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Neoliberalism and authoritarian media cultures: A Vietnamese perspective

Nguyễn Yến-Khanh[a]*, Sean Phelan[b] and Elizabeth Gray[c]

[a]Department of Business Innovation, RMIT University, Hồ Chí Minh City, Việt Nam and School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand;

[b]Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium and School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand;

[c]Department of Teaching and Learning, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Abstract

This study asks how the concept of neoliberalism can be adapted to a critical analysis of authoritarian political and media cultures that cannot be adequately understood through the Western-centric narratives that dominate the literature on neoliberalism. We examine the case of Vietnam, a country where the relationship between the media system and the political system is defined primarily by the power of the party-state autocracy. We explore the extent to which neoliberalism is a useful theoretical category for grasping the relationship between state, market and civil society actors in Vietnam, especially as it relates to media culture. Supported by an analysis of how Vietnamese news media cover healthcare and education for people with autism, we conclude by extrapolating three theoretical-methodological guidelines that will be useful to researchers examining the relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarian political and media cultures in different countries.

Keywords: authoritarianism, neoliberalism, de-Westernizing media studies, Vietnamese news media, autism representation

Introduction

The concept of neoliberalism has been primarily theorized from a Western-centric perspective (Dados and Connell, 2018). The neoliberalism narrative privileges a specific historical imaginary, which universalizes the experiences of Western societies (especially Anglo-American societies) transitioning from a social democratic and Keynesian capitalist formation to the "age of neoliberalism" (Hallin, 2008). Within the field of media and

communication studies, critical discussions of neoliberalism are often inflected through a "narrative of decline" (Dawes, 2014: 702), which contrasts the relative political, economic and cultural gains of the post-World War 2 era with the deleterious impact of neoliberalism on media cultures. Neoliberalism is constructed as the name for an ideology and political-economic system that is corrosive of democracy, with the collective memory of the social democratic era functioning as a kind of affirmative foil to the excesses of neoliberalism.

This study discusses the relationship between neoliberalism and media while departing from the Western-centric assumptions of the existing literature. We address a question that has received comparatively less scholarly attention: how can the concept of neoliberalism be adapted to a critical analysis of authoritarian political and media cultures that cannot be adequately grasped through a Western-centric historical narrative? We examine the case of Vietnam, a country where the relationship between the media system and the political system is defined primarily by the power of the party-state autocracy. We ask to what extent neoliberalism is a useful theoretical category for grasping the relationship between state, market and civil society actors in Vietnam, especially as it relates to the workings of its media system and journalism culture.

The argument is organized in four parts. First, we consider the relationship between the concepts of neoliberalism and authoritarianism, as they have been discussed in cross-disciplinary literature on neoliberalism. We highlight the value of the concept of "authoritarian neoliberalism" as a perspective for capturing a form of political rationality that speaks to Vietnamese specifics and also interrogates an enduring tendency to define neoliberalism as a "free market" ideology opposed to the state. Second, we present a political economy analysis of the relationship between market, state and civil society in Vietnam, especially as it relates to the relationship between journalism, commercially owned media companies and the party-state.

Third, we support our argument with an illustrative textual analysis of how Vietnamese news media cover stories about healthcare, education and justice for individuals with autism, a marginalized group in the population. While autism may not seem like an obvious topic for illuminating an argument about neoliberalism, we show how media coverage of a topic that is represented as if it was without political significance is symptomatic of a cultural political economy where the state is largely invisible as a social policy actor. Fourth, and finally, we extrapolate three theoretical-methodological guidelines

from our analysis, which we offer to researchers examining the relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarian political and media cultures in different countries.

The study contributes to different literatures: a media studies literature that remains Westernized in ways that go beyond discussions of neoliberalism (Curran and Park, 2000); the literature on authoritarian neoliberalism, a concept that has been developed in the field of international political economy, but also deployed by media scholars (see Yesil, 2016); and cross-disciplinary debates about the usefulness of the concept of neoliberalism to Vietnam. We note at the outset that it is not our intention to reduce the analysis of Vietnamese society or its media system to what some media scholars see as the denunciatory category of "neoliberal" (see Flew, 2014). Rather, we are interested in illuminating how aspects of Vietnamese society that can be usefully described as neoliberal intersect with other social and political logics, with the objective of giving a more rounded picture of the ideological heterogeneity of Vietnam's cultural political economy.

Neoliberalism, authoritarianism and Vietnam

There are two distinct ways of thinking about the relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarianism. The first might argue that neoliberalism has always-already been authoritarian, and that the very notion of "neoliberal democracy" is an "oxymoron" (Couldry, 2010: 68-69). Recent work on the history of neoliberalism highlights its origins as a political-intellectual project motivated by a suspicion of democracy and a strategic desire to constrain popular energies and imaginaries (Slobodian, 2018). Stuart Hall's work on the "authoritarian populism" of "Thatcherism" is also pertinent. The Pinochet coup of the democratically elected Allende government in Chile in 1973, and the subsequent imposition of a doctrinaire neoliberal policy blueprint scripted by Chicago School economists, provides one notorious example.

The second approach, while not denying the relevance of the aforementioned historical examples, would stress the limitations of reducing our understanding of neoliberalism to an authoritarian phenomenon, or collapsing the distinction between (comparatively) democratic and anti-democratic articulations. This approach would align itself with work that highlights the protean character of neoliberal formations, and the existence of different neoliberalisms (Phelan, 2014). It would stress the ideologically heterogenous character of "actually existing neoliberalism"; rather than looking in vain for

some “pure” neoliberal identity, neoliberal reason is reframed as something that is articulated in hybrid, messy forms that incorporate elements from other ideologies and discourses (Peck et al., 2018). It would also interrogate an enduring tendency (evident in both academic work and popular media discourses) to define neoliberalism through the simplistic image of a free market ideology that is (somehow) opposed to the state and the very idea of state intervention in the economy.

Our argument here is informed by this second perspective, as is work on the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism. The concept rejects understandings of neoliberalism that dichotomize the institutional relationship between market and state, and gloss over the importance of non-market mechanisms to the political articulation of market rationality. Suggesting that authoritarianism should not simply be equated with “the exercise of brute coercive force” (Bruff, 2014: 115), Bruff and Tansel (2019) offer two ways of understanding the political geography of authoritarian neoliberalism. The first conceptualizes it as a Western-centric phenomenon: a name for the austerity-based neoliberal regime that emerged in the aftermath of the 2007/2008 global financial crisis. This regime can be justifiably called authoritarian because it is constructed around a political order that becomes more dependent on the imposition of top-down legal rules (and arbitrary technocratic decisions) which do not “strive for [the] explicit consent or co-optation” (Bruff and Tansel, 2019: 234) of the target population. This logic was exemplified by the EU-led troika’s imposition of punitive bailout terms on the Greek state in 2015, only weeks after Greek voters had rejected them in a public referendum. Authoritarian neoliberalism found another expression in the “hyperreactionary neoliberalism” of the Trump administration (Fraser, 2018), illustrating affinities between neoliberal and far-right ideas that are legitimized by strands of neoliberal theory (Slobodian, 2019).

The second way of thinking about authoritarian neoliberalism focuses on political and media systems that are conventionally categorized as authoritarian, in contrast to Western-style liberal democracies (Curran and Park, 2000). This offers a useful theoretical perspective for thinking about the neoliberalized character of a country like Vietnam, and the place of neoliberal governmentality in the policy agendas linking the global north and global south through sponsoring institutions like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the World Trade Organisation.

The extent to which Vietnam can be helpfully described as "neoliberal" has been debated in different fields, but not, to any significant extent, in media studies. Scholars have rightfully balked at any suggestion that Vietnam can be *adequately* described as neoliberal. But what is widely recognized are insights that resonate with Bruff and Tansel's (2018) observation: that the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism invites us "to explore how neoliberalization in authoritarian states produces a symbiotic configuration whereby the reforms are enacted and protected through existing mechanisms of authoritarian statecraft" (239). In the case of Vietnam, due to its extensive engagement with different international organisations since the 1990s, "Vietnam has integrated into [the liberal] order so extensively and deeply that they are bound by the various rules and norms produced within that order" in economic development (Thiem, 2015, 91). Schwenkel and Leshkowich (2012) suggest that any discussion of neoliberalism in Vietnam needs to be alert to the distinctiveness of its local articulation; conceptual abstractions like neoliberalism, capitalism, socialism and communism should not be treated as names for discrete governmental regimes (see also Thiem, 2015). Gainsborough (2010), while more skeptical of the concept of neoliberalism, likewise suggests that analyses of neoliberalization in Vietnam need to reckon with how little has changed in the "underlying philosophy" and practices of the top-down communist party-state infrastructure that existed before the *Đổi mới* market reforms initiated in 1986. Thiem (2015) recognizes that upholding the supremacy of the party-state in Vietnam remains the central political objective, but argues that the neoliberal "good governance" doxa prescribed by international institutions has forced the party-state to rationalize its political authority in a way that has weakened the official socialist ideology. Thiem suggests that neoliberal governmentality has increasingly compelled the party-state to affirm "rational-legal sources of legitimacy" (87) in a country where the gap between formal legal codes and social practices is often profound. These challenges to the political legitimacy of the authoritarian state have become more discernible on social media platforms, as terms like "transparency" and "accountability", and the very idea of "civil society", became part of the normal vocabulary used by Vietnamese citizens to talk about the failings of the Vietnamese state (Thiem, 2017: 96).

Vietnam has been transformed from one of the world's poorest nations to a lower middle-income country over the last 30 years (World Bank, 2017). Capitalist rationality is articulated selectively for economic development, but, according to Nicholson and Gillespie (2005), the core precepts of socialist authoritarianism remain, including Communist Party

sole leadership, state economic management and an administrative centralism. Citizens have a chance to be symbolically consulted at the end of top down policymaking processes, so long as their feedback does not run counter to the party-state's orthodox ideologies and interests (Shanks et al., 2004: 26).

Vietnam is comparable in many ways to its role model China: the initial (neo)liberalization of "the economy was not to be accompanied by any progress in the fields of human, civil or democratic rights" (Harvey, 2005: 123). According to Thiem (2014), the party-state in Vietnam articulates top-down sovereign rights over human rights and individual needs. When individual rights are arbitrarily deemed secondary to political stability, they can easily be violated by powerful interest groups (83), or simply ignored.

Working with the assumption that the notion of authoritarian neoliberalism should not be reduced to some rigid template or schema (Bruff and Tansel, 2019), the next two sections of the paper present a critical analysis of how authoritarian and neoliberal logics are articulated together in the workings of the Vietnamese media system. Our account of media culture is informed by a cultural political economy approach. Cultural political economy follows the same orientation of political economy approaches that highlight the structural interplay of economic and political power in the design and architecture of social systems, including media systems (Hardy, 2014). At the same time, by emphasizing the constitutive importance of cultural and semiotic processes, cultural political economists depart from the tendency of some political economy approaches to displace the analytical importance of culture, or see it as a merely supplementary element. In a media studies context, Yesil's (2016) analysis of authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey offers a useful reference point for our own approach. Rather than inscribing "binary oppositions" (Yesil, 2016) between categories like state and market, modernity and tradition, or economy and culture, we likewise assume that the Vietnamese media system must be grasped as part of the governmental order that mediates the relationship between state, market, culture and civil society in Vietnam.

To describe neoliberalism as protean suggests a concept that cannot be neatly defined. But for readers who might appreciate a supporting definition, we commend Davies' succinct definition of neoliberalism as "pursuit of the disenchantment of politics by economics" (Davies, 2016: 6). The image of political disenchantment may suggest Western-centric arguments, often discussed under the heading of post-politics. However, the definition can be

usefully adapted to the Vietnamese context, inviting consideration of how social and media regimes driven by narrow commercial concerns intersect with an aversion to politics, which takes a distinct anti-democratic form in Vietnam. As we will argue later, this anti-political disposition also finds expression in the invisibility of the Vietnamese state in different policy domains and in the failure of Vietnamese journalism to hold the state accountable for its inaction.

Media, journalism and the Vietnamese party-state

The Vietnamese media operate in what is officially designated as a "socialist-oriented market economy". At the onset of the *Đổi mới - Reform* project in 1986, all media outlets were state-owned. In the 1990s and 2000s, more private media companies penetrated the market, including local online news outlets, international lifestyle magazines and franchised television shows, but most had and have to operate under the umbrella of state agencies. The economic liberalization of Vietnamese media has therefore taken place in tandem with the continuation of rather illiberal norms governing the relationship between journalism and the state.

Whether state owned or privately owned, Vietnamese media outlets have been defined first and foremost as the mouthpiece of party and state agencies, and private media are not officially recognized as distinct entities in successive Press Laws (Vietnam National Assembly, 2016). The Central Ideology and Propaganda Department appoints editors-in-chief and key personnel at all media outlets, including privately-owned media entities. While on the one hand media outlets are politically controlled in heavy-handed ways, they are on the other commercialized in forms that are based on either reduced or zero state subsidies (McKinley, 2008).

In its hybrid role of commercialized business and party-state mouthpiece, Vietnamese media often attempt to gain profits by publishing sensational content while at the same time abiding by the Communist Party's interests. Vietnamese news media are not considered, in some archetypal liberal sense, as "public spaces" to provide the information needed by citizens (Croteau and Hoynes, as cited in Vaagan, 2011: 304). Instead, notions of the "public interest" and "national interest" are typically articulated in ways that render them indistinguishable from the interests of the party-state. Vietnamese citizens and media are not generally acculturated to expect that particular public concerns will be addressed by

authoritarian rulers and other social entities. This is borne out by the Worldwide Governance Indicators produced by the World Bank in 2016: Voice and Accountability in Vietnam was ranked at less than 9.85/100, Regulatory Quality at 35.10/100 and Rule of Law at 57.21/100 (World Bank, 2016).

A key driver in the commercialization of the media system was the launch of commercially available internet in Vietnam in 1997. With an internet penetration of 69 million people, or 70% of the population, and an annual growth rate of 10% (Statista, 2020), online media provide the primary means of news access for most Vietnamese people. However, two of the three Internet Service Providers (ISPs), representing 78 percent of the internet infrastructure market, are government owned (Abuza, 2015). Thus the government can easily order these internet providers to intervene into the media ecology when necessary by deleting or blocking access to certain information.

The Vietnamese media market is a lucrative one: a report by Google and Temasek/Bain (2019) estimates that online media, including news and entertainment, contributed USD3 billion to Vietnam's economy in 2019. Vietnamese news media companies' reliance on advertising as a source of income is increasingly undermined by the advertising power of Facebook and Google. In GroupM's report (2020), 59% of the digital advertising budget of USD324 million (Statista, 2020) from Vietnam now goes to *Facebook* and 29% of advertising spending goes to *Google*. Because Vietnamese online media, including news and entertainment, only occupy a small 10% of market share in digital advertising revenue, they have to work hard to survive, mainly by producing paid content and advertorials for local and international brands.

The line between journalism, public relations (PR) and advertorials is blurry in Vietnam. It is common for many press conference and event organizers in Vietnam to openly offer journalists an envelope of allowances in their press kits, which is considered a given by PR practitioners (a "thank you gift" or "pay-for-play" game) (Doan and Bilowol, 2014: 488). In turn, journalists and media practitioners view public relations as a source of both information and income, and due to the envelope culture, they often neglect to verify the (self-serving) information provided by the business sector. Positive media coverage is considered a commodity that can be paid for (Doan and Bilowol, 2014). In Vietnam, journalism training, or the limitations thereof, is partly responsible for problematic media standards. Formal journalism training only started in Vietnam in the early 1990s and the

curriculum of journalism degrees at three state-own universities is strictly controlled by the party-state with the ultimate goal of educating party loyalists (Nguyen, 2006).

Notwithstanding the censorship regime, Vietnamese politicians do give the media some space to raise issues of concern to their audiences. This is partly driven by commercial motives (Cain, 2014: 5) and partly by a quasi-democratic need to show some "responsiveness to readership" (Coe, 2015: 620). Tabloidization is hardly unique to Vietnam, but because the national media generally have to avoid politically sensitive topics, the focus on spectacle and soft news drives day-to-day practice to a comparatively greater extent, despite some ambiguous and perfunctory standards for good reporting enshrined in the Press Law 2016.

Vietnamese media outlets are still punished for reporting different taboo topics, such as: political pluralism, human rights and religious issues; critical reflection on the past (Sanko, 2016: 19); bureaucratic incompetence in preventing corruption at top levels (McKinley, 2008); freedom of speech and freedom to assemble (Gillespie, 2014); land rights controversies (Abuza, 2015); and the relationship with China (Công Khế, 2014). State manipulation of media takes varying forms, including verbal orders to stop covering a topic, or requests to frame content a particular way. Punishments can range from job loss, to arrest, to the shutdown of media outlets. However, the authorities generally do not bother to monitor journalistic coverage in relation to other public interest topics. The media is primarily "accountable" to the party-state (Matthews, 2016), but not to the audience or other stakeholders. Ownership notwithstanding, heavy-handed repression ensures media outlets submit to the party-state's orders regarding publishable agendas and frames.

At the same time, Vietnam's state authorities manipulate content on social media platforms, and a November 2020 Amnesty International report accused Facebook and Google of complicity with "industrial-scale repression" in Vietnam because of the companies' amenability to government requests to remove online content (Reed, 2020). Generally, the state filters information that is considered threatening to the party and national security. There has been a movement of citizen investigative journalists, but dissident netizens who gain popular influence can expect backlash, including imprisonment. However, Nguyen (2009) observes that sometimes the issues raised by citizens on social media create public pressure and may lead to responsive coverage from mainstream media. Despite the reassertion of authoritarian power over social media and the blogosphere in recent years as a

result of the Press Law 2016 and the Cyber Security Law 2019, Vietnamese netizens have to some extent been able to make some positive contributions to the media landscape (Thiem, 2017; Nguyen, 2009). Generally, the political economy enables the normalization of media misrepresentations, unethical practices and a culture of weak political accountability, which we will now illustrate by examining how Vietnamese media cover stories about autism.

Vietnamese media coverage of autism stories

In Vietnam's transition to a socialist-oriented market economy, state authorities selectively make use of neoliberal ideologies on economic management and social policy. London (2014) reports the state "has actively sought to shift financial responsibility [for education and healthcare] on to households" (99). As a consequence of the commodification of education and the marketization of education governance, inequality in education in Vietnam has escalated (London, 2010). Commercial service providers operate within a largely unregulated system (Van Cong and Weiss, 2018).

This section offers two textual illustrations of different aspects of the relationship between state, market and public in Vietnam as it relates to the provision of critical services to a marginalized group of citizens. The examples are drawn from a 580,000 words corpus of media coverage on the autism topic in online news media that was examined as part of a doctoral study (Yến-Khanh, 2020). A prior corpus-based framing analysis was conducted and found the media dominantly framed autism as a family problem and medical illness, not a social policy issue. The first example examines the media coverage endorsing VinMec International Hospital in its stem cell transplant therapy for children with autism, without rigorous scientific evidence on safety and efficacy. The case of VinMec was examined because the hospital belongs to the biggest, most politically powerful corporation in Vietnam, thus the related stories illuminate the relations between state, corporate and media actors. The second example highlights the failure of news media to hold state institutions accountable for the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream schooling. Our analysis is informed by a critical discourse analysis approach, particularly as it relates to illuminating the relations between the general framing of news texts and the ideological and power dynamics of the cultural political economy context (Fairclough, 2013). Both examples offer an empirical prelude to the reflections on authoritarian neoliberalism in the final section of the article.

Media and state cronyism in promotion of a "cure"

Stem cell therapies are still categorized as experimental and unproven in scientific research, considered "unsafe, inefficacious and thus unethical when clinically used" (Datta, 2018: 352). Nonetheless, a number of news outlets united in reporting stem cell transplants by VinMec International Hospital as a new "cure" for cerebral palsy and autism. Vinmec is a private hospital, owned by the richest billionaire in Vietnam, Phạm Nhật Vượng. It is part of the private Vingroup corporation that is strongly supported by the party-state, but either admired or hated by Vietnamese people (Voice of America, 2017).

A news article by *Afamily.vn*, a private news aggregation website, framed Vinmec's stem cell story under the emphatic headline *To cure completely cerebral palsy and autism thanks to stem cell transplant* (Tiểu Nguyễn, 2016). The title makes an assertion *"cure completely"* that cannot be justified ethically in the absence of rigorous evidence. Another article entitled *Treating autism and cerebral palsy by stem cell* (Thái Hà, 2016) was published on 12 November 2016 on *Tienphong.vn*, a formerly popular tabloid print newspaper whose circulation is declining in the digital age. In the article's lead, Prof. Dr. Nguyễn Thanh Liêm, the then Director of Vinmec International Hospital, is quoted as claiming (translated): "together with India and China, Vietnam is one of the three leading countries in applying stem cell transplant to treat patients with cerebral palsy and autism in Asia" (Liêm, as cited in Thái Hà, 2016). With its extensive provision of diverse services in Vietnam, Vingroup often proclaims its achievements as representative of Vietnam's national standing, and is encouraged to do so under a Prime Ministerial order that frames consumer support for Vietnamese business as an act of patriotism (Vietnam Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2020). Despite criticism on social media of how Vingroup often lobbies for and takes advantage of favourable state policies, Vingroup positions itself as a national hero (BBC, 2017) and appropriates nationalist discourses to advance its own commercial agenda.

Given that Vinmec International Hospital had been using stem cell transplant to treat autism in its *"thí điểm" [pilot research]* stage, as stated in one article (Thái Hà, 2016), it is striking that the journalists raised no basic questions about the experimental procedures such as who participated in the pilot research, were they paid, and what consent did they provide as per international best practice for clinical trials (Dominguez et al., 2012). These ethical considerations were invisible in the reportage, even though it was revealed in another article that patients had to pay 75 million Vietnam dongs (or 3,400USD) out of their own pockets per treatment (Mai Hiền, 2016).

Based on Prof. Liêm's proposal, Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc assigned the Ministry of Health in 2019 to consider Liêm's recommendations on autism issues. In effect, it suggested a model of governance where the formation of state health policy takes its cue from a corporate blueprint. This was confirmed in an official document published on 26 November 2019 that asked Vinmec to submit a specific proposal on research into stem cell therapy as a treatment for autism (Cục quản lý Khám chữa bệnh, as cited in Liêm, 2019). The Prime Minister endorsed a privatized healthcare solution and made an order to the Ministry of Health and its subordinate agencies. Liêm posted this official document on his Facebook account, fending off burgeoning criticism of Vinmec's stem cell treatment. The message was explicit: "A national program for autistic children is drawing near" (Liêm, 2019). In this case, a private medical service is framed as a national program with the explicit endorsement of the party-state.

Instead of monitoring Vinmec's alignment with the medical ethical processes specified in different legal documents (Vietnam Ministry of Health, 2013), the case shows how state authorities and media outlets collaborated with the conglomerate to support an unproven medical treatment. Vingroup's operations arguably offer an example of "red/crony capitalism", which some authors have identified as a marked characteristic of Vietnam's political economy (Beresford, 2008). Reed (2019) has observed in a *Financial Times* article that "national policymakers and politicians are in danger of being used by Vingroup or any of the country's other rising private companies", warning that without checks and balances, conglomerates like Vingroup may gain too much power, abuse policies, and even operate above the law. In a Vietnamese economy driven by relationships (Beresford, 2008) and corporatism (Thiem, 2015), interest groups and private conglomerates like Vingroup may manipulate a complicit media to promote their commercial interests, with either the implicit or explicit support of the party-state. Crony capitalism and authoritarian norms worked hand in hand by means of concerted media publicity and politicians' willing subordination of the remit of state agencies to a private company. In this context, citizens have to navigate a largely self-regulated system of powerful corporate and political alliances without the national journalism culture holding them meaningfully to account.

Nevertheless, as a recent development involving the first author illustrates, the affordances of digital culture can still give citizens opportunities to demand accountability themselves. In May 2021, a VinMec publication on stem cell treatment for children with

autism (Nguyen Thanh et al., 2020) was heavily criticized for its misleading, abusive and invasive approach (Finlay-Morreale, 2021). When the first author of this paper raised the issue on a research integrity forum for Vietnamese academics worldwide, VinMec was condemned further for charging high fees for treatment not proven to be safe and effective. Given VinGroup's ambition to expand international research and education, VinMec decided – in an unprecedented move – to refund the fees they had collected from about 700 families in 7 years, which could reach an estimated USD 7 million, if they are paid fully. The first author pitched the story with two top Vietnamese newspapers *Tuổi Trẻ* and *Thanh Niên,* which occasionally pursue investigative journalism, but they chose not to cover it. Only *BBC* picked up the story in its Vietnamese coverage (BBC, 2021). A bioethical violation at this scale would have likely attracted wide media investigation in other countries.

Media failure to pursue accountability

Our second example highlights the way media reported educational challenges faced by children with autism in a public school, in the absence of institutional intervention and facilitation. A news article first published on April 4, 2015 took the headline *Autistic children hopelessly struggle on the integration path: Tears of a mother* (Bạch Dương, 2015). The article was published on *Infonet.vn* and republished with the same title on *24h.com.vn*, one of the most popular news aggregation websites in Vietnam. The headline's emphasis on "tears" constructs the mother as an object of pity, rather than as a citizen legitimately petitioning for her rights and the rights of her child to be upheld.

The article begins: "Many parents have to pitifully take their children back to specialized schools because the children cannot integrate with other friends at normal schools" (Bạch Dương, 2015). This lead presupposes that children themselves are fully assigned the task of adapting to the school environment, in a way that obscures the responsibilities of other agents. After complaining about how a particular student disrupted the classroom and affected other students at naptime, the teacher quoted in the article says: "Coaxing the student is to no avail, I give up and tell Mum to take the child home to let other friends sleep" (as cited in Bạch Dương, 2015). Highlighting the behavioural problem of a child with autism this early in the article creates the impression that the faults here belong solely to the child. The article uses the verb *than phiền [complain]* to contextualize the quote of the teacher in the first paragraph (Bạch Dương, 2015), again laying blame on the child and thereby justifying the negative comment and exclusionary act by an institutional

representative. The article mentions no individualized approach or pedagogical efforts by the teacher or school to help the student to manage the challenges. It simply foregrounds a teacher comment that pushes educational responsibility back to the family, assigning the student and family with what scholars of neoliberal governmentality would call "self-responsibilization" (Brown and Baker, 2012). While touching upon the issue of teachers' lack of training and skills, the reporter does not undertake the journalistic accountability work of interviewing school management, education administrators, and policymakers at city and central levels to illuminate the training regime's inadequacy. The question is asked but no real attempt is made to answer it or point to the fact that certain answers should (by law) exist.

Public facilitation for students with special needs, still a new idea in Vietnam, has not made its way out of official legal documents. Under the formal legal strictures, the dismissal of students with autism from school violates Article 30 of the Law on Persons with Disabilities (Vietnam National Assembly, 2010), which stipulates that educational institutions are not allowed to refuse the educational access of individuals with disabilities. It also contravenes the Education Law (Vietnam National Assembly, 2005), which stipulates in Article 11 that all citizens of school age are entitled to pursue universal education. However, these legal commitments are not cited anywhere in the media story, which reduces the case to an episodic tale of misery for families and children with autism. The case illustrates the disparity between official policy and school practice in Vietnam, which is partly sustained by the national media's failure to hold institutional stakeholders accountable. The emergence of relatively progressive human rights laws in Vietnam has often been due to pressure from international development assistance donors, but the substantive commitments of those laws have not materialized. Or as Thiem (2015) suggests, the authoritarian state retains the power "to circumvent the neoliberal logic of transparency and accountability" (96).

When submissively withdrawing their children from an unsupportive public school, Vietnamese parents seem to internalize the concept of autonomous citizenship or what Schwenkel & Leshkowich (2012) describe as "the conflation of market behaviours and appropriate forms of moral personhood" (382). Similarly, Thiem (2015) observes the detrimental effects of a Vietnamese development model on the long-term wellbeing of its people, which is anchored exclusively in economic growth and material achievements "at the expense of social justice" (91). With its emphasis on "pitiful" personal problems and personal

responsibility, and its elision of state officials, the media reporting does not hold the state education system or the school accountable in facilitating the educational rights of students with autism, displacing the potential political valences of the story.

Conclusion: researching neoliberalism and media in authoritarian political cultures

This article reflects on the neoliberalization of Vietnam, with specific focus on its media system. Our examples of how media cover stories about autism can only offer fragmentary insights into the structural co-ordinates of Vietnam's cultural political economy. Nonetheless, they illustrate both the general relevance of the concept of neoliberalism to an analysis of Vietnam's media culture, and the particular relevance of the hybrid concept of authoritarian neoliberalism.

Our analysis offers a media studies perspective on arguments about Vietnamese neoliberalism: that neoliberal logics are articulated in ways mediated by authoritarian forms of statecraft that are already internalized in the journalism culture's submissiveness to the authority of national political and economic elites. Our media illustrations capture different aspects of this authoritarian neoliberal dynamic. In the Vinmec story, where the media coverage amplifies the impression that a "cure" has been found for autism, any notional boundary between corporate PR and journalism dissolves. The case also suggests the interpenetration of the interests of a private corporation and the interests of the state, as a corporate policy blueprint becomes the basis of public policy. The example recalls theorizations of neoliberalism as an internalization of corporate rationality by state institutions (Crouch, 2011), but in a fashion where the media coverage forecloses any critical evaluation of this development and official ethical guidelines seem to be ignored.

Our second example offers a more subtle account of the relationship between neoliberalism and Vietnam's authoritarian political culture, and challenges the critical tendency to see everything that might be bundled under the expansive heading of neoliberalism as ideologically regressive. Journalism's failure to represent the challenges faced by children with autism in the public educational system as more than a private family tragedy suggests a media culture that avoids politicizing topics that are justifiably politicized - in this instance, the gap between on-the-ground schooling practices and the Vietnamese state's official commitments at face level to uphold the educational rights of children with autism. On the one hand, the case starkly illustrates how neoliberal discourses of self-responsibilisation can work in countries with inadequate welfare state provisions. On the

other, following Thiem (2014, 2017), even the demand that the Vietnamese state be accountable for its legal commitments is partly the result of the state's internalization of notions of transparency and accountability that are a standard part of the lexicon of (neo)liberal governmentality. In thinking about the relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarianism in Vietnam, it is therefore important to grasp how certain policy prescriptions that might be cursorily dismissed as neoliberal elsewhere may also potentially offer discursive resources for challenging the authority of the authoritarian state. The point seems particularly relevant when considering the political place of journalism. While journalistic accountability work in Euro-American societies can often take a depoliticized and neoliberalized form (Djerf-Pierre et al., 2014), it remains a more daring activity in an authoritarian society like Vietnam.

We would like to end by reflecting on how our analysis offers a perspective on neoliberalism that might be useful to media scholars researching different authoritarian political cultures. The motivations of our argument here have their origins in the first author's doctoral study of how autism is covered in Vietnamese media, which revealed the resonance of the concept of neoliberalism in the Vietnamese context (Yến-Khanh, 2020). However, the transposition of arguments from primarily Euro-American academic sources sometimes elided or overrode the specifics of the Vietnamese context. The study underlined the importance of conceptually distinguishing the liberal democratic experience of neoliberalism from the experience of neoliberalism in authoritarian societies, with their own distinct histories, polities, and cultures.

In that vein, below are three succinct theoretical-methodological guidelines for analyzing neoliberalism in authoritarian political and media cultures that have emerged our analysis. They offer a distillation of arguments made in the wider interdisciplinary literature on neoliberalism (including the literature on authoritarian neoliberalism) that are comparatively underemphasized in media, communication and journalism research. They draw on arguments previously made by the second author elsewhere (Phelan, 2014).

(1) It is *not* helpful to think of neoliberalism as some unitary, monolithic "thing" that is given undifferentiated expression in Vietnam or any other (democratic or authoritarian) country. Be wary of how this impression can be animated by banal formulations like "neoliberalism *causes"* or "*the impact* of neoliberalism", particularly when recontextualizing arguments from liberal democratic societies in

authoritarian cultures. It may be impossible to avoid sometimes talking about a singular "neoliberalism". But to put the concept to work in an analytically productive way, focus attention on how neoliberal *logics* are combined with other social, political, media, cultural, and authoritarian logics. Put differently, instead of reducing a media culture to the singular image of a *neoliberal* culture, it might be more helpful to think of it as a *neoliberalized* culture that will inevitably be shaped by other political, cultural and social processes.

(2) It is also *not* helpful to conceptualize neoliberalism through some rigid dichotomy between market and state, particularly when analyzing authoritarian political-media cultures where this opposition makes even less sense than it does in liberal democratic contexts. Instead, it is more useful to think of neoliberalism as a regime of state-corporate-market relations, whether articulated through the "neoliberal nationalism" (Harmes, 2012) of the alliances between the Vietnamese state and Vingroup, or in the globalized form of the partnerships between the Vietnamese state and Facebook and Google. Theoretical descriptions of this regime as anti-political assume a distinct valence in authoritarian neoliberal formations that are partly sustained through an orchestrated repression of the political agency and consciousness of civil society actors. It suggests that the often-lamented anti-political logic of neoliberal reason in Euro-American political and media cultures may take an even more acute anti-democratic form elsewhere.

(3) Finally, discussions of neoliberalism in media studies and elsewhere often assume pejorative connotations (Flew, 2014), because neoliberalism is usually analyzed from critical perspectives where it is either explicitly or implicitly opposed. We also wish to critique neoliberalism. However, this interpretative impulse should not obscure the potential analytical and empirical significance of other ideologies and discourses, particularly when they might be even more politically regressive. Our analysis of the Vietnamese case also highlights how (neo)liberal appeals to transparency and accountability may offer democratizing resources for potentially challenging the legitimacy of an authoritarian state, particularly in authoritarian journalism cultures where the mythical work of "holding power to account" may not be the taken for granted proposition that it might be elsewhere. When analyzing the place of *neo*liberalism in authoritarian political and media cultures, we should therefore not fixate on the semiotics of the prefix, and obscure neoliberalism's significance as a

variant of a more ideologically heterogenous tradition of liberal, and liberal democratic, politics and thought (Phelan and Dawes, 2018).

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