

# Role of Social Media Gears in Australia and Vietnam to Offset COVID-19 Initial Impacts: *Problem of Theory*

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**Abstract:-** Our existence has been marked by great social and political changes following the global spread of COVID-19 over the past two years. As the concerns over the widespread disease grew, so did the use of social media by almost people and officials from diverse walk of life seeking to promote healthy and secure environment. In the wake of emerging challenges, countries with unique economic and political attributes adopted disputable approaches towards the use and function of new media. This paper seeks to address this conflictual space, as the central problem of study, through case studies of two different economic and political systems in the Oceania and eastern Asia, namely in Australia and Vietnam, to show that under particular condition of COVID-19 pandemic, social media technologies played pivotal roles in appropriating communication structures to respond to the viral urgencies. It is argued that normative classical theories, either singularly or integrated and still on the curriculum agenda of academic circles, are problematic and of less descriptive capacity to account for the communication policies adopted by authorities and rulers of distinct political structures at the time of risk management. The study concludes that normative media theories, with their limits and rigid definitions, fail to explain the complexities of emerging conditions.

**Keywords:-** Australia, Covid-19, Social Media, Theory, Vietnam.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The social impacts of novel coronavirus, which might have been taken less seriously by some countries in the earlier days of its outbreak, was considered with great care and concern by other countries like Australia and Vietnam. Theoretically talking, Australia as the developed liberal country in the sphere of media and communication should have sought approaches, in dealing with the risks of pandemic, which would be free from rigid regulatory environments in which technologists are frequently forced into the position of requests and permissions. Likewise, Vietnam, as the heir of the Soviet Union communist political and press system, was expected to rely on traditional propaganda apparatus for communicating its messages and socio-political agenda to tackle the is-sue. However, in the face of earlier circumstances of pandemic urgencies, these systems operated to some extent in contradiction to their normative traits, outlined by some media scholars, in the use of communication technology to address adverse impacts of the disease. These states harnessed

new media and relevant machinery to contain and control the trouble, however, whereas Australia tended to compress, Vietnam inclined to moderately open the space for the role of emerging media.

This paper seeks to address, which it chooses to call, the problem of theory and at-tempts for standard representations of relationship between state and media through the case study of the two countries which were forced to readjust fundamental principles in the structure of their social and political values under pandemic weight. To explore the dynamics and implications of functionalized media, this study will firstly discuss the significance and roles of specific apps and platforms and their integration into media systems in Australia and Vietnam amid the surge of the disease. It will eventually bring under the spotlight the challenges posed by revised approaches on closed frontiers and rigid relations among the variables of theory basically assumed to govern the behavior and function of media in separate social and political systems.

## II. AUSTRALIA'S APPROPRIATED REACTION

The taxonomy developed in 1956 by three journalism scholars at the University of Illinois, Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, classified press as the auxiliary of politico-economic structures seeking to set criteria for judging the operation of a given media system. Based on this classification, in Four Theories of The Press, "they built their argument around two basic value-oriented theories of how the press ought to behave: authoritarian and libertarian. They then created two variations on these: Soviet/communist and social responsibility" (Hanson, 2019, p. 934). On their definition, in libertarian theory, which is set against the authoritarian view of media, the privacy of individuals, their personal information and freedom of expression are secured by law in the face of attempted infringement and violation. The governments of these countries are also protectors of values of democracy and freedom of media activities (Hanson, 2019, p. 941). By the same token, in the liberally-developed and "smart" country, like Australia, it is assumed that if there is any threat against free or forced use of media, the government would be expected to intervene. This is the challenge that the authorities in the Oceania had to acknowledge several months after the early surge of pandemic. In an attempt to re-open Austrian society following the first wave of infection, that shut down social and economic activities from March to May 2020, the country's officials sought to build the COVIDSafe app based on the Singaporean Trace Together model to trace the

movement of virus by the population across the country. The software was designed to automatically track user encounters and allow the health authorities to notify a user if they have been within 1.5 meters of an infected individual for 15 minutes or longer (Hunt, 2020).

Concerns over the possible access of the police to their data, a break into their privacy or the surveillance implications raised serious debates among public and media sectors. To address the concerns, Scott Morrison the Prime Minister of Australia joined an interview saying that they “need to get an automatic industrial level tracing of the coronavirus . . . Now, we’ve been working on this automatic process through an app that can ensure that we can know where the contacts were over that infection period and we can move very quickly to lock that down” (Bellotti, 2020). Accordingly, and in order to alleviate the sensitivities regarding the possible infringements, “the Australian government emphasized that it was keen to adopt a ‘consent-based’ model . . . [and] that participation would be voluntary,” (Goggin, 2020, p. 66). Such remarks along with other measures, like the passage of the Privacy Amendment Act 2020, or the Australian government’s legal guarantees through “a formal Privacy Impact Statement from a leading law firm” (Goggin, 2020, p. 66), however, did not stop the debates that the COVIDSafe app was in fact an information system which could make use of data gathered, for any purpose, available to the authorities. The persistence of ruling system to take advantage of the app-based contact tracing, in the time of emergency, stipulates that information technologies could serve as an inevitable means of surveillance in so-cial life in even liberal societies.

In the quandary of managing the disease using media technologies while dealing with the challenges of privacy violation in the media use, Australia was a victim ‘normatively’ talking. While under public and media pressure the officials had to consider the ways to make privacy issue more manageable, data negotiation inherent and typical of networked systems regularly rubbed the boundaries of public and private. The plight was inevitable and Australia, as a developed modern society favored the use of smart media, rather than police machinery, to establish order, secure interests and enforce the law. This has been the controversial point about state’s intervention in media autonomy and freedom of choice within the libertarian theory in modern times. Challenged by interconnected traits of new media and inevitability of its use for common interests, normative libertarian theories seem less capable to account for the necessities of the age of communication.

In 1991, Roya Akhavan-Majid and Gary Wolf were first to use the "Myth of Libertarianism" to explain that the theory was incapable of describing the U.S. mass media system "with respect to the increasing concentration and conglomeration of ownership and the subordination of the ideals of diversity and independence to the corporate search for synergy and profits" (p.1). By the same token, beginning with social net-working in the 1980s and '90s, new media and technology therewith have once again shown the diminishing explanatory and descriptive rigor of libertarianism in media systems. Under current circumstances, the elites are presented as rational beings who should decide for the good of individuals and the collective community and faith is placed on the government and its

measures. In contrast to the assumptions of theory, the authorities through officially-developed media operate as a watchdog for the public media interactions and keep citizens informed about their responsibilities as per the government and ‘healthy’ society. This is in stark contrast to the kernels of truth buried in the principles for which the media should advocate in a liberal society, which holds true, more or less, with similar approach in the communist-ruled Vietnam media environment at the earlier encounter with COVID-19 challenges.

### III. VIETNAM’S PRAGMATIC RESPONSE

The communist theory of media and communication posits that media have a didactic and ideological function in the formation of social order. According to Hanson (2019), media in all its means and materials are at the disposal of communist party and are exclusively used to promote the ideals and objectives of the state (p. 938). Such a moment is often resistant to popular culture refusing acknowledgement of ‘inclusive’ policies. Similarly, totalitarian moments prefer to make systematic use of new communication technology - for instance, in the face of pandemic challenges, they want communication technology to assist them in the domains of education and health - but they are unable to accept some of its prospective popular implications. However, in spite of these attitudes, it is politically accepted that if such a structure is subjected to forces outside of its control, it will be compelled to make difficult decisions to capitulate, albeit it will not succumb to the new circumstances in all ways. This stays staunch with the recent developments in the centralized press system in Vietnam.

In a research by Todd Pollack et al. (2020), we read that beside other measures on the early days of pandemic emergencies, the Vietnamese government started “texting people directly, taking advantage of Vietnam’s use of social media” to access people for health instruction and lockdown measures. Moreover, the authorities managed to relay the relevant messages through 80 percent of smartphone users to have the local social media app, Zalo, installed (Pollack et al., 2020). The government, who traditionally used to loudspeaker system to pass on their opinions and leads to the public, now benefited from the health communications among people by using Facebook platform which is popular among the Vietnamese. Facebook is not only popular with individuals and commoners but also is used for official brand fan pages, key opinion leaders (KOLs), TV channels, news, and government departments as a connecting bridge with customers, readers and citizens (Tran, H., et al, 2021).

Tran, H., et al (2021), in Figures 1 and 2, picture the co-occurrences of top keywords, collected from social media in Vietnam from January to March 2020, and suggest that the government was actively took advantage of popularity of social media to respond to first confirmed cases of pandemic.

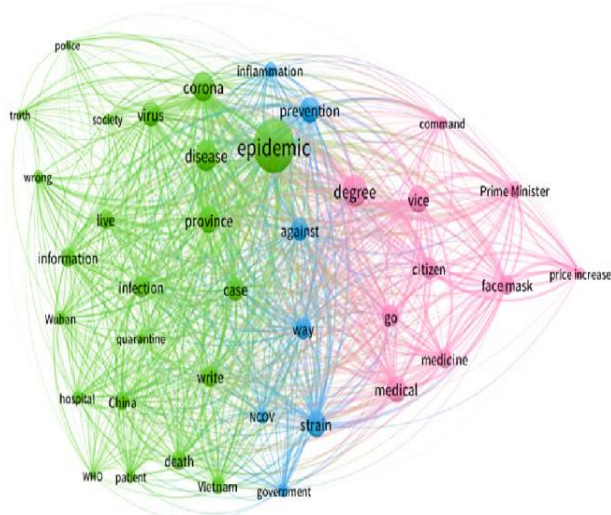


Fig. 1: Co-occurrences of top keywords, Jan. 23-Feb. 26, 2020 WHO: World Health Organization (Cited from Tran, H., et al - 2021)

The green cluster in Fig. 1 illustrates epidemic situation updates in China and the first 2 cases in Vietnam ... the blue cluster represents the government’s epidemic prevention plan through the keywords “inflammation,” “government,” “against,” “prevention,” and “NCOV” ... the pink cluster reflects when the prime minister issued a directive to sanction drugstores, which increased mask prices” as reflected in the key-words. (Tran, H., et al, 2021).

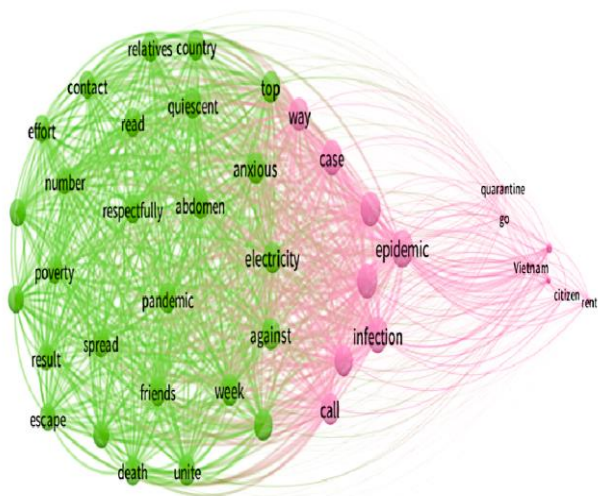


Fig. 2: Co-occurrences of top keywords, Feb. 27- March 5, 2020 (Cited from Tran, H., et al - 2021)

The green cluster shows the respect for frontline workers’ efforts and calls for national spirit and unity to fight the pandemic via keywords .... The pink cluster represents people’s cooperation with the government’s pandemic policy reaction, in particular quarantine, through the keywords displayed. (Tran, H., et al, 2021)

Although, Nguyen-Thu (2020) considers the government's engagement in social media use and its early accomplishments as a propaganda ploy aimed at "boosting its political legitimacy" (p.145), the significance of Party-State's active use of new communication technology, as well as its articulated pragmatic reaction to the spread of the disease,

which gained international notice, cannot be undermined. This development is regarded, by Athique (2019), as “digital transaction” in eastern Asia where the heirs of communist rulers blend state-run press with relatively open social media to cope up with the demands of survival.

IV. CONCLUSION

As it was discussed, the advocators of normative theories posit that “a direct connection exists between a country’s media system and its political system” (Hanson, 2019, p. 947). Essential to this assumption is the idea that free and non-exploited media in a functional democracy are key factors for libertarian theory. Besides, it presumes that media-state, a principle of communist theory, would inherently restrict the use of popular social media. However, in this paper through the Australian and Vietnamese examples, limitations of these theories were discussed and it was shown that rigid formulation of media structure and its relations to political systems have been reconsidered amidst COVID-19 challenges. Australia’s appropriation of media technology and development of surveillance apps, as well as Vietnam’s attentive pragmatic approach to integrate social media within the official media apparatus contributed to the success of both states in response to the outbreak of the disease in the early days. As it was explained, the normative theories, whether in singular or at the articulated level, have lost power to account for the urgencies of new conditions. Therefore, for designing alternative theories – whatever they choose to call them – the scholars need to be slightly cautious of defining too precisely what they are and what they are not because of the perils of policing the boundaries of theories. Or, as Alan Wells suggests (in Hanson, 2019, p. 948), the normative theories of press might be replaced by a number of criteria – including but not limited to “control”, “finance”, “programming goals”, “target audience” and “feedback mechanism” – by which the relations between media and ruling systems are explained.

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