Commentary

Covid-19 Misinformation and the Social (Media) Amplification of Risk: A Vietnamese Perspective

Hoa Nguyen 1,* and An Nguyen 2

1 Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA; E-Mail: hnguyen7@umd.edu
2 Department of Communication and Journalism, Bournemouth University, Poole, BH12 5BB, UK; E-Mail: anguyen@bournemouth.ac.uk

* Corresponding author

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Abstract
The amplification of Coronavirus risk on social media sees Vietnam falling volatile to a chaotic sphere of mis/disinformation and incivility, which instigates a movement to counter its effects on public anxiety and fear. Benign or malign, these civil forces generate a huge public pressure to keep the one-party system on toes, forcing it to be unusually transparent in responding to public concerns.

Keywords
Covid-19 infodemic; disinformation; misinformation; online incivility; risk amplification; Vietnamese social media

1. Introduction
Friday, the 6th of March, 2020 was a critical turning point in Vietnam’s battle against coronavirus. A midnight press conference was called after a residence street in the centre of Hanoi was locked down. A few days before that, a young resident in this area returned from London, failing to declare to airport quarantine officers that she had been terribly unwell. She had now tested positive and become Vietnam’s 17th Covid-19 patient. It was a brutal blow: The country had done its best to contain the virus from Day 1 and had seen no new case for 24 days. Flashing back to January, when coronavirus started to wreak havoc in Wuhan, Vietnam’s top leadership, disregarding all assurances from the Chinese government, its traditional political frenemy, was quick to take heavy-handed measures—including closing its 900-mile land border with China, ordering schools not to reopen after the Lunar New Year, and deploying its extensive surveillance system to track and trace primary, secondary and tertiary contacts of patients. By mid-February, things seemed to have eased off, with the number of cases staying unchanged from the 12th onwards. Until now.

The midnight press conference led many Vietnamese into a white night of hysteria and then days of panics. With that came an extreme level of incivility on social media. In the hours following the news, Patient 17 became a target of brutal online attacks, especially on Facebook, with a staggering amount of hate speech against her. Unsubstantiated information about her whereabouts in Europe before returning to Vietnam was, intentionally or unintentionally, spread on Facebook, as were intimate images and details about her seemingly prodigal lifestyle and decadent personality. A Facebook page named Patient 17 was created for people to post information about the “rich kid” and voice anger towards her. Some labelled her a national traitor and called for her to be criminally prosecuted for being dishonest about her health at the airport, which for them was the root of this
new saga. A few even wanted to kill her. Some of the domes-
tic media and expatriates’ news sites were quick to
join the crowd, creating a chaotic world where human
dignity—in this case, that of a hospitalized patient bat-
tling for life—was relentlessly stampeded in temper.
Incivility is nothing unfamiliar on Vietnamese social
media. A week before the above incident, Microsoft
(2020) published a Digital Civility Index report, rank-
ing Vietnam at the 21th out of 25 surveyed countries,
mainly because of the pervasive risks that its digital me-
dia pose to professional reputation, personal safety, and
health and wellbeing. Among the oft-mentioned prob-
lems are unwanted contacts, sex-related offences, hate
speech, and the spread of fake news, hoaxes, and scams.
Disrupting Vietnamese life in that context, Covid-19
seems poised to cause incidents such as the above.
This commentary will examine this social media phe-
nomenon through the theoretical lens of social amplifi-
cation of risk.

2. A Vicious Circle

The central assumption of social amplification theory
is that events pertaining to hazards ‘interact with psy-
chological, social, institutional, and cultural aspects in
ways that can heighten or attenuate public perceptions
of risk and shape risk behaviors’ (Renn, 1991, p. 287).
Social amplification happens in two stages: The risk is
first amplified during the transfer of information, trig-
ggering social responses that in turn, further amplify the
risk (Renn, Burns, Kaspersion, Kaspersion, & Slovic, 1992).
As hazardous events, especially those with a close prox-
imity to a community (Costa-Font, 2020), interact with
individual psyches and socio-cultural factors—such as
the intensity of public reactions on social networks—
they create ample room for miscommunication about re-
lated risks (Busby & Onggo, 2013). Given the unforesee-
able and uncontrollable aspects surrounding hazardous
events, even minor hiccups in the process of relaying le-
gitimate, fact-based information can trigger a strong pub-
lic response and/or result in detrimental impacts on so-
ciety and the economy.

This social phenomenon manifests in the informa-
tional chaos that coronavirus creates in Vietnam’s so-
cial media. Like other outbreaks, it is associated with
a great deal of uncertainty. Ironically, as science and
other authorities know the least about the novel virus,
the public thirst for answers is at the highest point. For
Vietnamese, this was asymmetry at the extreme. The risk
is perceived to be at the doorstep since Vietnam has
strong physical, economic, and political connections
with China, a country that the Vietnamese public—often at
odds with its leadership’s ambivalent relationship with
its Chinese communist counterpart—holds a strong sen-
timent against. This, aided by a general lack of trust in
government transparency and confusing responses by
public authorities in the early stage of the outbreak, led
people to have nowhere to satisfy their need to know
but their own interpersonal networks. Simply put, when
rushing for answers without receiving any from author-
itative sources such as scientists, health professionals,
and government bodies, people turn to any source they
trust in daily life, even though those sources are in no
better position to know more about the disease.

Such amplification is seen in any disease outbreak,
but things would have been a little more manageable
in the past. During the H1N1 pandemic (2009–2010),
for instance, gossips about the outbreak were restricted
to smaller settings, such as a beer/coffee catch-up, a
phone chat, a community meeting, a family reunion,
or at best, the less interactive and less personal online
spaces like blogs, forums or the then nascent Facebook.
2020 was, however, different: Vietnam now had 68 mil-
ion Internet users, with 65 million being active on social
media (Hootsuite & We Are Social, 2019). Amidst the vast
uncertainty, Facebook quickly became a main place for
Vietnamese to seek, share, and discuss news and infor-
mation about Covid-19 as a way to deal with their grow-
ing uneasiness and impatience. By allowing users to get
news and information from not only friends but “friends
of friends” or even “friends of friends of friends,” social
media create a fertile land for pandemic rumours, fake
news, hoaxes and so on—especially those appealing di-
rectly to negative emotions such as anxiety and fear—to
grow at an exponential rate.

Overall, as we have reviewed elsewhere (Nguyen,
2020), the Covid-19 infodemic on Vietnamese social me-
dia features three major types of mis/disinformation.
The first is false information and conspiracy theories
about the origin of the virus—such as that Coronavirus
is a biological weapon being leaked from a lab in Wuhan,
that Coronavirus is an attempt to make money by the big
pharma, that coronavirus is an effort by the rich and pow-
 erful to reduce global population growth. Most of this
was translated from foreign sources by either social me-
dia users or some gullible mainstream news outlets.

The second surrounds the development of the pan-
demic. This can take the form of deliberate make-believe
posts—such as a translated video of a fake Wuhan
health worker claiming in January that hundreds of thou-
sands were infected with the virus, not thousands as the
Chinese government said. Sometimes, it might be just
 rudimentary posts declaring something without any sup-
porting evidence—e.g., someone has died of the virus
somewhere. Such crude mis/disinformation could find
its way through the net simply because it is the daily ob-
session of a worried public.

The third is around prevention and treatment mea-
sures: While scientists are yet to understand the virus
and its working mechanisms, a plenitude of “health ad-
vice” has been posted online to teach people how to kill
it or even to treat Covid-19. The most shuddering is advice
for people to drink their own urine or bleach to prevent,
even treat, Covid-19. Less severe are the numerous posts
claiming people can stay away from Coronavirus by sun-
bathing, drinking hot water, avoiding ice creams, using
hair driers, wearing a face mask soaked with saline solution, or eating garlic, pepper, ginger, kimchi and so on. To be sure, some mis/disinformation has stealthy intent behind it. There are, for example, the invisible hands of hackers and state apparatuses who spread false and malicious content about the Covid-19 to exploit public fear for personal, commercial or political gains. In most cases, however, it is likely that the information chaos is down to a combination of negative emotions and low media literacy: People, out of fear/anxiety and the lack of news evaluation skills, unwittingly like and share wrong or untruthful information in their genuine but hasty belief that it is true. In February, soon after a woman died at a hospital in Ho Chi Minh City, her death declaration, personal identity, and close-up photos were immediately circulated on Facebook and other social platforms. The “news” was that she died of Coronavirus. The death note, however, specifies clearly that her death was caused by ‘myocarditis, multiple organ dysfunction’ (quoted in Nguyen, 2020). It was the few extra caution words after that—‘flu not excluded’—that sparked the rumour. It was easily taken as truth by many people who, in their sincere intention to alert others, did not pause to question the information or read the death note.

In short, from the perspective of social amplification theory, Covid-19 on Vietnamese social networks could be a classic example of risk being amplified in a vicious circle of intensified and attenuated signals about itself. The more information people seek on social media, the more confusion many—if not most—seem to have. As confusion goes that direction, it reaches a point when information quality becomes secondary to bias confirmation. As social messaging around Coronavirus is amplified to deaf ears, it contributes considerably to the formation and consolidation of anxiety and fear. Its effects can be seen in a range of irrational behaviours in real life: stockpiling food, queuing from 4 am to buy facemasks, abusing rumoured Covid-19 cures (e.g., chloroquine), discriminating people from areas with Covid-19 cases (e.g., Vinh Phuc province), and so on.

3. The Bright Side

Not everything is bleak, however. The chaos has seen many troubled users trying to do their bit, either as individuals or as group members, to mitigate its dreadful impacts. A voluntary Facebook page called News Check (Kiểm Tin) has been proactive in exposing fake Covid-19 news. By the end of April, less than five months since its birth, the page had about 24,000 followers, having published more than 260 posts that fact-check, cross-verify and debunk fabricated stories or false claims on both mainstream and social media. On YouTube, there is a boom of clips warning people of the emerging infodemic. Many KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) support the fight by voicing their views about false claims, helping bring the “infodemic” concept into Vietnamese households. Some doctors, epidemiologists and journalists have become essential Facebook places for confused members of the public to check for authoritative news and advice.

In the absence of systematic research, however, it is impossible to know the extent to which such efforts have changed the hearts and minds of a panicked public. Like other bad news, misleading or untruthful content around Covid-19 sweeps through the network with a much faster speed and wider reach than any correction. Further, those with the good intention to fix things are still a minority compared with the millions of emotion-driven Facebook users. While social media companies have been proactive in cleaning their space, their efforts seem to focus on clear fabrications, with insufficient attention to the subtle, probably more popular type of factually correct but substantially untrue content (e.g., correct facts that are “massaged” or misinterpreted during sharing or commenting).

The amplification of Covid-19 risk through mis/disinformation on social media, however, does seem to have an unexpected positive effect: It creates immense pressures on the one-party regime, forcing it to go out of its usual secrecy to address public concerns. After an initial period of disconcerted responses, Vietnamese authorities realised the urgent need to unite words and actions, sparing no effort to control the flow of information in parallel with its extensive track-and-trace system. There have been controversial moves—such as a new decree that has since February led about 800 people to be heavily fined (at amounts equivalent to three to six months of basic salaries) for spreading mis/disinformation about Covid-19 (Reed, 2020). But, under intensive public scrutiny, there has been an unexpected level of transparency and creativity. Every new Covid-19 case, with details about their movements and contacts, is immediately published on governmental websites, mainstream media, and social media. Different forms of media, such as outdoor posters, television trailers, and even dancing performances, are used to keep people abreast of developments as well as to understand the virus, its transmission and its prevention measures. In February, Coronavirus Song (Ghen Cô Vy)—a Ministry of Health’s edutainment clip to mobilise people to fight the virus—went viral on YouTube (with 4.4 million views as of April 30), made news on global news channels and websites and has since been translated and mutated in other countries.

As we write, Vietnam has started to return to normal life, being internationally acclaimed for its resolute, low-cost response to Covid-19. If this sustains as a success throughout the rest of the pandemic, future historians will have one sure thing to say: the strangely joined force of the good, the bad and the ugly on Vietnam’s social media was part of that success.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.
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About the Authors

Hoa Nguyen is a PhD Candidate at Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, where he also works as a Teaching Assistant in Media Literacy, Journalism Leadership, and Audience Metrics. He researches mainstream media versus digital media, audience metrics, risk communication, climate change in the news, media literacy and media history. His work also covers the power of journalism professionalism and education in the digital age. Before embarking on his PhD, he was Director of News at HTV (Ho Chi Minh City Television), one of Vietnam’s major television networks.

An Nguyen is Associate Professor of Journalism in the Department of Communication and Journalism, Bournemouth University, UK. He has published widely in several areas: digital journalism, news consumption and citizenship, citizen journalism, science journalism in the post-truth era, data and statistics in the news, and news and global developments. His work has appeared in, among others, *Journalism, Journalism Studies, Journalism Practice, Digital Journalism, Public Understanding of Science, International Journal of Media and Culture Politics, Information Research, Journal of Sociology, and First Monday*. Prior to academia, he was a science journalist in Vietnam.