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The disenchantment of Southeast Asia: New media and social change post 9/11

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The Disenchantment Of Southeast Asia: New Media And Social Change Post 9/11

Although governments around Southeast Asia bemoan their failing ability to control the flow of news and information in the Internet age, the terrorist attacks on the US and, in particular, those in Bali in October 2002, are likely to provide a fillip for the region's hard-liners, and underpin surveillance states in the region. As culture becomes a major factor in national security and international relations, the role of the media and communications technology in political change has become ambiguous. The Internet allows the high-tech mobilisation of radical constituencies, and threatens to shake dominant political visions and cultural traditions to the core. Although technology has allowed a greater share of voice for the disillusioned, the dispossessed and the disadvantaged, it is also an effective weapon in the hands of the state. With Southeast Asia's silent majority prepared to sacrifice gains in democratic pluralism in return for security, the war on 'terror' will allow authoritarian governments to reel in many of the gains in freedom of speech only recently won and further alienate the Malay-Islamic communities, driving them into the arms of militant radicals.

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When people talk of the freedom of writing, speaking, or thinking, I cannot choose but laugh. No such thing ever existed. No such thing now exists; but I hope it will exist. But it must be hundreds of years after you and I shall write and speak no more.

- John Adams, 1818 letter to Thomas Jefferson

I am smashing up the old Fada - I shall change everything and everybody in it. I am abolishing the old ways, the old ideas, the old law; I am bringing wealth and opportunity for good as well as vice, new powers to men and therefore new conflicts. I am the revolution, I am giving you plenty of trouble already, you governors, and I am going to give you plenty more. I destroy, and I make new. What are you going to do about it? I am your idea. You made me, so I suppose you know.

- Joyce Cary, Mister Johnson

Disruptive Technologies: Change, Conflict, Breakdown

Southeast Asia is trying to come to terms with globalisation in its latest reincarnation, a blend of modernity and speed. Its societies are grappling with issues of governance, the shape of institutions like the media, and the possible ramifications of some of globalisation's general trappings that are seen to smack of the West: reactionary, decadent and deceitful. The search for answers has led to a tremendous richness in response but, as regional instability mounts in the wake of the 11 September attacks on the United States, it is a struggle the region may be losing in an irrevocable process of change, conflict and breakdown.

As governments in the region open up their economies in an attempt to reap some of the financial benefits of being part of the global information economy, they find themselves helpless in the face of the forces of change that are riding roughshod over their societies, with serious social and political ramifications. For while information technology has boosted productivity, growth and job creation in industrialised countries, its benefits have gone beyond the economic sphere. Its power has extended to politics as well. Despite the unequal distribution of the new communication technology, its falling costs mean that dissidents have increasing access to it to challenge established structures of authority. It is undermining established communities as it creates new ones, particularly where it "articulates a mood of dissent" (Sorlin, 1994: 33-35).

From satellite television and financial data to the 'emoticons' beloved of the *oyayubizoku*, the thumb tribes of Japan, and SMS, the information economy is ensuring "the intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens, 1990:64). Information is racing round the world at "netspeed" (Friedman, 2000: 218). But rather than proving the ruling social science paradigm of an "inexorable liberal-democratic end of history…[where] economic progress inevitably presaged eventual liberalization and democratization" (Jones & Smith, 2001: 855), the collision of computing, always-on communications and physical mobility is ambiguous in its effects. It enables people power in the Philippines and the wherewithal for the rise of techno-terrorism just as easily provides for the rise of the "surveillance state" (Jones & Smith, 2002), and the erosion of privacy from the encroachment of government and commercial interests.

Where once the dissemination of information served as an integral part of nation building and political control, unfettered access and increasingly porous national borders are providing a challenge to established regimes in Southeast Asia. It is a development that has not been lost on the elites in the region. They are falling over themselves in the rush to contest and reclaim the media space, in an

attempt to control the changes sweeping through their societies. Governments and others have long been keen to control technologies such as the Internet through laws and regulations, just as the wrangling over data protection has been ongoing since the birth of information technology (IT).

Their success has tended to be limited and constrained both by technological ability and by the political culture in which the intrusions take place. The debate over individual privacy, while not new, has not only met difficulties such as problems of definition, but different positions on the relationship between the state and the individual. After the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre, however, the debate takes place against a changing political environment, in which a number of trends have been identified. These trends include increased communications surveillance and search and seizure powers; weakening of data protection regimes; increased data sharing; and increased profiling and identification. While none of these policies are new, it is "notable" the speed with which many of them "gained acceptance and, in many cases pushed through to law" (Privacy International, 2002).

Thus, the Internet can be added to the list of "collateral damage" caused by the general spate of security interests, as the anti-terrorism drive threatens Internet freedoms worldwide (*Reporters Sans Frontiers,* 2002). Many governments are using the pretext of the 'war on terror' to curb basic freedoms or crack down on their domestic opponents using the Internet, leading, it is claimed, to an "unprecedented abuse" of individual rights and freedoms (*Reporters Sans Frontiers,* 2002). But, as the blast from October's bombs in Bali echoes around the region, governments seem unable to contain internal unrest amidst deepening economic troubles and a turbulent sea of social change, raising the question as to whether or not Southeast Asia's models of authoritarian control can survive.

This paper, then, will consider the implications of the impact of the Information Age and its attendant communications technology on Southeast Asia. It will look at the sea change in mass media and communications in the region, such that the communication media is no longer a tool of national governments alone, but is now increasingly accessible to the ordinary citizen, with dramatic consequences for the political and social fabric of Southeast Asia.

It will consider how transnational crime syndicates bent on piracy or perfidy can use the globalised communication infrastructure. It will consider how the same technology networks terrorist and democratic movements, and how the 'war on terrorism' following the attacks of 11 September 2001, is giving governments in the region, an excuse to crack down on free

expression and political dissent on the Internet. Finally, in the face of a rise of the surveillance state, it will discuss how many citizens are prepared to exchange their hard won rights and freedoms for convenience and security, while frustrated minorities are being pushed into the hands of militant fundamentalists.

Those seeking to curb the flow of digital traffic are likely to find that they have growing support both internally, from the quiet majority seeking protection and, externally, from the West. Nevertheless, in the Information Age, modern global activism - from campaigns to save the world's oceans to those which seek the violent destruction of global capitalism and American hegemony - is intricately linked to IT, that is more accessible than ever before. The centrality of a globalised communications media in everyday life and the fact that the new media, in particular, enables those less constrained by the precedents of tradition to challenge established forms of power and authority, is leading in Southeast Asia to a compounding of the region's security dilemmas.

Information Economy As A Security Dilemma

The beginning of 2003, brought the announcement of what was claimed to be the first terrorism research centre in the Asia-Pacific, to be set up in Singapore by the end of the year (Rekhi, 2003). This news marked the latest in a flurry of regional security meetings, discussions of intelligence sharing, even agreements on regional police forces (Sharma 2002), which followed in the wake of 9/11.

Before the 9/11 attacks on the US, progress with the institutionalisation of multilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region had been "very slow, painful and frustrating" (Ball 2000). After the attack on the US, regional powwows took on a more urgent flavour. In Southeast Asia, the failure to recognise the extent of the coherence and cohesion of the politically radicalised Islamic opposition in their own backyard (Jones & Smith, 2002), brought the issue further to the fore, although substantive agreements still seemed tantalisingly out of reach (Christoffersen, 2002). The Bali bombs, which directly threatened both the economies and regime stability in the region and brought a previously recalcitrant Indonesian government to the 'war of terror' alliance, should serve to focus the mind yet further.

This preoccupation with the inner threat should be no surprise. Security is an overriding concern for Southeast Asia's elites, and a key consideration when explaining their behaviour (Ayoob, 1995: 191; Job, 1992: 66). They belong to relatively new states, many of which only became independent in the 1950's and 1960's. State building is still an ongoing process and internal security is an obsession. So, not only are the perceptions of the elites and the regimes involved in the state-building important in defining security

problems (Ayoob, 1995: 191), but there is also a blurring of the lines between state and regime security, and a "predisposition to conceive of national security as regime security" (Samudaranija, et al, 1987: 12).

A colonial inheritance of "discontinuities and distortions" (Job, 1992: 69), has often resulted in low regime legitimacy as well as deep fissures in the social fabric of the new states, causing "domestic insecurity" (Ayoob, 1995: 190). These fissures can be ethnic, religious, or economic, and they often coincide, further weakening national foundations.

These new states are also vulnerable to external pressures due to their relatively weak position on the global stage. Interference from institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (both dominated by the major industrial powers), as well as from the advanced industrialised states and multinational corporations, adds to the destabilising effects of the ideas and values bound up in the process of modernisation (Ayoob, 1995: 37).

Thus, their lack of autonomy and the permeability creates an environment of increased insecurity, preoccupying the elites with trying to counter these external pressures. In doing so, however, they face certain security dilemmas, particularly when regime legitimacy is linked to overall security and prosperity. The pursuit of economic development creates further instability: they have to weigh cross border information flows against information control; global advertising and consumerism against national financial needs; foreign ideas and values against traditional mores and beliefs. The porosity of the state increases, further diminishing its autonomy, as it becomes a part of the global economy (Samudaranija & Paribata, 1987: 12; Job, 1992: 4-5).

Moreover, just as global economic development is uneven, so different groups within the state prove more able and more prepared to embrace the changes this development entails. The social transformation results in challenges for the regime, from the emergence of new interest groups, internal migration, and a younger, more demanding, literate, educated and increasingly urban population. Many also feel dislocated and disenfranchised by the changes around them: uncomfortable and unsuccessful in the new and the modern, they turn back to traditional value systems, causing further conflict (Samudaranija, et al, 1987: 6-9).

The fact that the US and its allies are prepared to brush aside notions of national sovereignty in pursuit of 'terrorists' in the post 9/11 world, is a forcible reminder of these feelings of insecurity, as well as a further source of alienation for increasing numbers of the region's youth. The Bali tragedy placed the war on 'terror' firmly on the doorsteps of Southeast Asia's government and, all

the while, the media, in particular the new media, is seen as carrying change to the heart of these societies.

IT And New Media Politics In Southeast Asia

In the Information Age, where communications technology is available at ever-cheaper rates, a globalised mass media has reached its tendrils into the fabric of Southeast Asian society, with ambiguous and unpredictable consequences. Technological developments and the current round of global economic integration have further ensured that the communication media has become increasingly central in daily life in Asia.

In Southeast Asia, information was once the jealously-protected ward of the local elites and the mass communication media had a central role in nation building. Today, the international media giants, seeking profitability through economies of scale, have taken their place alongside local producers. They have extended their reach across Asia, eroding monolithic state ownership in an apparent profusion of choice and ownership.

There is a paradox here, however. Although many Southeast Asian governments might fear the links drawn by the modernisation theorists between capitalist market development, the free flow of information and the development of liberal institutions (Huntington, 1991; Diamond & Plattner, Berger 1986; Lerner, 1958), their worries in this area are generally unfounded. The elites in Southeast Asia regularly rail against the international media, but are proving that they can respond fairly effectively (Woodier, 2001; Atkins 2002; Rodan 1998, 2000), as they attempt to retain control over, or manipulate the flow of information flooding across their borders.

It is, however, the depth and pace of the changes swept in by a cultural firestorm, presaged in part by the explosion in the number and reach of international media products and aided by the proliferation of cheap communications technology, that has many governments in the region in damage limitation mode. The wider they open the doors to their economies in an attempt to reap some of the financial benefits of being part of the global information economy, the more they seem to fan the flames of modernity that are licking at the social and political foundations of their societies.

Indeed, the developing 'after image' of the attacks in the US, has not meant less globalisation. Where there has been a slow down in traditional measurements such as foreign direct investment (F.D.I.), a more nuanced portrayal of the situation shows an increase in levels of both political and economic integration. Beyond the economy, global integration actually deepened on several levels. The war on terrorism, for instance, is a key factor fuelling political integration, and 11 September looks to be a "symptom rather than

a cause of the stresses inherent in global integration" (A.T. Kearney / *Foreign Policy Magazine,* 2003).

Despite the widely held fears of "the destruction of traditional culture and values (under the code of modernisation), and [the imposition of] a new kind of transnational, global consumer culture…" (Kellner, 1990: 88) the media is not simply an avenue down which march the imperial legions of cultural change (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1996: 132-133). But, even though the transnational content providers might be careful to ensure political pitfalls do not pepper their path to profits, these are still products that come with a built in slant.

As public spaces in Southeast Asian cities see a proliferation of skateboard-wielding youths in their baseball caps and baggies, it is clear that the message from the global media giants is MacWorld and definitely not *Jihad* (Barber, 1995). However, in the converging currents of media reception it is not a matter of MacWorld or *Jihad*: a member of *Jemaah Islamiah* (JI) is just as likely to pick up a McDonalds, while the *burqhua* often hides a Nike 'swoosh'. After all, media production and reception is a process of "constant negotiation" (Macgregor, 1997: 53). The new media, in particular, is a disruptive technology, and its role in cultural transformation is both complicated and unpredictable (Thompson, 1995: 190). The media can be used to extend and consolidate traditional values, nourishing a sense of identity and sense of belonging (Thompson, 1995: 194), while also serving to "shake dominant political visions and cultural traditions to the core" (Lull, 1995: 114).

The mass communication media is at the centre of "new modes of image production and cultural hegemony, the political struggles of various groups and the restructuring of capitalist society" (Kellner, 1990: 129). Local elites see control of such a potentially subversive space as vital, yet media production and reception is subject to a growing "struggle for availability and for access" (Fiske, 1994: 4).

In this battle for control, the division of power and resources is unequal, weighed towards ownership of the means production. Yet other groups can negotiate access to media spaces, and are becoming increasingly good at it. Likewise, inequalities in terms of access to the global networks of communications have not prevented the emergence of local strategies of opposition, from local cultural production to piracy, providing a "complex syncopation of voices" (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1996: 180), around the world. These new technologies are supporting both a concentration and a dispersion of power.

New media allow those on the periphery to develop and consolidate power, and ultimately to challenge the authority of

the centre. In this high-tech mobilisation of radical constituencies (Wright, 2002), the voices often speak in opposition to globalisation, fed by "its major discontents, nationalism, regionalism, localism and revivalism" (Tehranian, 1999: 81), challenging the authority of the centre and eliciting a response at an elite level.

The Rise Of Internet Opposition: The Battle For Control

In Southeast Asia, as regimes toppled in Thailand and Indonesia in the 1990's, the global communication media was increasingly identified as an important cause of regional political upheaval (Atkins, 1999: 420; 2002). The burgeoning media industry does not sit easily with governments around the region, which are used to controlling the flow of information within and across their borders. Identified as a key variable in driving regional political upheaval (Atkins, 1999: 420), these governments have been keen to quarantine what many see as the source of a contagion of internal instability (Ayoob, 1995: 196).

The post-colonial state's nation-building ambitions and control strategies have made Southeast Asia one of the most information sensitive regions in the world, yet the 1980's saw a loosening of these controls (Atkins, 1999: i). With governments in the region just as keen to reap the rewards of being part of the global economy as they were to continue to control the flow of information across and within their borders, policy confusion led to general growth in the industry in Asia. But it has been the growth of the Internet in the 1990's that has really complicated Southeast Asia's government efforts to control the flow of information.

US government moves to establish the information superhighway marked an upping of the ante in the competition to be a winner in the global economy (Langdale, 1997: 117). In response, governments across the region have tried to put the Internet to use in developing their economies, as falling costs mean access has become a reality for many in the region's more developed areas (Minges, 2001).

Despite the possible economic advantages, the perceived political implications of embracing the information age remain a concern to governments around the region. Even Singapore, a model for control and constraint, appears to been losing its grip in the face of recent technological developments, in particular, the growth of the Internet. The leadership of the seemingly indomitable ruling Peoples Action Party (PAP), recently threw up its hands, exclaiming that its sway over the communication media was slipping (Kuo & Peng, 2000: 420).

However, where Southeast Asia is concerned, Singapore is leading the way in successfully placing "strict restrictions on the flow or market exchange" (Wong, 2001: 3) of information related

commodities and related cultural products such as news, movies and television programmes. There appear to be few cracks in a system of control that continues to provide and model for other authoritarian regimes in the region (Rodan, 2002:10).

Singapore has continued to compete at the highest levels. From the Government's "intelligent island" initiative (National Computer Board, 1992), to more recent e-initiatives (including the $S1.5-billion *Infocomm 21* - <www.ida.com.sg>, the government sought to exploit IT for economic growth, while working to maintain its position as gatekeeper for information and media access for its citizens. Despite one of the highest computer and Internet penetration rates in the world (Chen, 2001, SBA.gov.sg.com), with a combination of technological, legal and policing strategies, it has also led the way in the region in working to control this new source of instability and dissent, and moved to secure its gatekeeping role over the flow of information across and within its border (Rodan, 2002: A11; Sesser, 1999: 1, 9; Gomez, 2002).

However, even in Singapore, the Internet is providing additional and less controllable space for political expression not necessarily sanctioned by the government. While the established local media and their international brethren know their place, globalisation and rapid progress in mass communications technologies, like the Internet, has provided "opportunities for communication among civil society groups on a scale and in a way which had not been possible before..." (Ooi, 2000: 192).

Lest the Singapore grip seems to slip too far, a criminal defamation investigation launched in July 2002, against Muslim rights activist Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff, was a clear indication by the government of its intention to maintain control over the Internet space. Any commitment to deregulating Singapore's media and entertainment industry is more about securing the wandering attention of Singapore's youth than a move towards a more pluralist system (*Agence France-Presse,* 2002)

Among Singapore's ASEAN neighbours, attitudes to Internet content tend to reflect the wider communication media environment. In the Philippines, the media is, by many established criteria, one of the most robust in the world (Zubri, 1993: 187). Discussion of the issues facing the Filipino media range from its overriding influence and the scrutiny of media ownership and control and its affect on editorial decisions, through the murder and imprisonment of crusading journalists and poor quality work and petty corruption, to sex selling the media and television news being repackaged as entertainment, with ratings driving production considerations. But these discussions also tend to mention the general health of the media, and positives such as the

use of the Internet to continue the experiment with libertarian and community journalism, and political debate.

Thailand and Indonesia both have a much less developed infrastructure than Singapore. Thailand's Internet population is seen as having the most potential growth within ASEAN, and is expected to exceed both Malaysia and Singapore in size. At present, however, access remains predominantly an urban phenomenon and confined to the capital (Nielsen, 2001). Given the apparent propensity of the country's Prime Minister (PM) to "emulate the slick authoritarianism of Singapore" (Rodan, 2002:10), similar moves to fence off the Internet are likely. Not only has the PM's Shin Corporation got significant interests in the communications infrastructure, but recent regulations imposed by the Ministry of Communications and Transportation ensure the state-owned Communications Authority of Thailand receives, free-of-charge, a 35% stake in all private Internet service providers (ISPs) (Swan, 2002: 21).

In Indonesia under Suharto, the Internet, which became accessible in Indonesia from 1995, allowed the relatively free flow of information in a tightly-controlled media environment. Post Suharto, the role of the Internet has weakened the regime's tight grip on the media. The Internet is seen as playing a major role in toppling the Suharto regime, and remains a technology of democracy in the public imagination. Its use in the 1999 election process served further to "authenticate the newly-emerging democracy in their eyes" (Hill, 2002: 5). However, the days of an unfettered Indonesian media are over, despite the 1999 law that prohibits censorship. Four years after restrictions on free speech ended with Suharto's fall, there are fears a recent government crackdown could signal a return to this nation's repressive past (Timberlake, 2002).

Given the propensities of its neighbours, one would expect Malaysia's policies, then, to be particularly restrictive. Malaysia has a western-style media in form but not content: "a sophisticated combination of legislation and ownership concentration [have] ensured the media remained under tight control" (Williams & Rich, 2000: 2). Malaysia, however, has probably been among the most liberal in its policing of the online world, at least until now. The desire on the part of the Malaysian authorities to encourage the development of its information industries and attract foreign players to the Multimedia Super Corridor, meant the government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed promised in 1996, not to censor the Internet. As a result, the medium has become a focus for those dissatisfied with the bias of the local conventional media. And, despite one well-publicised court case (Ibrahim & Kaur 1998: 1), Mahathir's commitment not to censor the Internet appeared to hold

true, at least until a government raid closed online news daily Malaysiakini in early 2003.

Indeed, as part of the regional move to clampdown on the free flow of information, the Malaysian Home Ministry has drawn up plans to impose a "code of content" and a licensing system for website operators. These proposals would enable authorities "to discourage the abuse of the Internet by irresponsible users" and to address national security concerns (Laurie, 2002; Loone, 2002; *ABC Asia Pacific,* 2002).

Southeast Asian governments are not alone in working to control the Internet in the Asian region. China, in particular, shares their schizophrenic attitude to the Internet, hoping to harness its potential as a tool of state propaganda and to boost economic growth, while reigning its use for expression of political opposition. Beijing has also taken advantage of the international drive against terrorism to strengthen the machinery of government and control (*Reporters Sans Frontiers,* 2002).

China, which has some 45 million Internet users, about 3.6 per cent of the population (CNNIC, 2002; cited in Hennock, 2002), has seen a move to block foreign web sites, the creation of an Internet police force to monitor use, and the closure of sites with articles on corruption or critical of the government. Beijing has also been working to contain the growth of cyber cafes, closing more than 14,000 over the summer of 2002, and has detained some 30 Internet users for subversion, one of whom it imprisoned for eleven years for downloading articles from the Internet.

Beijing has also managed to get ISPs and web sites to sign self-censorship agreements. More than 300 organisations are reported to have put their names to a pledge to discourage the publication of 'immoral' or 'dangerous' material online. This included some celebrated agreements with US corporations such as Yahoo (Wong, 2002a; 2002b).

India also seems to have picked up this regional malaise. The role of the Internet and IT in rural development, as well as its contribution to broader economic gains, is well understood (Sharma, 2003). But the nationalist government of Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), also clearly understands the threats posed by these disruptive technologies.

The ongoing troubles of online news portal, *tehelka.com,* highlight not only the government's growing discomfort with criticism and awareness of the space provided by the Internet, but also form a lightning rod for the ongoing debate over privacy and the media. The website's owners blame their current cash shortage on an alleged government campaign to deter potential investors. The campaign, they suggest, stems from a story it ran in March 2001,which led to the resignation of senior defence officials,

including a Cabinet minister and the chief of the BJP party. The site obtained the evidence by way of a 'sting operation', where they secretly recorded on video, army officers and politicians accepting bribes from journalists posing as arms dealers (BBC, 2002b).

Where its neighbours in South Asia have always had a fraught, if not downright nasty relationship between their elites and the expression of opposition and dissent, India has been known for its relatively liberal attitudes. There are mounting concerns, however, that the current government is taking a more authoritarian position. Reporting on political issues, for example, has become risky for journalists, particularly against a background of ongoing tensions over border disputes with Pakistan, and Islamic and Marxist separatists in the north-eastern states of Jammu and Kashmir (Ahmad, 2002).

Between the IT Act of 2000 (policed by the 'Cyber Crime Investigation Cell'), and the March 2002 Prevention of Terrorism Act, the government certainly has the legal wherewithal to intercept electronic communications. The planned Electronic Research and Development Centre, to develop new cyber forensic tools, is expected to ensure it has the equipment it might need for a crackdown (Privacy International & EPIC, 2002).

The hardening of attitudes towards the new media throughout the region should be put in context. "Larger, more diverse political systems will not be able to simply replicate a Singapore model of control…", something which would require "the development of a mutually reinforcing set of institutions comprehensively subordinated to ruling party interests" (Rodan, 2002: 10). Despite this, the Singapore model will continue to inspire, inform and guide authoritarian regimes in the region, particularly in the wake of 9/11 and the Bali Bombings.

Electronic surveillance: "Every move you make, every breath you take…"

Admired though it is, the Singapore government is finding there are drawbacks to its approach. The government wants to differentiate itself from its neighbours in Asia, and attract international investors and global talent to help make its companies winners (Saywell & Plott, 2002). It wants to create an entrepreneurial culture, currently stifled, although the government would not use the term, by the aura of 'authoritarian capitalism'. This "…suppresses individualism and intellectual freedom and will greatly impair the formation of entrepreneurs… [and] in the long run…[is] unlikely to sustain the levels of high performance recorded in recent years" (Lingle, 1998).

Whilst the Singapore government is keen to encourage its

citizens to make money, it is not prepared to trust them with a more plural system. And, although Singaporeans have become increasingly noisy, at least in Cyberspace, the American 'war against terror' has provided Singapore's governors with a useful excuse for cementing over some of these cracks, as the moves in July 2002 clearly showed.

Indeed, at the state's recognition of the "premonitory snufflings of civil society" (Jones, 1998: 163), it seems to step in swiftly to ensure its political monopoly remains firm. In the post 9/11 world, this attitude might find some support from the most unlikely quarters. Asian values were once the talisman used by governments around the region to ward off what they saw as the worst effects of globalisation - the move towards liberal democracy and the undermining of their authority. The attacks on the US and the global financial fallout from both the telecommunications stock price meltdown and the Enron-inspired corporate scandals have tested the commitment of even the strongest proponents of globalisation. With many in the West now leery of its ramifications, the 'war on terror' is further reinforcing the garrison-state mentality, providing a fillip to authoritarianism and in conflict with global, open media policies of the 90's.

Of course, politics has not been the only context in which the region is witness to a resurgence of surveillance and scrutiny. As Southeast Asia's citizenry migrates into the digital world, it leaves its privacy behind in the analogue world, something that will only be reinforced by the use of broadband.

In the broadband age, commercial imperatives rather than political initiatives will drive much of the invasion into our privacy. Most of us seem to shrug off these increasing incursions as a small price to pay for convenience. Every purchase we make is an "electronic confession" (Dogg, 2001). Merely using a credit card allows a bank, and anybody else who obtains access to the data, to know where the credit card is being used. Likewise, advanced mobile telephony might appear to be a convenience, but it also means a user can be traced geographically, perfect for pushing an advert for the latest sale in a nearby shopping mall. Internet use is subject to increasingly sophisticated methods to watch what surfers are doing and to make e-commerce pay (Ward, 2002).

This is the stuff that oils the cogs of modern commercial life. Similarly, the efforts of governments to provide e-citizens with easy ways to pay bills, apply for licences and the like, mean that as we interact with the modern capitalist system, so we register our virtual existence on computers around the world. Thus, many of the innovations in communications technology come with huge opportunities for surveillance. There are no hiding places on the Net as governments around the world chase your data (Campbell,

2000).

This is of course, meat for conspiracy theorists, and myths abound about the abilities of governments to monitor our every electronic word. From *Echelon* - described by privacy groups as a global surveillance network that intercepts all kinds of communications for redistribution among the primary partners in a decades-old UK-US alliance that also includes Australia and New Zealand, to the FBI's *Carnivore* - an Internet wiretap that looks at packets and records those it considers suspect, the tools for almost Orwellian surveillance possibilities seem to be in place (Oakes, 2002; Poroskov, 2002; Darklady, 2002).

Most recently, reports have suggested the Pentagon is developing a computer system that resembles a vast electronic dragnet, trawling through personal information in the hunt for terrorists around the globe. The system is said to be being developed under the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). *The New York Times* named Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, the former national security adviser in the Reagan administration infamous for his role in the Iran Contra affair in the 1980's, as project director. Poindexter has described the system in Pentagon documents and in speeches as providing intelligence analysts and law enforcement officials with instant access to information from Internet mail and calling records to credit card and banking transactions and travel documents, without a search warrant (Markoff, 2002). DARPA (2002) brushed aside the story, in particular Poindexter's association.

Myth or reality, the row over encryption, including calls by the US authorities for a global ban on all encryption software, implies a thread of truth worming its way through the tales of *Echelon* and *Carnivore.* What is more tangible is the Homeland Security Bill signed by President George W. Bush on 25 November 2002, which "effectively drafted corporate America to serve in the war against terrorism—with Internet service providers among those on the front line" (Swibel, 2002). The law puts new burdens on ISPs to cooperate with the government. For example, law enforcement agencies won't need a court order to install pen register and trap-and-trace devices when there is an 'ongoing attack' on any computers used in interstate commerce or communication.

And, the ISPs got something in return: The new law makes it easier for the USA's 3,000 Internet service providers to volunteer subscriber information to government officials without worrying about customer lawsuits. Under the new law, they can release the contents of customers' communications to law enforcement agencies without a court order and without fear of a suit if they have a 'good-faith' belief that an emergency warrants it. Before, they had to have a 'reasonable' belief - a higher legal standard - that release was warranted.

But, it is not only digital communication that has risks for our privacy, the widespread deployment of other surveillance technology also has serious implications. We are monitored at work, and in the streets. Video cameras – used widely for urban surveillance in Great Britain – offer security in exchange for providing the state with ability to monitor movements and behaviour. With face-recognition software, it becomes possible to track the movements of every human being as they walk down the street (D'Elia & D'Ottavi, 2002).

And the current round of terrorist attacks have offered further encouragement to law-abiding citizens to trust their governments with ever increased powers of scrutiny. Vigorous debate goes on in the US about the scope of this authority, from the Patriot Act, the new 'Office of Information Awareness' (OIA), which is part of Homeland Security Act and Operation TIPS (Terrorism Information and Prevention System). Despite this, the US has led the way in giving federal officials greater powers to trace and intercept communications both for law enforcement and foreign intelligence purposes (The Economist, 2002: 33; Doyle, 2002; Holtzman, 2003).

Director of the National Security Agency, Lt. General Michael V. Hayden, told US Congress that they could best help him by "going back to their constituents and finding out where the public wants to draw the line between liberty and safety" (Hayden, 2002). In the November 2002 elections, US voters appear to have given carte blanche to the Bush administration to draw the line where it wants – so long as they can sleep safely in their beds.

Of course, the use of IT is not just a one way street, cordoned off by the state and major corporations. There is also the obvious value of IT in enabling a terrorist attack: cell phones were used in the co-ordination of the attacks of 11 September, and to detonate the Bali bombs.

And then there is the even more important use of ever-cheaper, ever-more-powerful information technologies to mobilise constituencies, from Al Qaeda's recruitment videos, to the new, unregulated satellite TV channels—notably Al Jazeera, founded in 1996— which are given an important role in the propaganda war between the US and Al Qaeda. The uncomfortable fact is that an unfettered media often "fuels antagonisms because people choose channels that bolster their biases" (Wright, 2002).

Asia's Clampdown – the cudgel and the stiletto

In Southeast Asia, the surveillance and interception of communications continues with impunity. Even *Echelon* is reported to be in action gleaning information from America's allies

in the region (Hager, N., 1986, Secret Power, cited in Simbulan, 2000). Not that those allies have been slow to do their bit in the war on 'terror'. Malaysia and Singapore have arrested nearly 40 alleged Islamic militants since December 2001, most of whom are reported to have admitted belonging to JI (Shari, et al, 2002: 22).

In Malaysia, there are plans to tighten security laws after a judge ordered the release of an Islamic militant suspect, even though he was immediately re-arrested. A minister in the Prime Minister's department Rais Yatim, told the *New Sunday Times* newspaper the government was thinking of tightening the Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows indefinite detention without trial (BBC, 2002a).

The Philippines welcomed the help of US Special Forces in its battle against Muslim radicals in the south of the archipelago, and is considering a controversial identity card scheme (Baguiro, 2002: A1). Even Indonesia, slow to jump aboard given obvious conflicting internal interests, moved to arrest the alleged spiritual leader of JI, Abu Bakar Bashir, after the Bali Bombings.

There have been few questions raised against the clampdown, suggesting that some of the 'evidence' from Malaysian and Indonesian security agencies looks to have been manufactured for domestic political and diplomatic purposes, further "alienating an already sceptical Islamic community" (Arkin, 2002). But, where once the West might have argued the human rights agenda with Southeast Asia's authoritarian governments, now that its assets are threatened, it has been unusually quiet.

As for the local response, in Singapore, at least, there is little in the way of public outcry to the State's policies. Singapore's uncertain beginnings have given rise to a political culture "founded on political indifference mixed with high anxiety," and a middle class which does not demand a pluralist society, given that "…the selective cultivation of tradition high cultural values and passivity and group conformity, and their subsequent promulgation through universal education programs militate against individualism, the rule of law and critical public debate" (Jones, 1998: 163).

While it is not possible to tar the hole of Southeast Asia's citizenry with Singapore's cultural brush, most elements of pluralist democracy in the region have only emerged recently. Where the Southeast Asian state has not been technologically sophisticated in its surveillance, or its citizenry too unconnected to be electronically monitored, the military has often taken a more direct role in support of the surveillance state (Jones & Smith, 2002: 147).

Besides, memories of the chaos that infected their post-independence years are still fresh, and the stalwart burghers of Southeast Asia are all too happy to allow their rulers to draw a far more ambiguous line between liberty and safety. Whether these elites can provide the security their citizenry so desperately desire

remains to be seen. Few outside the region have much confidence that ASEAN will step up to the breach, given that regional co-operation in countering terrorism in the past has "not been well co-ordinated and has continued to be ad hoc due to the constraints of conflicting national interests and mutual suspicions" (Chan, 2002: 107).

Conclusion

Consideration of the political economy of the communication media has provided a useful analysis of structures of ownership and control, as well as charting developments such as the growth of the media, the extension of corporate control, and convergence within the industry. Any understanding of the unfolding events in Southeast Asia, however, shows that a more nuanced approach is necessary, one that takes into account those who challenge the centres of power, whether inside institutions, countries or regions. Likewise, it is important to include their audiences and the technology itself, as analysing the way that "meaning is made and remade through the concrete activities of producers and consumers is … essential" (Golding & Murdock, 1996: 15).

As Kellner suggests, the media it is not a tool of monolithic capitalist ideology, but "a synthesis of capitalist and democratic structures and imperatives and is therefore full of structural conflicts and tensions" (Kellner, 1990: 15). There is an ongoing struggle for the use and control of IT and for the space the new media, in particular, creates. There is an understanding in the region of the unique ability of the modern communication media to influence the daily construction of reality, and the assumptions that underpin it, those who might profit from its economic, political and cultural influence. Thus, the perspectives of technological determinism, cultural studies and the ideas of Thompson and Giddens, also form a valuable element of the warp and weave of the fabric of our understanding impact of IT and the communications media, as well as of the unintended consequences of technology.

Indeed, while the war on 'terror' is giving hardliners in Southeast Asia the backing they need to try to clamp down further on dissent within their communities, these actions will only serve to further undermine their own positions. Events post 9/11 have indicated that governments around the region need to allow more critical engagement with issues that are threatening regime continuity around the region, in particular the challenge that militant Islam represents to stability in Pacific Asia.

The limited coverage of alternative perspectives by the mass media, partly because of their preparedness to bow to local controls and partly because of a process of dumbing-down, clearly played

a role in the failure of both Singapore and neighbouring Malaysia to recognise the extent of the coherence and cohesion of the politically radicalised Islamic opposition in their own backyard. There are no signs of a more liberal attitude.

Rapid technological change in areas such as the development of broadband telecommunication services in East Asia is leading to more "complex bargaining relationships" (Langdale, 1997: 128) between global companies, local firms, citizens and their national governments. Around the region, "new responses to these technologies will be and are being crafted not only by the state, but also the media and society" (Ooi, 2000: 192). But, all too often, any liberalisation of freedom of expression is driven from above, and "democratisation thus involves the expansion of political participation and consultation within the limits defined by the state…" (Jones, 1995: 84).

The avenues through which the dispossessed and disenfranchised can vent their unease are increasingly choked. The region's governments are inflexible on this point, even though their embrace of globalisation has given rise to groups which clearly believe their only resort is "a rabid response to colonialism and imperialism and their economic children capitalism and modernity" (Barber, 1995: 11). Control remains their strategy – even if it is a flawed one. The bombing in Bali in October 2002, has only served to harden their resolve.

We are witness to an unfolding drama around Southeast Asia. It is nothing less than the disenchantment of this world and the end of Southeast Asia's 'Age of Deference', encouraged by the ideas carried by a globalised media and realised by the same communications technology upon which the media, itself, relies. As change and conflict lead to inevitable destruction, it remains to be seen just how widespread this will be, and what shape the region's institutions will take. Given the continued strategic importance of the region, the US, in particular, is likely to show particular interest. The last time Southeast Asia suffered serious internal instability, in the years following WWII, the US played a major role in drawing the region's political map. Interference this time is likely to drive more of Asia's disaffected youth into the hands of hard-liners like JI and Al Qaeda, and hasten the demise of Southeast Asia's surveillance states.

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