

Vietnam Formulates Nationwide Code of Conduct for Social Media

Whether or not it is enforceable, the move hints at Hanoi's desire for tight control over what its citizens say and do online.

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Late last week, Reuters reported that Vietnam's government had introduced a new national social media "code of conduct," which encourages its people to post positive content about the country and prohibits anything that violates the law or affects "the interests of the state."

According to Reuters, which cited a June 17 document from the Ministry of Information and Communications, the code applies to state organizations, social media companies, and all of their Vietnamese users. It states that social media users "are encouraged to promote the beauty of Vietnam's scenery, people and culture, and spread good stories about good people."

The new social media charter encourages social media users to create accounts using their real identities (which is Facebook's policy anyway), share information from official sources, and avoid posting content which violates the law, contains bad language, or advertises illegal services.

It's not hard to see why the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) would take such a close interest in what the nation's citizens do and say online. With more than 66 million Facebook users, Vietnam has the seventh-largest user base in the world. This has cracked open the VCP's informational monopoly, granting the Vietnamese a public arena in which to air complaints about the government, or to press arguments for democratic reforms.

The new social media code also requires social media providers in Vietnam to "deal with users in accordance with Vietnamese law" when requested by authorities to remove content from their platforms.

This is already largely the case. Over the past year and a half, Vietnam has increased its pressure on social media networks to remove politically sensitive content. In a December report, Amnesty International claimed that Facebook and YouTube were responsible for "censorship and repression on an industrial scale" in Vietnam.

The report dates the tightening to April of last year, when Facebook announced it had agreed to "significantly increase" its compliance with requests from the Vietnamese government to remove "anti-state" posts. As detailed Reuters then reported, the firm justified this policy shift by claiming the Vietnamese government had deliberately throttled the speed of traffic to the platform as a warning to the company – and endangering its estimated \$1 billion in revenues from Vietnam.

According to its own transparency reports, in the first half of 2020, Facebook complied with 834 content restriction requests, 10 times the number for the previous six-month reporting period. In the second half of the year, the number increased to 2,205, most of which "were

alleged to violate Decree No. 72/2013/ND-CP, including content opposing the Communist Party and the Government of Vietnam.”

In its report, Amnesty described Vietnam as the first country in Southeast Asia where Facebook has “officially acknowledged a policy to increase compliance with censorship of political expression in accordance with a government’s requests.”

In addition to increasing its control over the internet, the Vietnamese government has itself become more active in asserting its own positions online. In late 2017, it formed Force 47, a 10,000-strong unit designed to disseminate propaganda, harass dissidents, and otherwise counter “wrong” views online.

All of these social media and internet controls are part of a broader clampdown that has also seen independent journalists and human rights defenders sentenced to heavy prison terms.

The new social media code goes much further than these efforts, shifting from negative prescriptions – bans on what its citizens can say online – to active promotion of “positive” messages. As such, it’s probably unenforceable. But as a statement of intent, it signifies the VCP’s intention of trying to force the full messy reality of the internet into its own Confucian-Leninist mold.