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The Influence of Social Media in Vietnam's Elite Politics

Thiem Hai Bui

Abstract: There has been a notable rise of social media in Vietnam's politics in recent years. The use of social media in generating and exchanging content for public consumption has become increasingly complex and sophisticated. The development of social media has led to the public being better informed about key political and economic issues of public concern. Social media is also playing a visible role in the competition among political factions. Increased exposure and public scrutiny has had a great impact on the way the political apparatus operates and the closed-door preparations made by party-state elites to select top leadership. This paper examines the patterns of use of social media and highlights some of its prominent features and roles in Vietnam's politics. I investigate the impact that social media exerts, as well as the constraints on its use for the public.

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Introduction

The rise of the Internet has led to social media increasingly playing a significant role in Vietnam's political life. It has been instrumental in giving elite politics in Vietnam an unprecedented level of visibility and exposure to the public. As such, social media has dramatically changed the landscape and scope of the public sphere in Vietnam. It has provided a new and powerful avenue for public opinion in Vietnam, along with a broader range of social activism, including social media and informal groups and individuals acting collectively on an issue-specific basis (Wells-Dang 2014). The impact of social media is now recognisable in public responses and the way the state handles the outcomes of contentious politics.

With the rise of social media, citizens' participation in governance has increasingly moved online and the initiative in social mobilisation on key issues of public concern has shifted away from state-linked agencies and media. Social media has enabled a mobilisational effect on policy formulation and public opinion. These developments show that the idea of 'sensitivity' regarding a number of issues is strongly conditioned on timing, framing, and actors' willingness to push the boundaries of accepted speech. Terms such as 'transparency', 'accountability' and 'advocacy' – once considered off-limits – are now in normal usage, and even 'civil society' is more widely used than in the past.

In Vietnam, the use of social media as interactive forms of information and communication technologies (ICT) that involve people in the generation and exchange content has become increasingly complex and sophisticated. The rising influence of social media has contributed to noticeable changes in political participation and usual practices. In turn, increased exposure and public scrutiny has resulted in noticeable changes in how the apparatus interacts with the public at what is now a critical juncture in Vietnam's political life.

This article adopts a qualitative method based on participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted between April and May 2015, which covers the period of the tree movement in Hanoi and the important political events leading up to the CPV National Congress in January 2016. The qualitative interviews were conducted with members of the press, social media users, NGO activists, and Vietnamese scholars. The article is also based on content analysis of websites, electronic newspapers, blogs, and government documents. Drawing on the network society theory and actor-media theory, this article seeks to demonstrate the many faces of social media in Vietnam in terms of how it both enlarges and complicates the public space. This paper focuses on the

impact of social media in the sphere of elite politics, which refers to the process of political participation and decision-making involves the more informed, educated and politically active people who have a strong influence in governance networks.

Analytical Framework of Social Media's Influence

The dramatic advancement of information and communication technologies has become a key factor in the development of civil society by providing new opportunities as well as creating new challenges. The Internet and social media have the agency to bring new dimensions to the development of civil society. According to Chang, Chu, and Welsh (2013: 153), the Internet and social media have three important implications for the development of civil society: (1) providing alternative sources of information; (2) lowering the cost of political participation; and (3) increasing the mobilising capacity of opposition forces. However, there has been an important academic debate regarding the extent to which social media can really facilitate political participation and enable the development of civil society.

In general, the scope for collective action in Vietnam's one-party system is highly limited or repressed. However, many academic works have recognised that the available space for citizens' collective action emerged from either the dialogues with the state (Kerkvliet 2001), or civil society networks (Wells-Dang 2012) or the concession on the party-state's side on certain governance issues (Bui 2013). Now that social media has become part of daily life of many ordinary people, the power has also been organised around communicative structures that can give rise to social change (Castell 2009: 20). The power and counter-power reproduced during the interaction between cyberspace and the physical space has constituted the space of autonomy (Castell 2012: 222). This represents the hybrid space that facilitates political participation and enables the development of civil society.

With regard to the meaning of the embeddedness of social life in the media and communication technologies, the actor-network theory appreciates the spatial dimension of power in the workings of the stretched-out networks (Cauldry 2008: 100). In this sense, the social media offers the networks of connections among human agents, technologies and objects. Although these connections "are contingent and emerge historically," the network that they form and develop – the social media – can acquire the force of "nature" (Cauldry 2008: 93). However,

it is also important to acknowledge the limits of social media. It is very difficult to translate activism on social media into collective action in the physical space to effect some change given the strict control of the state. The analysis in this article concurs with the point made by Kurfürst (2015: 124) that the influence of social media in Vietnam has ‘yet to form a networked social movement’ and, to a certain extent, existing power differentials are reproduced in cyberspace.

The Ascendency of Social Media in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the existence of any opposition force is seriously questioned due to the thorough destruction of any independent power centres; which is a consequence of the Revolutionary Wars (1945–1975). Despite this, cyber dissent has been on the rise and is likely to become organised in a more cohesive way. In response, the party-state has recognised the importance of managing and disciplining cyber dissent. It has been able to adopt a combination of repressive and responsive measures to mitigate the adverse effects of economic mal-performance and public frustration in cyberspace. These include technological measures such as access restriction by firewalls, filtering and list blocking, and political measures such as the extensive use of compliant networks and legal measures to force compliance (Thayer 2009; Wells-Dang 2012; and Kurfürst 2015).

Vietnam has been one of the fastest growing countries in terms of Internet usage, both in the region and the world, with a very high Internet penetration rate and youthful users.¹ By the end of 1997, the Internet had started to become commercial in Vietnam, albeit with limited users, initially from state agencies. Within 15 years, the number of Internet users had exploded. According to the Vietnam Internet Centre under the Ministry of Information and Communication, 31.3 million people, or 35.58 per cent of the country’s population, had been Internet users by November 2012 and this number has continued to grow.² In 2013, there were approximately 20 million mobile broadband Internet users (3G subscribers). Most of the Internet users are young, urban, educated and middle class. Just as the Internet has done worldwide, Vietnamese society is now increasingly empowered to spread information, build ties

1 See analysis of Digital Media in Vietnam, online: <https://wiki.smu.edu.sg/digitalmediaasia/Digital_Media_in_Vietnam> (20 December 2013).

2 VNNIC, online: <www.thongkeinternet.vn/jsp/thuebao/table_dt.jsp> (20 October 2013).

among geographically separate peoples and connect them via common interests. However, one caveat is that citizens in Vietnam do not have equal access to the new technologies and the skills to fully participate in the political discussion in the social media. As Kurfürst (2015: 144) correctly pointed out, most social media users are among the country's highly educated and urban-based populations.

The high level of Internet penetration in the population has had a number of important implications for virtual association in Vietnam. There are now numerous Internet communication vehicles, such as blogs, microblogs, social networking sites, chatrooms, emails, mailing lists, instant messaging, and online forums, that can be used to connect dissenters and distribute their opinions. The Internet and mobile phone data services have provided fertile ground for the blossoming blogosphere and cyber activism that challenge the mainstream press owned by the state in many significant ways. Social media users are the important target audience of the emerging players in the development of civil society in Vietnam, such as NGOs and independent organisations and informal groups that have no ties to the party-state. The new players have been taking advantage of the blogosphere and social media to circulate their contestations and dissent over governance ideas and norms. They include informal groups of intellectuals, retired government officials, professors, students, writers and independent activists.

The rise of the Internet in Vietnam has been a major landmark for a disproportionately expanding independent cyberspace of discussion and deliberation. It has provided crucial support for the re-emergence of civil society elements in Vietnam (Bui 2013: 79–80). The Internet has increased access to different sources of information and advanced freedom of information. In doing so, it has helped reduce the party-state's control over information flows and has helped some aspects of civil society to thrive. There has been a marked increase in the social interactions over the Internet. In the context of an authoritarian state with strict control over physical association, the virtual association has tended to encourage political involvement and active citizenry as it is "typically more anonymous than traditional group membership, and usually is less formal" (Kittilson and Dalton 2008: 4). Similar observations have been made by other Vietnam researchers, such as Thayer (2009), Wells-Dang (2010, 2012) and Kurfürst (2015). Anonymity and information access are among the important reasons why an increasing number of people have chosen to use Internet communication tools.

The use of anonymity in online life also reflects societal worries, ranging from possible detection by the state regarding taboo issues like

politics, to fear of higher authorities, such as bosses, parents and teachers. In essence, Vietnam's society structure has partially transposed onto the Internet where the older generation are less prominent than they are in real life.³

Social media, particularly Facebook, is an important outlet for dissent regarding the party's control of society. According to Socialbakers, a social-media analysis company, the number of Facebook users in Vietnam reached 22 million in 2014.⁴ Besides Facebook, other Vietnamese home-grown social networking sites like ZingMe and Go.vn have also had significant growth in terms of users. Blogging and microblogging are also very popular among Internet users. It is estimated that 3 million Vietnamese people have personal blogs.⁵ As Morris-Jung (2015: 404) noted, "blogging and Facebook have become increasingly important for expressing dissent and organizing campaigns that criticise government policies and challenge state authority."

The rising influence of social media has contributed to noticeable changes in public awareness and in the role of the traditional media. David Brown (2015) pointed to the power of the social media in "stealing readers from the conventional press." Facebook has become the most important and influential outlet of information. Mainstream journalists now have to rely on the key issues debated on Facebook to develop their stories on the print media. A majority of the 18,000 journalists licensed by the state have active personal Facebook accounts and proactively interact in this cyberspace. As a result, mainstream print media is increasingly moving online and mobile. Pressure on mainstream media is building in face of the challenge of losing the interest and trust of readers. Although the state has been seeking to promote Internet usage and online participation on the government-controlled websites, there is little evidence that the state actively invites citizens' online participation in social media where the state finds it more difficult to control. Kurfürst (2015: 135–136) made a similar point about the two-fold response by the Vietnamese state to the development of digital communication.

3 Digital Media in Vietnam, see online: <https://wiki.smu.edu.sg/digitalmedia/asia/Digital_Media_in_Vietnam> (20 December 2013).

4 Socialbakers, online: <www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/vietnam> (20 September 2015).

5 Statistics from the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Report, prepared by Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2013 to be submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Social Media as a Political Resource

Social media has been well-received by political actors in Vietnam as a useful resource to tap into as they pursue their goals. They can use the interactive functions of the social media to generate content and public interest to support their own positions and bolster their popularity. In this regard, Minister of Health Nguyễn Thị Kim Tiến and the Office of the Government of Vietnam were among the pioneers of the use of Facebook accounts to promote their activity to the public.

More remarkably, social media has started playing a visible role in the competition among political factions as a useful political instrument. Social media has revealed a “sense of acute political gridlock” and “a bitter and uncharacteristically public proxy struggle for control over the party Politburo” (London 2014: 1). To a certain extent, social media influences public opinion by filling gaps in information provided by the mainstream media. Various websites and blogs have emerged with unknown sources or owners that provide insiders’ information about important public figures and high-ranking officials, and these have attracted a lot of public curiosity. Although some critical bloggers have been detained and arrested, the actors behind these websites have not been publicly identified.

Some interesting coincidences have emerged between the inception of some influential blogs and important political events in Vietnam in recent years. For example, *Dân làm báo* (Citizens’ Journalism) began going online in August 2010 when top party officials were jockeying for positions at the 11th Party Congress which took place in January 2011. *Quan làm báo* was established in May 2012 on the threshold of the 5th Plenum of the CPV Central Committee of the 11th term. This plenum sent signals of intensified efforts to curtail the power of Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng. At the centre of the plenum’s agenda was the review of the anti-corruption work and the performance of the Central Anti-Corruption Steering Committee headed by Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng (CPV Central Committee 2012). It was decided at the plenum that the Central Anti-Corruption Steering Committee would undergo some important organisational and leadership changes. These changes were placed under the direct purview of the CPV Political Bureau instead of the Government, and the chairmanship of the Steering Committee was transferred from the prime minister to the party general secretary. The two blogs of *Dân làm báo* and *Quan làm báo* included numerous attacks on the prime minister. The prime minister publicly ordered the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and the Ministry of Information and Communica-

tion to investigate and take strict measures against some blogs, including *Dân làm báo* and *Quan làm báo* (Office of the Government 2012).

Chân Dung Quyền Lực ('Profiles of power') was established in December 2014, just before the important votes of confidence on 20 top party officials at the 10th Plenum of the CPV (Communist Party of Vietnam) Central Committee of the 11th Term, which took place in January 2015. The blog initiated a series of corruption-related charges against high-profile politicians including Deputy Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc, Defence Minister Phùng Quang Thanh, and President of Supreme People's Procuracy Nguyễn Hoà Bình. The fact that the blog never published any account of Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng gave rise to many well-founded speculations that this blog was aimed at the prime minister's political opponents (*BBC* 2015). According to an informant's estimate, approximately 70 per cent of facts and figures revealed by *Chân Dung Quyền Lực* and another site, *Dân Luận*, are accurate, although political leaders have not spoken publicly or responded to information posted on these sites.⁶ Interestingly, the prime minister made a public comment at an official meeting in January 2015 that social media is "a necessity and cannot be banned", amid some concerns raised in officialdom about the "poisonous" information produced by the social media, implicitly aimed at *Chân Dung Quyền Lực*. Paradoxically, *Người Cao Tuổi*, a newspaper under the management of the Elderly People's Association, was immediately punished for printing sensitive facts and figures about several high-ranking officials, including the former Government Inspector-General Trần Văn Truyền (Minh Quang and Da Trang 2015). With the rise of the blogosphere, the initiative in social mobilisation on key issues of public concern related to elite politics, such as corruption and key political positions, has shifted away from mainstream state-linked agencies and media.

More recently, during the months leading up to the general election on 22 May 2016, many independent candidates running for seats at the National Assembly used social media to mobilise support for their candidacy. By the deadline for registration to run for seats at the National Assembly on 13 March 2016, there were 162 applications as independent candidates.⁷ The independent candidates were highly proactive in using

6 Interview in April 2015.

7 This number dropped sharply after each consultative meeting run by the Vietnam Fatherland Front to vet for candidates. After the second round of consultations organized by the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), 154 individuals remained as independent candidates. However, at the conclusion of the third

Facebook and other websites to promote their political action plans to the public, even though the 2015 Election Law stipulates that only two means of election campaigning are legal. These are: (1) meeting people at voters' meetings organised by the VFF, and (2) using the mainstream media. The use of social media for election campaigning is not mentioned by the law, and is therefore deemed unofficial and discouraged. However, the interaction and responsiveness of social media users had led to waves of people registering to run as independent candidates, which has raised serious concerns from the party-state (Tan Son 2016).

Social Media as a Political Arena

Social media and the blogosphere have become major battlegrounds for contested ideas and norms in governance. Various civil society organisations and better-informed citizens have turned to the Internet to associate virtually and articulate their demand for more effective governance and popular participation in policy-making. For example, NGOs such as ICS, iSEE (Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment), and CECM (Centre for Community Empowerment) have relied heavily on the social media to reach out to supporters and lead the campaign for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) rights in Vietnam over the past few years. Dozens of NGOs and like-minded individuals interact regularly through networks such as the Working Group for Public Administration Reform (GPARG), the People's Participation Working Group (PPWG), and the Gender and Community Development Network (GENCOMNET), with Internet platforms being the main gateways for communication and discussion on social issues of immediate concern and reaching consensus on collective action.

Using data from Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) to investigate regime legitimacy in Southeast Asia, Chang, Chu and Welsh (2013: 153) observed that 'conflicts are taking place more and more online nowadays, and bloggers are often the front-line combatants.' In Vietnam, blogs, microblogs and social media have served as effective outlets for increasingly vocal calls from the public, demanding democratic rights, the freedom to association, assembly, and participation in the public realm. Well-known political blogs and websites include *Anh Basam*, *Bauxite Viet Nam*, *Dân làm báo*, and *Diễn đàn Xã hội Dân sự* (Civil Society Forum). They all attract millions of readers and thousands of followers each day, despite various firewalls set up by the party-state to restrict access. They have

round of VFF' consultation, the final list of eligible candidates totaled 870, including only 11 independents, who came from eight different provinces/cities.

stirred up a new form of political activism and added to the complexities of state-society relations. For example, the blog *Ba Sàm* (or *Anh Ba Sàm*) was started in 2007 with an aim of educating Vietnamese netizens about Vietnamese political, social, economic, and cultural issues from a different perspective by publishing translations of English and French language articles and excerpts from books or providing links to a variety of news sources. When Nguyễn Hữu Vinh, supposedly the owner of the Ba Sam blog, was arrested, the charges against him acknowledged that one microblog on the site – namely *Dân Quyền* (‘Rights of Citizens,’ founded in September 2013) – “published 2014 pieces of writing, received 38,574 comments and got 3,243,330 access hits.” The prosecuting agency’s report also noted that another blog, *Chép Sừ Việt* (‘Writing Vietnamese History,’ founded in January 2014), “published 383 pieces, received 3,401 comments and got 480,353 access hits” (SPP 2015). Police and prosecutors found that 12 articles published on *Dân Quyền* and 12 on *Chép Sừ Việt* have

untruthful and baseless content; distort the lines and policies of the Party and the law of the State; vilify a number of individuals and affect the prestige of offices and organisations; present a one-side and pessimistic view, causing anxiety and worry, and affecting the people’s confidence in the leadership of the Party, the Government, the National Assembly, and the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. (HRW 2016)

As the charges against the owner of Ba Sam show, blogs like this have had a clear impact on the political arena of Vietnam.

As the traditional media in Vietnam is solely owned and strictly controlled by the party-state, the social media is virtually the only effective and practical way to navigate through the censorship and restrictions over the information and critical knowledge. The issues that attract the social media started from governance problems and mismanagement by the party-state regarding the economy, the environment, foreign affairs, the integrity of the system and officials, education, healthcare and culture. Initially compartmentalised in specific issue areas, these issues have quickly spilled over and become inter-related. A typical example is the establishment and development of *Bauxite Viet Nam*, a blog started in 2009 as a forum to air criticisms over the party-state’s policy of bauxite mining in the central highlands of Vietnam, mostly on environmental grounds. The critiques had developed to incorporate an economic analysis of costs and benefits and strategic security arguments against the government’s bauxite mining policy. The blog had become very influential among intellectuals and the general public, despite the party-state’s

determination to proceed with the project. *Bauxite Viet Nam* has retained its original title but has become a generic forum for various topical development issues and critical governance problems.⁸

The rise and fall of *Quan làm báo* within a short period is another notable case. It was launched as a forum to fight against official corruption amid the dramatic infightings among top political leadership in Vietnam, which reached its pinnacle at the 6th Plenum of the CPV Central Committee in October 2012, when the Politburo made an unprecedented (and ultimately unsuccessful) bid to discipline the prime minister. The blog had exposed detailed profiles of high-ranking officials in the Vietnamese party-state in collusion with businesspeople who had supposedly been implicated in corruption. While the provenance and authenticity of their reports and information cannot be confirmed with certainty, they did trigger a lot of suspicion and distrust about top officials. In some particular cases, they even disclosed secrets and highly sensitive news that were later confirmed by the official media. At its peak, *Quan làm báo* attracted millions of regular readers and followers.

However, the blog's popularity among the public declined in 2013 as the political leadership reached a certain level of compromise and the blog was unable to consistently report verifiable news and analysis about corruptible officials and their dealings. One important reason for this was the shift of public attention towards the process of amending the 1992 Constitution. The Group of 72 and the Civil Society Forum occupied the foci of attention from the public in 2013. These groups constantly analysed and criticised the proposed amendments of the Constitution made by the party-state institutions, convincingly pointing out various flaws in the amendments for the national development and the rights of people. Since the conclusion of the constitution-amendment process, the Civil Society Forum has sustained public interest by initiating a series of projects focusing on critical governance issues and civil society development.

The Case of '6700 people for 6700 trees'

This was a case in which interested individuals and social actors came together around a social issue using social media to network and build pressure on the local government of Hanoi to stop a plan to cut down

8 For a recent discussion of the *Bauxite Viet Nam* blog, see Kurfürst (2015: 138–139).

6,700 trees. It is a kind of rightful resistance in the form of environmental activism, both online and on the streets.

Vietnamese Blogosphere Landmarks

2001: *Talawas* is established and run by Writer Pham Thi Hoai (the website closed down in November 2010).

2005: *X-cafevn* is established as an online forum and *Yahoo! 360°* launched in Vietnam.

2006–2009: Yahoo! 360° reaches its peak in Vietnam with 2 million users (it closed in July 2009). *Anh Ba Sam* in September 2007 (Nguyen Huu Vinh and associates), *Dieu Cay* (Nguyen Van Hai) and *Free Journalists Club* in September 2007, *Anbba Sai Gon* (Phan Thanh Hai), *Osin* (Huy Duc), ‘*Change we need*’ in March 2009 (Tran Huynh Duy Thuc) use Yahoo! 360° for political blogging.

August 2008: Decree 97 on the Management, Supply, and Use of Internet Services and Electronic Information on the Internet.

Mid-2009: *Bauxite Viet Nam* is established by Nguyen Hue Chi, Pham Toan, and Nguyen The Hung.

2009–present: *Facebook* is the most influential social media in Vietnam and a number of other blogs have been established: *Que Choa* (Nguyen Quang Lap), *Truong Duy Nhat*, *Nguyen Xuan Dien*, *Huynh Ngoc Chenh*, *Mẹ Nấm* (Mother Mushroom) and *Người Buôn Gió* (Wind Trader).

August 2010: *Danlambao* (Citizens’ Journalism) blog is launched.

May 2012: Blog *Quanlambao* begins going online.

January 2013: *Group of 72* launches Petition on Constitutional Amendments through Bauxite Vietnam and other blogs.

April 2013: A group of rights activists (*Free Citizens Group*) makes a call on social media for human rights picnics in May at public parks in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Nha Trang to discuss human rights issues.

May 2013: Blogger Truong Duy Nhat is arrested.

June 2013: Blogger Pham Viet Dao is arrested.

July 2013: *Vietnamese Bloggers Network* and the online statement by 130 bloggers demanding the abolition of Article 258 of the Criminal Code appear.

July 2013: Decree 72 on the Management, Supply, and Use of Internet Services and Information Content Online.

September 2013: 130 individuals initiate '*Dien dan Xa hoi Dan su*' (Civil Society Forum)
May 2014: Blogger Nguyen Huu Vinh, who runs *Ba Sam*, is arrested.
November 2014: Blogger Hong Le Tho, who runs *Nguoi lot gach*, is arrested.
December 2014: Blogger Nguyen Quang Lap, owner of *Que Choa*, is arrested.
December 2014: Blog *Chan dung quyen luc* goes online.
January 2015: Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung publicly states that social media is 'a necessity and cannot be banned.'
March 2015: Facebook page entitled '6700 people for 6700 trees' created to prompt Hanoi municipal government to reverse its plan to cull 6700 trees.

Social media has enabled those people with legitimate concerns about Hanoi's environment and landscape to create a common platform to document the events vividly, communicate their grievances persuasively to a greater audience and justify their claims robustly. Le Quang Binh et al. (2015: 31–32) provided an account of five phases of the tree movement: (1) sharing emotions and the love for trees; (2) bringing the voice of the people and experts to oppose the cutting of the trees; (3) calling for physical actions for tree protection; (4) reflecting on personal responsibility; and (5) sharing information as events flow and conclude.

In March 2015, information from credible source that the municipal government of Hanoi was preparing a plan to fell 6,708 trees, without any transparency and accountability for its actions, raised spontaneous reactions of anger and anxiety from various people. On 10 March 2015, Hanoi City's Department of Construction released to the media a number of measures to be taken under a project entitled 'Renovating and replacing city green trees for the period 2014–2015,' approved by Hanoi People's Committee. The mainstream media carried some news about the felling of trees along Nguyen Trai and Nguyen Chi Thanh streets, giving rise to public lamentations about the city's loss of historic and environmental assets.

Public concern started with some discrete voices on social media about this plan and its damaging effect on the environment and emotional life of Hanoi people. The dynamics for the online protests gathered momentum when a number of public figures and prominent intel-

lectuals raised their voices. Tran Dang Tuan, a former senior government official, wrote a letter to the People's Committee of Hanoi to demand that the city managers take accountability for this plan and suspend its implementation. His open letter, posted on 16 March 2015, was spread widely on Facebook.⁹ Just one day later, the city government made its first response through the statement of Mr Phan Dang Long, deputy director of the Municipal Party Committee's Propaganda Board, that it is not necessary to consult the people in order to fell trees. His statement was widely seen as indicative of the local government's antipathy to the people's concerns and feeling of insecurity. On a separate note, Ngo Bao Chau, a prominent professor of math, also published an open letter on his Facebook page to the municipal government of Hanoi, raising three major issues with 10 critical questions about the problems of the plan. The online activism initiated by the two public figures was immediately supported by many other collective actions. On the forum for journalists, heated debates began about the serious problems of the plan to fell 6,700 trees in Hanoi; some mini-surveys on these fora had revealed massive support among journalists for the ideas of Tran Dang Tuan and Ngo Bao Chau.

The strong support on social media has forced the municipal government to pay due attention to the issue. It was an effective answer to the earlier public announcement by the city officials that the people agree with the plan to cut down the trees. Hanoi People's Committee Chairman Nguyen The Thao had to provide a response to Tran Dang Tuan's open letter about the plan of cutting down the trees and asked the relevant competent agencies to carefully review the plan and its implementation (Dan Tri 2015). More people had become interested in the issue and promptly taken to social media to vent their anger and anxiety at the plan. A group of interested and active citizens launched a Facebook page called '6700 people for 6700 trees,' which provided regular updates on the situation and reactions from the people and the authorities. This Facebook page attracted widespread interactions and was followed by more than 80,000 users. Various people, from architects, artists and singers to university lecturers and students made comments on their own Facebook pages, electronic news portals and printed newspapers expressing their support for protecting the trees, information transparency, and respect for public and experts' opinions.

9 On Tran Dang Tuan's Facebook account, his open letter entry received 6,567 likes, 789 shares and 588 comments after a few days.

This cyber activism was quickly translated into a form of political activism in the physical space. Many people, particularly young people, organised and participated in movements like tree hugs or tree mapping, tree location identification and tree protection walks. A student in Hanoi named Hoang Thuy Linh launched a project to protect the trees by encouraging people to tie yellow knots around trees to show love for them and express their protest against felling these trees. Participants in this project used Facebook to spread the message and share emotions. A number of journalists conducted a series of investigative reports on the media to expose the signs of wrong-doings by the local authorities related to the tree replacement project and lack of accountability. A number of people spontaneously organised green walks and tree hug marches, holding up signs along Thien Quang Lake and Hoang Kiem Lake during March and April of 2015. These actions were quickly suppressed by the local authorities. Meanwhile, several lawyers – most notably Tran Vu Hai, Nguyen Ha Luan and Le Van Luan – started a legal battle against the tree-felling project. They drafted and signed an appeal for immediate suspension of the project, pointing out significant signs of law infringements (Cong Ly 2015). Another remarkable action was taken by some non-governmental organisations. PanNature (Center for People and Nature Reconciliation) and MEC (Center for Media in Educating Community) organised a workshop on 23 March 2015 to create a forum for the experts to voice their concerns to the public and media about the tree-felling project in Hanoi.

The phenomenal civil society activism in this case prompted both the municipal government of Hanoi and the central government to respond. The Government Inspectorate had to inspect the situation to report to the central government. As a result, a number of city officials were found to have demonstrated a lack of responsibility and to have violated current rules (Tien Phong 2015). Hanoi authorities eventually disciplined those officials and reversed the plan to cut down the trees. More importantly, Hanoi authorities had learned a lesson about paying due attention to and respecting people's concerns and feelings, particularly related to the transparency and accountability in the city's projects.

This is an interesting case of intense interaction through social media for civil society activism being used to effectively influence a decision-making process. This case exemplifies the experience of different forms of peaceful assembly and growing confidence of people involved in collective action for common interests, let alone the interests of environmental protection.

Response by the Party-State to Social Media

The party-state in Vietnam has serious concerns about its inability to control the influence of the social media over the public deliberation of governance issues through the possible use of convenient, widespread social networking. Although the party-state maintains firm control over information access and public discussion via traditional media, it has found it increasingly difficult to moderate content over digital channels, especially those related to politically sensitive issues and religious freedom. *Nhan Dan*, the mouthpiece of the party-state, cautions about the underground power of the social media (Anh Khoi 2012). The history of insurgents using innocuous Internet communication means, particularly in Arab uprisings in the early 2010s, has resulted in the state being more wary of Vietnamese political comments and content online.

The press in Vietnam has always been considered as a strong propaganda tool of the party-state. There are 812 press agencies in the country, which produce 1,084 print outlets including daily newspaper and periodical magazines; 1,174 news websites; and 67 broadcasting organisations that have 101 television channels and 78 radio stations.¹⁰ However, all of them are owned by the party-state and subject to regular instructions and direction from the Ministry of Information and Communication and the CPV Commission for Ideology, Education and Propaganda. All of these media outlets are supposed to act as instruments for generating and disseminating particular kind of knowledge and narratives in the interests of the party-state. The party-state's propaganda and communication officials often lament that the mainstream press is falling behind on the information front and giving way to the citizen journalists or free bloggers who are more interested in the production and dissemination of critical knowledge, which frequently embarrass or undermine the authority of the party-state.¹¹ This situation raised grave concerns among the party-state about regime security on the cyber space. A high-ranking official responsible for information and propaganda once acknowledged that the party-state-sponsored press is ceding ground to social media in

10 Statistics from the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Report prepared by Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2013 to be submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council.

11 See <<http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/chinh-tri/131596/ba-o-chi--khong-dang--ma-n-ga-xa--ho-i-se--chie-m-li-nh.html>> (1 August 2016).

terms of reporting critical governance issues and sensitive news updates.¹²

The party-state's information and propaganda sector has been trying to gain back ground in terms of influencing public opinion in favour of the party-state policies and results. The Vietnamese party-state has been applying numerous techniques and considering tighter cyberspace security rules. First and foremost, the restrictions have been applied in the laws and decrees that are often criticised as vaguely worded, catchall and arbitrary. As Abuza (2015: 3) noted,

in Vietnam, the growth of the Internet far outpaced the government's ability to contained it technologically – the government has relied instead on laws and decrees that put the onus of regulation and control on ISPs and content producers.

Second, the party-state employs political influence and financial incentives over networks of compliant businesses, universities, hacker groups, and other civil society actors to enforce its will on the Internet by technically filtering, putting up firewalls and placing certain websites on block lists. For example, it is widely assumed that the state is responsible for Facebook's inaccessibility at times in Vietnam. The state requests cooperation and assistance from Internet and telecommunications companies, which are all either partly and/or wholly owned by the state or structurally tied to the state. The communications technologies and service providers are required to provide the state's competent agencies with the information they want and facilitate state surveillance through data mining and information analysis on individuals' background, history, preferences, tastes, habits, etc. In May 2013, a decision issued by the prime minister required foreign news channels like BBC and CNN to translate all of their content into Vietnamese language for the purpose of broadcasting. Some cable service providers in Vietnam have suspended the broadcasting of CNN and BBC on their channels.

The party-state has considered and implemented new restrictions on civil and political liberties on virtual networking, as a kind of soft repression. In April 2012, the Ministry of Information and Communication introduced a draft Decree on the Management, Provision, Use of Internet Services and Information Content Online. In effect, the decree would force foreign content providers to increase cooperation with Vietnamese authorities by removing content that had been deemed illegal

12 Do Quy Doan, vice-minister of Information and Communication, repeated his comment on various occasions. See <<http://tuoitre.vn/Pages/Printview.aspx?ArticleID=529150>> (20 November 2013).

and potentially housing data centres within the country. The decree would also require users to use their real names online, which could severely restrict free speech. In fact, hard repressive measures are also employed to punish those bloggers who “misuse their democratic freedom to infringe on the interests of the state” or “conduct propaganda against the state.” In July 2013, the official Decree No. 72/2013 was promulgated and caused an immediate outcry from human rights groups like Reporters without Border, the Freedom Online Coalition, and Vietnamese bloggers. The decree prohibits bloggers and users of social media from “providing aggregated news” and imposes a number of restrictions on sharing and providing information. Decree No. 72/2013 put many restrictions on circulating and aggregating news and analysis on the social media, with the aim of effectively eclipsing the influence of social media over the public. Most concerns have focused on the state’s attempts to exercise massive and constant surveillance over the cyberspace to police the online population and its vague language to give almost blanket authority to punish any netizens at the state’s discretion. Decree 72 bans:

the use of Internet services and online information to oppose the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, threaten the national security, social order, and safety, sabotage the national fraternity, arouse animosity among races and religions, or contradict national traditions, among other acts. (Article 5, Decree No. 72/2013/NĐ-CP issued by the Government on 15 July 2013)

Another strategy that has been employed is to hire opinion-influencers and online commentators to follow political blogs and social networking sites to engage in online battles against “hostile” forces.¹³ However, the effectiveness of these strategies by the part-state remains limited. The coercive measures mostly invite resistance from the Internet users and the hired commentators do not have the capacity to provide persuasive arguments on rational grounds. Social media continues to grow beyond its control and represents a major source of support for the development of civil society.

13 In an annual national meeting of the information and propaganda sector in December 2012, Ho Quang Loi, head of information and propaganda of Hanoi’s Party Committee, disclosed that 900 online commentators had been mobilised for blogosphere battle during the year. See Dao Tuan 2012, <<http://laodong.com.vn/chinh-tri/to-chuc-nhom-chuyen-gia-but-chien-tren-internet-98582.bld>> (20 January 2013).

The Limit of Social Media in Impacting Elite Politics

While social media has enabled political participation at a new scope and scale, its implication for elite politics should not be exaggerated and should be treated with caution. It is often difficult to confirm the authenticity and source of the information that spreads on social media. Thus, the social media is fertile ground for the spreading of politically motivated rumours. For example, in 2014, there was a lot of speculation on blogs and Facebook posts that Nguyen Bá Thanh, the populist politician at the forefront of the anti-corruption movement, had been poisoned by his political rivals, resulting in his death. There had been no trustworthy independent media to either confirm or disprove those conspiracy theories around his death. In 2015, the rumour about the sudden death of Phùng Quang Thanh, the incumbent minister of defence, had ignited a lot of curiosity and speculation on social media about his political rivals and their schemes (Nguyen Giang 2015). Even when the state media released pictures of his normal activities, the rumours did not stop.

Public participation through social media is not always an active process. In an environment characterised by a lack of transparency, disclosed information on the sensitive issues to the party-state is often politically purposeful. Thus, the social media can be manipulated by various political forces for their own purpose, while not necessarily representing the complete truth or even providing false information. One should not exclude the possibility that certain elements of the party-state have also been taking a hidden role in providing unconfirmed information on the social media in their own interest.

While there are high hopes that social media can serve as a powerful tool to start social movements around issues related to inequality, injustices, and environment, it has become more difficult to translate the reactions of the crowd on the social media into collective action in the physical sphere. Cases such as '6700 people for 6700 trees' in Hanoi remain rare. Civil society activism is more likely to become more dynamic if it does not directly challenge political authority, the interests of powerful institutions, or the personal interests of powerful individuals, both locally and nationally. Meaningful participation to influence the political process on social issues at a broader and deeper level requires more than just the spontaneous reactions and emotions of the participants in cyberspace. Trust and respect among the people interacting on the social media are often not the rules of game.

Conclusion

Social media in Vietnam has been a major force in terms of enlarging the political space for public participation and increased interaction with the elite politics over the past few years. Thanks to technology, social media has enabled mass participation and rendered many of the traditional controls by the government, such as censorship, less effective. The ascendancy of social networks has empowered many ordinary citizens with access to the Internet, as well as social actors, to voice their concerns and call for action despite the constraints imposed by legal restrictions.

With the development of social media, the public has been better informed about key political and economic issues of public concern. Civil society action has shaped public responses and the way the state handles the outcomes of contentious politics. The ascendancy of social media has taken civil society to a new level of development of civil society of its impact and the level of organisation, coordination, and responsiveness by the people involved, despite some of its limits. With the use of social media, civil society actors can push the boundaries of what is acceptable to the state and claim an expanding political space. However, the social media does not serve as a level playing field for all actors, as one might think; it is still a political space characterised by inequality. Participants in this political space have different weights of influence. The party-state still can wield much infrastructural power to permeate the cyberspace, not just police it.

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