



THE FIRST VIETNAM CYBER DIALOGUE

VALENCIA, SPAIN

| About

The first ever Vietnam Cyber Dialogue (VCD) was co-hosted by ARTICLE 19, Reporters Without Borders and Viet Tan as part of the 2017 Internet Freedom Festival (IFF) in Valencia, Spain. Supported by Open Technology Fund, attendees from 33 organisations ranged from frontline activists, tech innovators, policymakers and journalists. Participants came from 15 different countries with 49 percent of participants identifying as female. Facilitated by Allen Gunn from Aspiration, the VCD aimed to address the challenges and produce partnerships to support the online community to safely access and disseminate information and tools.

| Desired Outcomes

The overall goals of the VCD were to:

- Enable attendees to establish new contacts, collaborative projects, or post-IFF plans
- Help stakeholders to gain a better understanding of the physical and security challenges when working in Vietnam or working as part of the diaspora network
- Showcase relevant projects and efforts both inside and outside of Vietnam, and provide avenues for allies to share their tools, technology, and resources



| Most Discussed Topics

There were some key points that were frequently mentioned in conversations during the various sessions throughout the day. They include:

- There is a need to tell the stories and amplify the voices from Vietnam
- Language is a key barrier
- Trolls, internet shutdowns, and online surveillance and censorship shape the Vietnamese user's web experience
- Forming human and organic relationships is vital to build trust between activists inside and outside of Vietnam
- Sharing of organisational best practices, tools, and standards is key

| Creating a Space

Participants identified the importance of creating a space to share and produce tangible solutions to resolve ongoing challenges faced by Vietnamese netizens. One attendee said “networking is very important to connect and share lessons.” Another identified the need for organisations to share organisational security standards and methods to better equip and support frontline activists.

An overview of the most popular tools used by Vietnamese provided better contextual understanding of the digital landscape. The most common form of communication platforms are Skype, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Zalo. Netizens also commonly use VPNs to access blocked content in Vietnam.





KEY CHALLENGES

| Government monitoring

Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security closely monitors Facebook activity. The Ministry has been known to follow activists' online activity and location. Security police frequently surveil and harass netizens online and offline. The Ministry of Information and Communications issued [Decree 72](#) in 2013, prohibiting the sharing of information reported by the press over social media, in a bid to monitor and crackdown on netizens and activists.

The Vietnamese government has been commonly suspected of [using surveillance software](#) to monitor activists. Voice conversations to and from activists have reportedly been [tapped and tracked](#) by authorities.

Even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been known to monitor the Facebook activity of its employees. An attendee mentioned that the government exerted pressure within its own ministry in order to weed out any dissent and scare employees so they would be discouraged from receiving and sending information via social media sites.

| Censorship

Telecommunication companies play a critical role in blocking access or preventing the distribution of information considered to be politically sensitive. Vietnamese telcos are ordered to [block](#) text messages with certain keywords or phrases during political events.

Censorship measures were also seen to be diverse. An attendee said that universal censorship by Internet Service Providers (ISPs) only applied to a small group of news sites (such as BBC in Vietnamese). Tests done by Citizen Lab in 2012/2013 regarding censorship in Vietnam showed very different censorship measures based on the ISP which indicated that there was no shared blocking list between various ISPs and the government.

There are currently no reports of virtual private networks (VPNs) being deliberately or systematically blocked.





| State-sponsored trolling

Vietnamese authorities also hire [people](#) to act as “public opinion shapers” and online trolls. State-sponsored trolls are used to spread information and undermine the legitimacy of activists and citizen journalists and it was mentioned that the government spends a large amount of resources in training these trolls.

Trolls also utilise Facebook’s report button to trigger the shutdown of activist pages and profiles, a sign of the evolution of state tactics as shutdowns become localised.

Activists mentioned that online trolls are not a breaking point and they have dealt with worse. However, it can be time consuming when administering and deleting comments left by trolls and online discussion is diverted. Several participants expressed an interest in researching the problem and developing remedies to trolling in Vietnam.

| Vietnamese netizen user habits

Activists mentioned they partitioned their identities to keep themselves safe. This would include keeping multiple computers and laptops or separating organisations into a visible and a separate underground component. It is also common to carry multiple mobile phones and tablets.

Both journalists and activists mentioned the use of multiple email addresses to contact different people. These email addresses had complex passwords but many failed to store passwords well. One had physically written their password on a piece of paper which was misplaced rather than choosing to use a password-manager. This resulted in losing access to their account and subsequently creating additional accounts.

It is not clear whether having multiple devices and emails is an effective long-term safety measure because both cellular and internet systems are centrally controlled. It was noted that Vietnamese netizens in particular were more reactive than proactive when taking safety precautions such as two-factor authentication due to convenience; however there is currently increased use in some measures.



| Language barrier

Attendees identified language barrier as a key challenge to working in Vietnam. An international organisation said it was challenging working in Southeast Asia as a regional group because of the vast cultural, language, and religious differences. Working effectively across these cultures can be strenuous.

The language barrier can also lead to a skills deficit as it prevents citizen journalists and activists from accessing capacity building resources. Finding trainers for Vietnam can also be difficult due to the language gap and travel limits.

| Media challenges

As one attendee pointed out, there are “more than 1,000 newspapers in Vietnam but there is only one editor-in-chief.” Not only is domestic media controlled by the Vietnamese government but foreign media outlets have found it difficult to enter the country or report on issues of their choosing. A BBC correspondent was [pressured](#) by authorities from reporting politically sensitive issues, with authorities withdrawing his reporting team’s accreditation and ordering them to stop reporting from Vietnam.

Another attendee pointed out that media literacy was fairly low in Vietnam. Readers were unable to differentiate between real news and fake news, undermining the accuracy of news reports and lessening the public trust of media. This also made it hard for everyday readers to trust alternative forms of media within Vietnam. A larger percentage of people did not understand or know about the issue of fake news.



Despite government monitoring and pressure, reporters in Vietnam have stories they want media outlets to tell. Unfortunately, they are not allowed to report these stories and often leak the news and become sources for other media organisations. However, verifying the news can be fairly difficult and can possibly compromise sources.



| Determining impact vs risk

Organisations need to assess how much risk they are putting frontline activists in and the relation to the actual impact they have on the ground. However, the measurement of both impact and risk can be interpreted differently by activists and organisations. Different types of risks apply to different actors -- organisations can face risks once establishing themselves inside the country but these risks may be different to frontline activists.

NGOs struggle with determining whether to measure success by working with one individual over a longer period of time or by working with a larger number of people over a specified period. Furthermore, NGOs struggle with this model because there are only a certain amount of grants for certain issues and organisations can be overburdened with the work.

Organisations find it difficult to assess and determine the risk and processes when working with activists and, defending activists without taking on risks of their own. Although international organisations can define risk as “no harm” being done, other activists may be more emboldened and not afraid to get arrested. It can be challenging for an international organisation to work with activists who are willing to die so organisations may as well carry out various actions. Some activists also see the upside of being arrested as there can be increased media attention for the greater cause.





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DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS MOVING FORWARD

| Measuring censorship

Organisations, activists, and technologists can collaborate together to provide more datasets measuring censorship in Vietnam. OONI (Open Observatory of Network of Interference) is a free and open software which can detect online censorship and surveillance by measuring and collecting data from networks and providers.



Open Observatory of Network Interference

ooni

Governments have plausible deniability when it comes to censorship. OONI provides different tests to determine when websites, instant messaging apps such as Whatsapp, and circumvention tools such as VPNs and Tor are blocked and how they are blocked.

OONI can also detect the presence of network components (“middle box”) which can be responsible for surveillance and traffic manipulation. OONI users are anonymous and datasets shared with OONI are done anonymously. OONI can be of particular use in Vietnam to determine whether particular sites and communication tools have been blocked during times of heightened sensitivity around political events.

| Localising tools

It was noted that many Vietnamese netizens were not using password managers when it came to managing multiple complex passwords. One of the primary reasons may be due to the language barrier. Localising various password managers into Vietnamese will help persuade users to utilise the tool. A localised guide for using appropriate VPNs that have been well-selected for Vietnamese threats can help users to access content in a more secure and private manner.



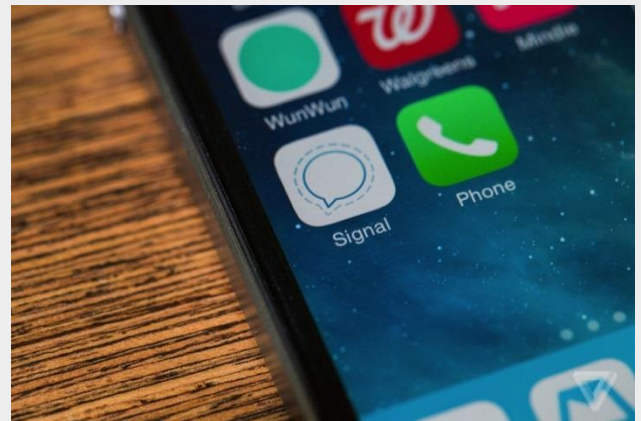
| Multiple identities

Vietnamese activists often had multiple devices, with one attendee mentioning he had up to ten devices to maintain different identities on each one. Qubes was a solution that was presented to conveniently manage multiple identities. Qubes is a virtual machine manager, a computer within a computer through virtualisation. Qubes allows users to direct different systems to different internet channels; users are able to use a VPN and Tor on different identities. Users are also able to delete systems if they think a system is compromised. The systems can be backed up on an external hard drive and deleted off the computer.

Tails (The Amnestic Incognito Live System) is a USB stick that aims to preserve privacy and anonymity. The stick is encrypted and all connections go through Tor. Tails is configured not to use the computer's hard drive, nothing stays on the computer and any possible infections will not affect the user's computer. Tails allows users to work with sensitive information and material on any computer and protects users from data recovery following shutdown.

| Changing user habits

Different narratives were discussed for an effective public awareness campaign to change Vietnamese netizen habits. Basic safety behaviours identified included two-factor authentication, managing secure passwords, and phishing. Relating computer safety information to national security such as adopting safety measures to protect a computer network against “overseas hackers” may be an effective approach.



Secure communication tools such as Whatsapp and Signal for group chats and Hangouts and Jitsi for group calls should be promoted. Users should be made aware of collaboration tools and platforms Slack and Mattermost to promote safer working channels.



| The role of the Vietnamese diaspora

Vietnamese diaspora's primary role is to drive the narrative of people in Vietnam and amplify the voices from within the country. The Vietnamese diaspora shares common values even though individuals may have different political beliefs.

The diaspora can also play a crucial role in providing examples of change and lessons from across the world. A group of activists from inside Vietnam and around the world conducted a [field study](#) to present lessons learnt from Burma about non-violent struggle and conducting free elections. The diaspora can also provide the backbone of basic survival support by strengthening grassroots movements in Vietnam.

As mentioned by an activist from Vietnam, raising awareness to the international community as well as people inside Vietnam is the easiest way to protect activists. Awareness of those who have been arrested can reduce the chance of them being harassed while in prison or possibly arrested in the future.



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ABOUT THE ORGANIZERS

| **Aspiration**

[Aspiration](#)'s mission is to connect nonprofit organizations, foundations and activists with software solutions and technology skills that help them better carry out their missions.

| **ARTICLE 19**

[ARTICLE 19](#) defends freedom of expression and information. ARTICLE 19 fight for all hostages of censorship, defend dissenting voices that have been muzzled, and campaign against laws and practices that silence.

| **Reporters without Borders (RSF)**

[Reporters Without Borders](#) (RSF) has been defending freedom of the press and freedom of information for over 30 years. Thanks to its unique global network of 150 local correspondents investigating in 130 countries, 13 national offices and a consultative status at the UN and UNESCO, RSF is able to have a global impact, gather on-the-ground information, conduct major advocacy campaigns, and assist and defend news providers all across the world.

| **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 a nonviolent struggle based on civic participation. Through its internet freedom program, Viet Tan aims to:

- Challenge legal statutes restricting freedom of expression
- Equip netizens with knowledge and tools for circumvention and digital security and
- Support citizen journalists and imprisoned cyber activists

One signature project is [Loa](#), an English-language podcast covering current affairs, culture, and politics in Vietnam.