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VIETNAM'S BLOGGER MOVEMENT: A VIRTUAL CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE MIDST OF GOVERNMENT REPRESSION

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- The limited scope for freedom of speech in Vietnam's growing political blogosphere is under threat.
- Blogging has developed into a new medium for citizens to discuss social injustices and issues of national concern.
- Your help is needed to support Vietnam's virtual civil society and rollback internet censorship.

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Internet usage in Vietnam

In comparison to other countries, Vietnam entered into the online age relatively late. But there has been a dramatic increase in internet users over the last decade due to the country's increasing economic integration. With thousands of internet cafés available and broadband connections at most universities, an estimated 24 million of Vietnam's 86 million people use the internet—a significant increase from just 200,000 users in 2000.

There are a multitude of popular platforms that Vietnam's youthful and technologically-adept population uses to communicate and network with one another. For example, Paltalk is a free internet chat service that boasts 4 million active users worldwide. Vietnamese language chat rooms (serving local and overseas Vietnamese) are the most popular among the international themed chat rooms on Paltalk.

Facebook recently released a Vietnamese version of its social networking website. In a few months, over 50,000 people have already joined.

In terms of web logging though, Yahoo! 360° is the favored blogging platform for most people in Vietnam and Yahoo! has a representative office in the country. Similar to Facebook, users can create personal websites, share photos, maintain blogs, supply profile information, and see which friends are online. Yahoo! 360° is so popular in Vietnam that just last year Yahoo! announced several Vietnam-centric initiatives which include Yahoo! 360plus—a new Vietnamese blogging application specific to the Vietnamese market.

The rise of citizen journalism

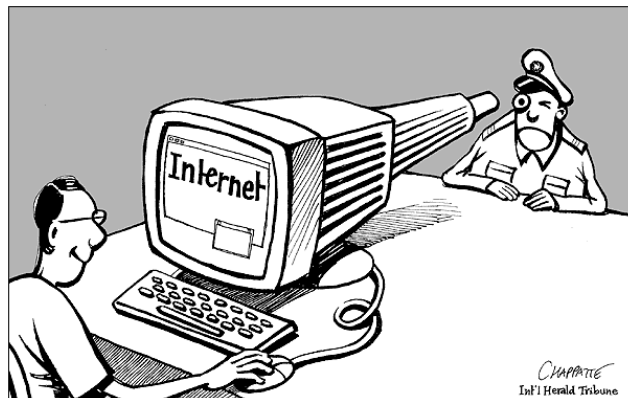
In an environment in which information is tightly controlled by the government, bloggers were quick to recognize the possibilities that the internet had to offer in terms of discourse and activism. News about government corruption scandals, social issues and political commentary outside and within the country have become major commodities in Vietnam. People look to blogs for news they cannot get from state-controlled media.

In the last two years, citizen journalists generated online coverage of:

- the Can Tho bridge collapse and blunders by the Ministry of Construction
- China's moves against the Paracel and Spratly Islands which are claimed by Vietnam
- corruption in transportation projects funded by Japanese aid money
- heavy-handed police treatment of farmers demonstrating against loss of land
- environmental concerns over bauxite mining in the Central Highlands

Bloggers have been responsible for conducting in-depth investigative pieces as well as publicizing snippets of information and opinion collected locally or from abroad. When Buddhist monks marched in Myanmar, their photos and YouTube videos made it onto many Vietnamese blogs. Likewise, "change we need" became a theme among various blogs in Vietnam following the election of President Barack Obama.

The ability to quickly organize like-minded individuals through the internet makes blogging a powerful tool for peaceful demonstration. Blogs played a vital role in organizing demonstrations outside the Chinese embassy and consulate in December 2007 and against the Olympic Torch Relay in Saigon in April 2008.



Government censorship

For years, the Vietnamese government has been controlling the internet by blocking websites critical of the regime. According to Reporters Sans Frontieres, Vietnam is among the worst countries when it comes to internet freedom.

In October 2008, the government created a new entity—the Administration Agency for Radio, Television and Electronics Information—to monitor the internet and control the flow of information from bloggers as the number of internet users continues to rapidly increase.

This new agency falls under the Ministry of Information and Communications, which issued a directive (known as “Circular 07”) in December 2008 updating the government’s expansive powers to censor the internet. According to a senior ministry official: “The state encourages the use of blogs to serve personal freedom but bloggers have to respect social interests and community interests under the laws.”

This Orwellian requirement means that internet users who post items on the internet deemed to oppose the state will face severe penalties. The contraband includes political commentary which criticizes the decisions of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the posting of links to sites which are blocked in the country.

The new internet decree is ultimately an extension of Article 88 of the Vietnamese Penal Code which criminalizes free speech. Under Article 88, so-called propaganda against the state can be punished by monetary fines and up to 12 years of jail time.

Role of foreign internet companies

The Vietnamese government seeks to emulate China’s “Great Firewall” by creating a dynamic online censorship program through collaboration with local and foreign internet service providers.

While internet platforms based *outside* of Vietnam are not subject to Vietnamese law, the Ministry of Information and Communications has expressed its desire to have foreign internet giants such as Yahoo!, Google, and Microsoft comply with provisions in the new decree, including providing personal information on bloggers to government authorities upon request.

Currently, the critical mass of Vietnamese bloggers is concentrated on Yahoo 360° servers which are located in Singapore, and not in Vietnam. This means two things:

- The Vietnamese government does not have full control over blogs.
- If the government wants to move all Vietnamese bloggers to a domestic server, of which they have full control over, they will have to develop content attractive to Vietnamese bloggers who are getting more advanced.

It is unlikely the authorities would shut down Yahoo 360° or other foreign-based services given the massive public outcry that would result. It is therefore of critical importance that these internet companies do not voluntarily collaborate with the Vietnamese police.

Any collaboration to help the Vietnamese government gain more control over the internet, like in the case of China, will set back the Vietnamese blogger movement. More bloggers will be arrested and more information will be blocked from Vietnamese citizens.

Imprisoned cyber activists



In January 2008, **Nguyen Van Hai**—a 56-year-old human rights activist who blogs under the name “Dieu Cay”—called for a boycott of the Olympic torch relay. The planned demonstration was in reaction to Chinese occupation of the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea which Vietnam also claims. Security police arrested Dieu Cay on charges of tax evasion in a case widely seen by both domestic bloggers and the international community as punishment for his political expression. Dieu Cay was sentenced to 2.5 years imprisonment.

Pham Thanh Nghien, a 32-year-old human rights activist was among a dozen activists arrested in September 2008 after publishing commentary on the internet critical of government policies toward China. Just prior to her arrest, Pham Thanh Nghien held a sit-in inside her home to protest police harassment. She has been held without trial and her family has yet been allowed to visit.

A 30-year-old mobile-phone repairman, **Truong Quoc Huy**, was previously arrested at his home in Saigon in October 2005 with his two brothers and a female friend. The group had been taking part in a Paltalk chat room discussion about democracy. They were detained incommunicado for nine months. One month after his release in August 2006, Truong Quoc Huy was arrested again when a dozen police swamped a Saigon internet café. Truong Quoc Huy was chatting online. He was subsequently sentenced to six years imprisonment followed by three years' house arrest.

Policy recommendations

1. Demand the release of imprisoned internet activists

Bring public attention to the cases of Vietnamese bloggers and democracy activists who have been imprisoned for their peaceful expression. Express your solidarity with these prisoners of conscience and provide support to their families.

2. Urge internet companies not to collaborate with the Vietnamese authorities

Remind Yahoo!, Google, and Microsoft to protect private user information and not cooperate with Vietnamese police to censor content. These companies have all signed on to the Global Network Initiative and have a corporate social responsibility to respect internet freedom and to not assist in human rights violations.

3. Call on the Vietnamese government to respect internet freedom and freedom of expression

The Vietnamese government must repeal archaic laws that criminalize peaceful expression. The draconian penal code and new internet decree are

inconsistent with international human rights conventions to which Vietnam is a signatory. Moreover, internet censorship is contrary to the Vietnamese government's stated aim of developing a knowledge-based economy.

4. Support Vietnamese citizen journalists

The internet has the power to transform Vietnamese society, leading to a *de facto* free media and virtual civil society. Technical, financial and educational assistance can help bloggers develop the capabilities to be more effective investigative journalists, human rights defenders and grassroots organizers.

Reaction from free-speech advocates

"Vietnam's donors should continue to insist that the government stop its criminalization of peaceful expression."

— Human Rights Watch

"China is the world's biggest prison for cyber-dissidents, followed by Vietnam and Iran."

— Reporters Sans Frontieres

"While Article 69 of [Vietnam's] constitution broadly protects press freedom and freedom of expression, [the Vietnamese] government has continued to use criminal and national security laws to arbitrarily stifle these essential freedoms."

— Committee to Protect Journalists

"Authorities have imposed strict controls over the internet aimed at filtering and reducing what they regard as politically harmful information."

— Amnesty International

About Viet Tan

The mission of Viet Tan is to overcome dictatorship, build the foundation for a sustainable democracy, and demand justice and human rights for the Vietnamese people through nonviolent struggle based on civic participation.