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# Networking Alone? Digital Communications and Collective Action in Vietnam

Sandra Kurfürst

**Abstract:** This article explores the potential for the formation of collective action in Vietnam. Referring to land and labour protests, bauxite mining, anti-China demonstrations, as well as the revision of the 1992 Constitution, the article examines the social movement repertoires diverse groups have adopted to reach their objectives. Drawing on social movement theory and communication power, this contribution shows that apart from access to the technology, citizens' opportunities to participate in digital networks as well as access to the default communication network of the state are necessary prerequisites in order to attain public attention and possibly to achieve social change. Moreover, this article shows that existing power differentials in Vietnam are reproduced in digital space. It concludes that for different collective behaviours to result in a social movement, it is essential to "switch" and to connect the different networks. For the moment, the call to protect Vietnam's sovereignty offers common ground for collective action.

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**Keywords:** Vietnam, collective action, communication, internet

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## Introduction

In the first quarter of 2011, many international observers wondered whether the dynamics of the Arab Spring would also spread to the one-party state of Vietnam. In the Middle East, citizens assembled in the cities' central public spaces – for instance, Tahrir Square in Cairo, Green Square in Tripoli, coordinating their protests through digital networks and mobile phones. There was a multitude of reasons for the protests: citizens' dissatisfaction with the government in general, unemployment, corruption, clientelism, and so on. Castells (2012: 220) concludes that the social movements witnessed in recent years originated from a combination of a structural economic crisis and a crisis of legitimacy on the part of the respective governments and political institutions.

Vietnam was hit by a structural economic crisis as well. The government's legitimacy suffered from its inability to curb accelerating inflation, which in 2008 reached its peak of 27 per cent, the highest inflation rate since a record 67 per cent inflation hit the country in 1991, five years after the economic reform programme, Doi Moi, was implemented. Food prices rose by 73 per cent, petrol and gas by 46 per cent, while rent and housing costs increased by 25 per cent (*Associated Press* 2008). Low-income workers in factories as well as farmers were most affected by the crisis.

The people of Vietnam have been increasingly and publicly expressing their discontent with the socialist state's performance. Accordingly, protests have broken out in the major export-oriented industries in Vietnam's main urban regions, while land protests led by individuals and groups have been going on for years. Environmental issues such as the online-mediated bauxite-mining controversy have been placed on the public agenda as well. In reaction, the state has passed new internet regulations to restrict the kind of information shared on social media networks as well as the people allowed to produce media. At the same time, it introduced participatory approaches to the law-making process. When the state initiated public debate in 2013 about the revision of the 1992 Constitution, it was well received by the Vietnamese cyber community. This paper argues that these initiatives are not – or are only partially – connected and have yet to form a networked social movement.

The paper is based on qualitative data collected during field research in Vietnam. Participant observation and qualitative interviews with citizens occupying central public spaces in Hanoi as well as users of digital social networks were conducted between 2007 and 2008, and again in 2014. Expert interviews with members of civic and professional organisations as well as Vietnamese scholars on labour issues and anti-China

demonstrations were conducted during field trips in 2011 and 2014. Additionally, content analysis included websites as well as government documents and newspaper articles. Drawing on social movement theory and discussions on communication power, the paper discusses citizens' communicative practices in both concrete and digital spaces for the formation of collective action in Vietnam. The paper closely examines the land protests, labour strikes, opposition to bauxite mining, anti-China demonstrations, and the 2013 revision process of the 1992 Constitution. The article shows that although many groups in Vietnam actually utilise digital communications, not all of them are able to extend their networks and get their objectives onto the public agenda. Accordingly, this article seeks to draw attention to questions of access and participation in digital communication networks and the reproduction of existing power differentials therein.

## Scope for Collective Action in Vietnam

Vietnam is a one-party state with the Communist Party of Vietnam as the ruling body. Kerkvliet (2001: 245) describes the relationship between state and society as a dialogue: while state agencies do not fully control policymaking and implementation, citizens are able to contest and negotiate the state's rules. One of the most effective ways to influence state decisions is to utilise personal connections to the state (Kerkvliet 2001: 248, 269). In particular, "elite allies," such as state officials, professionals, and prominent journalists, are important for civil society networks to realise their objectives (Wells-Dang 2012: 172).

With regard to the legal framework, the recently revised Constitution of 2014 guarantees citizens the freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right of access to information, the right of assembly, the right of association, and the right to demonstrate (Article 25).<sup>1</sup> Yet, in practice, the state maintains tight control over "concrete" (physical), in particular urban, public space. Therefore, the scope for demonstrations and assemblies appears to be rather limited. In labour struggles, strikes have come to be an effective instrument. Yet, most of the strikes that have taken place thus far have been illegal, as only the trade union is allowed to organise strikes (*Asia Sentinel* 2008). However, the trade union is unlikely to organise a strike because it is part of the Vietnamese "mass

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1 The freedom of opinion and speech, the right to be informed, and the right to assemble were already included in Article 69 of the 1992 Constitution.

organisations,” closely related to the state, which of course aims to protect the investment environment.

In the past ten years, digital space has become an important arena for debates on the common good (Kurfürst 2012: 59). Although print and online media are still owned by official bodies such as ministries and the party, not all media are subject to censorship due to the tremendous increase in websites and blogs (Wells-Dang 2012: 53). As a consequence, digital communication networks are spreading in Vietnam.

## Social Movements and Communication Power

Tilly (2004: 3) treats social movements as a “distinctive form of contentious politics.” By “contentious” he implies that social movements involve the collective making of claims, which, if realised, would conflict with someone else’s interests. The term “politics” denotes the involvement of governments in the claim-making process as either the addressees of claims, or claimants themselves. Overall, Tilly (2004: 3) comprehends social movements as “vehicles of ordinary people’s participation.”

Social movements originate from a combination of a crisis of economy and political legitimacy. According to Castells (2012: 218), it is the “combination of a degradation of the material conditions of life and of a crisis of legitimacy of the rulers in charge with the conduct of public affairs” that brings people to take things into their own hands and thereby engage in collective action outside the prescribed institutional channels.

Tilly (2004: 3) explains that social movements emerge from a synthesis of “campaign,” “social movement repertoire,” and “WUNC displays.” While the campaign refers to “a sustained, organised public effort making collective claims on target authorities,” the social movement repertoire denotes the application of combinations of different forms of political action – for example, the formation of special-purpose associations, public meetings, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition drives, public media statements, pamphleteering, and so on. (Tilly 2004: 3). In other words, social movement repertoires comprise citizens’ communicative practices, which they adopt to voice their opinions. WUNC displays refers to “participants’ concerted public representations of **w**orthiness, **u**nity, **n**umbers, and **c**ommitment of themselves and/or their constituencies” (Tilly 2004: 4; emphasis by author).

The synthesis of these three elements hints at the importance of public space for the development and representation of social movements. In fact, social movements communicate in as well as through

public space. In the public space of the city, campaigns are launched and articulated through different repertoires, including demonstrations, public meetings, and strikes, among others.

Harvey (2012: 72–73) differentiates between public space and public goods on the one hand, and urban commons on the other. He argues that whereas public space and public goods are often subjected to state power and public administration, urban commons originate from citizens' political action. Social movements then have the capacity to turn central public spaces close to the centre of power into urban "commons – a place for open discussion and debate over what that power is doing and how best to oppose its reach" (Harvey 2012: 161). Consequently, the placement of bodies within central public spaces is an important determinant of the production of urban commons (Harvey 2012: 161). This definition of urban commons once again claims the importance of face-to-face interaction.

In today's network society, this central premise of face-to-face interaction needs to be reconsidered and amended to include digital communications. In the information age, power is multidimensional and organised around networks. In social life, networks are communicative structures; they process flows that are streams of communication between nodes (Castells 2009: 20). Consequently, communication networks are most relevant to power-making.

"Network-making power" – the ability to exert control over others – depends on the ability to develop networks and to programme a network in terms of the goals assigned to it. Additionally, network-making power relies on the ability to connect, and therefore to "switch," to create different networks, and to ensure their cooperation on the basis of sharing common aims and by setting up strategic cooperation in order to parry competition from other networks (Castells 2009: 45). Moreover, counterpower can be produced through the (re)programming of networks (Castells 2012: 5).

Overall, the network of power constructed around the state is of major importance, as all networks seek to control and define the rules and norms of society through it. In effect, the state is the default network for the functioning of all the other networks of power (Castells 2012: 8).

Finally, Castells (2012: 229) concludes that social movements live and act through digital communication networks that are in contact with face-to-face interaction. This integration of face-to-face interactions with digital communications results in the production of a "hybrid space": a

space located between the digital social networks and occupied urban space.

The space of the movement is always made of an interaction between the space of flows on the internet and wireless communication networks, and the space of places of the occupied sites and of symbolic buildings targeted by protest actions. This hybrid of cyberspace and urban space constitutes a third space that I call the space of autonomy. (Castells 2012: 222)

The recent literature on social movements frequently underscores the democratic potential of the innovations in communication and information technologies (see, for example, Castells 2012; Rahimi 2011; Soja 2000); equal access to both the technology and opportunities necessary to participate are prerequisites for this. Jenkins (2008: 23) explains that the discussion has shifted from the digital divide to the so-called “participation gap,” which allows for an emphasis on the cultural protocols and practices associated with the new media: users might have access to the technologies but not the skills and resources required to fully participate in the cultural practices associated with digital communications. Informed uses of digital media rely on many skills, such as knowledge about how to contribute online content and find relevant networks, the ability to evaluate content credibility, and so on (Hargittai 2008: 940). Furthermore, as Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 748) underscore, the introduction of digital media to networks based on the logic of collective actions does not alter the core dynamics of the action. It also – as I will show – does not necessarily lead to an extension of existing digital networks or, most importantly, to the switching and connection of networks to also include those networks that in the offline world are socio-economically marginalised.

Social movement repertoires such as demonstrations, rallies, and strikes are frequently applied by citizens fighting for land-use rights and better working conditions. They make themselves seen and heard in concrete, particularly urban, public space. Nonetheless, they usually fail to connect to the urban public. On the contrary, digital networks appear to be more successful in expanding their networks and getting their issues onto the public agenda. In response, the state has issued several internet regulations within the past years. The legal framework actually supports the growth and switching of digital networks among more highly educated citizens. Citizens with higher levels of education actively participate in the revision process of the 1992 Constitution and the bauxite-mining opposition, applying social movement repertoires such as online petitions, public media statements, and blogs. Finally, the anti-

China movement illustrates how movements have the capacity to switch and to connect different networks.

## Demonstrations and Strikes

For years, citizens have taken their complaints about the mishandling of their land-use rights to the streets. In Vietnam, all land belongs to the people but is managed by the state. Citizens can acquire land-use rights that guarantee the right of long-term usage, the right of transfer, the right of descent, the right of mortgage, and the tenure right, as well as the right to compensation for land taken away. However, the issuance and formal recognition of land-use certificates is highly contested. The first land protest to attract massive public attention occurred in Thai Binh Province in May 1997, as 10,000 demonstrators marched into the provincial capital, Thai Binh, which led to violent protests (Kerkvliet 2001: 266). The Land Law was accordingly amended in 1998.

The social movement repertoires most often used in land conflicts are petitions to the highest government institutions as well as demonstrations in urban public space. In particular, sidewalks in front of government institutions in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are frequently occupied by citizens from all over Vietnam, rural areas in particular, to claim their rights from the state. Demonstrators consist of individual citizens who make the trip to Hanoi on behalf of their family or their village (Kurfürst 2012: 112; UN General Assembly 2009: 7; Wells-Dang 2010: 100).

For example, Anh, a 13-year-old boy, came to the capital with his family from Dong Nai Province in Southern Vietnam. Together with his two sisters, he played in a small park next to the government office in Hanoi, stating,

I have come to Hanoi to claim land. I have been coming to Hanoi for three years now. [...] I do not go to school because I am in Hanoi. I have come to Hanoi together with my parents and two younger sisters. My older brother did not come with us. (Interview 9 November 2007, translated from Vietnamese)

To make themselves seen and heard in the city, citizens use signs and placards that have their full names, addresses, and petitions written on them. They refer to symbols of the nation-state including, for example, the Vietnamese national flag or red T-shirts with the yellow star (Kurfürst 2012: 114). Moreover, citizens use their bodies to publicly display their claims, wearing self-written T-shirts. Anh's youngest sister

was wearing a T-shirt that stated: “*Bác hãy cứu chúng cháu*” (“Uncle, rescue me please”). The back of her T-shirt depicted her family sleeping on the floor in front of a government institution. A female protestor who had joined the family was wearing a T-shirt with the words “*tham nhũng*” (corruption) on it. Protestors often assemble on the traffic island opposite the government office in Hanoi, located at a major road connecting Hanoi’s Old Quarter with the area around West Lake. For example, on 7 April 2008 approximately 15 citizens from the southern provinces of An Giang and Hau Giang occupied the traffic island to protest. Demonstrations reached their peak around 17–18 April, when 40–50 citizens assembled on the traffic island holding up billboards.

By placing their bodies in the streets, they demand accountability and legality from the state. While the potential for the creation of an urban common emerges as citizens on the sidewalks become aware that others share the same interests, they seem to fail to connect with the urban public. Although the protestors occupy a traffic island at a major junction where thousands of people pass every day, the passers-by do not even stop, let alone join the protests.

Likewise, a concerted public representation of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment was observed only in rare cases, such as the demonstration of peasants from Tien Giang Province and seven other southern provinces near the local offices of the National Assembly in Ho Chi Minh City in 2006. The assemblage differed from others, as citizens from eight provinces united to turn a central urban public space into a political common. They connected to digital networks by giving interviews over their mobile phones; photos of the protest were soon published on the internet. Moreover, they gained support from the charismatic figure of Venerable Thich Quang Do of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, as well as from overseas and local oppositional networks (Thayer 2008: 15).

In this case, the social movement repertoire applied was a combination of face-to-face interactions and the adoption of digital communications, which allowed – if only for a short time – urban commons to be produced in front of government institutions. Apart from this concerted struggle, the only evidence of an organised public effort was an official letter apparently composed by a group called Hội Nhân Dân chống Tham Nhũng (People’s Association against Corruption) that one demonstrator from An Giang Province in April 2008 carried with her and was intended to reach newspapers and be distributed among veterans and students. At the very least, national print and online media do report on land-related struggles.

Labour strikes form another social movement repertoire that is based on the occupation of physical space, such as assemblies on factory sites and the blockade of infrastructure – for example, by sitting on the road, blocking traffic. In 2011 alone, Vietnam witnessed more than 857 labour strikes (*Talkvietnam* 2012).

Vietnam is a major provider of cheap labour in the labour-intensive textile and shoe industries. Currently, the production is shifting from textiles to quality goods such as electronic devices, particularly smart phones (Chan 2011: 1; GTAI 2015). Over the last few years, many international enterprises have moved their production sites from China to Vietnam. A great number of the labourers are rural migrants who move temporarily to the export-processing zones to earn a living. In the textile and garment industry, 80 per cent of the workforce is comprised of women (Hang 2008: 16).

Since the beginning of the soaring inflation in 2008, the country has been hit by a wave of spontaneous strikes, most of which have taken place in the foreign-invested enterprises in the industrial parks of Hanoi, Da Nang, and the Southern growth triangle, Ho Chi Minh City–Dong Nai–Binh Duong (*Asia Sentinel* 2008; Chan 2010: 3). Many Korean, Taiwanese, or Chinese-owned companies have been involved. When asked about the high occurrence of strikes within foreign-invested companies, Mrs. Hoa from the Vietnam Textile and Apparel Association (VITAS) responded that the roots can be found in the lower wages these companies pay in comparison to what their Vietnamese counterparts offer, and the cultural differences that exist including the communication difficulties caused by the different languages employers and employees speak. Labour strikes seem to occur less frequently in state-owned companies because wages are higher and employees enjoy better welfare benefits and shorter working hours (Chan 2010: 3).

In addition, the Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs reports that a lot of strikes are caused by companies' failure to abide by labour laws: enterprises often refuse to sign labour contracts, pay social insurance, or grant their staff leave (*Talkvietnam* 2012). Lodging in the industrial parks or in so-called "boarding houses" on the urban fringe close to the enterprise, migrant workers try to save a great deal of their wages to send back home to support their families (Waibel and Gravert 2009: 42). Yet, due to the high inflation, many workers are no longer able to save money as living costs have grown exponentially. Accordingly, employees have been campaigning for wage increases. Their social movement repertoires consist of assembling on factory grounds and blocking infrastructure: In 2008, 17,000 workers from the Taiwanese-

managed Nike Company in the Southern Long An Province assembled on the factory grounds and distributed leaflets, forcing the company to stop production (*Libcom* 2008). In 2010 several thousand employees from the Taiwanese shoe company Pouchen Vietnam Co. in Dong Nai Province, close to Ho Chi Minh City, even went as far as to occupy Highway No. 1, Vietnam's main route, which connects the North with the South, in order to protest against their employers (*VietNamNet Bridge* 2010). In many of the strikes, violence broke out between the employees and the authorities and/or fellow employees, particularly involving those who did not want to partake in the strikes, which indicates a certain amount of disunity among workers.

Strikes occur spontaneously and will often end after one or two days, if the company meets the employees' demands (*The Straits Times* 2008). According to economic and political experts, strikes show little degree of organisation. Kerkvliet (2010: 176) explains that, initially, strikes often even lack identifiable leaders, and it is only within the strike process that spokespersons emerge, some of whom are elected. Workers rely on their existing social networks for the organisation of strikes. In this process, face-to-face interaction in the workplace or the boarding houses appears to be most important. Strikes are announced through leaflets or graffiti calling for collective action painted on the walls of toilets within the enterprise (Kerkvliet 2010: 176, 179; *Libcom* 2008). In addition, mobile phones, particularly the use of text messages, have become an important means of communication among workers. As for the usage of web 2.0, workers basically lack the time as well as unrestricted access to these technological resources. Moreover, their work practices are not linked to new media. Digital communication skills, and hence familiarity with the cultural protocols and practices associated with it, are not a requirement in their work process. This is particularly relevant for garment industry employees, most of whom are women.

These women are generally assigned weaving, spinning, and knitting duties, while male workers conduct a variety of technical and mechanical jobs (Nguyen, Sutherland, and Thoburn 2003: 9). As Mr. Nam, an expert on female labour migration, explained: "They lack the capacity, skills, and do not have daily internet access. They often work from 7 a.m. until 9 p.m."

In sum, communicative practices applied in labour strikes remain confined to the space of the factory. They suffer from a lack of unity among workers and fail to appeal to the local public. Harvey explains that

work-based struggles, from strikes to factory takeovers, are far more likely to succeed when there is strong and vibrant support from popular forces assembled at the surrounding neighbourhood or community level (including support from influential local leaders and their political organisations). (Harvey 2012: 138)

This nonetheless presumes that links between the factory workers and the local population already exist or can be easily established. These links can grow naturally when, for example, workers' families comprise the local community; in more diffuse urban settings, these ties need to be constructed and maintained (Harvey 2012: 138–139). However, in the industrial zones there is little time and space for the construction of these ties.

To date there is – as in the case of land-related struggles – no evidence of a nationwide or even regional social movement claiming labour rights, despite the fact that workers from different companies throughout Vietnam share a common goal: to secure a wage raise and to improve working conditions.

## Internet Usage and Regulations in Vietnam

Digital communications can help to connect actors across time and space and thence assist in reaching out to a wider public.

In recent years, the rate of internet users has increased enormously. In 2013, 43.9 per cent of Vietnam's population had access to the internet. In comparison, four years earlier in 2009, the rate of internet users was only 26.6 per cent (World Bank 2014). This high growth potential for internet usage has attracted major internet companies such as Yahoo, Friendster, and Facebook to the Vietnamese market. In 2008 the service provider Yahoo counted more than 15 million e-mail users and 2 million bloggers in Vietnam, which constitutes 25 per cent of Yahoo bloggers worldwide. In 2009 Facebook was estimated to have 3 million members in Vietnam (*Intellasia* 2009; *Press Association* 2009; *VietNamNet* 2008). Five years later in 2014, the Danish marketing firm Epinion reported that 25 million people in Vietnam had a Facebook account (Lipes 2014). Another social network provider is the locally produced Zing Me (Clark 2013).

The Vietnamese state has responded to this development twofold: on one hand, it seeks to promote internet usage and the provision of technical infrastructure in order to boost the economy; on the other hand, it is well aware of the development of digital communication networks that are difficult to control. Therefore, policies need to be introduced that depart from the control model in physical space, while, at the

same time, leaving enough room for the development of innovation and creativity, a dilemma that Singapore and many other Southeast Asian states face as well.

Since 2009 the authorities have repeatedly attempted to block access to Facebook, particularly as it has been used by political activists to organise demonstrations and petitions. These restrictions, however, do not threaten internet users. Soon after the government blocked Facebook, instructions about how to circumvent the blockade circulated on the internet. Compared to the rate of internet users, the rate of mobile phone users is much higher, with 1.39 mobile phone contracts per capita, totalling 127,318,045 in 2012 (*Wearesocial* 2012).

The major internet businesses and service providers in Vietnam are state-owned – such as Vietnam Posts and Telecommunications, or Viettel, which is owned by the People’s Army of Vietnam – and account for 74 per cent of the market. The state ownership facilitates the government’s blocking of “malicious” websites by adopting the domain name system. Additionally, the state owns the three major mobile phone operators, making up 90 per cent of the market (Reporters without Borders 2014).

## Internet Regulations: Producing an Exclusive Space

Since 2008 the government has passed several new regulations on internet usage. In August 2008, Decree No. 97/2008/ND-CP on the provision of information on the personal electronic information page was passed and amended by a further circular in December 2008. The circular defines the personal electronic information page (blog) as follows:

The blog is used to show personal information, serving the needs of storing or exchanging with a group of people or internet-using community. The blog is registered and created on the internet by its owner. (Ministry of Information and Communication 2008)

In 2013 the government passed Decree No. 72/2013/ND-CP on the management, provision, and usage of internet services and online information (including online games), which has been in effect since 1 September 2013, when it replaced Decree No. 97/2008/ND-CP. In January 2014, Decree 72 was supplemented by Decree 174, which provides authorities with an even greater scope of action to charge bloggers for “anti-state” crimes (Vandenbrink 2014). Two months earlier, in November 2013, the state had further curbed posting criticism of the govern-

ment on social media by elevating fines up to VND 100 million (EUR 3,413) (*Reuters* 2013).

Taking a closer look at Decree No. 72/2013/ND-CP, the aforementioned government objective of promoting internet usage in the scope of modernisation is striking. In Article 4, the government declares that they encourage the use of the internet for all economic and social activities, especially for education, healthcare, and scientific research to raise productivity, create jobs, and improve quality of life. A further objective is the development of broadband internet infrastructure in public institutions such as schools, hospitals, research institutes, and libraries as well as in state agencies, enterprises, public internet stations, and households. Moreover, internet services need to be provided to remote areas. At the same time, Article 4 regulates cases of internet abuse, especially with respect to national security and social order: the internet must not contradict the code of ethics, traditions, and Vietnam's laws. Article 5 explicitly prohibits internet usage in order to oppose the state, to sabotage national unity, to propagate wars and terrorism, and to arouse animosity among races and religions, among other things (Chính Phủ Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam 2013). This article has been criticised, particularly by the international community. David Brown (2013), however, qualifies the debate by stating that the prohibitions depicted in Article 5 are "standard stuff in Vietnamese media management laws, lifted directly from the nation's constitution. For dissident bloggers, it falls, almost, into the category of white noise."

Finally, Article 20 demonstrates the attempt to distinguish between the distribution of personal and public information on the internet. It classifies five types of websites: (1) electronic newspapers in the form of websites, (2) news websites, (3) internal websites, (4) personal websites, and (5) specified websites. This distinction is considered a further step against freedom of expression both by Vietnamese citizens (see the declaration on the bauxite blog signed by 630 people discussed in the following) and by international observers. In particular, the distinction made between news websites and personal websites is problematic (Brown 2013). News websites are defined as

websites of organisations and enterprises that post general information cited from official sources [and] specify the authors or managing agencies of the official sources and the time when such information is posted,

whereas personal websites are

websites established by individuals or via social networks to provide and exchange personal information. Those websites neither represent other organisations or individuals nor provide general information (Chính Phủ Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam 2013 translated from Vietnamese).

In fact, this definition specifies that social media users are allowed to post only personal information, and that they must abstain from posting any news links – even to those articles published by the state media (Brown 2013; Clark 2013). In October 2014, Decree 72 was supplemented by Circular No. 09/2014/TT-BTTTT, which states that websites must have a system of elimination for content that violates Article 5 within three hours of its detection by state organs.

The circular further stipulates that the person responsible for the content of the website ought to at least have a university degree (Bộ Thông Tin và Truyền Thông 2014), which creates a paradox: on the one hand Decree No. 72 propagates the provision of broadband internet to public institutions as well as the extension of internet services to remote areas, and on the other hand, it hinders and deprives citizens with a lower educational background from active participation in web 2.0. As a result, citizens in rural areas will gain access to the technology, but will also be excluded by law from the production of media content if they do not have a university degree. According to the UNFPA Census of 2009 (UNFPA 2009), only 2.5 per cent of the rural population had an upper-secondary-school degree and 3 per cent a bachelor's degree, whereas in urban areas, 5 per cent held an upper-secondary-school degree, 20.5 per cent had a bachelor's, and 1.2 per cent held a postgraduate degree. In other words, the state has replaced the digital divide with a participation gap and thereby promotes active online engagement among those who already do so. Vietnam's well-educated urban middle class already actively consumes and produces media content as the following analysis of citizens' participation in the revision process of the Constitution and of the anti-bauxite-mining network shows.

## Digital Social Networks

While the state appears to be delimiting public debate on the internet, it is also testing new approaches to people's participation. The draft laws are published on public body websites such as those of the National Assembly and the various ministries. For example, the National Assem-

bly's website, <<http://duthaonline.quochoi.vn>>, explains the law-making process, providing commentaries on the draft laws and inviting citizens' comments.

The largest people's participation to date was achieved in the revision process of the 1992 Constitution in 2013, as the state had pursued a participatory approach by inviting citizens to hand in their comments and suggestions on it (*The Washington Post* 2013). In total, about 26 million public comments were registered (Petty 2013). While individual citizens made use of this opportunity to engage in the drafting process, networks of citizens also published their statements and suggestions.

On 13 November 2013, Bloc 8406 published excerpts from its manifesto from 2006 while requesting that the people carefully monitor the drafting process as well as the content of the Draft Constitution in diverse blogs. Bloc 8406 is a digital network predominantly consisting of urban professionals.<sup>2</sup> It is named after its founding date: on 8 April 2006, a group of 118 pro-democracy activists issued the *Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy for Vietnam*. By the end of 2006, the network had expanded to 2,000 members (Thayer 2008: 13–14). Its claims include the restoration of civil liberties, the establishment of political parties, the drafting of a new constitution, and the holding of democratic elections for a representative National Assembly.

By February 2013, a group of 72 former high-ranking party officials, well-known intellectuals, veterans, and others with good connections to the state had submitted a Western-style draft constitution to the Drafting Committee. The group that achieved recognition as Group 72 called for a multiparty system, or at least competitive elections (Hai Hong Nguyen 2013; London 2013). Up to mid-November 2013, almost 15,000 people had followed up on their recommendations. Shortly before the National Assembly's discussion of the draft constitution, Group 72 published an online call to stop the adoption of the draft constitution.

Finally, on 28 November, 486 out of a total 488 representatives from the National Assembly voted in favour of the draft constitution. In spite of this almost unanimous assent, the president of the National Assembly publicly declared that some of the responses from citizens to the draft constitution were in the form of criticism and disagreement.

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2 Of the manifesto's initial signers, 31 per cent were teachers and lecturers, 14 per cent Catholic priests, 13 per cent university professors, 7 per cent writers, 6 per cent medical doctors, and the remaining 29 per cent comprised diverse individuals including intellectuals, engineers, nurses, Hoa Hao religious leaders, businessmen, army veterans, technicians, ordinary citizens, etc. (Thayer 2009: 13).

Moreover, he admitted that even within the rows of the National Assembly, critical voices were present (*Tuổi Trẻ* 2013). On 1 January 2014, the revised Constitution replaced the Constitution of 1992. While there are no major changes in the realms of politics and economics, the Constitution reaffirms the Communist Party's leading role in the political arena as well as the relevance of state-owned enterprises for the economy. Although it seems that the National Assembly did not follow citizens' suggestions, choosing instead to use the party's and government's road map, Jonathan London (2013) suggests that "there are hundreds of party members of equal or greater stature who have and will continue to advocate for fundamental reforms." The submission of an open letter by 61 party officials to the state leadership on 28 July 2014, demanding a democratic and law-abiding state, actually corroborates London's account. The letter was published in light of the ongoing conflict with China in the South China Sea.

In sum, the government's participatory approach has enabled thinking about alternative political programmes. It has initiated a sustained debate on political pluralism and democracy in the Vietnamese public sphere. Yet, if we take a closer look at the composition of digital networks such as Bloc 8406 or Group 72, it becomes obvious that most of their members are more highly educated citizens, of whom many have good connections to the state. So the question remains as to how far these networks represent only a certain constituency. The same is true for the bauxite-mining opposition.

The bauxite-mining opposition is one of the earliest and most enduring digital networks. Vietnam holds the third-largest reserves of bauxite ore in the world, a raw material in high demand for the production of aluminium. The Vietnamese government has contracted two bauxite-processing plants in the Central Highlands to the Aluminium Corp. of China, Ltd. (Chalco). The mining complexes in the provinces of Lam Dong and Dak Nong are managed by the Vietnam National Coal Mineral Industries Group (VINACOMIN) (Reuters 2009).

After these contracts were awarded, opposition to bauxite mining emerged in the Vietnamese public sphere. A popular opponent was General Võ Nguyên Giáp, who in 1954 had successfully defeated the French colonial troops in the battle of Dien Bien Phu. In 2009 he issued three open letters pointing to the devastating effects of mining on the environment, the displacement of ethnic minorities from their homelands, and, most importantly, the threat to national security posed by opening the strategically important Central Highlands to China (Thayer 2009: 50). Furthermore, he had alluded very early on to the danger of the

influx of Chinese workers, which would – five years later – result in the emergence of anti-China protests by Vietnamese workers. Additionally, at a seminar organised by Vietnam’s Ministry of Industry and Trade, its Federation of Technical and Science Associations, and VINACOMIN in April 2009, scientists publicly pointed to the irreversible environmental damage caused by bauxite mining. Accordingly, the deputy prime minister called for tight mining controls (*Reuters* 2009; *DPA* 2009).

Thus, bauxite mining evolved as both an environmental and a political issue. In fact, many of its opponents were intellectuals with linkages to the state. Additionally, environmentalists, scientists, local residents, and war veterans joined in the public debate (Thayer 2009: 51), and popular Vietnamese bloggers like Mẹ Nấm (Mother Mushroom) and Người Buôn Gió (Wind Trader) have also voiced their opinion. In their blogs, they have openly criticised Vietnam’s foreign policy towards China among their more general critique of the Vietnamese state (*Asia Sentinel* 2009).

Overall, the new media played a crucial role in the formation of the bauxite-mining opposition: news spread online and opinions were shared on Facebook (Thayer 2014: 146). Additionally, the network functions on a two-modal structure, comprising a blog and a website. Although both were hacked in 2009/2010, the blog had received more than 17 million hits during the few months it existed (Committee to Protect Journalists 2010; Stocking 2010). Following the hacking, the blog was moved to the internationally hosted blogspot platform (<boxitvn.blogspot.com>), and the website is now available at [www.boxitvn.net](http://www.boxitvn.net). The blog’s administrators provide information to users about how to access the site through [anonymouse.org](http://anonymouse.org), a server that acts as an intermediary and makes private data anonymous.<sup>3</sup> As such, the personal data of visitors to the website cannot be traced.

The blog and website’s headline says “Information and exchange on bauxite in Vietnam. The voice of a network of intellectuals” (translated from Vietnamese).

The narratives and images applied online hint towards the historical consciousness of the network’s programmers: the blog opens with a picture of a historical personality of Vietnam. In the past, General Giáp graced the front page; currently displayed is a photo of Phan Chu Trinh, a Vietnamese intellectual and nationalist who sought to secure Vietnam’s independence from French colonial rule through the adherence to dem-

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3 During a page request, Anonymouse filters all personal data and requests the page from the target server again. After the response by the target server is anonymised, it is sent back to the user (Anonymouse 2014).

ocratic principles. The photo is also shown on the website next to the categories “petitions,” “raise your voice,” “photos and videos,” and “Dien Hong meeting” (translated from Vietnamese). The latter is a reference to the historical meeting in Dien Hong Palace in 1284, which had been convened by King Trần Thánh Tông to assemble the elders from all over the country and is considered the first democratic congregation in Vietnamese history.

These historical references argue for the historical continuity of democratic movements in Vietnam. In this democratic tradition, the bauxite-mining blog provides a discussion forum for diverse social issues comprising religious freedom, corruption, and democracy in Vietnam. In 2013, for example, the blog published a petition signed by 630 people to the state leadership calling for the amendment of the aforementioned internet regulation (Decree 72). Currently, China’s actions in the South China Sea are among the hot topics debated on the blog.

In sum, the anti-bauxite-mining movement was able to switch networks. Scientific debate over an environmental issue was linked to other domains of social life, particularly the claim for democratic freedom. To date, nonetheless, its engagement remains confined to digital space. It is exactly this retreat to digital space that raises questions about the worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment of the network members: How much can be gleaned about people’s commitment from the signing of online petitions or the number of “likes” on Facebook, particularly if many of the signees are based outside the country?

In fact, the majority of participants are urban-based white collar workers, mainly from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and Vietnamese living abroad – for instance, in Germany, France, and the United States.<sup>4</sup> The members of the network also define its objectives. Consequently, the network does not address the demands of workers or citizens claiming their land.<sup>5</sup> It remains an exclusive network of the more highly educated just as the blog’s and website’s headline suggests.

## Production of Hybrid Space

The call to protect Vietnam’s sovereignty offers common ground for collective action. Since gaining independence from China in the eleventh

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4 In 2010 the majority of visitors to the blog came from the United States. According to Alexa (2010), 28.9 per cent users accessed the blog from Vietnam, 37.2 per cent from the United States, 8.8 per cent from Japan, 7 per cent from Germany, and 2.9 per cent from Canada.

5 The blog’s search terms do not even show an entry for “land”-related issues.

century, Vietnam has sought to maintain and defend its sovereignty. In particular, territorial disputes between the two nation-states have been going on for centuries. A major dispute centres on the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, an area rich with gas, oil, and fish (Will 2014: 9-10).<sup>6</sup> Since 2007/2008, several protests have taken place in urban public space claiming Vietnam's sovereignty. During the Olympic Games in China, Vietnamese citizens publicly voiced their opinion: smaller protests took place in front of the Chinese embassy in Hanoi and even in front of the Hanoi Opera. While some protests were seemingly organised by state organs, others were self-organised by citizens through digital communication networks, and were prevented by the authorities from being held. In May 2014, the instalment of a Chinese oil rig near the Paracel Islands led to protests throughout the country. Chinese-, Taiwanese-, and Korean-owned enterprises were attacked by Vietnamese protestors, leaving two dead and several injured. In Binh Duong Province, for example, a Taiwanese footwear company was invaded by 4,000 protestors (Gold and Nguyen Phuong Linh 2014).

Companies owned by Taiwanese and Koreans have long been blamed for their non-compliance with Vietnamese labour law. Interviewees report that in some industrial zones in Thanh Hoa Province, Chinese enterprises would only hire Chinese employees, which resulted in feelings of resentment among the local population. Chinese employees often occupy higher positions as experts or technicians, receiving higher wages and supervising the Vietnamese employees (Hayton 2014; Wang 2014). This, of course, heightens tension among workers. Thus, the Chinese attack on Vietnamese sovereignty, a matter of national interest, has become an outlet for an outraged Vietnamese workforce.

There are parallels between the recent factory takeovers and the aforementioned wave of strikes in that they have both targeted foreign-invested enterprises and often turned violent. The simultaneous occurrence of protests in industrial zones all over the country, however, and the degree of violence involved argue for a new dimension, particularly given that the protestors did not express labour-related demands but claimed instead Vietnam's sovereignty, deploying symbols of the Vietnamese nation-state. Protestors waved the Vietnamese national flag and red banners saying *Hãy Đứng Lên Bảo Vệ Tổ Quốc* ("Stand Up to Protect the Nation"), while shouting *Mong muốn Việt Nam* ("Long Live Vietnam"). For the organisation of the factory takeovers in several differ-

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6 The Spratly Islands are claimed by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei.

ent places at the same time, digital communication networks were crucial. In effect, workers applied a broad communicative repertoire combining face-to-face interaction in their workplaces and lodgings that included distributing flyers and communicating through text messages, blogs, and phone calls. Again, no specific leadership or organisation can be identified as having taken over the coordination. Since May 2014, correspondingly, several rumours have spread saying that the protests were initiated by the Chinese government, or the overseas Viet Tan Party.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the violent mob is said to have been mobilised and funded by criminal groups. That said, political experts and union representatives agree that the workers were joined by other people who took advantage of the situation in order to plunder the factories.

Demonstrations arose in Vietnam's major cities in the same month. In Hanoi, citizens occupied central public spaces such as Dien Bien Phu St., which is close to the Chinese embassy, and Ly Thai To Square, at the banks of Hoan Kiem Lake. In fact, Ly Thai To Square is a symbolic place as its name-bearer was the first ruler to establish a centralised state independent from China with Thang Long-Ha Noi as the royal capital.

In contrast to previous anti-China demonstrations, the government initially allowed the demonstrations, especially in front of the Chinese embassy, and permitted media coverage. Then, in the wake of the violent outbursts in the industrial parks, the government tried to prevent further demonstrations from taking place in urban public space (Brown 2014; Peel and Sevastopolu 2014). The prime minister sent a text message to all Vietnamese cellular users, calling on them "to boost their patriotism to defend the fatherland's sacred sovereignty with actions in line with the law" (Einhorn 2014) – a move that is only possible in a country where most of the mobile phone providers are state-owned. Nonetheless, citizens continued to produce hybrid spaces through the coordination of protests in digital networks such as Facebook and blogs. The blog *Ba Sam* appealed to "all young friends who love the country to take to the streets to oppose the Chinese invasion" (*Ba Sam* 2014; translated from Vietnamese), and published the date and venue of protests in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Nha Trang, and Long An Province. The writers distanced themselves from the violence that had occurred, pledging peaceful demonstrations. On the blog *Xuandienbannom*, the Group Anh Em No U Hanoi called for a demonstration at Hanoi's Ly Thai To Square on June 19, requesting that the government secure public order so that "all citi-

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7 In September 1982, Hoang Co Minh, a former admiral in the Republic of Vietnam Navy, established the Viet Tan Party, which aimed to overthrow the Vietnamese communist government (Thayer 2008: 16).

zens who love the country [could] make use of their right to demonstrate” (*Xuandienhannom* 2014; translated from Vietnamese). The worthiness, unity, number and commitment of people were displayed in their occupation of symbolic space and their call for the nation’s autonomy, which was multiplied by diverse political issues, such as the release of political prisoners, land confiscations (China Underground 2014), and general critique of the government. Lien, a long-time member of the Communist Party and participant in the demonstrations, explained: “It was about China and about the government, not about the workers.”

In sum, the anti-China movement touches on multiple domains of social life under the umbrella of nationalism and love of country. Accordingly, it has the potential to unite diverse social groups including workers, students, intellectuals, war veterans, politicians, and ordinary citizens. Still, citizens placing their bodies in the streets clearly distanced themselves from the violent factory takeovers and therefore from the workers, indicating that, to date, the workers and their rights claims remain excluded from this dominant urban discourse.

## Conclusion

According to Touraine (2004: 718), a social movement affects all the main aspects of social life, not only the conditions of production in one sector. The different conflicts outlined above all centre on important social issues in Vietnam ranging from land-use rights to labour conditions, environmental issues and the freedom of expression, to the political foundation and the sovereignty of the state. To date, however, these multiple collective behaviours rarely switch and connect with other networks in order to campaign. Indeed, only the bauxite-mining opposition was able to link networks with groups struggling for religious freedom, freedom of expression, and democracy. Furthermore, it reprogrammed the anti-China network for its own objectives. While the revision process of the Constitution introduced sustained debate about political pluralism in Vietnam, it is nonetheless striking that the social movement repertoires for the most part remain confined to digital space.

One reason for this certainly is the high level of state control in concrete, physical space. In contrast, digital communications appear to offer a “space of autonomous communication” (Castells 2012: 11). The networks of the bauxite-mining opposition, Bloc 8406, and Group 72 all work on a digital basis, switching networks with actors outside of Vietnam, particularly overseas Vietnamese.

These digital networks are built upon existing social relations. In fact, communication innovations are integrated into existing relationships and practices (Baym 1998; Tilly 2004: 103). This is how projects are expanded and how connections that already exist are maintained. Accordingly, new media can lower the costs of coordination among activists who are already linked to each other (Tilly 2004: 98). At the same time, though, those who were not already part of the network might be excluded. Citizens struggling for land-use rights and better working conditions make use of digital communications, too, using mobile phones and the internet. Nonetheless, they remain excluded from the more powerful networks of the urban elite, even more so from the network of the state, despite the fact that communication for collective action works well along established social ties within their workplaces, boarding houses, and home towns.

This shows that it is not so much about access to the technology, but rather citizens' opportunities to participate. While the government has narrowed the digital divide by promoting the expansion of internet services to remote areas, it has also widened the participation gap by delimiting active participation in web 2.0 to the more highly educated. The bauxite-mining opposition, Bloc 8406, and Group 72 all consist predominantly of more highly educated citizens. They are familiar with the cultural practices and protocols associated with the new media and on this basis are able to actively participate, creating, programming, and extending their networks. Moreover, their network-making power is determined by access to the default network of the state – an important asset that workers in the industrial zones and citizens claiming land lack. As members of the state's communication network, they know how it works and can reprogram it for their own ends.

Shifting the focus from access to participation allows us to take a closer look at the power differentials at work in the production of digital networks. In Vietnam, existing socio-economic inequalities, particularly the urban–rural bias, are reproduced in digital space. These inequalities are in fact reaffirmed and manifested through state regulation, producing a digital logic of inclusion and exclusion.

A small window of opportunity has recently opened up for the different collective behaviours to connect with each other, to reprogram the anti-China discussion into a debate about the common good, and thence to organise a sustained public effort making collective claims on the government. Anti-China actions seem to provide an outlet for citizens' dissatisfaction with diverse social issues such as bad labour conditions, environmental pollution, socio-economic development, and Vietnam's

foreign policy, thereby providing a linkage between various social groups. The reference to love for country allows for a critique of the political status quo to enter the public sphere – as demonstrated by the open letter by 61 party officials. Yet, as long as urban citizens distance themselves from workers' struggles, and with digital communication networks becoming an exclusive circle of the more highly educated, the switching of networks as well as the synthesis of the three elements of campaign, social movement repertoire, and WUNC displays has yet to occur.

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