

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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## **Flexing Censorship Muscles and Leveraging Public Sentiments: How The Vietnamese State Scrambles to Sanitise Its Image Online**

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*Screengrab of the British docuseries “MH370: The Plane That Disappeared” where Netflix was forced to remove one out of the three-part episode in Vietnam as the content was deemed unacceptable. Source: Official Trailer from YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDg0m2Q3H8c>. Video accessed on 24 July 2023.*

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Netflix recently found itself having to entertain requests to censor three shows after Vietnamese authorities deemed their content unacceptable and “hurting the feelings of the people.” This raises the question of how much this rhetoric genuinely reflects the views of the general population.
- Vietnam’s ongoing efforts aimed at safeguarding national prestige in the digital sphere have resulted in the introduction of new regulations that could expose the online streaming industry to heightened censorship. Against that backdrop, it appears that Netflix’s future may be at stake if the streaming platform refuses to go along with the Vietnamese government’s censorship demands.
- An examination of three instances of censorship of Netflix shows indicates that the popular public sentiments that Vietnamese authorities cited to justify their censorship decisions were predominantly confined to an echo chamber, consisting mainly of pro-regime Facebook pages and state-controlled news outlets that actively promote government-sanctioned narratives.
- The censorship overreach and the manipulation of public opinion employed to sanitise the regime’s image in the digital sphere risk being counter-productive. These moves could end up casting the Vietnamese government in a bad light, revealing its hypersensitivity, insecurity and double standards.

## INTRODUCTION

A British docuseries, a South Korean television drama, and an Australian spy drama. Netflix has recently been forced to remove these shows altogether from its programme lineup in Vietnam in response to the authorities flagging them for having content deemed unacceptable. This development highlights the heightened censorship the American streaming giant has faced in Vietnam.

In April 2023, Netflix removed the first episode of the docuseries *MH370: The Plane That Disappeared* from its service in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Vietnamese authorities pilloried the three-episode show, stating that it contained “inaccurate and unsubstantiated” information regarding Vietnam’s search-and-rescue efforts for flight MH370, the Malaysia Airlines plane that vanished in 2014 en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing with 239 people onboard.<sup>2</sup> In October 2022, *Little Women*, a K-drama about three sisters living in modern-day South Korea, was pulled from Netflix after the authorities claimed it distorted Vietnam War history.<sup>3</sup> In June 2021, Vietnam demanded the removal of the Australian spy drama *Pine Gap* for featuring a map depicting Beijing’s unilaterally declared “nine-dash line” that represents its expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea.<sup>4</sup>

Vietnamese authorities have consistently defended their censorship decisions by stating that the content in these programmes provoked public outrage.<sup>5</sup> Using discourse analysis, this paper examines how much that rationale genuinely reflects the sentiments of the public at large. It explores how the Vietnamese government leverages popular public sentiments to justify its censorship of these Netflix shows, with the ultimate aim of safeguarding the regime's image in the digital space.

## PROTECT NATIONAL PRESTIGE ON THE DIGITAL FRONT

Over the past 25 years, the curbing of anti-state content has shaped the way Vietnamese authorities deployed various online censorship strategies, while also dictating how a raft of laws and regulations on Internet controls were formulated and enforced.<sup>6</sup> In Hanoi’s perspective, anti-state content is what potentially can undermine national prestige, besmirch the reputation of the ruling Communist party, and slander and defame Vietnamese leaders.<sup>7</sup> Dangling access to a lucrative market of nearly 100 million people, Vietnamese authorities have become increasingly adept at exploiting their economic leverage to strong-arm big tech companies into erasing content flagged as anti-state.<sup>8</sup> (Facebook boasts nearly 70 million users in Vietnam while YouTube has 63 million users and TikTok around 50 million).<sup>9</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, enticed by the lure of the Vietnamese market, major digital content platforms have exhibited a growing inclination to accommodate the Vietnamese government’s censorship demands,<sup>10</sup> citing the need to adhere to local laws in the countries where they operate. Based on the latest data disclosed by Vietnam’s Ministry of Information and Communications, Facebook complied with government requests and deleted 2,549 posts during the first six months of this year; similarly, YouTube removed 6,101 videos, and TikTok took down 415 links.<sup>11</sup> The ministry has claimed that the compliance rates by Facebook and YouTube both exceed 90% while according to its transparency report, TikTok’s was lower, at

74.4%.<sup>12</sup> Since 2017, the transparency reports of Facebook and YouTube have also revealed that a majority of the restricted or removed items were related to “government criticism”<sup>13</sup> or “oppose the Communist Party and the Government of Vietnam.”<sup>14</sup>

Constant government efforts aimed at safeguarding national prestige in the digital sphere have led to the implementation of new regulations that may subject the online streaming industry to increased censorship. Since January 2023, a Vietnamese government decree has imposed penalties and bans on movies, including those available for online streaming.<sup>15</sup> The offenses – such as undermining national interests, eroding cultural values, or corrupting morality – are vaguely defined, leaving them subject to broad interpretation and arbitrary enforcement. This dynamic portends a bumpy road ahead for Netflix, which is geared up to become the first major American tech firm to set up shop in Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> It appears that Netflix’s future may be at stake if the streaming platform refuses the Vietnamese government’s demands to censor content. But finding a way to accommodate those requests has proven to be challenging in a country where an unpredictable censorship system makes it difficult to determine what content would be considered unacceptable.<sup>17</sup>

## **DRIVEN BY PUBLIC OPINION – OR DRIVING IT?**

This section examines three recent cases of Vietnam’s censorship of Netflix shows by analysing public sentiments on them on Facebook, the country’s most popular social media platform. In all three instances, a strikingly similar pattern emerged: Vietnamese authorities justified their requests for censorship by invoking the notion of “hurting the feelings of the people.” This rationale was either directly mentioned in their statements or conveyed through reports in state-controlled news outlets.<sup>18</sup> The section explores two questions. Firstly, to what extent does this “hurt feelings” rhetoric actually reflect prevailing public opinion? And secondly, to what degree was there government manipulation involved in influencing this narrative?

The section examines the relevant content of 90 public Facebook pages and 10 state-affiliated news outlets and portals. These are divided into three categories:

- Category I – Pro-government pages: 30 self-proclaimed patriotic pages that explicitly adopt a pro-government stance. Amassing a strong base of followers between 21,000 and 236,000, these pro-government Facebook pages have been highly engaged in flagging content deemed detrimental to the reputation of the Vietnamese party-state. They actively shape nationalist storylines and peddle them across the cybersphere.
- Category II – Mainstream media: 10 state-controlled news outlets and portals. They are the mouthpiece of the party-state (the Government News Portal, Vietnam News Agency, Vietnam Television, and Voice of Vietnam), influential news outlets (Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien, VietNamNet and Lao Dong) and most-read online news sites (VnExpress and Zing News).

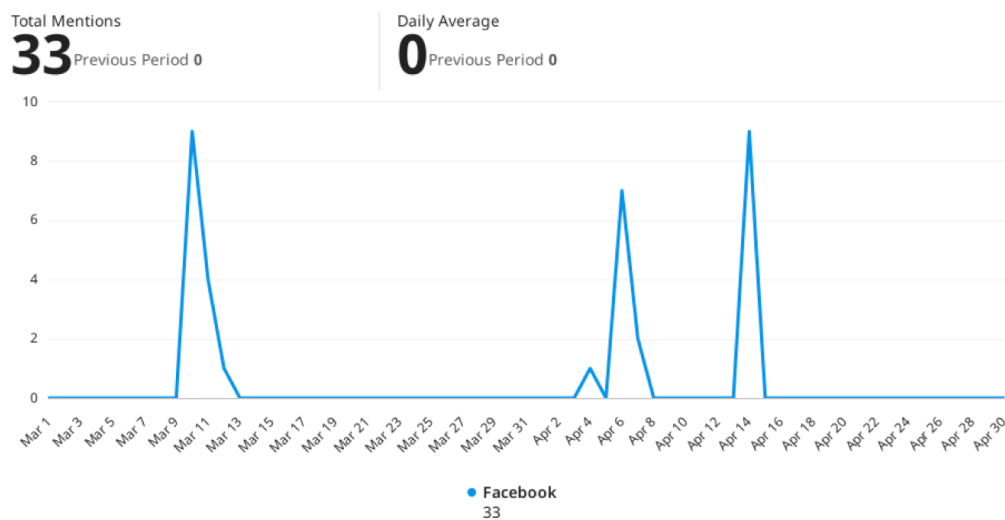
- Category III – Neutral pages: 60 Facebook pages that engage in discussions about movies, entertainment, and garden-variety subjects, excluding politics. These groups have also built up a strong base of tens of thousands of followers.

*MH370: The Plane That Disappeared*

Judging by the official rhetoric, the Vietnamese government’s vehement objection to the *MH370: The Plane That Disappeared* docuseries was pinned down to a single line in the first episode. In this line, a family member of a missing Chinese passenger desperately pleaded for her country’s intervention: “We hope the Chinese government can quickly send a search-and-rescue team, as the Vietnamese [government] doesn’t seem to have much ability.” The Vietnamese government asserted that the show sparked “public outrage.” But it is hard to comprehend why the Vietnamese public would bristle at just a single line quoting a plea made by an ordinary citizen in a desperate situation.

In fact, an analysis of public sentiments suggests that the online backlash against the MH370 docuseries was largely confined to a bubble of state media outlets and pro-government Facebook groups. As shown in Figure 1, the topic elicited few mentions on Facebook (33) from 1 March to 30 April 2023. The most substantial spikes in discussion aligned with the official narrative and revolved around three key timeframes: First, on 10 March, Tifosi, a vocal pro-government Facebook page, flagged the perceived problematic content of the docuseries.<sup>19</sup> About a month later, on 6 April, Vietnam’s foreign ministry spokesperson officially requested that Netflix rectify and remove “inaccurate information” related to the country’s search efforts in the show. And on 13 April, Netflix gutted the first episode.

**FIGURE 1. ONLINE DISCUSSION ON THE MH370 DOCUSERIES**



(Source: ISEAS data)

The mainstream media stuck to the official line that panned the docuseries for doing a great disservice to Vietnam's efforts during the rescue mission. Pro-government Facebook pages not only amplified such criticism but also delved into further discrediting the show by excoriating its promotion of "conspiracy theories" that stand on empirically thin ice. Intriguingly, these pages specifically pointed out that one of such conspiracy theories was floated by Florence de Changy, a French journalist who authored a book on the MH370 incident.<sup>20</sup> According to pro-government Facebook pages, de Changy has speculated that the MH370 plane was deliberately shot down over the South China Sea by the US military to prevent undisclosed cargo from reaching China. These pages accused de Changy of continuing to allude to that theory in episode 2 of the docuseries and of implying that Vietnam had played a role in it.

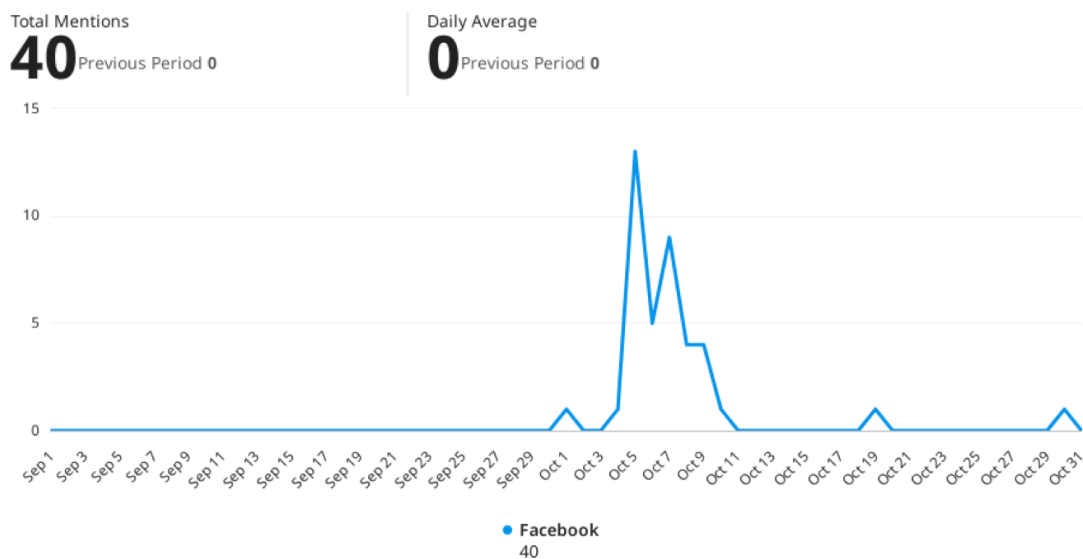
State media outlets and pro-government Facebook pages played a dominant role in flagging the issue, shaping the narrative and propagating it in cyberspace. In contrast, the neutral Facebook pages analysed for this section did not touch upon this subject at all. The topic also elicited low public engagement online. Out of the 90 Facebook pages and 10 state-controlled news outlets and portals examined for this section, another content analysis was conducted specifically on 10 actors identified as the most active in promoting the relevant narrative. The examination finds that nine of them were pro-regime Facebook pages, while the remaining one was the Facebook page of the Government News Portal. Of a total of 3,589 posts churned out on various topics by those 10 Facebook pages between 1 March and 30 April 2023, the Government News Portal and Tifosi were responsible for producing solely three unique posts related to the MH370 docuseries. The other pages merely picked up, aggregated, and amplified those narratives. No post made it into the list of the top 100 most engaged content, ranked 148<sup>th</sup>,<sup>21</sup> 224<sup>th</sup><sup>22</sup> and 349<sup>th</sup>.<sup>23</sup> In response to those posts, Internet users were generally supportive. But notably, their opinions closely aligned with, and often mirrored, the main thrust of the propagated narratives.

### *Little Women*

The censorship of *Little Women* appeared to hinge on several lines in episode eight of the 12-part series, which featured a war veteran bragging about how South Korean troops slaughtered their Vietnamese counterparts. "In our best battles, the kill-to-death ratio for Korean troops was 20:1. That's 20 Viet Cong killed for one Korean soldier dead," the veteran said, referring to the communist-led army and guerrilla force supported largely by North Vietnam during the war. He added that the ratio was even higher among his country's most skilled soldiers. Vietnamese authorities stated that the K-drama "distorted" the events of the war; but it appears that it was axed because the lines, in Hanoi's perspective, callously reopened the wounds of the conflict.<sup>24</sup>

As Figure 2 shows, the topic garnered a relatively similar level of attention as the MH370 docuseries case, with a dismal number of mentions (40). The most conspicuous peaks in online discussion on the topic also correlated with the government's official narrative and revolved around two key developments: First, on 4 October, the Vietnamese government officially demanded that Netflix remove the entire show. Two days later, the platform honored the request.

**FIGURE 2. ONLINE DISCUSSION ON THE LITTLE WOMEN DRAMA**



(Source: ISEAS data)

The mainstream media simply quoted the Vietnamese government's general statement that *Little Women* was removed due to its distortion of the history of the Vietnam War, without providing further details. But in picking up and amplifying the narrative initiated by Tifosi, other pro-government Facebook pages went the extra mile to recall the atrocities perpetrated by South Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War, a topic leaders from both countries have shunned in the face of burgeoning bilateral ties.<sup>25</sup> Of note, online discussions on this topic also took place on neutral Facebook pages, where Vietnamese netizens expressed criticism of the show for the lines related to the war in a more moderate manner. But intriguingly, a similar portion of other Internet users opined that the Vietnamese government was making a fuss just over several lines in a show featuring South Korea's contemporary society.

It is important to note that such discussions only gained momentum after Thanh Nien, an influential state newspaper, flagged the perceived controversial line<sup>26</sup> and Tifosi then fanned the flames.<sup>27</sup> At the end of the day, it was still state-run news outlets and pro-government Facebook groups that were most active in flagging the topic, shaping the narrative and trending it in cyberspace. Another content analysis was carried out on the 10 actors most active in peddling the official narrative. Among them was the Facebook page of the Government News Portal; the other nine were pro-regime Facebook pages. Out of more than 2,020 posts covering various subjects by those 10 Facebook pages from September 1 to October 31, 2022, Tifosi, the Government News Portal, *Hoc vien phong chong phan dong* (Anti-reactionary Academy), and *Don Vi Tac Chien Dien Tu* (Comrade Commissar) generated a total of six original posts specifically focused on the topic; the other pages just compiled, adopted and magnified the narratives. Only one of these posts managed to secure a spot among the top 100 most engaged content, ranked 8<sup>th</sup>.<sup>28</sup> The other posts were ranked 149<sup>th</sup>,<sup>29</sup> 194<sup>th</sup>,<sup>30</sup> 316<sup>th</sup>,<sup>31</sup> 449<sup>th</sup> and 1059<sup>th</sup>.<sup>33</sup>

### *Pine Gap*

The move to censor *Pine Gap* became even more puzzling when considering the circumstances. While Vietnamese authorities claimed that the show “angered and hurt the feelings of the entire people of Vietnam”, there was hardly any discussion about it on social media, even among pro-government Facebook pages, let alone enough to trigger an online backlash. State-run news outlets only started covering the case after Vietnam's Authority of Broadcasting and Electronic Information requested the removal of the show, with which Netflix ultimately complied.

To be sure, few actions are as sensitive and likely to provoke public discontent in Vietnam as those that validate China’s maritime claims.<sup>34</sup> Case in point: in July 2023, Vietnam banned the release of the highly anticipated *Barbie* movie, allegedly because of a scene that featured the nine-dash line.<sup>35</sup> There has been no compelling evidence to substantiate this claim by Vietnamese censors, however.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, the Philippines conducted a “meticulous review” and concluded that the movie does not portray the nine-dash line on the world map, leading them to decide against banning its screening in that country.<sup>37</sup> But still, the ban on *Barbie* in Vietnam has not triggered any significant public backlash. In fact, a significant portion of Vietnamese netizens threw strong support behind the decision.<sup>38</sup> Seen in such a light, the Vietnamese public would have likely objected to the display of the nine-dash line in *Pine Gap* had they been given the opportunity to see it. It is more probable, however, that only a limited number of ordinary Vietnamese individuals, much less the “entire population”, had actually watched the show before the authorities intervened and censored it preemptively. In fact, when it was taken down in June 2021, *Pine Gap* had not even cracked the list of the top 10 most popular shows in Vietnam.<sup>39</sup>

### *Key takeaways*

As shown in those three case studies, what Vietnamese authorities claimed as popular public sentiments to justify their censorship decisions was in fact confined to an echo chamber, primarily comprising of pro-regime Facebook pages and state-controlled news outlets that were highly proactive in propagating government-sanctioned narratives. This means that such sentiments expressed online were unlikely to reflect the prevailing public opinion. As Truong (2022) has argued, there has been a growing reluctance in the Vietnamese public to openly express their political views online, particularly due to the presence of staunch defense-security figures within the Politburo, the country's supreme decision-making body.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, Vietnam’s state-sponsored cyber troops have become more skilled in manipulating public sentiments online.<sup>41</sup> Previous research done by ISEAS also indicated that popular backing for the Vietnamese government’s positions on certain issues may have been artificially inflated through posts from pro-government Facebook pages.<sup>42</sup>

## **IMAGE SANITISED OR TAINTED?**

It is indeed perplexing why Vietnamese censors reacted strongly to just a single line in the MH370 docuseries, as the country was internationally recognised for its efforts in the search and rescue mission for the missing flight.<sup>43</sup> Given that the docuseries has also been released to poor reviews<sup>44</sup>, such censorship only revealed the underlying insecurity of Vietnamese



authorities when confronted with narratives that were perceived to be tainting the regime's reputation. The removal of *Little Women* appears to be a hypocritical action; the Vietnamese government has never formally requested for an official apology or reparations from South Korea for its wartime atrocities.<sup>45</sup> This display of toughness seems to be a mere facade in light of the actual historical context. It was also puzzling as to why Vietnamese authorities resorted to engineering a popular backlash to justify their censorship of *Pine Gap*. Vietnam has made it crystal clear that companies operating within its borders must adhere to the laws prohibiting content that undermines the nation's maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea.<sup>46</sup> Foreign companies also know full well that this is a line they must never cross while in Vietnam.<sup>47</sup> In light of this, the manufacturing of public opinion to buttress the Vietnamese government's censorship request was just unnecessary.

The fixation on sanitising the regime's image on the digital front has increasingly dictated Vietnam's Internet controls. But the censorship overreach and the engineering of public opinion employed to achieve this goal, as examined in the three case studies above, are likely to prove counter-productive and only serve to lay bare the regime's hypersensitivity, insecurity and double standards.

## ENDNOTES

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