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How The Vietnamese State Uses Cyber Troops to Shape Online Discourse

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A Vietnamese youth checks his mobile phone on the century-old Long Bien Bridge in Hanoi on September 3, 2019. Vietnamese authorities have handled public political criticism - both online and in real life - with a calibrated mixture of toleration, responsiveness and repression. Photo: Manan VATSYAYANA, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The operations of Vietnam's public opinion shapers and cyber-troops reveal that the online discourse is manipulated to enforce the Communist Party's line.

- Vietnamese authorities constantly grapple with the vexing question: How to strike a delicate balance between placating critical public sentiment online while ensuring that it does not spill over into protests against the regime.

- When it comes to methods, targets and motives, there appears to be significant crossover between public opinion shapers and the government's cyber troops.

- The Vietnamese state cyber-troops have been encouraged to use real accounts to mass-report content. This helps explain why it is the only Southeast Asian state to publicly acknowledge having a military cyber unit.

- The lack of political and technological wherewithal presents an uphill battle for these cyber-troops in influencing Vietnam's online information environment.

INTRODUCTION

Since its official inception in 2017,[1] Vietnam's 10-000-strong military cyber unit, dubbed Force 47, has been subjected to widespread lampoon, criticism and backlash. Critics have pointed the finger at what is widely assumed as the main objective of the unit: target dissidents and activists[2] and mass-report anti-state content in order to have their accounts suspended and "anti-state" posts removed.[3] While there is some truth to this observation, zeroing in on such operations could risk glossing over the core duties laid out at the very outset for Force 47.

In the view of the authorities, Force 47 has a legitimate raison d'être: These "well qualified and loyal" cyber-warriors work "every hour, every minute, every second" to scour and collect information on social media, participate in online debates to maintain "a healthy cyberspace" and counter any "wrongful opinions" about the regime and protect it and the public from "toxic information".[4]

But as Vietnamese authorities have handled public political criticism - both online and in real life - with a calibrated mixture of toleration, responsiveness and repression,[5] the key tenet of the operations of Force 47 should be appraised in a broader frame. In fact, a closer look at how Vietnam's public opinion shapers and cyber-troops have operated offers a glimpse into the unit's ultimate goal: manipulate online discourse to enforce the Communist Party's line in a country whose leaders have been fixated on curbing anti-state content.

The authorities have publicly admitted that Vietnam's ossified propaganda apparatus was ceding ground to social media in the race for readers' attention.[6] But Vietnam's lack of political and technological wherewithal and limited home-grown social media platforms[7] have throttled its efforts to create a "national Internet" meant for enforced blocking of Western social media platforms.[8] This has paved the way for Facebook to become the main venue for Vietnam's cyber unit to safeguard the party line, shape public opinion, and spread state propaganda.[9]

Some key observations: First, the red flag that would galvanize the cyber unit into action is anti-state content, one that is deemed detrimental to the reputation and legitimacy of the regime and its leaders; second, discourse, toleration and responsiveness have been the prioritized strategy of choice; and perhaps most intriguingly, while the authorities have repeatedly warned the mainstream press against the risk of trailing behind social media, they have often tacitly sanctioned the cyber unit to be ahead of the propaganda media in shaping the online narrative on certain sensitive issues.

CURBING ANTI-STATE CONTENT: A TALL ORDER FOR THE TRADITIONAL PROPAGANDA MODEL

Vietnamese authorities have long frowned upon anti-government propaganda and freer flow of information as threats to the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party, using this as a pretext to rationalise reining in the online sphere and cracking down on such activities. In recent years, contents being anti-government has been the most oft-cited rationale for Vietnamese censors to force Facebook and Google's YouTube to restrict or take down posts from their platforms.[10] There have also been real-life consequences. According to *Reuters*, of 280 people who have been arrested for "anti-state" activities in Vietnam since 2016, 260 have been convicted. This marks a precipitous spike from the 68 arrests and 58 convictions carried out during the 2011-2016 period.[11]

On the legal front, since the Internet's arrival in Vietnam in 1997, Vietnam has enacted a raft of laws and regulations, with a consistent focus on criminalising those who use the online sphere to "oppose the government; undermine the state and state unity, or threaten national security, public order, or social security; or incite violence or crime".[12] An analysis of Vietnam's laws and regulations on Internet controls during the 2001-2020 period shows how legal terms governing the criminalization of anti-state activities have formed the frontline in the country's Internet control efforts. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Legal terms on anti-state activities dominate Vietnam's Internet controls

(Source: compiled by the author)

On the information control front, Vietnam's propaganda czars have hashed out terminology as well as the tone and position of press coverage on individuals, organizations and contents flagged as "anti-state" (Table 1).

TABLE 1. List of key terms used to describe anti-state activities

Vietnamese	English	Description
"thế lực thù địch"	hostile forces	any groups or organizations plotting to topple the regime.[13]
"diễn biến hoà bình"	peaceful evolution	the process in which anti-communist forces deploy unarmed means under the banner of "democracy", "freedom", and "human rights" against the Communist Party.[14]
"cách mạng màu"	colour revolution	popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes, such as those which took place in former Soviet countries.[15]
"tự diễn biến", "tự chuyển hoá"	self-evolution, self-transformation	recently coined terms to describe those who, after being able to access a more free flow of information, lose faith in the regime and decamp from its ideology.[16]
"xuyên tạc", "chia rẽ", "chống phá"	distort, divide, sabotage	used to label the act of spearheading anti-state propaganda or plotting against the regime.

The Central Propaganda Department – the Communist Party's propaganda organ – and the Ministry of Information and Communications have been at the helm of controlling this discourse, dictating over all state-run print, broadcast, online, and electronic media.[17] The flip side of this approach is glaring, however: Couched in hackneyed language, the mainstream

media has often been pooh-poohed for being riddled with a war mindset that is occasionally borderline "paranoid".[18] This risks leaving the government message out of sync with a language used by forward-looking, Internet-savvy young population.[19]

Opting to embrace social media – chiefly Facebook – to spread the Party's message,[20] the authorities have been constantly grappling with a vexing question: How to strike a delicate balance between placating public sentiment online while ensuring that it does not spill over into protests against the regime. This is the context in which Vietnam's public opinion shapers and cyber-troops enter the fray, setting the stage to jockey for control of public narrative in the online sphere.

MEET FORCE 47 AND PUBLIC OPINION SHAPERS

Vietnam had already in 2013 acknowledged publicly that it had deployed groups known as "public opinion shapers" to spread views in defence of the state against detractors or "hostile forces".[21] It was only in late 2017 that the country officially rolled out Force 47. When it comes to methods, targets and motives, significant crossovers occur between public opinion shapers and cyber troops.[22]

To gain insight into the personnel, structure and operations of both Force 47 and public opinion shapers, we examine hundreds of posts and comments on 10 Facebook groups whose stated missions, policies and contents are systematically aligned with the modus operandi of the cyber unit. Several of these groups publicly claim links with Force 47. We have also thoroughly reviewed dozens of publicly available documents, reports and newspaper articles that shed light on this issue.

• **Who they are:** Officially, Force 47 is backed by the Ministry of National Defense and comprises mostly of "professional defense officers" mostly trained in propaganda and equipped with skills to counter "wrongful opinions" or "toxic information" about the regime.[23] Who accounts for the force of "public opinion shapers" is a trickier question to answer. Due to the voluntary and pro bono nature of their work, at a certain time, anyone interested – be it war veterans, journalists, doctors, academics, businesspeople, or students – can take the government up on its offer to dabble as public opinion shapers online. Another potential segment, which is not part of the state-sanctioned cyber unit but which should not be discounted altogether, are zealous Internet users who may be voluntarily participating in defending the state. The common pull factor? These people share a nationalist, and to some extent anti-West, sentiment, and are sympathetic of Vietnam's policies and actions.

In what is called "diversified propaganda", these actors are often recruited by the local chapters of the propaganda apparatus or from other state-affiliated political groups such as the Ho Chi Minh's Communist Youth Union or Women's Association.[24]

Elsewhere in the region, Thailand has also turned to youth groups to aid in shaping public opinion on social media.[25] The public opinion shapers are not obliged to report to any agency, but if they do, it is often to the local-level propaganda departments.[26] Like the Philippines,[27] Vietnam is also said to have commissioned paid influencers to shape public opinion in certain cases. But still, there has been no definitive research to substantiate this allegation.

• **How they are managed:** Both Force 47 and public opinion shapers operate on a mission-based basis without any concrete organisational or physical structure. Nguyen The Phuong, a researcher from Vietnam National University-Ho Chi Minh City, summed up the structure of the cyber unit in a 2018 article for *The Diplomat*: "There is minimal or even no command and control in some cases because members of the task force are given the rights to operate independently and actively in the Internet. The [Vietnam People's Army] can still maintain order and ideological discipline of this force (and of course provide general guidelines) through its unique network of political commissars."

• **What they do**: Vietnam's Force 47 and public opinion shapers have made the most of Facebook to execute their daily tasks and missions, which include "training, studying and interacting with specific audiences."[28] According to a report by researchers at Oxford University,[29] the expanded typology of the strategies of messaging and valence (valence describes "how attractive or unattractive a message, event, or thing is") that cyber troops use to communicate with Internet users online includes: "(1) spreading pro-government or pro-party propaganda; (2) attacking the opposition or mounting smear campaigns; (3) distracting or diverting conversations or criticism away from important issues; (4) driving division and polarization; and (5) suppressing participation through personal attacks or harassment." Vietnam's cyber-troops check three out of five boxes (Table 2).[30]

TABLE 2. Messaging and valence strategies of Vietnam's cyber-troops

(Source: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation report, University of Oxford)

The Oxford report places the communication strategies of the cyber troops into five categories: "(1) the creation of disinformation or manipulated media; (2) mass-reporting of content or accounts; (3) data-driven strategies; (4) trolling, doxing or harassment; and (5) amplifying content and media online." Vietnam ticks four out of these five categories[31] (Table 3)

TABLE 3. Communication strategies of Vietnam's cyber troops

(Source: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation report, University of Oxford)

As Giang Nguyen-Thu (2018, p. 903) points out, Vietnam's online censorship playbook still more or less "adheres to the old model of mass media discipline."[32] In that context, the modus operandi of both Force 47 and public opinion shapers continue to comport with the ideological and political dos and don'ts that have long dictated the editorial line of the mass media. The methods and communication strategies of the cyber unit, however, show that it has evolved into a more sophisticated extension of Vietnam's traditional propaganda model.

PRO-STATE CONTENT IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

This research programme at ISEAS sets out to examine several case studies to sketch out a pattern of how Force 47 and public opinion shapers allocate resources in the online sphere. There has been no consistent implementation of the aforesaid calibrated mixture of toleration, responsiveness and repression in the online sphere. The two following two case studies seek to illustrate when, how and to whom toleration, responsiveness or repression are applied. The first case involves Thuy Tien, a popular Vietnamese singer who is also known to be a keen philanthropist. The other relates to Pham Doan Trang, a high-profile Vietnamese dissident arrested in October 2020 for "anti-state activities."[33]

When floods ravaged central Vietnam in October, Thuy Tien used her Facebook account to call for public donations.[34] She also went to the central region to personally provide succour flood-hit victims. That should have been a feel-good story, which indeed it was, grabbing headlines and setting social media abuzz. But when the donations crossed the threshold of VND100 billion (US$4.3 million), Thuy Tien found herself caught in the whirlwind of a growing online controversy.

It first centred around the legitimacy of the funds, then it morphed into a spate of online criticisms. Critics lambasted Internet users for capitalizing on Thuy Tien's charity and her Facebook page to unleash a floodgate of anti-state comments. According to the critics, in questioning the legitimacy and efficiency of the regime in its response to the floods, those comments besmirched the reputation of the government and dismissed the state effort and the sacrifice of many soldiers. Those comments were also accused of misleading the public into believing that the authorities were conspiring to siphon off the donations that Thuy Tien had been able to raise.

Nowhere was such criticism more manifest than on Facebook pages purportedly run by public opinion shapers and/or Force 47.

Gleaning from all relevant posts on the same Facebook pages (10 of them) analysed in the previous section, we are able to establish a pattern: In the case of Thuy Tien, online conversations on the topic were not flagged until they involved anti-state content. Her popularity and influence further merited the intervention of either cyber-troops or public opinion shapers, or both. Their activities centred around (i) arguing directly with critics, (ii) seeking to neutralize undesirable public opinion by peddling pro-state views through posts and comments on Facebook, and (iii) steering online conversations in what is perceived as the right direction. The propaganda media did not take the lead in initiating the discussion, only chiming in later to mostly encapsulate what had already been discussed on pro-state Facebook pages.

In the case of Pham Doan Trang, a different pattern emerged: The issue attracted much less attention and bandwidth in all those Facebook pages. The contents chiefly focused on

amplifying the government indictment of her anti-state agenda and rebutting foreign criticism of the arrest.

We take a deeper dive into all relevant posts and comments from three such Facebook pages, codenamed A, B, and C. They were selected for analysis because:

- Their direction and contents are consistently aligned with the purpose and modus operandi of Force 47 and public opinion shapers .

- Whenever anti-state content is flagged on social media, these pages swing into action almost immediately and concurrently. The state-sanctioned terminology on anti-state activities were exhaustively used, particularly in the comments.

- They have all amassed a strong base of followers. A, which has a foreign name, has 171,000 followers. B, which claims to have a mission to counter reactionary information, has 198,000. C, which is said to be commissioned by a group of military officers, has 66,500.

The posts appeared between October and December 2020. It was in early October 2020 that Thuy Tien started raising money for flood-hit victims; and Pham Doan Trang was arrested on October 7.[35] Posts related to the case of Thuy Tien overwhelmingly outnumbered those on Pham Doan Trang. B entertained 14 posts on Thuy Tien but only 2 about Pham Doan Trang. A and C, despite their popularity, did not have any post on the latter. The number of average reactions, shares and comments on Thuy Tien in each Facebook page also exceeded those on Pham Doan Trang by a wide margin (Chart 1).

CHART 1. The number of reactions, shares and comments on Thuy Tien and Pham Doan Trang
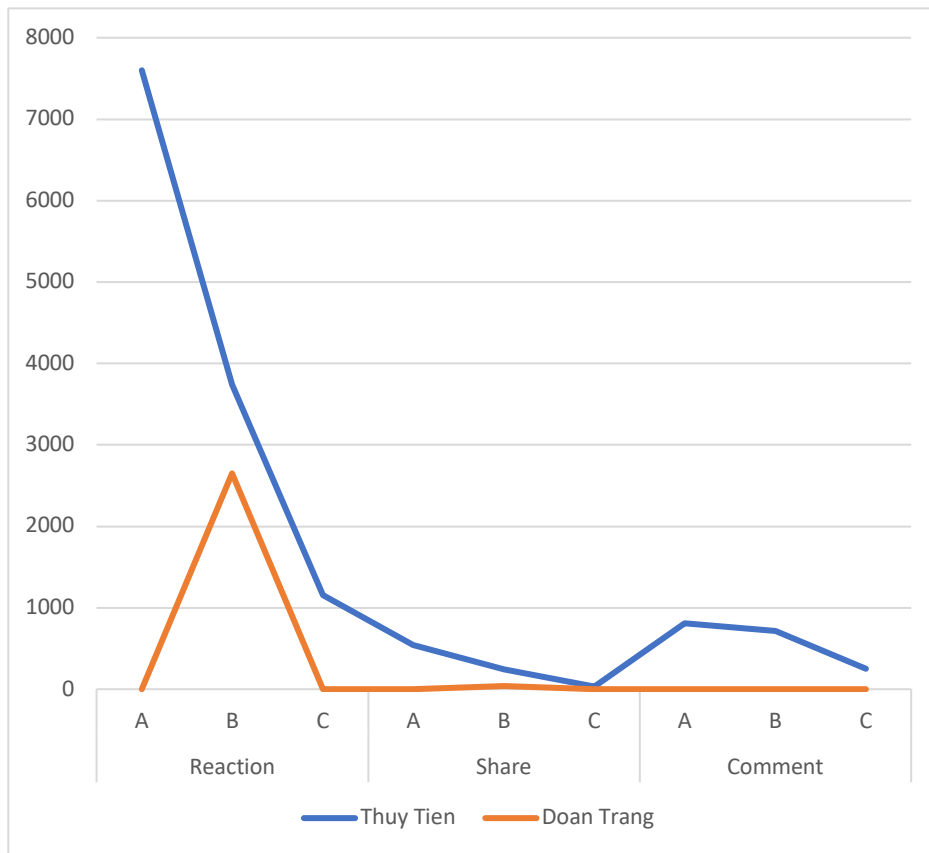
(Source: compiled by the author)

What accounts for the different approaches and findings in these two case studies? Some important context: Social media is a concern for Vietnamese authorities, not so much for the public criticism, but more for its ability to coalesce collective action or organise protests in real life. The takeaway here is that as long as collective action is nipped in the bud, social media can serve as a release valve for public opinion.[36]

Even though the anti-state comments in the case of Thuy Tien, the singer, were disparaging, they showed little sign of translating into real-life actions. In that context, by allocating major resources to handle online criticism, the censors in fact proved their intent on tolerating the discourse. There was even some sign of responsiveness: Almost immediately in the wake of the online controversy over the legitimacy of the charity funds, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc called for the quick clearing of any legal hurdles that could stand in the way of such philanthropic activities.[37]

In contrast, the Vietnamese police have long been accused of harassing and beating up Pham Doan Trang, the dissident, for her activism in real life.[38] Past and recent crackdowns on social media in Vietnam have shown that repression took place mostly when dissidents or activists appeared to cross the red line on political multilateralism, improved human rights, freedom of speech and regime change. In that context, for both Pham Doan Trang and the authorities, her arrest was perhaps a more or less foregone conclusion. The onus of dealing with her would

thus appear to have fallen concretely to Vietnam's security apparatus, and not the cyber unit in the online sphere.

From July 2020 to January 2021, anti-state content stemmed mostly from controversy over philanthropic activities for flood victims, Vietnam's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the arrest of several high-profile dissidents (Pham Doan Trang included). We generate relevant keywords on those topics and analyse online discussion on them in two opposing categories: anti-state and pro-state content. 54.4 percent of the content originated from social media, which more or less means Facebook; 32.5 percent were from news sites (Chart 2).

CHART 2. Online posts on pro- and anti-contents in different channels
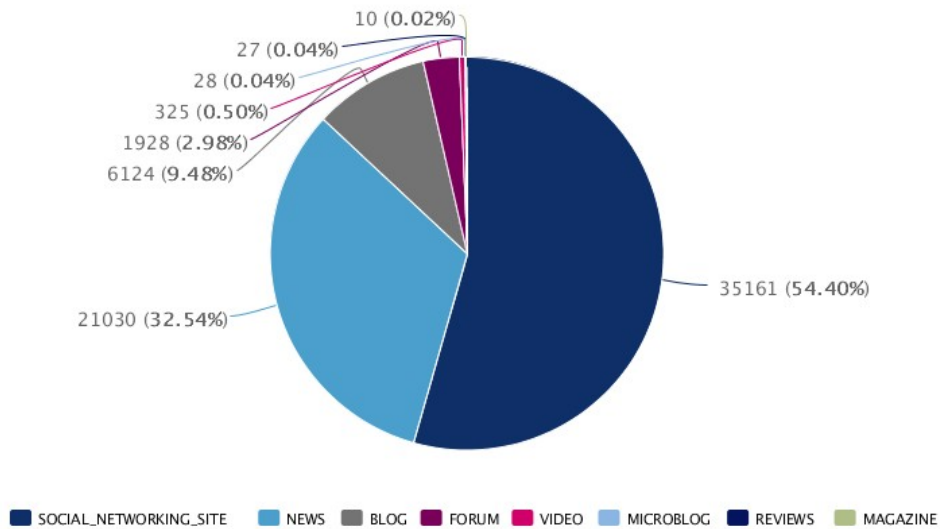
(Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and Isentia)

Pro-state content overwhelmingly eclipsed anti-state content online over the July 2020-January 2021 period (Chart 3). The reasons could vary: By successfully battling the Covid-19 pandemic,[39] Vietnam's leadership could have won hearts and minds. Force 27 and public opinion shapers may have played a role, or it could have been due to the combination of both factors, and possibly other reasons.

CHART 3. Pro- and anti-contents in the online sphere since the first half of 2020
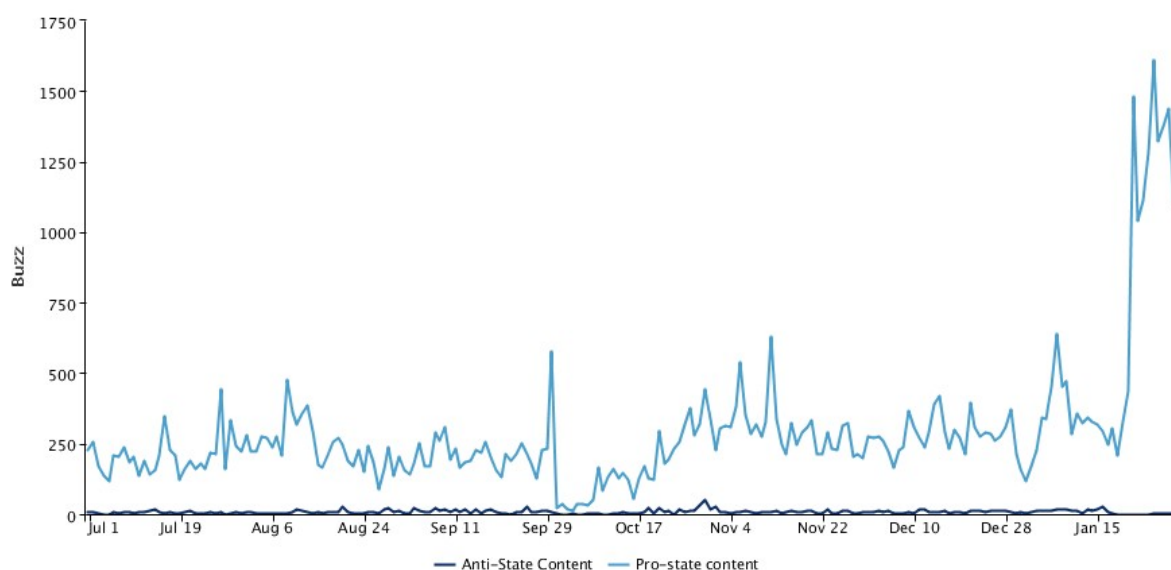
(Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and Isentia)

There have been media reports in which advocacy groups, dissidents and activists accused Vietnam's cyber-troops of online harassment and abuse.[40] Force 47 has also allegedly cashed in on loopholes in Facebook's community policies which allow for automatic rejection of content if enough people lodge complaints about certain accounts. In other words, by mustering up a large number of cyber-troops to report to Facebook, the task force could have targeted accounts suspended and content belonging to activists removed.[41] The lack of empirical evidence has, however, made it hard to ascertain the extent to which these operations account for the daily workload of Vietnam's cyber-troops.

Unlike their peers in Thailand, Malaysia or the Philippines, Vietnam's cyber-troops have been encouraged to use real accounts to mass-report content.[42] This helps explain why Vietnam has been the only country in the region to acknowledge its authorities' deployment of cyber-troops. The use of real accounts is also a testament to how increasingly adept Vietnam has become at co-opting Facebook. When the authorities invoked local laws to compel Facebook to take down posts, the platform was bound to document such "content restrictions" in its biannual transparency report, which could deal a major blow to its reputation and invite increased scrutiny. But when Facebook removes content based on mass reporting, which is subject to its own content moderation policies, the takedown does not merit any public acknowledgement. This approach amounts to a two-way street that is likely to redound to the benefit of a transactional social media giant.[43]

STILL MILES AWAY FROM THE CHINESE MODEL

At a time when Southeast Asian nations are embracing China's state censorship approach,[44] the use of cyber-troops appears to be part and parcel along that trajectory, and Vietnam is apparently not an exception.[45] But the scale, capacity and performance of Vietnam's cyber-troops are still dwarfed by those of their Chinese counterparts.

Contrary to widespread assumptions, empirical evidence presented in a 2017 Harvard paper shows that China's "50-cent" party, which consists of as many as two million people tasked with faking around 448 social media comments a year, "engages in almost no argument of any kind".[46] The force is instead charged with chiefly "cheerleading for the state, symbols of the regime, or the revolutionary history of the [China]'s Communist Party." According to the paper authors, these activities are designed to strategically distract from "collective action, grievances, or general negativity." Even though Vietnam has said its web-monitoring unit is now capable of scanning up to 300 million news items per day for "false information",[47] it remains an uphill battle for Vietnam's cyber-troops to fulfil the task of diluting the information environment in the online sphere.

Against that backdrop, the daily mission of Force 47 and public opinion shapers is likely to continue revolving around (i) making specific, directed pro-regime arguments, (ii) attacking those who oppose the government from inside Vietnam and from abroad, and (iii) targeting high-profile activists and influential groups online. It is likely that the Western media will continue focusing on how Vietnam's cyber-troops target dissidents and activists. Still, in a country where the media is tightly controlled, how much the cyber unit contributes to the official narrative is an intriguing question and merits further discussion.

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