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POLITICAL CULTURE, REGULATION, AND DEMOCRATIZATION

The Internet in nine Asian nations

In recent years, a number of analysts have argued that the Internet demonstrates an inexorable pull towards democratization of public life. The overwhelming majority of analysis conducted to understand the democratic potential of the Internet has taken place in Western Europe and North America, where democratic traditions are firmly established, and there is widespread acceptance of the liberal democratic norms arising from three hundred years of a set of religious and philosophical traditions. To date, research on the democratizing impact of the Internet outside these traditions has been sparse and incidental, rather than comprehensive and sustained. In Asia, however, recent events have threatened the vision of the democratizing power of the Internet, as politically oriented websites have suffered from dwindling economies and governmental pressure, as well as hackers.

This paper will survey the state of the Internet and democracy in Asia, drawing from data compiled as part of two recent research projects, the most systematic and sustained efforts yet to take place to examine these questions. The paper will present data from nine nations across Asia, including China, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, and others, and identify the critical variables that are most directly affecting the ability of new political participants to effectively deploy the Internet for mobilization. This analysis will demonstrate the ways in which the reality of politics in Asia significantly modifies the findings of researchers examining the political impact of the Internet within the established democratic nations of North America and Western Europe.

Keywords democracy; Internet; Asia; regulation; political culture; digital divide

Introduction

Many activists, scholars and governmental officials have assumed that the advent of the Internet would help to democratize authoritarian governments in Asia. The overwhelming majority of analysis conducted to understand the democratic potential of the Internet, however, has taken place in Western Europe and North America, where democratic traditions are firmly established, and there is widespread acceptance of the liberal democratic norms arising from three hundred years of religious and philosophical tradition. To date, research on the democratizing impact of the Internet outside these traditions has been sparse and incidental, rather than comprehensive and sustained (Ott 1998).

This paper will survey the relationship between the Internet and democracy in Asia, drawing on analyses from nine nations across Asia, including China, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea and India, and identify the critical variables that most directly affect the ability of political participants to effectively deploy the Internet for mobilization. This analysis will demonstrate the ways in which the reality of politics and economics in Asia significantly modifies the political impact of the Internet.

To date, there have been a few attempts to measure the political impact of the Internet across national borders (Hachigian 2002; Kalathil & Boas 2003; Norris 2003) but these attempts have been limited in their conclusions, due largely to the difficulties in accessing data from various nations, as well as theoretical and methodological difficulties. In fact, to date, there has been no systematic attempt to obtain specific data points of comparison from varying national contexts. This essay will attempt to chart out some theoretical considerations to contribute to the generation of a sufficiently generalizable methodological framework. Thus, although we will be able to make few definitive claims in this essay concerning the democratizing power of the Internet across national borders, we hope to at least be able to chart some theoretical considerations that must be built into any such claims.

There are two primary assumptions that inform this analysis. The first is that, within Asia, there are often radically different expectations of government, as well as political mechanisms, than in the developed West. Moreover, there is not a finite and complete set of 'Asian' values or expectations. With a number of different philosophical, religious and cultural traditions, all working either in tandem or in conflict with one another, Asia comprises not only nations that are fully democratic, in the commonly accepted definitions, such as India, Taiwan and South Korea, but also nations that are completely undemocratic, such as Myanmar and Vietnam, and a host of nations which fall somewhere in between. Second, we would

argue that all discussion of 'democratization' must take into account the long history of academic work on political reform, which argues that democratic development is primarily about creating social conditions and cultural expectations, and mechanisms for direct participation in governance, and rejects the technological determinism inherent in much academic work regarding new media technologies and democratization (Kedzie 1997; Becker & Slaton 2000).

Expectations of the democratizing power of technology are not new, and have long precedents in Asian history, in spite of a number of high-profile exceptions. During China's famous May 4th Movement of 1919, for example, students and activists put forward two primary goals for China's modernization: 'Science' and 'Democracy'. Many believed that science and democracy went hand in hand, and were inherently linked (Spence 1990). That nation has been on a long path to both scientific modernization and democracy for at least a century, but continues to pose interesting challenges to assumptions of the transformative power of technology. The government has fully committed itself to a digital future, but has largely been successful in either blocking access to content that the political leaders consider dangerous, and even more spectacularly successful in creating conditions in which nobody has any great desire to access those same sites (Kalathil & Boas 2003; Kluver & Qiu 2003).

Singapore, likewise, is one of the world's most fully wired nations, and has a full slate of democratic mechanisms and a nominally regulated Internet, but with little real political competition and a strong authoritarian bent. Indeed, the outcomes of the 2001 general elections seem to indicate that the populace is quite content with the status quo. The 2003 SARS crisis even helped to galvanize local public opinion that the current government's authoritarianism works to the nation's advantage, as it allowed the medical crisis to be brought under control very quickly, something which Vietnam also discovered. Recent studies in this context have found that the Internet reinforces the already overwhelming power of the ruling party, and provides almost no benefit to opposition parties (Rodan 1998; Kluver 2004).

At the opposite extreme is South Korea, where an already free-wheeling politically competitive environment has been enriched by the Internet. The December 2002 presidential election saw the Internet deployed to great effect for the campaign of the underdog challenger, thus presenting a positive role for the Internet in democratization, in attracting newer and younger voters. On the other hand, an open and free Internet carries certain inherent risks to democracy. For example, in Malaysia, one of the parties making the most effective use of the Internet, the *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS), is the party that is least representative of a diverse population in its political vision.

This makes much of the work done on democratization emerging from the fully developed democracies of the West quite removed from the

experiences of political change and democracy within Asia. Within most Western nations, there is a long-inculcated understanding of what democracy is, or at least ought to be. Asian governments, especially democratic ones, are beset by a number of major problems that are often overlooked in the West, such as high levels of illiteracy, insurmountable urban/rural divides, intrusive media and political regulation, traditions of elite-driven politics, and other elements of political culture. Moreover, a number of significant thinkers and political leaders within Asia are not convinced that democracy is inherently superior to other modes of governance.

The argument of this essay will be that although the technological features of the Internet demonstrate potential for democratizing Asian politics, other mediating factors constrain this potential to such a degree that it raises serious questions about the potential for democratization. We have identified at least three critical issues that condition and constrain the impact of the Internet within Asia: political culture, regulatory regimes, and unequal levels of access to information technology. We will illustrate these three areas by reference to data and findings from a number of scholars from across Asia conducted in the last two years. Many of the data presented here are drawn from presentations at the 2001 Internet Political Economy Forum, held in Singapore, and the 2002 Internet and Democracy in Asia symposium, held in Bangkok and supported by a grant from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and the subsequent publication of these essays (Banerjee 2003; Ho *et al.* 2003). Our goal in this essay is to summarize these findings and draw conclusions as to the potentially democratizing impact of the Internet drawn from empirical analysis of the situations in a variety of nations.

The nations that we are examining are broadly representative of the different regions of Asia (East, South and Southeast), and are, with some qualifications, representative of the types of government present in Asia (multi-party democracy, authoritarian democracies and one-party states). Our analysis deliberately excludes the less developed nations because, at this point, the diffusion of the Internet in these nations is marginal to the political process.

This essay will first examine in depth each of these three mediating factors, and provide examples of how each constrains the deployment and use of the web in Asia for political action. The final section of this essay will then draw some tentative conclusions regarding the political impact of the Internet across Asia.

Political culture

Although the list of systemic and cultural distinctions to be drawn between Western nations and Asia is formidable, drawing conclusions even within

Asia can be problematic. The bureaucratic officialdom that still predominates in China is conceptually and experientially quite a different thing from the charismatic traditions of leadership in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. The religious traditions of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and, to a certain extent, Marxism, have influenced different Asian nations in very different ways, leading to very different understandings of the nature of governance, the role of the government, and the rights and duties of citizens (Pye 1985; Keyes *et al.* 1994).

The reason that this is important is that academic analysis of whether the Internet is having a democratizing impact typically focuses upon one narrow element of 'democracy', and draws final conclusions based on whether that element is being strengthened or weakened. For example, a number of scholars, including Applbaum (1999), Barber (2000/2001), Dahlberg (2001) and Wilhelm (1999) discuss the nature of 'deliberation' in the online environment as a key indicator of democratization. Alternatively, a number of other writers focus upon Habermas's understanding of the 'public sphere' as a place where citizens can exchange views on matters of importance to the common good, so that public opinion can be formed. The logic of this argument is that the Internet, to an extent not previously possible, enables a new public sphere to emerge via technology, unmediated by state control (Jakubowicz 1994; Papacharissi 2002; Tambini 1999). But, all of this analysis presumes a basic consensus forged in the West since the Magna Carta, but without deep cultural roots in Asia.

As another example of how these different assumptions lead to different conclusions, take the example of corporate versus public ownership of media outlets such as ISPs. Much criticism of the democratization thesis arises from political economists, who question the ability of corporate owners of the media to contribute to a fully democratic discourse (Barney 2000), whereas in Asia, the privatization of media is referred to as 'liberalization', and there is a much higher suspicion of 'public' or government-supported media (Atkins 2002). Thus, the expansion of new media outlets via the Internet, especially if they are privately controlled corporations, is seen as a positive development. In other words, consumerism and privatization are often seen as a reliable shortcut to democratization.

Thus, one of the most critical mediating factors on the influence of the democratic potential of the Internet is that of political culture, which we define as the symbolic environment of political practice, shaped by historical experiences and philosophical and religious traditions (Kluver 2005). This includes the assumptions, expectations, mythologies and mechanisms of political practice within a nation. Pye (1985) argues that 'in different times and places people have thought of power in very different ways . . . of all social phenomena power is one of the most sensitive to cultural nuances; its potentialities and its limitations are always constrained by time and place' (p. viii).

If the distribution and deployment of power differ from place to place, so do the ways in which technologies are used to seek, maintain and use power. Theorizing about the impact of the Internet on political practice, then, must take into account the host of issues that comprise political culture. Just as political culture defines and constrains political practice, it also constrains the deployment of the Internet into culturally specific uses and functions.

Within Asia, of course, there are a variety of symbolic resources concerning authority and legitimacy, democratic mechanisms and political structures, and political values. For example, Confucianism is often seen as providing an important moral basis of the social order, which stresses harmony over conflict and privileges educated voices much more than it does the greater population. Buddhist nations, however, tend to have traditions that reflect an emphasis on the '*sangha*', or the community of believers, and tend to privilege more charismatic leadership (Pye 1985). Citizenship in these nations is conceived of less as a technical legal category but rather as part of a communal identification with not just residence in a physical state, but participation in the religious tradition.

Across Asia, the number of full-fledged democracies has grown, comprising nations such as the Philippines, Taiwan, India, Japan and South Korea. These nations embody vibrant competition, limitations on the power of the state, generally free media, and a general adherence to the rule of law. However, there are still significant differences between these nations in the actual practice of politics, including campaigns, sources of legitimization and the expectations of authority, and these differences make a difference in how the Internet is deployed for political purposes.

In South Korea, for example, the 2002 presidential election saw Roh Moo Hyun elected, in large part due to the deployment of an extensive web presence, including campaign websites and online news sources. Roh claimed to be the first candidate to actually understand HTML coding, and his website was credited with galvanizing youth voters, by providing a rich, interactive experience, including video clips and online audio endorsements from rock stars and celebrities. In addition to the use of the net in electoral campaigning, online news sources have had an inordinate impact in altering the public agenda. In particular, OhmyNews, an online portal, has been significant in generating huge crowds for rallies and influencing governmental policy towards North Korea.

Likewise in India, the online news site Telheka.com caused a major scandal when it reported on corruption within the defense ministry, which ultimately led to the resignation of the Minister of Defense. In spite of the fact that only a fraction of India's population is online, in contrast with the South Korean situation, the ability of smaller parties and news organizations to disseminate news widely has had a positive impact on governmental accountability.

In contrast, Singapore's very different 'authoritarian democracy', which does hold regular elections and has a generally free press, is widely known for its authoritarian political governing structure. Although Singapore ranks at the top of most indicators of Internet diffusion, the Internet has had little impact on the political processes of the nation (Rodan 1998; Banerjee & Yeo 2003; Kluver 2004). Singapore's political culture leads it to deploy Internet technology in ways that reflect Confucian concerns for social order and the maintenance of hierarchy. For example, the Internet and other mechanisms of the state are more likely to be deployed towards surveillance and monitoring of political opponents (Gomez 2002), and the communal mentality of the nation leads to regulations prohibiting the deployment of individual candidate websites. Rather, all online campaigning is under the rubric of the Party. In addition, the nation's commitment to non-corruption leads to regulations preventing fundraising via campaign websites, which is a major goal of many Western party and candidate websites (Kluver 2004).

In Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore's nearest neighbors, opposition parties have been able to deploy the Internet much more effectively. In Malaysia, online news sites such as Malaysiakini have been able to use loopholes in the regulatory regime to publicize information that is not generally available in the mainstream press and political parties have been able to use the Internet to rally supporters and generally support their constituencies (Chin 2003; Loo 2003). Likewise, in Indonesia, the Internet has served to broaden the space for public participation, creating something like a civic space available outside the constraints of the authoritarian democracy (Lim 2003; Somantri 2003).

Finally, many Asian states have few democratic mechanisms at all, and even when these are present, such as in Cambodia, they tend to be heavily controlled. This does not prevent some of these nations, however, from claiming to be 'democratic', such as the People's Republic of China, which defines itself as a 'consultative democracy', meaning that although there are no competitive elections, the governing party must be responsive, or consultative, with the population. Within many of these nations there is a predominant fear of the chaos that might ensue were the strong state to be attacked or weakened and, thus, there is strong public support for restrictive censorship measures. In these authoritarian states, especially in China, the impact of the Internet has been varied (Hachigian 2002; Kalathil & Boas 2003; Kluver & Qiu 2003). In many ways, the government has been able to deploy the Internet to strengthen itself, both in terms of social surveillance and to increase to some extent the legitimacy of the government, by increasing the efficiency of the state and thus precluding any challenges to the state. However, there is little doubt that there has been an increased ability of citizens to participate at some level in the political process, by giving them

a means to set the agenda outside the domination of the state (Li *et al.* 2003). Even this practice, however, is reminiscent of Chinese political culture, in that throughout Chinese history one of the prime mechanisms for citizens to effect political change has been the use of the 'big character poster' (*dazibao*), an individually authored essay usually posted in a public place to express complaints or urge the government towards some action.

What this example serves to illustrate is that the more vibrant the democratic practice prior to the introduction of the Internet, the more vibrant the role of the Internet in political action. In nations with strong, vibrant and competitive democratic practices, the Internet has been deployed to extend the reach of opposition parties, to set the public agenda, to upset mainstream candidates and generally to increase the power of political actors. In nations with a more authoritarian political culture, the Internet has had a more indirect affect, to some extent increasing the ability of parties and individuals to alter the public agenda, but has generally not been a major factor in political reconfiguration. Rather, the governments have often been more successful in using the Internet to consolidate their own authority and legitimacy. And finally, in nations without democratic mechanisms, the Internet has given citizens greater ability to express political opinions and to participate in an indirect way in the governing processes of the nation.

Regulation

We have already indicated that one of the primary mediating forces between information technology and democratization is political culture. Now we turn our attention to the second critical issue, the role of regulation. It has become increasingly clear that, in spite of early enthusiasm for the 'unregulatability' of the Internet and by extension its democratic utility, governments can and will govern the Internet through a variety of mechanisms. This is especially true in Asia, as media content generally, and political communication specifically, is subject to a greater degree of regulation. Moreover, Lessig (1999) argues that there are at least four ways in which the Internet can be governed; through law, code, social norms and the marketplace. Thus, it is not really all that essential for a strong set of regulations to govern the Internet if social norms, the market and the architecture of the Internet itself can be made to serve the interests of the state.

Of course, governmental control of the Internet has been one of issues that has received a significant amount of attention from academics, and there are a number of examples that illustrate the differential impact of these mechanisms of control and regulation to undermine the democratic potential of the Internet. For example, although China has largely abandoned

its efforts to create an 'alternative' Internet, or a vast Chinese intranet that would preclude the necessity of joining the global Internet, the nation has been able to implement a series of mechanisms designed to both filter out undesirable content and censor the websites the Chinese are able to see (Chase & Mulvenon 2002; Kalathil & Boas 2003). In addition, although the early efforts to register and maintain surveillance over Internet users have been abandoned, the government has worked closely with the providers of information technology infrastructure, such as Cisco, Nortel and other large IT companies, to design a system that served the purposes of the state, thereby eliminating the anonymity and accessibility of Chinese users to surf the Internet (Walton 2001). And, finally, China has deployed net censors ('big mamas') to watch over chat rooms and forums to delete any content that might be seen as undermining the Communist Party. This, as well as a general political apathy among the bulk of China's netizens, means that China has faced few serious challenges to the dominance of the Chinese Communist Party from the Internet (Kluver & Qiu 2003).

A second example arises from Singapore, where effective regulation over political speech, rather than the Internet itself, has minimized the potentially destabilizing effects of the Internet. Singapore has made massive investments in becoming an information technology hub, and has been very successful in moving its population online, establishing an extensive e-government portal that has garnered international attention, and nurturing the IT sector. In addition, it has actively encouraged citizen participation on issues of governance through a variety of feedback mechanisms. However, Singapore maintains strict vigilance over online political content, and governmental pressure has been largely effective in precluding the effective use of the Internet by opposition parties (Gomez 2002). To be sure, Singapore does not maintain the same extensive set of censors and blocked sites that China does, and the Media Development Authority can claim that it maintains a 'light touch' in terms of Internet censorship. In addition, opposition parties are allowed to have websites to present policies, etc. However, when it comes to political websites, Singapore's restrictions concerning political information generally have a clearly limiting effect on online politics. These regulations specifically mandate that political websites be registered with the MDA, and that the sponsors of the sites are legally liable for the content on the site, thus exposing website hosts or operators to lawsuits for content that might appear on their sites. Thus one high-profile civil society site, Sintercom, was closed by its founder because it became evident that the content on the site might lead to prosecution by the government. The site that arose to replace the original Sintercom has not achieved anything close to the level of relevance of the original site, at least partially because of the new operator's decision to remain anonymous so as to avoid prosecution.

Of course, these regulations are far easier to enforce in Singapore, given the small size of the nation and, hence, the number of potential Internet service providers. Thus, the sites clearly identified as political are not difficult to monitor, and the general perception that the government will take action against unregistered sites precludes direct challenges to the regulatory regime, regardless of the fact that it is not overly burdensome.

Japan provides yet another clear illustration of how political regulation, even in an openly democratic nation like Japan, limits the effectiveness of the Internet in political campaigns. Japan's governing authorities, especially Prime Minister Koizumi, have made Internet accessibility and its use in citizen participation a high priority (Ichikawa & Asakura 2003). In this case, regulations concerning campaign activities in other media environments have been applied to online content, thus undermining the immediacy and relevance of the Internet. Thus, just as campaign commercials cannot be aired immediately before an election, so websites cannot be updated in the month before an election, thus depriving candidates of the opportunity to present new information in the period immediately before an election (Tkach-Kawasaki 2003). A similar situation exists in South Korea, where political content expressing support for North Korea, or other potentially subversive material online, is used to censor certain types of content. Because of these regulations, a number of prosecutions have been brought against web users who posted materials challenging the government's position on these issues (Kyu 2003).

Of course, Internet regulation is an international phenomenon, and thus the Asian case studies do not represent a radically novel phenomenon. However, regulation is clearly having an impact on the democratizing potential of the Internet throughout Asia. There are few nations, if any, where no regulations at all exist, and these only in nations where there is no Internet presence at all.

Digital access

The third critical issue affecting the ability of the Internet to influence the political systems of Asia is the tremendous gap in information access across Asia. Again, the same gap exists between the developed nations of the West, where most of the significant research on democratic politics and the Internet is conducted, and the developing and underdeveloped parts of the world. In Asia, the discrepancies between the wired and unwired parts of the population are in some ways quite overwhelming. Our data are drawn from the Asian nations where there has been the greatest Internet diffusion, as there would be little to discuss if we were to turn our attention to the less developed nations. However, since our goal is to present the experience of nations for understanding the relationship between the Internet and democratization, this issue is worth a short discussion.

Recent research on the state of digital access in Asia reveals mixed conclusions. On the one hand, access to the Internet in many nations is increasing rapidly, and a number of innovative approaches have been taken to bring the Internet to the lower economic rungs of society, such as the *warnet* (cybercafe) movement in Indonesia (Lim 2003). According to Beal (2003), the percentage of Internet users from Asia has increased dramatically compared to the overall global totals. This is especially true of China, where heavy investments in technology have helped to cause a dramatic swing upwards in Internet access, from some 33 million in 2002 to almost 80 million as of January 2004 (Beal 2003; CNNIC 2004).

The use of the Internet for political purposes, however, requires not only a connection to the Internet but also other infrastructural elements (PCs, telephone line connection, etc.) and, just as importantly, specific skills and training. Just providing physical connection to the Internet will not change much in most Asian nations where the lack of general as well as computer literacy constitutes a serious obstacle to Internet use. Poor basic infrastructure, including the lack of electricity in many parts of rural Asia, poses serious and fundamental challenges to Internet use and diffusion. Thus, there is little hope in the foreseeable future that the Internet will make much difference in those nations that most desperately need political information and empowerment. In fact, the rapid progress of the technology means that while some citizens gain greater and greater access to information, those on the lower rungs fall even further behind. The Asian nations that were in a state of being able to benefit from the Internet (economically and socially) revolution largely already have, while the less developed nations have largely been left behind. Within individual nations this remains true also, in that the elite elements of societies, who tend to have greater political power already, gain further politically oriented information and mobilizational capability while their less educated, typically rural compatriots lose what relative political power they do have.

This observation raises a fundamental question concerning the definition of democratization. If access to the Internet is limited to the elite, typically with higher education, higher economic and social status, and access to advanced technologies, then how 'democratic' can it be said to be? Although the Internet does indeed increase the potential for mobilization and organization for certain wired segments of society, in much of Asia this means that politics becomes less democratic, as the greater bulk of national populations remain without access to political information and mobilizational capability, and without democratic power. This is not a new issue in Asia as a number of nations have formal democratic procedures but real political power remains in the hands of the elites, usually educated abroad and maintaining significant economic advantages over their fellow citizens.

Practically, this gives rise to some significant conundrums for those who advocate the democratizing potential of technology. In the Philippines, for

example, popular support for Joseph Estrada was largely from the lower classes of society, while the upper classes supported his ouster. In fact, the use of mobile phones and other technologies contributed greatly to the mobilization of the rallies to oust him in early 2001. As another example, since less than 5 per cent of China's citizens have access to the Internet, and these tend to be university-educated elites, the fact that they have greater input on policy through newsgroups and chat rooms tends to undermine claims that the Internet is increasing democracy, as it gives elite university students more access to political information than their fellow citizens have.

There are significant policy questions facing Asian leaders in attempting to address the digital divide, however, and the competing impulses to focus on advanced technologies and more basic needs are not easily resolved. D'Costa (2003), for example, argues that while India has committed a huge proportion of its education budget to advanced technical training, it has done so at the cost of more basic levels of education, thus privileging the middle-class, urban families who least need it, and the economic benefits from these policies have not made a significant contribution to lifting the nation from poverty.

There is not a straightforward relationship between development, and hence Internet penetration, and democracy, either. For example, Brunei has an Internet penetration rate (10.4 per hundred inhabitants) more than three times higher than the Philippines (2.6/100) and Indonesia (1.9/100), almost twice as high as Thailand (5.8/100), and over ten times as high as India (0.7/100), all of which have much more democratic governments than Brunei's (ITU 2002). We are aware of no evidence that suggests the development of the Internet in Brunei is leading to political reform, a dismantling of the Sultanate, or any other form of democratic activism.

Conclusions

These data suggest that in the developed nations of Asia, the introduction of the Internet has increased the ability of a larger number of people to access alternative news sites, to expand opportunities for mobilization and, in some notable cases, to have a significant influence over both government policy and election outcomes. In the developing nations, a number of highly educated, elite segments of society have gained access to international news sources, and some opportunities for mobilization. For the less developed nations, however, the Internet has had no impact on the electoral politics or the ability of ordinary citizens to either access government services or affect public policy.

We have sought in this essay to identify three critical issues that mediate the impact of the Internet on the processes of democratization within Asia: political culture, regulation of political content and access to the Internet. What this summative analysis suggests is that the Internet has had the

TABLE 1 Political culture, regulation, and access in Asia

<i>country</i>	<i>political culture</i>	<i>regulation of political content</i>	<i>internet penetration rate (users per 10,000 inhabitants 2001)</i>	<i>primary political activity</i>
China	Marxist–Leninist	Extensive	260	Alternative news Accountability
India	Multi-party	Minimal	68	Alternative news Online campaigns Mobilization
Indonesia	Islamic/secular democracy	Moderate	191	Alternative news Civic space
Japan	Multi-party	Moderate	4394	Online campaigns Mobilization
Malaysia	Islamic democracy	Minimal	2731	Alternative news Online campaigns
Philippines	Multi-party	Minimal	256	Online mobilization Alternative news
Singapore	Confucian democracy	Extensive	3631	Negligible to minimal mobilization
South Korea	Multi-party	Moderate	5200	Vibrant public sphere, online news
Thailand	Buddhist/charismatic	Minimal	577	Civic networking Alternative news

Source: ITU, 12 December 2002.

greatest political impact in the nations that are already developed (or quickly developing), a minimal level of regulation of political content, and a higher proportion of citizens with access to the Internet (see Table 1). In one sense, then, the impact of the Internet is that the rich (in terms of political democratization) get richer, while the poor get poorer.

Our analysis also would discount the technological determinist perspective, which posits a direct and measurable effect of the Internet on democratic practice. As we have noted, the Internet is deployed within specific political and cultural contexts, and at least these three mediating factors can undermine the ability of the Internet to empower or mobilize political action in nations.

That being said, however, we still identify several hopeful trends concerning the democratizing impact of the Internet, and believe that ultimately the Internet will indeed 'make Asia freer' (Ang 2001). First, even in nations with tight regulation, the ability to access alternative and international news sites has a positive effect. Although it might not contribute to a wholesale change of government, the increasing capacity for self-expression definitely increases the ability of the online population to influence public agendas and governmental priorities.

Second, as the Internet is deployed for both economic and social developmental purposes, the provision of government services seems to be extended to a greater number of people. As governments become more efficient at providing for the basic informational needs of people, more resources can be deployed for offering greater educational and economic opportunities.

Finally, democratic activists across Asia are enthusiastic about the abilities afforded them by the presence of the Internet. Although we would dispute the contention that this in itself creates a more democratic environment for the greater bulk of the citizens of a nation, there is little disputing that as democratic and community organizations gain the ability to provide alternative perspectives and to mobilize citizens, new configurations of power are made more possible than they were prior to the introduction of the Internet.

In sum, our meta-analysis across these nine Asian nations suggests that to understand the impact of the Internet on the political practice of a nation, we must understand not just the technology but also the social and political context in which it is deployed. Our argument has been that theoretical work to discern the democratic potential of the Internet is gravely flawed if it excludes the experiences of nations outside the developed world of the Western democracies. Although it is certainly possible to theorize from a more narrow perspective, or not attempt to universalize the relationship between the Internet and democracy, to do so risks making our research irrelevant to a developing world, much of which is looking to technology to bring it into the modern world. Moreover, it makes our conclusions so narrowly construed that they can be of little theoretical value at all.

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