widespread acceptance among Vietnamese users. According to a Group M report, social networking and online chatting are the most common uses of the internet among youth under 24 years of age, and remain popular among older age groups as well (who typically use the internet to read news and stay informed).

Vietnam’s first popular online communications tools were Yahoo Mail and Yahoo Messenger (both still commonly used). As social networks and blogging became global trends after 2005, Vietnamese turned to Yahoo 360. Vietnamese consumers often prefer established international brands, and perhaps for this reason Yahoo 360 was the default social network choice, while elsewhere Blogger and Wordpress were more popular. Yahoo stopped development of the 360 service in 2008 – precisely as Facebook was rapidly gaining popularity. There were so many Vietnamese Yahoo 360 accounts that Yahoo briefly put a ‘360 Plus Vietnam’ service in place to keep its Vietnamese user-base intact. However, the flow to Facebook could not be stemmed. By the end of 2014, there were over 20 million active Facebook accounts in Vietnam, equal to 22% of the population. The next largest social network is domestic firm Zing, with about nine million users. The Vietnamese government attempted to create a domestic portal with a social network function, go.vn, but this effort lagged and has largely failed.

The rise of Facebook posed a conundrum for Vietnam’s political leaders. Keen to promote the internet infrastructure and its use as part of Vietnam’s modernization efforts, the government was less enthused to have its citizens use a social network that offered access to banned political content. Facebook is not entirely an ‘on-or-off’ choice for censors – individual pages within the site can be filtered (particularly if Facebook agrees to block them). Nonetheless, it is easy for users to create new pages so blocking content is difficult. The choice facing Vietnam’s censors was not an easy one. By 2010, with Facebook Groups and Pages established by overseas political parties calling on Vietnamese to overthrow their government, the state was concerned enough to briefly ban Facebook. But as filtering goes, the Facebook ban was a ‘soft’ block. Facebook’s primary IP address was blocked, but internet users quickly learned to change their DNS settings to access Facebook from various alternate IP addresses. At present, the government seems to have given up the ban without much of a fight. Facebook is either unblocked or easily accessed on all of Vietnam’s major internet service providers, and individual pages do not seem to be filtered. Furthermore, circumvention tools are easily accessed from inside Vietnam via simple Google searches.


3. Although more robust monitoring and investigation is needed. Tia Sang Vietnam began monitoring the accessibility inside Vietnam of a watchlist of 120 websites and Facebook pages in early January 2015. Facebook and the pages of several known activists within Facebook are testing ‘accessible’ at this time.

4. While testing performed by ONI-Asia in 2012 did find some circumvention tool websites blocked in Vietnam, anecdotal reports indicate circumvention tools are still widely known and distributed within Vietnam. A Google search in Vietnamese of a text string like ‘How do I access Quan Lam Bao?’ (a blocked site) returns numerous pages offering advice in Vietnamese on how to circumvent blocks.
The half-hearted attempt to ban Facebook and other sites highlights the dilemma that widespread internet use and social networking has created for the Vietnamese state. Vietnam's effort at modernization and economic growth has involved courting foreign investment and remittances from ethnic Vietnamese living abroad, and providing the opportunity for Vietnamese to study in, travel to and interact with the wider world. Relatively unhindered access to the internet is one of the carrots that comes with this commitment to economic development. A level of hypocrisy is added into this already muddled equation when you consider that many Vietnamese believe that the highest level of officialdom wants (some) Vietnamese people to be able to access independent news sites – because these power players use independent, anonymous blogs to filter down stories about their political rivals that would not otherwise make it into the mainstream media. The 'Vietnamese Litvinenko' case described below is one such example. But setting aside this type of hypocritical illusion of independence, it remains clear that open political dissent is not permitted, and the stick used to control online activity is the arrest of bloggers and activists who turn to the internet to voice their complaints. That Vietnam is widely regarded to have one of the world's worst human rights records is not new, but the rate at which independent online writers are being arrested is nonetheless alarming.

VIETNAM’S HUMAN RIGHTS CONUNDRUM

Vietnam ranks among the worst countries in the world for restricting press freedom and detaining political prisoners. Human Rights Watch reports that Vietnam has around 200 political prisoners. The Committee to Protect Journalists lists 16 reporters and bloggers currently imprisoned, the fifth highest number worldwide on the CPJ’s ranking by country. Intimidation and threats toward political activists are common, and one writer was recently beaten unconscious by plainclothes assailants thought to be police.

Despite this oppressive environment, some independent criticism of state officials and policies is tolerated, and public protests do occur. As the examples discussed in this paper will show, Vietnamese are increasingly vocal about what they see and record in the real world and share online. Not all political bloggers are arrested all the time; only some are arrested some of the time. While this might be typical of any keep-them-guessing, carrot-and-stick approach, it nonetheless raises the question – what are the determining factors, if any, in decisions to threaten, intimidate, arrest or imprison an activist, blogger or political dissident?

Only one study, published in 2012, looked at ‘regime dissidents’ in Vietnam and attempted to answer “how, when and to what extent (Vietnam’s) leaders resort to repression” in their response to different types of public criticism. Kerkvliet’s study analyzed 62 cases where writers or dissidents were arrested, and the particular variables involved in each case. What all the cases had in common was “writings, extended interviews, and/or leadership positions in unauthorized

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5. The CPJ list starts with Tran Huynh Duy Thuc, imprisoned on 24 May 2009, and stops at Hong Le Tho, imprisoned on 29 November 2014. In December 2014, three more writers were detained. The CPJ list is available at https://cpj.org/imprisoned/2014.php

organizations and publications that are highly critical of the regime.\textsuperscript{7}

Kerkvliet found that common themes in dissident writing included corruption and nepotism; the absence of democracy and democratic rights; the lack of religious freedom; and the need for ‘national pride’ in standing up to China (the latter an issue as Communist Party leaders are said to benefit personally from Chinese investment dollars). Discussion of these issues typically focused on the need for fundamental political change, given the intransigence of Communist Party leaders. Occasionally, dissident writers focused on policy issues like education, and the widening disparity between rich and poor.

Regardless of the subject matter addressed, Kerkvliet felt dissident writers could be classified into two main groups: those that aggressively called for an end to Communist Party domination of the political system (the confrontation camp), versus those that stressed working with state officials (the participatory camp). Writers that took a participatory approach had a greater tendency to focus on policy issues like education, development and welfare, while the confrontation camp focused on political reform as a necessary precursor to development. Within this latter camp, some of the writers had connections to overseas groups that often call for political change in Vietnam. While most of the writers acted as individuals, a few were part of religious groups, linked to overseas-based political parties, and – more recently – some were part of a movement called Bloc 8406, named after the date of a manifesto issued by the loose-knit group.

From the state perspective, Kervliet’s study found a change in how dissidents have been dealt with in recent years. From quietly arresting writers and not reporting on their cases, the mainstream media now openly discusses the accounts of writers and bloggers being arrested, referring to these dissidents as ‘criminals’, ‘agitators’ or ‘opportunists’ who are in league with foreigners to overthrow the government. Open harassment of dissidents and their families appears to be more common. In particular, their electronic communications are hacked and monitored. Violence and physical intimidation also appears more frequently in recent years.

Of the 62 cases examined in Kerkvliet’s study, there was a notable variation in periods of detainment and imprisonment. The only trends discernable were that being elderly and having a connection to the revolutionary struggle seemed to help dissident writers either avoid prison or receive a lighter sentence. The longest sentences were given to writers directly connected to overseas groups or who were particularly harsh in their critiques of the Communist Party. Dissidents were most commonly said to have broken Article 258 of the Penal Code, which pertains to ‘abusing freedom and democracy to infringe upon the interests of the state.’ The law states that committing an offense can result in ‘non-custodial reform’ for up to three years or a prison term of between six months and three years. Longer prison terms of up to seven years are possible ‘in serious circumstances.’\textsuperscript{4} Prison terms tended to be lighter in recent years, but there were no clear links between the claimed offense and the prison term handed out.


In the period since Kerkvliet's study was published in 2012, the lack of clear trends seems to have continued. It appears that protest against China is a strong precursor to many arrests, that dissidents are getting slightly younger on average (but most are well over 40 years), and that the rate of arrests is increasing. Popular independent blog Dan Lam Bao reports that 2014 saw 31 political dissidents or writers detained, 18 of whom were imprisoned. \(^9\)

As can be expected, the passage of time means fewer dissidents today have a direct connection to the revolution. Nonetheless many are former Party members, former officials, or journalists currently or recently working within the state media system. One clear trend is that many or most political activists are now bloggers, and so they are fairly widely known to the public in the period before their arrest. Many have large followings among other bloggers or social networkers. Furthermore, the state in Vietnam is no longer trying to hide or cover-up the arrest of dissidents. It is publicizing their cases, as examples of writers and bloggers who are ‘abusing their freedoms.’ The state’s decision to publicize these arrests is no accidental policy change. It reflects the nature of its efforts to control and contest politics in the online world.

**UNDERSTANDING ONLINE CONTROLS AND CONTESTATION**

Vietnam is an important example of many of the trends of control and contestation that now define cyberspace in Asia and around the world. After an initial laissez-faire period of open access and non-regulation, the past twenty years has seen all governments take an increasingly active role in controlling cyberspace. This control can be divided into three main ‘generations’ that, while emerging in logical sequence, have often been implemented concurrently depending on the national context. SecDev’s Rafal Rohozinski and his Open Net Initiative (ONI) collaborators have written at length about the framework of internet controls put in place in many national environments, with a particular focus on Russia and the CIS countries. \(^10\) A summary of Rohozinski’s framework is as follows:

First-generation controls aim at denying access to specific websites by blocking servers, domains, keywords and IP addresses. This is achieved by specialized software that is put in place at the internet service provider (ISP) and internet exchange provider (IXP) levels, which are either under state control or compelled by the state to comply. Cybercafes are also commonly policed and monitored as part of first generation controls. As Rohozinski notes, “this generation of filtering is common only among strictly authoritarian regimes, including Vietnam and China.” \(^12\)

Second-generation controls aim to create a legal and normative environment that, combined with more sophisticated technical capacities, allow the state to deny access to online content “as

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11. The summary of internet controls presented here is drawn from an unpublished paper that predates the ONI work: “Controls and Subversion in Russian Cyberspace” by Rafal Rohozinski, April 2008.

and when needed, while reducing the possibility of blowback or discovery.”

Examples of overt second-generation controls include compelling internet sites to register with authorities and to issue regulations on ‘acceptable’ content. Expanded use of defamation laws is common, or ‘veracity’ regulations on spreading ‘false information’ can be put in place to deter bloggers from posting material sourced from outside official media channels. National security concerns are often used to justify blocking internet access at specific moments (of civil or political unrest). Covert actions consistent with second-generation controls include temporary, rapidly deployed dedicated denial of service attacks that make specific websites inaccessible for a given period of time.

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**Chart 2 - ONI-Asia internet testing results from April-August 2012**


**Chart 2.** [https://opennet.net/blog/2012/09/update-threats-freedom-expression-online-vietnam](https://opennet.net/blog/2012/09/update-threats-freedom-expression-online-vietnam)
Third-generation controls take a more sophisticated, multi-dimensional approach by competing for ‘informational space’ with potential civil society or dissident competitors. The focus is less on denying access than “successfully competing with potential threats through effective counter-information campaigns that overwhelm, discredit, or demoralize opponents.”

One frequent component of third-generation controls is the creation of a national internet environment that is distinct from the global, English-language dominated internet. China and Russia are the preeminent examples, as they have devoted significant resources to create national-language search engines and portals. In China’s case, these national portals completely replace banned international sites like Facebook. A national internet space can be policed more easily – as the companies controlling content are located domestically and often fall under state or pseudo-state control.

**SOPHISTICATED CONTROLS, INCONSISTENTLY APPLIED**

Vietnam shows evidence of the use of all three generations of internet control, with increasingly sophisticated third-generation controls put in place in recent years. It is interesting to note, however, that many of Vietnam’s blocks to internet access are circumvented by seemingly large segments of the population, with little effort by the state to stop this behaviour. This ambiguous position may in part be due to the direct and indirect involvement of state actors in spreading and disseminating ‘unofficial’ news, and their own interest in having easily unfettered access to such news.

Vietnam’s use of first-generation controls is evident in the pervasive, though uneven, blocking of websites. No active keyword filtering has been found in Vietnam. In 2012, the ONI undertook extensive testing of Vietnam’s internet. Sites blocked included both domestic and international Vietnamese language sites, primarily political groups and political writers openly critical of the regime, including the blogs of writers already imprisoned. Several independent religious groups were blocked, as were those of ‘Montagnard’ (ethnic minority) organizations. Viettel blocked some English-language content (Radio Free Asia, Voice of America), while the other two ISPs blocked only the Vietnamese-language versions of these sites. Only Viettel blocked Facebook at the time the testing was carried out.

Second-generation internet controls in Vietnam include new laws and regulations that apply specifically to internet users, combined with more sophisticated ‘just-in-time’ attacks on political

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15. As ONI-Asia notes: “In Vietnam, Internet filtering happens at the domain name system (DNS) level, which means that instead of blocking a site, ISPs simply configure domain names to resolve to an invalid address or remove blocked Web sites from their DNS servers. It is widely known that blocking at the DNS level is subject to vulnerabilities, as this form of blocking can be easily circumvented by Internet users through the use of circumvention tools, proxy servers, and virtual private networks (VPNs) or simply by tampering with the DNS (for instance, changing a DNS provider to a publicly available one such as Google DNS). There are many Vietnamese circumvention help sites whereby more advanced Internet users provide information on how to access blocked sites.” See: https://opennet.net/research/profiles/vietnam
websites. When bloggers and dissidents are arrested, most often they are said to have broken Article 258 of the Penal Code, which relates to ‘abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State.’

Targeting political activists, Article 258 bears little relevance for the average internet user in Vietnam. In September 2013, however, Vietnam issued Decree 72 on the ‘Management, Provision, Use of Internet Services and Information Content Online.’ This decree requires internet companies in Vietnam to cooperate with the government to enforce its information controls; makes it illegal to distribute any materials online that harms national security or opposes the government; and bans the distribution of news from any official media outlet through social media. With Decree 72 in place, sharing or ‘liking’ a news story on Facebook – any domestic news story – is, strictly speaking, illegal. Although this last restriction has not been applied in practice, the law provides an easy excuse for the government to ban or block social networks, or fine or detain bloggers and social network users, at any time.

In addition to its legal efforts, the Vietnamese government is said to be behind a range of dedicated denial of service (DDoS) attacks on activist and political group websites. These attacks flood a website with data requests, typically from a botnet of infected computers, until the site is effectively blocked as other users cannot gain access. Unlike with the DNS filtering techniques usually employed in Vietnam, circumvention tools do not allow access to a site blocked by an effective DDoS attack. Viet Tan, a political party based in the United States, has long accused the Vietnamese state of DDoS attacks on its sites. The most well-known DDoS case involves a flood of internet requests that blocked a well-known anti-bauxite mine site in 2010. Technicians at Google and McAfee were able to determine that a popular Vietnamese typing program, VPSKeys, had been distributed with malware that infected host computers with botnet software. The botnet was able to spy on infected computers, possibly logging keystrokes and recording passwords. Since the software effectively allowed its controller to spy on Vietnamese language speakers around the world, many speculated the source of the malware code lay within the Vietnamese state.

The VPSKeys example, if truly originating with the Vietnamese state, indicates that third-generation controls involving the creation of malware are in place (as opposed to simply hiring a criminal botnet group to carry out an attack). This is particularly relevant given the high rate of malware and botnet infection among Vietnam’s computers. Vietnam is said by Microsoft to have one of the highest rates of malware infection internationally, and a malware expert recently said Vietnam is likely to be among the top three sources of DDoS attacks in the world in 2015.

Malware attacks thought to originate in the Vietnamese state security apparatus have targeted overseas bloggers and human rights organizations.\textsuperscript{21} Alongside such attacks, a Vietnamese official in early 2013 admitted the state employs an army of 900 ‘public opinion shapers’ to leave pro-government messages on all manner of online forums and comment boxes.\textsuperscript{22} Unlike China and Russia’s third-generation efforts, however, Vietnam has not committed itself to creating a ‘national internet.’ While Vietnamese portals like Zing are popular for music sharing, Facebook remains the dominant social network site, and the government’s USD 200m go.vn effort has largely been abandoned as impractical in the face of overseas competition.

Instead of a national internet with enforced blocking of international sites, Vietnam’s approach seems to be the carrot of international access and openness for the general population, tied to the stick of harassing and detaining those who break the laws and ‘rules’ against open dissent. If greater numbers of dissidents emerge or the overall regime of control is threatened, the state can always close off the internet. For a nation that is so international, with a sizable diaspora in constant communication with the homeland, the threat of blocking Facebook or closing off internet freedom is tangible, and would impact people’s lives and their ability to communicate with friends and family.

So far, cooptation seems to be an effective approach for Vietnam’s objectives of achieving a superficial openness while maintaining tight political controls. The Prime Minister is sufficiently confident that he has said publicly that Facebook and other social networks will remain open.\textsuperscript{23} But how long can this balancing act be maintained? As much as it can be separated from ‘off-line’ or real-life events, online discourse and social media activity may bridge the very gap the government wants to keep in place – that between the lives of everyday people and the views of political dissidents. The internet offers everyday people easy access to read, understand and react publicly to the writings and actions of activists, and to the news of political controls and arrests. Furthermore, the internet offers everyday people the chance to create their own content, and see this content become part of larger debates on social and political issues.

**SOCIAL MEDIA CONTESTING STATE CONTROL**

The headline stories on internet freedom in Vietnam are undoubtedly the harassment, arrest and imprisonment of bloggers and activists – a situation expected to continue and even worsen in 2015 as political competition for the 2016 leadership race heats up. Behind the headlines, however, a range of social media activity points toward a slow change in the landscape of everyday politics in Vietnam. Several recent examples of viral social media stories that influenced real-world decision-making and events indicate that politicians in Vietnam face increased scrutiny, and the state’s grip on shaping public opinion is more tenuous than ever.

\textsuperscript{21} https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2014/01/vietnamese-malware-gets-personal
\textsuperscript{23} https://www.yahoo.com/tech/s/vietnam-pm-says-impossible-ban-social-media-report-064822879.html
• **Measles outbreak:** In January 2014, an outbreak of measles hit 24 provinces, including Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, with 993 cases and 7 deaths. The government did not react promptly and official news channels were largely silent on the issue. Only in April did Facebook posts by doctors discussing the outbreak cause widespread alarm. By that time, measles was present in 60 of 63 provinces and ultimately nearly 150 people died. Under public scrutiny that included protests outside the Ministry of Health, different levels of government tried to pass blame on each other. A Facebook page was created calling for the Minister of Health to resign, and several famous singers and at least one National Assembly member joined this chorus. Dissident bloggers like Nguyen Lan Thang also covered the story and integrated it into their ongoing political critiques.24 Part of the criticism focused on money allocated to prevent measles that was clearly not spent well (or was siphoned off for other purposes). The Minister has not resigned, but the Prime Minister was forced to publicly criticize his own government’s handling of the issue.25

• **Bridgegate, Vietnam-style:** In early 2014 an incredible video went viral in Vietnam showing pupils being transported across a flooded, fast-flowing river inside a large plastic bag held by a wiry but evidently very strong man.26 Social media posts sharing the video lamented the lack of basic infrastructure in rural, mountainous areas and how students were willing to put their lives at risk to get to school. The outcry was soon picked up in the mainstream media (Tuoi Tre posted the video on 17 March), and, to the surprise of many, the Minister of Transport acted quickly. In early May 2014, construction of a bridge over the dangerous river began.27 Many Vietnamese were surprised social media could have such a significant and rapid impact on senior government officials. (An unfortunate postscript: the bridge was destroyed by a storm in July 2014.) 28

• **Viral video makes revisionism hard:** In September 2014, the Museum of History in Hanoi announced an exhibit on the land reform campaign of the early 1950s. An opening ceremony was held with a large crowd on hand. Given Ho Chi Minh’s eventual apology for the excessive violence of the campaign, it is widely known in Vietnam that land reform went ‘too far’ and killed too many people. Surprising then that an exhibit in 2014 would gloss over the violence and focus only on ‘positive aspects’ of the land reform. At the exhibit opening, a TV interview was interrupted by a young man (not a reporter) asking if government officials owning huge tracts of land today had any similarity to the landlords who were killed in the 1950s for owning huge (or even small) tracts of land.29 The video went viral. The next day, protestors gathered outside the museum hoisting banners demanding protection from government land appropriations.30 The exhibit soon closed down, with no reason given. While Vietnam’s demographics result in most social media users being very young, it seems some elderly people suddenly started posting their memories of the violence of land reform.31

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25. [http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%E1%BB%8B%8Bch_s%E1%BB%9F_Vi%E1%BB%87t_Nam_2014](http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%E1%BB%8B%8Bch_s%E1%BB%9F_Vi%E1%BB%87t_Nam_2014)
30. [http://doithoaionline.wordpress.com/2012/04/25/v%E1%BA%A5n-d%E1%BB%81-nong-dan-v%E1%BB%87-t-nam-d%E1%BA%A7u-th%E1%BA%BF-k%E1%BB%B7-21/#more-34988](http://doithoaionline.wordpress.com/2012/04/25/v%E1%BA%A5n-d%E1%BB%81-nong-dan-v%E1%BB%87-t-nam-d%E1%BA%A7u-th%E1%BA%BF-k%E1%BB%B7-21/#more-34988)
immediate connection to today’s events was also telling. The technocrats who approved the exhibit had clearly miscalculated: 1) how many people remember the events of the 1950s, and 2) the ability of the general public to see links between historical and contemporary conditions.

• **“I don’t like the Communist Party of Vietnam”:** An informal ‘selfie’ photo campaign that started in early January 2015 involved dozens of people posting photos of themselves online holding a sign that read ‘I don’t like that Communist Party of Vietnam’ followed often by a reason why. Most of the photos show people’s faces, and many are clearly taken inside Vietnam, including a series taken at a public protest in downtown Hanoi. The campaign was started by activist La Viet Dung and now boasts a Facebook fan page and a writing contest. More on this case is available in the Tia Sang Vietnam FlashNote available at [www.tiasangvietnam.org](http://www.tiasangvietnam.org)

• **Vietnam’s Litvinenko?:** Social media activity in Vietnam in the last week of December 2014 focused on rumours surrounding the public disappearance of Nguyen Ba Thanh, a politician from the central city of Da Nang who several years ago was appointed to head anti-corruption investigations at the national level (Da Nang developed rapidly under Thanh’s administration, and he was considered a rising political star). Thanh disappeared from public eight months ago. In late December, a blog called Chan Dung Quyen Luc (‘Portraits of Power’) claimed that he had been poisoned by a radioactive substance – in a manner similar to Alexander Litvinenko (a former Russian secret service agent and critic of Putin who was killed in London in 2006). The state media initially did not comment, but after the story went viral a public official did state Thanh was in the US receiving cancer treatment. Recent posts on ‘Portraits of Power’ have provided details including the name and phone number of the American doctor treating him for radiation poisoning.

Photos on the blog claim to show Thanh in a visibly ill state (critics claim they are fakes). Thanh is now said to have returned to Vietnam and to be near death. Nothing in this case can be confirmed by multiple sources. Everything rests on the accounts provided on ‘Portraits of Power’ – which among its blog posts has a story pointing the finger directly at two of Thanh’s political rivals, who were under investigation for corruption. Ultimately, the story may not be accurate. But many everyday people consider it to be true, and find it ‘very believable’ that a political rival poisoned Thanh.

‘Portraits of Power’ is an ‘independent’ blog with an anonymous author, publishing material that is clearly slanderous and in violation of Vietnam’s libel laws (specifically, Article 9 of the Media Law deals with defamation). The blog could not have this information, or publish it, without some very high-level political figure feeding the information through or indeed pulling the strings completely. This is not considered unusual in Vietnam, as it is widely viewed that some ostensibly independent sites, including popular blogs like Dan Lam Bao and Quan Lam Bao, are used in battles between political factions, to smear intra-Party opponents in ways not possible in the mainstream media. ‘Portraits of Power’ reports that it had over 24 millions visits a month after it first appeared.

• **Vietnam's China balancing act:** International media reporting on the struggle for democracy in Vietnam often glances over the actual content of dissident writing and their sources of discontent. Many Vietnamese dissidents are most vocal about their government’s failure to protect the country’s sovereignty in light of China’s aggressive push for oil and other natural resources. While the struggle for democracy more broadly remains an important component of online dissent in Vietnam, it does not have the widespread public support of anti-China protest. The two most vocal moments of protest and dissent in Vietnam in recent years have involved Chinese incursions into the Spratly/Paracel islands and Chinese investment in a bauxite mine in Vietnam’s central highlands. Widespread rioting and the death of some Chinese factory workers in May 2014 indicate the potential for further unrest.⁶

Social media has emerged as the primary terrain of conflict in this struggle. It appears that much of the government’s online controls are aimed at silencing bloggers and dissidents from questioning the government’s relations with China – particularly the implication that Chinese investors are lining the pockets of Vietnam’s corrupt officialdom. Furthermore, many of the government’s most sophisticated internet controls pop up around the China issue (such as the attack on the anti-bauxite mine website). It seems likely the Vietnamese government is paranoid that protest against China, with its broad base of support, could turn suddenly inward and become protest against the regime itself. In Confucian terms, they fear losing the ‘mandate of heaven.’

**PERSPECTIVE**

The 2016 Communist Party Congress will see the Central Committee select new leaders for the three top positions in Vietnam – Party chairman, state president and prime minister. Regardless of the final outcome, this year will see a great deal of behind-the-scenes political maneuvering. Typically, the months prior to Politburo leadership changes see a virtual ‘news freeze’ occur to prevent public speculation on changes and criticism of the Party. Already, government spokespeople have warned the public to curtail direct criticism of the state in their online activities, and said that official media outlets will be under ‘direct control’ of the Party for the entire year.³⁷ Bloggers, ignoring these warnings, launched a viral campaign that has brought in a wider audience and range of participants than ever before. The ‘I don’t like’ photo campaign is a very direct challenge that may yet generate a strong response from the state. A crackdown on all internet activity, with wider and more strongly imposed blocks, is possible. Further arrest of bloggers and political activists is highly likely. But despite any crackdown or arrests, it seems irreversible that social media will continue to further influence political discourse in Vietnam – bridging the divide between ‘everyday politics’ and political activists; shaping the issues addressed in the mainstream media; and informing greater numbers of policy- and decision-makers as they come into direct contact with people’s opinions and information. The landscape of political control and contestation has changed permanently, and 2015 may well be a watershed year in understanding the future trajectory of political change in Vietnam.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The SecDev Foundation, The SecDev Foundation is a Canadian-based think-do tank that works at the cross-roads of security and development – because you can’t have one without the other. Our aim is to build a better world through open intelligence and empowerment.

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Tia Sáng, provides ongoing data and analysis on internet access and freedom in Vietnam. The initiative aims to support a range of stakeholders by analyzing internet access data from Vietnam and monitoring mainstream and social media, and political events relevant to the online world.

www.tia-sangvietnam.org