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DISCIPLINING DISSENT

Freedom, control, and digital activism in Southeast Asia

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Introduction

From Bersih rallies in Kuala Lumpur to oppositional protests in Phnom Penh, in the 2010s we have witnessed numerous protests and mass movements take place in Southeast Asia. While their causes and motivations varied, all incorporated the uses of mobile social media. Prior to the era of social media, the internet was already incorporated in various major political events in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as in the "People Power" protests in the Philippines, *Reformasi* in Indonesia and Malaysia, and Burma's "Saffron Revolution". Urbanized parts of Southeast Asia have been places with the most vibrant digital activism for the past two decades. However, "despite this impressive record, Southeast Asia has been marginalized from 'global' accounts" of the role of digital media and protest movements (Postill 2014: 78) that have pre-dominantly emerged in the European and American context, with the exception of the Middle East which gained a temporal prominence immediately after the "Arab Spring". Kluver and Banerjee (2005) pointed out that there has been very little internet research on the widely varying political systems and philosophical foundations of societies outside Europe and North America. This statement still rings true today.

Political regimes in Southeast Asia represent a rich mixture of political structures, cultural systems, depth of political engagement and histories—none of which readily fits into the historical timelines or categories used to assess sociopolitical implications of technology in European and American settings. The distinctive constellations of forces at play underlie dramatically different cultural and sociopolitical configurations among the nation-states of this region. Singapore, for example, with its well-developed economic and (post-)industrial system, bears perhaps the most striking similarity to the nations of Europe and North America in terms of economic and technological status. However, Singapore's information policies have been markedly different, and its form of state paternalism and tight control over civil society allows for no easy comparison with European and American democracies. Other nation-state political systems in Southeast Asia have equally divergent profiles. Consequently, each state-civil society context needs to be studied in its own right rather than forced into overly-stylized models from European and North American contemporary literatures.

A key set of issues perceived by many governments is how to embrace the internet to enhance flows of information and knowledge to spur economic growth while minimizing the potential for regime destabilizing political unrest that can be fostered through the same

technology. Within Southeast Asia, the differences among nations, regions, and localities can be dramatic. Accompanying varying political structures, urbanization and development, religious-philosophical traditions have influenced Southeast Asia in different ways, leading to contrasting understandings of the nature of governance, the role of government, and the rights and duties of citizens (Pye and Pye 1988). Due to the diversity of contexts and non-linearity of political change, the question of the role(s) of digital media in supporting civil society and civic activism has no unequivocal resolution in the abstract. Rather, answers will emerge from the historical and societal experiences in specific local contexts. So, too, will vary the realization of the roles of digital media to "liberate" civil society from the fetters of state control over media and communications as well as from "uncivil" elements within civil society itself.

The state of the internet and social media in Southeast Asia

The economic promise of ICT encouraged countries in Southeast Asia to focus on it as one of the significant components of national development plans. The internet began to enter the region in the mid-1990s, and since then Southeast Asia has experienced a dramatic growth in internet users. Among the 644 million population, 53% (339 million) are online, 47% (305 million) are on social media, and 42% (272.6 million) are active mobile social users (We are Social 2017). However, statistical indicators, as shown in Figures 37.1, 37.2, and 37.3, illustrate that ICT developments among countries in the region are highly unequal. Figure 37.1 shows the dramatic growth of mobile-cellular users in the region. Except in Myanmar and Laos, there are more than 100 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants. This inequality reflects unequal levels of urbanization in the region (Table 37.1).

The internet penetration in the region, however, is still generally low (see Figure 37.2). In Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei, more than 70% of these countries' populations are connected to the internet. Vietnam made considerable progress in getting more than half of its population
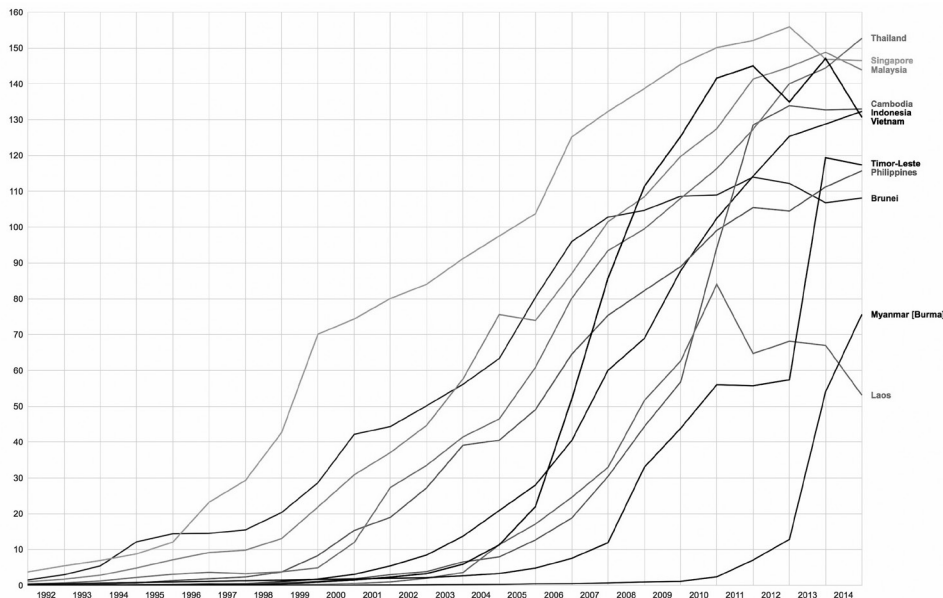

Figure 37.1   Mobile–cellular subscription per 100 inhabitants in Southeast Asia[1]
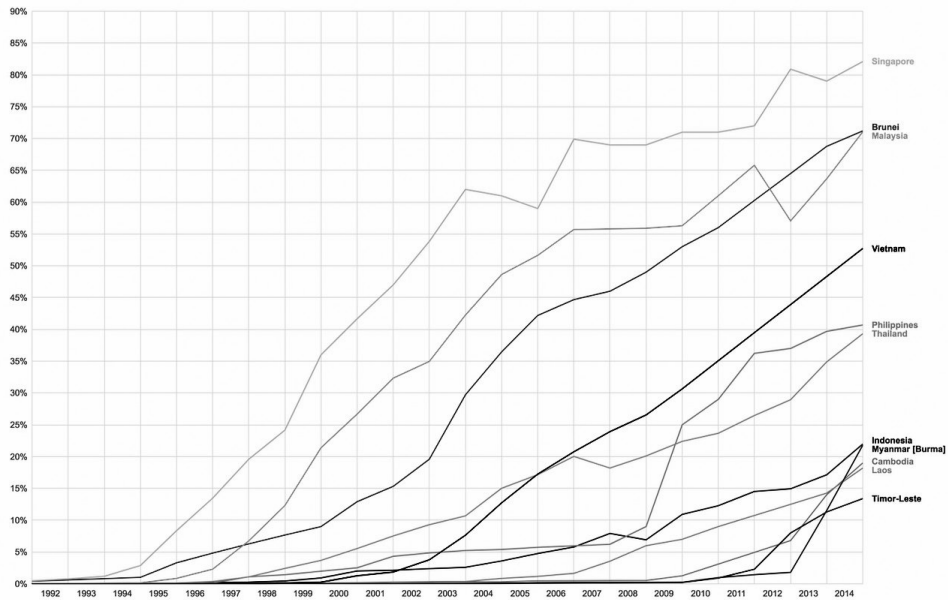
Figure 37.2   Percentage of individuals with an internet connection in Southeast Asia[2]

connected to the internet by 2015. However, 2015 data shows that in Indonesia,[3] Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Timor-Leste, the internet penetration levels were still below 25%. The numbers were much lower for fixed (wired)-broadband subscriptions (Figure 37.3), where all but Singapore had less than 10 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants. This gap demonstrates that the connection in the region is largely dependent on wireless technology.

Since the mid-2000s, Southeast Asia has witnessed a remarkable growth of social media usage. With an average of 4.17 hours daily (2016), Filipinos spend more time on social media than anyone else in the other countries (We Are Social 2017). Malaysians and Indonesians

Table 37.1 Social media usages and urbanization in Southeast Asia (2016)[5]

|	*% National population in urban areas (rounded)*	*% Country urbanized (rounded)*	*Social media*	*Mobile social media*	*Facebook*	*YouTube*	*Twitter*	*Instagram*
Brunei	77%	N/A	86%	76%	86%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Cambodia	21%	1%	31%	38%	31%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Indonesia	27%	2%	40%	35%	48%	49%	38%	39%
Laos	39%	0.4%	26%	21%	26%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Malaysia	75%	5%	71%	65%	67%	68%	41%	47%
Myanmar	34%	1%	26%	24%	26%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Philippines	44%	4%	58%	52%	57%	56%	35%	34%
Singapore	100%	79%	77%	70%	72%	75%	33%	43%
Thailand	50%	7%	67%	62%	65%	64%	40%	44%
Timor–Leste	33%	N/A	33%	31%	33%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Vietnam	37%	2%	48%	43%	51%	51%	22%	22%
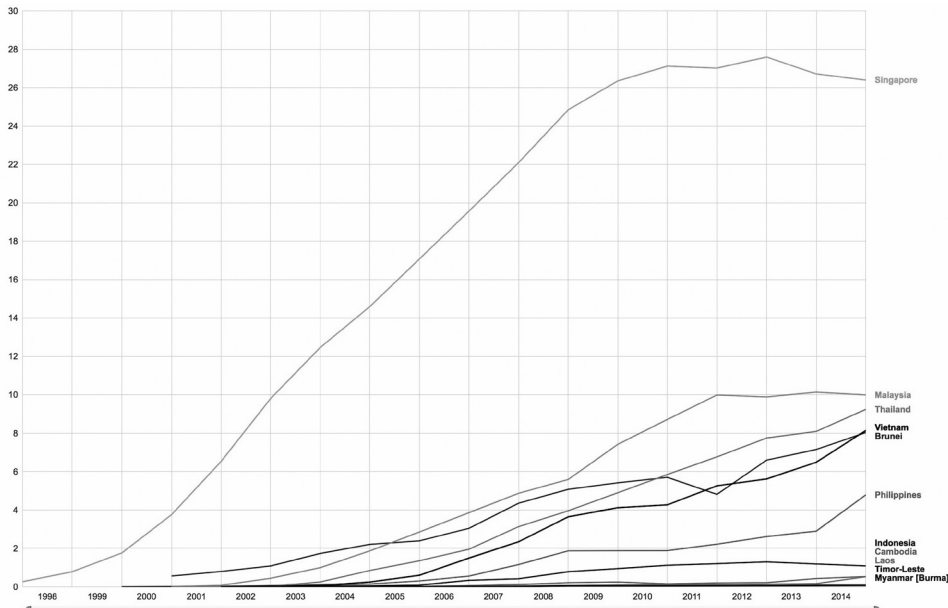
Figure 37.3   Fixed (wired)-broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in Southeast Asia[4]

come close with 3.19 and 3.16 hours, respectively. The growth of social media usage came two decades after exponential growth of population in cities and a relatively high urbanization rate (see Yap, this volume, and Rimmer and Dick, this volume) but the usage concentration remains highest in the capitals that are significantly larger than other cities. Capital cities such as Bangkok, Manila, and Jakarta, each had their turn in gaining a reputation as social media capital of the world. In 2012, Bangkok was the world's top city for Facebook users with 12.8 million users, earning the nickname "Facebook capital of the world" (Maierbrugger 2012), and Jakarta was named the world's most active Twitter city (Al Jazeera 2012). Meanwhile, Manila and the Philippines have long been recognized as "the texting capital of the world" as well as "the social networking capital of the world" (Golangco 2014).

Statistical data do not really show much about digital activism in Southeast Asia, but these numbers are useful to map the state of the internet and social media in this region of the world. These trends also reveal the shifting terrain of the complex state of affairs of the sociopolitical uses of the internet and social media in various settings, particularly urbanized areas. Some argue that the level of internet connectivity is paralleled with the degree of democratic activities (Kedzie 1997; Cooper 2002). Cooper (2002: 74) even states that "those who have computers and Internet communications find themselves better trained, better informed and better able to participate in democracy". The implication of this statement is that places with higher degrees of infrastructure development and services are better able to participate in democracy. In contrast with this line of argumentation, my research shows that this is not always the case. Here, I contend that the level of activism and political engagement cannot be determined or predicted by simply looking at the level of connectivity, number of users, or technological infrastructure readiness alone. As revealed in the following section, countries with high internet penetration such as Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore are not equal in their shares of digital activism. Furthermore, despite their very low levels of internet connectivity, countries such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar are not free from digital activism.

Freedom, control, and digital activism

Historically, countries in Southeast Asia did not provide much space for participation by civil society. In 1997, nearly all countries in the region had no free press (Figure 37.4). Thailand and the Philippines, at that moment, were the only exception to the rule, but they started declining in the early 2000s. From 1997 to 2016, most countries either experienced flat trajectories or declining freedom, except for Indonesia and Myanmar where there were dramatic turns follow-ing a regime change in each country, in 1998 and 2010, respectively.

In 2017, press freedom in Southeast Asia was generally still under the world average level where no country can be categorized as having free press or even free society (Table 37.2).

Table 37.2 Freedom indexes in Southeast Asia (2016)[7]

|	*Political rights 1 (best) to 7 (worst)*	*Civil liberties 1 (best) to 7 (worst)*	*Freedom aggregate score 0 (worst) to 100 (best)*	*Freedom status*	*Freedom of the press status*	*Freedom of the net status*
Brunei	6	5	29	Not free	Not free	N/A
Cambodia	6	5	31	Not free	Not free	Partly free
Indonesia	2	4	65	Partly free	Partly free	Partly free
Laos	7	6	12	Not free	Not free	N/A
Malaysia	4	4	44	Partly free	Partly free	Partly free
Myanmar	5	5	32	Partly free	Partly free	Not free
Philippines	3	3	63	Partly free	Partly free	Free
Singapore	4	4	51	Partly free	Not free	Partly free
Thailand	6	5	32	Not free	Not free	Not free
Timor–Leste	3	3	65	Partly free	Partly free	N/A
Vietnam	7	5	20	Not free	Not free	Not free
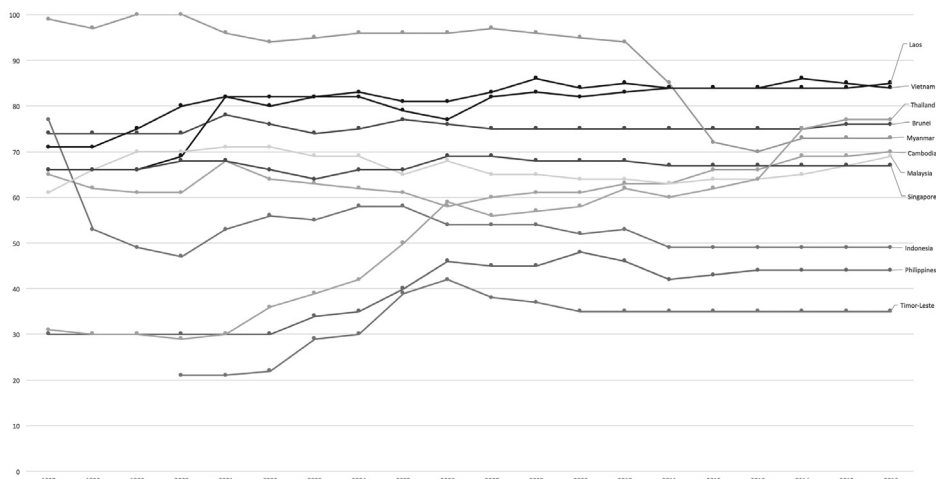
Figure 37.4 Press freedom indexes in Southeast Asia (1997–2016) ranging from 0 (best) to 100 (worst)[6]

However, the diversity within Southeast Asia is too wide to allow for a single stylization of political structures and their impacts on civil liberties. Just as governments range from the highly dictatorial to the more democratic, press practices in these nations of Southeast Asia vary from freewheeling in the Philippines and post-1998 Indonesia to totalitarian control in Laos and Vietnam. In between are Singapore and Malaysia where the semi-controlled press has long been maintained. The internet encountered and further diversified the already variegated media landscapes when it entered Southeast Asia in the 1990s.

How these countries regulate the internet does not always mirror their regulations over the more traditional media; yet some governments continue to pose a threat to freedom of speech in the same manner that they have done for print and broadcast media.

Brunei

One of the richest countries in the world, Brunei is also one of the few remaining absolute monarchies. Ruled by the monarch Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah and under the emergency laws for nearly half a century, the country's media are neither diverse nor free (Freedom House 2014). While private media exist, they are either owned, partly owned, or controlled by sultan's family. If found guilty of reporting or broadcasting "libel and slander", journalists, bloggers, and alike can face up to three years' imprisonment under the Brunei Defamation Act (AGC 2000). The 2005 Sedition Act further restricts freedom of expression by making it an offence to criticize the royal family. The act also makes it an offence "to raise discontent or disaffection amongst the inhabitants of Brunei Darussalam" or "to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different classes of the population of Brunei Darussalam" (Amnesty International 2009). Both rules are vague and subject to different interpretations, prohibiting individuals and the media from exercising their rights to freedom of expression.

The internet population grew dramatically from 3% in 2000 to over 80% in 2016. However, there is no evidence suggesting that the growth of users is leading to political reform, any resistance against the Sultanate, or any form of democratic activism. While internet access is reportedly unrestricted, the primary internet service provider (ISP) is state-owned. The government's strict control over media is extended to cyberspace where "the internet practice code stipulates that content must not be subversive or encourage illegitimate reform efforts" (Freedom House 2015: 108). The state ensures a cradle-to-grave social welfare system and, in exchange, the population is expected to be loyal to the monarch without having a representative system. Under this social contract, Bruneians' usage of digital media "is largely guided by a high degree of self-restrain and respect for the royal family" (Li 2012: 129), hence individuals commonly practice self-censorship despite actively participating in uncensored online discussion communities and social media.

Cambodia

The rights of freedom of expression guaranteed in the 1993 Cambodian Constitution led to the growth of print media, which has led some to argue that Cambodia's press is one of the freest in Asia. However, the media is deeply politicized due to a legacy of factionalism and political patronage. In 1994, the country's first ever press law was drafted by the government and signed into law by King Sihanouk a year later. This law prohibits any reporting deemed threatening to "national security and political stability" (Freedom House 2002).

Despite low internet population at 19% (2016), the government is alarmed by the internet's political potential especially concerning its usage by the opposition. The government is seeking

to control the flows within the country by appointing the state-owned telephone community as the sole operator for internet exchanges to filter out pornography and, as pointed out by the opponents, to block criticisms against the government and the ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). While being controlled, the internet is freer than any other media in the country, opening up space for emerging alternative voices, albeit in a constrained environment.

Cambodian bloggers had started using the internet to express their opinions as early as the mid-2000s. In 2007, a group of Cambodian bloggers (or "cloggers") held blogging workshops in twenty universities across the country, popularizing blogging even further. The rise of social media in the late 2000s provided more avenues for dissent to emerge, especially among political oppositions whose voices were suppressed by mainstream media. Whereas the 2013 elections resulted in the victory of the CCP who won by a narrow margin, the increased popularity of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), the main opposition, can be credited to its online mobilization, especially among young voters who use social media for political exchanges. The opposition against the government also proliferated to the streets of Phnom Penh in January 2014. The account of the violently suppressed protests was censored from the state-owned media and, yet, made its way to reach online audiences through social media. Despite threats, intimidation, and censorship on online and offline spaces, digital activism has taken roots in Cambodia.

Indonesia

Prior to the 1998 regime change, Indonesia was among the countries with the least freedom in Southeast Asia, second to Myanmar (Figure 37.4). The media was strictly controlled by the Minister of Information; censorship and the outright banning and closing of news media were common. In contrast, the Suharto regime applied no rule to online space, partly due to the novelty of the technology—the government found it too difficult to control and did not realize the potential of this technology—and the economic crisis left this technology unmanaged by the government.

During the 1996–1998 period, just before and during the peak of the Asia finance crisis, the internet became the principal channel through which people could discuss and criticize the regime (Hill and Sen 2005; Lim 2004, 2008) and, eventually, helped to galvanize the anti-Suharto student movement in 1998. Combining online and offline activism, using different means of communication not overtly controlled by government—telephone, fax, cellular phone, and particularly e-mail—students and others mobilized people to the streets and to occupy parks, plazas, and the frontage of governmental buildings to force President Suharto to step down (Lim 2004, 2008).

Post-Suharto reforms had some dramatic changes on freedom of expression and greater access to information. Meanwhile, the internet continues to be a free media that is still very much unregulated. However, concerns remain about the use of criminal defamation laws and the effect of the 2008 Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) Law on freedom of expression on the internet. As the online population in the country grew exponentially through the popularity of mobile social media, digital activism had further expanded to include a large population of the urban middle-class such as in the case of the anti-corruption movement in the late 2000s (Lim 2013). On one hand, social media provide space for activism of various causes, including those representing marginalized communities. On the other hand, the media landscape provides "a friendly environment for activism that revolves around simplified narratives tailored towards urban middle-class consumers" and, in contrast, "is generally unfavorable for

complex narratives of justice and inequalities, or the poor" (Lim 2017: 415). The emergence of algorithmic enclaves, which confine groups of individuals to online groups as echo chambers of their shared identities and perceived threats, produce multiple forms of tribal nationalism where "social media users claim and legitimize their own versions of nationalism by excluding equality and justice for others" (Lim 2017: 444).

Laos

In 2001, the Laotian government committed itself to an unprecedented domestic media reform with the new Mass Media bill allowing the establishment of private media enterprises (CNN 2001), a departure from the established model of journalists as government officials tasked to unify the party, state and masses. However, the private owners are required to pledge loyalty to the party's principles and any reports criticizing or endorsing opposition to the government and national policy are viewed as criminal.

There is a lack of data on the status of the internet freedom in the country. The internet population is low and the connection is reported as painfully slow, but strict regulations were imposed by Laotian authorities early on, as demonstrated in the punishment of online journalists because of deviant views in the early 2000s (CPJ 2001). With the growing availability of mobile phones, internet and social media usage expanded. However, a repressive internet law, passed in 2014, criminalizes the dissemination of vaguely defined types of contents such as "false and mis-leading information" against the ruling party and any content that undermines "the peace, inde-pendence, sovereignty, unity, and prosperity of Lao PDR" (Palatino 2014). The law that also prohibits anonymity on social media has essentially placed excessive regulations on online space and discouraged citizens from expressing their opinion. Beyond employing legal measures, the government also utilizes social punishment, as exemplified in the case of three Laotians arrested in March 2016 for posting anti-government messages on Facebook. Having been imprisoned for two months, they were also forced to publicly confess and apologize on state-owned TV. Sitting beneath a banner proclaiming "peace, independence, unity, prosperity" they pledged to change their attitudes and "stop all activities that betray the nation" (Jha 2016). Despite such a repressive environment, online dissent continues to exist in Laos.

Malaysia

Malaysia's media are highly regulated. With proxy ownership by the ruling coalition, they are expected to support the power status quo, leading to self-censorship practices among journal-ists and media workers. In the meantime, Malaysia has invested enormously in the internet for economic reasons, such as in the building of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), a high-tech business center developed to support the country's leap to the information age (Bunnell 2004; Postill 2014). The government decided not to censor the internet, a pledge that contrasts sharply with the nation's tightly controlled print and broadcast media outlets, but continues to be "torn between the desire to promote the technology for economic prosperity and shield its citizens from being exposed to 'unwanted information'" (Lim 2016: 2). In practice, the inter-net is not really free as the government has been using media-related and libel laws against any online dissenting voices.

Digital activism in Malaysia has a long history spanning two decades that can be traced back to the first *Reformasi* wave in 1998–1999. In September 1998, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad abruptly sacked his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, making extraordinary accusations of

corruption and sexual misconduct that were widely regarded as politically motivated (Abbott 2004; Postill 2014). This dramatic event exploded online, provoked a storm of protests that eventually proliferated to the streets, and began a movement called *Reformasi* (Nair 2007; Postill 2014). The public sphere had been widened by the emergence of online alternative sources of information as rivals of government's mainstream media, such as *Malaysiakini*, Harakah Daily, Suaram, and Hindraf online. After the imprisonment of Anwar Ibrahim, street protests vanished but digital activism persisted through the growing popularity of alternative media, especially *Malaysiakini*, and the proliferation of blogger-activists (Abbott 2004; Lim 2016; Pandi 2014). The two decades of Malaysian digital activism since the 1990s provided a groundwork for *Bersih*, an electoral reform movement launched in 2006, which successfully mobilized multiple large street rallies from 2007 to 2017 and helped increase the popularity of the oppositional coalition (Lim 2016; Postill 2014).

Myanmar

In spite of all technical difficulties, strict control, and repressive authoritarian government, Myanmar is one of the countries with the longest history of digital activism in Southeast Asia. The earliest form of Myanmar's digital activism can be traced to the establishment of Free Burma Online (www.freeburma.org) in 1995, a website of the Free Burma Coalition, a political initiative to support the Burmese people's struggle for democracy and human rights led by Zarni, a Burmese student at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Burmese activists living in exile and Burmese diaspora had utilized the internet to declare their cause and coordinate digital dissents.

The Myanmar government began to allow access to a limited package of government-approved websites, the Myanmar Wide Web, in 2004. The government closely monitored all .mn emails, and websites and international websites were inaccessible from the country. However, "the tiny internet cafés that dot the former capital, Yangon, [were] adept at bypassing the government's firewalls, using proxy servers to evade the censors and access banned sites" (Doherty 2010). During crisis times the junta simply disconnected the internet to stop the global flows of information. In 2007, the Saffron Revolution:

> [c]aught global attention as bloggers and digital activists flooded cyberspace with grainy images and videos of saffron-robed monks leading large, peaceful demonstrations against the government . . . Burmese citizens took pictures and videos, many on their mobile phones, and secretly uploaded them from Internet cafes or sent digital files across the border to be uploaded.
>
> *(Chowdhury 2008: 4)*

The government successfully put down the dissent, but digital activism that linked individuals in and outside Myanmar persisted.

In 2012, after transfer of power and the National League of Democracy (NLD)'s election victory, the online censorship was lifted and Myanmar's state of free press and its freedom status in general has been slowly improved. Today, the internet and social media have become space for dissent for marginalized minority groups such as Rohingya. However, like what happens in Indonesia, social media have also amplified racial and religious contestations between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority, encouraged the rise of tribal nationalism, and deepened the polarization even further.

Timor-Leste

Since independence in 2002, Timor-Leste (also known as East Timor) successfully ascended from internal violence conflicts and political instability. Despite its government's commendable efforts, immense challenges remain. Poverty remains high, especially in the rural areas where 72% of the population lives (2010) (World Bank 2017). In 2009, only 1% of the population was connected to the internet (Freedom House 2010). While still low, the number had jumped to over 13% in 2014. Mobile phones, however, are very popular with 117 subscriptions per 100 people (2015) boosting the number of mobile social users to 31% in 2016 (Table 37.1).

Despite being a new country, Timor-Leste has had a long history of digital activism. In fact, online activism was very much part of its struggle for independence. Hosted by an internet domain for Timor (.tp) managed by Connect-Ireland (established in 1997), the transnational support for the Timorese independent movement was largely coordinated online connecting multiple networks such as the East Timor Ireland Solidarity Campaign, the Portuguese TimorNet, the American ETAN, Mojo Wire, the Australian Timor Today, and the Indonesian Solidamor (Cardoso and Neto 2004). In the transnational movement in defense of the human rights of the Timorese, the internet was intensively utilized as a resource and tool for mobilization and information propagation.

Despite its violent past experience with Indonesia, Timor-Leste comfortably embraces inter-border exchanges in the media landscape. Timor-Leste manages to establish a competitive media environment and "avoid the worst excesses of monopoly [and conglomeration] that afflict media in many other countries" including Indonesia (Braithwaite, Charlesworth, and Soares 2013). Meanwhile, the pre-independent solidarity movement has crafted a vibrant digital space and network for Timorese to continue their engagement with transnational exchanges for Timor-Leste's democracy.

The Philippines

The Philippines holds a reputation as one of the freest countries in Southeast Asia, yet corruption, cronyism, and nepotism continue to be prevalent, with a few dozen powerful families continuing to play dominant roles in the economy and politics. In the last fifteen years, however, the country has been on a downward trend in upholding freedom due to credible allegations of massive electoral fraud, corruption, the intimidation of oppositions, the killing of journalists, and, recently, under President Rodrigo Duterte, the war on drugs as well as assassinations and threats against civil society activists (Freedom House 2005, 2017b).

The Philippines government does not censor, filter, nor block access to websites. However, the fight against separatist organizations in Mindanao has been used to justify laws authorizing surveillance of the internet, posing threats to privacy and security. The Philippines' anti-terrorism law, the Human Security Act of 2007, contains overbroad and potentially abusive provisions that would not advance the counter-terrorism agenda, but instead could have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and human rights (HRW 2007).

Digital activism has a long history in the country. The internet became the main source of information that drove and stimulated resistance toward President Estrada and led to his downfall from presidency in 2001. The mobile phone translated this online resistance into street protests (Rafael 2003).

With their growing popularity, social media, too, became very part of political activism. On August 26, 2013, organized by Facebook, Twitter, and texts, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos

gathered at Luneta Park in Manila to mark the first of a series of protests calling for the total abolition of the graft-tainted pork barrel fund, the practice of appropriating public money for local projects through congress. Currently, however, the President has allegedly employed a social media army to flood social networking sites with "attacks on critics and posts pushing pro-Duterte sentiment" (WNYC 2017). Further, social media have also helped far-right groups to disseminate extreme-right discourses, exploit ultra-nationalist sentiment, and expand their basis.

Singapore

In posturing itself as a beacon of information services, Singapore has not unfastened political control over citizen or resident use and dissemination of information. Singapore's constitution gives every citizen the right to free speech and expression, but that right may be restrained where "necessary or expedient in the interests of the security of Singapore . . . public order or morality . . . to protect the privileges of Parliament" (Penfold 2003: 91). The Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA), currently replaced by the Media Development Authority, led this control and oversaw the internet content regulation scheme (Penfold 2003),, which only relates to content of concern to Singapore, as exemplified by such statements as "in the case of racial and religious material, purview covers only materials which may incite racial or religious hatred among the races in Singapore" (SBA 2002).

In 2003, over 50% of the total population in Singapore were online, but digital activism was virtually invisible. A 2001 survey showed that Singaporeans unanimously supported the censorship policies; 85% of Singaporeans believed that censorship was necessary, and 82% were satisfied with the level of censorship (Samtani 2001). Still, the internet "does offer ever more space for critical space" if compared to print media, "has broadened the public sphere . . . and allows even the endemically marginalized to engage with policies" (Weiss 2014: 96).

The Singaporean version of digital activism started as early as 1994 with the launch of Sintercom, an online forum whose content was political despite its claim as a "civic" organization. The government's pressure to register as a political organization forced Sintercom to shut itself down in 2001. Despite the political pressure, various underground political sites emerged. Among the most prominent ones were *New Sintercom*, a satirical site *Talking Cock*, a newsgroup website *The Optical*, a commentary site the *Void Deck* and other alternative websites such as Think Centre, Singapore Window, and Sammyboy. Under political pressure and strict censorship, Singaporean digital activism thrives in the form of reporting activism or contentious journalism. While its impact is ambiguous, the increased popularity of the Workers' Party and other oppositions in the 2006 and 2011 general elections, as well as the rise of LGBT rights movement in the country, cannot be separated from the role of digital activism.

Thailand

Lèse-majesté laws, the laws against defaming the monarchy, have been used for a variety of transgressions in Thailand. Despite having been one of the countries with the freest media in Asia since 1992, the military takeover in 2014 resulted in alarming levels of lèse-majesté charges where nearly 75% were related to the exercise of the right to freedom of expression (FIDH 2016). The National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) and the junta-appointed government "have issued orders that prohibit online content perceived to criticize the Thai monarchy, the NCPO, or the government" (Freedom House 2016). In 2016, the government introduced a new Computer-Related Crime Act which "gives overly broad powers to the government to restrict free speech, enforce surveillance and censorship, and retaliate against

activists" (HRW 2016). These new crime laws in combination with century-old lèse-majesté laws are heavily used to mute criticism and dissents against the government and resulted in self-censorship practices by media and individuals.

Digital activism has always existed in Thailand. The earliest example of this was the news-group called "soc.cul.thai" that was extremely popular among Thai net users. In the 1990s, civic and grassroots organizations used the internet as a medium to mobilize action. Thaidemocracy. org, for example, successfully organized more than 1,500 volunteer teachers to teach in remote schools in the countryside. Some pro-reform organizations also set up websites such as www. prachachon.net, which aimed to be a counter-agent against the monopoly of information.

In more recent developments, digital politics have mirrored on-the-ground polarization and partisan politics. Social media have become part of political contestations between the Yellow Shirts, who mainly are pro-establishment, royalist, and anti-election, and the Red Shirts, who are anti-establishment and Thaksin supporters. Meanwhile, the more restrictive control applied by the military junta also encouraged the emergence of human rights activism online. Since the coup, "bloggers, activists, and human rights lawyers have formed coalitions such as Thai Lawyers for Human Rights to monitor the situation and document human rights violations by the junta" and "anonymously operated Facebook pages allow individuals to share their opinions and organize political activities, including Stop Fake Thailand, which has over half a million followers" (Freedom House 2016).

Vietnam

The ruling party in Vietnam not only restricts and monopolizes every area and level of the media but also arbitrarily arrests and terrorizes anyone who dares voice opinions other than the official views (Thayer 1992). The People's Army deems the "Western" model of press freedom unsuitable for Vietnam and that it amounts to subversive propaganda. Although the traditional function of reporting and analyzing the news exists, the Vietnamese press is primarily a medium for filtering information. Vietnam remains one of the world's most repressive countries where websites, which are considered politically and morally dangerous, including foreign news sites and those of international civil society organizations, are blocked by the government. It is officially forbidden to use the internet for political opposition, for actions against national sovereignty and security and violations of morality or the law. Violations of this regulation are often punished with imprisonment for several years.

With the growing popularity of cyber cafés in late 1990s to early 2000s, the government made café owners responsible for their customer's messages and set up a national monitoring system to ensure that cyber café users did not see "politically or morally dangerous websites" (RSF 2003). A number of cyber-dissidents were arrested or harassed after publishing criticisms on the government and its policy or religious texts (Free Vietnam Alliance 2002). Some examples include Nguyen Vu Binh, a former journalist who was arrested in an internet café in Hanoi on 21 February 2002 after posting an article criticizing the 1999 Vietnamese-Chinese border agreement, and Nguyen Khac Toan who was arrested in Hanoi internet café on 8 January 2002 and was sentenced to twelve years in prison after he was "found guilty of spying for emailing material to allegedly 'reactionary' Vietnamese human right organizations abroad" (IFEX 2003).

Despite the government's continuing detentions and harassments, digital activism continues. The growth of social media users has emboldened digital activism, making the internet "the de facto forum for the country's growing number of dissenting voices" (Wallace 2017). According to Human Rights Watch, there are over 100 bloggers and activists jailed in Vietnam (Bauchner 2017). In 2016, Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, a popular blogger better

known by her online name Mother Mushroom, was arrested for "conducting anti-State prop-aganda" and, following a trial in 2017, sentenced to ten years in prison. And, yet, social media dissent continues to flourish. Facebook becomes an organizing tool, "as a monitoring device for people when they are being detained and when they get released", "to organize prison visits and vigils . . . and to solicit donations for political prisoners" (Wallace 2017). As more dissidents migrated from blogs, which were easier to block, to Facebook, Vietnamese social media activism became more vibrant.

Understanding the spectrum of Southeast Asia's digital activism

Southeast Asia has enthusiastically embraced ICT for economic grounds and in so doing has opened the door to a wide variety of unforeseen corollary effects. Due to economic circum-stances, socio-political and cultural contexts, the region's experience illuminates several issues that are not often encountered in European and North American experiences with the internet. Some Southeast Asian governments, while following the lead of many European and North American governments in the formation of policies to govern the new information society, have also addressed a host of policy issues in very different ways, and in some ways quite inadequately, in their overt attempts to regulate the use of the internet for regime maintenance purposes. The significance of these very different policy orientations is complex; this chapter is only a begin-ning toward their fuller exploration.

Similarly, assumptions about political empowerment that is thought to be embedded on the internet in Europe and North America were matched by skepticism in Southeast Asia, and sub-sequent experience has demonstrated that the technological determinism of much of this debate was misplaced—or at least too naive. In the Southeast Asian context, the internet is frequently portrayed by elites and those in power as a technology that is likely to disturb social harmony by affording political empowerment to the wrong sections of domestic as well as foreign agents seeking drastic system change, or more prosaically, upsetting moral standards.

An understanding of Southeast Asia's political dimensions of the internet should be located in the socio-political and historical contexts of the region rather than drawn without reflection from the history of the internet in Europe and North America. The internet's political impacts in Southeast Asia cannot be separated from the political history of nations; e.g. existing civil society development, civil and political liberties, and freedom of speech and press. This includes the debates of the moment in Europe and North America about a dichotomy between "have" and "have-nots"—the so-called digital divide—as the principal measure of access to the tech-nology. Stories from Southeast Asia show that state-civil society relations are of equal, if not more, importance than the degree and nature of access to the internet in explaining freedom of expression in the public sphere.

In the Southeast Asian context, the assumptions about the rise of the urban middle class—major users of ICT—as a major driver of political change also does not necessarily correlate with either the level of per capita GDP or access to the internet. Linkages to other media resulting in hybrids of internet and more traditional networks can magnify the impacts of the internet to a greater extent in some societies than in others, which goes a long way toward explaining how civil society movements fostered through the internet and social media can potentially be more fruitful even in places with relatively low internet access.

Country case studies also show no direct causality to link the level of surveillance (internet control/censorship) and resistance (digital activism). Vietnam, for example, has entered a period of radical economic reform without political reform that is accentuating contradictions between

diminishing state control over the economy and efforts by the state to tighten controls over information technologies. In contrast, Singaporeans, who live in a multicultural urban society, have over time seemingly accepted the state's right to limit freedoms of speech and press in the name of maintaining public order and ethnic harmony.

Within the range of variations in Southeast Asia, until the 1990s, the majority of countries were in a mode of governance (socialist and authoritarian developmental states alike) that severely restricted possibilities for media to be outlets of voices from the ground. However, political reforms in the 1990s started to widen experiences within this band just at the time when the internet came to the region. This conjuncture of technological novelty and deep political reform raises the question of whether the internet played an empowering role in these reforms. The cases of the Indonesian *Reformasi*, the Philippines' People Power II, the Burmese reform show it did. Yet this is not the end of story. In the last two decades following the introduction of the internet in the region, an intense struggle has emerged within civil society and with remnants of old regimes still holding (indirect as well as direct) power. While sometimes billed as a struggle between secularism vs. sectarianism or democracy vs. anti-democracy, the contestation taking place in many parts of the region actually have many dimensions, including core-periphery power imbalance (following from the artificiality of the nation-state as a colonial construct), neo-liberal and global corporate assault on the nation-state itself, and widening inequality/class disparities.

Conclusion

Experiences from Southeast Asia suggest that while digital media can have and has played an important role in political reform, it can equally play the role of furthering social divides. The role cannot be determined by technology itself, but rather by the interplay between technology and society, which while globally influenced is still substantially locally constituted. From this viewpoint, projecting into the future from the current state of affairs in Southeast Asia suggests non-linearity, continuing divergence of experiences, and unexpected rather than predictable outcomes. The amalgamation of digital media and civil society movements in Southeast Asia has resulted in distinctive socio-technological configurations that are yet to be fully explored.

Notes

1 Data from ITU 2017.
2 Data from ITU 2017.
3 We Are Social (2017) reported that in 2016 the internet connection level in Indonesia had reached 50%.
4 Data from ITU 2017.
5 Data from We Are Social 2017, UNData 2017 and Demographia 2017.
6 Data from Freedom House 2017a.
7 Data from Freedom House 2017c.

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