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# Cacophony or Empowerment? Analysing the Impact of New Information Communication Technologies and New Social Media in Southeast Asia

Jason P. Abbott

**Abstract:** The capabilities, tools and websites we associate with new information communication technologies and social media are now ubiquitous. Moreover tools that were designed to facilitate innocuous conversation and social interaction have had unforeseen political impacts. Nowhere was this more visible than during the 2011 uprisings across the Arab World. From Tunis to Cairo, and Tripoli to Damascus protest movements against authoritarian rule openly utilized social networking and file sharing tools to publicize and organize demonstrations and to catalogue human rights abuses. The Arab Spring, or Jasmine Revolution, was an event that was both witnessed and played out in real time online. This article explores the impacts and effects of these technologies on regimes in East Asia, in particular exploring the extent to which they proffer new capabilities upon activists and reformers in the region's semi-democratic and authoritarian regimes. Drawing on data on Internet and smartphone use, as well as case studies that explore the role of these technologies on the 2008 and 2011 general elections in Malaysia and Singapore respectively, this article suggests that the Internet and social networking platforms do present unique opportunities for activists, citizens and social movements.

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**Keywords:** Southeast Asia, information communication technology, ICT, new social media, democratization

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It's not a Facebook thing, it's an Internet thing [...] I think Facebook was neither necessary nor sufficient for any of those things to happen [...] but] If it weren't Facebook, it would be something else (Mark Zuckerberg, CEO, Facebook at e-G8 summit, Paris, 25 May 2011).

We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world (Egyptian activist in Cairo, February 2011).

Throughout 2011 the international community witnessed unprecedented political opposition and revolutions across the Middle East. Dubbed the 'Jasmine Revolution' or 'Arab Spring' popular movements overturned three of the region's long-standing political regimes, the Ben-Ali regime in Tunisia, the 30 year rule of strongman Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and perhaps most unexpectedly the Qaddafi regime in Libya. Furthermore the demonstration effects from these countries incited protest in countries from Bahrain to Syria. Much of this caught everyone by surprise, be they academics, diplomats, journalists or policy advisors. While this outburst of popular discontent clearly reflected a number of long-term trends: a demographic explosion in the 1970s and 1980s; high levels of youth unemployment; and pervasive levels of corruption, perhaps the most discussed feature has been the role played by information communication technology (ICT) and social networking tools. Of the latter much has been made of the fact that protests were 'advertised' as forthcoming events on Facebook, while the micro-blogging site Twitter became an instant source of information from the scene.

These events prompted speculation as to whether such popular uprisings could happen in that other bastion of authoritarian and quasi-democratic regimes, Southeast Asia. Might demonstration effects spread to countries as diverse as Burma, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Vietnam? Leaders in these countries were initially clearly worried. In February 2011 the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib issued a stark warning, "[d]on't think what is happening in Tunisia and Egypt will also happen in Malaysia. We will not allow it to happen here" (Then and Rose 2011). Former deputy Prime Minister and opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim however had a different take remarking that the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt should be a warning signal to other autocracies "whether in the Middle East, Pakistan or Southeast Asia" (Anwar 2011). Anwar continued noting that the demise of regimes where corruption and nepotism flourished, should remind Malaysians that governments built on the suppression of citizens are always temporary.

In Cambodia, strongman Hun Sen, who has dominated national politics since 1989 and has been Prime Minister since 1998, was even starker in his warnings stating on 20 January, in response to comments on a Radio Free Asia report that a Tunisian-like protest could occur in Cambodia, "I

have to send a message to people who want to inspire a riot (like) in Tunisia [...] I will close the door and beat the dog” (Sothanarith 2011). Again in contrast the embattled long-standing anti-corruption opposition figure Sam Rainsy echoed Anwar’s views when he stated on 2 February,

I see that it is not long [...] that there would be such a situation in Cambodia that is the same as Egypt and Tunisia, where people have ousted leaders from power (Peang-Meth 2011).

In Vietnam on 21 February one of the country’s leading dissidents, Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, launched an appeal in Ho Chi Minh City asking people to take to the streets to save the country (Hung 2011). His appeal was taken up by a Vietnamese website urging supporters of political change to meet each Sunday in Hanoi and HCMC. Another dissident group, *Bloc 8406*, which issued a manifesto on democratization on 8 April 2006, released an online statement in which it urged Vietnamese to follow the example of North Africa and demand greater democracy and human rights (Hung 2011).

Even in the region’s most repressive regime, Burma, where a military-led government has presided over the country since 1988, a Facebook group entitled *Just Do It Against Military Dictatorship* was launched on 13 February, (the birthday of Aung San, the late Burmese independence leader and father of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi) denouncing Burmese military chief Senior-General Than Shwe, and as in Egypt urging the army to join with the people (Ellgee 2011; Wai 2011). Although the group failed to inspire any mass protest, it did result in the distribution of anti-government materials in a number of cities across the country. In addition Facebook has become one of the most popular websites in Burma with by one estimate over 400,000 members (Htwe 2011).

Obviously there are clear differences between these regimes and their counterparts in North Africa. In the case of Vietnam political power no longer resides in the figure of a single authoritarian leader but instead the succession problem has largely been resolved, as in China, by the retirement and promotion of successive generations of party apparatchiks. In addition, in Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam government censorship and the security and intelligence forces are both more pervasive, heavy-handed and to date have proven more pro-active in anticipating political unrest and acting quickly and decisively before such unrest can appeal to wider constituencies.

While it is too early to deliver a conclusive assessment of whether information communication technologies and social networking tools online play a causal role in fomenting and facilitating democratization this article will explore the social and political impact of the Internet on Southeast Asia. In particular the article addresses to a number of questions:

1. To what extent is the use and diffusion of new information communication technologies (principally use of the Internet, and social networking platforms) correlated with levels of economic development?
2. Is the diffusion of those technologies limited to a relatively small proportion of the population, and if so does this diminish the democratizing impact of the Internet?
3. In what ways does the use of the Internet and social networking platforms confer opportunities for activists, citizens and social movements?

For all the hype and punditry, this is not the first time ‘new’ information communication technologies have impacted on political mobilization in Southeast Asia. The use of cell phone text messaging by demonstrators to coordinate protests was first witnessed during the revolution that brought down General Suharto in Indonesia in 1998 as well as during the ESDA II protests in The Philippines in 2001, that led to the resignation of Joseph Estrada (Rizzo 2008). Similarly supporters of the uprising by Buddhist monks in Burma in 2007 used Facebook prominently to raise international attention. Likewise conventional blogging first emerged as a common feature of politics in Malaysia during the Reformasi protests of 1998 and in the aftermath of the arrest and detention of its *de facto* leader Anwar Ibrahim (Abbott 2001b). Since then several anti-government bloggers have risen to prominence and notoriety, with a handful even elected to public office in 2008.<sup>1</sup>

What is new is the development of specific tools for enhancing social network interaction and the increasing integration of these with text messaging and email into the latest generation of cell phones (dubbed smart phones). These phones allow the user to take photographs, record video, access the Internet and communicate instantly via a range of tools and platforms. One of the results of this is that “savvy opposition campaigners [have] turned social media applications like Facebook from minor pop culture fads into a major tool of political communication” (Howard 2011: 4).

In many countries worldwide, including Southeast Asia, governments have traditionally relied on their control of the mainstream media to silence or limit opposition voices while restricting access to alternative media sources, including foreign media. Traditional media was both hierarchical in its organizational structure and unidirectional in the flow of information thereby enabling the state to monopolize the production of content. The

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1 The most famous bloggers elected in 2008 were Jeff Ooi, who won a seat on the island of Penang and Tony Pua, who won a seat in the capital Kuala Lumpur. Other bloggers elected were Nik Azmi Nik Ahmed and Elizabeth Wong, a noted human rights activist and media reforms advocate (Seneviratne 2008).

Internet and new social media by contrast are fundamentally challenging this. The development of social media tools (e.g. Facebook), freely available blogging software (Blogger, Word Press), photo and video sharing sites (Flickr, Youtube), blogging agglomeration sites (Digg, Reddit) and collaborative production are undermining and overturning the traditional media model by effectively eliminating the costs of information production and the dissemination of that information. In the new media audiences are no longer passive but active, both consumers and producers of content. Individual users can post their own stories and become citizen journalists which in turn can be shared and evade even the harshest censorship controls and repressive regimes. In Burma in 2007, for example, citizen journalists equipped with smartphones and handheld camcorders (provided by the Norwegian based *Democratic Voice of Burma*) were able to record and broadcast footage of the Buddhist monk uprising and its repression (Win 2008).<sup>2</sup> Similarly during the Green revolution in Iran hundreds of videos were uploaded daily on YouTube. In addition these technologies now allow ordinary citizen to conduct surveillance and monitor the state, documenting human rights abuses and at least in theory improve the capacity of civil society.

Critics of the 'leveling and enabling thesis' (e.g. Morozov 2011; Gladwell 2010; Robins and Webster 1999) advance a number of arguments of which the most often heard are firstly that all technology is neutral, thus these new technologies and tools can be used to advance extremism, and anti-democratic agendas just as much as they can of 'progressive' causes and democracy. Secondly that they can be manipulated to expand the reach of the state rather than to minimize it; and finally that the impact of the new media is exaggerated because a) the spread and penetration of Internet access remains limited to a small largely urban middle class elite and is not a widespread social phenomenon, b) significant digital divides continue to exist and c) the majority of internet users are unconcerned with politics and instead use it to communicate with friends, shop, game or simply to idle away the time. It is these propositions that this article specifically addresses.

It is important at this juncture to define what is meant by democratization in the context of this article. Here is taken to refer to more than simply a process of political liberalization, transition or regime change but instead a process that includes both the dissemination of democratic norms and practices as well as the emergence and enlargement of public spaces (particularly online spaces) where citizens can exchange opinions and views openly and freely. In other words democratization is also a process of increased partici-

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2 As also documented in the award-winning documentary *Burma VJ*.

pation and a process in which existing hierarchies of social, economic and political power are undermined.

## The Scope, Reach and Impact of the Internet, and Social Networking Platforms in Southeast Asia

While there is no single comprehensive survey of the eleven countries that comprise Southeast Asia seven of the countries of the region have been the subject of either the World Values Survey research project or the Asian Barometer research program on public opinion (and a handful of both). The countries for which there is no comprehensive data for comparison are: Brunei, Burma, East Timor, and Laos. Both projects comprise a broad range of survey findings across a range of subjects most notably peoples' values on democracy, governance, quality-of-life issues as well as attitudes to, and use, of new technology. It must be noted, however, that the data on Internet usage is limited both in terms of what was measured, and more specifically because of when the data was collected. The most recent surveys that are publically available were conducted between 2005 and 2008 which means that Internet usage in these surveys do not reflect the exponential growth of social media.<sup>3</sup>

Since few of the major comparative surveys have yet to *specifically* address the impact of the Internet, let alone of new social media,<sup>4</sup> the main data in this article is largely drawn from private research companies such as Nielsen, Gallup, Ipsos etc., data which one must note is primarily gathered for market research purposes. Of these the most recent surveys that are pertinent for this study are the 2006 Harris Interactive/MSN Windows Live report on blogging in Asia, the 2010 inaugural *Asia-Pacific Social Media Report* by the US based media research company Nielsen (Nielsen 2010), their October 2011 study on *Digital Media in Southeast Asia* and the August 2011 report by Google and Ipsos of 30,000 smartphone users in 30 countries worldwide, of which eleven were in Asia.

In terms of the how extensive and pervasive the Internet is in Southeast Asia, Nielsen's 2011 study of six countries in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam) showed that on average 39.5 per cent of the population had used the internet in the past twelve months. As Table 1 shows this ranged from a low of only 21 per cent in Indonesia to a high of 67 per cent in Singapore. While the incidence of In-

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3 Facebook was launched in February 2004, Youtube in 2005, Twitter in 2006 and Tumblr in 2007.

4 The only major regular studies are conducted by Nielsen Media and Alexa Internet.

ternet use appears to be roughly correlated with economic development the notable exception to the rule is Vietnam which has the lowest GDP per capita of the sample size at 3,143 USD<sup>5</sup> but the second highest penetration rate according to Nielsen. Moreover in terms of frequency of use the overwhelming majority of Internet users go online *at least* several times a week or more, with almost a half (49.8 per cent) doing so daily.

Table 1: Internet Use Total and by Age

Country	Total %	Age					GDP per Capita USD
		15-19	20-29	29-39	40-49	50+	
Indonesia	21	55	26	14	5	1	4,347
Malaysia	38	60	55	41	19	n/d	14,744
Philippines	33	60	43	21	11	3	3,920
Singapore	67	97	92	86	72	33	56,694
Thailand	31	76	52	34	23	9	9,221
Vietnam	56	92	76	43	27	17	3,143

Source: Nielsen 2011.

Table 2: Use of Internet in Past 4 Weeks

Country	Daily	Several times a week	Once per week	Once or twice a month	Less often
Indonesia	32	43	9	9	7
Malaysia	53	35	6	5	0.3
Philippines	34	45	16	4	1
Singapore	80	15	3	2	0.3
Thailand	36	52	9	3	0.3
Vietnam	64	31	3	3	0

Source: Nielsen 2011.

Reading the above data in a different way we can calculate the mean score for *non-usage* of the Internet at 57.3 per cent. Indeed in only two countries, Singapore and Vietnam do Internet users represent a majority of the population, thus the median proportion that is not online is 64.5 per cent. In other words despite strong growth in Internet penetration in recent years the Internet is still used by a minority. However acknowledging this does not nec-

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5 GDP per capita calculated by Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), REF.



essarily undermine the argument that the Internet remains an important medium of political expression and socio-political change.

For example, Howard (2011) dismisses the skeptical view that because the proportion of people using information technologies in the developing world is relatively small the impact of such technologies is exaggerated. Instead he maintains that,

[i]t does not matter that the number of bloggers, twitterers, or internet users may seem small, because in a networked social movement *only a few 'brokers'* need to be using these tools to keep everyone up to date. These are the communication tools for the wealthy, urban, educated elites whose loyalties or defection will make or break authoritarian rule (Howard 2011: 11, emphasis added).

Indeed Howard's argument should not be particularly surprising for scholars of democratization and transition since the same effective argument has frequently been made in the broad literature about the agency of political change. Transition theorists have long argued that one of the principal causal explanations of democratization in authoritarian regimes is the emergence of an organized middle class (e.g. Moore 1966; Huntington 1991; Rueschmeyer, Huber Stephens, and Stephens 1992) This class, usually partially co-opted by the existing regime, consists of the better educated, upwardly mobile and entrepreneurial in society that increasingly finds the strictures of authoritarianism undesirable. Whether the middle class and its social, economic and political demands command wider popular support is questionable, but their role has for the most part been accepted largely as canon. In a similar vein Howard makes the point that it is precisely this social class that will be among the most Internet-savvy and active online and thus the Internet, information communication technologies and new social media arguably have a disproportionate impact because of this.

Indeed Howard's argument seems to be borne out by the data both from Nielsen as well as the four Southeast Asian countries included in the World Value Survey which clearly shows that while the overall number of Internet users might be relatively small the Internet population is disproportionately young – of the six countries in the Nielsen survey an overwhelming majority of 15-19 year olds are online, with the second highest penetration among 20-29 year olds (Table 1) – and drawn from the better-educated sectors of society (see Tables 3 and 4 below).

**Table 3: Internet Usage and Education**

Country	No education	Completed Elementary	Completed Secondary	Some University	University Degree
Indonesia					
<i>Used last week</i>	6.2	3.2	7.8	23	44.1
<i>Not used last week</i>	93.8	96.8	92.2	77	55.9
Malaysia					
<i>Used last week</i>	18.2	7.9	30.6	91.4	75.6
<i>Not used last week</i>	81.8	92.1	69.4	8.6	24.4
Thailand					
<i>Used last week</i>	9.8	3.7	15.6	60	56.2
<i>Not used last week</i>	90.2	96.3	84.4	40	43.8
Vietnam					
<i>Used last week</i>	0	2	9.9	47.4	47.4
<i>Not used last week</i>	100	98	90.1	52.6	52.6

Source: World Values Survey 2005-2008; Asian Barometer 2005-2008.

As the above table (Table 3) clearly demonstrates in all cases, regardless of economic development or regime type, the most active Internet users are those with at least some University education. A similar picture emerges if we cross-tabulate usage with occupation (see Table 4, below). Here the most active Internet users are drawn from occupations associated with the middle classes as opposed to occupations associated with the working class or agricultural class. In addition very high percentages of students are active online, which again we would expect since in the literature on democratic transitions students and the intelligentsia are often at the vanguard of political reform/ revolutionary movements.

**Table 4: Percentage of Respondents Reporting to Have Used the Internet in the Last Week to Obtain Information by Occupation**

	<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>Malaysia</b>	<b>Thailand</b>	<b>Vietnam</b>
Employer/ Manager	30.3	31.2	44.4	18.1
Professional	29.4	60.7	29.4	24.5
Student	46.1	52.8	56.5	53.1
Office worker (supervisor)	36.1	62.7	38.3	18.6
Office worker	24.5	56.3	27.2	15.2
Foreman/ Supervisor	16.7	60.9	29.2	16.7
Skilled manual	10.4	37.1	8.6	15.9
Semi-skilled manual	7.5	19.4	7	14.8
Unskilled	7.5	21	15.8	7.1
Farmer	2.7	0	5.4	5.4
Agric worker	2	0	3	2.7

Source: World Values Survey 2005-2008; Asian Barometer 2005-2008.

## Data on New Social Media and Smartphone Usage

One of the few studies to date of the impact of new social media in Southeast Asia is the October 2010 inaugural *Asia-Pacific Social Media Report* by the US based media research company Nielsen. What is particularly interesting about the report is that it clearly demonstrates that new social media is having a growing impact on the online population both globally and in Asia. Nielsen found for example that 74 per cent of the worldwide Internet population has visited a social network or blogging site and that users spend an average of 6 hours a month on such sites. Furthermore the study reveals that three of the seven biggest online brands are social media sites (Facebook, Wikipedia and Youtube).

Although again there is a clear divide between developed and developing world economies (for example the most active bloggers globally are found in Japan), in all countries the trend is towards the ever-greater penetration of new social media among the online population. Table 5 below for example shows that seven of the 20 largest Facebook populations are found

in the Asia-Pacific region but that, of particular note, four of these are developing countries and the second largest Facebook population is, surprisingly, found in Indonesia.

**Table 5: Largest Facebook Populations in the World 2010 (Asia-Pacific Countries Selected)**

Rank (Dec. 2011)	Country	Number of Facebook users Dec 2011	Number of Facebook users 1st April 2010	Number of Facebook users 1st April 2009	Penetration rate %
2	Indonesia	40,829,720	20,775,320	2,325,840	16.8
3	India	38,045,000	7,809,800	1,561,000	3.2
8	The Philippines	26,752,000	11,561,740	1,026,300	26.8
16	Thailand	12,881,800	2,895,320	284,340	19.4
17	Malaysia	11,816,200	5,552,660	1,197,560	45.2
18	Taiwan	11,600,260	9,053,660	6,107,100	50.3
19	Australia	10,721,020	9,862,820	7,922,140	50.42

Source: Socialbakers n.y.

It is important to note that the figure for India conceals the fact that India is the second largest market in the world for Facebook’s Google-created rival social networking platform Orkut. As of September 2011 it was estimated that there were approximately 11.1 million Orkut users in India (Sharma and Thoppil 2011). If we combine this figure with the number of Facebook users then we reach a figure of almost 50 million users. Additionally although Facebook, Orkut and Twitter are included on the list of sites blocked by the so-called “Great Firewall of China” China has its own social networking site Qzone which with over 480 million users makes China home to the largest social networked population in the world (Rapoza 2011). Furthermore Chinese Internet users are avid online bulletin board posters. In 2006 the state-run China Internet Network Information Center (CINIC 2006) reported that 43 per cent of all Chinese Internet users regularly used bulletin boards and since multiple user IDs can be registered it was estimated in 2010 that there were over 3 billion registered bulletin board IDs (Cap Gemini 2010).

## The Use of Social Media and the Internet

But what are Southeast Asia’s digital populations doing online? Again data from the 2011 Nielsen study is quite revealing. With the exception of Indonesia accessing online news was one of the top five activities conducted on at least a weekly basis. While the activity itself ranged from first to fourth most popular, the mean percentage among those surveyed was 83 per cent. Interestingly the countries in which accessing news online received the highest percentage scores were the three countries in which press freedom is most widely curtailed. While acknowledging that the sample size is too small to draw statistical significance from the data, there does appear to be a correlation between the two variables, if only among these five countries.

**Table 6: Percentage of Internet Users Accessing News on at Least a Weekly Basis and Press Freedom Rankings**

	<b>News online in %</b>	<b>Press Freedom Ranking 2011</b>
Malaysia	82	143
Philippines	79	93
Singapore	86	150
Thailand	79	138
Vietnam	90	177

Source: Nielsen 2011; Freedom House 2011.

As to the other popular activities email, communicating via social media (including private messaging on social media), and searching are the most common. Consistent with the sheer number of Indonesians using Facebook, social media activities make up four of the five most popular activities conducted online in the country.

Among the new social media Facebook overwhelmingly dominates the landscape across Southeast Asia with the exception of Vietnam where only 28 per cent of the online population have an active profile (compared to 33 per cent for the Vietnamese social network Zine Me), and to a lesser extent Thailand (where 4Shared has a comparable market share). Twitter has yet to make a significant impact in the region with the only countries where a sizeable number of digital users have an active profile being The Philippines with 31 per cent, and Indonesia with 19 per cent (Nielsen 2011). Youtube by contrast has a widespread reach in all six countries with a mean of 39 per cent (Nielsen 2011). In Malaysia the third most popular social media platform is Google’s blogging site ‘Blogger’ with 31 per cent of Internet users having an active profile. This points to the widespread phenomenon of blogging in Malaysia which according to some reports has one of the highest

number of blogs per capita.<sup>6</sup> Indeed data from Alexa shows that Blogger is the 8<sup>th</sup> most visited website in Malaysia as a whole. Catalyzed by the Anwar Ibrahim affair and the Reformasi movement of 1998, blogging became a leading source of alternative news and comment in Malaysia much earlier than in the rest of the region. Led by sites such as the Free Anwar Campaign (which would become *Malaysia Today*), Crossroads and the Nut Graph, blogging also took off because of Prime Minister Mahathir's pledge to investors in the Multimedia Super Corridor not to subject online media to the censorship and controls that largely mutes the mainstream media in the country.<sup>7</sup> In addition the influence of bloggers in the 2008 General Election has been widely noted, including by Prime Minister Najib who remarked that his coalition had "lost the Internet war" (*Voice of America* 2008).<sup>8</sup>

As noted earlier blogging has become increasingly widespread both globally and across Asia, but what of their significance and impact? The 2006 Harris Interactive/MSN Windows Live report,<sup>9</sup> found that 74 per cent of online users stated that they were most interested in blogs by friends and relatives, followed by work colleagues with 25 per cent. Blogs by politicians however were poorly received with only 14 per cent of respondents saying they found them of interest, although in Malaysia this figure was higher at 20 per cent. While this may suggest at first that political blogging may not be significant in terms of democratization the survey also noted that half of all respondents stated that they found blog content to be *as trustworthy* as traditional media, supporting the premise that because such platforms and tools challenge existing hierarchies of information and encourage greater participation they are indeed democratizing. For example, the news blog and blog agglomeration site *Malaysia Today*<sup>10</sup> is ranked as one of the top twenty web-

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6 While calculating the number of blogs worldwide is extraordinarily imprecise since a large number of blogs remain online even if inactive, estimates nevertheless suggest that there are upwards of 160 million blogs worldwide. In Malaysia government ministers have suggested that the number of blogs in Malaysia exceeds 500,000 (*The Star* 2008).

7 Mahathir's motivation here was simply to give Malaysia a competitive edge against projects in other countries in the region. The pledge however was written into the Bill of Guarantees of the Multimedia Super Corridor project.

8 See footnote 1.

9 The report was conducted for Microsoft's Windows Live platform which includes a blogging service. The report was conducted online across seven markets: Hong Kong, India, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand and 25,000 respondents took part (*Xinhua* 2006).

10 Deeply critical of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition that has ruled Malaysia since independence in 1957, the website's founder and chief editor Raja Petra Kamarudin was arrested under the country's infamous Internal Security Act in September 2008. Although subsequently released he fled to England (he has dual citizenship)

sites in Malaysia by the web information company Alexa and receives over 1.5 million visits a day of which 83 per cent come from Malaysian IP addresses.

## Smartphone Use

Nielsen’s October 2011 survey of the digital habits of Southeast Asian consumers reveals that household ownership of desktop computers, laptops and internet-capable cell phones are fairly ubiquitous in all countries except Indonesia (see Table 7 below). Moreover, with the exception of Vietnam, ownership of Internet-capable cell phones is either equal to or exceeds computer ownership. In addition smartphone ownership is significant with mean ownership already 44 per cent. In Indonesia smartphone ownership exceeds both desktop and laptop ownership, suggesting that these devices may become a substitute for more expensive computer ownership. Indeed this conclusion is not simple speculation. Neilsen’s survey also asked households about their intention to purchase digital consumer goods in the year ahead. In Indonesia 29 per cent indicated they would purchase a smartphone against 27 per cent for a laptop and only 19 per cent for a desktop PC.

Table 7: Household Ownership of Devices

	Desktop	Laptop/ notebook	Internet capa- ble cell phone	Smartphone
Indonesia	31	29	78	38
Malaysia	77	79	77	48
Philippines	68	54	64	35
Singapore	74	86	85	70
Thailand	70	61	77	60
Vietnam	75	25	32	11

Source: Nielsen 2011.

Examining how Southeast Asians access the Internet the Nielsen survey found that desktop and laptop computers continue to be the principal device for access, although cell phones are becoming more significant. Of note again here is Indonesia where cell phones are already the main device for accessing the Internet (see Table 8). This further suggests that smartphones

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during a criminal defamation case in 2009 citing fears that he may be arrested again. Due to repeated Denial of Service attacks the website is hosted on foreign servers.

could become a substitute for PCs and a means of bridging one of the identified digital divides (cost). However the case is not conclusive since similar trends are not identifiable in The Philippines or Vietnam, both of which have comparable levels of GDP per capita to Indonesia. This notwithstanding, similar trends have been identified in other developing world countries (Cruz 2011). We thus might conclude that at the very least PC usage may no longer be a clear indicator of how online a country may be.

Table 8: Device Used to Access the Internet (ever/ main)

	Indonesia		Malaysia		Philippines		Thailand		Vietnam	
	E	M	E	M	E	M	E	M	E	M
PC	82	42	92	42	88	39	82	38	95	80
Laptop	36	12	87	49	93	50	81	35	30	16
Cell phone	73	43	73	3	79	8	63	7	21	4

Note: E = ever; M = main.

Source: Nielsen 2011.

While the above analyses have explored the growth in usage of new ICTs, the Internet and new social media, this in itself does not really address whether despite the fact that users are predominantly drawn from the middle class they remain *democratizing*. Testing this quantitatively is somewhat problematic but one can proffer that if the technology was broadly democratizing we should expect to see either abrupt changes in country measures of freedom (revolution) or a trend line towards greater freedom (reform). One way of testing this is to examine Freedom House rankings over the past decade since the surge in Internet use has been since the late 1990s.

Table 9 demonstrates that with the lone exception of Indonesia there appears to have been no significant democratization of the political systems in Southeast Asia. While there was a modest improvement of a single point in Malaysia, the majority of regimes remained stable either as authoritarian or semi-democratic types. In Thailand and The Philippines, where we would expect to see an improvement given their sizeable middle classes and active civil society, both saw deteriorations in their scores. In Thailand this was the result of a military coup in 2006, whereas in The Philippines it was a result of growing political corruption and electoral violence. Consequently if the *only* measure of whether information communication technologies and the Internet have a democratizing effect is a quantitative comparison of the above kind then the second, and arguably most critical of the hypotheses advanced in this article, would not be supported by the evidence.



Table 9: Freedom House Rankings (Political Rights) 2002-2010

Country	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Trend
Burma	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	(Auth) Stable
Cambodia	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	(Auth) Stable
Indonesia	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	(D) Improvement
Malaysia	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	(SD) Improvement
Philippines	2	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	3	(D/SD) Mixed
Singapore	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	(SD) Stable
Thailand	2	2	2	2	3	7	6	5	5	5	(D/SD) Deterioration
Vietnam	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	(Auth) Stable

Source: Freedom House 2011.

To comprehensively test whether use of the Internet and new social media has had a democratizing effect on Southeast Asia such data would have to be supplemented with comprehensive case study analyses which clearly is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless two examples from Malaysia and Singapore suggest that such analyses would provide ample evidence to support the case for democratizing effects.

## Malaysia and Singapore: The Impact of the Internet in Semi-Democracies

In both Malaysia and Singapore general election results from 2008 and 2011 respectively saw historic electoral setbacks for the governing Barisan National coalition and Peoples Action Party. While in neither country did the opposition win the election, they nevertheless achieved record gains. In Malaysia the opposition Pakatan Rakyat denied the Barisan its two-thirds majority and won control of a record five state legislatures (Kedah, Kelantan, Penang, Perak and Selangor). In Singapore the Peoples Action Party secured its lowest vote share since independence (60.4 per cent), while the opposition both contested and won a record number of seats and for the first time

won in a Group Representation Constituency. The results caught the respective governments by surprise, and many commentators have attributed these results to the growing impact of online media. In both countries a combination of repressive legislation, ownership structures and compliant editors have ensured that the mainstream print and TV media has been overtly biased towards the government giving little if any air time to opposition politicians or campaigners (Abbott 2011). As a result the Internet has been the only effective arena in which opposition parties have been able to campaign, compete and critique (Brown 2005).

In Malaysia the country's opposition parties were among the first to go online, quickly developing websites that enabled them to circumvent the restrictions on the print media. Indeed attempts by the Malaysian government to restrict the 'offline' publications of the opposition actually contributed to the increased sophistication and innovation of online activities. For example, in March 2000 the Malaysian government acted to restrict the rights of the Islamic party PAS to publish its newspaper *Harakah*. All publications in Malaysia are required by the Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984) to renew their publishing permit annually, allowing the Home Minister to deny renewal to publications it considers likely to endanger national security or create social unrest. Thus in 2000 in renewing the publishing permit for *Harakah*, Deputy Home Minister Chor Chee Heung stated that the newspaper could now only be published twice a month instead of bi-weekly (*BBC News* 2000). PAS's solution was to pour resources into an online version of the paper *Harakah Daily*. Within a year the website incorporated multimedia 'online television' and continued to add functionality at a rapid pace. Today *Harakah Daily* includes both a Malay and (since March 2011) an English language site, multimedia resources, letters pages, columns, RSS feed, feed from its Twitter account and a link to its Facebook Page, which has over 210,000 'fans'. By comparison Malaysia's leading newspaper by circulation, *The Star* only has 44,000 fans, and the country's oldest newspaper, *The New Straits Times*, has 50,000.

Consistent with Howard's (2011: 180) argument that in autocratic regimes opposition political parties and civil society are among the first to go online, a vibrant alternative media flourished in Malaysia, in part because of the explicit economic decision not to censor the web. Probably the best example to illustrate how the Internet has matured in Malaysia as an arena of contestation is the case of the Malaysian news website *Malaysiakini*. In November 1999, taking the government's commitment not to censor the web at its word, former *Star* journalist Steven Gan launched the country's first commercial online newspaper, *Malaysiakini*. Unlike the country's mainstream media, which is heavily biased toward the government (Abbott 2011), *Malay-*

*siakini* remains free of government regulation and is widely regarded domestically and internationally as one of the few credible independent voices in Malaysia. Nevertheless because it is pro-opposition by default, in the sense that it is the only news source that is openly and explicitly critical of the government, and it has been the subject of government attacks, both virtual and real, including three police raids in which computers and servers were removed. Most recently the website was shut down just before state elections in Sarawak in April 2011 as a result of a sustained Denial of Service attack (Whitehead 2011). Nevertheless traffic to *Malaysiakini* has continued to grow peaking during the 2008 General Elections. As of November 2011 *Malaysiakini* was one of the top ten most visited websites in Malaysia (7<sup>th</sup>). The only other news-site in the Top Ten is the pro-government English-language daily *The Star*.<sup>11</sup>

Singapore's 2011 election was the first in which social media tools were effectively used both by the opposition and by the ruling Peoples Action Party. As in Malaysia the opposition proved to be remarkably adept and savvy at using platforms such as Facebook to both campaign online as well as an alternative media for communication that was able to circumvent the country's strict media controls and censorship. In part this was a result of the government categorizing political blogs as media outlets in order that they fell under the strict censorship laws that govern the traditional media (*ABC Radio Australia* 2011).

The most high profile Facebook campaign of the election was mounted by the youngest ever candidate for election, 24 year old Nicole Seah (Russell 2011). Within a week of launching her campaign for the Marine Parade GRC<sup>12</sup> her fan base had catapulted her ahead of all other political figures in the country with the sole exception of the country's elder statesman, Lee Kuan Yew. Seah, representing the opposition National Solidarity Party, was put forward to run against the 27 year old PAP candidate Tin Pei Ling. Ling was chosen by her party to directly appeal to the country's youth and the PAP launched a high profile campaign for her on Youtube and Facebook (Ong 2011). In what one blogger referred to as "the battle of the Sweetie Pies" (*The Strait Times Stomp* 2011) and another "the Battle of the Cutest" (*Loganized* 2011) Ling came across as a largely bland, uncharismatic figure

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11 Coming in 6<sup>th</sup> place, *The Star* is arguably the most independent of all the pro-government newspapers. Nevertheless its bias, particularly during the 2008 election has been quantitatively demonstrated (Abbott 2011).

12 Group Representation Constituency. A GRC is a multi-member constituency in which the party that wins a plurality of the vote succeeds in having their entire slate (team) of candidates elected. In Singapore GRCs form the bulk of the country's constituencies and vary in size from 4-6 members.

dutifully toeing the party line. Seah by contrast proved extremely media savvy, “straight-talking” and keenly aware of the potential of social media. Seah, whose Honors thesis at the National University of Singapore examined the impact of online media in the country, quickly won the battle of Facebook likes, dwarfing Ling by a factor of ten (Ong 2011).

Although the PAP won Marine Parade GRC, the opposition’s performance in the constituency was deeply embarrassing for the party. Firstly PAP was challenged in the constituency for the first time in 19 years. (In 1997, 2001 and 2006 it was uncontested.) Secondly, whereas in 1988, 1991, and the 1992 by-election PAP had consistently won between 73 and 77 per cent of the vote, in 2011 this fell by 20 points to 56 per cent. This remarkable reversal of fortune was made even more poignant by the fact that the constituency has been the seat of the second Prime Minister of Singapore Goh Chok Tong (1990-2004) since he made his debut for the party in 1976. While no longer a single member constituency, Goh has led the team of PAP candidates for this seat since 1988 and he is widely regarded as the third most influential figure in the country behind Lee Kuan Yew and his son the current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Partly as a result of the overall result, the worst performance by the PAP since independence, both Goh and Lee Kuan Yew subsequently retired from the Cabinet in their positions as Senior Minister and Minister Mentor respectively.<sup>13</sup>

While it is difficult to quantify the actual impact social media had on the election as a whole a poll conducted during the campaign for *Today*, the second-most widely read English language newspaper in Singapore, found that Facebook was the third most popular source for online news after Yahoo and Channel News Asia. What is interesting about this result is that since Facebook is not a news site it points to the increased use of social media to post content and share links, especially given the introduction of ‘like’ and ‘share’ buttons on the site. Moreover while the study found that respondents preferred newspapers over the Internet as their primary source of news, 7 out of ten felt that online news sources provided “a wider range of political views than traditional media.”

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13 Although one should note they were subsequently both hired as Senior Advisers, Lee to the government and Goh to the Monetary Authority of Singapore.

## The Levelling Hypothesis: How the Internet and Social Networking Platforms Confer Unique Opportunities for Activists, Citizens and Social Movements

As well as arguing that there is nothing intrinsically democratic about ICTs and social media skeptics also argue that technological-savvy authoritarian governments are still capable of censoring these new technologies directly, or indirectly by encouraging self-censorship and the complicity of corporate actors – one is reminded here of Google’s initial agreement with the Chinese government to censor key words from its search engine in China (*Associated Press* 2006). Nevertheless both Shirky (2011) and Howard (2011) argue that while the above may be true, the technologies nevertheless do confer certain advantages to activists or indeed ordinary users that ‘old’ communication technologies did not. Additionally the new communication tools also confer significant disadvantages to autocratic regimes.

Turning to the latter first, Shirky argues that one of the most revolutionary features of new social media is that it creates a ‘shared awareness’ of the realities of public and private life. The state may have ever more sophisticated tools of surveillance but now ordinary citizens have the ability to use similar tools against the state. In addition an autocratic state “accustomed to having a monopoly on public speech [now] finds itself called to account for anomalies between its view of events and the public’s” (Shirky 2011).

Furthermore Shirky also argues that the new communication technologies now create a dilemma for autocratic states, what he dubs ‘the *conservative* dilemma’. This dilemma comes from the fact that traditional methods of countering dissident voices: propaganda and censorship are now less effective. Since citizens can ‘fact check’ government narratives in a way that was impossible before, the value of propaganda is reduced, while censorship of the internet can have adverse economic and commercial ramifications. While it is possible to opt to ‘shut down’ the Internet domestically, as the Burmese Junta did in November 2007 and the Egyptian government briefly did in February 2011, this strategy risks alienating regime supporters and harming the economy.<sup>14</sup> In addition the nature of new communication technologies is that it is extremely difficult for state authorities to differentiate between political use and apolitical use.

This dilemma provides a retort to the skeptics argument that the overwhelming majority of users of new information communication technolo-

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14 According to the OECD the cost of the Mubarak regime disconnecting Egypt from global networks for five days was 90 billion USD (Howard 2011).

gies are apathetic, more likely to use the Internet to chat with friends, download music and play games. As Shirky (2011) contends, the problems for autocrats is that

[t]ools specifically designed for dissident use are politically easy for the state to shut down, whereas tools in broad use become much harder to censor without risking politicizing the larger group of otherwise apolitical actors.

This has been dubbed by Zuckerman *The Cute Cat Theory* of Internet activism since specific tools designed to counter censorship can be shut down but “broader tools that the larger population uses to [...] share pictures of cute cats are harder to shut down” (Shirky 2011). Moreover as Zuckerman (2008) contends,

cute cats are collateral damage when governments block sites. And even those who could not care less about presidential shenanigans are made aware that their government fears online speech so much that they’re willing to censor the millions of banal videos [...] to block a few political ones.

Furthermore Zuckerman (2008) argues that such action actually has the effect of radicalizing such users since blocking content effectively “teaches people how to become dissidents [...] learning how] to find and use anonymous proxies” which itself becomes a “first step in learning how to blog anonymously”. Indeed recent data by Pew on social media in the United States found that Internet users are more likely to be politically active than non-users with Facebook users in particular “more likely to be politically involved than similar Americans” (Hampton et al. 2011).<sup>15</sup>

Howard (2011: 12) echoes Zuckerman’s view above arguing that while social networking and the diffusion of ICTs does not substitute for traditional political activism “in times of crisis banal tools for wasting time [...] become the supporting infrastructure of social movements.” Howard gives the example of the surge in traffic to political blogs in Iran during the failed Green Revolution, but a similar phenomenon was observed in Malaysia on the night of the 2008 General Election results when traffic to *Malaysiakini* surged once it became clear that the opposition had performed better than

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15 According to Pew Internet users are nearly two and a half times more likely to have attended a political rally, 78 per cent more likely to have attempted to influence someone’s vote, and 53 per cent more likely to have reported voting or intending to vote than non-Internet users. Additionally a Facebook user who visits the site multiple times per day is over five times more likely to have attended a meeting than a non Internet user, 2.79 times more likely to talk to someone about their vote, and 2.19 times more likely to report voting (Hampton et al. 2011).

anyone had expected and the mainstream media simply did not know what to do, or how to report this. Overall a million visitors flocked to the site on election night helping to make *Malaysiakini* the fastest rising search item term on Google.my in 2008 (Google Zeitgeist 2008).

The final, and one of the most critical differences between new communication technologies and old communication technologies, is that they allow the individual to both be a producer as well as a consumer of technology since the cost of producing digital content has now fallen so low with the growth of smartphones. This represents a significant change in the nature of communication away from hierarchical systems that are easier to control centrally to networked systems that are not. The result of this is that, “citizens and civic groups promote their points of view online, but also use information infrastructure as a tool for resisting state control and battling with opposing points of view” (Howard 2011: 29).

Two examples will suffice to demonstrate this. The first took place during the Saffron uprising in Burma by the country’s Buddhist monks in September 2007. When the junta finally shut off the country’s Internet connection activists were able to upload images recorded on their smartphones via a direct satellite uplink provided (clandestinely) by the Norwegian-based *Democratic Voice of Burma*. Similarly perhaps the most famous incident during the Iranian protests of 2009 was the shooting of Neda Agha-Soltan. Shot at a demonstration her death was caught on several mobile phones, uploaded to Youtube and became both a rallying point for the opposition and an iconic image of the Green Revolution (Lee 2009).

## Assessment

What does all the above analysis reveal? While we need to be careful to avoid hype and punditry in examining the role of new ICTs, the Internet and new social media the impact of what is clearly a revolution in communication, information dissemination and organization will be most acutely felt in authoritarian regimes. While this paper agrees with Howard that the Internet itself is not a causal factor *for* democratization, in and of itself, it nevertheless does limit the options for authoritarian regimes. The technology clearly is *democratizing*, in the sense that it is connecting, empowering and informing a greater number of people than ever before. It is also *globalizing* as the technology now both allows activists on the streets of Cairo, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and even Beijing to broadcast their struggle to the wider world in real time, while also allowing diasporas of dissidents to communicate openly and directly with like-minded groups in their home country. In the sense that it limits the policy options for autocrats and lays bare their

ensorship of traditional media, it provides an infrastructure on which democratization potentially can be built. Thus to repeat an earlier quote from Howard (2011), “it is safe to conclude that today *no* democratic transition is possible without information technology” [emphasis added].

This is not the same as declaring that Facebook campaigns and activists twittering where the next demonstration against a regime will in themselves *cause* revolutions. Indeed Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg echoed this when he told the 2011 e-G-8 forum in Paris that the social media site’s role in the Arab Spring had been ‘overplayed’. Continuing he stated that “Facebook was neither necessary nor sufficient for any of those things to happen” (Bradshaw 2011). Nevertheless despite this caveat he acknowledged that new ICTs and social media were “fundamentally rewiring the world from the ground up” and that the tools for sharing photos and status updates were, “ exactly the same tools [...] that enable these broader changes” (Bradshaw 2011).

For revolutions and transitions to occur local actors, local processes and specific factors will be causal. Facebook, Twitter and Youtube *assisted* the protests in Cairo against the Mubarak regime, they helped to *co-ordinate* protest and *enabled* activists to get footage out of the country to the global media audience even when foreign journalists were denied access and cable and satellite television shut down. But what delivered change in Egypt was ultimately a series of factors unique to Egypt’s political system: the decision by the army to allow protests against the regime, splits in the ruling elite, and the decision of the Muslim Brotherhood to play a relatively low-key role among others (Anderson 2011; Shehata 2011).

Similarly in Malaysia the decision not to censor the Internet, taken for purely economic reasons, undoubtedly catalyzed the opposition to Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the 1998-99 Reformasi movement. It certainly led to the emergence of a robust and fairly sophisticated alternative online media. It also clearly *energized* civil society to forge greater cross-ethnic alliances and coalitions and contributed to 2008 election results.

## Concluding Remarks

The quantitative data presented in this article demonstrated that the use of new ICTs in Southeast Asia has risen alongside the rapid economic growth of the region and is thus broadly correlated with economic development. It similarly confirmed that Internet use is more prevalent among the middle classes whether measured by education level achieved or by profession although the advent of the smartphone is set to make access available to an



even greater number of people by removing the cost barriers associated with PCs or laptops.

With the exception of Indonesia, analysis of Freedom House data did not reveal any significant improvements in political liberties. Nevertheless specific examples from Malaysia and Singapore demonstrated that the growth of Internet use, and in particular the availability of alternative media and critical blogging, have clearly impacted upon the political systems and contributed to the relatively poor performance of the ruling coalition/ party in the 2008 and 2011 elections respectively. In addition in both countries the Internet has provided an online public space in which critical voices have been able to be more freely expressed. While recognizing that more in-depth comparative analysis of the impact of new ICTs and social media in South-east Asia is necessary to make concrete conclusions, the evidence presented tentatively at least supports the premise that they have broadly democratizing effects.

Finally throughout the article related examples demonstrated that there are unique features of the new technologies. Principal among these are the ways in which ordinary users can be both consumers and producers of information; the ability of ordinary citizens to surveil the state; and the ability of activists to organize more readily and rapidly by utilizing social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

Is the cumulative effect of all this that it is now inconceivable that social and political reform or revolution can now occur without new ICTs playing a significant role? This paper has certainly made the case for this, and consequently rejects skeptics like Malcolm Gladwell who has famously declared that “the revolution will not be tweeted” (2010). However while generally supporting the argument that new ICTs can play a contributive role in democratization, and that it is hard now to envisage how such technologies cannot be a feature of future reform movements and revolutions, I would caution against technologically deterministic views on political change. While the Internet may be “a raucous and highly democratic world” (Warf and Grimes 1997: 261) it clearly does continue to have gatekeepers (although their influence is diminished), often reflects existing social and economic hierarchies, and is ever more commercialized. Nevertheless “the Internet makes possible new social forms that are radical transformations of existing types of social network interaction” (Christakis and Fowler 2009: 275) enabling people to act collectively in ways that simply were not possible before. As such new information communication technologies and new social media are democratizing because they have effectively eliminated the costs of publishing and disseminating information and because they make organizing social protest so simple that almost anyone can do it. How

Southeast Asia's autocrats respond to this and whether they prove any more adept than the regimes that succumbed to popular uprisings in North Africa in 2011 remains to be seen.

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