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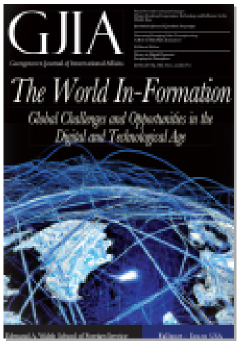

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"Everything Everywhere All At Once": Social Media, Marketing/Algorithmic Culture, and Activism in Southeast Asia

Merlyna Lim

Abstract. *This article delves into the intricate relationship between social media and politics, specifically concerning the dynamics of activism in Southeast Asia. It reveals that regional and domestic political conditions, the logic of marketing, and the prevalence of algorithmic culture affect the salience of this relationship. The article highlights that in today's social media landscape, civil society operates against growing state control and repression while simultaneously navigating the emergence of algorithmic politics often characterized by binary populist frameworks and the expansion of the cyber-propaganda industry. In closing, this article calls for efforts to cultivate deep deliberation spheres needed to sustain long-term civic engagement and preserve democratic activism in the region.*

Introduction

2010 *Time Magazine* named Facebook founder and chief executive Mark Zuckerberg its "Person of the Year." In the following years, the world celebrated social media for empowering citizens globally, including in Southeast Asia. The victory of President Joko Widodo, also *Time's* 2014 Person of the Year, was excessively associated with the power of social media-based grassroots activism.[1] In the Philippines, viewers unduly credited Facebook for energizing the "Million People March" in 2013, and the success of a Malaysian electoral reform movement, Bersih, was disproportionally attributed to social media.[2]

In 2018, *Time Magazine* named a group of journalists collectively called "the guardians of truth" its Person of the Year. The issues of that year highlight the contrast between fact-based journalism and widespread "fake news"—disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda—on social media. Among the celebrated journalists was Maria Ressa, a Filipino online news platform CEO whose coverage critiqued President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs and its fake news cyber campaigns.

In only eight years, the popular perception of social media radically shifted from utopian to dystopian. Many scholars and observers share this popular view, concluding that once lauded for mobilizing "people power," social media platforms" had transformed into significant threats to democracy.[3] Recent scholarly works, including those focusing on Southeast Asia, primarily point to a shift towards a more negative casting of social media as a disinformation tool, a catalyst for polarization, and a central cause of rising extremism and authoritarianism.[4] In summarizing a comparative discussion across political regimes in Southeast Asia, Marco Bünte argues that the predominant effect of social media on politics in the region has been one of autocratization.[5]

The undemocratic utilization of digital media is not a recent phenomenon. Empirical cases from diverse environments in Southeast Asia show that social media platforms and their

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precursors, the static Internet, were historically used by civil and uncivil (un/civil) society actors, including extremist and violent groups, for both progressive and regressive interests.[6] However, it is worth noting that in recent years, we have witnessed an escalation in the undemocratic and detrimental utilization of social media in politics, concurrent with a global rise of authoritarianism and autocracy. This situation reflects not only the impact of social media on politics but also the broader context of autocratization in the region.[7]

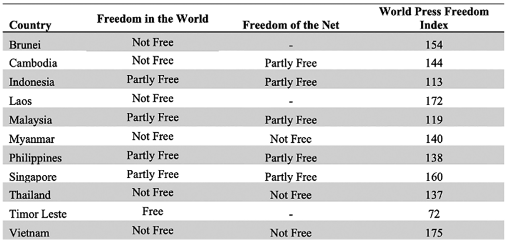
A comprehensive and detailed analysis of the mutual shaping of social media and autocratizing politics in Southeast Asia is beyond the scope of this short article. Instead, it aims to enrich the current understanding of this relationship by locating un/civil society activism within the reality of a social media landscape marked by dramatic user growth and increased state control and repression. It also seeks to position un/civil society activism within the technological and cultural landscape of marketing ascendency and algorithmic logic.

By 2022, seventy-two percent of the total population in Southeast Asia was online, with over 646 million social media accounts in the region.

The state of social media in Southeast Asia: user growth and increased control

Social media was introduced to Southeast Asia in the mid-2000s, and its use has grown exponentially in the past twenty years. By 2022, seventy-two percent of the total population in Southeast Asia was online, with over 646 million social media accounts in the region.[8] The Philippines ranked first globally in 2021 for online activity. However, Filipinos are no exception: Southeast Asian users consistently spend more time online than the global average. Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia all fall within the top ten.[9]

As social media usage has become ubiquitous and highly intensive, these platforms have become integral to citizens' everyday lives—from work and family to entertainment and politics. Un/civil society has historically used social media for diverse causes, in diverse settings, and with diverse outcomes. The differences in outcomes reflect the development of social media platforms as they have experienced dramatic user growth and expansion into the central marketplace for consumers and corporations. These differences also reflect the development and diversity of un/civil society actors and their responses to changing political contexts, particularly state control and repression and the autocratizing nature of the political landscape.



Country	Freedom in the World	Freedom of the Net	World Press Freedom Index
Brunei	Not Free	-	154
Cambodia	Not Free	Partly Free	144
Indonesia	Partly Free	Partly Free	113
Laos	Not Free	-	172
Malaysia	Partly Free	Partly Free	119
Myanmar	Not Free	Not Free	140
Philippines	Partly Free	Partly Free	138
Singapore	Partly Free	Partly Free	160
Thailand	Not Free	Not Free	137
Timor Leste	Free	-	72
Vietnam	Not Free	Not Free	175

Table 1. Freedom in Southeast Asia[10]

In contrast to the early Internet period—when digital space was relatively free—governments have vastly strengthened their capacity to oversee the digital sphere in recent years. In 2021, Timor Leste was the only country in Southeast Asia regarded as having "free" Internet. The increasing use of control and repression in the region cannot be separated from the global trend of autocratization. There are now more autocracies than democracies worldwide, and over seventy-two percent of the world's population lives in an autocracy.[11] In their 2023 *Democracy Report*, the Varieties of Democracy Institute stated that "advances in global levels of democracy made over the last thirty-five years have been wiped out" and pushed back to 1986 levels. This decline was precipitous in the Asia-Pacific region, including Southeast Asia, which rolled back to 1978 levels. As Figure 1 illustrates, Malaysia was the only democratizing country in the region from 2012 to 2022, while other Southeast Asian countries displayed an autocratizing trend, including those already ruled by authoritarian regimes. Countries that were electorally democratic or democratizing, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, also experienced a similar trend.

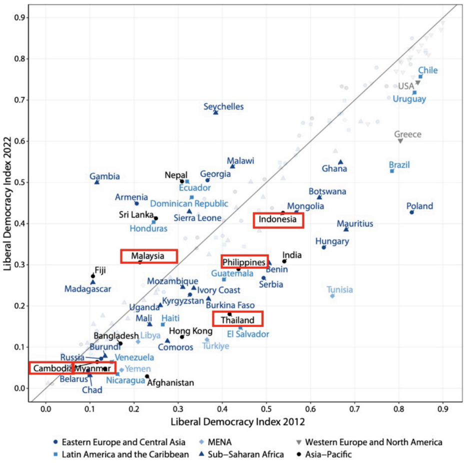


Figure 1. Liberal Democracy Index (2012-2022 Trend)[12]

Within this autocratizing milieu, social media has become a vital tool for exerting control, especially considering the growing prevalence of disinformation and fake news in the region.[13] Further, national governments attempt to combat this issue through legislation, often reinforcing state control rather than alleviating the problem.[14] For instance, all governments in Southeast Asia have passed electronic transaction laws, and some have passed cybersecurity laws. These laws have limited online expression and allowed governments to pressure platform providers to censor information, block accounts, and erase messages critical of the government, significantly impacting civil society activism.[15] In the Malaysian context, for example, sedition laws and article 263 of the *Communication and Multimedia Act* have been instrumentalized to target and arrest digital activists and news organizations critical of the government, thus producing a "chilling effect" on free speech.[16]

Culture and politics of social media

In countries undergoing autocratization, levels of media censorship, repression of civil society organizations, and restrictions on academic freedom are increasing. In these countries, autocratization, increasing disinformation, and polarization primarily found on social media are mutually reinforcing. Scholars generally agree that social media is not the sole cause of autocratization.[17] Hence, social media does not determine political trajectory per se. Nevertheless, online platforms are also not mere reflections of domestic politics either. Rather, domestic political conditions *shape* how social media is utilized and *influence* its role and implications for political developments. This essay argues that social media simultaneously amplifies and accelerates certain political practices, especially those that fit the logic of marketing and algorithmic culture, which cater to the sensational and emphasize personas and personalities rather than nuanced democratic discourse.

Social media affordances: mobilizing, not democratizing.

Social media features provide affordances for organizing collective action and mobilizing the masses.[18] These affordances include how platforms facilitate users' abilities to communicate and interact with each other, opportunities to build relationships that bypass geographical boundaries, and the ease with which these platforms enable users to share and distribute content. Consequently, social media increases the possibility of forming and expanding information networks. Cases from Southeast Asia show that social media has been successfully utilized for mass mobilizations and possesses characteristics that help groups confront collective action problems.

Social media simultaneously amplifies and accelerates certain political practices, especially those that fit the logic of marketing and algorithmic culture, which cater to the sensational and emphasize personas and personalities rather than nuanced democratic discourse.

However, mobilization is not the same as democratization. While mass mobilizations are essential to political change, not all are democratic. Some citizens and civil society actors may organize to support democratic institutions, but others may mobilize in the opposite direction. Social media can amplify democratic voices and facilitate the activism of progressive civil society actors, but the same platforms may also boost uncivil and more extreme voices. Authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia utilize such effects to mobilize content and flood social media with information that strengthens their positions. For instance, since Thailand's 2014 coup, the military has operated "ROTC Cyber," where groups of ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) are mobilized to disseminate pro-military authoritarian propaganda on social media.[19] In Malaysia, the government employed cyber-troopers, surveillance, and laws that penalize political dissent to deter engagement in social media activism.[20] In Vietnam, the Communist Party employs military cyber-troopers called "Force 47" to shape and influence public opinion on social media platforms.[21]

Platform capitalism and marketing culture

While aiding mobilization, social media is not specifically devised to promote democratic discourse or tailored to accommodate civic practices. It fundamentally embodies the platform capitalism model, which revolves around digital platforms acting as an intermediary that connects users, producers, and consumers within a digital ecosystem.[22] In this context, the relationship between social media platforms and users is primarily driven by commercial interest and user data collection.[23]

Hence, social media is designed with a marketing culture propensity, where users are treated as consumers and even as products—the raw materials that platforms package and sell to advertisers and other third parties—instead of citizens. Branding, which refers to the symbolic value and psychological representation of a product, is central to this culture, and "going viral" remains the ultimate goal of marketing strategy.[24]

As marketing becomes central in politics, political campaign strategies have increasingly adopted commercial marketing tactics. In other words, to successfully mobilize on social media, political actors and un/civil society organizations embrace branding culture, and citizens are treated as consumers or loyal fans.[25] Such was the case with Trump in the United States, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Duterte in the Philippines, and Widodo in Indonesia, among others.[26]

The economics of attention and emotion

In general, the social media affordances discussed earlier enable the rapid dissemination of information. However, they do not result in equal opportunities for all types of content to achieve viral status. Virality remains an exception, as most content reaches only a limited audience. The world of social media is vast, content over-abundant, and attention spans short—a phenomenon known as the economics of attention.[27]

As such, for activism, its potential for virality does not necessarily align with its democratic significance. Instead, it correlates with its meme-ability, or how closely a piece of content resembles a meme—a condensed package of information capable of quickly capturing users' attention.[28] Hence, social media activism generates "many clicks but few sticks," with most online activism failing to generate sustained mass support.[29] While activists can use social media for many causes, the social media landscape is friendlier to activism and can be retrofitted into branding logic. In other words, activism with simple meme-able narratives is more likely to be successful.[30]

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It is also essential to consider the centrality of social algorithms. Social media platforms employ a diverse array of algorithms subject to continuous changes. However, in essence, their fundamental principles are (1) machine learning, where the algorithm learns from users' past behaviors to influence future behaviors, and (2) sorting, which puts elements of a list in a specific order, such as numerical or lexicographical, in order to sort posts in a user's feed based on relevancy as opposed to chronology.[31] These principles cater to the economics of emotion, which are leveraged to capture the user's attention and prolong their viewing time, ultimately translating into increased advertising revenue.

Populist politics and binary frameworks

The preeminence of the economics of attention and emotion results in a bias favoring memeable, superlative content that tends to provoke extreme reactions. In simple terms, reductionist narratives that incite love or hate and divide users into devoted supporters or fervent opponents are more likely to go viral because they align with an existing branding culture that feeds off of emotion.[32]

This condition explains why controversial and extreme content produced by uncivil society actors and autocrats, particularly those that embrace reductionist populist frameworks, such as far-right, ultra-nationalist, and extreme fundamentalist groups, often gain prominence. The employment of hyper-nationalistic narratives in anti-Rohingya campaigns in Myanmar and the pro-monarch/ultra-royalist movement in Thailand exemplifies this tendency.[33]

In this context, populism is not a derogatory term but a political logic and discourse that involves rallying the political public against a common, powerful adversary.[34] It does not embody a specific ideology and may be embraced by the left, right, and center. It may also be regressive or progressive in nature. For instance, ongoing anti-corruption campaigns in Indonesia and the Philippines, such as #SaveKPK and the "Million People March," respectively, frame themselves within populist binary frameworks that position "the people" against a common, powerful adversary: the corrupt "elites."[35] Similarly, civil society and oppositional grassroots activism in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam oppose the authoritarian regimes in those nations. These anti-corruption campaigns and anti-authoritarian activism exemplify *progressive* populism. In contrast, Filipino President Duterte's brand of penal populism, with the war on drugs at its core, represents a *regressive* populism with no regard for democratic institutions.[36] These examples all represent binary, populist frameworks, where groups are positioned against each other with little nuance.

Algorithmic politics and the cyber-propaganda industry

Incorporating algorithmic dynamics into politics has resulted in "algorithmic politics," which "centers its modus operandi around the algorithmic maneuvering of issues with a core purpose of dominating media spheres to steer public opinions."[37] In other words, algorithmic politics encompasses political practices that exploit existing algorithmic biases to influence public opinion. Algorithmic politics comes to the fore when political actors manipulate algorithms to influence citizens' choices in politics, not only in elections but also in routine political and policy-related issues.[38]

Widespread acceptance of algorithmic politics has been increasingly marked by "the professionalization of social media campaigning, driven largely by elite money with ties to the campaign industry."[39] Social media campaigns have become a significant feature of modern-day elections, which use both the more "formal [and] public social media production of candidates' policies" and "another social media campaign that is subversive and underground, and promotes scandalous, unsourced material based around identity politics."[40] Cases from Southeast Asia, for instance, show that the effects of social media are easily retooled for cyber-propaganda, where disinformation and misinformation become part and parcel of the control strategies of autocrats and would-be autocrats.[41] For example, President Duterte employed cyber-troops in the Philippines to silence and attack critics while promoting pro-Duterte sentiment.[42]

Public deliberation—a missing feature

Marketing logic and algorithmic culture do not render social media a fertile ground for democratic, civic, and progressive pursuits. While generating mobilizing effects, social media platforms are particularly ineffective at facilitating public deliberation, another crucial aspect of democratic civil society and social change. Specifically, deliberation and mobilization are forms of democratic participation that have different and occasionally conflicting goals.[43]

Rule-bound deliberation is slow and ponderous, emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge and expertise, focuses on government laws and policies, and succeeds when citizens partner with government officials in the service of good decisions, political legitimacy, and social stability. In contrast, mobilization often requires quick, decisive action, emphasizes people's identities as historical agents of change, focuses on corporate influence within and beyond political jurisdictions, and succeeds when activists disrupt and disable undemocratic corporate entities and dictatorships from committing injustices.[44]

Democratic mobilization deepens democracy where it does not prevail.[45] As social media and algorithms speed up the mobilization process, social media mobilization poses the danger of being "too fast, too thin, and too many." Social media focuses on moments and issues instead of long-term political goals, such as political reform and societal change. What is needed are spheres and affordances for deep deliberation amidst an anti-deliberative algorithmic culture.

The following recommendations propose several fundamental principles that can serve as guidelines on how to transform social media platforms to be more readily utilized by civil society and society at large in pursuing healthy public deliberation:

- *Transparency*: Require platforms to disclose algorithm functioning and establish an independent regulatory body to oversee algorithmic decision-making.
- *Diverse content*: Redesign algorithms to promote diverse viewpoints and address algorithmic biases that potentially perpetuate the formation of algorithmic enclaves,[46] filter bubbles, and echo chambers.
- *Disinformation reduction*: Collaborate with fact-checkers, penalize deliberate disinformation, and reduce algorithmic amplification of false content.
- *User empowerment:* Enhance user control over data and algorithm preferences, strengthen privacy regulations, and ensure transparency in data collection.
- *Critical digital media literacy*: Promote critical thinking and media literacy education, provide contextual information and fact-checking resources.
- *Public-private collaboration*: Foster collaboration among platforms, policymakers, and civil society organizations for ongoing dialogue and policy development.

These recommendations, whether they are adopted in the form of digital or non-digital policies, should afford deliberative qualities such as opinion diversity, representativeness, reflexivity, knowledge gains, and civility. In their current forms, social media platforms do not facilitate these qualities. Creatively combining the digital and the in-person is necessary to facilitate spheres where in-person deliberation can be informed, enhanced, and complemented through digital tools.

To date, governments in Southeast Asia have yet to attempt to create such spheres or embrace the recommendations above, which are designed to combine the digital and in-person deliberative spheres. However, the case of Bersih—a progressive movement calling for electoral reforms in Malaysia—provides a compelling example for future policy.[47] Since its genesis in 2006, Bersih has incorporated digital media as the backbone of its movement. Blogging and YouTube were primarily used in mobilizing a mass Bersih rally in 2007. In the subsequent rallies of 2011, 2012, 2015, and 2016, Bersih incorporated Facebook and Twitter into its toolkits for mass mobilization. However, beyond these mobilizing effects, Bersih also utilized these platforms—especially blogging in earlier years and, more recently, WhatsApp and other encrypted messenger services to evade surveillance—with in-person meetings for democratic deliberative discussions and small-group conversations, in both private and public spheres.[48] These engagements played a pivotal role in bolstering the movement's endurance, allowing it to withstand governmental manipulation and suppression.[49]

The movement has made a long-lasting impact on the Malaysian socio-political landscape. The most profound impact is that the movement managed to form a political community across partisan, ethnic, and religious boundaries. This new system opposes racialized politics that dominated the Malaysian political landscape for decades. The case of Bersih not only illustrates the possibility of carving democratic spheres in social media but also underscores that transformative civil society activism necessitates a sustained process involving both mobilization and deliberation processes, spanning digital and in-person contexts and encompassing both public and private realms.

Everything everywhere all at once—a concluding remark

With most Southeast Asians on social media, social media has increasingly become the leading site for political conversation. The platforms are the sphere for "everything everywhere all at once" in politics, including political dynamics that contribute to autocratization and democratization. Social media helps un/civil society and citizens generate political spheres that may be messy, segmented, polarized, and anarchic. Not all these spheres aim to democratize, but within these spheres, civil and uncivil society actors have more chances to be political.

The social media landscape is not a flat playing ground where all political actors have equal opportunity. After all, social media and its algorithms were not designed for progressive and civic democratic pursuits. In embracing social media as a mobilization strategy, civil society actors are afforded more opportunities to form networks, disseminate information, and mobilize mass activism. However, the platforms' marketing and algorithmic culture also privilege extreme and emotionally evocative narratives while disfavoring complex ones of justice and democracy.

As discussed earlier, civil society operates against increasing state control and repression while simultaneously navigating the rise of algorithmic politics marked by binary populist frameworks and the cyber-propaganda industry. In this milieu, any attempt to sustain the future of civic and democratic activism cannot merely rely on social media and algorithmic dynamics alone. Instead, civic and democratic activism must be anchored in active and long-term civil society efforts to cultivate deliberative environments. Such efforts should always embrace but not depend on digital media. More importantly, these efforts should be free of cooptation by marketing and algorithmic cultures.

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civil resistance: Social media and mob tactics in Malaysia," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 2 (2017): 209-227; Merlyna Lim, "Digital media and Malaysia's electoral reform movement," in *Citizenship and democratization in Southeast Asia* (Brill, 2017): 209-237, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004329669_010; Merlyna Lim, "Sweeping the unclean: Social media and the Bersih electoral reform movement in Malaysia," *Global Media Journal* 14, no. 27 (2016): 1-10; Michelle Tye, Carmen Leong, Felix Tan, Barney Tan, and Ying Hooi Khoo. "Social media for empowerment in social movements: the case of Malaysia's grassroots activism," *Communications of the Association for Information Systems* 42, no. 1 (2018): 15.

48. Johns and Cheong, "Feeling the chill"; Johns, "This will be the WhatsApp election."
49. Ibid.