



VIETNAM'S



SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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SUMMARY

With a population of 93 million and an internet user base fast approaching 40 million, Vietnam represents a huge opportunity for marketers, activists, technology companies, and censors. Social media is fast becoming integral to the everyday life of many Vietnamese.

While internet participation is global, its participants are still subjected to a political system in the offline world. In the case of Vietnam, rapid adoption of connectivity has provided unique challenges for the government, resulting in repressive technical measures and the haphazard application of restrictive laws. This paper analyzes how social media is changing Vietnam and offers recommendations to further its positive impact.

SNAPSHOT OF A DIGITAL VIETNAM

Connectivity is a stated priority for the Vietnamese government. In 2010, authorities laid out a scheme to make Vietnam “a country strong in information and communication technologies” with a 2020 goal of almost all households using digital services, 50-60% of households nationwide with access to broadband internet, and 95% of the population with broadband mobile coverage. Clashing with this lofty connectivity goal is the transformative role of the internet—as both new media and unfettered social network—which the Vietnamese government deeply fears.

In GlobalWebIndex’s market research survey at the end of 2014, Facebook was found to be the overwhelming preference for Vietnam’s netizens. As of March 2015, Vietnam has over 30 million monthly active users on Facebook. This is significant growth, as the tally in 2012 (during the waning days of the block) was an already impressive 8.5 million. Over this timespan, Facebook added nearly a million users each month.

VIETNAM POPULATION: 93 million

INTERNET USERS: 39 million
(ESTIMATED AT END OF 2014)

FACEBOOK: 30 million
(MONTHLY ACTIVE USERS)

MOBILE SUBSCRIPTIONS: 145% (134 million)

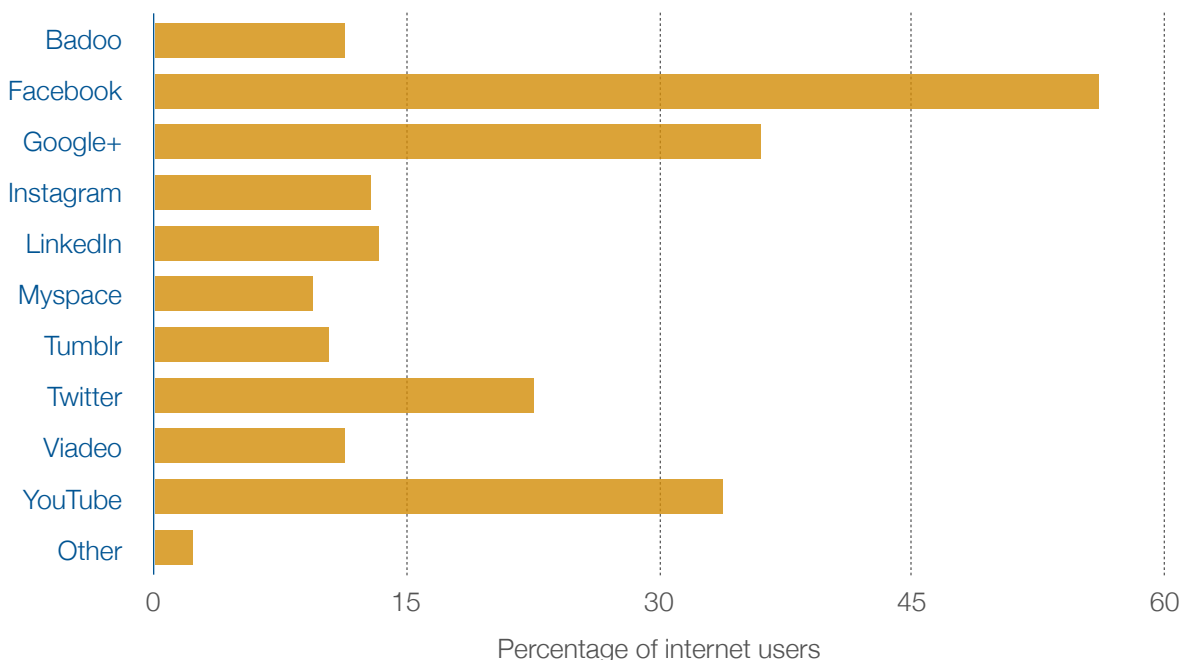
SMARTPHONE USERS: 22 million

TIME SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA: 2 hours, 30 minutes
(PER DAY)

Source: We Are Social, GlobalWebIndex, World Bank

ACTIVE USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN VIETNAM (2014)

Source: GlobalWebIndex



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Twitter, on the other hand, has not really caught on. While a precise number for Vietnam's Twitterverse is not readily available, it is believed that Twitter is primarily used by expats. One possible explanation is rooted in culture and utility. Twitter's user experience, based on public information and public conversations promotes relationship building with strangers and acquaintances. The relationship-based experience of Facebook more closely mirrors Vietnam's social life.

Google dominates search in Vietnam with a market share consistently over 90%. Bing and Yahoo each have a small slice of the remaining market. There is no Vietnamese search company akin to China's Baidu. Given the high entry costs and the already established market it is highly unlikely that a local Vietnamese search company could displace Google—absent a draconian protectionist policy banning foreign search engines. This suggests that Google, which has not been known to censor its Vietnamese search results, is a vital window to the world for Vietnam's online community.

Locally operated social media sites tend to occupy a niche role. For example, ZingMe which was once expected to be the leading social network (after the Facebook block) had a high number of user accounts but limited activity. ZingMe users are primarily 14-21 years old and use the site for gaming and music, not social networking.

NEWS (NON-STATE MEDIA)	
BBC Vietnamese	1,070,000
VOA Tiếng Viet	665,000
Dai A Chau Tu Do (Radio Free Asia)	211,000
Saigon Broadcasting Television Network	117,000
RFI Tiếng Viet	31,000

CITIZEN JOURNALIST GROUPS	
Radio Chan Troi Moi	189,000
Dan Lam Bao VN	44,000
Dong Chua Cuu The Viet Nam (VRNs)	37,000
Sai Gon Bao	29,000
Dan Luan	16,000

ACTIVIST GROUPS	
Viet Tan	381,000
Thanh Nien Cong Giao	231,000
Nhat Ky Yeu Nuoc	199,000
Triet Hoc Duong Pho	147,000
Bo Truong Y Te Hay Tu Chuc	117,000

SNAPSHOT OF POPULAR FACEBOOK PAGES IN VIETNAM

VIETNAM'S MOBILE ECONOMY

Vietnam's mobile market represents the new frontier for internet access. With mobile voice and data plans inexpensive, widely available, and users allowed to buy multiple prepaid SIM cards without limit, Vietnam has high mobile oversubscription, only behind Macau, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

Looking at the 135 million mobile phones in use in Vietnam, feature phones still play a predominant role.¹ However, smartphone use is on the rise. No longer a device for the elite or affluent, the smartphone user base is 22 million and growing.

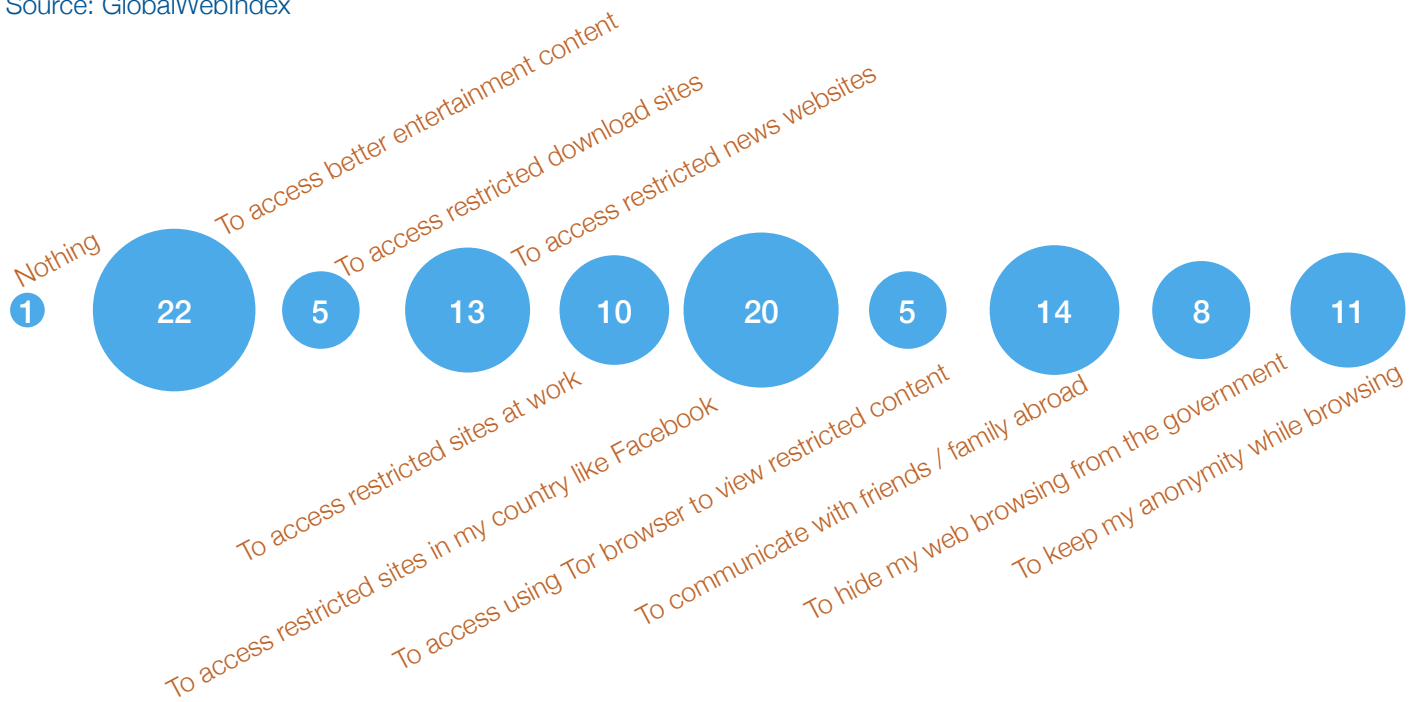
RESISTANCE TO CONTROL

VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) and proxy servers are typically a niche practice among savvy users to access restricted content or maintain anonymity. However, for netizens in Asia Pacific and Vietnam in particular, many have grown to recognize the vital roles these tools play in staying connected.

Discounting those who use VPNs or proxy servers to access restricted sites at work, 60% of users have used VPNs or proxy servers to access restricted content in Vietnam. This number is important, as it shows a significant number of Vietnam's netizens weary of the government's controls and an active participation to circumvent.

MOTIVATIONS FOR USING VPNs OR PROXY SERVERS WHEN BROWSING THE INTERNET (IN PERCENTAGE)

Source: GlobalWebIndex



¹ Open Technology Fund, "Internet Access and Openness: Vietnam 2013", June 2014

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS CHANGING VIETNAM

Before the internet (prior to the year 2000), the Vietnamese communist government possessed a monopoly over all media platforms. While print and broadcast media are still state controlled in Vietnam, social media is playing the role of a de-facto independent media with far reaching socio-political implications.

NUDGING STATE MEDIA

Like many places in the world, social media has pushed the Vietnamese mainstream media to be more responsive to issues that are deemed to be politically sensitive. Often times state media has picked up stories that began online.



Death row inmate Ho Duy Hai's mother.

Source: VRNs

Earlier this year, the case of Ho Duy Hai, a 29-year old prisoner on death row, received widespread attention on social media. The citizen journalist site VRNs, and later state newspapers, raised serious questions on whether Hai was truly guilty of murder. Because of this attention, one day prior to his scheduled lethal injection, authorities postponed the execution pending further investigation.

In another example, a monk in the state-controlled Vietnam Buddhist Church (VBC) posted photos and video of himself unpacking a new iPhone 6. Posted on his personal Facebook page, the images were perceived as unseemly given the perception of modest living monks. Several state newspapers² subsequently reported on the story which spurred disciplinary action by the VBC against the monk.

In many cases, online discussion has influenced mainstream coverage. In 2014, Vietnam experienced a measles outbreak with hundreds of fatalities. In defending the slow response by authorities, Health Minister Nguyen Thi Kim Tien made statements considered callous and uninformed. Her comments were heavily criticized on social media and a Facebook campaign was organized calling for her resignation. Nguyen Thi Kim Tien held on to her job but continued to receive scrutiny from bloggers and state media. In March 2015, she started a fan page on Facebook to repair her public image.

INTRODUCING ACCOUNTABILITY

While police brutality continues to be a serious problem in Vietnam, social media has introduced an element of accountability. During one of the 2011 anti-China protests in Hanoi, a plainclothes police captain stepped on the face of a peaceful protester. It was not the first time police roughed up peaceful protest, but this incident was caught on camera and distributed online. Within hours, the identity of captain Pham Hai Minh was crowdsourced. Public outcry online prompted officials to launch an unprecedented investigation. In a news conference concluding the investigation, a security official denied any wrongdoing, but police captain Minh was suspended from duty.

² Nguoi Lao Dong (The Laborer), "Monk shows off photos of himself unpacking new iPhone 6", 10 March 2014

No longer can abusive security police, from the traffic cop to the plainclothes agent, stay anonymous. A search on YouTube for the words “cong an danh nguoi” (police brutality) yields 148,000 results. These amateur videos document and expose instances of police violence throughout Vietnam.

In May 2014, China's decision to place an oil exploration rig in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone sparked a massive outcry from Vietnamese public opinion—especially online—and a somewhat muted response from senior government leaders. One of the key demands from activists and bloggers was to bring China's maritime infringement to an international court. The Hanoi leadership was reported to be deeply ambivalent about taking a tough public stand against Beijing. Mindful of public sentiment, the Vietnamese government in December 2014 finally filed a “statement of interest” with the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague. It was not a claim for international arbitration as demanded on social media but it was a clear move to mollify domestic critics.³

EXPANDING POLITICAL SPACE

Social media has also played a major role in expanding the political space in Vietnam. With the offline restrictions on freedom of association and assembly still in existence, online platforms provide a public town square and virtual civil society. Nowhere is this more evident than in activities criticizing the Communist Party.

In early 2015, netizens began uploading photos with the hashtag “I don't like the Communist Party of Vietnam” (Toi khong thich dang cong san Viet Nam). Thousands of creative photos were shared online. Authorities briefly [detained blogger La Viet Dung](#), the initiator of the campaign, but were largely helpless in stopping the wave of civil disobedience.

A similar campaign initiated by rapper Nah Son began with his song “[Fuck Communism](#)” (Dit Me Cong San), which went viral on YouTube and spawned the hashtag #DMCS. This hashtag has now appeared offline in Vietnam, graffitied on walls and written on classroom chalkboards. While the original meaning of “DMCS” is well known, young activists have perpetuated this internet meme by devising creative phrases for the four letters.

Thanks to social media it has become possible and even trendsetting to publicly question the Communist Party's legitimacy. Such expressions of free speech —by a new generation of activists—is all the more striking this year, on the 40th anniversary of the the unification of Vietnam under communist control.

EXPOSING PARTY SKELETONS

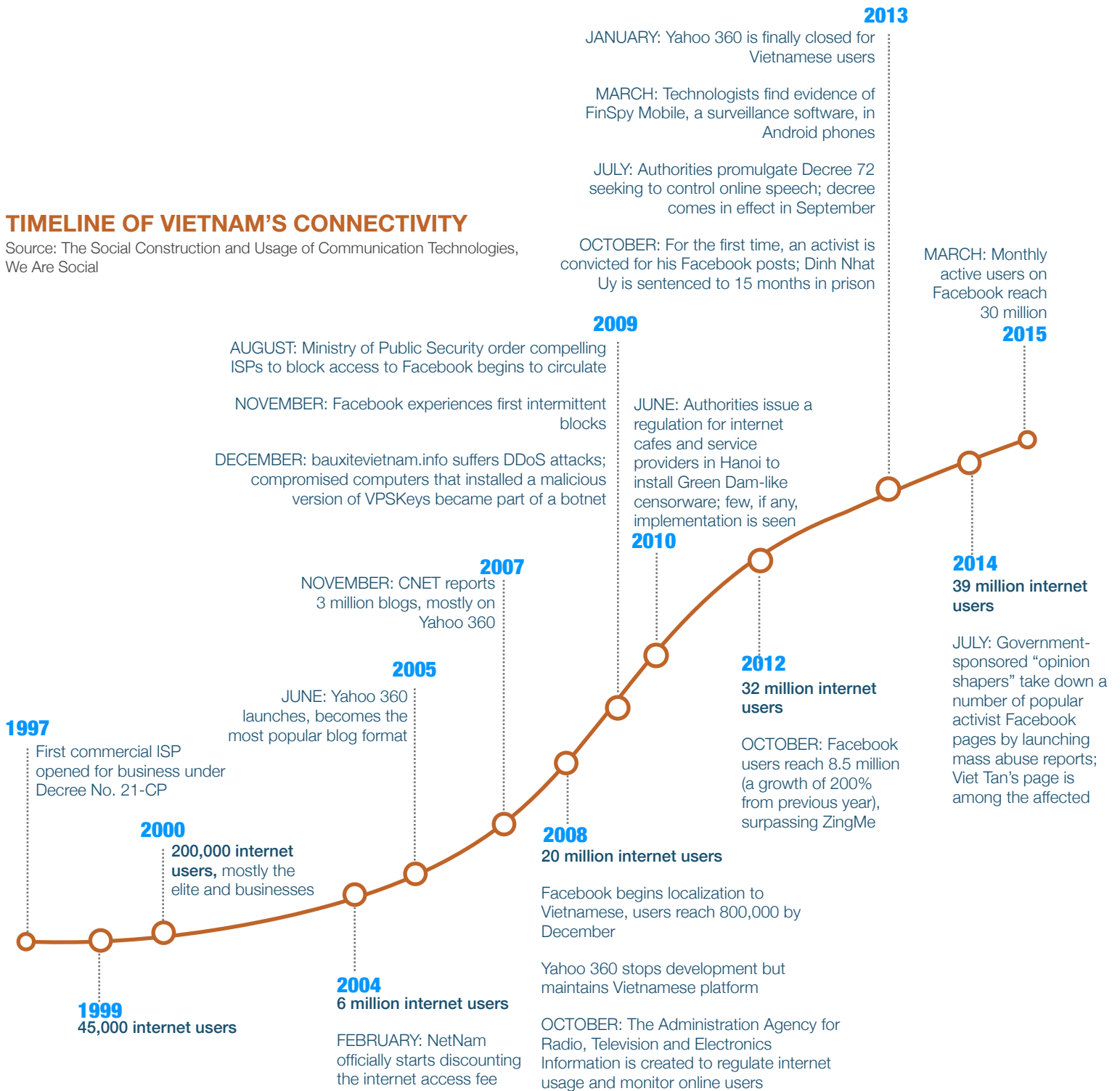
With the 12th Congress of the Vietnam Communist Party scheduled for early next year, social media has also been a battleground for different factions vying for dominance. In the past, power struggles would happen behind closed doors. Now, they are splashed on blogs and Facebook.

A new blog called “[Portraits of Power](#)” (Chan Dung Quyen Luc) has spilled tantalizing party secrets, including the business dealings and love affairs of senior leaders and their adult children. With little regard to privacy, this blog also publicized the deathbed pictures of a senior communist leader, who until recently was poised to join the Politburo and seen as a rival of the prime minister.

³ Carl Thayer on CogitASIA, “Vietnam Files Statement of Interest with the Permanent Court of Arbitration”, 14 December 2014

TIMELINE OF VIETNAM'S CONNECTIVITY

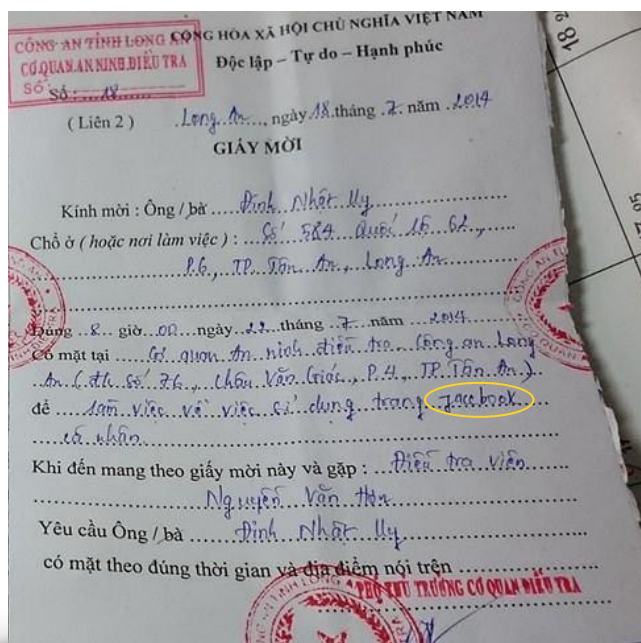
Source: The Social Construction and Usage of Communication Technologies, We Are Social



A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERNET CENSORSHIP IN VIETNAM

Until the mid 2000s, authorities censored the internet primarily by filtering websites with politically sensitive content. This worked reasonably well as most Vietnamese netizens lacked the tools or strong incentive to practice circumvention. In 2007, internet penetration passed 15 million and blogging became widely popular, especially on the Yahoo 360 platform.⁴

In response, Hanoi took a two prong approach to limit the free flow of information:



First, the government created a new agency entity—the Administration Agency for Radio, Television and Electronics Information—to monitor the internet. This new agency was placed under the Ministry of Information and Communications, which issued a directive (known as “Circular 07”) in December 2008 updating the government’s 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.”

Second, as internet platforms based outside of Vietnam are not subject to Vietnamese law, the Ministry of Information and Communications expressed its desire to have foreign internet companies to comply with provisions in the new internet decree, including providing personal information on bloggers to government authorities upon request.

Activist Dinh Nhat Uy is summoned by police soon after his release from detention. Police order references his use of “Facebook”. Source: Dinh Nhat Uy family

Both of these approaches had limited impact as Vietnamese internet users continued to gravitate toward social media and foreign internet companies (namely Yahoo! and Google) were reluctant to collaborate with the government.

When Facebook took off in 2009, authorities tried a new censorship method which was to order local ISPs (Internet Service Providers) to block access to Facebook⁵ through DNS tampering. The block worked initially but soon lost its effectiveness. Authorities belatedly realized that Vietnamese youths want to stay connected and will find ingenious ways to circumvent and to teach their friends how to circumvent.⁶ The Facebook block was ultimately futile as even government leaders and municipalities all had the need to create their own Facebook accounts.

⁴ Viet Tan, “Vietnam’s blogger movement: A virtual civil society in the midst of government repression”, 1 April 2009

⁵ Viet Tan, “Facebook and civil disobedience in Vietnam”, 4 March 2011

⁶ Viet Tan assisted netizens by translating and distributing circumvention guides, localizing circumvention tools, and launching the No Firewall digital security and circumvention portal

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The outcome of intermittent government efforts to block Facebook was that Vietnam's online community became experts at changing their DNS configuration, using VPNs (such as Hotspot Shield), and sharing circumvention methods. Since internet users were now adept at bypassing filtering, news and politically oriented websites hosted outside Vietnam could be widely accessed.

The Vietnamese government responded to this new situation by launching Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks against websites critical of the regime.⁷ At a Ministry of Public Security meeting in May 2010, a police general reportedly bragged that his unit was responsible for taking down over 300 dissident websites.

Vietnamese authorities have supplemented their cyber attacks with concerted efforts to spy on netizens. This has become pervasive in the last several years. In January 2014, the Electronic Frontier Foundation documented a malware campaign targeting EFF and the Associated Press in addition to Vietnamese bloggers and activists.⁸

Along with the above technical measures, the Vietnamese authorities expanded their ability to police the internet through the [introduction of Decree 72](#) in July 2013. This expansive and vaguely worded decree stipulates that social media sites be used only for personal purposes and not to distribute news or information to oppose the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. To “assist local authorities in controlling information,” [Decree 72](#) requires that all local servers store user registration information and the entire history of posting activities. It also contains ambiguous language requiring foreign internet companies to cooperate with the Vietnamese government.

Decree 72 has been strongly criticized by international rights groups. To date, it is still not clear how the Vietnamese government will enforce this new provision. Decree 72 could represent yet another effort by the Hanoi government to update legal restrictions on freedom of expression—that is met by widespread civil disobedience among Vietnamese internet users.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Facebook is currently the primary social network used by people in Vietnam. Domestic social networks are unlikely to supplant Facebook. Local alternatives could potentially compete with Facebook in terms of technical features, but cannot match the reach of Facebook.

Authorities have focused on diminishing the Facebook experience by mobilizing an army of so-called [opinion shapers](#) to troll activist pages and post harassing and polemical comments. During the summer 2014, these opinion shapers launched a campaign to suspend the Facebook account of prominent Vietnamese activists by lodging frivolous abuse reports. With the help of digital rights organizations, the activist accounts were subsequently reinstated.



#DMCS tag on a police station wall. Photo submission to “Toi Khong Thich” Facebook page.

⁷ Viet Tan, “Denial of service: Cyberattacks by the Vietnamese government”, 27 April 2010

⁸ Electronic Frontier Foundation, “Vietnamese malware gets very personal”, 19 January 2014

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Finally in January 2015, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung [publicly conceded](#) that it was impossible to ban social media. But that does not mean that Hanoi has given up on internet censorship.

The Vietnamese government's current efforts to control internet usage could be summarized as follows:

- Distribute malware to spy on internet users and then publish/distort stolen private content to instill fear and division among the online activist community
- Diminish the online experience through trolling behavior by government-sponsored opinion shapers
- Establish a legal basis for internet censorship through the promulgation of restrictive statutes such as Decree 72
- Harass and arrest prominent bloggers to intimidate the larger online community against discussing politically sensitive content

The detention of activists for their peaceful expression and advocacy continues to be the greatest challenge facing the Vietnamese online community. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least [16 journalists and bloggers](#) are imprisoned in Vietnam. Vietnam is among the top jailers of reporters in the world, behind China and Iran. Reporters Without Borders considers the Vietnamese government an “[enemy of the internet](#)” because of its crackdown on bloggers and cyber dissidents.

JOURNALISTS/BLOGGERS DETAINED IN VIETNAM

NAME	DATE IMPRISONED
Tran Huynh Duy Thuc (Tran Dong Chan), Freelance	May 24, 2009
Dang Xuan Dieu, <i>Vietnam Redemptorist News</i>	July 30, 2011
Ho Duc Hoa, <i>Vietnam Redemptorist News</i>	July 31, 2001
Paulus Le Van Son, Freelance	August 3, 2011
Nong Hung Anh, Freelance	August 5, 2011
Nguyen Van Duyet, <i>Vietnam Redemptorist News</i>	August 7, 2011
Ta Phong Tan, Freelance	September 5, 2011
Le Thanh Tung, Freelance	December 1, 2011
Nguyen Van Khuong (Hoang Khuong), <i>Tuoi Tre</i>	January 2, 2012
Pham Nguyen Thanh Binh, Freelance	May 25, 2012
Le Quoc Quan, Freelance	December 27, 2012
Truong Duy Nhat, Freelance	May 26, 2013
Vo Thanh Tung, <i>Phap Luat Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh</i>	August 7, 2013
Nguyen Huu Vinh (Anh Ba Sam), <i>Ba Sam</i>	May 5, 2014
Nguyen Thi Minh Thuy, <i>Ba Sam</i>	May 5, 2014
Hong Le Tho, Freelance	November 29, 2014

Source: CPJ (as of December 2014); the list of imprisoned netizens is more extensive

LOOKING AHEAD

Social media has the potential to further increase the political space in Vietnam and contribute to the country's socio-economic development. It is both a platform for free expression and a catalyst for civil society.

Advocates and stakeholders can play an important role in:

1. Empowering Vietnamese citizen journalists by providing digital tools and hands-on training. An impactful strategy would involve localizing the latest mobile phone apps and other best practices.
2. Promoting circumvention and digital security by localizing existing circumvention tools for Vietnamese users, providing training to activists and bloggers, and publicizing the techniques to everyday netizens. Just as importantly, so that the web is not an instrument of the oppressors, an understanding of digital security needs to be disseminated widely through a variety of channels.
3. Advocating for an open internet by being a voice against the legal restrictions and web censorship by the Hanoi government. This would also involve speaking out against Western companies that supply filtering technologies to the Vietnamese state and urging Western technology companies not to collude with the censors.
4. Championing human rights by campaigning for activists and bloggers detained for organizing and speaking online. These peaceful activists deserve legal support, assistance to their families, and international advocacy for their release.

As Vietnam pushes towards greater connectivity with an online populace showing greater willingness to exercise their right to connect, censorship will be more difficult for the government to accomplish. The government's experiment in intermittently blocking Facebook has only served to expose a large population to circumvention tactics.

Authorities could be discouraged of future censorship tactics as international stakeholders continue to speak out and Vietnamese netizens demonstrate their continued appetite for the knowledge and tools to counter control.

"The government is so afraid of social media's pervasive power to connect people and ideas that they have tried everything to block it. But so far, they have failed and now have to live with it."

**Rev. Anton Le Ngoc Thanh, C.Ss.R
Managing editor of VRNs**

ABOUT VIET TAN'S WORK ON INTERNET FREEDOM

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.

As part of Viet Tan's Internet Freedom Program, we are working with the international community and activists in Vietnam 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

Viet Tan operates the No Firewall (nofirewall.net) portal for circumvention and digital security information in Vietnamese.



Clockwise: No Firewall's Facebook ad promoting mobile security; Vietnamese bloggers participate in 2014 World Press Freedom Day at Radio Free Asia, pictured with Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Scott Busby; a user shows digital security manual in Hanoi; nofirewall.net