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FROM GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM TO DISINFORMATION: SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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When the Hanoi city administration announced a plan to cut some 6,700 trees from the city's boulevards in 2015, the authorities did not anticipate it would trigger a large-scale grassroots movement online. A Facebook page "6,700 people for 6,700 trees" quickly gathered more than 55,000 likes. Protests in the capital city subsequently ensued as civil society groups and ordinary citizens hit the streets. Within days, the central government immediately halted the plan to cut the trees, and launched a further investigation. In a one-party Communist state like Vietnam, whose regime has a tight grip on traditional media and criticism of the government is largely repressed and frequently punished, that an online movement could trigger a widespread backlash and force authorities to scrap its plan was extraordinary. As one of the most repressive regimes in the world, grassroots online activism was rising in Vietnam and a more politically engaged citizenry seemed to be an inevitable result.

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, social media's positive impact on promoting grassroots issues seemed similar. In Indonesia, Joko Widodo was elected as president in 2014 partly through a powerful social media presence as a "new" kind of grassroots-driven politician, supported by much of Indonesia's civil society and pro-democracy activists. In Malaysia, the Bersih "Clean Elections" movement used social media to coalesce reformists, and enabled mass street protests against a corrupt semi-authoritarian regime. In Myanmar, one of Southeast Asia's most conservative societies, LGBT communities flourished on Facebook when Colours Rainbow Yangon was established to advocate for gay rights. Even in Thailand, reformists were making important gains. The Thai government planned to consolidate internet traffic through the creation of a single gateway, causing internet rights and media civil society groups to fight back. Internet advocacy groups created online petitions on change.org that elicited more than 500,000 signatures and heated conversations across a number of Thai web board communities. A Facebook group, พลเมืองต่อต้าน Single Gateway เพื่อเสรีภาพและความยุติธรรม ["Citizens against the Single Gateway for Freedom and Justice"], garnered more than 200,000 likes and generated much grassroots pressure on the government's controversial plan. Eventually, the Thai government backed off from the single gateway proposal.

The emergence of the internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s coincided with the flourishing of democracy in much of Southeast Asia. As internet penetration expanded, and as social media sites became central to citizens' information society, there was hope for "liberation technology" to have a significant effect in both democratic and authoritarian states in Southeast Asia (Diamond and Plattner 2012). Social media was empowering ordinary people to speak out, increase political participation, expand the space for civic activism and provide new avenues for independent media (Norris 2011; Stoycheff and Nisbet 2014). Some scholars noted the power of social media in reducing entrenched socioeconomic inequalities by lowering information asymmetries and costs of political engagement (Earl and Kimport 2011; Castells 2012). Studies from around the 2013–15 years espoused a positive correlation between social media use, civic action and political participation across both democratic and authoritarian political systems (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Hyun and Kim 2015). According to the Global Database of Events, Language and Tone (GDELT), which tracks

protest events around the world since 1979, the majority of Southeast Asian states experience a significant increase in the number of reported protests once internet penetration rate surpasses 10 per cent of the population.

Initially, much scholarly literature was dedicated to examining the role of new media technologies in providing alternative spaces and reforms in a region with an increasingly vibrant online public sphere (Liow and Pasuni 2010). The rise in offline protest events is most notable among authoritarian states in the region, such as Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia, and is likely underestimated as online contentious actions are not included. A study by Fergusson and Molina (2019) draws on contentious events and value survey databases from 2006 to 2016 in 194 countries, and demonstrates that 14–26 per cent fewer protests would have occurred without Facebook. Their findings conclude that Facebook has a positive and robust effect on citizen protests, especially in countries experiencing economic downturns and/or whose citizens have few opportunities to oppose authorities (low freedom of expression and assembly, opposition repression). They argue that Facebook accounts for a 10 per cent increase in individual's perception of freedom to express their thoughts, join organizations and voice political opinion.

But the optimism was short-lived. By the mid to late 2010s, scholars were more concerned about the negative or hindering role social media was playing in democracies and around issues pertaining to universal human rights (Deibert 2015; Sunstein 2018), while at the same time the diversity and vibrancy of online platforms has seemingly reduced. With increasingly repressive and manipulative use of social media tools undertaken by governments, there is widespread concern that social media is fuelling anti-democratic elements of society, rather than grassroots reformists (Freedom House 2019). Some scholars even regard social media as a key driver of authoritarianism and repression (King, Pan and Roberts 2013).

Scholars are now most concerned with the role of “disinformation” and “fake news” production, and governments are creating laws which attempt to address this trend, ultimately limiting the freedom in which people can interact and engage with each other online (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Freelon and Wells 2020). Disinformation here is defined as “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed,

presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (EU Commission 2018). While disinformation itself is not new, social media is regarded as “weaponizing” it to a new level, with its global reach and speed unmatched by previous and existing media platforms. Disinformation production via social media enables greater distrust in political and media institutions, and widening polarization (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). The Computational Propaganda Research Project reports in its 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation that there is evidence that at least one political party or a government agency in seventy countries has launched disinformation campaigns to shape domestic public opinion—an increase of 150 per cent in the last two years (Bradshaw and Howard 2019). The Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) has recognized the growing peril of online falsehoods and issued a Declaration on a Framework to Minimise the Harmful Effects of Fake News in 2018 to promote socially responsible online behaviour.

This edited volume asks: what went wrong? It answers this question in the context of country specific chapters in Southeast Asia. In identifying trends in these Southeast Asian states, and situating them within the global context, the authors pay particular attention to the specific local contexts of each country that contribute to a deeper understanding of how social media has impacted state-society relations. We have covered eight countries in the region, but do recognize that more work needs to be conducted in smaller, less studied countries of Laos, Brunei and East Timor, and more opportunities for scholars in these countries who are not included in this volume. All of the authors are locally-based Southeast Asian scholars. They are not only experts in their field, with many having completed a PhD thesis on social media in their country, but they have also lived through the past ten years by engaging in social media platforms themselves. Rather than solely going back on existing literature to study earlier years, they are in many ways reflecting on their own lived experience of how they felt the “shift” personally.

The research grows out of a concern over mounting online disinformation worldwide, despite early optimism of the benefits social media could bring towards grassroots activism. This volume examines this global shift, but in the context of Southeast Asia, by asking three main questions:

- 1) How has social media evolved to become a platform used predominantly for reform to a space of increasing deception and manipulation?
- 2) Who were the main actors in this transition: governments, citizens or the platforms themselves?
- 3) Finally, we challenged the authors to find a “light at the end of the tunnel” by asking how Southeast Asian reformists might “reclaim” the digital public sphere?

This book advances the argument that social media has contributed to genuine expansion of grassroots activism in the early stages of its inception in Southeast Asia. That digital activism has been able to take hold in the region, in varying times, was made possible largely because Southeast Asian states had left the online space alone. Slow and reluctant state interventions in the cyberspace had provided political opportunities for existing civic groups to expand and new ones to emerge. Once these states recognized the threats social media could pose to the political security of the governing parties, they in turn have begun to exploit social media affordances to manipulate public opinion for their gains.

A key element of this book is the ability of each author to identify a key “turning point” in social media production in each country. The turning points occurred at different times in each Southeast Asian country, but they tended to correspond to national elections where either the incumbents experienced a decline in electoral support or opposition parties have been able to gain important electoral leverage online. Online disinformation tactics along with increased surveillance and attempts at censorship have been deployed to suppress, discredit and drown out political opposition as well as to co-opt virtual publics.

Given the rising prominence of the smartphone in Southeast Asia, we should look to this region to see what these new “communities” look like, and how society is changing. The fields of political science and media studies, and social media studies in particular, have become excited by the possibilities big data analytics can bring. Quantitative studies of politics and social media are, as a result, plentiful in Western universities. But we need a wide range of scholarly fields to engage more deeply with the subject, not only through an analysis of big data

algorithms. The rise of closed groups also negates the potential for big data analysis. This means that the type of research and analysis that has dominated the digital research industry—notably data obtained largely from Twitter—is likely to be less relevant in understanding politics and societies. Rather, empirical and ethnographic research by scholars who have access to these communities and understand their needs and identities, can provide deeper insights on the impact of social media in the Southeast Asian region. This was our premise as we set out to choose authors and research methodologies for contributing chapters.

This book contributes to a crucial issue of the growing autocratization of the internet and social media, shaped by both domestic politics and external forces. While there remain real democratic benefits of social media, their overall impact on the politics and society of these states are uneven, in various pockets and are becoming overshadowed by rising cyber restrictions. Yet, the benefits social media bring exists in serious tension with the expanding information controls by governments. The result is an attack on transparency, freedom of expression and quality of journalism. Finding our way out of this tangled web of disinformation and state crackdowns will be crucial for democracy, human rights and good governance as we move further into the “digital era”.

SOUTHEAST ASIA’S DIVERSE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

No other region experiences both the fortunes and misfortunes of social media’s impact than Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia is one of the most social media active regions in the world and one of most politically diverse. Measuring internet access and social media usage, however, is not a simple task in Southeast Asia. Surveys show that, for example, some 64 per cent of Indonesians, 65 per cent of Filipinos and 75 per cent of Malaysians have regular access to the internet. But these statistics are often beset with erroneous conclusions—for example, many citizens answer “yes” to having Facebook, but “no” to having internet access when taking part in professional surveys (Jurriens and Tapsell 2017). These percentages also do not tell us the disparity *within* internet usage. The millions of Southeast Asians on

the “digital divide”, who have minimal access to the internet, are generally understudied. This group has grown considerably because of the massive expansion of the smartphone market through cheap, Chinese-made Android handsets. As such, the majority of Southeast Asians access the internet only by mobile phones (estimated at 70 per cent of internet users in the region).

A mobile phone for internet usage changes the way citizens read, watch and participate in social media. Long articles, therefore, are far less likely to be read, while content that is available for short, one- to two-minute videos is easy to consume. We need to think more about the limited access that Southeast Asians have to the broader domains of the internet that do not adhere to such mobile phone usage formats. Internet speed matters too, because it means that internet access is more likely to be for the use of platforms that require slower internet speeds for effective usage, such as Facebook’s “free basics” in the Philippines, Myanmar and Indonesia, and other simple messenger sites like WhatsApp in Malaysia and Indonesia, and LINE in Thailand. Thus, many of these citizens are not loading full websites, reading lengthy news stories, let alone spending time going through fact-checking sites, which various government and civil society organizations increasingly urge them to do.

It is common to read about how younger millennial Southeast Asians are driving this new information society in the region. There is of course much truth to this overall argument. Seventy per cent of Indonesia’s online population is under the age of 35, most of whom are using social media sites on a daily basis. Around 47 per cent of internet users in Malaysia are aged between 20 and 29, and another 25 per cent between 30 and 39, while 31 per cent of Filipino Facebook users are aged between 18 and 34 (Tapsell 2020). However, at the same time, older generations in semi-rural areas of Southeast Asia are for the first time accessing the internet via a mobile phone, and it is generally they who are understudied and underrepresented in mainstream media accounts of rising internet access and social media uptake. Younger Southeast Asians are usually the first to complain of their parents or extended family members spreading false information on family WhatsApp groups, suggesting the drivers of information (and misinformation) are not always millennials.

Within Southeast Asia, there is some disparity in the use of platforms. For example, Filipinos use Facebook Messenger regularly and connect with people who are not “friends” on the platform. Messenger sites like WhatsApp are growing rapidly in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia. In Thailand, the Japanese platform, LINE, is the most popular. In the Philippines, Facebook’s ubiquity is its greatest strength. Facebook’s ubiquity in some Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia and Singapore, can be its greatest weakness, as citizens move towards more “closed group” spaces where they can post away from the prying eyes of older generations, wider friendship groups and even government monitoring. Thus for some Southeast Asians, Facebook is becoming less popular for younger urban people because of its ubiquity—they see their parents, extended family members, and other people they have never met, all on the home page and therefore seek a more “exclusive” site where they can post material meant for their friends. This view explains the rise of social media platform Path in the early 2010, and subsequently the rapid popularity of Instagram amongst Indonesian urban youths. Scholarship in Indonesia and Malaysia has shown the growing importance of Instagram celebrity Muslim preachers, and thus how Instagram is increasingly crucial in shaping political discourse (Slama and Barendregt 2018), including the rise of “click farming” (Lindquist 2018).

Scholars and analysts tend to focus their findings from Twitter analyses in disinformation studies. They do so largely because data are much more easily available for big data mining and analysis. But in Southeast Asia, Twitter’s role seems to be declining and is generally used by older, urban elites. For example, 64 per cent of Malaysians gather news from Facebook, and 54 per cent from WhatsApp, far higher than from Twitter, at 25 per cent (Tapsell 2020). This is not to say that Twitter is unimportant. It is still widely used by elite actors and media professionals, and their comments can generate mainstream media articles and wider public discussion. Furthermore, public relations companies who provide social media data to companies and governments in Southeast Asia often rely greatly on Twitter data, suggesting its discourse has a significant effect on how elites view “public attitudes”. But this discourse is likely to be slanted towards urban, middle-class usage. Thus, social media usage in Southeast Asia is not uniform, and much depends on what device citizens use to

access the internet with, which social media platform they use regularly and therefore potentially trust more, and what internet speeds they endure in order to receive and share various forms of political and other materials.

THE RISE OF DISINFORMATION

“Negative campaigning” has long been a feature of election campaigns, but digital technologies have exacerbated the spread and impact of slanderous or libel materials. Political parties and candidates are increasingly hiring professional online campaigners to produce “hoax news” about their opponents, which includes an increasing prevalence of terms like “black campaign”, “weaponized” social media and “fake news”. In each country, certain social media campaigners are identified through local terms: “trolls” in the Philippines, “buzzers” in Indonesia, and “cybertroopers” in Malaysia, for example. Numerous investigative journalism reports and academic research have outlined large swathe of online campaigners creating and disseminating disinformation. Disinformation in the Philippines, for example that of the Oxford Internet Institute (Bradshaw and Howard 2017), shows a rising trend of “bots” and paid fake accounts via Twitter.

Globally, internet freedom has been on a decline since 2010 and social media has been the main culprit for the growing restrictions in cyberspace. Revelations of the Russian fake news campaigns in the 2016 US election and the 2016 Brexit referendum have prompted the World Economic Forum to identify digital disinformation as among the top ten greatest perils to society (Stroppa and Hanley 2017). Governments of all stripes have caught on to the benefits of social media—an inexpensive platform to shape public opinions and deliver political messaging. The Freedom House estimates that 59 per cent of internet users live in countries where authorities have employed disinformation tactics online. In their seminal article, “The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions”, Bennett and Livingston (2018) argue that online disinformation proliferates in environments of legitimacy crisis, such as when there is a declining trust in democratic and press institutions. Combined with a belligerent and untrustworthy digital culture, social media is charged with damaging free and fair elections—a key tenet of any liberal democracy.

Political disinformation campaigners range from high-end million-dollar advertising companies to mid-range companies who hire young university students casually to young sole traders and entrepreneurs who understand the digital realm and strategically create and pay Facebook to boost disinformation content.

A recent report published by NATO's StratCom Centre of Excellence shows that the "disinformation industry" is growing in Southeast Asia (Ong and Tapsell 2020). Almost all candidates—from presidential to local mayors and councillors—see the importance in social media campaigning. Increasingly, they feel the need to hire a social media team that can counter "black campaigning" against them. These groups often end up producing "black campaign" material against their employer's opponents. The reality is that the changes platforms are making are not keeping up with the dynamic, innovative and also insidious new disinformation as well as the social media "black campaign" industry.

Tech companies will say that their growth is central to the emerging digital economy, which will create jobs and therefore provide more potential for innovation and thus greater growth. The ability of tech companies to microtarget customers, including by ethnic or religious group, is why they are valued so highly, not just for present purposes, but also for future gains, as their algorithms become more advanced at locating—geographically and sociopolitically—and selling to specific people and groups. Of course, this is true of locally-based apps as well as the global behemoths like Facebook and Google. But as this book will show through critical examples in a number of countries in Southeast Asia, it is no longer enough for big tech companies, or other global social media platforms, to espouse the virtues of economic growth in the United States, and not be held responsible for damages caused locally elsewhere.

While there is diversity in platform usage regionally, Facebook continues to dominate as a monopoly in many Southeast Asian countries, not only in social media interactions but also as "the internet" for many citizens who have only recently bought a smartphone for the first time. In the early 2010s, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was one of the most popular guests of Southeast Asian politicians, with his visits attracting thousands of onlookers eager to get a photo. This would not be the case today; Facebook is derided by governments,

activists, civil society and journalists, seen to be undermining trust in institutions and ultimately hindering the democratic system. In short, social media is seen as a tool which divides and polarizes Southeast Asian communities rather than assisting in its diversity and vibrancy.

Many working in big tech companies think that society's problems with social media can be resolved by the very industry in Silicon Valley which created the platforms in the first place. That is, manipulation of social media platforms simply needs computer scientists with better and faster algorithms to counteract bad actors. But each time an algorithm is created, disinformation producers find new ways to get around it. When citizens move away from Twitter due to too many buzzers and prefer Instagram instead, for example, campaigners sack their buzzers and begin to hire Instagram "click farmers". The challenges are many, but given the ubiquitous use of social media platforms, there is no reason Southeast Asia cannot lead the world in finding solutions to these complex problems.

However, the Southeast Asian "solution" has been for governments to introduce new laws to (ideally) crack down on hoax news peddlers and disinformation producers. When these laws become politicized or are used inappropriately, citizens will be increasingly cautious of what they say publicly on social media platforms. They will revert to the safety of closed groups, in trust that their information will not be distributed. This trend has the potential for even greater echo chambers and filter bubbles of information, which scholars have previously identified as an important impact for social media.

As such, this book argues that the reformists and activists need to "reclaim" the social media space in Southeast Asia, and urges authors of each chapter to try to examine how this might be possible. Social media has given the voice to the previously disengaged and disenfranchised and massively expanded avenues for activism and new ways to strengthen civic society. It has provided new repertoires for participation and contestation on public issues to ordinary citizens where they were not previously afforded. Governments at all levels are under increasing public scrutiny over their affairs and are held to more accountability and transparency. As such, this book is also a reminder that social media can and has promised a more open, tolerant and liberal society which should translate into some positive impacts on democratic development in these states.

THE ARGUMENTS OF THIS BOOK

The increasing use of social media to manipulate public opinion has emerged as one of the greatest threats to democracy in recent years. Each chapter in this book addresses this phenomenon within their national context. For most analyses, the key “turning point” was an election, where the ruling government either increased their own activities (including disinformation production) on social media campaigning, or the government introduced and began to implement harsh laws and crackdowns on the social media space.

Elections

In Indonesia, Muningsari Sri Saraswati argues that despite many commentators and scholars believing in “bottom up” social media campaigning driven by grassroots actors, the seeds of disinformation began to be sown as early as 2012. Saraswati asserts that “the rise of disinformation via social media is new, but is part of a long history of engineering consent and manipulation by elite political and economy forces in the country”. The 2012 governor’s election which brought local politicians Jokowi (Joko Widodo) and Ahok (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama) to the national stage witnessed for the first time extensive and professional use of social media campaigning, and the beginning of what is now well entrenched in the Indonesian digital sphere—“buzzers”. The political campaign industry has expanded ever since, and Jokowi’s ascendancy through to two election victories in both 2014 and 2019, included these campaigners and their staff and supporters.

In Malaysia, Niki Cheong points to the 2013 general election as a turning point because the ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional, amplified and professionalized existing practices due to the “pervasiveness of new communication technologies” amongst opposition forces. It was around this time that the Barisan Nasional established teams of “cybertroopers”, a strategy which ultimately failed them in the 2018 election—the first time Malaysia experienced a change in government in sixty years. In many ways, new digital technologies in Malaysia remained the “opposition playground”. As citizens move towards closed group discussions on WhatsApp and Facebook, it rendered state-sponsored “cybertroopers” initiatives outdated. For Malaysia, the challenge is to make sure all political parties understand the difficulties these new campaign tactics

bring to democracy and political discourse, as the country's political elite struggle to consolidate gains made by civil society, in what Hutchinson and Lee (2019) describe as a "complicated democracy".

In the Philippines, Pamela Combinido and Nicole Curato examine the 2016 election victory of Rodrigo Duterte, and how the Philippines was described as "patient zero" for disinformation. They argue that Duterte's victory was "a turning point in the amplification of hateful comments and disinformation". The authors also point out that his election campaign of drugs and crime "resonates to public anxieties, and fits with architectures of communication that sustain public life in contemporary Philippines", and shows how various groups on online forces need to be examined beyond simply describing them as "trolls". Since Duterte became the president, disinformation has become "entrenched" and increasingly "multifaceted". Only a reimagining of the digital public sphere in the Philippines will transform politics in the country.

In Cambodia, Mun Vong and Aim Sinpeng posit that the 2013 national elections served as a turning point as the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and its long-time leader, Hun Sen, nearly lost power. Up until then, Cambodia experienced a moderately open cyberspace that had allowed for an emergence of a very small, but active, blogosphere, and burgeoning forms of social media activism. Regime critics, civil society organizations and opposition figures were the digital entrepreneurs and first movers when it came to leveraging digital media affordances for activism. Since the 2013 elections, the CPP took social media seriously and began to use it as a tool to suppress and co-opt critics for their own gains. Social media has also become a key domain for the ruling party to manipulate public opinion to shore support for the regime. With the main opposition party now largely eliminated, the challenge for social media activism for Cambodians is how to use the platform to counter state abuse of power and hold the ruling party accountable.

Laws and Crackdowns

For Singapore, Natalie Pang argues that the 2011 election and its immediate aftermath are the key turning point due to the way in which new media technologies "inspired the awakening of 'political consciousness'". After this election, the Singapore government began to regulate the online space more forthrightly. In 2013 the Broadcasting

Act was expanded to include a law requiring online sites that “report regularly on Singapore and have a significant reach” (Gov.sg, 2013) to apply for a media licence as individual entities, followed later by the Network Enforcement Act where problematic content had to be taken down completely. Under this law, licensees need to put up a \$50,000 performance bond, and comply with taking down offensive content within twenty-four hours. In 2019, Singapore created the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, known as POFMA. Pang concludes by making the important point that “legislations alone will not be sufficient” and that we need to recognize that in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, misinformation and disinformation campaigns threaten various sectors of society, particularly minority groups who are most vulnerable to hegemonic group actions and state crackdowns.

In Thailand, Janjira Sombatpoonsiri argues that prolonged political conflict and polarization prompted the political establishment to securitize disinformation in order to mobilize public opinion in their favour. Social media emerged during a time of intense political crisis and had been used by both pro- and anti-establishment forces. Both groups build contrasting versions of “truths” to mobilize grassroots support for each feuding side. The coups d’état in 2006 and 2014 served as turning points in this war on “truths” and provided the military—and the political establishment—the upper hand in securitizing the digital realm. Through a suite of new laws and institutions in the cyber arena, the establishment has sought to control the narratives of online information and to marginalize opposing voices. As long as Thailand remains politically divided, social media would remain an intensely divisive space.

In Myanmar, social media arrived in the midst of the country’s greatest political transformation in contemporary history. As Myanmar embarks on its unprecedented political transition from decades of military dictatorship towards an electoral democracy, Nyi Nyi Kyaw argues that social media has become a weapon of hate speech and falsehoods with devastating results. Social media is a contributing factor to the worsening humanitarian crisis with regards to the Muslim and Rohingya minorities, which has led to sustained offline communal violence. Social media has become a readily available tool for hate speech and disinformation partly because the state—especially the military—condones radical voices against Muslims and the Rohingyas

online for their own political gain. Despite the coming to power of the political opposition, their implicit support for such hate speech and falsehoods against the targeted minorities means that a resolution is not foreseeable in the near future.

In Vietnam, Dien Luong argues that the ruling communist party had sought to control online information early on, especially on social media, but such measure was ineffective. Civil society organizations and critics of the government were able to continue using social media as a platform for activism, despite repressive internet controls. As social media grew rapidly in Vietnam, the ruling party saw an opportunity instead to engage in disinformation campaigns to silence dissent and manipulate the public to bolster its legitimacy. But as more netizens find their voices online and become more politically active, Vietnam is headed for a more tolerant and repressive internet regime. Grassroots activism on digital media would continue as long as there is sufficient space for online advocacy.

The concluding chapter is written by Marco Bünthe, who provides an important comparative discussion on the role of social media across political regimes in Southeast Asia. Does social media help or hinder democratization in the region? Bünthe argues that the overall impacts of social media on Southeast Asian politics has been one of autocratization. While acknowledging the liberalizing contributions social media has made in empowering activism and increasing civic engagement, social media has contributed to autocratizing both democratic and authoritarian regimes in the region. For electoral democracies like Indonesia and the Philippines, social media has facilitated democratic regression, while for authoritarian regimes in Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand, social media has helped embolden the ruling power.

In conclusion, we hope this edited volume provides an important and timely analysis of the ways in which social media impacts state-society relations and the politics of Southeast Asia. The strengths of this book lie in its emphasis in chronicling social media contributions to politics from inception to the present as well as its attention to the local contexts. We recognize that one cannot fully examine the role social media plays in society without understanding the political and societal structures in each locality in which social media first came into contact. Social media arrived and expanded in each Southeast Asian country in different ways and at varying speeds, and such variations matter to

understanding its individual impact in each country. Furthermore, we recognize that social media is not used the same way in each country and any serious examination of how social media impacts societies must pay attention to the local specificities. Our volume therefore contributes much needed empirical analysis of the role social media plays in the politics of all eight Southeast Asian nations. While the dynamics of social media on politics in the region follows the global pattern of increasing information controls, the unprecedented impacts that social media has in empowering grassroots activism even in the most repressive regimes serve as an optimistic caution to such a depressing global trend. Reflecting on the original gains, as well as seeing where things went wrong, allow us to think about how citizens can “regain” the digital public sphere to promote reforms for democracy, human rights and a fairer and more equitable economic system.

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