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Social Media and Political Participation in Vietnam

Disrupting Journalism in the Virtual Public Sphere

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About This Book

In the age of digital transformation, social media has emerged as a powerful force shaping various aspects of society, including journalism and political discourse. This book, titled *Social Media and Political Participation in Vietnam*, explores the impact of social media, with a specific focus on Facebook, in the context of Vietnam's evolving socio-political landscape.

This book, titled *Social Media and Political Participation in Vietnam*, delves into the transformative role of social media, with a particular focus on Facebook, within the socio-political context of Vietnam. It characterises Habermas' theory of the public sphere, which was born in Western democracies, to the specific situation of the concept of "state digital authoritarianism" in the Vietnamese Facebook environment. It also examines how a new public sphere—the Facebook sphere—sets an approach that is translated into a unique situation in the political atmosphere among young Facebook users who are living in an authoritarian society.

Built upon Habermas's theory of the public sphere, this book seeks to portray it in terms of its relation to the rise of social media, the existence of "state digital authoritarianism," and the opportunities grasped by digital citizens. From these contexts and theories, the research explains how young people in Vietnam with limited opportunities for voicing an opinion in mainstream media have engaged in "compensatory consumption" of social media content to politicise their participation and make public their opinions.

The book explores the extent to which young Vietnamese people engage in politics in their everyday lives via Facebook and other social media platforms. It also investigates how they conduct the "battle for truth" in Foucault's idea through their Facebook discourses. Furthermore, it examines whether the Facebook environment is suitable for them to create a sphere for political participation among young Vietnamese people.

The book supports the possibility that although Facebook in Vietnam has yet to reach the level of Habermas' ideal of the public sphere, it meets some conditions for forming an online public sphere: the "Facebook sphere." In other words, in Vietnam, Facebook users have (re)formed a social media platform into the Facebook sphere, beyond the confines of the ideal identified by Habermas. The nature of the

Vietnamese Facebook space is defined in the thesis as a "reactive public sphere," a sphere of political discussion with discursive waves that are continually shifting and ambiguous but that nonetheless help shape public opinion, with persistent and frequent impact on public policy.

The book argues that recent arguments on social media in general, or Facebook in particular, can result in a fragmentation of consensus in the online sphere. By engaging in the discourse battle and by using step-by-step strategies (starting with environmental movements), young Facebook users increasingly took advantage of the socio-technical affordances of the online space to speak up, and from there shaped the picture of a Facebook generation in Vietnam.

Through analysing aspects/dimensions of the public sphere on Facebook, this book determined that in Vietnam, Facebook constitutes a reactive public sphere, evident in five essential components. They are: (I) Facebook opens an environment through which users can discuss public issues. (II) In Vietnam, Facebook is more tolerant and open than any other public space due to its capacity for self-expression. (III) Facebook promotes mechanisms to facilitate its users' participation in political debates and activities. (IV) Facebook, in its everyday use, does not foster the long-term interests of participants in terms of any particular political issue. (V) There is no hope of using Facebook to reach a rational consensus (as Habermas argues is a necessary precondition of an ideal public sphere). These five characteristics of what occurs in the everyday use of Facebook indicate that the general discussions that happen within the Facebook sphere limit its effectiveness in terms of developing public policy. Even so, it opens the potential for public debate.

Broadening the scope of the discussion by analysing the role of social media influencers in Vietnam, particularly in shaping political and social discourses, a later chapter of this book introduces a user-centred, multi-layered approach to regulating social media influencers, emphasising the balance between freedom of expression and cultural values in the Vietnamese context, while also expanding the book's focus beyond Facebook to include TikTok, a rapidly growing platform in Vietnam.

In conclusion, this book investigates the transformative role of social media, with a specific focus on Facebook, within Vietnam's socio-political context. Through an interdisciplinary approach and the examination of empirical data, this book offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics between social media, journalism, political debate, and civic engagement in a country grappling with state digital authoritarianism.

Contents

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Detractors of new media express concern that its emergence represents the unlocking of a modern Pandora's box within Vietnamese society (Butler, 1997; Kata, 2010). On one side, the political regime views social media as a means to engage with the public (Bui, 2016; Son, 2015). Furthermore, the internet and social networks offer opportunities to enhance the vitality and influence of the business sector (Cameron et al., 2018). Conversely, the regime has experienced new insecurities due to the impact of social media, which undermines the heavily regulated media system established and supported by the state (Mach & Nash, 2019).

To curb the freedom that the Pandora's box promises, the state has resorted to censorship and self-censorship of social media, as well as implementing stringent legal measures for digital content. This merging of state power and technological platforms has given rise to what MacKinnon (2011, p. 32) terms "networked authoritarianism," ultimately leading to the emergence of a new form of dictatorship known as digital dictatorship. This study proposes the use of the concept of "state digital authoritarianism" to highlight the distinctive nature of the "responsive-repressive state" in Vietnam, as discussed by Kerkvliet (2019).

Drawing upon the potential offered by this Pandora's box, Vietnamese citizens have utilised digital tools to amplify the voices of the marginalised, effectively empowering those who lack power. In a context where information is limited and mainstream media is tightly controlled, the dissemination of information in Vietnam has been subject to a system of self-censorship. This is particularly evident when the media addresses topics that the party-state considers 'sensitive' (Le, 2018). However, the advent of social media has opened avenues for ordinary individuals to access, share, and disseminate information. The online environment has transformed into a space for public discourse on political matters, functioning as an open arena for everyday interactions. In contrast to the traditional notion of the public sphere in European democracies, which disregards social status, encourages rational debates, and upholds inclusivity as central tenets (as described by Habermas, 1995), the

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emergence of the social media public sphere in Vietnam, termed the "reactive public sphere" in this thesis, introduces a new dimension to Habermas' theory.

The adoption and popularity of Facebook in Vietnam have generated mixed feelings of optimism and doubt. Several grassroots online environmental movements have emerged among young people, such as 'Tree Movement,' 'Save Son Doong,' 'Save Son Tra,' the Vinh Tan toxic dump campaign, and '6700 People for 6700 Trees' (Duong, 2017b; Gillespie & Nguyen, 2019; Kurfürst, 2016; Le, 2018; Nguyen & Malesky, 2019; Vu, 2017a, 2017b). These movements, along with various online campaigns marked by hashtags like #MeToo and #IChoseFish, as well as issues like 'Students' Voice for Students' and 'Right to Know,' indicate contrasting political interests among young Vietnamese. This growing digital dissent, coupled with the presence of social media platforms like Facebook, has led some researchers to suggest that it has become an active space for political engagement (Borton, 2017; Bui, 2017).

This is somewhat in contrast with dominant perceptions of the younger Vietnamese generation, however, which is generally chastised for not being politically active within the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). British Council (2020) noted that Vietnamese youngsters might be concerned about issues related to their personal experiences, such as finding a good job, earning more money, and succeeding in professional work rather than engaging in what their elders might classify as political issues. Alternatively, Duong (2017b) believes that Vietnamese youth have not engaged in CPV's politics because this has not made sense in their lives.

Starting with the online survey, the study confirmed that social media, including Facebook, was part of the daily life of many young Vietnamese and perceived as an essential source of information for 'the Facebook generation' in Vietnam. This was the case even though the Vietnamese Government occasionally disconnects Facebook to prevent public engagement with forbidden topics. Given this, the survey results indicate that many respondents choose not to discuss or share political issues in overt ways using social media. Initial findings suggested that Facebook and other social media have yet to become a widely accepted platform for political discussion; even though there are some indications that some young people may use it as such.

This stage of the study indicated that an ambiguity characterises Vietnamese social media. This ambiguity is promoted by a conflicted public policy duality, which is to say, a governmental wish to control information as a means for social stability, but also to take advantage of personalised media to serve socio-political purposes. This complexity, combined with a heavily regulated mass media helps make Vietnam a perfect test case for examining whether social media is capable of expanding into a public sphere, supporting involvement in everyday politics.

Online political participation did not depend on whether a respondent used Facebook more or less, how long they had been online, how many Facebook friends they had, or how many online groups they had joined. Instead, online political participation was relatively independent of these elements but more closely related to indicators of offline involvement. Differences in social capital, occupation, and education also have a significant impact on young people's online political participation.

The Facebook environment, however, introduces young users to political discussions and comments. Facebook in Vietnam includes news, discussion and even debate relating to what are clearly political issues, even if they are not part of the accepted activities of the CPV. This lively content makes the site's spaces more active in terms of their potential for online political participation. In other words, the political environment in which Vietnamese social media is positioned is itself a decisive factor in supporting online civic engagement in social media spaces. Facebook opens up opportunities for political participation in a social media-facilitated public sphere.

The study determines that although the Vietnamese Facebook environment has not become an ideal space for political participation, it has become a space for sharing opinions and discussing public issues, as well as having a positive impact on agenda-setting. It is unrealistic to hope to reach a consensus on whether Facebook is a Habermasian public sphere, however, because its environment includes much political disagreement and even hate speech. Facebook users rarely appear to modify their views about an issue because of the material they encounter on social media. By providing diverse information and perspectives for public discussion and debate, the Facebook space has met some, but not all, requirements established by Habermas (1962, p. 42). The specific situation of online participation in the Facebook community requires a broader concept, and that is, the notion of a digital 'Facebook sphere' arising within a controlled mass media environment.

Myriad communication options are were offered by the Facebook environment making its political discussions dynamic, flexible, and diverse with a rapid change of topics, content, and opinions (Bakshy et al., 2015; Miller et al, 2015). In Vietnam, the authorities use propaganda techniques, including distraction and manipulation, to drive public discussion in the ways they wish it to go. The growing amount of false and misleading information spread on Facebook (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017; Mach, 2019; Nguyen-Thu, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) contributes to this aim. Meanwhile longevity—the question of how long such a public discussion or debate can be maintained over time—is one of the defining characteristics of a public sphere (Ferree et al., 2002; Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015). The distraction and short-time discussions that characterise political discussion on Vietnamese social media are a feature of what may be termed as a 'lack of sustainability.' These have created a phenomenon that this thesis proposes to describe as a 'reactive public sphere.' This refers to the sense that Facebook is not always a sustainable, accessible and inclusive forum for public discussion, and that progressive debates do not so much fuel public opinion formation as offer support for a public conversation. These features of public discussion on Facebook do not meet the conditions for reaching a rational public consensus that could then stimulate political action (De Zuniga, 2015). In other words, Facebook may facilitate what Fraser (1992) terms "weak publics": "publics whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision making" (p. 134). Valtysson (2016) points out that features of digital platforms can be "considered 'perpetual betas' which underlines their precariousness. Indeed, these are fragile, temporary constructions that need to be decoded in proper contexts" (p. 104). This may be because of that kind of public opinion is formed through a "disintermediation process" (Robles-Morales & Córdoba-Hernández, 2019, p. 37)

without media agents, or political organisations acting as an intermediary. Digital spheres facilitate open and free discussion, and reach some level of agreement, but public opinion arising within that environment is not sustainable. If a true public sphere in the Habermasian sense is unrealistic and unattainable (De Zuniga, 2015, p. 3155), then a reactive public sphere may be discerned by applying Habermas's theory of the public sphere to Vietnamese digital spaces.

The term 'reactive public sphere' highlights the ways in which young Vietnamese people react to political issues raised via social media agenda-setting in an active, but not necessarily sustainable, way. This term recognises the important contribution to political debate constructed via interactions between social media users' networks. Social media users engage in agenda-setting through discussing critical political issues of relevance to them and their lives.

The reactive public sphere demonstrates the initiative of Vietnamese social media users in receiving and adjusting the agenda set by mainstream media, instead of complying with the traditional agenda-setting approach which has not contested received media priorities. The use of this term ('reactive public sphere') highlights the active role of social media users which, far from being passive and driven by the media, actively reacts to agenda-setting through social media discussions and debate. Instead of passively waiting for media organisations tell them what to think about, Vietnamese social media users engage with media content and with the events of their everyday lives, reacting to these inputs and analysing their importance in relation to the big issues of the day: land rights, the environment, corruption, and so forth. This everyday activity of social media users is a departure point for the disruption of journalism and political debate in Vietnam. The term 'reactive public sphere,' therefore, clarifies the characteristic of the sphere developed within the social media landscape in Vietnam that has become a forum through which ordinary people can impact the public agenda, ask the government for more responsibility, and organise around political issues. This thesis returns to the notion of a reactive public sphere in later Chaps. (8, 9 and 10) as a means of thinking about how the public sphere crafted within the social media space can create and communicate public opinion within a party-led society such as Vietnam.

Under certain conditions the reactive public sphere may condense into a public sphere. Those conditions may include confronting a problem that benefits, or risks affecting, the interests of the public. Alternatively, a reactive public sphere may support the construction of active mass movements, with social media amplifying issues raised in the mainstream media, or otherwise facilitating offline movements. At that point, the reactive public sphere will impact upon agenda-setting as well as requiring stakeholders, including the dominant state, to take action and reach a settlement.

The headline results outlined above indicate the potential role which social media, but especially Facebook, may play in facilitating political engagement in Vietnam. It may create a sphere through which young people engage with political issues that begin with political news and perspectives which appear on a Facebook user's news feed. Facebook is an important source of political news in Vietnam (Broadcasting Board of Governors, 2016). This may be explained by the theory of 'compensatory

consumption'. It notes how "individuals respond to information about deficits in their abilities, skills, status, and so forth by consuming products that symbolically compensate for the self-deficits" (Kim & Gal, 2014, p. 526). Arising from Caplovitz's (1967) sociological investigation, as applied to news consumption, people with limited opportunities for voicing their opinions in mainstream media arguably engage with social media to get information and voice their attitudes and opinions as a means for 'compensatory consumption.'

Social media can interact with offline political participation to facilitate online political participation, potentially promoting political knowledge, understanding and engagement. The present study's results suggest that the Facebook environment can support users to move towards political engagement. Interaction and connection itself can promote awareness of political concerns and may develop political interests. Offline political participation can be a catalyst for political participation online, and there is a significant statistical relationship between the two, according to the survey analysis results.

The book is organised as follows. After the Introduction, Chap. 2 'Vietnam—Social media and post-perform era' explores the brief history of political social media in Vietnam—from the blogosphere to the Facebook sphere and how social media were used in street demonstrations. After outlining gaps in knowledge concerning how young Vietnamese people engage with politics and transform the online space into a political sphere using social media, this chapter describes the research questions that are examined and the methodology applied in the book.

Through exploring the notion of political participation, Chap. 3 'Vietnamese young people and political participation' also examines why Vietnamese youths, in one sense, can be considered politically apathetic, but in another sense, express their political views on social media. It also mentions the term 'Facebook generation' to highlight the upbringing of the young Vietnamese generation who use Facebook in their everyday life. Chapter 4 explores the relationship between young people, social media, and the public sphere in Vietnam. There are still some arguments related to the role of social media in political participation—whether the information that makes random appearances on Facebook news feeds can be seen as a form of information seeking and whether online activities like "click, like, comment, retweet, or share" constitute campaign participation (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016, p. 1811). This chapter explores constructions of online political participation, which are polarised between "cyber-optimists" and "cyber-skeptics," as proposed by Norris (2001), and the effects of mobilisation versus reinforcement, as Loader (2007) suggested. It goes on to examine the specifics of the Vietnamese social media environment.

To provide a background for further analysis of the role of social media in political participation, the study uses Habermas' (1962) public sphere theory. In the light of a Habermasian ideal, the perfect public sphere can only be established in a fully participatory society. The participation of young Vietnamese people in political life through the social media environment can be used to test Habermas' theory, as applied to the digital environment of Web 3.0. Foucault's (1980, p. 93) conception of discourse. Moreover, "the relations of power in the production of discourses of truth" (Foucault, 1980, p. 93) is considered in the context of the social media sphere in

Vietnam to shed light on an analysis of how young Vietnamese people use Facebook's socio-technical affordances in political participation, potentially creating a Facebook sphere.

Chapter 6 'Facebook as a tool' explores the transformation and modernisation of Vietnamese society on the path of the "Reform" policy, the interaction of globalisation, and the adoption of new media, especially social media. They have opened up new opportunities for Vietnamese people to raise their voices and express their views on political issues (Duong, 2017b; Le, 2018; Vu, 2017). This chapter examines Facebook as a tool for political participation to help understand how young Vietnamese individuals have used these new opportunities for engagement. The results of the analysis of the online surveys confirmed a correlation between social network use in general and Facebook use, especially with critical factors for political participation.

The chapter shows that the social media environment creates opportunities and motivates online political participation among young Vietnamese people, albeit in moderation. This raises several questions. For example, does online political participation inform the development of public opinion, and is it a sufficient condition for the development of an online public sphere? Alternatively, it might only create social conversations. If the online public sphere is being developed by social media, how do social network environments contribute to the formation of public opinion and strengthen the public sphere? How does this process affect the perception and behaviour of social media users, as well as impact the public agenda? A combination between surveys and in-depth interviews is required to address these questions and understand more about the social media environment and the people who use it to formulate and communicate their political ideas.

Chapter 8 'Facebook as a discourse' looks at Facebook from the perspective of a Foucauldian discourse on power. It focuses on discovering how young people make sense of Facebook as a discourse in their everyday politics. In other words, it explores how young Vietnamese people "negotiate" with technology and with algorithms, as well as with the Vietnamese authorities or one-party state—the three dimensions of the power structure of social media in Vietnam—to expand the Facebook sphere into a public sphere. After reviewing the three dimensions that structure social media in Vietnam, this chapter analyses in-depth interviews with Vietnamese Facebook users to reveal the silent struggle in the online world over accessing power and knowledge. Using Foucault's idea of "games of truth" (Foucault, 1990), this section highlights the ways in which Facebook users negotiate Facebook's processes. The research then explores "how and around what concepts they formed, how they were used, where they developed" (Rabinov, 1991, p. 12) to highlight the strategies Vietnamese youth use to embrace social media for discussing political issues and expressing their views.

Chapter 9 'Facebook as a sphere,' which considers Facebook as a public sphere using Habermas' public sphere theory, will analyse in-depth whether the polarisation of political views on Facebook leads to a disintegration of the public sphere among young Vietnamese people or whether it opens up a new space for them to speak out and share political discussions. It is suggested that the battle for truth may be revitalising a new form of the public sphere beyond Habermas's ideal type. Given

this, the chapter also interrogates the nature of this new form and how it might meet the requirements for a public sphere in Habermasian theory.

The chapter leads to the conclusion that Vietnamese Facebook opens a space for the discussion of political issues and promotes its users' participation in online politics. The Facebook environment does not support the forming of a consensus. However, at least at the level of rational debate, this is allowed. Thus, Facebook may not be able to transition from being a public space into becoming a public sphere in all the four features identified by Habermas (equality of access, rational debate to reach consensus, disregarding status, and being culturally inclusive) (Habermas, 1995, 2019).

In Chap. 10 'Vietnamese Facebook sphere,' the results of the interview analysis are compared with those from the online survey to explore the characteristics of Facebook in Vietnam constructed as an open space and to investigate whether it might become a "hybrid space" between mass communication targeting the public and interpersonal communication targeting the private sphere. Vietnamese Facebook will also be interrogated to determine whether it has the characteristics of a "reactive public sphere" in the sense that although it is still an invaluable civic resource for engagement and participation, its environment does not promote sustainable public discussion because its users are less likely to engage for long periods with any given political issue. As a result, the Facebook sphere does not always produce a public opinion.

Chapter 11 'Regulating social media influencers in Vietnam: A user-centred multi-layered approach' investigates the complexities of regulating social media influencers in Vietnam, using the case of TikToker 'No O No' to illustrate the emergence of a quasi-public sphere where public concerns shape content regulation. It emphasises the importance of a user-centric multi-layered approach that integrates users, platforms, and legislative bodies to ensure culturally sensitive and effective regulation. The chapter also explores the role of influencers and platforms in content creation, arguing for enhanced media literacy education through creative methods like memes to promote responsible online behaviour. By placing users at the forefront of regulation, this approach aims to balance freedom of expression with respect for local cultural values, offering insights for other countries facing similar challenges.

Chapter 12 'The social media public sphere: A space for dialogue and political engagement' examines Facebook as a public sphere for dialogue and political engagement among young people in Vietnam. It explores how Facebook has become a vital platform for political expression, despite state-imposed digital authoritarianism. The research highlights the dual role of Facebook as both a tool for political participation and a reactive public sphere, where discussions are often fragmented and temporary. While Facebook does not fully align with Habermas's ideal public sphere, it serves as a critical space for young Vietnamese to negotiate with the state and engage in a "battle for truth." The findings underscore the potential of social media to foster political awareness and participation, albeit within the constraints of Vietnam's political environment.

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Chapter 2
History of Social Media in Vietnam: From Yahoo 360 to TikTok

The proliferation of social media in Vietnam has had a profound impact on various aspects of society. It has transformed the way individuals communicate, share information, and express their opinions. Social media platforms have become important channels for political discourse, civic engagement, and mobilisation. During the past decade, social media played a crucial role in raising awareness about social issues, organising protests, and advocating for change.

Yahoo 360: Early Steps in Social Media Adoption

In the early 2000s, as the internet became more accessible in Vietnam, Yahoo 360 emerged as one of the first social media platforms in the country. Launched in 2005, Yahoo 360 provided users with personal blogging capabilities, photo sharing, and a friends list feature. It quickly gained popularity among Vietnamese internet users, who were eager to embrace new online technologies.

According to Tran (2009), Yahoo 360 provided a unique platform for Vietnamese individuals to express themselves, connect with friends, and share their thoughts and experiences. It fostered a sense of online community, allowing users to interact and engage with each other. The platform facilitated the formation of virtual social networks, playing a pivotal role in shaping online social interactions in Vietnam, fostering the growth of online communities and encouraging user-generated content. Nevertheless, the platform was marred by the presence of harmful content, such as slander and explicit material, which proved difficult to control. The closure of Yahoo 360 left many bloggers shocked and uncertain about their next steps. While alternative platforms such as Facebook, WordPress, and Multiply existed, the fragmented nature of the migration process posed challenges for the former Yahoo 360 community (Yahoo 360, 2009).

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