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Vietnam's Shaky Crusade Against Online 'Trash Culture'

In the absence of firm principles, Vietnam's ambitious effort to combat malicious online content has been guided by public outrage.

By **Le Nguyen Duy Hau**

Earlier this month, Vietnam's Authority of Broadcasting and Electronic Information (ABEI), the country's main watchdog of online content, escalated its game against "trash" online content – a term the authority uses to chastise content that is deceptive or runs counter to its conception of civil morality. According to ABEI's head, under this campaign, domestic and international brands will be fined for advertising on blacklisted channels – websites, social media accounts, content channels, and community pages – described by ABEI as "harmful." Meanwhile, a priority "whitelist" of licensed channels will also be circulated, though ABEI will retain the power to blacklist a whitelisted channel within hours.

The campaign is ambitious, but it raises many questions, chiefly given that recent probes into online content have appeared to depend more on public sentiment than hard rules. The shaky approach of the campaign, together with the proposed harsh punishments, may bring more harm than good, undermining the rule of law and notions of social fairness.

ABEI delivered the above messages in early December, only days after the takedown of a viral TikTok clip. The clip was posted by Tuan, a content creator who runs a shockvertising TikTok page, and depicted him gifting a poor elder with her favorite meal of choice. The deed was good, but Tuan's language mocked the poor lady. His language was deplorably distasteful yet ignorable. It could be argued that Tuan did not mean bad when he mocked the lady, and the lady did not resist his deeds and words.

Yet, a huge boycott call ensued, and Tuan was summoned for a meeting with ABEI. In the meeting, which a uniformed policeman also joined, Tuan remorsefully admitted that his action was "careless" and "morally inappropriate." He was then fined $300 for "sharing content that violated civil customs." The financial loss was small, but TiktTok blocked his channel permanently. Tuan's channel will likely be blacklisted by ABEI, marking an end to his career as an influencer.

Tuan is just one of person who has fallen afoul of ABEI's strictures in recent years. In September 2020, a content creator was fined for a clip of him cooking congee with an unplucked chicken. The authority found that his action went against social customs. In April of this year, a famous singer was fined (through his agency) for releasing on YouTube a music video depicting a depressed teenager who ostensibly jumped off a high-rise building. The authority censured the clip as "negative and non-educational," geoblocked it, and fined the singer for "having damaging impacts on the health and psychosocial well-being of the community." The clip was released during the country's anxiety over three teenagers' suicides and triggered a huge backlash from

netizens. Despite the singer's explanation that he meant to alert people about mental illness, the authority sided with the public worry.

However, not all cases have been treated the same.

A year before Tuan's case, Vietnam Television, the country's flagship broadcaster, was spared when its anchorman touted hawkers as "the economy's parasites." After a small public outcry, the broadcaster apologized without any ensuing fines. Recently, a popular Facebook page jokingly posted a fake price list of spots in popular bridges for people looking to jump off after losing bets during the football World Cup. When someone questioned the morality of the joke, especially when betting-related suicides are a growing occurrence in Vietnam, many came to defend the post and its sense of humor. The authorities did not intervene.

This inconsistency reflects a problem with Vietnam's morality law. Enforcers appear not to have a compass with which to determine when to investigate a particular case. Concepts such as "civil customs" or "social morality" are so vague that principled enforcement is impossible. Attempts to define them are futile. In October 2021, the Vietnamese Communist Party held an on-site national cultural conference, 75 years after the first one. Quoting Ho Chi Minh in his opening speech, Nguyen Phu Trong, the party chief and Vietnam's de facto leader, stated that "culture lights the way for the nation." He berated the contemporary culture as "entertainment-focused," harming social morality. Trong called for the strengthening of cultural values which would promote national pride and "attract the world." He came up with a list of values, including patriotism, zero tolerance of corruption, solidarity, respect for loyalty, social harmony, social justice, and social morals. To elaborate, Trong resorted to folklore proverbs, ranging from care for the poor, spousal faithfulness, appreciation of local norms, respect for elders, and respectful manners.

Trong's proverbs, while poetic, are not useful. The values listed are arbitrary, and do not help settle day-to-day disputes, such as instances in which a joke is deemed inappropriate. Apparently, Trong is not a lawyer, and the conference was never meant to be legally conclusive. Smaller workshops ensued in which top cultural minds debated what their leader meant by "national values" and how they could be used to "light the way for the nation."

Working with these vague concepts means that cultural watchdogs like ABEI will have to enforce the will of the country's leader without a clear moral compass or set of criteria. It leads to them strategically appealing to public sentiment when a particular case creates a controversy. When public sentiments are outraged or there are calls for a boycott, the authority often steps in. In cases where the outcry was non-existent or insufficient, there is no intervention no matter how similar the cases may be.

This inconsistency weakens Vietnam's quest against malicious culture, given how easily public sentiment can become inflamed and the salience of "cancel culture" online. While the payoff of this campaign is questionable, it has already come at a high cost. As soon as next year, being blacklisted by the state could mean no second chance professionally.

Vietnam's goal of combating malicious content is appreciable. Yet not all good deeds are harmless. And the bigger question remains: should government intervene at all? The answer can be yes only if there is a principled way to undertake these interventions. Otherwise, the cost for the rule of law will be far greater than any benefit the moralists hope to create.

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