

Virtual civil society... but it is real

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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the rise of civil society in Vietnam in the last five years from 2007 to 2012. It focuses on how civil society has been growing since 2011 with the crucial contribution of social media networks even though the political culture around it is communist. In addition to describing the growth of civil society, it seeks to outline the many measures that the ruling communist party has been taking to put blogosphere in Vietnam under tight control, and the ongoing online war between the party and democracy activists.

Despite the daunting control by the ruling communist party, civil society has been burgeoning and broadening its influence in Vietnam, with the Internet as its starting point.

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October 21, 2011 may have been a black Friday for Tran Gia Thai, the director of the state-owned Hanoi Television. Being a member of the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam and a journalist with years of experience of working under its leadership, he had never faced such a strange thing: a group of ten to twenty people gathering in front of the gate, chanting “justice and truth”, “objection to the Hanoi Television”, “journalists, respect the truth”, etc. Those people were launching a small protest against the station for having broadcast “slandorous information about patriotic protestors.” Apart from this common purpose, they shared another characteristic, that is, all of them were either Facebookers or bloggers, or both. At the same time, a “live coverage” of their demonstration was being shared rapidly on social media networks and on “Sidewalk News Agency”, one of the leading political blogs in Vietnam.

Two months before, in its evening news program of August 21, Hanoi Television – an official mouthpiece of the local party apparatus in Hanoi – broadcast a reportage labelling all anti-China protestors in Hanoi as fomenters and hostile forces trying to sabotage national solidarity and disrupt social order “under the guise of patriotism”.

Just in the morning, a protest by Hanoi bloggers was quickly suppressed with 47 people arrested, some of them accused of “disrupting public order”. This was the last one in their serial anti-China protests in the summer of 2011, which suffered from brutal suppression. Participants were arrested by the busloads, some carried like pigs. Blogger Nguyen Chi Duc was pushed down and

stamped on the face by a young policeman. Although an anonymous video of this dramatic scene went viral on Facebook, the police simply alleged it to be a fake.

For Ho Chi Minh City, protests had been stamped out with much more violence and ended after three Sundays. Photos circulated on Internet showing plainclothes policemen punching and knocking down young protestors on main streets.

Apart from the police, state-owned media had also been mobilized thoroughly in “propagating the mass” against these protests. Mass media was used actively to alienate the protestors from the public, equating comments critical of the government with “defaming the state”, and discrediting whoever appeared influential to the public but not yet arrested.

With such machinery of media, the CPV may have rested assured that things are well under its control: People keep being brainwashed, and if a minority of people want to speak out their different opinions, they simply cannot find any way to do. Also, there is no way for people to get connected: no communication, no right to assembly. No way.

But the light at the end of the tunnel came with the advent of Internet media.

Dawn of the blogs

Internet was introduced in Vietnam in November 1997. Initially it was a luxury: Only wealthy people could afford the high rates charged for access and usage. However, the rates were brought down over time and Vietnam is currently among the countries with highest Internet growth rates.

Apart from using the Internet for chatting and playing games, the Vietnamese prove to be particularly interested in social networks. On June 24, 2005, Yahoo! 360° was in the US. It quickly became a phenomenon later on in Vietnam, a country where the people have for years just read, watched and listened to what the government allows them to. Now with Yahoo! 360° blogs, people can write what they think, first for themselves and then for those they want to share the contents with. They don't need to rely absolutely on the state-owned media any more.

Soon later Vietnam witnessed a new wave in mass media realm: 2006-2008 is Yahoo! 360°'s boom years in Vietnam. Vietnamese net users wrote notes, posted photographs, shared files and links to sources outside the government's realm. A whole new world opened to them with a lot of “first-time” wonders: for the first time in Vietnamese history, people can self-publish; a generation of “net-writers” formed as fiction authors wrote chic-lit and posted to blogs; and, most importantly, people could connect with each other in ways that were totally out of state control.

There were some prominent net-writers, such as Tran Thu Trang, Trang Ha, and Ha Kin. It was understandable that most famous net-writers were women in their 20s and they stayed away from

politics: after all, politics remained risky in communist Vietnam. After years of propaganda, the mass media and the education system have succeeded in making people, especially young ones, think of politics as either a bad and dangerous thing or the business of “the Party and the state” only.

While politics is forbidden, chic-lit is a good option. Short stories and novels on popular topics such as urban life, love, and sex were produced and posted to blogs in series like some kind of soap opera, but on the Internet instead of television. Some bloggers tried to increase page views by publishing titillation entries and photos as well as contents related to celebrities. Co Gai Do Long (The Dragon-killing Lady) and Only You were two such bloggers.

There were also a few political bloggers, or to be exact, politics-oriented bloggers. But they were so few in number that can be counted on the finger of one hand, and none of them was famous yet: Vang Anh (meaning “Oriole”, mainly known for sex-related entries and thrillers, interspersed with political commentaries), Nguoi Buon Gio (meaning “the Wind Trader”), and Anh Ba Sam’s Sidewalk News Agency. Gio and Sam would later become very famous names in the community of Vietnamese bloggers.

Proletarians, you can’t unite!

The ability to get connected and to communicate is the most important criterion for people to form groups as the platform of civil society. The CPV must be well aware of this fact, so it controls the press strictly as discussed above. In addition, it keeps a close eye on the ability of people to build real-life networks. Using the law as a powerful tool, the ruling party prevents organizations from being formed and operated without state intervention. Article 79 of the Penal Code, for example, imposes even life imprisonment and death penalty on those who “carry out activities, establish or join organizations with intent to overthrow the people’s administration.” With this the CPV deters the establishment of any potential political party.

Article 258 goes further in the vague legal language as saying “Those who abuse the rights to freedom of speech, freedom of press... assembly, association... to infringe upon the interests of the State, the legitimate rights and interests of organizations and/or citizens” shall all be sentenced. This vague and confusing provision paved the way for arbitrary arrests and sentences imposed on journalists and bloggers.

On May 12, 2008, the circle of Vietnamese journalists and Yahoo! 360° community were shocked by the arrest of two investigative journalists, Nguyen Van Hai and Nguyen Viet Chien, who had reported on a major multi-million-dollar corruption case. Both were charged under Article 258. The arrest and the subsequent sentence against Hai and Chien dealt a harsh blow on anti-corruption media and news coverage on this “sensitive” topic has been plummeting since.

Co Gai Do Long, one of the most popular bloggers in Vietnam since the time of Yahoo! 360°, was arrested on October 26, 2010, for having posted an entry “defaming” a public security officer, General Nguyen Khanh Toan, and, again, she was charged under Article 258. The problem was, as many bloggers pointed out, it was hard to distinguish between fighting corruption and infringing “upon the interests of the State.”

The government also used Decree 38 (2005) on public order to stamp out demonstrations, and Article 88 of the Penal Code on propagating against the state to imprison dissidents. In the past two years, dozens of demonstrators were taken to rehabilitation camp and accused of violating Decree 38. In 2012 alone, 52 people were either detained or charged under Article 88.

Well, we unite online then!

When the communist lawmakers issued legislation to restrict democratic rights, they did not think of a forthcoming powerful “enemy”: Internet. Its power began to be noticed by the government since the end of 2007.

The Sunday morning of December 9, 2007 marked a noticeable event: protests by bloggers broke out in Hanoi and HCMC in opposition of China’s ratification of a plan to set up “Sansha City” to administer the Spratly and Paracel islands. Those were the first demonstrations in Vietnam since 1975.

What should be newsworthy was that the protests originated from calls for demonstrations spread via Yahoo! 360°. The traditional media, as usual, stayed silent. But Internet media, on the other hand, was excited. People kept sending photos and blog entries covering the first-ever demonstrations. Dieu Cay was among the most active participants. Even apolitical bloggers must have heard that there were anti-China demonstrations “somewhere”.

The government, however, saw the event from another angle. The subsequent protests on the two following Sundays were soon cracked down upon. Four months later, on April 19, 2008, Dieu Cay was arrested, then sentenced to 2 years and 6 months in prison for “tax evasion”. He would later be given another sentence of 12 years more for “propagating against the state” under Article 88.

However, despite the arrest of Dieu Cay, the authorities failed to break the network of independent journalists or “citizen journalists” he had built, the “Free Journalists’ Club.” They did not think that even a blogger – an non-professional writer and photographer like Dieu Cay – could have his audience, even “fans”.

A campaign of suppression upon protesters and other members of FJC began with Dieu Cay’s arrest. Many young people were made jobless, even homeless if they were not residents in Hanoi and HCMC. Two other founders of FJC, Phan Thanh Hai (aka. Anhbasg) and Ta Phong Tan,

were successively detained in 2010 and 2011. Together with Dieu Cay, they would be given harsh sentence of 4 and 10 years in prison at a notorious trial of December 28, 2012.

However, persecution seemed not to create the fear that the government had hoped for, especially when the persecuted bloggers began to report on blogs what happened to them. This was a big change. In the past, there used to be campaigns against political dissidents or those deemed to be defectors, such as the “Nhan Van – Giai Pham” of the 1950s and the “anti-revisionist” of 1960s. Suppression, though brutal and inhuman, went almost unnoticed because everyone kept silent. Now things were different: Bloggers were always ready to write about interrogations, pressures and the many forms of persecution they faced, in doing so they revealed some truth about the authorities. It turned out that government officials, police, and other representatives of the state were not infallible or superior to the people. Even the technique of interrogation was incredibly bad sometimes, as Facebooker Goc Say (The Reed) once reported on his page such an interrogation:

Policeman: Why do you go protesting? Defending national sovereignty is none of your business. The Party and the Government are in charge.

Protestor: Let the Government do what it is in charge of. I am just an individual, a citizen having no space to voice my opinion, so I go protesting.

Policeman: By doing so, you just worsen the situation. You let those bad people, those reactionaries and hostile forces take advantage of you.

Protestor: That’s your opinion. But there’s nothing like “hostile forces taking advantage of demonstrators.” We are mature citizens, we are educated, and never let anyone use us for their purpose...”

On July 13, 2009, Yahoo! 360° closed down. Initially this close-down looked like a big loss to political bloggers in Vietnam, when their community split up. Some automatically moved to Yahoo! 360° Plus, which is managed from Yahoo!’s office in Vietnam. Others chose Wordpress, Blogger, Multiply, Weblog, etc. However, they would soon gather again, this time in a new, powerful and influential forum: Facebook. Statistics updated in March 2013 showed that Vietnam is among the leading countries in Facebook growth rate, with 11 million accounts. Such must be a frightening battlefield for the CPV.

Some political bloggers emerged. Anh Ba Sâm’s blog became a hot “meeting point” for those who pay attention to politics. Anh Ba Sam is the nickname of a blogger, who named his blog “Thong Tan Xa Via He” (Sidewalk News Agency), mocking Vietnam News Agency. (Sidewalk news is Vietnamese slang for “gossip” or “canards” that people tell each other when they are passing their time at sidewalk cafes). What the editors have been doing so far is to publish a

daily news summary about Vietnam, whether by Vietnamese mainstream media or by blogger (citizen journalists) or by international media agencies. For each item, the editors post its link and add their personal comments to it, often in a humorous and satirical style. The job seems too simple to attract such a huge audience – over 100,000 readers per day, the desirable readership for any state-owned printed newspaper. But for sure it is not at all simple. Anh Ba Sam’s blog has satisfied an audience tired of lifeless and overly serious propaganda who are thirsty for alternative media. The Sidewalk News Agency appeared to be more appealing than any other mainstream media agency: It provides a good variety of news in domestic and international politics, business, education, science and technology, with an unprecedented idiosyncrasy – a mixture of straightforward, humorous southern Vietnamese language and critical analyses of the sober northern Vietnamese mind.

Beside Anh Ba Sam, there are some other famous blogs such as Nguoi Buon Gio, Que Choa, Xuan Dien, and Truong Duy Nhat (just detained on May 26, 2013 under Article 258 of the Penal Code). The number of political blogs has been growing at an unexpected pace in the years since 2011, and now it amounts to around 30 – such an unimaginable figure four or five years ago.

Unlike officially sanctioned or Party-owned media, these alternative media are highly interactive: Indeed they are online forums where people give free comments, and authors can discuss, even quarrel with audience about topics of concern. This important feature of “citizens’ newspapers” made them ideal rallying points for people, whether domestic or overseas, anonymous or identified, to assemble online. Some people even grew famous because of their comments, not for their works. Dan Lam Bao (People Do Journalism), one of the most vocal dissident blogs, even called itself a “hamlet”. Herein lay a new form of civil society: *the civil society on the net*.

Online relationships may go offline. Some people would soon meet in real life to become small groups, for sure without registration or state recognition. They did a lot of practical things: they helped the families of imprisoned bloggers like Dieu Cay, Ta Phong Tan and Anhbasg; they went to the trials of new political dissidents such as legal activist Cu Huy Ha Vu; they shared and even printed self-published books on the taboo realm of politics. And, perhaps most importantly, they made up the platform for forthcoming demonstrations.

State-owned vs. Citizens’ journalism

China seems to play a particularly important role in Vietnam’s politics. Apart from the allegation that the Chinese Communist Party kept unjustifiably interfering into its counterpart’s domestic concerns, the fact is that “objections to aggressive China” has always been taken by Vietnamese bloggers as a good reason for protests, especially in light of the sea dispute between Vietnam and China.

On May 26, 2011, Chinese maritime surveillance vessels cut seismic exploration cables of Petro Vietnam's Binh Minh 2 vessel in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone. A burst of anger spread on the blogosphere and Facebook. The Nhat Ky Yeu Nuoc (Diary of Patriotism, a Facebook page created in April 2010) called for protests against China, and the result was, on June 5, protests broke out in both Hanoi and HCMC. Together with Nhat Ky Yeu Nuoc's Facebook page, Xuan Dien and Anh Ba Sam emerged as prominent rallying points for protestors. They published notices of demonstration, even calling on the police to "make way for citizens to exercise freedom of expression."

Such calls were unacceptable to the government in a country where demonstration had been a taboo since 1975 when the war ended and the CPV took power. This could be explained by what a public security officer told the author in an interrogation in July 2012, "We can never let a small flame grow into a fire. We must extinguish it as soon as we can." On one hand, the authorities reacted immediately by sending the police in, employing violence to crack down on protests. On the other hand, suppression campaigns grew on the Internet. A simple technique was to launch site attacks. Anh Ba Sam, Que Choa, Goc Say, and other influential blogs were regularly hacked, data removed and replaced by information insulting the victims. Every site attack was considered by the blogger community to be a disaster, but the good news was that the blog was usually restored quite soon. Arguably all site attacks were attributed to Vietnamese internet police, sometimes even to Chinese hackers.

The classical way of Internet control – site blockade – was also widely used. Since 2009, Facebook, Blogspot, Multiply, etc. experienced blockades now and then. The police also did not give up persecuting bloggers. Numerous bloggers have been summoned, interrogated, detained, and assaulted by the police in the last five years. Xuan Dien was fined by the Hanoi's Department of Information and Communication for his publishing "bad contents" on his blog.

In addition, the state-owned media has been mobilized thoroughly in "propagating the mass" against demonstrations which are now labeled "anti-state acts". The mass media machinery played an active role in alienating the protestors from the public, equating comments critical of the government with "defaming the state", and discrediting bloggers who appeared influential to the public but not yet arrested. Protestors reacted by writing more, shooting more and sharing more on Facebook, Youtube, and blogs. Some held a small demonstration just in front of Hanoi Television in objection to "calumnious reports on patriotic protestors." The demonstration did not gain much: Tran Gia Thai and the television as a mouthpiece of Hanoi's Party Cell would never apologize to "reactionaries". But at least it was the first time the state-owned television saw the wrath of victimized audience.

The communication battle turned fierce when the authorities started to use "bloggers against bloggers". Head of the Hanoi Party Committee's Propaganda Department, Ho Quang Loi, in a

meeting to review the press' activities in 2012, said the Department had set up a force of 900 "rumormongers" (ie. public opinion shapers) in Hanoi alone "to fully exploit the power of propagandists." The Propaganda Department, Loi added, also succeeded in building "teams of professionals" to directly participate in pen wars on the Internet against dissidents; until then they had set up 19 news sites and 400 net accounts. These hired commentators are really savage cyber troops. Anonymous, faceless, and perhaps ill-educated, they act like Internet guards, browsing political blogs and bombing them with whatever fallacious and crude language they can think of.

But it seemed too late for the authorities to deter people from grouping online and speaking out about their opinions. Facebook, with the utility of allowing users to hold secret groups, became the first choice of platform. It seems the more strictly Facebook is blocked, the more strongly Facebookers aspire to log in, and the more Internet-savvy they turn. No firewall can impede them. And what must come around, came around. In August 2011, when the crackdown on protestors reached its peak in Hanoi with an official warning from the People's Committee to disperse all kinds of assembly, the first secret groups of "patriotic protestors" were created. It was understandable that they never registered and would never be licensed. For the first time in the history of democracy process in Vietnam, dissidents could connect in organized, though underground, groups.

Within a few months since August 2011, underground groups developed into a large network of activists all over Vietnam's Internet. No one really knows or can tell how many groups there are in Vietnam at this moment – it is what the police are really hungered to grasp. Now the government and their police are fully aware that demonstration is not "spontaneous" any more.

Most significantly, those online groups have gradually extended their concern from the China-Vietnam territorial dispute to other issues in present Vietnam, for example, the struggles of farmers for land rights. From protestors inspired by nationalism, they became democracy and human right activists. Actually those groups are far from opposition parties under the current circumstance, but at least people concerned about socio-political issues are able to form themselves in groups, in which they share experience and skills in confronting the police, report cases of human right abuses, do charity and launch various social projects together. No-U FC, for example, is a football team whose members meet every Sunday ostensibly for football matches, but whose real aim is to "propagate against China's ox-tongue line" (or the nine-dotted line, the U-shape line, which is used by China as the extent of its territorial claim). Established in October 2011, it soon became the target of police surveillance and harassment. But that did not stop it from broadening membership and social activities like going to charity, helping disadvantaged children and holding seminars on South China Sea disputes – activities that the state had maintained monopoly for decades.

Conclusion

For years the CPV has succeeded in portraying Vietnam to the world as a small beautiful country with impressive economic growth rates, a dynamic government and hospitable people. There is a widely held belief that China and Vietnam can be two prominent examples of how a country can make economic progress even without political reform, or, in other words, development does not necessarily require democracy.

But looking into the undercurrent struggle of bloggers against repressive rulers can bring a totally different insight. The fact is that under the surface of (by now very weak) economic development lies authoritarian policies, a corrupt and repressive government which shuts up voices of dissent and constrains freedom rights. Definitely what this government hates most is accountability and transparency. Consequently, the Internet, with its power to bring everything to light, soon becomes “public enemy.” This is especially true when social media sees its boom in Vietnam. When obsolete mainstream media fails to win the heart of the audience and the public sphere is lost to bloggers, the authorities resort to force.

But, once the people know the taste of freedom, they will not give it up. Democracy and freedom always tend to broaden. In Vietnamese there is a metaphor of “the ceiling”: Once the ruler imposes a ceiling upon the people, everyone must stay below it; but if some people manage to push the ceiling upward to broaden the limited space, the whole community will benefit and they will want more. Thereby the ceiling will soon be pushed upward more and people will enjoy more space to get more addicted to freedom.

Things are the same with freedom of expression in Vietnam in the Internet era.

It is hard to say that civil society organizations have been operating effectively and make contribution to the country’s democratization. Nor can it be said that with the support of Internet, democracy is gaining speed and there will soon be an “Arabian spring” in Vietnam. However, all the groups that have been created on the Internet, though poorly organized, politically inexperienced and far from being opposition parties, are the forerunners of civil society in real life, which at least can familiarize the masses with ideas of a freer space with less state control. Ideally, these online civil society organizations will be the sources of non-communist candidates for public offices in future democratic elections.

ANNEX:**CHRONOLOGY OF BLOGGING MOVEMENT IN VIETNAM (updated 2013)****2003-2004**

2003: Golden days for Talawas (talawas.de), a website founded in 2001 whose founder is the writer Pham Thi Hoai.

End 2003: iCMS, the software product that won the first prize in the Vietnam Intelligence Contest 2003, is found to commit piracy by copying and localizing an international open source software without tribute. The case leads to an ebullient discussion around the topic on Dương Vi Khoa's Informatics Forum (ddth.com), attracting much attention of the IT community.

2004: On the same occasion, the Informatics Forum sets up box X-café, administered by YunaAdmirer, to discuss social issues. The box will later be expanded to other areas such as history, politics, domestic and foreign policy. Many members join the discussions, but at the same time, many others protest for two major reasons. First, political-socio issues go beyond the spectrum of attention of the forum. Second, sensitive topics discussed in box X-café may get ddth.com involved and closed down.

2005

2005: Yahoo! 360° came to Vietnam after officially launched on June 24th in the US.

September 13: Following Dương Vi Khoa's decision to close box X-café, which unofficial sources attribute to an order by public security offices, old members of X-café open another, independent forum, X-cafévn.org. Its philosophy is "To respect the difference", aimed at encouraging open dialogues on political-socio topics.

2006-2008

2006-2008: Yahoo! 360°'s boom years, the dawn of a whole new world of Internet media. Vietnamese net users write, photograph, share files, and get connected with each other. A generation of "net-writers" forms as fiction authors write chick-lit (chicken literature) including novel, short stories, feuilleton, and post their works to blogs everyday. Prominent figures included Trần Thu Trang, Trang Hạ, Hà Kin, Nick D... Most of them are women in their 20s, and most of them stay away from politics, only focusing on their chick-lit works.

Some bloggers try to increase page views by publishing titillation entries and photos, as well as contents related to celebrities: Cô Gái Đò Long (The Dragon-killing Lady), Only You, Vàng Anh.

There are also a few political bloggers, but none of them are famous yet: Vàng Anh (mainly known for sex-related entries and thrillers), Người Buôn Gió (Wind Trader), Anh Ba Sàm (a former public security officer).

August 25, 2007: The Paracel Data Center (hoangsa.org) is founded.

Blogger Hà Kin launches her book, “New York Love Stories”, a typical “net fiction” that tells love stories of a Vietnamese young girl in New York City.

September 9, 2007: The Yahoo! 360° of Anh Ba Sàm is set up.

September 19, 2007: Điều Cày establishes the Free Journalists Network (FJVN). Founders include Điều Cày, Lê Xuân Lập, Huy Cường, Vũ Quốc Tú (aka. blogger Uyên Vũ), and Ngô Thanh Tú (blogger Thiên Sầu). Tạ Phong Tần (owner of the blog Công lý & Sự thật [Justice and Truth]), Phan Thanh Hải (aka. blogger AnhbaSG) join later. From September 2007 to October 2010, when AnhbaSG is detained, there are 421 articles published on this blog, of which 94 articles are written by members of FJVN, and 327 quoted from other sources such as VOA, RFA, the 8406 bloc, Dân Luận, Thông Luận, Người Việt Online, etc.

October 12, 2007: Sex scandal “Vàng Anh” (Vietnamese for canary or oriole) breaks out when a five-minute video tape filming sexual intercourse of Hoàng Thùy Linh, the teen star featuring the female protagonist in TV serial drama “Vàng Anh’s Diary”, is posted to Youtube and, before removed, spreads over Internet at a variety of webpages such as cafechieu, sex9x, etc.

On the evening of October 14th, a whole TV show is devoted by VTV3 to the filmmakers for their “apologies to audience.” On early October 16, another video tape whose length reaches 16 minutes is disseminated on web. On October 25th, four students are arrested for “disseminating debauched cultural products.”

Tắc Kè (Gecko) is the first blog to post the video tapes and “behind-the-curtain” stories related to their protagonists, including the son of a public security officer. Second to Tắc Kè is Vàng Anh, whose nick is named after the female protagonist in the serial drama “Vàng Anh’s Diary.” With their “philosophy” of blogging being “sex, politics and thrillers”, Tắc Kè and Vàng Anh are the two hot bloggers in the period 2007-2008.

Sunday, December 9, 2007: First protests by bloggers in Hanoi and Saigon opposing China’s ratification of a plan to set up “Sansha City” to administer the Spratly and Paracel islands. These are also first people’s demonstrations in the communist Vietnam.

X-café is one of the forums that actively involve in reporting on these anti-China protests in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Its members are also present in these protests.

While the police may not arrest any protester during their rallies, repression begins right afterwards: All bloggers who prove to be “influential” face harassment.

Late 2007, journalist Huy Đức begins to publish his high-impact articles on the Sài Gòn Tiếp Thị (Saigon Marketing) newspaper and his personal blog, Osin, simultaneously.

2008

February 1: The first X-café magazine is introduced.

April 9: Members of “The Saigon party cell”, including many veteran members of X-café since its times on ddth.com, are summoned by public security officers for interrogation around their X-cafevn.org membership and their articles “defaming the Party and the State, creating a frisson of fear among the society.” They are forced to undertake that they will renounce X-cafevn.org.

April 19: Blogger Điều Cày is arrested. He will later be sentenced to 2 years and 6 months in prison for “tax evasion”.

April 29: Youths protested at the Olympic Torch Relay in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The scope of the protests was rather small.

Early November: News about the “great project” of bauxite mining in Tây Nguyên (Central Highland of Vietnam) begins to spread on both mainstream media and in the blogosphere. Some intellectuals and pundits make the first petition urging a review of the whole project.

November 28: Admin Tqvn2004 publishes the declaration of “Goodbye to anti-communist extremists” on X-cafevn.org. The declaration is criticized by many veteran members of the forum. Consequently, it is removed and Tqvn2004 resigns himself from admin of X-cafevn.org.

2009

January 14: VietNamNet publishes a letter from General Võ Nguyên Giáp to Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng, dated January 5, regarding the Chinese bauxite mining project in the Central Highlands. He would subsequently send two more letters – one dated April 9, 2009, to the National Seminar on the Bauxite Mining Project, the other dated May 20, 2009, to the Politburo, National Assembly and Government. The degree of his alerts increased over time: from requesting for a review of the project, to advising not to conduct the project, to finally suggesting that the entire project, including any test phases, be canceled.

January 22: Dân Luận is founded in pursuit of a civil press, whose guideline is observing “neutrality, rationality, and pluralism.” Dân Luận shares the same server with X-cafevn.org.

March: A new political Yahoo! 360° blog, “Change We Need”, becomes famous by directly attacking the bauxite mining project.

This blog provided readers with unverifiable information about the government and its relations with Chinese counterparts. “The Tay Nguyen bauxite mining project: a grave the Vietnamese communist regime digs for itself,” it said.

April 9: The first and only national conference on the bauxite mining project is held at Melia Hotel in Hanoi and lasts for one day. Though the opponents outnumber the supporters, the final decision cannot be reversed.

May 24: Trần Huỳnh Duy Thức, CEO of the One-Connection IT company, is arrested.

Mid-2009: Professor Nguyễn Huệ Chi, elementary school teacher Phạm Toàn, and Dr. Nguyễn Thế Hùng set up a website critical of the bauxite mining project (<http://bauxitevn.info>). It was hacked and subjected to denial of service attacks hundreds of times.

June 11: Lawyer/Activist Cù Huy Hà Vũ filed a lawsuit against Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng for signing the Decision no. 167/2007 in approval of the Tây Nguyên bauxite mining project.

June 13: Lawyer Lê Công Định is arrested. It turned out that Thúc and Định were behind “Change We Need.”

June 18: Blog Free Lê Công Định (freelecongding.wordpress.com) is introduced.

July 13: Yahoo! 360° is closed down permanently. The community of bloggers in Vietnam splits up. Some automatically move to Yahoo! 360° Plus. Others choose Wordpress, Blogger, Multiply, Weblog, etc.

Following the closedown of Yahoo! 360°, Facebook soon emerges as the most popular social network. Anh Ba Sàm’s blog becomes a hot “meeting point” for those who pay attention to politics. He calls his blog “Thông Tấn Xã Vía Hè” or “The Sidewalk News Agency”, mocking Vietnam News Agency. (Sidewalk news is Vietnamese slang for “gossip”, “canards” or “unverifiable information” that people tell each other when they are fooling away their time at sidewalk cafes).

Many new blogs on politics were created in 2009-2010 as a result of the closing of Yahoo! 360°: Quê Choa (<http://quechoa.info>), Trương Duy Nhất (<http://truongduynhat.vn>), Nguyễn Xuân Diện, etc. Quê Choa is the blog of Nguyễn Quang Lập, a fiction writer and scriptwriter, whose humourous, even vulgar style was very popular with audience. Trương Duy Nhất is a mainstream reporter, who declared that he quit professional journalism to focus only on blogging as a free man. Nguyễn Xuân Diện, Ph.D., is a researcher on Vietnam’s ca trù (a Vietnamese folk song genre). Huy Đức's blog Osin is attacked and closed down as of February 5, 2010.

August 27: Người Buôn Gió is detained. Phạm Đoan Trang is detained on the following day, and then Mẹ Năm a few days later. The three were released respectively after a nine-day detention.

Around September: Facebook is blocked for the first time. Facebookers pass on to each other the guidelines of how to bypass firewall.

Late December: The second blockade of Facebook, which is much more fierce.

2010

January 20: X-cafevn.org and Dân Luận are subjected to denial of service attacks for the first time, coinciding with the court of four political dissidents: Lê Công Định, Nguyễn Tiến Trung, Trần Huỳnh Duy Thức and Lê Thăng Long, accused of “carrying out activities to overthrow the people’s administration” under Article 79 of the Penal Code.

February 28: Hacker group Sinh Từ Lệnh penetrates X-cafevn.org and Dân Luận, stealing private registrations of members and posting them to web at sinhtulenh.org. While this group has previously attacked and damaged “left-sided” blogs and websites, this is the first time they appear under the alias Sinh Từ Lệnh (the Command of Life and Death).

August 23: Danlambao is founded. Danlambao means Dân Làm Báo, “citizens do journalism,” as opposed to state-owned media.

At the same time, Freelecongdingh (the forerunner of Danlambao), Thư viện Hà Sĩ Phu, Thông Luận, Tiền Vệ, X-Cafe, Talawas are all attacked by hackers to become inaccessible.

October 18: Blogger AnhbaSG (jurist Phan Thanh Hải) is arrested, just one day before Điều Cày completes his prison term. Subsequently Điều Cày remains in detention under the new charge of “spreading propaganda against the state.” One year later, the third active member of FJVN, blogger Tạ Phong Tần, is arrested on September 5, 2011.

October 26: “Social blogger” Cô Gái Đồ Long, also known as journalist Lê Nguyễn Hương Trà, is arrested for having posted an entry “defaming” a public security officer, General Nguyễn Khánh Toàn, and accused of committing libel.

November 3: Talawas closes down after nine years of operation.

November 5: Legal scholar/ activist Cù Huy Hà Vũ is arrested in a hotel in Ho Chi Minh City in an apparent ambush by policemen. The arrest triggers a war for public opinion between the official media and alternative media begins. Such battles would continue in all other events of the democracy-human rights movements in the following years which revolve around demonstrations, victims of land grabs, trials against dissidents and bloggers, etc.

2011

April 4: First trial of Cù Huy Hà Vũ. Four months later, on August 2nd, an appeal court will confirm Vũ's sentence of 7 years imprisonment for “disseminating anti-state propaganda”.

April 26: Nguyễn Anh Tuấn (born 1990), a student at the National Academy of Public Administration, sends a “confession” to the Supreme People's Procuratorate, requesting to be charged with “conducting propaganda against the state” as was Cù Huy Hà Vũ, for he has also stored “documents with contents against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.”

His request is not resolved and the authorities fail to issue any official decision on the case, but Tuấn was summoned for interrogations and investigation. On May 19, he publishes an open letter, saying “it's a tragedy for nations where good will is only one-sided – from the people.”

May 26: Chinese maritime surveillance vessels cut seismic exploration cables of PetroVietnam's Bình Minh 2 (Dawn 2) vessel in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone. A burst of anger spreads on the Internet, including the blogosphere and Facebook. The Nhật Ký Yêu Nước (Dairy of Patriotism, a Facebook page created on April 12, 2010, officially launched on April 16, 2010) called for protests against China.

Sunday, June 5: Protests broke out in both Hanoi and Saigon. Nguyễn Xuân Diện and Anh Ba Sàm (now known as Ba Sàm) emerge as prominent rallying points for protesters. Both blogs are regularly hacked and attacked, arguably by both Vietnamese internet police (red guards) as well as Chinese hackers. Whereas Ba Sàm just quoted sources from both mainstream and unmainstream media, adding some satiric comments, Nguyễn Xuân Diện seemed to have “overstepped” by posting even the calls for protests, advertising the place and time to rally. It is said this may be part of the reason why Diện has always been in trouble with policemen and in danger of arrest anytime, while Ba Sàm was apparently safe.

Once-famous bloggers Hà Kin, Trang Hạ, Trần Thu Trang, Nick D... are not much heard of now. They keep writing, but there have also been many new faces in chick-lit; thus it looks more difficult now for them to win the hearts of readers. Moreover, when Vietnam is undergoing economic recession, books on such subjects as imaginary romance, home and family, etc. would possibly become less attractive. (This does not necessarily mean that audience will rush to political news and stories instead).

June 9: Chinese fishing boats damaged seismic exploration cables of Viking II, another PetroVietnam vessel.

June 12: Protests in Ho Chi Minh City are suppressed brutally. Photos circulate on Internet showing plainclothes policemen knocking down young protesters on the streets of Saigon.

At the same time, police suppression escalates in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Protesters are intimidated, harassed and isolated. Some are dismissed from their job under police pressure. State-owned media and cyber troops launch massive campaigns against protesters who claim they just peacefully exercise their right to freedom of expression.

June 19: Third Sunday of protests in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. This was the last “bloggers' protest” in Ho Chi Minh City. In Hanoi, protests continued each Sunday until August 21st, when 47 people were arrested, some of them accused of “disrupting public order” (similar to “inciting social disorder” in China).

August 18: The e-book “The F-Generation” is published online at Dan Lam Bao, Ba Sam, etc. as a collection of writings by Vietnamese bloggers on the three anti-China protest rallies in early summer.

August 23: X-cafevn.org and Dân Luận are hacked for the second time by Sinh Từ Lệnh. All data are removed.

October 30: No-U football club is established. “Sharing a sense of patriotism and anger towards China's aggressive acts, suffering from the same police intimidation and suppression, the protesters find themselves united. Furthermore, football is a sport that can most easily bring people together. The No-U football club is founded in this context.

In the spirit of fighting against the irrational ox-tongue line claimed by China in the Southeast Asian sea dispute, and claiming Vietnamese sovereignty over Paracel and Spratly Islands, the football club has also done many other good deeds, including conducting charity tours in support of indigent people and children in remote areas.” (blogger Nguyễn Tường Thụy).

November 17: Mr. Hoàng Hữu Phước, deputy for Ho Chi Minh City, speaks before the National Assembly, “The majority of people will not support a law on protests and demonstrations because protests and demonstrations, by nature, are vulnerable and may lead to abuses, which can easily lead to chaos.” This position and many other opinions and writings on his personal blog earn Phước the title of “Crazy Deputy” given by bloggers.

November 27: A group of bloggers in Hanoi hold a small demonstration to “support the PM and National Assembly” in promulgating the law on protests and demonstrations. All of them are arrested and kept in custody in Lộc Hà rehabilitation camp until the end of the day. In Sai Gon, blogger Bùi Thị Minh Hằng is arrested and taken to Hanoi after trying to protest against the arrest of her Hanoi companions, then detained in the Thanh Hà education camp, Vĩnh Phúc province, until April 29, 2012, for alleged “disturbing public order.”

On the same day, Sai Gon No-U football club is founded.

2012

January 1: Writer Phạm Thị Hoài, who used to run Talawas, sets up her new blog, Pro & Contra.

Thursday, January 5: The Tiên Lãng shootout breaks out in the suburb of Hải Phòng when two fish farmers, Đoàn Văn Vươn and his younger brother Đoàn Văn Quý, using improvised mines and muskets, resist an eviction by local policemen. Mainstream media and blog community are both driven into the incidence, carrying news, analyses and commentaries.

Tuesday, April 24: A notorious land grab takes place in the district of Văn Giang, on the outskirts of Hưng Yên province. Bloggers go first in reporting news about it, followed by official media. Photos and video clips of the eviction spread virally on the Internet.

Tuesday, May 29: Quan Làm Báo (quanlambao.blogspot.com) is introduced, its first entry being “The Love Story of Tâm and Mạnh.”

June 5: The second edition of “The F-Generation” is published, “reflecting the moods and thoughts experienced by Vietnamese bloggers in each of their “online” and “offline” protests from 2007 to 2011, coupled with tensions in Vietnam-China relations. Among the authors, one is still in detention on this date – jurist Phan Thanh Hải, aka. blogger AnhbaSG; and one was deceased – artist and blogger Đinh Vũ Hoàng Nguyên (aka. Lão Thầy Bói Già - the Old Fortune-teller)

Saturday, June 23: China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) offers for joint cooperation with foreign companies nine offshore blocks which are located in the seas bounded by the notorious “ox tongue line”, well within Vietnam’s exclusive zone and 200-nautical mile continental shelf.

Wednesday, June 27: Vietnam National Petroleum Group (PetroVietnam) holds press conference to protest CNOOC and China’s bidding.

Sunday, July 1: Anti-China protests outbreak in Hanoi and Saigon, and will continue on Sundays of July 8, July 22 and August 5, 2012.

Monday, August 20: Nguyễn Đức Kiên, known as “bầu Kiên” (Vietnamese for “manager Kiên”), a prominent tycoon and soccer manager, founder of the Asia Commercial Bank (ACB), is detained. The arrest, which has previously been mentioned on the blog Quan Làm Báo, entails a deluge of information on this blog, which seems to be profoundly haunted by conspiracy theory.

September 24: Trial against Điều Cày, Tạ Phong Tần and AnhbaSG takes place in Sai Gon. The indictment says, “the crime that the three accused committed is especially serious, continuous, enduring, obviously seen, and has badly affected national security as well as the image of the Vietnamese state on international arena.”

The judges allege Điều Cày and Tạ Phong Tần to have “stubbornly denied their alleged acts”, while AnhbaSG “has admitted and expressed remorse for his crime, and has requested clemency”. The result is very harsh sentences imposed upon Điều Cày and Tạ Phong Tần: 12 and 10 years of imprisonment respectively. Anhba SG receives a 4-year sentence in prison.

October 14: Nguyễn Phương Uyên (born 1992), a female student at the Food Industry College, is arrested by the Ho Chi Minh City police at her dormitory and transferred to Long An police. The reason for her arrest is not announced until ten days later, that is her “conducting propaganda against the state” under Article 88 of the Vietnamese Penal Code.

December 12: Journalist Huy Đức, also known as blogger Osin, releases on Amazon the first volume, “Liberation”, of his book “The Winning Side”. Printed version of the book is released a few weeks afterwards in the United States. “The Winning Side” incites a harsh controversy among different viewpoints on Vietnam's modern history. It is considered both as “the best Vietnamese history book since 1975” and “a biased look in history”. At the same time, the author's Facebook page becomes a battlefield between ideologies.

The second volume, “Authority”, is released on January 13, 2013.

December 27: Human rights lawyer Lê Quốc Quân, director of Vietnam Solution Ltd., Co., is arrested for alleged “tax evasion”.

December 28: The appeal court hears the case of three bloggers Điều Cày, Tạ Phong Tần, AnhbaSG, and affirms the sentences. As at the trial court, dozens of people are harassed, arrested and held in detention for coming near the courthouse.

2013

January 9: Head of the Hanoi Party Committee's Propaganda Department, Mr. Hồ Quang Lợi, a former journalist, in a meeting to review media and propaganda activities in the previous year, confirms the existence of the so-called “rumourmongers“, or public opinion shapers, and “button-pressing journalists”. In Hanoi alone, the number of rumourmongers amounts to 900.

January 19: 72 intellectuals sign on “the Petition for the 1992 Constitution Amendment”, calling for separation of power, for the creation of a constitutional court, and for the new Constitution to be in

accordance with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They also call on the military to pledge loyalty to the nation and the people rather than the Vietnamese Communist Party as stipulated in Article 70 of the Draft prepared by the Committee for the Revision Draft of the 1992 Constitution.

March 31: Three students at the Ho Chi Minh City Law University, including Phạm Lê Vương Các, Nguyễn Trang Nhung, Bùi Quang Viễn, issue the “Justice for Đoàn Văn Vươn” Declaration, to persuade and encourage the tribunal to be courageous, independent and impartial in implementing its duty.

April 2: Trial against the fish farmers Đoàn Văn Vươn and Đoàn Văn Quý takes place in Hải Phòng. On April 5th, each of them receive a five-year sentence of imprisonment under charge with “murder”. Nobody died when these farmers fought against the police force coming to confiscate their land.

April 18: The Free Citizens issues the notice of “Human Rights Gatherings”, which are outdoor social gatherings to discuss human rights, to be held on Sunday, May 5, at Nghĩa Đô Park (Hanoi), April 30th Park (Ho Chi Minh City) và Bạch Đằng Park (Nha Trang).

May 5: At the invitation by the Free Citizens group, some people in Hanoi, Nha Trang and Ho Chi Minh City go to public parks to participate in “Human Rights Social Gatherings”. In Hanoi, the picnic turns to a rally of right activists and land-lost farmers (known in Vietnamese as “dân oan”, or victims of miscarriage of justice). Many people are confined by local police in their homes as if they were under house arrest. In Ho Chi Minh City, the police launch brutal crackdowns on bloggers who they think are active participants.

May 16: Nguyễn Phương Uyên and Đinh Nguyên Kha stand on trial court in Long An. Uyên is sentenced six years of imprisonment, Kha eight years, for “conducting propaganda against the state”, violating Article 88 of the Vietnamese Penal Code.

May 26: Journalist and blogger Trương Duy Nhất, owner of the blog “A Different Viewpoint”, is arrested and charged with “abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the state, the legitimate rights and interests of organisations and/or citizens” as stipulated in Articles 258 of the Vietnamese Penal Code.

June 13: Journalist and blogger Phạm Viết Đào is arrested and charged with violation of Article 258.

June 15: Blogger Đinh Nhật Uy, the elder brother of Đinh Nguyên Kha, is arrested also under Article 258.

July 15: The PM signs Decree 72 on “the management, provision and usage of Internet services and online information”, which strictly prohibits the use of Internet to “oppose the State...; threaten the national security, social order, and safety”, and bans personal websites from providing general information. The Decree takes effect as of September 1, 2013.

July 18: A group of bloggers, calling themselves as “The Network of Vietnamese Bloggers”, release Statement 258, urging the government to amend law to demonstrate its UNHRC candidacy commitment, especially repealing Article 258 of the Penal Code. Afterwards, these bloggers meet with a series of

international organizations and diplomat missions to hand in Statement 258, including the OHCHR, HRW, CPJ, embassies of the United States, Australia, Sweden, Germany, and the EU-Delegation in Vietnam.

August 13: Police stage an ambush on an evening English class of a group of young people in Hanoi. The young people, including bloggers and students, are escorted to the local police station for arbitrary interrogation, their belongings confiscated without reason. Although they are released subsequently at 3 a.m., when they go to the police station the next morning to claim back for the confiscated mobile phones and laptops, they are beaten seriously. Blogger Phạm Ngọc Thắng is hit so that his eardrums were perforated.

August 16: Appeal is heard in the case against Nguyễn Phương Uyên and Đinh Nguyễn Kha for “conducting propaganda against the state.” Uyên is given a suspended three-year sentence, and Kha a four-year sentence of imprisonment. Three months later, on November 29, Uyên is expelled from school.

September 23: 130 Vietnamese people inside and outside of the country sign and release the Declaration on Implementing Civil and Political Rights in Vietnam, and, at the same time, launch a website named “Civil Society Forum”.

October 2: Human rights lawyer Lê Quốc Quân appears before trial court for “tax evasion”. He receives a sentence of 30 months in prison. His company, Vietnam Solution Co., Ltd. is ordered to pay a fine of 1.2 billion dong (equivalent to 56,800 USD).

October 29: Đinh Nhật Uy is put on trial court and given a suspended 15-month sentence.

November 13: The Vietnamese government signs Decree 174 on “administrative sanctions in the area of postal, telecommunication, IT and radio frequency”, imposing a fine of between 70,000,000 and 100,000,000 dong (approximately between 3300 USD and 4700 USD) on those who commit any of a great many acts, including “conducting propaganda against the state”, but not to the extent of penal liability examination.

November 28: The Vietnamese National Assembly vote on adopting the amendments of the 1992 Constitution as drafted by the ruling Communist Party. What is worth noting is that 95% of its deputies are members of the Communist Party; the remaining five percentage are either non-partisan or in the awaiting list to be sworn in as communists.

December 10: The Network of Vietnamese Bloggers's celebrations of the International Human Rights Day in Ho Chi Minh City are brutally suppressed. Many bloggers are nearly put under house arrest so that they cannot join the events. Around ten bloggers, including women and their children, are battered by police and “outrageous masses”, or those hired by the authorities to “maintain social order”. Bloggers attending the celebrations are even attacked by “dirty bombs” of pungent shrimp sauce.

Two days before, on December 8, celebrations by bloggers in Hanoi are also harassed, with state-sponsored “social order defenders” grabbing bloggers' belongings, pressing burnt cigarettes against balloons to blow them up, and destroying human rights materials.