



How do private corporations influence freedom of expression?

The case study of private corporations and online censorship in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This is a thesis about how private corporations in Vietnam influence the situation of the right to freedom of expression in the country. The aim of the research was to investigate how private companies in Vietnam handle their criticisms in cyberspace. Drawing on the old and new theory of censorship, the research hypothesized that both the state's and the social media platform's actions are parallel with the old and the new theory of censorship in blocking information unfavorable of private corporations. In order to collect necessary data, online ethnographic method and semi-structured interview were used for the research. 5 stories published on Facebook were presented in the thesis and 6 people were interviewed via the Internet.

The research provides evidence that the government has taken actions to repress opinions against private corporations in Vietnam and, at the same time, social media's policies have been misused to censor these opinions. In particular, Facebook users are threatened by the police to stop criticizing private companies and their accounts are attacked and suspended in the name of community standards violations. Furthermore, online newspapers are also subject to censorship by private corporations. The research suggests further studies on the relationship between censorship and other human rights, in addition to the right to freedom of expression.

Key words: censorship, digital authoritarianism, Facebook, freedom of expression, mass reporting, private corporations, social media, Vietnam

This thesis contains 16,743 words.

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To all the people who have been ceaselessly and tirelessly fighting for a better Vietnam where human rights are protected and respected

To all the people to whom I did not have the last chance to say goodbye

And special thanks to my respectable supervisor, my beloved family, and my dear friends, without whom I would not have been able to do it.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context

Together with the advent of digital technology including the Internet, social media, and smartphones, many people predict that it will help empower individuals by giving citizens better access to information and the ability to promote and protect human rights. However, it has been observed that digital authoritarianism and digital dictatorship have been emerging in autocratic states where civil space is constantly restricted. New technologies have given these states fresher means and tactics to preserve their power as well as continue to crack down on human rights. For example, the North Korean government blocks Internet access to most of the country's population, while censoring the information available to the small number of people who are privileged enough to be granted an Internet connection. At the same time, the government has dominated the online space with "overtly propagandistic messages" created to promote its legitimacy (Gerschewski and Dukalskis, 2018).

In addition, facial recognition technologies and mass surveillance have been utilized to monitor people's activities. In this regard, China is one of the most notorious states with the ambition to supervise all its citizens. In the past, the system such as *hukou* (household registration) and *dang'an* (personal archives) were employed to conduct state surveillance; now, with the development of technology, the Chinese government can easily scrutinize its people via the nationwide network of CCTVs and the social credit systems which collect people's personal, financial, and social data and then "score the 'creditworthiness' and 'trustworthiness' of each individual and organizational actor" (Liang *et al.*, 2018). To make matters worse, some governments in the Middle East and African regions are becoming more digitally authoritarian by following the mass-surveillance model from China as well as implementing laws and policies that restrict freedom of expression in the cyberspace (Lynch, 2022). A report by Freedom House also pointed out that authoritarian states are moving closer to the Chinese model while President Xi Jinping's ambition is to transform the country into a "cyber superpower" with the "digital Silk Road" project (Shahbaz, 2018).

Given this situation, scholars and experts have been concerned that Vietnam will be following the digital dictatorship model of China (Le, 2019). In 2018, the National Assembly of Vietnam ratified the Law on Cybersecurity which places a lot of restrictions on cyberspace and on tech companies that operate or have servers in the country. For instance, upon request, businesses

must “erase information, prevent the sharing of information that has content” prohibited by the Vietnamese government. This is seen as a way to crack down on people’s freedom of expression in cyberspace. Many have found that the Law on Cybersecurity of Vietnam is identical to that of its neighboring country (Trinh, 2017).

There is no denying that the advent of technology has enhanced living conditions and created more discussion space for people. However, from an academic perspective, Smith points out that the advent of technology and the internet also poses challenges to the freedom of expression globally (Smith, 2018). A study in 2021 also showed that Vietnam, among other Southeast Asian countries, is notorious for online repression and self-censorship (Ong, 2021); and Facebook, as the most popular social media in Vietnam, has been reported to commit basic human rights abuses (Sieber, 2019). In April 2020, Facebook confirmed that the company had agreed to conform with the government’s request to “restrict access to content which it has deemed to be illegal” after the local servers in the country had been shut down for weeks (Pearson, 2020).

Normally, only content that criticizes or opposes the state is taken down; however, it has been observed that many Vietnamese Facebook users complain that their accounts or posts are reported or removed even if they criticize products and services of large corporations, like Vingroup, FLC, or BKAV, etc. in Vietnam. Some have even been summoned by the police for what they wrote on Facebook.

It is worth noting that the right to freedom of expression is stipulated and protected under international human rights law. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) recognize the right to freedom of expression of people and to “seek, impart, and receive information”. Furthermore, in July 2012, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution which affirms “that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression”.

There is also widespread recognition that business enterprises should also respect human rights as some private transnational corporations are becoming so powerful that they can influence societies politically and economically. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which are based on three pillars, emphasize the following principles: (i) the State’s duty to protect against human rights violations; (ii) the corporate responsibility to respect human

rights; and (iii) greater access to effective remedies for victims of violations (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011).

1.2. The purpose of the study

In an economy driven by relationships like Vietnam, conglomerates or big corporations often rely on relationships with government officials to gain commercial interests and market share. While some people completely support these companies for building skyscrapers and creating jobs, others are concerned about negative impacts they have on the environment and the way they, especially Vingroup Company, manipulate social media to suppress opposing opinions against them (Reed, 2019). Many Facebook users have confirmed that their accounts or posts were reported for violating community standards after they wrote something to complain about the products or services of big corporations like Vingroup, FLC, Sun Group, or BKAV, etc. Some have even been summoned by the police for what they said and wrote on Facebook. Hence, the research will focus on the ways big Vietnamese corporations handle their criticism and how they may take advantage of relationships with the government and social media's algorithms to silence opposing opinions that are unfavorable to them.

As a single-party state, Vietnam has been criticized for continually cracking down on the right to freedom of expression in cyberspace as it often imprisons dissidents and activists who criticize the government or the Communist party. In 2022, the country ranked 174th out of 180 countries in terms of press freedom (Reporters without Borders, 2022). It is observed that human rights organizations and international communities have paid attention to the government's crackdown on dissidents, however, there is quite little research on the repression of online expression against big private corporations in the country. That is why the topic is expected to shed light on the impacts these conglomerates are having on the situation of the right to freedom of expression, especially in cyberspace.

1.3. Aim research questions

1. How do Vietnamese private corporations act against their online criticisms?
2. What happens to Vietnamese Facebook users after they have criticized private corporations?
3. How have Vietnamese Facebook users reacted after they have experienced inconvenience for criticizing these corporations?

As far as concerned, the concepts of digital dictatorship and digital authoritarianism are being discussed more frequently but only states are considered as human rights violators; therefore, after collecting and analyzing data, the researcher expects to make a contribution to the human rights field by showing that actions from big private corporations, supported by state authorities, can contribute to violations of freedom of expression. Therefore, the aim of the thesis is to investigate the ways big private Vietnamese corporations handle their online criticisms.

1.4. Delimitations

The researcher has been fully aware that due to limited time and human resources, the thesis will not cover a broader research scope in terms of geographical locations, therefore, it only focuses on the context of Vietnam, but not other areas, with which the researcher is most familiar. The thesis could also have encompassed state-owned businesses, but this would have driven the research too far away from its original cores and aims; therefore, the researcher decided to center on private enterprises as potential human rights violators. In addition, the research focuses on the contemporary situation in Vietnam since the data collected is only from the last few years.

1.5. Brief review of the chapters

The thesis is divided into six chapters as follows:

Chapter 1, Introduction, provides the context in which the research will focus on, the purpose of the study together with research questions that the researcher expects to address after conducting the research.

Chapter 2, Literature review, gives brief scholarly knowledge and contemporary discussions on the topic about the rise of digital dictatorship or digital authoritarianism and the repression of the right to freedom of expression in cyberspace.

Chapter 3, Theoretical framework, provides some reviews about discussions of the old and new theories of censorship and how the researcher has applied these theories to analyze the data collected.

Chapter 4, Research methodology, clarifies which research methods have been utilized to collect and analyze data for the thesis. In particular, the chapter covers the online ethnographic method (participation observation) to collect stories by Vietnamese users on Facebook, the

qualitative method (semi-structured interview) to get in-depth data from people with experience, and the narrative analysis method to analyze data collected from the ethnographic and qualitative methods.

Chapter 5, Data analysis, presents data collected from the participant observation process and semi-structured interviews. The data will be presented under the thematic narrative analysis method.

Chapter 6, Discussions, analyzes data collected based on the old and the new theory of censorship as the theoretical framework.

Lastly, chapter 7, Conclusions and recommendations, shows the conclusions of the researcher after collecting and analyzing data to answer the research questions as well as suggest relevant recommendations for upcoming research in the field and recommendations for social media platforms or big techs to improve their algorithms to protect users' freedom of expression.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will present the contemporary discussions about digital technology and human rights as well as how digital technology and big tech companies' policies can be misused to quieten dissent opinions.

2.1. Digital technology and human rights

Contemporary research on the relationship between digital technology and human rights tends to present a clear dichotomy between the positive and negative impacts of technological innovations on human rights. On the one hand, many scholars have argued that the advent of digital technology, especially social media, has helped promote human rights campaigns and social and political movements around the world. Social media platforms with unique functions help speed up the exchange of information on the Internet. A research by Al-Hasan, Yim and Lucas (2019) about Egypt during the Arab Spring pointed out that Facebook, which was a fairly free online space back in the day, played an important role in collective action in the country as people could freely share pictures on the platform, which contributed to individual participation. Similarly, after conducting a study on the Black Lives Matter movement and social media, Chang, Richardson and Ferrara (2022) concluded that Instagram, with its unique ecosystem, did positively facilitate one of the biggest human rights movements in American history.

Furthermore, digital technologies are a promise for improving the enjoyment of the right to health care of people. Sun *et al.*, (2020) proved that technological innovations mitigate “inequalities and barriers to healthcare quality and access” as they are able to reduce health care costs and enhance the health care system with more “accurate and responsive care”. In addition, digital innovations can also help authenticate evidence in cases of human rights violations. A study by Ulbricht *et al.*, (2022) displayed that cryptographic hashing and distributed-ledger technology securely store human rights abuses data collected by “trained observers, journalists, and everyday citizens” and they protect photos and videos from being manipulated and modified.

On the other hand, despite the positive effects of technological development and social media on human rights promotion and movements, it has become more and more evident that digital technology also poses new challenge, as it can be used as a sophisticated tool for authoritarian regimes to crack down on dissents and human rights defenders as well as to put restrictions on

the people's enjoyment of fundamental human rights. If pro-democracy movements can deploy a social media platform like Facebook to mobilize people to join mass protests against authoritarian regimes, then repressive governments can also adopt the same techniques and services to secure their power. This phenomenon is named digital authoritarianism, which means "the use of information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations" (Polyakova and Meserole, 2019). In fact, the phenomenon of information and communication technology being used to support authoritarianism was not formally recognized or discussed until the late 2000s. Seminal studies on this phenomenon were published in the early 2010s, and terms such as digital authoritarianism and networked authoritarianism were coined. In a networked authoritarian state, in spite of the discussions about the issues facing the country on various websites and social media platforms, the governing political party still maintains sole control (MacKinnon, 2011).

Two main sub-topics that have been discussed the most about the topic are the exportation of China's digital authoritarianism to other countries and the challenges of digital authoritarianism to human rights. An article on The Washington Post confirmed that the government of President Xi Jinping has always wanted to spread the mode of digital authoritarian governance to other countries through its Belt and Road Initiative. The government of China and private Chinese companies have been exporting digital infrastructure, laws on cybersecurity, and state-sponsored and pro-regime ideas to developing countries in Africa, South America and Central Asia (Editorial Board, 2020). Sharing the same perspective, a research report by Australian Strategic Policy Institute asserted that the 'China model' of digital authoritarianism is spreading rapidly beyond China's territory as non-democratic regimes has been increasing the use of digital technology for repression, censorship, and targeting journalists and human rights defenders (Cave *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, private telecommunications companies in Zimbabwe had to comply with the government's requests to shut down the Internet and social media services, as explained by Admire Mare (2020), following digital authoritarianism. Pakistan, as a member of China's Belt and Road Initiative, has also seen its media freedom threatened by digital authoritarianism (Jamil, 2021).

At the same time, many other scholars have also discussed how technological innovations may lead to greater human rights abuses. Michaelsen and Glasius (2018) argued that citizens may have their right to privacy and right to freedom of expression violated due to mass surveillance technologies, digital censorship and manipulation. As pointed out by Wilson (2022),

authoritarian governments such as China and Russia always have plenty of resources to shut down the Internet (within their territory), develop tools which can block unwanted websites or social media platforms and filter information, and organize cyber troops to manipulate public debate on the Internet. When these things happen, Siatitsa (2020) made a conclusion that it could lead to a direct violation of the right to freedom of assembly as well.

However, Dragu and Lupu (2021) developed a model to predict technological changes on human rights and authoritarian regimes. They concluded that “both technology optimists and pessimists are correct, but only up to a point” as the relationship between technology and authoritarian governments is complicated to observe.

2.2. Digital technology, private companies, and censorship

As mentioned above, digital technology can be taken advantage of to censor and manipulate content and debate in cyberspace. In fact, states are not the only actors which have control of information, as private businesses are also able to intervene in discussions on the Internet to some extent.

Brenkert (2010) offered four distinctive situations of control of freedom of expression made by private corporates as follows: (i) censorship of the Internet by search tools at the request of a government; (ii) restrictions on Internet content by service providers; (iii) decisions by business enterprises not to sell or provide some certain products and services to their customers; and (iv) lawsuits against individuals and groups by corporates trying to prevent the dissemination of particular information. In a study of corporate cyber censorship, Rothschild (2013) somewhat agreed with Brenkert’s opinion, as he pointed out two layers of censorship in China: online information in the country can be restricted by the government’s Great Firewall system and by Internet content providers who are involved in “the coerced self-regulation” as they need to follow the government’s regulations to obtain an operation license in the country. In addition, in a submission by Association for Progressive Communications (2016) to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the organization claimed that control of information in cyberspace comes not only from state actors but also from private actors through their voluntary actions of issuing terms of service or policies that may lead to censorship and self-censorship.

It has been reported that Vietnam is the first market where Facebook's policies have been used to facilitate censorship. The community of activists and dissidents in the country have found that their Facebook accounts become targets of a new form of cyber-attack in the form of mass reporting. This is because the service's "report abuse" feature, which is designed to flag content that is deemed as inappropriate, has been taken advantage of to become a tool for silencing dissent and possibly for promoting state propaganda. For instance, by submitting a large number of abuse reports against a page or an individual account, they can be suspended temporarily or permanently from the platform. Pro-government groups have discovered how to utilize the reporting system of Facebook to their advantage, which generates harmful effects (Brandom, 2014). Now the pro-private companies forces also apply the same tactic to stifle opinions against them.

Another example where private corporations are involved in the censorship phenomenon is South Korea. However, the context of the country is somewhat different from the situations mentioned above as digital technology is not involved in censorship in the context of chaebols, which are known as big business conglomerates run and controlled by an individual or family. A study by Lee (2019) showed that, in the country, chaebols are reported to deploy their economic power to dominate media and state policies and they see the media as a tool to obtain and sustain their power in society. The relationship between the mass media and chaebols, who are the biggest advertisers for newspapers and broadcasting, is very close. As a result, journalists often practice self-censorship when reporting on chaebol-related matters. In addition, chaebols' public relations staff frequently intimidate reporters to prevent negative news coverage, and this tactic usually works. The scandal over Samsung's leaked text messages revealed how the company had been manipulating the press. In particular, some senior leaders of the company had sent messages to media executives and journalists asking for favors made by the press, while others had used funding in the form of commercials or secured a position at the company in exchange for good coverage of Samsung (Kim, 2017).

The situation seems to be similar to Vietnam's context as in a research about social and mass media in the country, Nguyen-Thu (2018) confirmed that the media is being influenced more and more by businessmen, who often function as undercover censors of non-political content. Commercial sponsorship from companies are primary financial sources for television stations and major newspapers in Vietnam. As a result, creating contents or producing programs which align with the sponsor's preferences becomes customary.

Whether or not private companies should have obligations to the right to freedom of expression of users and customers is not discussed in the thesis. However, despite many debates and research on the impacts of digital technology on human rights and digital censorship stated above, the researcher realized that there are not many studies about censorship to protect private corporations in Vietnam. Therefore, the researcher decided to focus on the context of Vietnam, where the government is known for following China's digital authoritarian model (Le, 2019) and for having an economy driven by relationships. In this paper, the main question is how private corporations react against their online criticism. Other researchers' works have focused on the emergence of social media platforms in the country or how big tech companies comply with authoritarian governments to suppress political opinions, while this research will concentrate on the censorship of non-political information against private business enterprises under the circumstances where private corporations and the government are intertwined together.

The next chapters will explain how social media platforms' terms of service or community standards and the reporting system have been deployed to censor information that does not favor private companies. It is worth noting that these business enterprises do not have to be only tech companies as in many contemporary discussions but can also be other types of companies.

CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will present the theory of censorship, the old and new one, and how practices of digital technology can be framed in the new theory of censorship.

From a sociological point of view, censorship serves as a means of self-protection for a political system or rulers (Bachleitner, 2022). Traditional liberal understandings of censorship often concentrate on states or state-like institutions as the main actors ordering censorship and censorship has always been considered to be always a coercive and repressive act. Some scholars believe that dictators censor information in order to prevent revolutions in advance. For Klaus Kanzog in Bachleitner (2022), the term censorship refers to a range of methods aimed at restricting or impeding the creation and distribution of written information. There are two forms of censorship: informal and formal. The informal spectrum includes self-censorship by authors as well as other informal forms of censorship through economic pressures or the influence of interest groups. In contrast, at the formal end of the spectrum, there are institutions that exist with a mission to decide whether certain works should be published or read, and they may engage in censorship as part of this process.

For new censorship theory scholars, however, the perception of censorship has expanded to embrace more than what Kanzog previously defined with his spectrum model. The new theory encompasses the process of choosing and inhibiting significant statements that are crucial in transforming thoughts into verbal expression. From this angle, censorship is no longer seen as an authoritative act, but rather as a necessary component of any society that can be productive. The focus has now shifted to self-censorship, which is now considered intrinsic in every speech act which involves making choices between alternatives, and therefore relies on restrictions and exclusions. Furthermore, censorship operates even in the absence of agents or institutions, since language and discourse themselves can exercise this power. Judith Butler has gone further to argue that censorship lies in language itself, in the domain of speakability, which enables the formation of subjects for communication (Bachleitner, 2022).

It should be noted that the new theory of censorship acknowledges the ideas presented in the Liberal conception and builds upon them, rather than rejecting them. This new theory seeks to broaden the definition of "censorship" to include an increasing number of methods and systems that influence the way communication is created and presented. The concept of the new censorship is no longer limited to being enforced solely by those in positions of power, but has

now expanded its scope to include multiple aspects such as the market, politics, and social interactions (Gould, 2022). It also sees censorship as an all-encompassing phenomenon in which numerous actors, including impersonal and structural factors, play a role in effectively censoring communication. Furthermore, the new theory of censorship has succeeded in transforming censorship from “a negative, repressive force, concerned only with prohibiting, silencing, and erasing, to a productive force that creates new forms of discourse, new forms of communication, and new genres of speech”. In addition, the concept of the new censorship theory emphasizes the various types of censorship and the outcomes that can result from it (Bunn, 2015).

Foucault's analysis of discourse shows that language and communication are not neutral or objective; but they are shaped by power relations and social structures. He asserted that the production of discourse is made of silencing, disciplining, and gate-keeping behavior. Censorship can therefore be seen as a means of shaping and controlling discourse, and of limiting the range of possible meanings and interpretations. Hence, it is not surprising that some new censorship theory scholars see a conception of censorship as a part of communication. Furthermore, Foucault also concluded that social institutions use techniques of observation, surveillance, and normalization to regulate and control individuals and populations in order to maintain the status quo of power. He used Bentham's Panopticon as an example of a tool to carry out experiments in modifying behavior and training or correcting individuals, which has a close connection to self-censorship (Foucault, 1995).

As well as censorship to conform to linguistic and stylistic expectations, the new censorship experts have argued that it is social practices and cultural norms which create another form of pervasive censorship. Pierre Bourdieu, a proponent of the new censorship theory, referred to these practices and norms as “structural censorship”, where one pre-emptively alters the content of one’s expression in order to fit what is deemed to be socially acceptable (Bunn, 2015). In a submission to the United Nations, the Association for Progressive Communications (2016) pointed out that the private sector has been conducting voluntary censorship. “Through their own terms of service and community guidelines, the private sector often takes measures that negatively impact freedom of expression online beyond what is strictly required from them under law.” For example, many social media platforms, including Facebook, are registered in the United States and have followed American legal norms and frameworks to form their own policies and standards. In the Communications Decency Act of 1996, section 230 states that neither service providers nor users are legal accountable for “any action voluntarily taken in

good faith to restrict access to or availability of material that the provider or user considers to be obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, excessively violent, harassing, or otherwise objectionable, whether or not such material is constitutionally protected.” Herein, the expression “any action voluntarily taken” underscores the voluntary rather than mandatory characteristics of content moderation. This does not motivate social media platforms to be transparent and responsible, which has been disapproved by various experts and scholars (Nurik, 2019).

This is the result of the new censorship theory from Bourdieu’s point of view, in which these big tech companies choose to conduct self-censorship by implementing their own terms of service or community standards to combat hate speech, incitement to discrimination, or human trafficking content as this is what is deemed to be socially appropriate.

For Matthew Bunn (2015), rather than merely applying the rigorous classification of censorship into a “dichotomy of repressive/authoritative and productive/structural”, he would like this strict distinction to be drawn. Perry and Roda (2017) successfully applied Bunn’s hybrid theory of censorship to analyze the phenomenon of Internet censorship in two different contexts, which are China and Europe, in their book “Human Rights and Digital Technology”. They found out that online censorship in China functions as follows: only after a big enough number of users has intensively discussed a particular sensitive topic “does the site regulator crack down and begin to inhibit further diffusion of information”.

Due to the social and political context, the censorship situation in Vietnam is somewhat different from the discussions above. Facebook has its own terms of service and community standards as a self-censorship practice with an aim to provide a safe space for users. However, these policies, along with technology and algorithms used to enforce these policies, have been abused to prevent information from being distributed widely. In particular, the “report” button is just one of many tools that Facebook has been used for content removal. This feature is an action from the big tech company to address the problem of graphic, violent, or inappropriate content on the platform and to remove it. The reporting option remains anonymous, so users cannot see who or how many people have reported them. Unfortunately, this tool is being turned completely against its original purpose and being used to arbitrarily silence people and perhaps even to promote state propaganda.

In Vietnam, the self-censorship practices of big tech companies have been misused to restrict information against both the government and big private corporations from being disseminated on social media. In this thesis, self-censorship means that private social media companies use

their own terms of service and community standards to block or remove accounts or content on their platforms. These terms and standards can include using sensitive words, copyright infringement, graphic content, hate speech, etc. It also refers to tactics adopted by Facebook users to circumvent censorship by the content moderation system. Thus, multiple types of censorship methods are deployed to silence people's voices, such as mass reporting or complying with governments' requests in order to continue operating in a country. For many new censorship theory scholars, self-censorship practices and various new forms of censorship are considered as part of constitutive censorship.

It has been aware that the new censorship theory has been heading to the direction of generating new forms of discourse and communication. Therefore, the researcher decided to apply a slightly different framework to analyze data. In particular, the old theory of censorship was deployed to explain how the government and actors close to the government manage to censor opinions against them. At the same time, the new theory of censorship was still applied to explain new forms of censorship generated under the context of Vietnam with the help of digital technology. Furthermore, it is observed that self-censorship is sometimes even more dangerous than explicit censorship as it can either be utilized by explicit censorship actors to prevent opinions from spreading, or people will simply stop sharing what they have in mind to avoid getting in trouble. Therefore, this thesis will explain how the self-censorship practices of Facebook as a social media platform has been used by explicit censorship actors to block people's opinion against big private corporations.

CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter will present the research methods to collect and analyze data for the research.

4.1. Methodology for data collection

4.1.1. (Online) Ethnographic methods

Frequently, conventional techniques of ethnography are employed to investigate a society in terms of “three fundamental aspects of human experience: what people do, what people know, and the things people make and use” (Spradley, 1980). As a result, researchers typically relocate to the community under examination to gather information and gain a deeper understanding of how individuals live and express their cultural practices. As Barnard asserts, ethnographic methods or participant observation “puts you where the action is and lets you collect data you want” (Barnard, 2011).

Nonetheless, with the advent of the Internet and social media platforms, the situation appears to have changed. In the work of Winter and Lavis (2020), Hine argued that cyberspace was “a place where people do things” so we, as researchers and observers, can “study just exactly what it is they do, and why, in their terms, they do it”. Consequently, she urged for virtual spaces to be acknowledged as research field sites where scientists could study about different communities and cultures online.

That is why the researcher opted for internet-based participant observation with prominent Vietnamese activists, civil society groups, and influential figures who have thousands of Facebook followers. With approximately 65 million users based in Vietnam (Meta, 2021), Facebook is the most renowned social media network in the country, where individuals are believed to share news and express their viewpoints without censorship. Therefore, Facebook was chosen as an online field site to conduct the research. By being both an observer and a user, the researcher could gain insight into what has happened, who got involved, read the opinions of other Facebook users who criticize private Vietnamese corporations, and understand the potential consequences that users may face after publishing their opinions or content on social media platforms. This is also in line with Barnard’s point of view that with participant observation, it is possible for researchers to gather any desired data while simultaneously mitigating issues of reactivity, whereby individuals may alter their behaviors when they are being observed or studied (Barnard, 2011). By adopting this approach, the

researcher played the role of a regular audience (Facebook user) to prevent the observed individuals from feeling uneasy. Ultimately, establishing trust and mutual respect is a crucial factor in conducting conventional participant observation (Angrosino, 2007).

In addition, by utilizing online ethnographic methods and selecting Facebook as a research site, the researcher could be able to not only observe current discussions and debates in real-time but also have access to data created in the past, such as posts written by Facebook users. This enhanced the accumulation of data, as both current and past information could be recorded, collected, and analyzed.

For the research purposes of this thesis, the researcher collected five (5) stories from Vietnamese Facebook users and pages who are considered social media influencers since they have thousands of people following their accounts. Furthermore, they also posted stories about complaining private companies, which received mass reactions from other users and then their accounts encountered some problems. Many other similar stories could have been collected, but those accounts have been removed or deactivated and no stories were saved. The purpose of collecting these stories is a supplement with more stories about what has happened with people who criticize private corporations online. The researcher, also as a Facebook user, has reacted to these posts and followed the progress of these stories. Therefore, it is believed that the role of the research in this case will be both as a participant and as an observer who got involved in the discussions and later presented them.

4.1.2. Ethical considerations of the (online) ethnographic methods

The Facebook account holders whose stories are presented in the thesis do not know that what they share have been collected and analyzed by the researcher. Since all of them set their accounts as “public” in the audience setting, asking for permissions to collect their posts is not necessary.

Regarding the ethical concerns of the method, the researcher would like to explain a bit about how privacy works on Facebook. It is well known that Facebook users can control who can see what they share on the platform, be it a post, a picture, or a video. Technically, there are four different categories of audience settings that allow an account owner to decide who they want to share their content with: public, friends, customs, and only me. The “public” setting means their content will be visible to anyone having access to the Internet, whether or not those people follow the account. The “friends” category gives an account owner a bit more privacy as only Facebook users who add the account owner as a Facebook friend can see the content. It is worth

noting that an account owner does not have to accept every friend request sent to them. The “customs” setting is slightly different from the “friends” one as the account owner can choose which specific people can read what they share, i.e., ten or fifteen people from their Facebook friend list. Finally, the “only me” setting allows only the account owner to access the content and nobody else can see it. For the sake of the thesis, the researcher only collected data from Facebook users who set up their audience as “public”, which again means anyone in cyberspace can have access to their content without having permission. This applies to both private accounts and accounts as pages, since Facebook pages usually choose the “public” setting for their audience.

The researcher is fully aware that the chosen method has its limitations due to the emergence of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms, so the researcher may face difficulties in conducting online participant observation as false or irrelevant stories and events might be followed. Therefore, the researcher only collected stories from verified accounts with a long time presence on Facebook and thousands of followers.

The observation took place from 31 January 2023 to 30 April 2023. After 30 April 2023, the researcher will not bear responsible for any changes made in the collected posts on Facebook. It should be noted that although the observation officially started on 31 January 2023, the actual Facebook posts may have been published before that date.

4.1.3. Qualitative methods (interviews)

From the aforementioned online participant observation, the researcher conducted **online semi-structured interviews** with six (6) interviewees who are prominent activists, representatives of civil society groups, key opinion leaders, or researchers who have studied or observed freedom of expression and mis/disinformation in cyberspace in Vietnam. The interviews aim to gain a deeper understanding and gather additional information about the potential consequences faced by Vietnamese Facebook users who are both activists and influential Facebook users after they voice their complaints against private corporations on the social media platform. This includes exploring issues such as the users' typical content and targeted companies, the fate of their accounts and posts, whether they have taken any actions to challenge Facebook's decision to remove their content or suspend their account, and how the platform justifies its decisions.

Typically, Facebook users who have had their accounts targeted do not discuss the matter publicly. Therefore, the best way to obtain accurate information about their experiences is

through interviews. This approach is considered a valuable supplement to the online participant observation method, as simply collecting data on who posts what or whether or not their accounts have been attacked is not sufficient for research purposes. The reason this method was chosen is that Robson (2002) contended that a qualitative research interview is appropriate when studying specific phenomena that are relevant to participants, and when individual experiences are necessary to comprehend how phenomena occur and evolve.

With the pointed view presented above, the researcher intended to utilize semi-structured interviews, as they offer greater flexibility in question wording, allowing for adjustments, elaborations, and the removal of unsuitable questions during the interview process (Robson, 2002). Additional questions can also be included based on the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the interviewees, which can provide further insight for the researcher. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allow interviewees the freedom to explore narrative tensions and fully convey their internal experiences.

After conducting the interviews, the collected data was analyzed using narrative analysis methods, since the researcher believes that stories of alleged human rights violations should be heard from the perspectives of those who have experienced them. Human rights encompass the “human” in them and so do human rights violations. Therefore, these stories should be fully heard and analyzed from a human-centered perspective and with human experiences.

One potential limitation to consider is that conducting all interviews online may affect the quality of the interviews. This is because it was difficult for both the interviewer and the interviewee to fully understand each other, as it was almost impossible to capture nonverbal expressions accurately. Bias is also hard to rule out (Robson, 2002), as despite the absence of solid evidence of misconduct or wrong doings, human rights activists and civil society groups frequently view themselves as victims of states and large private corporations.

It was difficult to find participants who were willing to be interviewed due to the topic’s sensitivity and political situation in Vietnam. The selection of interviewees was done based on two methods: purposive sample and snowball sampling. The invitation was sent out to fifteen (15) people by private messages, in which twelve (12) of them were through a purposive sample because they have characteristics that the researcher needed such as being influencers on Facebook, having written posts criticizing private corporations, or having observation and experience in monitoring the freedom of expression in Vietnam. The other three (3) were recruited through other participations, which served as snowball sampling. The researcher

aimed to have ten (10) people interviewed as three (3) of the invitation recipients had been arrested and sentenced in prison before the research began and the other two (2) did not respond. However, only seven (7) of them accepted the invitation while the other three (3) refused to participate. This could be an implication that a repressive environment like Vietnam creates a self-censorship mindset in some people, so they are reluctant to talk about both the government and actors closely connected to the government, even if sometimes it is only a private corporation like Vingroup. Eventually, six (6) interviews were conducted, and the last person disappeared after accepting the invitation.

Lastly, all interviews were performed in Vietnamese as it is the native language of both the participants and the researcher, so the records of the interviews were transcribed in Vietnamese. This means all quotes used in the chapter of analysis were translated into English by the researcher.

4.1.4. Ethical considerations of the interviews

There were some ethical concerns regarding the safety of the interviewees and what the researcher faced was anonymity and data protection because some people's stories are available on the Internet so there is a possibility that they could be identified.

Given the complicated political circumstances in Vietnam, ethical and safety issues of the method were also taken into consideration, as interviewees could get harassed by the authorities if the information about the research and interviews were accidentally leaked. Therefore, in order to protect the interviewees, who are also activists and representatives of civil society groups at risk, a detailed informed consent form and interview guide had securely been provided before the researcher conducted the interviews. The original versions of the information letter, consent form, and interview guide were written in English and then translated into Vietnamese before being sent to interviewees so that they could understand properly. All interviewees were thoroughly explained and informed about the research information and their rights to participate in or withdraw from the research before each interview. All interviews were conducted via an end-to-end encryption application which was at the interviewees' convenience and safety. All interviewees gave both the written and oral consent for the interviews to be recorded.

The interviewees were offered anonymity and all of them chose not to publish their names in the thesis. In addition, all transcriptions of the interviews and interviewees' signed consent forms were encrypted by a special software (VeraCrypt) that only the researcher has the

masterpass to open. The researcher was approved by the Norwegian Ethics Committee on 31 January 2023 to collect and process personal data and the legal basis was valid until 30 June 2023. Finally, all personal data related to the interviewees and records as well as transcriptions of the interviews will be destroyed permanently after 30 June 2023.

4.2. Methodology for data analysis

4.2.1. Narrative analysis

Telling a story about an event or an experience is a universal activity shared by all human beings regardless of race, nationality, or religion. It is one of the most common ways to construct discourses as people learn as a child. For qualitative sociologists, telling a participant's story is not a new method to conduct social research at all. Narrative is probably less popular than other approaches such as case study or grounded theory, but it is still one of many qualitative methodologies to collect and analyze data in the social sciences (McAlpine, 2016). According to De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2011), since the 1980s, there has been an increasing trend to utilize narrative methods and analysis in various aspects of the social sciences. This narrative turn has had a wide-reaching impact on almost all disciplines within the fields. Sociological research has benefited greatly from narrative-based studies and scholars have employed narratives to unveil people's perspectives on social issues such as health problems, social marginalization and isolation, gender inequality, and migration.

With narrative analysis, the researcher can interpret the construction of the narrative through which research participants interpret their lives. Hence, the method is additionally useful for researchers because it can help participants or respondents reveal about social and cultural lives through an individual's story (Riessman, 1993).

However, what is a narrative? While Onega and Landa defined a narrative with literary criticism as "the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way"; Toolan gave his explanation of a narrative as "a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events" (Patterson, 2013). Hinchman and Hinchman shared Toolan's point of view as they also described narratives as "discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience" (Elliott, 2005). The use of narrative analysis means that the researcher will find a core narrative which is a generalized narrative based on the research participants' stories.

De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2011) concluded that it is difficult to distinguish analysis from transcription and researchers should bear in mind that “there is no one-fit-for-all method of narrative analysis”. Parcell and Baker (2017) pointed out that there are four main narrative forms of analyses, including structural, functional, thematic, and dialogic/performance analysis. The former two approaches were developed by Mishler while the latter two were proposed by Riessman. For Mishler, there are three types of studies that can be used in narrative research: “studies focused on temporal ordering and reference” (temporal), “studies based on the analysis of coherence and structural makeup” (structural), and “studies centered on the investigation of narrative functions in social contexts” (functional). For Riessman, thematic approaches focus on the contents of stories and structural analysis focuses on how the meanings of stories are displayed based on the structure of narratives (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2011).

In this thesis, the researcher decided to apply the method of thematic narrative analysis developed by Riessman to analyze the data collected from semi-structured interviews. In more concrete terms, (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2011) said in order to determine methods of narrative analysis, researcher may consider various parameters such as: object of analysis (texts, events, phenomena, etc.), methodological approach (qualitative, quantitative, and eclectic) and data analysis (focusing on language/style, content/themes, interactional processes and social practices). Of three types of data analysis, only the analysis of content/themes answers the question of what people are speaking of. Since the thesis focuses on the content of what people narrated about what happened to them and their experience, the researcher believed thematic narrative analysis is a suitable method to analyze the collected data. In order to identify different themes, all the interviews were transcribed into texts and after screening through all the transcriptions, the researcher realized some key words appear more often than others such as: the police, Facebook mass reporting, account suspension, removal of articles, etc. In this way, the researcher was able to develop themes from different narratives of different people who had similar experiences and to confirm the uniqueness of the political and social situation in Vietnam. In addition, the research also included several stories of her own and her friend’s experience to give a clearer picture of how dissenting opinions are treated in the country.

4.3. Validity, reliability, and generalizability of the research

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is often based on empirical data rather than pure logic or formulas. It is, therefore, frequently considered less rigorous in terms of its scientific approach since it is usually deficient in clear and properly justified methods. Furthermore, analytical procedures are not transparent enough and its findings are seen as a compilation of personal points of view that can be influenced by the biases of the researcher (Noble and Smith, 2015).

To overcome this, the researcher collected and explained data in consistent investigation as the process is transparent in terms of participant selection and the interview aimed at obtaining data to answer the research questions. Another advantage in terms of validity and reliability is the fact the stories collected on Facebook from verified accounts with thousands of followers act as supplement to data collected from interviews. These stories are available and can be accessed and analyzed at any time as a data source of the study. This can be seen as constant data comparison and comprehensive data use, suggested by Silverman in an article by (Leung, 2015). In addition, the fact that all the interview recordings were transcribed presents good validity and reliability because this prevents information distortion by the researcher. The old and new theory of censorship was also applied to analyze the collected data, which shows the theoretical validity of the research (Hayashi, Abib and Hoppen, 2019).

Finally, this research focuses on a specific issue in a certain context which is the censorship phenomenon in Vietnam, therefore, the generalizability of the research findings is not ultimately expected. However, the same issue can be discovered in other contexts or countries which share similar politics or culture with Vietnam.

CHAPTER 5. DATA ANALYSIS

Disclaimer: For safety reasons, all pronouns referring to interviewees and some related people in this thesis will be used as they/them/their(s).

This chapter will analyze the data collected during the process of participation observation and interview. Based on the data collected, the researcher decided to divide the chapter into different topics which are: the police getting involved, Facebook users encountering problems with their accounts, articles on online newspapers or magazines being taken down, and self-censorship practices. The first three topics are going to answer research questions number 1 and 2, while the last topic answers research question number 3.

5.1. Topic Number 1: The police getting involved

This section will present how the police in Vietnam have gotten involved in content against big private corporations on social media. They have used both formal and informal ways to crack down on these opinions and people who share and participate in these discussions. The same tactics are also applied to impede activists from pursuing their advocacy for human rights. Vingroup is considered the largest private business corporation in Vietnam and the company has made its mark in almost every single aspect of the society such as real estate (Vinhomes), resorts (Vinpearl), supermarket chains (Vinmart), education (Vinschool), healthcare (Vinmec), smartphones (Vinsmart) and automobiles (Vinfast).

At the end of September 2017, Vinschool in Hanoi suddenly announced its plan to raise tuition fees and move a number of students at Vinschool Times City to a new campus in the Vinhomes the Harmony urban area. This provoked anger among parents, so they created groups on Facebook to discuss problems and express their concerns fiercely. A few days later, the Department of High-Tech Crime Prevention (known as C50) became involved in the incident and “invited” some parents to the police station for discussions. In the “invitation letter” below, the police did not give a specific reason why the recipient needed to be present at the police station; instead, they simply wrote “to ask about something relevant”.

State-owned media also reported the incident, mentioning that some parents of Vinschool students had been summoned by the police. Le Hong Son, head of the Department of High-Tech Crime Prevention of Hanoi (known as PC 50), confirmed that some parents were

“invited” by the police but it was not related to the conflict between Vinschool and the parents, but because the police wanted to investigate further about some people who “have defamed and insulted a leader of Vingroup” (Infonet, 2017).

Regarding the incident, Interviewee Number 1 shared the following:

“Some of my friends whose children were studying at Vinschool Times City complained on Facebook about the rising tuition fees and the quality of the school. They were then summoned by the police and forced to either deactivate their Facebook accounts or to remove these posts”.

This is not the first time the police have interfered with social media content related to Vingroup. In May 2018, Nguyen Anh Tuan, a prominent Vietnamese social and human rights activist who often wrote on Facebook about the large land deals involving private corporations and the authorities, was stopped at Tan Son Nhat Airport in Ho Chi Minh City upon his arrival in the country. Usually when an activist or dissident is stopped at the airport, it is for political reasons or because of their activism. This time, however, his detention was related to his writings about Vingroup, and an official even told him: “You have to delete the post about Vingroup and how they came to occupy the land lot.” Tuan refused to comply with the request (Reed, 2019).

This kind of action is seemingly compatible with the old theory of censorship, since a state institution (the police) has ordered the removal of information, even though the target (of the information) is not the government but a private corporation. The way the police summon or detain an ordinary citizen displays an instance of a coercive and repressive act of power to censor information that they do not want to be disseminated.

Having the “same same but different” experience regarding writing critical posts about Vingroup on Facebook, Interviewee Number 3, also had to meet with the police. In particular, a few months ago, Interviewee Number 3, who is followed by tens of thousands of people on the social media platform, wrote a post about the controversial relationship between Vingroup and a newly established company on their personal Facebook account. The post received more than three thousand reactions and shares, which, according to the interviewee, should be equivalent to approximately sixty thousand reaches.

“A few days later, I received a call from a police officer who wanted to invite me for coffee. During the coffee time, they told me to remove the post that I had written

about Vingroup earlier. Although I did not agree with them to delete it, I did tell them that I would change the audience settings from 'public' to 'friends', but not remove it", they said.

As discussed in chapter 4 of research methodology, changing the settings from “public” to “friends” means fewer people have access to the post.

In the case of Vinshool’s tuition fees and the case of activist Nguyen Anh Tuan, all the people involved were either summoned or detained by the police; however, Interviewee Number 3 was invited to meet the police in an informal and friendlier way – having a coffee with them. This is an example of the various tactics used by the police to approach different types of dissidents. Usually, they deploy some strategies such as: summoning the target to the police station, inviting the target to have an informal meeting (for a coffee, for a chat, etc.), pressuring the family of the target instead of the target themselves, and finally detaining or arresting the target. For those who have no or very little experience, the police often approach them with hard strategies, meaning that they receive formal summonses and sometimes even threats from the police. However, for vocal dissidents who are not afraid of the authorities and who are also not considered a real threat to the regime, the police tend to approach them in softer ways such as inviting them for coffee and then gently persuading them to stop writing or raising their voices against social injustice.

These kinds of tactics are used not only against online dissidents but also against political, social, or human rights activists in Vietnam. A friend of the researcher used to be “forced” to meet with the police for coffee almost every single month for over a year because of their activism during the given time. In these meetings, the police often either tried to get information as much as they could by asking about other dissidents and activists, warned that they knew everything about the target, or threatened the target not to continue activism. These informal meetings with the police may have negative impacts on an activist’s mental health and destroy their resistance, leading them to gradually give up on activism. Furthermore, it is likely that the tactic can create doubt between the targeted activists and their colleagues because the latter cannot know exactly what is discussed between the police and the targeted activists. Hence, this tactic is effective in censoring the information exchanged, deterring activists from continuing their activism, and isolating targeted activists from their colleagues.

Another tactic utilized by the police is pressuring family members of the target activist. Here the researcher can relate to her own experience 10 years ago. When she was 18 years old, the

researcher was detained and interrogated overnight by the police for joining a group of college students who were promoting democracy and human rights. After that, the father of the researcher was summoned to the police station, and he was filmed and recorded when he was being questioned by the police there. The pressure increased when the police visited the father's house later at night. The researcher did not get to be involved during these two meetings because the police chose to target the father who was supposed to pressure the researcher to stop her social and human rights activism.

The above stories have served the purpose of illustrating how the police apply both soft and hard approaches to restrict activism and opinions against not only the state but also private corporations, since these two actors often have close relationships with each other.

5.2. Topic Number 2: Having problems with Facebook accounts

In the section below, the researcher will explore problems faced by Vietnamese Facebook users after they have criticized private corporations on the social media platform. It is a common knowledge among Vietnamese people that if one person criticizes or raises concerns over projects, products, or service qualities of private corporations such as Vingroup, Sun Group, or FLC, it is likely that the Facebook account of that person will encounter some problems, for example, post removal, account permanently disabled, or account temporarily restricted.

Having observed the police involved in the Vingroup's scandal, Interviewee Number 1 decided to share their concern on Facebook and later noticed some changes to his account. They said:

“In Vietnam, Vingroup can manipulate the police, so I just shared my observations on Facebook that Vingroup has asked the police to threaten people who criticize them. After that I found out my Facebook account has been restricted from displaying within the (Vietnamese) territory... That means they have a lot of tactics which make... Actually, Facebook makes a decision based on many criteria, such as community standards, copyright infringement, or something like that. Then it uses those criteria to flag users' accounts. Normally, when an account is disabled or a post is taken down, Facebook will notify the user what community standards they have violated so that their post will be removed. However, in my case, Facebook did not provide any notifications or explanations and I only found out about it when I checked my profile section myself”.

In fact, what happened to Interviewee Number 1 is not unique as Facebook has also applied its arbitrary restrictions on other users' accounts. Interviewee Number 3 retold his experience regarding his Facebook being deactivated for unknown reasons:

“At the beginning of March this year, when I was trying to log into my main account which has tens of thousands of followers, I realized it had been deactivated for no reason. To make matters worse, I could not find the appeal button on the interface as usual to appeal their decision, so I had to write an email asking them to explain the reason why my account had been deactivated. Later, they wrote back to me to confirm the recipient of my appeal and said that if my account was deactivated for any other reasons than publishing fraudulent or misleading contents or violating copyrights many times, I would never receive explanations. I believe that there must be someone who requests Facebook to close my account; that is why the platform does not want to reveal the real reason behind their decision.”

The suspicions of the interviewee 3 was confirmed by another interviewee. When the researcher conducted an interview with Interviewee Number 5, an internal source from Vietnam's Ministry of Information and Communications¹, they said that the Ministry had had many negotiations with Facebook and wanted to directly intervene with the platform's system to remove contents, to disable accounts temporarily or permanently, or to restrict accounts from displaying on others' news feed. However, Facebook refused the Ministry to have direct access to the platform but agreed that the company will handle the Ministry's request on case-by-case basis, and

“the Ministry can contact Facebook through a special channel whenever they have a request to remove a post or an account. Based on my observation, I realize that many times Facebook does not follow their own community standards when they handle requests from the Ministry... Big private companies in Vietnam usually have established relationships with the authorities like the Ministry of Information and Communications, or the Ministry of Public Security, and news agencies. So, when

¹ According to the website, the Ministry is in charge of “the policy making and regulatory body in the fields of press; publishing; posts, telecommunications; radio frequency; information technology, electronics; broadcasting; media; foreign information; domestic information; and national information and communication infrastructure; management of related public services on behalf of the Government.” Available at: <https://english.mic.gov.vn/Pages/ThongTin/114253/Main-Functions.html>

information against these companies appears on social media, they will ask the authorities to put pressure on those platforms to block the information.”

Interviewee Number 5 also explained why sometimes criticizing a private company also implies criticizing the government:

“When someone raises a question about a private corporate, it is not only about the company itself but also related to a decision made by the authorities. For example, for the project of Vinhomes Long Beach in Can Gio, Vingroup needed to level and fill parts of Can Gio Beach, which would have had impacts on the environment. Therefore, when someone criticizes this project of Vingroup, they also target the authorities because the authorities granted Vingroup permissions to implement the project. Hence, it is easy for the company to manipulate the authorities to manage the media crisis.”

To illustrate what Interviewee Number 5 said above, Interviewee Number 2, as an admin of a Facebook page which monitors and raises concerns about real estate projects by private companies in Vietnam, shared their experience about encountering the same problem in the past when their page was deactivated due to mass reporting.

“I think they must have used thousands of accounts to report my page. After it had been disabled, they created another page which looked exactly like mine. People who used to follow my page also follow and like that newly created fake page too. Even now when I was able to gain control of my page again, it is still restricted. For instance, when I try to look for my page on the search bar of Facebook, the fake one will appear in the first place, not my page. The number of reach or reactions on my page is also much lower than before. In the past, a post or a picture uploaded could have 50 thousand up to 100 thousand reaches, but now it is just 10 thousand maximally... I have a friend who works for the media crisis management team of Sun Group. S/he said Sun Group has a team called ‘media (crisis) management’. Each member of the team has about 40 to 50 Facebook accounts. When they are ordered to attack a post or a photo, hundreds of accounts of the team will report the content.”

In fact, having a Facebook post or account removed arbitrarily is not uncommon as Interviewee Number 6 also experienced the same as follows:

“In June 2021, I myself used to raise a problem regarding Vinmec applying a medical treatment (using stem cell therapy as treatment for cerebral palsy and autism – researcher) which had not been approved by Vietnam’s Ministry of Health and getting money from patients. Vinmec started “selling” the treatment in 2014 while there was no scientific medical evidence to prove that the treatment was safe and effective. So, I raised and discussed this problem in a Facebook group named Liêm Chính Khoa Học (in English: Integrity in Science - researcher). Of course, people who supported Vingroup flocked to the group, commented negatively, and even swore at me under my post, which made other members worried that sooner or later the whole group would disappear. However, nothing happened at that time until one year later, I received a notification from Facebook that my post in the group was deleted due to community standards violations. I did not try to figure out what actually happened because it has been a long time, so it is not easy to trace back the activities.”

Based on their experience and observation, Interviewee Number 5 explained methods utilized to pull down contents or deactivate Facebook accounts which happened to Interviewee Number 2 and Interviewee Number 6:

“The thing is not everyone’s account will be attacked whenever he or she criticizes a private company. Usually, only accounts or posts which receive many reactions will be attacked. From what I know, there are two ways to remove a post or disable a Facebook account. The first one is using accounts created and managed by one or many bots’ (to conduct mass reporting). When multiple accounts report a content or an account at the same time, it actually means they are trying to trick Facebook’s algorithms; because taking down a content or blocking an account temporarily is handled automatically by artificial technology, not by humans. If a Facebook account is not verified with a blue checkmark or is not highly influential, chances are that account can be easily disabled, at least temporarily, by these bots. After that, the account owner may file an appeal to get the account back [...] The second way is using bots and contacting Facebook through a special channel (as mentioned above – the researcher) to disable a verified account of an influencer or a public figure.”

Below are also stories of other Facebook users who experienced problems with their accounts after criticizing or complaining about private companies.

Phuong Ngo has been known for pointing out mistakes and errors made by Build-Operate-Transfer businesses in Vietnam. Recently, she started writing on Facebook about frauds and misconducts committed by other private companies, especially F88. F88 is considered a financial services firm that provides loans for micro and small businesses and individual consumers. However, many people claim that F88 is functioning like a loan shark because the company offers loans at extremely high interest rates. Furthermore, the F88 company has hundreds of employees who work as debt collectors, threatening debtors and showing signs of extortion. On 4 January 2023, Phuong Ngo officially sent her criminal complaint to relevant authorities. Since then, her Facebook account has been repeatedly reported anonymously and some restrictions have been applied. In particular, on 17 March 2023, she said that within 7 days, more than 200 posts she had written were reported as copyright infringement or community standards violations and then removed from her accounts. Although many of these posts are not about criticizing private companies, they still got reported and removed. At this time of writing, her Facebook Messenger account is being suspended, which means she cannot reply to whoever sends her messages (Phuong, 2023).

At the beginning of January 2022, a Facebook account named Thanh Luong Le wrote a long post on her page about the quality of Vinfast's customer services. In particular, she bought an electric motorbike for almost \$3000, which required her to sign a battery lease contract for the motorbike and to pay around \$200 for the battery deposit. Everything seemed to work smoothly until 3 months later, her son's motorbike suddenly stopped working. When she contacted Vinfast, they said she needed to pay monthly battery fees, in addition to battery exchanging fees, which were not stated in the contract. They explained that their policy had not been completed by the time she bought the motorbike, and this was the new policy she had to follow. Thanh Luong Le decided to sell the motorbike but the company said they only accepted an electric motorbike WITHOUT batteries, which means the motorbike's value then decreased by more than 70%. Her Facebook post received thousands of reactions and comments from others and some users also shared their bad experiences with Vinfast as well (Thanh Luong, 2022a)².

² This is cited from Facebook account of Nguyen Lan Thang who reposted the post of Thanh Luong Le as Le's original account was deactivated. The original post was published at: <https://www.facebook.com/100005385582005/posts/1746542805535222/?d=n> but it is not available anymore. It is worth noting that Nguyen Lan Thang has been known for his critics of both the government and big private corporates such as Vingroup and FLC. Lately, he was sentenced to 6 years in prison under Article 117 of the 2015 Criminal Code for "making, storing, distributing, or disseminating information, documents, and items against the

Eventually, she could not access her account and it has disappeared until now on Facebook, which she claimed on her new account that her old Facebook account's disappearance was linked to what she had written about Vinfast earlier (Thanh Luong, 2022b).

Save Tam Dao is a Facebook page created by a group of Vietnamese activists, dissidents, and environmentalists who protest the development project in Tam Dao National Park by Sun Group³. In 2020 and 2021, the page was continuously attacked anonymously as posts and photos published were reported as copyright infringement even though the admins confirmed all photos either were taken by them in Tam Dao National Park or were cited properly before publishing on Facebook (Save Tam Dao, 2021a). To be worse, the Save Tam Dao Facebook page was even reported as a fake account, which led to the page's deactivation for ten days (Save Tam Dao, 2021b).

These stories above are examples of new forms of censorship with the help of digital technology. Clearly, community standards created by Facebook to protect users from toxic contents have been abused to censor information on the platforms. It is understood that Facebook does not take a direct action to remove the post or the account but their community standards to protect users (as in form of self-censorship practice) has been utilized by explicit censorship actors to censor information.

What Interviewee Number 3 assumed above is not totally unfounded since in April 2020, Facebook confirmed that the company decided to comply with requests by the government of Vietnam to censor more content anti-state posts and "restrict access to content which it has deemed to be illegal" (Pearson, 2020). Although the sources of Facebook only mentioned anti-state posts or allegedly illegal contents and did not include posts against private business companies, it is a possibility that the state wants to censor information critical of private companies as well if they see it as a threat to the regime or the economy. It is also an important

State". This controversial article has been used to arrest and charge many human rights defenders and journalists in Vietnam.

³ In 2016, the project got revived by an investor, Sun Group, one of the largest real estate development corporations in Vietnam. It was reported that 300 hectares of forest land of the national park will be converted to land that would be used in development projects. To be worse, the government did not disclose the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the project to the public like other development projects in the country in which land disputes over the state and people have lasted for years. It is worth noting that the development project in Tam Dao National Park is not the only environmentally controversial project by Sun Group in Vietnam.

aspect of the old censorship theory because the general belief is that the state has the right to control the flow of information and ideas.

Another problem which is worth noticing is that the state actor is always afraid of being criticized for issuing wrong policies, even though sometimes public discussions are about real estate development projects of a private company; therefore, they still put effort to control opinions. This action is parallel with another aspect of the old censorship theory which believes that the state strives to ensure that all information shared or disseminated is consistent with the state's policies and values.

This strategy of censorship is not only applied to social media, but also to online newspapers. Further information will be presented below.

5.3. Topic Number 3: Online newspapers or magazines being subject to censorship by the power of big private corporates

This section will present a topic about how newspapers and magazines are directly or indirectly subject to censorship by private companies. The issue had not previously been on the agenda as a research question, but it unexpectedly became an issue that arose during the researcher's interviews with the participants.

Interviewee Number 3 retold their story when the newspaper they often write for was questioned by a state official because of their writing:

"I once wrote an article about Vingroup regarding the corporation's real estate development projects for the special issue of [redacted] magazine. After the issue including my article was released nationwide, the managing editor of the magazine told me that (s)he had received a call from the deputy head of the Communist Vietnam's Central Propaganda Committee questioning why my article had been published and saying that my article should not have been published."

In connection with the story about Vinmec's unethical treatment above, Interviewee Number 6 continued:

"When I was discussing the problem regarding Vinmec's treatment in the group mentioned above, I said that I had done research on the hospital's misinformation and research ethics violations in my PhD dissertation, so other people could read my dissertation to understand more about the problem. The funny thing is that later,

when I was looking back at all the online newspaper articles about Vinmec that I had cited in my dissertation, I realized they had all been taken down, even though they had been published 5, 6 years earlier. Before I wrote about the problem in the group, these articles were still available to access. This means that these newspapers removed the articles at the request of Vingroup”.

Interviewee Number 6 also found out that while some newspapers took down their articles about Vinmec’s unproven treatment, others were unwilling to write new articles about the topic. When Interviewee Number 6 contacted these newspapers, they did not respond:

“Around that time, I contacted Báo Tuổi Trẻ (Youth Newspaper) and Thanh Niên (Young People’s Newspaper), which are often considered the most progressive newspapers in Vietnam, to talk about the problem but both of them ignored me and never got back to me even though I used to have a good connection with them. Having said these things to prove that even when such a dangerous and unethical practice like that happened, even the most progressive Vietnamese newspapers did not dare to cover it because of Vingroup’s power”.

Having worked for a newspaper in the past, Interviewee Number 4 shared their observation that may explain why some journalists and newspapers are reluctant to write critics of private companies:

“I know it is difficult for newspapers or news agencies to criticize private companies because they sign commercial sponsorship contracts with these companies... For example, I do not know if they still apply the policy, but when I was working for Thanh Niên newspaper years ago, there was a policy that it is the responsibility of journalists/reporters to have private companies sign commercial sponsorship contracts with the newspaper. For each contract signed, that journalist or reporter receives a commission of 10% of the contract’s value... In general, it is the way they operate, so they cannot freely write about private corporations and political issues.”

This phenomenon also happens in South Korea in a study by Lee (2019), mentioned in the chapter of literature review, as big private corporations utilize their economic power to manipulate mass media.

On 28 May 2020, the online version of Báo Phụ Nữ Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City’s Women Newspaper) was suspended for one month and the newspaper was required to

pay a VND55 million (US\$2,372) fine for publishing false information, according to a decision of the Authority of Press under the Ministry of Information and Communications. This followed after the newspaper had conducted a series of investigative stories during the period from September to October 2019 in its print and online editions about Sun Group and its controversial development projects. On the same day of the decision, the Facebook page named Báo Phụ Nữ (Women Newspaper), which belongs to Báo Phụ Nữ Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, published a long post explaining how and why they did not agree with the decision made by the Authority of Press and clarifying that Sun Group had made a lot of misconducts (Báo Phụ Nữ, 2020). Later a group of journalists and reporters who got involved in the incident were either fired or got their press pass confiscated (Save Tam Dao, 2020).

It has been estimated that there are more than 700 newspapers and magazines in Vietnam (Vietnam News Agency, 2021) but all of them are operated under control of (the head of) Communist Vietnam's Central Propaganda Committee functioning as a censorship department. In 2006, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung even signed the Decree on Cultural and Information Activities which, among other regulations, stipulates that articles be reviewed by the state before being published (Government of Vietnam, 2006). In Vietnam, all print and online newspapers are operated under state's control and therefore, all journalists and reporters who work for those newspapers must obtain the press pass, in accordance with Vietnam's Law on the Press.

These stories above are examples of both the old and the new theory of censorship. On the one hand, all newspapers in Vietnam function under the state's control, which follows the old theory of censorship. On the other hand, these newspapers are also subject to market censorship as part of the new censorship theory.

5.4. Topic Number 4: Self-censorship

The section below will show various reactions and tactics applied by different people who have faced difficulties after criticizing private corporations on social media. When being asked whether they or people they know have changed or stopped criticizing private companies after encountering problems, the interviewees gave answers with different attitudes and reasons.

Below is response from Interviewee Number 1:

"I am myself sometimes under a lot of pressure, so I need to stop writing for a while, but it is not forever. I also think that Facebook users should also be more

responsible for what they write. That means instead of directly accusing some companies of misconduct or bad services, they should raise concerns and provide concrete evidence.”

Unlike Interviewee Number 1, Interviewee Number 2 shared some different observations and experience:

“I have a friend who used to work for Save Con Dao and was summoned to the police station several times so s/he stopped activism. That group has no longer written anything against real estate development projects. Now they just focus on sea turtle protection... About me, I do not change anything or restrain myself from writing. The more they attack me, the more reasons I have to keep writing.”

It is quite common for activists and dissidents to go off radar for a while or sometimes forever when being pressured or threatened so reactions from Interviewee Number 1 and friends of Interviewee Number 2 are not unexpected. The same phenomenon also happens in other countries where activists and reporters are often in a vulnerable situation. For example, many female journalists and human rights activists went into hiding as the wave of violence against them escalated in Afghanistan (Hein, 2021).

Interviewee Number 3 also does not stop writing and even comes up with new tactics to circumvent the content moderation system:

“I do not stop writing and I have learned some tricks to avoid being reported automatically. I know many friends of mine who have been reported because they do not know how to avoid censorship of Facebook. For example, if I need to use allegedly sensitive words in my posts to describe a situation or an issue, instead of writing them the usual way, I try to use both letters and special symbols to formulate the word. So, when someone wants to report me for using inappropriate words or inciting violence, Facebook’s algorithm will not detect it.”

Regarding the practice utilized by Interviewee Number 3 to avoid Facebook’s censorship, it is called “algspeak neologisms” or “algspeak”. It refers to code words or phrases adopted by netizens in an intention to circumvent censorship by content moderation systems. Because algorithms have a tendency to flag content containing specific words regardless of context, some users have to write them in an unusual way. Algspeak may appear to be recent but this practice has actually been in existence since the development of internet service and early times

of social media (Meacham, 2023). This may seem to be parallel with the new censorship theory in terms of generating new discourses and forms of communication.

Interviewee Number 4 and 5 were not asked this question because they have not been active in criticizing private corporations on social media.

Interviewee Number 6 said they no longer writes about Vinmec because after they had exposed the hospital's unethical treatment and research, the hospital agreed to refund money they received from patients and their families. That means Interviewee Number 6 achieved their goal.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSIONS

As presented in the previous chapter, all the stories collected through semi-structured interviews and the online ethnographic method are about how state and non-state actors and Facebook deliberately or unwittingly implement censorship against critics of private companies in Vietnam. These stories can be analyzed through the prism of the old and new theories of censorship. In the past, censorship was understood to be solely an explicit and repressive action. However, the new theory has categorized certain forms of censorship as implicit (Walker-Beaven, 2022).

6.1. Old theory of censorship

The old theory of censorship or the traditional liberal concept of censorship believes that censorship is usually explicit and carried out through the actions of powers (Roussin, 2020) with repressive effects. In the stories told by the interviewees and the stories collected on Facebook presented in the previous chapter, the police and other authorities represent the power of the state that has intervened to stop people from disseminating information not only against the state but also against private corporations. The government of Vietnam always promotes a “socialist-oriented market economy”, therefore, it is understandable that the Vietnamese media culture practices under the control of the state. Yên-Khanh, Phelan and Gray (2022) suggested using the term authoritarian liberalism to better understand the relationship between market, state, and civil society as media in Vietnam. Furthermore, according to an article published by John Reed (2019) on Financial Times Magazine, a scholar at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies confirmed that private companies in Vietnam usually have good relationships with the government (or those who work for the government) to protect their interests and profits; therefore, they can leverage the relationship to silence critics against them. The underlying reasons censorship actions may include, but are not limited to, the following: First, when people question real estate development projects by a company, it is implied the government’s misconduct for approving these controversial projects. Second, the government tends to prevent any opinions that may create collective action which can challenge the regime’s power and legitimacy.

By summoning some or even just one parent to go to the police station, the authorities sent a signal to warn those involved to stop circulating discussions. This tactic has always been effective in censoring and blocking the flow of information in a country with the politics of

marketization like Vietnam, and it is applied not only to ordinary discussions and debates among people, but also to the press in general. After conducting research on press censorship in the country, Geoffrey Cain (2013) used the phrase “kill one to warn one hundred” to describe the situation when some journalists and reporters were arrested for unearthing wrongdoing and corruption made by senior leaders. This fits well with the old censorship theory because here the power of the state was used to block the flow of information since the state wants to ensure that all debates and discussions are in line with its policies and to maintain the status quo. Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous chapter of data analysis, some people have given up criticizing projects by private corporations and have stopped their activism completely. This shows that the action done by the police had a repressive effect to stifle people’s voices, which is recognized in the old theory of censorship.

The same can be said about the tactic of mass reporting discussed in the previous chapter since mass reporting can be organized by power, even if it comes from non-state actors, with the suppressive intention to suspend members discussing marginalized topics from an online platform. For Perry and Roda (2017), in this case, the impact of a repressive campaign is reinforced by non-state actors mimicking state censorship strategies. Brandom (2014), mentioned in the chapter of literature review, revealed how pro-government groups organized mass reporting to repress opinions against the state on Facebook. In 2017, the government of Vietnam established a 10,000-member cyber warfare unit, known as Force 47, to thwart “wrongful” opinions about the state on the Internet (Nguyen, 2018b).

6.2. New theory of censorship

For Interviewee Number 1, Interviewee Number 2 and other Facebook users who have experienced being shadowbanned, this practice is analogous with constitutive censorship which is a part of the new censorship theory. Jansen in Oltmann, Knox and Peterson (2021) pointed out that constitutive censorship is the elusive practice by which “the powerful invoke censorship to create, secure, and maintain their control over the power to name; this level of censorship can be hidden and implicit, motivating the various rules about what content is allowed or prohibited.” Furthermore, this type of censorship has no legal basis.

Because of their self-governing nature, social media platforms have usually established their own set of community standards which are deployed as measures of regulation. Nevertheless, the procedures for moderating content are frequently unclear, based on personal opinions and can exhibit prejudice. What happened to Interviewee Number 1 and Interviewee Number 3

when their accounts were restricted from displaying and suddenly drop in reactions is “shadowbanning” – a type of online censorship wherein someone is permitted to talk, but they can barely get their voice heard. So far, it is impossible to understand this phenomenon properly as none of the social media platforms are willing to explain their algorithms or policies regarding shadowbanning which they prefer to use phrases such as “deamplification” or “reducing reach” (Fowler, 2022). Furthermore, what Facebook and Instagram have done to their users by shadowbanning their accounts are not required by laws. In numerous other cases, the platform’s implementation of the policy does not constitute equal treatment under the law (Stjernfelt and Lauritzen, 2020). These fit the model of constitutive censorship because they are invisible and create many principles by which content can be permitted or banned.

Regarding the algospeak adopted by Interviewee Number 3 to circumvent Facebook’s content moderation methods, academics who examine the way people communicate on social media suggest that this occurrence is an indicator of a larger trend: Whenever those in charge of online platforms or governments try to constrain what people can say in the cyberspace, Internet users will come up with innovative methods to get around the regulations. These tactics may be used to spread abuse or to protect the right to express oneself (Hershberger, 2020). This can be seen as consistent with the new theory of censorship framework. Contrary to the liberal viewpoint, the new censorship theory scholars describe the theory as a pervasive aspect of societal existence. They no longer consider it as a suppressive occurrence but, conversely, as a driving force behind the generation of new discourses and speech (Roussin, 2020). Therefore, the creation of algospeak has confirmed that the new theory of censorship can have a generative effect. In particular, the content moderation system of social media is designed to censor or block the usage of some specific words, phrases, or topics on the platform. However, users always have the need to express their concerns or opinions related to these discourses, so algospeak has been produced as a new way to communicate about these topics.

In the previous chapter, Interviewee Number 4 shared their experience working for a Vietnamese newspaper where journalists are not allowed to freely criticize private corporations because the newspaper needs to secure a sponsorship contract with these companies. Interviewee Number 6 also retold their story about contacting the two most progressive newspapers in Vietnam in relation to the Vinmec’s unethical and unproven treatment, but both the newspapers did not respond as they did not want to cover the news. This can be explained by Bourdieu’s (new) theory of self-censorship practices or structural censorship. On the one hand, the newspapers might be afraid that the authorities would sanction them for publishing

news against Vingroup as a private corporation, as the same thing had happened to Báo Phụ Nữ Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City's Women Newspaper) before. On the other hand, structural censorship compels the two newspapers to self-censor in order to meet the demands of the market or the audience. In this case, the audience is not the newspapers' readers but private companies which may have commercial sponsorship contracts with them. Most likely, these newspapers did not want to get into trouble with the state and the company, so they decided not to report the news that was unfavorable to Vingroup.

6.3. The mixture of old and new censorship theories

A study by Nurik (2019) has confirmed that both explicit and implicit censorship are active on Facebook. Furthermore, her findings have exposed the shortcomings of the social media platform's self-censorship practices as they place more emphasis on profits in the name of user protection. A study by Stjernfelt and Lauritzen (2020) also shared the same perspective as there is evidence that Facebook's flagging system has been abused in "an organized manner" to remove certain pages. Herein, a group of cyber attackers engaged in mass reporting represents the old theory of censorship as explicit censors, while the platform's algorithms and community standards automatically removing reported content operate as implicit censors of the new theory of censorship. When a vast number of accounts report a post simultaneously due to community standards violations or copyright infringement, the post will be taken down automatically by algorithms of Facebook. If many posts of an account are reported, it is likely that the account will be disabled, either temporarily or permanently. In this way, implicit censorship or self-censorship practices of the platform is even more detrimental than explicit censorship. Although Facebook has declared its commitment to human rights, including the right to freedom of expression (Meta, 2021a), in fact, it aids the explicit censors to push some vulnerable members and sensitive topics into an even more marginalized position. In 2018, a group of Vietnamese activists sent a letter to Mark Zuckerberg accusing the Force 47 aforementioned of "exploiting Facebook's community policies and disseminating fake news about the activists" (Nguyen, 2018a). Furthermore, it is worth noting that when an account is under attack of mass reporting, not only the post targeting a private corporation is reported but also other posts that have nothing to do with criticizing the government or private business corporates. This is done to increase the chance of taking down a targeted account.

It can be said that new censorship practices of mass reporting and shadowbanning make the censors invisible, which makes it similar to the Panopticon mentioned in the chapter of

theoretical framework. However, to some extent, this is also true for old censorship in phone tapping to read emails or conducting mass surveillance of citizens. Eventually, social media users or citizens will become unwilling to freely discuss certain topics because of the fear of being suspended by social media platforms or being punished by governments.

Another finding from the interview with Interviewee Number 5 is that all of the Facebook accounts that have been under the mass reporting attack are usually influential accounts which have many followers or accounts that publish content which suddenly gets a lot of attention from the public. This means that not every account or post will be reported if they present opinions against private corporations. This is parallel to the studies by Perry and Roda (2017), as sometimes Internet censorship is not focused on “exhaustive coverage” but only aims at preventing the possibility of collective action. In an authoritarian state like Vietnam, any potential opportunity of collective action is often considered as a threat to the ruling party, even if it involves criticizing private companies only, not the government. An example of the government’s crackdown on expressions against private companies to stop collective action is the 2016 environmental disaster in Vietnam. In that year, Hung Nghiep Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Corp, a Taiwan-based group’s local affiliate, discharged industrial wastewater into the sea, which caused the mass fish death along the central coast of Vietnam (Tiezzi, 2016) and damaged the livelihood of thousands of fishermen. Around that time, many people raised their voices on Facebook to call for the company to be held accountable and for the government to investigate the incident. As a result, people went on demonstrations to protest against the steel company and demand an appropriate explanation. Later, the government repeatedly repressed and arrested activists who expressed concerns about the marine life disaster (Amnesty International, 2017). Thus, it can be said here that in contrast to the research by (Al-Hasan, Yim and Lucas, 2019), mentioned in the literature review, about Facebook played an important role in collective action during the Arab Spring, in Vietnam the government tends to repress any online opinions that may lead to collective action.

In conclusion, traditional liberal belief of censorship only focused on state actors as explicit censors with repressive effects but scholars of the new theory of censorship have argued that censorship can be done by non-state actors as implicit censors and sometimes has multiple forms with generative effects, especially with the advent of digital technology. This can be reflected by how the Vietnamese authorities get involved in blocking information against private corporations and how algorithms of Facebook, as a social media platform, have supported to suspend accounts and posts criticizing private companies in Vietnam.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter offers conclusions obtained from the collected data to answer all the aim research questions, as well as suggest recommendations for further research and for social media platforms.

7.1. Conclusions

The purpose of the research was to examine how private corporations handle information against them on Facebook and how relationships with the government and social media have been abused to silence critics of them, which brings negative impacts on the right to freedom of expression in Vietnam.

The first research question of the thesis is: How do Vietnamese private corporations act against their online criticisms?

Overall, private corporations in Vietnam, such as Vingroup and Sun Group, have so much power that they can influence the state authorities and social/mass media. Firstly, in an “authoritarian neoliberal” state like Vietnam (Yến-Khanh, Phelan and Gray, 2022), private corporations often have good relationships with the government to leverage their benefits, therefore, when these companies face a new wave of criticism, they tend to ask the authorities for help to obstruct unfavorable ideas against them. Secondly, social media platforms like Facebook can be used by private companies as a “battlefield” to combat their criticism. For example, Sun Group mobilizes their employees to report critic accounts. Finally, even though the researcher did not aim at Vietnamese online newspapers, it appeared in some interviews that newspapers are subject to censorship not only from the government but also big private companies. Since several newspapers receive commercial sponsorship from some private corporations, they are not free to criticize these companies. Even if when a newspaper like Báo Phụ Nữ questioned a real estate development project by a company like Sun Group, the newspaper got fined by the authorities.

The second research question is: What happens to Vietnamese Facebook users after they have criticized private corporations?

It has been observed that when a Vietnamese Facebook user complains or raises concerns about a big private company on the social media platform and their post goes viral, two things usually happen. Firstly, the police, as representatives of the state, may get involved and request the

user to stop writing about these private businesses. This can be done through a formal invitation to the police station or an invitation to a café with the police. Secondly, the user's Facebook account will be attacked by mass reporting or will be deactivated for unknown reasons.

To better understand how social media has been taken advantage of to stifle critics of private companies, it can also be drawn from the data collected that the community standards and the content moderation system of Facebook have been abused by cyber attackers to conduct mass reporting. When a content is reported in the name of community standards violation by other multiple accounts, either the content will be removed or the account will be (temporarily) disabled. Even if the account owner files an appeal and successfully gets the account back, it is still a long process which causes inconvenience and reduces public attention to a specific subject. Furthermore, sometimes the Vietnamese authorities even contact Facebook's representatives through a special channel to take down content or accounts. The big tech did once confirm they have to comply with requests from the government of Vietnam in order to continue operating in the country.

The final research question is: How have Vietnamese Facebook users reacted after they have experienced inconvenience for criticizing these private corporations?

Facing various inconveniences from the social media platform and sometimes pressure from the authorities, Vietnamese Facebook users have reacted differently. While some people have stopped writing against private companies as well as their activism, others have come up with different strategies. Some try to keep their profile low when the situation becomes so tense or when they are threatened by the police and others adopt algospeak to circumvent censorship by social media's content moderation systems.

Hence, it can be concluded that people in Vietnam are not free to criticize private corporations like Vingroup and Sun Group. These corporations, thanks to the relationship with the state and the support of digital technology, have bad impacts on the right to freedom of expression of the people.

7.2. Recommendations for further research

The current study can be interpreted as a pilot study on the relationship among human rights, state, market (private corporations), and digital technology (social media). While many studies focus on digital technology and human rights, such as by Dragu and Lupu (2021), Liang *et al.*, (2018), and Rothschild, (2013), etc., and on private companies and mass media in South Korea,

such as by Park (2021) and Lee (2019), this thesis concentrates on a more complicated influence of state, private companies, and technology on human rights. However, the result of this research should be taken into consideration with caution due to the special context of Vietnam, the small number of interviewees, and the lack of time and human resources.

Furthermore, this thesis also emphasizes that when it comes to censorship, the right to freedom of expression or the right to freedom of speech are not the only human rights that need to be taken into account. With all narratives involving Vinschool, Vinmec, and Sun Group presented in the previous chapter, it is also people's right to health and the right to healthcare and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment that have been violated. Also, repressing opinions against private companies to prevent collective actions is also a violation of the right to peaceful assembly. If people are not allowed to freely express their concerns, suspect private companies' projects, and question decisions made by the government regarding the environment, these rights mentioned above cannot be fully respected and protected. This is an example showing that when one human right is violated, other rights cannot be left intact because human rights are always interdependent and indivisible. On this basis, future research should examine the connection between censorship and different human rights other than the right to freedom of expression such as the right to healthcare or the right to education. It is important that people have the chance and safe space to raise their voices about social problems and injustices. If all dissenting opinions of the public are silenced or censored, it may have a negative effect on the quality of healthcare services, education, and public policies. What can people do when their health or living environment is damaged but they cannot complain about it? Furthermore, upcoming studies can also explore the impacts of mass media censorship on transparency of information. If the press is arbitrarily censored, the people's right to seek information cannot be fulfilled. It is well known that the news media is one of the "pillars of democracy", so if newspapers are under control of the state and the market, there is no guarantee that people can live in a full democracy where fundamental human rights are protected.

Finally, since it is recorded that Facebook has been arbitrarily censored users' accounts or contents and the content moderation system has been misused to suppress marginalized ideas, it is recommended that the company should take further actions to improve their algorithms and technology as well as protect users' rights better. It is worth noting that the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights highlight the responsibility of, in addition to states, private corporations to respect human rights; therefore, Facebook and all other social media platforms should always take these principles into consideration when developing their products and services.

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APPENDIX: Interview guides

This interview is part of research for a master thesis in human rights **in which** the main purpose is to understand how big corporations in Vietnam influence the right to freedom of expression in cyberspace.

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

I will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. I will process your personal data confidentially and I will replace your name and contact details with a code. The list of names, contact details and respective codes will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data, I will store the data in an encrypted device under an encrypted software using a masterpass that only I have the access to it. You will not be recognizable in publications as your name, age, occupation and other identified information will not be included in publications.

The project is scheduled to end on 30 June 2023. After this date, all information, including recordings of your voice, provided by you will be deleted permanently. For any questions do not hesitate to contact me at: amelia.hoangmt@gmail.com.

Thank you for your participation.

Questions

1. Personal questions

- a. Name
- b. Telephone number

* This question is to confirm the identity of the interviewee. Information provided in personal questions will NOT be disclosed in the thesis/publications.

2. Do you or any people you know write critics of Vietnam's big corporations on Facebook or any other platforms?

3. Frequency of complaining about Vietnam's big corporations on Facebook/other platforms (from you or from people you know/follow)⁴
 - a. Never
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Usually

4. Do you or people you know encounter problems after complaining on Facebook/other platforms?
 - a. Nothing happened
 - b. Police involved
 - c. Content restrictions
 - d. Content removal
 - e. Account reported/suspended
 - f. Other

5. Are there any explanations from Facebook/other platforms regarding their decisions on your accounts/contents?
 - a. Community standard violations
 - b. Copyright infringement
 - c. Other

6. What are your reactions after those experiences?
 - a. Stop writing about them completely
 - b. Continue to write about those corporations if they do something wrong
 - c. Still write about them but with a self-censorship mindset
 - d. Other

7. Do you have any other experiences or observations relevant to the topic? If any, what are your experiences/observations?

⁴ From this question, all a, b, c,... items are served as suggestions. Interviewees do not need to follow them.