

Chapter 31

The Rise of Professional Facebook Content Generators in Vietnam: A Fake News Campaign Against the Betibuti Founder

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ABSTRACT

This case study is empirical research. It highlights the fact that the dynamic and complex Facebook content generators involve actively in the formulation and dissemination of fake news in Vietnam. Professional Facebook content generators include not only the paid online commentators, being hired by the government or business sector but also the professional journalists, who can earn for their living by promoting certain ideas and products on Facebook. As journalism functions as a tool for propaganda in Vietnam, even some governmental officers engage in the formulation of fake news, as long as the fake news serves the propaganda purposes. Through the analysis of the engagement of each group of Facebook content generators in fake news, this chapter contributes to the identification and elimination of fake news, and therefore, it is especially significant for journalists in reflexive truth-seeking practice.

INTRODUCTION

The media landscape in Vietnam during 2014-2019 has witnessed a rise of professional content generators on Facebook, including journalists and paid online commentators. The pre-mature legal system can be the reason for this phenomenon. Legal framework for social media management in Vietnam has not yet fully developed. In addition, Vietnamese does not have law for doing lobbying. As the consequences, using media, particularly the prominent social media platform, Facebook, to promote ideas and policies becomes a common practice. Doing propaganda is a norm for Vietnamese journalism. Thus, authorities

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can sometimes prioritise shaping the public viewpoints, rather than truth seeking and verification. This chapter investigates the roles and characteristics of those who produce and deliver content on Facebook for professional purposes, and elaborates their performance in a case study of the fake news against Le Nhat Phuong Hong, the founder of Betibuti, the breastfeeding community in Vietnam.

The first section of this chapter analyses the media context in Vietnam, from the measles outbreak in April 2014 to the approval of the Cyber Security Law in June 2018. The measles outbreak stimulated an unprecedented wave of using Facebook to call for the resignation of the Minister of Health. Responding to this wave, the Minister of Health began to use Facebook for public communication and, as of October 2018, she was the first and only minister managing a ministerial Facebook account in Vietnam. The government and business sector started to establish so-called ‘cyber troops’ and paid online commentators to manipulate social-media contents. Professional journalists engage in Facebook across a spectrum of three categories: social-media refuters, hybrid-media producers, and social-media leaders. Notably, journalists have formed a system of professional content generators on Facebook, doing advocacy for the business sector. The intensive engagement of journalists on Facebook blurs the boundary between professional journalism and manipulated communication. In June 2018, the National Assembly of Vietnam passed the Cyber Security Law, which requests proof of identification from social-media users. Before that, social-media accounts could be unverified and unidentifiable. These developments in the context of Vietnamese media have caused the mushrooming of fake news on Facebook, as well as degradation of journalistic quality.

The latter section of this chapter analyses a case study of fake news used against the Betibuti breastfeeding advocacy group. As of early March 2018, the group had 250,000 followers. In mid-March 2018, starting from a rumour on Facebook that ‘a mother and an infant died during home-based labour in Ho Chi Minh City’, the Ministry of Health of Vietnam (MoH) organised a press conference to deliver the MoH’s charges against the group. Some MoH officers confirmed that the rumour was true, which provoked public scrutiny of the group. Journalists and Facebook became platforms for character assassination and defamation of the group’s founder. Facebook deleted the founder’s account, resulting in the removal of the group from social media and cancellation of group events. MoH then confirmed that the story about a mother and an infant dying was not true. However, this fake news stopped the expansion of breast-milk promotion and advocacy. The reputation of the group founder was severely damaged and had not yet been restored by the end of October 2018. The positive media notice she had earned before was removed or blacked-out by mainstream journalism.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT FOR THE RISE OF PROFESSIONAL FACEBOOK CONTENT GENERATORS

This section explores the rise of professional Facebook content generators in Vietnam from 2014 to 2019. It identifies the measles outbreak in April 2014 as the beginning of using Facebook for public-opinion expression and manipulation. Following this change in the media landscape, a shift has occurred among state-controlled journalists from publishing on mainstream media to publishing on Facebook. Notably, journalists stopped working for the state-run media house and started earning by posting advertorial contents on Facebook, marking the formation of a new media system on Facebook parallel to that of the mainstream media system. Besides journalists, paid online commentators are joining the network generating Facebook contents. Although posting on Facebook was becoming a highly organised profes-

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