

The beginning of online social movements in Vietnam

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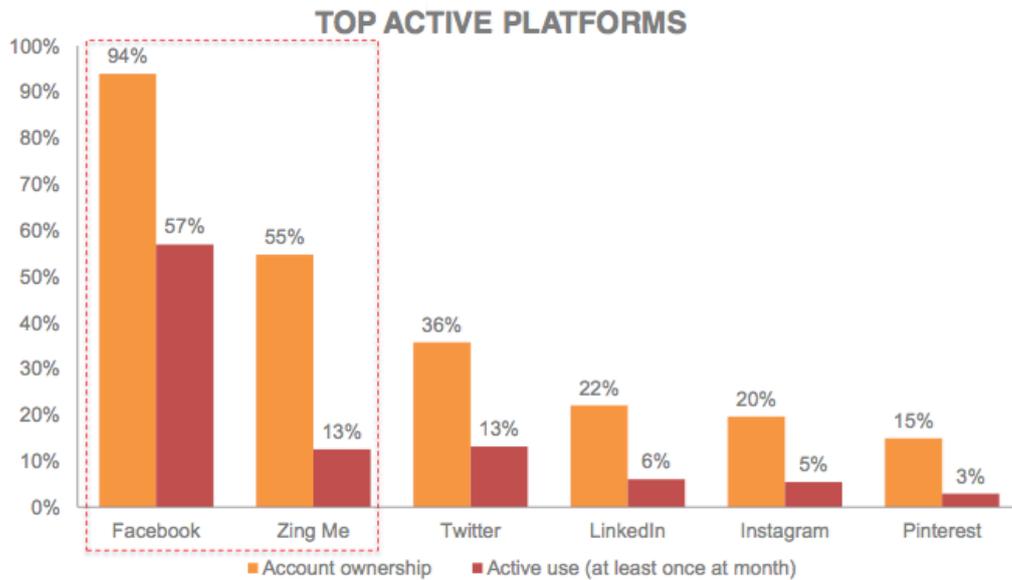
Abstract

After the Vietnam War, and particularly since 1986, Vietnam has been internationally recognised as one of the few communist countries to successfully implement a socialist-oriented market economy. In the digital age, Vietnam has become one of the most active locations in Asia for the use of information technology, and Facebook has grown to become the unrivalled social network in Vietnam used by more than half of the country's population of 92 million. The social network has proved that its influence extends far further than the entertainment needs of Vietnamese people. Active Vietnamese internet users are networking their voices to express their discontent about social issues and demand that Vietnamese authorities act. This study highlights the recent phenomenon of online social movements in Vietnam having some characteristics of the 'horizontal networks' and 'mass self-communication' conceptualised by theorist Manuel Castells. My arguments are developed on the basis of an analysis of original research interviews with media professionals and using a case study approach exploring the dynamism of internet users who began networking to voice their public feelings on social issues. This article suggests that online social movements in Vietnam are in their early stage, and are expected to increase along with the growing influence of the internet and the control of Vietnam's communist authorities.

Keywords: Facebook; internet; social network; online social movements; Vietnam

Introduction

Facebook arrived in Vietnam in 2009 and quickly rose to become the top social network in the country, with 64 million Facebook subscribers by 30 June 2017 (InternetWorldStats, 2017). Facebook's leading position is far ahead of the second social network for gaming and music fans owned by a domestic company, Zing Me, and followed by Twitter (Figure 1). Twitter was present in the country at the same that Facebook arrived, but has been unable to expand because it does not fit well with the culture or provide a relevant utility to Vietnamese people (Hoang, Huynh & Nguyen, 2015). A report on Vietnam's digital landscape shows the number of Vietnamese Facebookers increased 22 times within five years, from 1.4 million users in February 2012 to 31.3 million in March 2015 (Moore Corporation, 2015).



Facebook and Zing Me are still the most popular social platforms in Vietnam

Source: Moore (2015).

Figure 1: Dominant usage of Facebook among other social media platforms in Vietnam (2015)

The average age of Vietnamese Facebookers is very young, from 18 to 34 years, and one in every three people in Vietnam logs onto Facebook at least once a month. They use the social network mainly for entertainment purposes, such as to visit pages about fashion, beauty, dining or travel (TuoitreNews 2015a). Some surveys conducted by market research companies have suggested that the Vietnamese people use social media – mainly Facebook – to get news of friends, to exchange gossip and to shop (Cimigo, 2012, Epinion, 2013). In recent years, however, Facebook has proved to be convenient and useful for more than entertainment needs.

International scholars have noticed the rising trend of Vietnamese people using Facebook as an alternative source of news other than the state-controlled mainstream media (Abuza, 2015; Gray, 2015; Nguyen, 2014; Sharbaugh, Robert & Brown, 2012). This trend has come about because the Vietnamese people can see for themselves the ‘gaps’ and ‘insufficiency’ in daily news coverage by state-owned propaganda media (Nguyen, 2014, p. 11). When the demand for more information regarding unanswered questions is not satisfied, the internet becomes the ideal source for the Vietnamese people. And the growing popularity of Facebook has brought further opportunities, becoming the new public space for the exchange of opinions on social crises. These exchanges gradually lead users into political discussion and reactions, strengthening a recent claim that the ‘beginning of an active online public sphere’ has come into existence in Vietnam (Sharbaugh, Robert & Brown, 2012).

Based on academic discussion of the digital public space in Vietnam, my research will extend the topic by featuring the very latest phenomenon of Vietnamese

Facebookers who have become more active and networked to pressure the communist authorities into resolving social problems. In this way, Vietnamese netizens have begun utilising the 'political resource' of the internet's power (Dutton, 2009, p. 4) to create networks as a way to have their voices heard regarding national affairs. The 'togetherness' of individuals is expected to lay the first bricks for the formation of internet-based social movements conceptualised by Castells (2013). My argument is based on the case study of Hanoi Tree Movement in 2015, with its features typifying the beginning of online social movements in Vietnam. Some of the discoveries also come from original research interviews conducted with nine activist bloggers and propaganda journalists with knowledge and expertise about Vietnam's online community.

Networked individuals and social movements

The world has changed very rapidly since the internet's significant impacts first emerged in the mid-1990s (Lee et al., 2012). The internet and its pervasive power globally have been recognised as the Fifth Estate in parallel role with the mass media (Dutton, 2009, 2013). In Dutton's view, there are two key elements in the Fifth Estate, including the networked individuals and the relationship between the internet and mass media. With the internet, 'networked individuals' can reach beyond the boundaries of institutions, and can link with one another at any time and in any place. This way of communicating provides a new source of accountability of public intellectuals, economic elites, the government, the mass media and any sectors that are involved in the networked societies. The networking made possible by the internet reshapes the way individuals and groups communicate with each other and enhances the power of 'citizen communication'. In countries with authoritarian leadership and constrained media, such as Vietnam, the emergence of the Fifth Estate plays a vital role, because in many cases the internet is the only weapon individuals can use to demand freedom and democracy (Dutton, 2009, p. 15).

Dutton (2013) attributes his concept of 'networked individuals' to the key ideas of a 'network society' shaped by renowned social theorist Manuel Castells. Using the network perspective of Castells, I examine the contemporary social context of Vietnam more broadly and relate it to state control and individuals in the media network. The theory also helps to illuminate the changing connections and relationships involved in the cyberspace of Vietnam.

Information technology has revolutionised the world, and Castells (2000, p. 15) has seen the changing social structure in the form of a network, which he defines as 'a set of interconnected nodes', in the economic, social and cultural realms. An important feature of networks, according to Castells, is that they are 'neutral'. After a network is programmed (by social actors), it will 'impose its logic' on all members (actors). If any members want to control the network, they have to be the winners in the struggle to set the rules of the network. They can destroy the network, but only by 'building an alternative network around alternative value' or by setting up a non-network structure without outside connections (2000, p. 16). This theoretical basis provides a meaningful tool with which to analyse how Vietnamese society is transforming in the information

age when the structure of online social networks has begun to grow at a level tolerated by the Vietnamese authorities.

Another feature of the network society is the rise of 'horizontal networks of communication' on the internet and wireless networks, which are termed 'mass self-communication' (Castells, 2007, p. 248). This mode of communication, facilitated by the digital age, is supporting the 'social actor' to react against the control of governments and corporations. According to Castells, the nature of 'power relationships' relates to the existence of both power and 'counter-power' at the same time, because 'wherever there is domination, there is resistance to the domination' (Castells 2007, p. 248). Each society has a 'specific form' of power and counter-power, and Castells states that the exercise of counter-power can result in the formation of networked social movements. In the present network society, social movements are characterised by interactive, autonomous, re-programmable and self-expanding communication, but the origin of social movements is not changed. Social movements are formed when many individuals feel humiliated, exploited, ignored or misrepresented. The cause of these emotions may be social, economic, political, cultural and psychological, but they finally turn into 'a process of collective action' (Castells, 2011) and are expressed in social movements in the digital age (Castells, 2013).

Castells' network concept views society in a broad way, and he has placed the role of the 'individual' higher in the society, due to the presence of information technology. In today's world, which is dominated by digital communication, the technology has enabled the individual to network and to create various changes through social movements. The social movements advocated by the internet can be seen in the Arab Spring uprisings in the Arab world and in some democratic countries (Castells, 2013). However, the power of the internet can also be implicit, obstinate and prolonged, as in the nations with the least freedom and democracy, such as Vietnam. Despite these challenges, more people have joined in the online discussions, pushing the limits to network their voices and make social online movements become common with initial promising effects.

Case study: Hanoi tree movement

The key developments

On 17 March 2015, a senior journalist and media administrator, Tran Dang Tuan, sent a letter to the Chairman of Hanoi People's Committee, recommending that the capital's leaders suspend the massive and ongoing removal of trees planted along the streets and roads of the city. Cutting trees down before the summer in times of heavy rains and storms is an annual job managed by Hanoi's Construction Department. However, the tree-chopping plan in early 2015 had a massive target of removing 6708 trees planted – or 23.19 per cent – on 190 streets and roads in the inner city (Duong, 2015; TuoitreNews, 2015b). Despite this large scale, the plan was implemented hurriedly just one day after it was publicly announced, shocking the people of Hanoi and tree lovers

around the country. Tran Dang Tuan's open letter officially ignited the tree-cutting plan of the capital city into a national story on Facebook.

For the first time, the discourse of the Facebook community reached beyond friends and entertainment to discuss tree-related issues. Users published posts denouncing the plan, reporting the tree-removal activities in their residential areas and sharing photos of healthy trees that had been removed, as well as of parents and children hugging the trees and calling one another to protest against the plan. A number of forums were launched to investigate the unusual points of the tree-removal plan and call on members to object against the plan through the acts of likes, shares or changes to their avatars to promote tree-protection. The public realised that the tree-removal plan had been developed without any consultation with the city's residents and scientists.

Following public pressure, the Hanoi authorities reluctantly decided to suspend the plan on 20 March 2015, but the story did not end there. Social anger grew even stronger about the way Hanoi leaders managed the tree crisis. At a press conference held to answer questions from the news media about the tree-removal plan and the resulting public anger, a vice chairman of the People's Committee of Hanoi made a 20-minute speech explaining the aims of the tree-cutting plan and acknowledging the authorities' shortcomings in communicating with the public. After listening to reporters' questions, the city's leader said the questions would be answered later and left the press conference, much to the surprise of the hundreds of reporters present (Duong, 2015). To add fuel to the fire, a member of Hanoi's leadership was quoted on mainstream media on 18 March 2015, saying that the removal or planting of trees was the job of the city's authorities and there was no need to advise local residents (H. Nguyen, 2015).

After these developments, the Hanoi tree-cutting plan became the most dominant public affair in online discussions among individuals and on public forums. The online community not only expressed its anger at the mismanagement of Hanoi, but also questioned the dubious aspects of the tree-removal plan. On 27 March 2015, freelance journalist Nguyen Huy Cuong launched a Facebook post noting that the open-access Wikipedia had been re-edited to add the information in favour of the new trees Hanoi authorities wanted to replace the 6708 old trees (H.C. Nguyen, 2015). Cuong presented an explanation that the added information had no scientific value to please some 'certain people', but the people knew very well that the newly planted trees were not the type claimed by the leaders.¹ He called on other Facebookers with knowledge of trees to add further evidence to reject the city's plan. Immediately after this call, Cuong's post was liked by 9300 people and shared by 2521 people. The post attracted 528 comments ridiculing the Hanoi officials and adding further photos and facts to support Cuong's opinion. Protesters against the plan also replaced their individual avatars with a symbolic photo of the group's logo and a message calling for the delay of the plan and actions to protect the trees. By this time, research centres and civil organisations began joining the Facebook discourse by holding seminars inviting scientists of biology, environment and natural conservation to provide scientific analysis of the tree-chopping plan (TuoitreNews, 2015b).

The Facebookers took more actions than just clicking on the buttons of likes, shares or writing comments. They created fanpage groups to evaluate the tree-removal plan, with a majority objecting. They did not wait for an explanation from the city's leaders, mainstream media and state institutions, but rather conducted investigations independently. They searched for scientific information on the internet or written by agro-forestry scientists and experts, analysed the information and shared the latest findings. They established a number of fanpages on Facebook to call for public unity against the city's tree removal plan.

The largest group, created by a Hanoian housewife, was named '6,700 people for 6,700 green trees'. Within days, more than 10,000 Facebookers joined the group, which kept growing until it reached 62,000 members by 28 April 2015. Members of this forum included journalists, artists, scientists and people from all walks of life. On this forum, people updated tree-removal news, expressed opinions and analyses of the development of the case development and posted photos taken by members inspecting the situation. The page's activities grew beyond the scope of an online discussion forum: the members signed a petition, sent it to the city's leaders and organised 'parades for Hanoi trees' for two consecutive Sundays, 22 and 29 March 2015. People use the angriest possible words to show their objection to the plan by naming it the 'tree massacre of Hanoi' and describing those carrying it out as 'urban poachers'. Under the increasing social pressure, the Hanoi authorities were forced to stop the plan, apologise to the public and suspend some of the officials responsible for it. This ending of the tree-removal plan was far and away due to the successful efforts of the Facebook community in saving thousands of the trees for Hanoi.



Figure 2: Home page of the tree-removal protest fanpage on Facebook. Words on the timeline photo on the page translate to 'I love trees, #6700 trees'.

Social activists have commented that the tree-removal campaign is positive proof of the progress of the civil movement against Hanoi's authorities. While some activists called it a step forward for democracy, others expressed pleasure at the united reactions of the people and at the unexpected tolerance of Hanoi's leadership towards the protests by the people (BBCVietnamese 2015, N. Nguyen 2015). In an interview for this study, writer of the open letter on the tree-chopping plant Tran Dang Tuan said he regarded the phenomenon as a form of 'social critics' because 'the people can and need to speak out their opinions about their dearest things' (email interview, 22 May 2015). Some National Assembly deputies argued that the people had a right to be advised about public issues, and Hanoi's leaders had learned a lesson about the importance of listening to the voice of the people (Ngoc & Hoang, 2015, Truc, 2015). The Vietnamese netizens were keen to resist the tree-cutting plan and pressured the Hanoi authorities until the authorities had to make a public apology, stop the plan and investigate the mismanagement of some officials.

When Vietnamese netizens become active

Numerous social impacts can be identified as a result of the Hanoi tree movement case but it is important to note that Vietnamese netizens have had a habit of using social media – particularly Facebook – to exchange ideas and opinions on everyday problems. As people in Vietnam do not have the opportunity to access all the information they need and freely express their thoughts and feelings through the state-owned mainstream media, Facebook has become a much freer space for public deliberation. Besides participating in online discussion, Facebookers also function as supervisors of the management of the authorities – the role the Vietnamese people have been granted verbally but never practically. In the authoritarian regime of Vietnam, the case of Hanoi's tree-cutting plan is the first time the public has been able to show major pressure online and offline, successfully forcing authorities to make a public apology and stopping them from imposing their desired plan. It is also the first time Facebook has been regarded as 'the thermometer' that Vietnamese authorities have used to measure public attitudes and listen to the public voice to help them make administrative decisions (Le et al., 2016).

In an unprecedented case, the active voice of Vietnamese netizens has influenced the state-controlled media, driving them to focus on the key concerns of the online community rather than speaking for the authorities as part of their required propaganda tasks. On 19 March 2015, one of the most popular online newspaper, *VnExpress.net*, asked readers for their opinion on Hanoi's plan to cut down 6700 trees. The survey received 32,517 votes in 24 hours, with 69 per cent of the votes against the plan. The topic also became headlines of all state media, and online newspapers were the best channel for updating information and showcasing the public attitude. In other popular e-newspapers in Vietnam, such as *Dantri.com.vn* or *Vietnamnet.vn*, the tree removal stories were the top news for more than a week and each story gathered hundreds of readers' comments. My data collected from 17 March to 30 April 2015 on four major online newspapers show a large number of stories, opinion pieces and interviews on the topic: *VnExpress.net* with 28 results, *VietNamNet.vn* with 28 results, *Tuoitre Online*

with 10 results and *Thanhnienvn* with 24 results. The story was reported from multiple angles, with fairness and quality investigative journalism, which observers commented was very 'open' (N. Nguyen, 2015). Many stories quoted examples and figures taken from Facebook and some investigative stories were very explicit – for example, *The Law* newspaper ran the headline 'Which is the Crime in the Case of Cutting Trees in Hanoi?' (Que, 2015). *The Labour* newspaper carried the story 'Cutting Down Trees in Hanoi: Strict Punishment to Maintain Trust' (Luong, 2015). The tree-massacre topic soon made headlines in the foreign media such as the BBC, Reuters, AFP and the Voice of America. More than just reporting the tree-removal issue, foreign media also noted the social media users' outrage and the cumbersome reactions of the communist leaders faced with an issue of social demand (AFP, 2015; H. Nguyen, 2015).

The tree-removal case also raises questions about the performance of the Vietnamese news media in covering a scandal that had direct impact on the leadership of the country's capital. Observers recognised that this event offered an unusual 'freer door' for the state-owned press. Commentators argued that the press had a louder voice supporting the Vietnamese netizens in this story because if they had not reported the scandal, social media and bloggers would have done the job instead. Other observers questioned a possible political motive behind the rare open coverage by the press because the Communist Party of Vietnam was preparing for the appointment of new leaders in 2016 (N. Nguyen 2015). The Vietnamese press is owned by the Communist Party of Vietnam so its messages always encode the hegemonic viewpoints of the authorities. Despite the Hanoi authorities trying to use their power by asking some local newspapers to write news stories defending the plan, a majority of national newspapers and most popular online newspapers had daily coverage echoing the public voice. The changing voice of mainstream media was recognised by the public, who said the press had 'more professional' coverage when the news stories had more balance to cover both public opinions and the official sources (Le et al., 2016, p. 56).

The rise of online social movements in Vietnam

The Hanoi tree removal social media developments have been exemplified as typical of the larger influence of social media in Vietnam (Bui, 2016), but the recent circumstances reveal more than the growth of social media. The case was not only the first online environmental discussion but also a political topic with communication and inquiry on the management capacity, bureaucracy, abuse of power and corruption of Hanoi's authorities. In this tree-removal case, the discussion was not limited to the virtual space, with words and outrage spreading virally; there were also signals of the beginnings of a social movement when the campaign first spread online and then was transformed into civil activities and protests. Hundreds of people gathered in Hanoi's downtown on 20 March 2015 to march against the tree-removal plan. About 22,000 people signed an online petition asking the city's leaders to stop the plan (Le et al., 2016). The online and offline public pressure grew into a nationwide social movement, making the government heavily critical of Hanoi's leaders and leading to promises of punishment of responsible officials to ease the public anger.

The Hanoi tree-cutting case should be regarded as a phenomenon because it has inspired further online social movements, making it a routine activity for Vietnamese internet users to actively post comments and network their opinions on everyday politics. In early 2016, an online boycott movement was initiated against a local drink manufacturer (Tan Hiep Phat Group) for treating a customer in an unethical way, causing the man to be trapped into a seven-year prison sentence (Huynh, Huynh & Huynh, 2016). The movement cost the drink manufacturer US\$89.29 million by the end of December 2016 and the company was forced to change its name to ease the public anger. In May 2016, the Facebook community joined in another large movement protesting against the toxic discharge from Taiwan's Formosa Plastics' steel plant on the central coast. The public was angry about the company and the 'sluggish response' of the Vietnamese government to the country's worst-ever environmental disaster, leading to mass fish deaths in central region (Minh, 2016). The growth of the online movement had a similar trajectory to the Ha Noi tree movement, with the formation of online discussion forums sharing and analysing the Formosa information sourced from the mainstream media, scientists, freelance journalists and even laymen, and the gathering of protestors to demand the government to react officially against Formosa. However, the anti-Formosa movement had more real-world impacts, with demonstrations held in more cities throughout the country on a larger scale and a longer timeframe until the Formosa steel plant admitted its responsibility for the environmental disaster and the government ordered the Taiwanese group to pay a US\$500 million fine.

The internet has been present in Vietnam since 1997 (Boymal, Martin & Lam, 2007; Nguyen, 2008; Van Koert, 2004), but the rise of online social media campaigns has only been seen since 2015. Vietnam's netizens have realised that the internet offers more opportunities than just economic and entertainment possibilities. Facebook has become a space for more Vietnamese people to participate in exchanging opinions on public affairs, and many of them have engaged more extensively with issues of policies, management capacity and corruption. Despite this online political awareness being late, these movements have seen fast progress in terms of their online scale and initial offline influence. To date, the movements have shown some features observed by Castells (2013), including interaction and 'self-communication' among individual online users to generate 'mass communication' in the form of participation in forums, likes or sharing posts as a way to react. In a country where the public is not allowed to discuss political affairs freely, the form of the first social movements, although limited to cyberspace, should be highlighted as a promising means of access for people whose voices have long been ignored and misrepresented.

It is important to note that Hanoi's tree-cutting movement and other recent social movements taken up by social media in Vietnam are only in their very early stages, and such social media outbursts need to meet an array of expectations to grow into online social movements. The activity of users clicking shares, likes and exchanging comments could be argued to take the form of 'slacktivism' rather than leading to 'practical activism' (Rotman et al., 2011, p. 821). The online community expresses a voice on everyday social problems such as corruption, food hygiene, pollution, health care and education, rather than focuses on more political affairs, because these latter topics are strictly prohibited by

the Vietnamese government. Characterised by spontaneity and hesitation, online social movements often calm down after the Vietnamese authorities act to appease public outrage with promises and minor changes. Administrators of online forums have been watched by the government's security forces and are required to prevent the members from heavily criticising the government. Many forums have been shut down and administrators removed for failing to set the limits of deliberation for the participants. Topics with the potential for social change, like democracy, freedom or human rights, are still not within the large public remit, and are heavily censored.

In his email interview for this study, freelance journalist Huy Duc used the 'village culture' phrase to explain the start of the present online social movements. Since 'village culture' expresses the importance of community affecting personal ideas (Ngo, 2004), Huy Duc's comments imply that the public has the habit of following the ideas of the majority rather than being urged to speak their mind. But he said one advantage of these movements was to make Vietnamese individuals 'gradually level up' (email communication, 21 August 2015). Although there have been more positive changes in Vietnam, the fact is that the internet is not a completely free space for political debate. Political blogs and Facebook pages of activists and dissidents are always under tight control through blocking, spamming or hacking, because the Vietnamese authorities want to prevent them from being widely diffused among the community.

These explanations for the initial phase of online social movements in Vietnam are logical when considered in light of Castells' (2000) frame of social movements. Internet-based social networks are 'a necessary condition' but not 'a sufficient condition' for today's social movements. In the current context of Vietnam, the netizens have adopted the habit of networking their voices against the country's issues; however, the movements are not politically motivated, and nor are they at the level of outrage needed to generate rebellion. 'Deeply rooted culture of fear', self-censorship (Vennevold, 2011) and enjoyment of economic reform are still current among a majority of the netizens.

The nightmare memories of wartime devastation still haunt the country, so people may prefer the current stability to change. These mixed feelings may contribute to making netizens hesitate to act further than participating in online social movements. A movement named 'I don't like the Communist Party of Vietnam' on Facebook has only 16,669 members one year after it was launched in early 2015. This contrasts with the mushrooming popularity of a page opposing the weak manager of the Ministry of Health, which attracted tens of thousands of followers within a short time in 2015. At this stage, the online social movements in Vietnam signal some online freedom given to the online community; however, this type of online freedom is still within the control of the Vietnamese authorities, so the movements are not up to the level of generating considerable social change.

Conclusion

The future role of the internet has been guaranteed by former Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, who promised to continue bringing the technology to 90 per cent of the Vietnamese population (T.D. Nguyen, 2015). Choosing the internet for economic development means Vietnam has accepted that its social structure will

transform into information networks functioning with their own logics. This article suggests that the case of Hanoi's tree-removal plan demonstrates the beginning of online social movements in Vietnam. Although the resistance of these movements to authoritarian power is still limited, online social movements have an array of potential to expand their scale and influence in cyberspace and in daily life to pressure for change in everyday social issues. However, I acknowledge that in some ways the case is atypical, and this limits its power to prove the rise of online social movements in Vietnam's political affairs. The network, once programmed, has its own 'logic' and resists anyone who wants to control it (Castells, 2000). Additional research would be needed to continue to monitor the progress of online social movements in Vietnam when they begin to reach more deeply into political issues, to see whether these movements can transform into offline social movements with sufficient strength and outrage for changes, or will be destroyed by the country's rulers. Despite both promise and peril lying ahead, the internet represents a golden opportunity for the Vietnamese people – one they should grasp more tightly to gain further freedom and more democracy.

Note

- ¹ Hanoi authorities claimed old trees would be replaced by more suitable varieties, including Camphor, Burma Padauk, Takia and Magnolia trees. However, Cuong's post reveals that the Vang Tam trees (*Magnolia fordiana*) were not planted and were actually replaced by another variety in the *Manglietia fordiana* family, the Mo trees (*Magnolia conifer*) which have less value. Scientists said the *Magnolia fordiana* trees should be planted on the hills and were unsuitable for the city.

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