

DOCTORAL THESIS

Legitimizing the Vietnam's Cybersecurity Law: Media Narratives and System Justification

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the justification strategies employed by the Vietnamese party-state to legitimize the Vietnam Cybersecurity Law (VCSL) promulgated in 2018. Grounded in System Justification Theory (SJT), this study explores how state-sponsored media constructs narratives to resonate with people's cognitive and psychological factors that drive them to rationalize, bolster, and defend existing social and political arrangements, even at the expense of fundamental human rights and individual's wellbeing.

The thesis consists of three interconnected studies. Aims to provide a comprehensive picture of the VCSL and contextual factors around law enforcement, the Study 1 undertakes a comparative approach to compare state-sponsored and international media discourses. The findings underline a stark contrast between the hypersecuritization narratives emphasized by threat politics in Vietnamese state-sponsored media and the human rights and economic concerns highlighted by international media. The Study 2 investigates the positioning of laypeople, portraying them as powerless and vulnerable to cyber threats in contrast to the powerful leadership of the party-state, thereby justifying the existential need for a protective and authoritative state. It also examines the construction of political allegiance and the alienation of hostile forces, further reinforcing the legitimacy of the VCSL. The Study 3 identifies key justification strategies, including rationalization, moralization, authorization, denial of system shortcomings, and stereotyping/delegitimization, and analyses their interconnectedness in supporting system justification.

To achieve research objectives, the thesis employs a mixed-method approach integrated content analysis, corpus-based critical discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis in the three studies. The findings reinforce a mechanism of system justification, by which, the party-state exploits existential threats, outcome dependence, a sense of powerlessness, political allegiance and alienation, and power of status quo as well as

social stability to mitigate resistance and enhance the perceived legitimacy of the VCSL and the ruling regime.

This thesis contributes to the theoretical advancement of SJT by providing an institutional perspective and evidence of the system justification on public discourse, thus, offering a nuanced understanding of how authoritarian regimes utilize media rhetoric to shape public perception, maintain political stability, and legitimize controversial policies.