

# **THE INTERNET, POLITICS AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN ASIA**

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## **Abstract**

There have been spirited exchanges over the consequences and effects of both globalisation and the growing new economy. Some critics have argued that the new digital technologies have merely reinforced the growing divide between the haves and the have nots in the world; they claimed that the 'digital divide' is real and cannot be wished away. Others have welcomed the advent of these technologies as the necessary first step in creating and fostering a more equal, just and interdependent global society. There is clearly a lack of agreement over the contours of this debate and evidence can be marshaled to support either case e.g. there is clearly a lack of connectivity in developing societies but at the same time, the connectivity that prevails engenders new possibilities for some of these communities. The evidence is mixed. In this paper, the focus is more narrow: it examines in particular how the Internet and the new ICTs can and have played a role in opening up political spaces in some Asian countries. It argues that via these new technologies, the seemingly political divide can be partially straddled and used judiciously, can be used to further enlarge prevailing windows of political opportunities in once-seemingly authoritarian regimes. It, however, cautions that an uncritical embrace of these technologies is equally fatal. It narrows options and other possibilities for community and social action.

## **Introduction**

Globalisation has come to dominate contemporary discussions of politics, economics, culture and society. Some celebrate this 'new global village' where borders and distance becomes 'irrelevant' (Cairncross, 1997; Ohmae, 1990). In this 'globalised view', the Internet has become the symbol which 'link distant localities', intensify worldwide social relations' and give market forces are greater efficacy and primacy (Giddens, 1990: 54; Negroponte, 1995; Castells, 1996; Gates, 1999). The Internet's speed, interactivity and

connectivity 'greatly facilitates the acquisition and absorption of knowledge, offering developing countries unprecedented opportunities to enhance ...(and) improve policy formulation and execution, and widen the range of opportunities for business and the poor. [It promises] to reduce that sense of isolation, and to open access to knowledge in ways unimaginable not long ago (World Bank, 1999: 9). It has, and 'is reshaping, at accelerated pace, the material basis of society', creating new cultures, new practices and actively transforming the socio-political landscape (Castells, 1996:1). As one of its high priests puts it: 'While politicians struggle with the baggage of history, a new generation is emerging from the digital landscape free of many of the old prejudices' (Negroponte, 1995: 230). In this 'new world' the old divisional politics of class, race, gender and other similar identifications recede in import; new 'leveling' cultures and practices replace them. For developing countries, it offers them the possibility of unshackling them from the chains of poverty and leapfrog into development (Wong, 2001b; 2001c).

Such images of a New Age technological Nirvana and/or El Dorado are certainly compelling and carries with it an element of truth and possibility for revolutionary changes. Businesses have and are celebrating the emergence of new global markets while politicians seemingly wrestle with their own political impotence in the face of fluid and fast finances<sup>1</sup>. But just as the digital superhighway is the greatest and most efficacious cultural manifestation of the 'free and democratic world', some have criticised its receptivity as one tooted in a 'apolitical attitude towards technological development' (Loader, 1998:6; Wong, 2001b). Perhaps, the most obvious concern is that the Internet has produced a growing 'digital divide' between the information 'haves' and have-nots' (Norris, 2001; OECD, 2001). The UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), amongst others have warned that the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) might actually 'widen the gap between the affluent nations and those lacking the resources, skills and infrastructure to do so' (UNDP, 1999: 63). A recent editorial of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* went further. It asserts that there is clearly a 'digital divide' and the challenge is to 'make life less elemental' for developing nations via these new information and communication technologies (ICTs) (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 12 April 2001).

This paper does not intend to rehearse the argument of the growing digital divide globally. It accepts sans the *Review* that this divide exists and is also interested in the process of enhancing the 'digital dividend' via the use of the Internet. In particular, it is more interested in the Internet as a vehicle for effecting potential political and democratic change. This issue of political reform and greater democratisation is, however, a marginal concern in discussions of the 'digital divide'. Most discussions focus on provision of access, the development of e-commerce capabilities and e-governance but unless the

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<sup>1</sup> The clearest expression of this political impotence is best seen in the various financial disasters – the October 1987 stockmarket crash where governments seemed unable to stop the downward slide. A more recent and potent example is that pertaining to the Asian financial crisis in 1997/8 where governments and transnational monetary institutions appear unable to stem the flow of speculative capital from the region, precipitating both an economic and political crisis for many governments in the region. It paved the way for the election for new governmental practices in South Korea, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Indonesia. This event also prompted Castells (2000) to temper his view and enthusiasm for ICTs and the new networked economy.

structural issues of greater democratic participation is addressed, reforms and the issue of 'divides', both digital and physical, will remain and widen.

The paper starts off with a sketch and examination of the contours of the 'digital divide' and the issues inherent in the concept. It next moves to a discussion of the Internet and the process of change in Asia, examining the responses of various Asian governmental responses to the Internet and their attempts to manage this process. The paper argues that the Internet provides a window of opportunity for many local activists to publicise their causes and to mobilise support regionally and globally. Its success has, however, led many people to equate the Internet with greater freedom and democracy. This is however, a mistaken view and in privileging the Internet as *the* medium for political change and participation, it fetishes a form of technological determinism and subordinates all other forms of political activism and agency. It also masks the nature of the inherent structural problems embedded in these societies and the enormity of the tasks of reforms and social and political change. Be that as it may, the Internet offers one possible means of transcending the 'political divide' in these countries as they search for greater democratic outcomes.

### **The Digital Divide: A Snapshot**

There is a growing sense that we are rapidly converging and evolving into a single, integrated world powered by the new ICTs. It has rendered the world 'borderless' and our daily lives are increasingly dominated by these new digital transactions and gyrations (Castells, 1996). Thus, the Internet Society proudly proclaims: 'The Internet is for Everyone' (Cerf, 1999). In its relentless march, 'all that is solid melts into air', and yet despite these pronouncements, multilateral organisations including the World Bank, the United Nations (and its attendant organisations) have voiced their concerns and warned that the North-South divide may be exacerbated by these new global tools and forces (UNDP, 1999; UNESCO, 1998; OECD, 20001).

These concerns have mothballed and coalesced around the issue of what is popularly known as the 'digital divide'. Today, concerns and debates on the digital divide have generated a new industry – the 'digital divide' watch industry. Organisations have sprung up all over the physical and digital worlds, ostensibly seeking to address this issue. The World Economic Forum, multilateral development banks and aid agencies now spend copious amounts of resources seeking to develop portals and search for 'solutions' to address this divide<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This has included business initiatives (as in Hewlett Packard's one billion E-inclusion' initiative) and strategies of consultation and co-optation extensively employed by multilateral agencies as they seek to critically engage in 'dialogue with civil society' and develop a new 'offensive of smiles'. A good example is the recently developed Global Development Gateway and the accompanying on-line 'consults'. For a critical view of the Gateway, see Wai-leng Wong's posting at [www.globalknowledge.org/english/archives/mailarchives/gkd/gkd-oct00/0060.html](http://www.globalknowledge.org/english/archives/mailarchives/gkd/gkd-oct00/0060.html) and various articles in [www.asianwomenonline.com](http://www.asianwomenonline.com) The issue of co-optation and the loss of autonomy as civil society finds itself subsumed within the state has been discussed by Hardt & Negri, 1994: 217-60. Indeed, an examination of the list of non-governmental organisations consulted shows that by and large, organisations like the World bank, the World Trade Organisation and other similar bodies, have different views of what constitutes civil

Indeed, the term digital divide is expansive. It has, as Pippa Norris, points out, ‘become so popular as an instant sound bite that it has entered everyday speech as shorthand for any and every disparity within the online community’. Within it congeals at least three possible divides, although more may be discerned. They include: a global divide (between countries), a social divide (intra divisions) and the democratic divide (encompassing the ability and capacity to use resources to participate and influence events) (Norris, 2001: 3-4).

Global divisions in the digital world are clearly demonstrable. For example, according to UN figures for developing countries as a whole, 18.5% have a radio, 14.5% have a television, about 0.4% have a telephone line, 0.7% have a computer and 0.05% have Internet access; for every person in the developing world, 149 are logged on in developed countries (UNDP, 1998: 167, 181, 193). UNESCO (1998) similarly found that 80% of the world still lacks basic telecommunication facilities, and two-thirds of the world’s population have never made a phone call. While there are no definitive figures on the digital divide, internet business research firms, like Netwizards, Cyberatlas, E-Marketer, Nua, have all documented and commented on the growing gap (on users uptake and the spread of technologies) between developed and developing countries. Cyberatlas (2001), for example, estimated that the top 15 countries’ account for well over 80% of the global net users.

In Asia, access to the Internet is a problem. Costs are high for both access and also for the purchase of web technologies. Recent Nua Internet Surveys show that the numbers in the Asia-Pacific region are currently about 104.88 million (Table 1). Of these, 40% are from Japan, 15% from South Korea, 8% from Australia, 7% from Taiwan, 4% from Hong Kong, 1.9% from New Zealand and 2.2 from Singapore. Clearly, if these countries were factored out of the equation, there are only 23 million users in the Asia-Pacific region (with 16 million users in Southeast Asia). Other studies found that less than 5% of the worldwide numbers connected to the Internet were in Asia, and men constitute 78% of all Internet users (Emarketer.com, May 2000). Robert Romulo, commenting on Internet access in Southeast Asia, notes that of the 300 million people connected to the Internet, only 1% (3.2 million) are in Southeast Asia (Romulo, 2000). Despite its proclaimed and much-vaunted equality and diversity, the Web is clearly not very representative; it is still dominated by young, urban, well-educated, middle-class, white men (Holderness, 1998: Wong, 2001e).

**Table 1: Number of Internet Users**

<i>Region</i>	<i>#Users (Millions)</i>	<i>% (percentage)</i>
Africa	3.11	0.81
Asia-Pacific	104.88	25.76
Europe	113.14	27.79

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society. In the main, these consultative partners turned out to be business organisations and/or where the appropriateness of their ‘non-business’ status is debatable.

Middle East	2.40	0.59
Canada & USA	167.12	41.05
Latin America	16.45	4.04
<b>World Total</b>	407.1 <sup>3</sup>	

Source: [http://www.nua.com/surveys/how\\_many\\_online/index.html](http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/index.html)

A closer examination of ICT input, output and diffusion reveals similar trends (See Tables 2 and 3 below). While the picture is and can change rapidly, there is clearly a global technological, economic and digital divide (Tables 2 and 3).

**Table 2**  
**Selected Technological Outputs by Region (1992-1997)**

	Television sets	Mobile Phones	Personal Computers	Internet Hosts	Fax machines	GDP per capita
OECD	522.57	102.21	193.57	138.25	31.43	20,113.50
Middle East	254.87	24.58	32.16	5.31	7.06	8,941.47
East Asia	164.08	24.36	46.10	6.26	6.34	6,270.63
Latin America and Caribbean	242.03	14.43	20.33	5.69	9.05	5,635.80
Eastern Europe and Transition Economies	288.47	6.34	28.21	6.99	2.27	4,027.36
Sub-Saharan Africa	47.76	1.61	5.05	0.50	1.66	1,971.51
South Asia	32.70	0.69	4.72	0.13	1.60	1,764.33

*Note:* Figures for Internet hosts are per 10,000 people; all others are per 1,000 people. GDP per capita figures are calculated at purchasing power parity.

*Source:* Rodriguez and Wilson (2000).

<sup>3</sup> As Nua states, 'The art of estimating how many are online throughout the world is an inexact one. Surveys abound, using all sorts of measurement parameters'. Clearly, what we have are approximate figures ( see [http://www.nua.com/surveys/how\\_many\\_online/index.html](http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/index.html) – accessed on 6 August 2002)0.81

**Table 3**  
**Selected Technological Inputs by Region (1992-1997)**

	R&D as % of GDP	Technicians	Scientists	Telephone Lines	GDP per capita
OECD	1.8	1,326.1	2,649.1	517.9	20,113.50
Middle East	0.4	177.8	521.0	136.5	8,941.47
East Asia	0.8	235.8	1026.0	140.3	6,270.63
Latin America and Caribbean	0.5	205.4	656.6	197.4	5,635.80
Eastern Europe and Transition Economies	0.9	577.2	1,841.3	167.9	4,027.36
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.2	76.1	324.3	24.3	1,971.51
South Asia	0.8	59.5	161.0	14.2	1,764.33

*Note:* Technicians and scientists are per 1 million people; telephone lines are per 1,000 people.

*Source:* Rodriguez and Wilson (2000).

Table 4 provides a snapshot view of the situation in Asia. Asia lags behind on most indicators and only Japan (which incidentally is an OECD country) appears to be at the forefront of ICT usage, adoption and development. From the table, Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan appear to fit their 'second tier' leadership tag<sup>4</sup>. Clearly, in the area of e-commerce (which is often and more commonly reflected in the number of secure servers), Asia is still at an early stage of development, and would need massive amounts of investment to develop their resources and capability in order for them to compete successfully.

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting that even in the development of the new economy, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan are in the second tier leadership stakes – it parallels very much the development paradigm articulated in the 'flying geese' and/or 'tigers' phenomenon.

**Table 4**  
**Selected ICT Output in Asia\***

Country	<i>Personal Computer</i>	<i>Internet Hosts</i>	<i>Telephone Lines</i>	<i>Mobile Phones</i>	<i>Secure Servers</i>	<i>ICT per capita</i>
Indonesia	11	0.11	26.7	5.2	60	8.86
Malaysia	78	1.93	204.7	101.5	146	214.69
Philippines	16	0.21	31.9	19.0	68	26.75
Thailand	33	0.03	82.2	39.6	116	52.11
China	7	0.02	73.6	20.1	184	31.40
India	4	0.01	20.3	1.2	122	13.17
Japan	272	11.03	493.9	315.7	5,153	2,485.69
Hong Kong	310	20.09	583.6	430.8	538	1,820.13
S.Korea	150	4.22	467.0	304.2	345	431.95
Singapore	344	13.45	464.6	280.7	525	2,348.20
Taiwan	178	16.71	542.7	194.7	372	610.86
<i>Mean</i>						
Asia	127.55	6.16	271.93	155.70	636.25	731.256
OECD**	270.48	26.18	496.40	230.64	4,377.88	1396.77
Non-Asia	221.48	20.55	424.71	182.61	2,613.51	1022.39

*Notes:*

\*All data are for 1998 unless otherwise stated. Figures are based on per 1,000 people.

\*\*Japan and South Korea are excluded from these OECD figures

*Source:* IMD (1999 and 2000); WEF (1998); Elsevier (various years); WTO (2000); [www.netcraft.com](http://www.netcraft.com); WITSA (2000)

Notwithstanding these divides, proponents have argued that the focus on the digital divide is counter-productive. What is required, they argue, is to harness ICTs to develop and enhance socio-economic development (Barr, 1998: 156-67); promote greater choices and opportunities for individuals (Naisbitt, 1984: 97; Gates, 1995: 6-7); enable greater democratisation and representation (Grossman, 1996); act as an 'equalising force between citizens and power barons' (Rheingold, 1993:6) and promote a 'strong democracy' (Barber, 1984). Globally, ICTs, according to these enthusiasts, connect and mobilise disparate communities, enabling the development of 'a worldwide civic society countering the role of international agencies, strengthening the voice of the developing world, dissolving some of the boundaries of the nation-state and reinforcing the process of democratisation' (Norris, 2001: 8-9; 172; see also Frederick, 1992: Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Zelweiro, 1998).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> There has been quite a lot written of ICTs and their mobilising effects. For example, the defeat and demise of the MAI (Multilateral Agreement on Investment) has been attributed to a successful Internet-

Other commentators and analysts are less sanguine. They assert that it is 'politics as usual' (Resnick, 1998) while others see its promise as unfulfilled. They see it as increasingly a captive of commercial forces and being transformed into a 'centralised marketplace' (Golding, 1996; McChesney; 1996). Critics point in particular to the possibility of both creating new inequalities of wealth and power and also in enhancing the power of entrenched power elites (as the disengaged are bypassed in this process of digital democratisation and empowerment) (Golding, 1998; 2000; see also Wong, 2001a; Norris, 2001: 13, 98, 101). Central in this debate of differences is a core issue of democracy discourse: democracy as a decision-making process and a deliberation in policy process, or democratisation as 'empowerment of the self'?<sup>6</sup> Clearly, the debate on democracy and democratic change are not so easily resolved and we will return to it later in the paper. The next section will discuss some of the changes unleashed by the Internet in Asia and some responses to this 'sea change'.

### **The Net Change in Asia**

Many Asian governments have embraced the new ICTs and see them as the key to 'leap-frog' development, ensuring wealth and prosperity to their nation-states. However, 'unintended consequences' (Sieber, 1981) follow. They could not imagine that the computer and the modem could be 'revolutionary tools', unleashing tsunami-like social forces enabling new voices and pressures for change and reforms. Their visions of a technologically advanced society ensuring better, faster and more secure economic transactions was a programme they sought to implement but the arrival of the personal computer (PC) clones, networks and the subsequent proliferation of pirated computer programs saw new uses and the development of new configurations of power. Students, the 'new' middle classes and both emergent and oppositional groups absorb and embrace these new advances in information technology and its concomitant effects, including the pursuit of greater freedoms and voices. This raised 'consciousness' prompts a greater interest in information and feeds on itself. In some cases, it also leads to direct action as people are mobilised and act to influence changes within the political system (Wong, 2001a). For example, wireless technologies were employed in the ousting of Joseph Estrada as president in the Philippines and the mobilisation of *reformasi* (reformist) forces in both Malaysia and Indonesia.

As Wong (2001a: 384) points out, it is, however, hard to pinpoint just when it was that the Web began to be transformed into a weapon of dissent in Asia, or anywhere else<sup>7</sup>.

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inspired campaign. (Drohan, 1998). The demonstrations at Seattle, Prague, Genoa, Melbourne and Washington have also all been linked to globally-linked Internet movements (see Eagleton-Pierce, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Clearly, there are many strands to the discussion surrounding the constitution of democracy. There is of course, the issue of what constitutes democracy – are we discussing issues of direct or representative democracy? Another strand is refracted in the debate between communitarian and cosmopolitan democracy and citizenship (Nussbaum, 1996; Walzer, 1996; Himmelfarb, 1996; Taylor, 1996; Held, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> While it is possible to chronicle the history of the Internet, I would argue that dating the history of dissent is far more problematic. In the first instance, 'what constitutes dissent?' is borne to generate myriad interpretations. It is, therefore, not a productive exercise but suffice to say that listservs, mailing lists and newsgroups have helped to 'circulate' dissentious views on the body politic.

What is clear is that Asian students studying abroad had discovered its many uses earlier than their compatriots at home<sup>8</sup>. Many of these overseas students first began using the Net to conduct online discussions and conferences, spawning a variety of student networks. It did not take long for these 'activists' to realise that cyberspace (especially via soc.culture) also afforded them the opportunity to talk about topics considered taboo back home, such as human rights abuses and the repressive policies of their governments, and to access alternative sources of information. Mailing lists also played key roles in spreading up-to-date information, accelerating a greater awareness of the issues prevailing in their own countries<sup>9</sup>.

On their return 'home', they use the Internet to access and share information, prompting greater awareness within and reassessment of their own 'local' social milieu. In most cases, this 're-assessment' leads to a greater push for greater freedom and rights. Of course, the 'globalisation waltz' and the clamour for greater participation in the development game (via the ICTs) help to push the momentum further along. It is easy to attribute the process of change and transformation merely to this group. It is both a popular and seductive view for in many ways, it entrenches the notion of generational gap and change as well as embracing the optimism, receptivity and ability of the 'young' to respond to new 'ideas' and challenges. But this is clearly an ahistorical view and fails to account for the rather dynamic and vibrant social forces prevalent in these societies. In all the countries discussed so far in this paper, there have been strong anti-colonial, national and popular movements. They cannot be simply wished away and to do so is to seriously distort and re-write history.

Indeed, some of the pioneers of ICTs use were Asian non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many like the International Organisation of Consumers' Union (IOCU, now called Consumers' International) and the Consumers' Association of Penang in Malaysia, employed GeoNet, FidoNet, Green Net and Peace Net regularly to share information and mobilise campaigns (via email, newsgroups, file transfer and electronic conferencing facilities). Some of these organisations supplied human rights groups and the diasporic Malaysian and Singaporean communities with information on the detention of social activists in both Malaysia and Singapore in 1987<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, the campaign of the indigenous peoples in Sarawak against logging activities and their assertion of indigenous rights also received global attention and became a constant embarrassment to the Malaysian government. Today, this struggle continues and information still traverses the Web to other social activists.

In Indonesia, *Wahana Lingkungan Hidup* (WALHI), a forum for environmental groups, got a link-up with an ISP in Europe in 1989 followed by LBH (Legal Aid Institute) in 1990. But the Internet became a force in its own right in 1995 when an *Urgent Action*

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<sup>8</sup> A good example of this is perhaps best seen in the leadership surrounding the 'reformasi' movement in Malaysia. Many of its leading activists are young, technologically-savvy activists who have learnt their craft as students overseas. A core component of 'reformasi' leaders have been students in Australia.

<sup>9</sup> An instructive and early use of this was *apakahabar*, focussing on events and developments in Indonesia, initiated by John MacDougall, it was *the* source of alternative and critical information on Indonesia.

<sup>10</sup> Detainees and support groups in Malaysia were also sent regular support messages via email. Solidarity activities and testimonies of detainees were also widely circulated via newsgroups and listservs.

(UA) on *Apakabar* (an information service bulletin with an e-zine presence run in the United States), prompted international action. The UA, consisting of only three short sentences, protested the murder of a woman labor activist who had been leading a workers' strike in East Java. In less than six hours after the UA was posted, the Office of the President, the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Defense and Security in Indonesia were jammed with hundreds of sheets of protest from around the world. This event dramatically changed Marsinah, a young and unknown village girl from East Java, into a 'global' workers' heroine. It also sparked an NGO-instigated online information war against one of the harshest militaristic regimes in the world.

By then, Indonesian journalists and academics chafed by the state's repression of mainstream media, had begun hosting websites and listservs. This intensified after the banning of three leading magazines, *Tempo*, *DeTIK* and *Editor*, in June 1994. Ex-*Tempo* staffers and its management decided to go online and developed the '*Tempo Interaktif*' in March 1996. This was a critical turning point for the use of the Internet as a tool of dissent by journalists who felt oppressed by the Suharto regime. Student activists downloaded the contents of *Tempo Interaktif* to make hard copies, which were then sold on campuses and among NGOs. Even today, young journalists, frustrated that their reports do not get published in full, post their works on the Internet<sup>11</sup>.

As we celebrate the Internet, we must not lose stock that the Internet is part of the panoply of ICTs tools. For those without access to a computer, hardcopies of downloaded Internet news are readily sold at fairly low prices by children at street corners, at markets and/or at public rallies and sometimes even at retail stores<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, the fax machines and photocopiers (which have become so mundane in 'western societies') are and have played critical mobilising and information disseminating roles in Asia, particularly in Malaysia (the detention of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 and previous detentions of social activists in 1987), South Korea (in the context of the detention of then opposition leader, Kim Dae Jung, the Kwangju uprising and the subsequent push for greater democracy), Singapore, Indonesia and China (the 1989 Tiananmen massacre). Relatively simple technologies can, therefore, still have more profound implications than the Internet for political mobilisation in many countries. The Internet, because of its limited access in some countries, is more of an instrument aimed at communicating with the outside world rather than aimed inwards for communicating with fellow nationals.

### **Asian Governments and the Internet**

Governments in Southeast Asia, have recognised the critical role played by these new technologies and have tried to thwart dissent on the Web by imposing restrictions on Internet access. The Internet was a necessary evil promoting 'development' but it has to be controlled and channelled into national development projects. But, like rhizomes,

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<sup>11</sup> Some journalists have even formed an online discussion group called '*Kuli Tinta*' (Slave of Ink). Web sites like *SiaR*, *MateBEAN*, *MeunaSAH*, *MamberaMO*, *KDPNet* and *AJINews* have attracted people interested in finding out the 'news' and 'truth' about local events.

<sup>12</sup> This is by no means a unique Indonesian experience. In most parts of the Asia-Pacific region where authoritarian governments seemed omnipotent, these 'alternative' sources of news have been 'developed' and assiduously promoted by opposition forces.

Asian Internet activists have sprout up continuously and wage their 'incursions' against the power of the ASEAN states. They are also aided by the lack of a national coordinated response by ASEAN governments as these governments seek to come to terms with their vulnerabilities arising from this 'new' threat and its machinations.

In Indonesia, responsibility fell inbetween the interstices of growth and development vis-à-vis notions of security and control. Rivalry between government departments (the Departments of Information and Defence and Security) meant divisions and policies vacillate between control and regulation (of 'divisive' or that 'incited' or 'endangered political stability') to a counter-corrective war against critics of the government. As criticisms of the Indonesian regime intensified in the 1990s, the Suharto government, via the Ministry of Tourism, Post and Telecommunications, hinted at imposing tighter controls and restrictions through the need to protect the young from spiritual and cultural pollution (as via pornography). Indeed, this refrain – dangers of spiritual pollution via pornography and subversion and divisions - is rather universal in many Asian countries<sup>13</sup>.

However, dissent is hard to suppress, once the so-called genie of 'freedom of expression' is experienced. In Malaysia, the government has found that stifling dissent is especially difficult once a nation's middle class embraces computers. After a 1998 feud over how to deal with the country's financial crisis, Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir dismissed his reformist deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, and jailed him on disputed corruption and sodomy charges. Since then, the government has clamped down on public dissent and the press (many publications critical of government policies e.g. *Detik*, had their renewable licences revoked). While street demonstrations of the pro-Anwar reform (*reformasi*) movement have become rare, '*reformasi*' has moved into cyberspace and ordinary Malaysian homes. The Malaysian authorities have rounded up several suspected dissident Webmasters but state actions have largely been ineffectual. Malaysians can still visit numerous pro-Anwar sites (e.g. '*laman reformasi*', '*maha firaun*'), many of which are hosted in the U.S.A. and Britain. These sites are generating continual public interest and many ordinary people are now accessing this new medium<sup>14</sup>. Opposition parties have also developed their sites and found many 'visitors'. On top of that, there is now an online daily netpaper, *Malaysiakini.com*.

*Malaysiakini.com*, proclaiming itself to be an independent internet newspaper run by professional journalists reporting 'only the news that matter' has caused some alarm within some government quarters. Via its analytical and critical pieces of the government and its policies, *Malaysiakini* has engendered a new critical awareness amongst the Malaysian polity. This has prompted some members of the ruling coalition to 'blacklist' *Malaysiakini* journalists by excluding them from its press conferences and official functions; government officials claim *Malaysiakini* is not a licensed publication under the Printing and Publishing Act. Some officials have gone further, issuing publicly veiled threats and repeatedly raising the issue of placing controls and restrictions on Internet

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<sup>13</sup> Most authoritarian regimes in Asia have tended to articulate this civilisational and values clash as a reason for tighter control and regulation of the Internet.

<sup>14</sup> *Freemalaysia.com*, *seachange.com* and *agenda.malaysia.com* are some sites that provide good critical analyses of Malaysia's political and economic systems.

publications (*New Straits Times*, 22 September 2000). The Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister has similarly criticised postings that are 'divisive' or those that 'incited' or 'endangered political stability'. Fortunately, though, regulations controlling web contents have yet to be introduced in Malaysia as the Mahathir government has committed itself to ensuring freedom of expression prevails in announcing its flagship developmental project, the Multimedia Supercorridor.

The Malaysian government response is not a shared response in Asia. Some Asian governments, in the face of these technological challenges, have adopted rather crude and blunt responses. They have detained people, seized computers or cut Web access (e.g. in China) but such extreme measures also carries with it invidious economic costs. As e-commerce transactions become more critical and thicker, network stability and continuity become critical concerns for both local and foreign businesses. Resentment and economic disruption can prevail, and this is one reason Singapore's censors have all but given up the fight to control the Internet.

Singapore, which has long controlled its local print and broadcast media, has invested billions in Internet infrastructure to become a networked and an 'intelligent island'. Information technology infrastructure has been upgraded and every person in Singapore has an assigned email account irrespective of their ability to access the Net. The government has also sought to attract investment funds in technology-linked areas into Singapore via a spate of measures, including co-financing arrangements and various other financial incentives (Wong, 2001a).

The government has promised that the Net will stay free from official interference but its history and record suggests that such assertions be taken with some skepticism. In 1994, a government official instructed a local ISP to scan 80,000 email accounts of university lecturers, ostensibly in a hunt for pornographic materials but of course, this was an unmitigated disaster. Most Singaporeans believed that the government was trying to control and intimidate its populace again. More recently, in May 1999, the IT Security Unit of Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs quietly wandered into the files of 200,000 private computers. This breach was detected by a private computer enthusiast, which forced the government to announce that SingNet, the Internet arm of the largely state-owned telecommunications giant, SingTel, had breached security protocols and practices<sup>15</sup>. The government has also a 'counter-intelligence' unit, seeking to correct reportage and representations of Singapore in the print and broadcast media. In fact, its record of writing to the media (e.g. the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, *Far Eastern Economic Review* and the *International Herald Tribune*) and taking the media to courts in Singapore is legendary (Seow, 1998).

In the main, ASEAN governments have sought to initially control the Internet via 'mainstream' broadcasting legislative and regulative measures. They have, however, found that effecting and implementing these measures are not so simple as previously

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<sup>15</sup> This was the subject of a television documentary on the Special Broadcasting Service of Australia in its Dateline programme which was aired in April 2001. See Wong, 2001a and Rodan, 1998 for a discussion of Internet control in Singapore.

thought. The technologies involved in web transmission and broadcasting mean that traditional control measures are largely ineffective. Because of this, many have tempered their strategies. Of the three ASEAN states discussed, Singapore is perhaps the only state able to effect its regulative and legislative measures most effectively<sup>16</sup>. In part, this is because of the island's size but the reach of the government is also critical. Its long arm has meant that the populace is easier to manage and controlled.

Generally, ASEAN governments have found that to counter the Internet, sheer force simply does not work: the Internet's anonymity, ubiquity and seeming speed, flexibility and invincibility protects the 'virtual' dissenters and quarantines them from the power and reach of ASEAN governments. As such, these governments have evolved a new strategy – setting up alternative sites of information (all three countries discussed above have adopted this strategy) and waging an information war in cyberspace against their critics. This is complemented by stringent regulative measures: mandating and blocking certain IP addresses (as for example, in Singapore and China<sup>17</sup>) and internet service providers (ISPs) are left to monitor and police traffic flows. Penalties are then inflicted on these breaches and typically, results in revocation of licences. There is also the more laborious act of physically monitoring on-screen the log of internet traffic of every ISP, second by second and blocking access to 'undesirable' sites. However, this has yet to be tried by any governments in the region.

### **The Internet as a Weapon of the Weak?**

For most Asian Netizens, the Internet has promoted and prompted intense discussions about identity, democracy and human rights. It has opened up the political divide between the government and the governed, and has become an alternative medium for views and news that would otherwise remain unheard and unwritten. It has enabled new voices to be heard and has engendered new practices – networking and the formation of new vibrant cyber-communities. Websites and e-zines have sprung up offering alternative sources of news and also act as agents of new communities. Unwittingly, it has created a sort of electronically mediated 'public sphere'<sup>18</sup> and consequently, facilitates 'quantum leaps in the field of democratic politics' (Becker, 1998: 343).

Indeed, in both Malaysia and Indonesia, people are accessing the Internet for alternative and 'reliable' information about their countries. White-collar workers download this alternative news or pamphlets using their office's internet access and then distribute these

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<sup>16</sup> The Singaporean experience is instructive as it has provided the benchmark for other countries e.g. China. ISPs are required to register with the Singapore Broadcast Authority (SBA) and site hosts are responsible for any content appearing on their sites, particularly those that threaten 'the public interest, public morality, public order, public security (and) national harmony' (as encapsulated in the Internet Code of Practice) (See [www.sba.gov.sg](http://www.sba.gov.sg)).

<sup>17</sup> Rather than seeing this as an Asian peculiarity, it should be pointed out that these practices are also common and mandated in 'western liberal democratic' Australia.

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps, the most influential proponent of this view of the public sphere is Jurgen Habermas (1989). According to him, the public sphere is an arena where citizens participate in the democratic process via 'rational critical debates'. Since then, this concept has been widely critiqued and in particular, Nancy Fraser points out that it once again neglects women and a more critical appreciation of this sphere would readily demonstrate a multitude of public spheres cohabiting together.

information widely at local and street markets and public rallies. In 2001, VCD copies of an Australian Broadcasting Corporation documentary on the Anwar crisis (which has not been shown in Malaysia), were sold widely on the streets and markets in Kuala Lumpur. Photocopy operators and street vendors also help in distributing this 'alternative' new source, enabling widespread dissemination of the information.

In Malaysia, the Internet Revolution was initially promoted through the government's attempts and investment in the new information and communication technologies to create a developed and technologically advanced society (as encapsulated in its Vision 2020 pronouncements). This techno-developmental view was the dominant global view until the events of 1998. When the government cracked down on alternative print media in the fall-out over the detention of sacked Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, the Internet's democratic edge received a fillip. Closing traditional avenues of dissent saw a migration of readers to the Web for information, as Malaysian citizens seek alternative news medium as opposed to the mainstream media.

This shift in information seeking and processing has caused the mainstream media to be very concerned, particularly over its drop in sales and advertising revenues, prompting some concessionary gestures to 'investigative' and 'critical' reportage. In fact, there are indications that at least one mainstream press monitors *Malaysiakini* reports and seeks to 'scoop' if not challenge the veracity and accuracy of *Malaysiakini*'s claims. Sadly, they fail to appreciate that *Malaysiakini* is a web-based publication and can be updated any time and on the spot, while the mainstream print media operates through scheduled print runs and, is also less flexible (Wong, 2001a).

The mainstream broadcast and print media have also targeted *Malaysiakini* and sought to report its 'inaccuracies', its 'conspirational links' with 'foreign' powers, including George Soros (who incidentally has been blamed by Dr. Mahathir as the cause of the Asian financial crisis of 1997). In so doing, they invoke the credo of 'developmental journalism', the bogey of foreign conspiracies and the mettle of nationalist discourse to contain and critique their Internet critics and rivals. This 'mobilisation of bias' has also seen a more spirited debate within the local journalist community as they seek to come to grips with their professional calling and the evolution of their society into a more open and democratic society.

These contesting currents and despite government's attempts, *Malaysiakini* has become an institution for Malaysians seeking information on the Malaysian political system. Many, including government departmental officials, logged onto the site everyday to read 'inaccessible' news. *Malaysiakini* has also been scanned and frequently cited by the international media e.g. the Dow Jones-owned *Asiaweek* and also in the highly influential *Far Eastern Economic Review*, thus endowing it with further credibility and legitimacy. It has, since, become the alternative 'mainstream' source of 'news' in Malaysia.

Likewise, in Indonesia, the Internet is increasingly seen as a credible source of news and information. 'Clients' frequenting internet cafes, regularly used the Internet to access 'unavailable' news. Like in Malaysia, mainstream print media and government officials

monitored Net news and occasionally used information gleaned from these sites but have largely been ineffectual in ‘closing down’ these sites.

In Singapore, alternative sites e.g. the thinkcentre.org, exists but they do not, as in Malaysia and Indonesia, make similar impacts. The ‘culture of silence’ and fear is still pervasive amongst the average Singaporean and many are reluctant to voice their dissent<sup>19</sup>. On the other hand, there are those who argued that the ‘development dividend legitimacy’ thesis applies in Singapore – the government has delivered development goods consistently and as rational, material and pragmatic beings, Singaporeans are unlikely to embrace the opposition.

In recent years, either because of a more ‘liberal’ attitude fostered by the government or because of its inherent nature, Singaporean academics have produced and articulated a more critical approach albeit often within academic circles. This is often a relatively safe space as not many Singaporeans may have access to such views. Publicly articulated views are however, systemically challenged and admonished as in the case of author and academic, Catherine Lim.

The ‘reach’ of the Singaporean state is also almost legendary and occasionally manifests itself ensuring that ‘inappropriate’ behaviour and practices are punished. An example that comes to mind is the penalising of two Singaporean students studying in Perth who had tried cannabis. The idea of dissent and inappropriate behaviour and practices in Singapore is still a dangerous idea and is ‘guided’, even remotely, by the Singaporean state and elite discourses. Because of its small size, the idea of possible control remain strong and overwhelms if not moderate the idea of the Internet as critique. For the Singaporean state, foreign and ‘diasporic’ dissent may cause some hiccups in international arenas but they count for very little in the eventual drama of realpolitik of international relations. Moreover, this dissent is both ‘foreign’ and ‘safe’ and since it is not rooted locally, as in having a local organisational base, it cannot influence and hurt the state and its exercise of power. As such, it can be ignored.

### **The Internet and the Promise of Democracy**

Enthusiastic proponents of ICTs (e.g. Toffler, Negroponte) see cyberspace as a veritable hothouse of virtue: equality, inclusion, friendships, community, democracy – and the list goes on. History has ended and social problems can be readily solved via the right

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<sup>19</sup> This ‘development dividend legitimacy’ thesis has been articulated often by many authoritarian governments and their supporters. It would be churlish to dismiss these arguments completely for these concerns clearly have some resonance with a significant portion of the population. This ‘authoritarian populist’ tendency embodies certain elements. First, there is the horror of mixing, a binary of purity and danger. Second, there is a fear of solitude. Third, there is an apprehension of freedom (ala Fromm) – it makes life more complicated and too many decisions have to be made. Fourth, there is tense anxiety over the possibility that equality will produce uniformity. These elements lead to an emotional economy in which specific kinds of ‘circuits of solidarity’ and ‘structures of feeling’ are produced and reinforced. The world is to become a perpetual, small, containable, predictable and safe place in which all know their place. Within this rather ‘absolutist’ vision of the view, democracy has to be limited or the myriad societal changes unleashed would tear this preferred ideal asunder. In a sense, these ‘structures of feeling’ support structures of vassalage which are as undemocratic as possible’ (LeDoeuff, 1991: 313).

combination of copper and silicon, and a new Athens will emerge from these unfettered interactions between individuals, their software, modem and copper (Barbrook & Cameron, 1997: 53; Hudson, 1997: 173-259). Like an unstoppable juggernaut, resistance is almost futile and useless; 'jacking in', on the other hand takes us down the productive, pleasurable and efficacious channels of technological nirvana. This image of cyberutopia 'offers the image of a world in which material abundance and spiritual fulfillment will be achieved, not through the painful restructuring of the social order, but through the spontaneous evolution of the existing system itself' (Morris-Suzuki, 1988: 22).

Because of its seductive image and the desire to seek 'developed country' status, many Asian governments have warmly embraced and promoted it aggressively. They see ICTs as engineering them onto a new development path laden with both the (economic) fruits and symbols of progress, modernity, economic prowess and sophistry. Students, the young, the growing middle classes and the elites saw it as part of the quest for modernity and sophistry, enabling them to enter a 'new world' of linkages and possibilities<sup>20</sup>. Via these new lenses, languages and dense ether exchanges, a sense of greater socialability emerges, helping to usher in, unwittingly, a new form of transnational democratic political activism (Beck, 1994; Falk, 1999; Keck & Sikkinck, 1998).

While there is a proliferation of information networks, and there is potential for considerably for greater individual freedom, in privileging ICTs to deliver democracy, ICTs enthusiasts fail to appreciate that these new technologies are embedded in social relations of power and control, and therefore, innately political. As 'contingent social products' (Sclove, 1995: 7), they are inimical to choices and their development are rooted and influenced by prevailing norms, beliefs and social structures (Jordan, 1999; Spender, 1996). As such, ICTs do not and cannot guarantee democracy nor can they ensure that democracy can be merely downloaded from the web or shopped for online. Democracy remains a highly contested process, requiring the mobilisation of social forces of power and control (Jordan, 1999; Beniger, 1984; Castells, 1989).

This issue of democratic control is most stark in its technical operations. The basic powers of rule-making, rule-applying or rule interpreting are developed and devolved from managers, systems operators and software designers and their expertise, which in turn, spawn their own internal logics and power<sup>21</sup>. ASCII (American Standard Codes for

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<sup>20</sup> These 'new possibilities' often invoke the celebration of the creation of new virtual identities. Whilst these identities can be empowering (Plant, 199; Turkle, 1996), the new 'post-human' embodiments are still digitally and materially inscribed and transcribed by various unequal power relations. As such, they cannot be divorced from the cultural, social, political and economic contexts within which the new technologies operate (Wong, 2001e; Hayles, 1998; Holmes, 1997)

<sup>21</sup> Numerous writers have pointed out embedded within ICT discourse and practice is an implicit 'enframing' process whereby our perceptions and our modes of thinking are structured and subsumed by the calculative and instrumentalisation of technology practice and logic (Heidegger, 1959; Weizenbaum, 1984; Robins & Webster, 198; Wong, 2001d). Alternative modes of thinking and practice in the face of this technological onslaught are suspended and posited as the *only* alternative for countries seeking and desiring greater growth and 'development'. Paul Virilio (1993) has suggested that we are in the midst of some kind of technological transition. But this movement, he argues, is not one towards greater democracy. For him, it is more totalitarian in spirit and character, and is led by technological elites, reminiscent of a class acting in and for its own interests. Because they control the production, distribution and consumption of these new

Information Interchange) implicitly sums up the state of the digital planet at this time, while IBM, Cisco, Hewlett Packard, Microsoft or Oracle produce almost all the hardware and software, and North American or European telcos support most of the connectivity.

This globalised, transnational economy is also not a level playing field, at least in terms of control and management of the high value-adding services, particularly, economic and banking services (including insurance and investment) and major transport services. In the 'new' Internet/digital economy, these interests also tend to narrow options as they seek to connect and funnel disparate and isolated individuals to their newly established 'enclosures' (such examples include portals and similar business-type communities). As companies seek to manage and maintain their profitability and competitiveness, issues and decisions about investment, taxation, intellectual property, pricing structures, substitutes<sup>22</sup> (Evans & Wurster, 2000; Varian, 2000; Cusumano & Yoffie, 1998; McKnight & Bailey, 1997), and licensing arrangements arise and invariably, spawn new political jurisdictions, practices and structure<sup>23</sup> (Wong, 2001c). This raises questions about governance, democracy and democratic control over economic decisions and knowledge resources. As such, it is a little premature to proclaim 'the end of history' and sound the death knell on structural inequalities.

The matrix of market rules and mantra of market populism may have pushed the ICTs= democracy envelope along but clearly this is a mistaken view. Even Bill Gates has reminded us, networks and technologies cannot and 'will not eliminate barriers of prejudice or inequality' (Gates, 1995: 251). While globally, 7% of the world's population is hooked up and as we have suggested in this paper, in Asia, the situation is even more acute (save for countries like Singapore, Japan and South Korea), this digital divide pales in terms of physical and social divides. The income gap between the fifth of the world's people living in the richest countries and the fifth in the poorest was about 30 to 1 in 1960, 60 to 1 in 1990 and 74 to 1 in 1997 (UNDP, 1999: 3). The World Bank similarly shares this concern. In a study drawn on household surveys between 1988 and 1993, it found that the income of the richest 20% of the world's population increased by 12% (more than twice the rate of growth of mean world income), while the poorest quintile dropped (Milanovic, 1999). By the late 1990s, it is claimed that assets of the three richest

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technologies, they are also simultaneously rewriting the history of these new technologies. As a result, they are able to command, baffle and seduce people with the mysteries and liminality of technology. In such a context, we are only able to exercise our individuality, freedom and democratic right via a consuming decision. Democracy, is thus 'emptied of all of its substance' (Mouffe, 1988: 97).

<sup>22</sup> As the economy becomes increasingly global and businesses seek to compete on competitive advantages via innovation, they tend to try to reduce their dependence on primary commodities. For example, rubber and jute are displaced by new synthetic materials and in the telecommunication (and new economy) sector, copper is and will be replaced by fibre optics and the development of photonics. Invariably, the terms of trade for developing countries move generally downwards.

<sup>23</sup> E-commerce proponents have argued that the Internet is a borderless bazaar, providing low entry and set-up costs with immense global market reach (Evans & Wurster, 2000). Developing countries, it is thus argued, would benefit from these developments. While seemingly accessible and easy to develop, developing countries are generally primary commodities, raw materials and tangible products (including handcrafts, clothing and fine shoes) which relies not only on ability to communicate with clients/customers but also on access to the physical infrastructure to ship these goods. They must also be supported by efficient banking service and credit cards access facilities. Again, such access is not open but managed, controlled and dominated by major transnational interests.

billionaires in the world were greater than the combined GNP of *all* least developed countries (my emphasis). Clearly then, with such polarising trends, as critical as ICTs and information are, there do not provide clean water, good health nor regular, stable food supplies for many people in the world who are still shut out from this digerati circle.

The barriers in and on the Web are real and cannot merely be wished away or simply dissolved in cyberspace. Cyberspace continues to manifest an aristocracy and community of location and disposition, laced with conflicts. Nonetheless, cyberspace has shown it has the potential and ability to create and provide a quick, innovative and efficient means to share experiences, information<sup>24</sup> and ideas; it also aids in mobilisation and enabled some new and alternative forms of interaction and ‘electronic civil disobedience’<sup>25</sup>.

In Asia, the impact of the Internet in promoting democracy is, however, not uniform nor easily explained. In some countries, (as evident in my discussion on Malaysia and Indonesia), it has certainly allowed social activists to resist, mobilise and attempt to create more democratic space and democratic communities. Many countries are still struggling with the notion and culture of citizenship practices that underpin democracy. Outcomes for greater democracy is, therefore, not guaranteed (as in China and Singapore) and the task for social and political activists campaigning for greater democracy is, therefore, to craft a strategy where the local-global contradictions are successfully negotiated. This strategy, would need to as a minimum, force them ‘to empower the disempowered, extend the boundaries of political debate, make enfranchisement into the system of political discourse easier, make political discourse more rational and informative, and bring citizens closer to interaction with centres of power’ (Hacker & Todino, 1996: 79). Until these strategies are effectively realised, the Internet will remain a divide, where the vast majority of humanity find themselves ‘in paradoxical waters that both show up their presence and render them invisible’ (Okri, 1997: 128), condemned and exiled to a hundred years of solitude.

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<sup>24</sup> The idea of information is especially critical. Social activists have bemoaned the lack of transparency and ability to be involved in decision-making processes. Via the Internet, information is now more accessible and easier to circulate. Without a context and interpretation, information as such is of limited value. The debates surrounding the interpretation and evaluation of the information is the value-adding outcome of Internet activism, particularly via mailing lists and conferences where ongoing flows of conversation constitute a kind of alternative community of discussion and debate. This forum is much more free-flowing and operates more democratically than traditional policymaking institutions.

<sup>25</sup> These forms of civil disobedience can include various kinds of online activities, including petitions, email protest campaigns and even ‘hacking’ although social activists movements have generally been critical of hackers.

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