

New Media and Freedom of Expression in Asia

Keynote Address, Freedom of Expression Asia Workshop (Yogyakarta November 4, 2007), organized jointly by COMBINE Resource Institution (Indonesia) and Global Partners and Associates (United Kingdom)

Ariel Heryanto

The University of Melbourne

This talk will address three issues. It will begin with problematizing the dominant views of the impacts of new media technology in general and in Asia in particular. Secondly, it will briefly highlight the general sentiment towards freedom of expression and democratization in East and Southeast Asia. This talk will conclude with a case study of the use of the new media by art workers at the lower level of Indonesian society. Underlying all the three issues is a basic premise that media technology transforms not only of our living environment, but also what we communicate, and more importantly our identity and social relations.

I wish to thank the organizer for inviting me to this important meeting. I feel much honored. I wish to speak about three things. I will begin with commenting on two concepts that are key to our workshop. The first is the nature and impact of media technology in general, and the second is the case of Asia as a site of such development.

Secondly, I will highlight some features that have characterized the general sentiment in East and Southeast Asia, with respect to freedom of expression and democracy. I wish to revisit the argument that in Asia, the new media have been instrumental to expanding and enhancing freedom of expression and bringing down dictatorships.¹

Those issues are primarily the concerns of the urban middle classes. I wish to conclude my presentation by looking at a case from Indonesia, where art workers in the lower layer of the society are using the new media. This example invites further discussion about the digital divide, globalization, copyright, and perhaps terrorism.

These issues are complex. Each deserves a more detailed discussion than I will be able to give in this session. But, underlying all the three issues is this one concern: do the new media technologies add on and multiply the power and the speed of previously existing communication tools? Is this how and why the new media have, or *should* have, been expanding the space and enhancing the quality of our freedom of speech in Asia?

My answer to these questions is no. Although I agree with the general observation that the new media have expanded our freedom of speech, I contend that this is not simply a case of the new media making us better

equipped to do what we have always been trying to achieve. I also want to point out that the “we” in the equation has been changing, often unnoticeably, and so has what “we” aspired to achieve.

My premise is that media technology transforms not only the pre-existing means of communications, but also *what* we communicate. More importantly, technology transforms ourselves, our identity and our mode of being. I hope this will become clearer as I discuss the first issue, the problematics of two key concepts relevant to this workshop: the ‘media’ and ‘Asia’.

Key Concepts: Media and Asia

Two things have struck me in many English language analyses of the new media in Asia. One concerns what the new media do for us. The other is the way Asia has generally been portrayed.

Discussions on new media technologies often revolve around what they do for us in important areas, such as governance, education, industry, personal relations and conflicts. These studies are definitely valuable. However I feel what is missing in these studies is a consideration of what the new media have done *to us*, as opposed to *for us*.

There is an assumption that this new technology changes many things around us, but not our inner selves. Such arguments presume the idea that human beings across the globe are trying to achieve the same ideals. But thanks to the new media, we can now do things better, easier, at a higher speed, and lower costs. The new media have generally been perceived first and foremost as a set of tools. They are perceived to be neither good nor bad in themselves. Their value depends on who owns them, or who has access to their use, and how these tools are used.

It is generally assumed that as human beings we are essentially one and the same thing, despite our having different skin colors, genders and being affected differently by changing climates, histories, and economies. We tend to think of ourselves as fundamentally autonomous and unchanging, despite the variations of our outer appearances, achievements, and living conditions. Although this nineteenth century humanist view has a noble intent, it is deeply problematic nonetheless.

This leads us to the second issue. For too long Asians have been assumed to have a common understanding and common level of desire for freedom of expression, democracy, and civil society as advocated in Northern America or Western Europe. The only problem, according to these studies, is the people in Asia *lack* so many things. They lack the means, the expertise, and time to be on par with their counterparts in Northern America and Western Europe. You will recognize that this is reminiscent of the now disreputable

developmentalist paradigm. In the past half a century that paradigm has become dominant in academic, journalistic, as well as government discourses.

Rest assured, I am not proposing that Asia is somehow unique. I am not proposing that any aspect of Asian culture or value is incompatible with external values or practices. I do not subscribe to any notion of the supposed uniqueness or essentialism of any society anywhere in the world. My point is that even within the West, the concept and the history of democracy have not been universally or unanimously valued and practiced. I also think that the best way of looking at the development of media in Asia is NOT by simply identifying what Asia lacks in comparison to the West.

Instead of seeing the flawed conception of Asia as an expression of ethnocentrism, I suspect this has something to do with a particular history of the earlier media technology, that is, literacy and print. As we all know, this medium helped give birth to Western modernity and the global rise of nations. It ushered in a particular kind of logic and reasoning. It helped construct an evolutionary perspective of history, and a sense of being that has become orthodoxy in our imagination for more than two centuries. As with all orthodoxies, it is hard for anyone living within it to understand their own condition. This situation is similar to that of fish that doesn't know what it means to be wet.

New Media in Democratizing Asia

In a sense, world history can be seen as a history of changes in media technology. The spread of a radically new medium of communication always threatens existing power structures and hierarchies, and helps to create new ones. When print first expanded in Europe, the Church was the major victim, suffering the loss of what then constituted the highest power and authority in public. Books were banned or burned by the order of the Church.

The wide spread of the new media today has once again shaken the existing social order. These new media have been promoting fragmentation, superficiality, hybridity, dispersion, plurality, and simulation. The impact has varied across the globe, with the centers of high modernity in many Western industrial societies the hardest hit. Key nodes of the modern world such as self, authenticity, history, authorship, originality, copyright, and privacy have all borne the brunt, because they are fundamentals to our nations, economies, as well as our educational, artistic and judicial institutions.

Ironically, the global technological change that the West has helped propel forward has given more favorable effects to the less modernized parts of Asia. The reasons for this relate to both technology and social factors. Electronics is the only commodity yet invented that has consistently become more and more accessible to a wider range of people, increasingly user-friendly, and cheaper. This is evident in the production and consumption of watches, radios and

mobile telephones. There are some qualities and tendencies in the media technologies, old or new media, that are inherent. They are not invented or intended by anyone. Electronics is one of the most equalizing forces in our history. But the power of its working has often been misunderstood: some over-estimate it, while others under-estimate it.

More than a decade ago, the Chinese government was aware that installing wire telephones to the mountainous villages in the regions cost several times more than supporting better distribution of mobile telephones (Clifford 1994). Many of the economically poor nations have moved to by-pass earlier stages of telecommunication technology, and jumped to digital technology at a level comparable to the more industrialized countries. This has not been one option, but often a *necessity* to attract investors.

The benefits offered by the new media is even greater in many parts of Asia where the notion of privacy is either new or foreign, and piracy is taken as normal.² I refer to many parts of Asia where industrial capitalism has been expanding only in the last two decades or less, and mainly in economic spheres. Unlike the situations in mature capitalist nations, in many parts of Asia there is little or no institutional support for industrial capitalism in legal, cultural, educational and moral spheres. There are exceptions perhaps in India, the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea.

Since the spread of new media, for many people in Asia, the lack of industrialization, effective state administration and law enforcement have proven to be an asset, instead of a liability. The new media have offered these people access to activities in commercial, intellectual, artistic and political domains that would have been much more restricted and more costly in many industrialized countries because of copyright laws, privacy acts, labor costs, and rules pertaining to professional certification. This is why one needs to be cautious when assessing the so-called digital divide and limited access to new media in economically poor countries of Asia. We never know for sure the exact figures of access to the new media in Asia, because a significant part of it is underground. The actual practice often evades official census and audit.

Two additional factors should warn us against underestimating the spread of the new media in Asia. For instance, figures of the internet users are often equated with private ownership of a computer and access to internet connection. The problem with such a measurement is obvious to anyone familiar with daily life in Asia. Most estimates suggest that between 60 to 70 per cent of internet users in Indonesia go to one of the cyber cafes to go online. I recall in 1990, several villages south of Yogyakarta collectively shared the cost of installing a parabola antenna, catering for signals for more than 40 television sets across the village. Several families watched each television set.³

Secondly, it is important to note that digital technology does not operate alone, or only converge with other digital technology. It does not necessarily work in competition with the older media. The fact that many Asians are excluded

from the online flow of global information does not necessarily mean that selected messages that matter to their community will not reach them in other formats or via another medium. The importance of media interface cannot be overemphasized.

What do all the above mean to the fate of freedom of expression, civil society and democracy in Asia? At the risk of doing great injustice to the complexity of the issues at hand, I wish to offer two sketchy points. One is a speculative assessment of the political sentiments in parts of Asia. The other revisits the roles of media technology in the changes of government in the past decade.

While democracy requires freedom of expression, and the technological means for such expression, neither the mere expansion of media technology nor freedom of expression necessarily promotes or strengthens democracy. This is illustrated by the case of Singapore and Malaysia. On the other hand, the recent case of Burma reminds us that under certain circumstances a few internet savvy individuals in a country with extremely low internet diffusion can make a big difference.

It is important to note that authoritarianism is not always administered by coercive measures against suffering subjects without endorsement from the latter. "In Southeast Asia for a long time but most visibly during the 1970s and 1980s, a substantial proportion of the population appears to have helped reproduce and even enjoy, social relations and a political order that outsiders with no hesitation would call 'authoritarian'. One would suspect that this inclination is by no means peculiarly Asian" (Heryanto and Mandal 2003: 2).

Freedom of speech and civil liberty are necessary, but not sufficient prerequisites for democracy. This may appear obvious for many of us in this room, but not necessarily so with many pro-democracy activists and supporters in the lead-up to the overthrow of authoritarian and militarist regimes in East and Southeast Asia. At their dismay, democratization is much more complex and more slow going and more emotion-consuming than have been expected. Although many things have changed, legacies of authoritarianism and militarism continue to linger on in post-authoritarian situations in Asia, disillusioning the pro-democracy activists and politicians alike. In varying degrees and pace this seems to be occurring in the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

Ironically, this is occurring at a time when many formal elements of democracy have been highly visible across this region. At the same time, digital telecommunications have been steadily growing. What, if any, connections might have existed between the Asian experience of democracy and the growth of new media technology?

In the wake of the economic crisis that hit Asia in 1997, the world witnessed the fall of several dictators. Soon afterwards, much ink was spilled on blaming the corrupt officials for the crisis for not complying with the advice of new

liberalism spokespersons. Others celebrated the role of the middle class activists and their mobile phones, and internet connections. Recent studies have questioned such views. But few analysts have suggested an alternative explanation.

I would like to refer to two important points from Eiko Ikegami's analysis of the economic crisis. She helps us consider an alternative reading of the crisis and its causes. Ikegami argues that one of the major causes of the Asian crisis has to do with what she terms "cyber-financial globalization". In her assessment, the Asian economic crisis was a consequence of the rapid movement of the inflow and outflow of large sums of capital in parts of Asia. Cyber-global financial capitalism is a new phenomenon, distinguished by its high mobility and fluidity (Ikegami 1999: 889), which in turn breeds panic-ridden, and short-term mentality among its managers (Ikegami 1999: 894).

In contrast to the more conservative managers of global industrial capital over a much longer history whose work was "based upon real exchanges of commodities, labor, and services" in very specific social settings (Ikegami 1999: 893), players of the newly born cyber-financial globalization have neither the need nor interest in the social, cultural and historical settings of any real space where investment is made. Rather, their work is constantly making "speculative decisions to mobilize or circulate large sums of capital in a matter of moments in virtual space with the aid of superspeed computers" (Ikegami 1999: 893). South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines fell victim to this new form of capitalism, with or without the rampant corruption in state administration, with or without the middle class street rallies under the rubric of reform.

Contrary to the common wisdom that globalization promotes democracy, Ikegami warns us that democracy -- not unlike dictatorship -- can easily fall prey to cyber-financial globalization. The logic and mode of operation of cyber-financial globalization are such that they threaten to undermine democracy in two ways. First, democracy has to be attached to a particular space, which in most cases today, is the nation-state. Without this attachment, "a political community cannot mobilize . . . or stabilize their loyalty and sense of belonging" (Ikegami 1999: 890). On the other hand "the ideology of cyber-financial globalization, predicated as it is on the desirability and inevitability of unrestricted international capital flows" (Ikegami 1999: 889). Second, democracy implies a long process of consultation, debates, and consensus that binds people's commitments. Cyber-financial globalization, in contrast, generates the logic and compulsion to act instantly with short-term interests being prioritized.

The illustration above underscores my point that the development of the new media have certain logic and tendencies that are not designed, immediately recognized, or under the control by human beings who have produced and used them. This is not to deny that human beings have lost agency, and responsibilities in dealing with technology. Let me now turn to a small, but

illuminating case of such human agency, but one least expected in the many discussions of media in Asia.

Cultural Creativity in the Digital Divide

Despite some validity in the arguments about the digital divide, we should not underestimate the capacity of the under-privileged to take advantage of what is available to them. In Indonesia no organization has made the most of the internet as the now defunct jihadi network called Laskar Jihad. They capitalized the internet precisely *because of* their limited resources (Hefner 2003). Other studies suggest that across Asia it is usually the weak political parties that have the most active or the first to use internet during elections.

Let me focus on one case from Indonesia, namely the rise to fame of the controversial dangdut singer and dancer Inul Daratista in 2003.⁴ It provides an opportunity to re-examine the digital divide thesis. Inul comes from a family with a modest background. As a secondary school student in the 1980s she was paid US\$2 to perform. A decade later she was making US\$5 for performing. By early 2003 her monthly income reached US\$78,500, making her one of the richest artists in the country during the economic crisis. *Time Asia* described Inul's debut in the following terms: "Virtually overnight, Inulmania swept Indonesia, and within weeks, Inul was bumping and grinding on the cover of major national magazines and appearing on television more often than the country's President" (Walsh 2003).

What concerns us most is the way she first came to fame. While observers agree on the contribution of video CDs (VCDs) to Inul's success, it is not easy to measure the total volume of recordings of Inul's performances. Estimates range widely between three and six or even ten million copies. At this time the highest sales figures for dangdut had been 0.5 million. The largest sales figure of any Indonesian music recording was slightly over one million copies.

Most analysts have often inaccurately described these VCDs as being "pirated". However, most of these early VCDs of Inul are not "pirated" in the sense of being illegal reproductions of pre-existing official copies of the "original". No "official" or "original" copyrighted editions of these video recordings exist. The story behind the production of these recordings may be unfamiliar to many distant observers. In many small towns of Java, aspiring dangdut performers would go to one of these recording companies and pay US\$ 200 to have their singing recorded with video cameras. These singers would then circulate copies of these recordings to friends and relatives as promotional material. One might suspect that in some of these cases selected titles were reproduced in for sale without the prior consent of the singers, but with their knowledge after the fact.

No share of the profit from the sale would go to the artists. But no single case has been reported of an artist complaining, or demanding that their copyright

be respected, and a share of the profit be paid to them. In fact, the opposite is true. In all published reports the artists expressed gratitude, acknowledging the non-material and non-immediate rewards of being promoted by the unauthorized circulation of the VCDs.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me reiterate my three main points, all taking issues with some dominant views in contemporary discussion of media and politics in Asia.

First, against the dominant view of human agency and the service of technology, I have suggested that we are often helplessly subjected to the media technology that we produce. I suggest that new media technologies are not simply a new addition to the existing communication technologies. They transform our environment, and they transform *us* along with it.

Second, against the familiar view of history as a linear and universal evolution, progressing towards to the image of the best examples of the modern West, I propose that for better or worse, history is much messier. History is not necessarily moving progressively towards better well being for the majority of the world population. With the specific reference to the development of the new media, I indicated that many less industrialized societies have in fact benefited more than their wealthy industrialized counterparts. And some of the disadvantaged sections of the population have more capacity than many of us have imagined in coping with the real threats of digital divide.

Finally, against the common wisdom, I suggest that there is no easy correlation between the spread of media technology, freedom of expression, and democracy in Asia, as elsewhere.

Notes

¹ When I speak of *new media*, I use it according to the definition offered by Denis McQuail (1994: 21). They are characterized by decentralization, high capacity, interactivity, and flexibility of form, contents and use.

² It is never easy to speak of Asia in a broad and even-handed fashion. On top of its overwhelming diversity, even scholars of Asian studies have increasingly been cautious in using the term “Asia”, despite its centrality to their profession. These scholars do not agree on how to draw Asia’s boundary, and they are aware of the mythical qualities in the dominant use of the term, such as in the phrase “Asian values”.

³ The reverse trend seems to be true with mobile phone ownership, where the actual number of users is much smaller than what can be assessed from the total number of mobile telephone numbers issued. The majority of Indonesian users purchase a pre-paid number that expires quickly and purchase another number within a short period.

⁴ The discussion of Inul in section was taken from from a more elaborated book chapter that is now in press, entitled *Popular Culture in Indonesia; Fluid Identities in Post-Authoritarian Politics*, London: Routledge edited by A. Heryanto.

References Cited

- Clifford, Mark (1994) "Pressure for Change", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 April: 36.
- Hefner, Robert (2003) 'Civic Pluralism Denied? The New Media and Jihadi Violence in Indonesia', in Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (eds) *New Media in the Muslim World*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Heryanto, A and Mandal, S.K. (2003) "Challenges to Authoritarianism in Indonesia and Malaysia", in A. Heryanto and S.K. Mandal (eds) *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia; comparing Indonesia and Malaysia*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 1-23.
- Ikegami, Eiko (1996) 'Democracy in an Age of Cyber-Financial Globalization: Time, Space, and Embeddedness from an Asian Perspective', *Social Research*, Fall, 66 (3), pp. 887.
- Walsh, Bryan (2003) 'Inul's Rules', *Time Asia*, 161 (11/March 24).