



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

# DEEPENING THE UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Ross Tapsell

**ISEAS**  
YUSOF ISHAK  
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# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# Deepening the Understanding of Social Media's Impact in Southeast Asia

By Ross Tapsell

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Southeast Asia's Internet users are far more diverse than usually reported. They range from the urban youth with laptops and high-speed Wi-Fi, to the older generation semi-rural and rural users with affordable mobile phones for Facebook and WhatsApp.
- Southeast Asians generally trust social media platforms more than in Western societies. This trust in social media reflects a lack of trust in local mainstream media and official sources of information.
- What campaign information (and disinformation) is being spread and which ones are most successful are essential for understanding how voters in Southeast Asia use and trust social media.
- Social media platforms and Southeast Asia's "app industry" need clearer and enforced regulation on their use of data and the extent to which they can sell data to advertisers. These advertisers include, but are not limited to, politicians and political parties.
- Since the future of social media usage will likely lie in closed groups, the role of big data analyses that have dominated research on social media over the past ten years, is likely to regress. Instead, ethnographic scholars who can access these groups and engage with their particular interests and identities are more likely to be useful in understanding the digital sphere in the future.





# Deepening the Understanding of Social Media's Impact in Southeast Asia

By Ross Tapsell<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asians with Internet access are ranked as some of the world's most ubiquitous users of social media platforms. Yet, it is true that in Southeast Asia as elsewhere, scholars, analysts and governments are still trying to understand how “the informational underpinning of democracy have eroded”.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I assess the kinds of information society that are emerging in the digital public sphere in Southeast Asia. To comprehend social media's impact, we need to think more about the different ways through which citizens access the Internet, and the circumstances under which they engage with certain social media platforms. We also need to understand the historical and cultural backgrounds that shaped the way digitalization has entered the existing public sphere. Finally, we need to take note of the political context and reasons for the spread of digital media material. I examine these three aspects of social media adoption in three Southeast Asian countries—Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

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<sup>2</sup> Alexis Madrigal, “What Facebook Did to American Democracy”, *The Atlantic*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/10/what-facebook-did/542502/> (accessed 13 October 2018).

## SOUTHEAST ASIA'S SHIFTING INFORMATION SOCIETY

There are some common mistakes that analysts make when writing about social media usage in Southeast Asia. The first mistake is overstating Internet access in the region. We often think of the “digital divide” as a clear distinction between those who have access to the Internet and those who have no access at all. In this frame, surveys show that some 64 per cent of Indonesians,<sup>3</sup> 65 per cent of Filipinos and 75 per cent of Malaysians have regular access to the Internet. But these statistics are often beset with erroneous conclusions—for example, many citizens answer “yes” to having Facebook, but “no” to having Internet access when answering professional surveys.<sup>4</sup> Some digital surveys, such as WeAreSocial, often only collect information on people who have Internet access. Others, such as AC Nielson, only examine responses from citizens in large cities where Internet signals are strong and where wealth is greater. These surveys only scratch the surface of the vast disparity in how Southeast Asians access the Internet. As Elizabeth Pisani wrote: “Millions of Indonesians are on US\$2 a day *and* are on Facebook.”<sup>5</sup> So the number could be skewed but more importantly, these percentages do not tell us the disparity *within* Internet usage. The millions of Southeast Asians “on the digital divide”, who have minimal access to the Internet, are generally understudied. This group has grown considerably in the past few years because of the massive expansion of the smartphone market through cheap, Chinese-made Android handsets. As such, the majority of Southeast Asians access the Internet only by mobile phones

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2019/05/18/indonesia-has-171-million-internet-users-study.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Edwin Jurriens and Ross Tapsell, “Challenges and Opportunities of the Digital ‘Revolution’ in Indonesia”, in *Digital Indonesia: Connectivity and Divergence*, edited by Edwin Jurriens and Ross Tapsell (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Pisani, *Indonesia Etc: Exploring the Improbable Nation* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 3.

(estimated at 70 per cent of Internet users in the region). A mobile phone for Internet usage changes the way citizens read, watch and participate in social media. Long articles, therefore, are far less likely to be read, while content that is available for short, 1 to 2 minute videos is easy to consume, especially for those on commutes to and from work. Therefore, we need to think more about the limited access that Southeast Asians have to the broader domains of the Internet that does not adhere to such mobile phone usage formats.

Internet speeds are vitally important in understanding social media practices in the region. In the Philippines, for example, fixed broadband Internet speed stand at 26.14 megabits per second, while mobile Internet speed is 17.76 Mbps (see Table 1). In Malaysia it is not much better. For example, only 56 per cent of Malaysian Internet users say they watch an online video every day.<sup>6</sup> Speed matters because it means that Internet access is more likely to be for the use of platforms that require slower Internet speeds for effective usage, such as Facebook’s “free basics” and other simple messenger sites like WhatsApp. Thus, many of these citizens are not loading full websites, not watching lengthy videos, nor spending time going through fact-checking sites, which various government and civil society organizations increasingly urge them to do.

***Table 1: Mobile and Fixed Broadband Speeds, December 2019***

<b>Country</b>	<b>Mobile Speeds</b>	<b>Fixed Broadband Speeds</b>
Singapore	52.96	194.09
Malaysia	22.52	78.82
The Philippines	17.76	26.14
Indonesia	12.94	20.15

*Source:* [www.speedtest.net/global-index#fixed](http://www.speedtest.net/global-index#fixed) (accessed 16 December 2019).

<sup>6</sup> *We Are Social*, “Time Spent on the Internet, Global Web Index Based on a Survey of Internet Users Aged 16–64”, 2017, <https://wearesocial-net.s3.amazonaws.com/uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/01/Slide034.png> (accessed 21 September 2017).

Younger citizens are the ones driving this new information society in the region. Seventy per cent of Indonesia's online population is under the age of 35, most of whom are using social media sites on a daily basis.<sup>7</sup> Around 47 per cent of Internet users in Malaysia are aged between 20 and 29, and another 25 per cent between 30 and 39,<sup>8</sup> while 31 per cent of Filipino Facebook users are aged between 18 and 34. At the same time, the older generation in semi-rural areas of Southeast Asia are for the first time accessing the Internet via a mobile phone, and it is generally they who are understudied and underrepresented in mainstream media accounts of rising Internet access and social media uptake.

The second mistake analysts often make is assuming that social media platform engagement is similar everywhere in Southeast Asia when, in fact, local context matters greatly. For example, Filipinos use Facebook messenger regularly and connect with people who are not “friends” on the platform. Alternative messenger sites like WhatsApp are not growing rapidly the way they are in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia. So, in the Philippines, Facebook's ubiquity is its greatest strength. Interestingly, in Indonesia, Facebook is becoming less interesting for younger people because of its ubiquity—these see their parents, extended family, and other people they have never met, all on the home page and therefore seek a more “exclusive” site where they can post material meant for their friends. This explains the early 2010 rise of social media platform Path, and, subsequently the rapid rise of Instagram amongst Indonesian urban youths. Facebook's ubiquity in Indonesia and Malaysia, therefore, is its greatest weakness as the market moves towards a place where young people feel they can post away from the prying eyes of older generations.

Scholars and analysts also overstate findings from Twitter analyses in Southeast Asia. They do so largely because data are much more easily available for “big data” mining and analysis. But in Southeast Asia, Twitter is declining and is generally used by urban elites. For example,

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<sup>7</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom on the Net 2015: Indonesia”, 2015, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2015/indonesia> (accessed 31 March 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, “Internet Users Survey 2017”, Statistical Brief no. 21, 18 July 2018, <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/MCMC-Internet-Users-Survey-2017.pdf>.

64 per cent of Malaysians gather news from Facebook, and 54 per cent from WhatsApp, far higher than from Twitter, at 25 per cent. This is not to say Twitter is unimportant. Twitter is still useful for generating discussion among the elite and media professionals. Public relations companies that provide “social media” data to companies and governments in Southeast Asia are also largely using Twitter data. But these analyses are likely to be slanted towards urban, elite usage rather than being representative of the millions of Southeast Asians who are really only using “the Internet” for two things: Facebook and WhatsApp. To be sure, WhatsApp and other encrypted messaging services like WeChat, LINE and Telegram, are become increasingly popular.

Thus, social media usage in Southeast Asia is not uniform, and much depends on what device citizens use to access the Internet with, what social media platform they use regularly and therefore potentially trust more, and what Internet speeds they endure in order to receive and share various forms of political and other material. Only by studying these communities more closely can we come to broader conclusions about how social media practices work. In this regard, scholars and analysts need to shift away from big data analytics, and undertake more traditional forms of media anthropology which require being amongst semi-rural and rural communities observing and engaging with their digital media practices.

## **TRUST IN SOCIAL MEDIA VERSUS MAINSTREAM MEDIA**

The rise of social media in Southeast Asia corresponds with the decline of mainstream media platforms. As a rule, where Internet penetration is rising, newspaper circulation drops. At the same time, the nature of the newspaper as a pro-government pamphlet has assisted in this rapid decline as well.<sup>9</sup> In Malaysia, the *New Straits Times* daily circulation dropped

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<sup>9</sup> See Ross Tapsell, *Media Power in Indonesia: Oligarchs, Citizens and the Digital Revolution* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); James Gomez, Mustafa K. Anuar and Y.B. Lee, eds., *Media and Elections: Democratic Transition in Malaysia* (Penang: GerakBudaya, 2018).

from 120,000 in 2008 to 44,000 in 2016.<sup>10</sup> Media Prima, which owns the *New Straits Times* and is Malaysia's biggest media conglomerate, reported a loss in 2017 of RM669 million (US\$172 million).<sup>11</sup> In 2019, one of Malaysia's oldest newspapers, *Utusan Malaysia*, closed down. In Indonesia, companies are merging and converging in order to stay afloat financially, brought about by a decline in newspaper circulation and advertising profits.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the broad trends we see in Southeast Asia are: a rise in social media usage amongst the broader population; but their dominance is not only in being "social" and communicating with one another but also in the way in which citizens share information and news. As elsewhere around the world, social media platform engagement is replacing traditional news media business models and audience engagement. But this is only one part of the story.

Key to understanding trends in Southeast Asian media usage is the loss of trust in traditional sources. Scholars use national surveys to understand recent trends in trust in institutions. For example, in a 2017 survey on trust in major institutions in Indonesia, the lowest ranked were political parties (45 per cent), the parliament (55 per cent), the courts (65 per cent), and the mass media (67 per cent). Even the notoriously corrupt Indonesian police (70 per cent) ranked higher than the press.<sup>13</sup> A 2017 survey found that 87 per cent of Filipinos who have Internet access trust social media more than they do the mainstream media.<sup>14</sup> These

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<sup>10</sup> Audit Bureau of Circulations (2016), Malaysia, cited in *Malaysian Media Handbook 2017* (Kuala Lumpur).

<sup>11</sup> Zaharom Nain, "Malaysia", in *Reuters Institute Digital Media Report 2018*, p. 132, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/digital-news-report-2018.pdf> (accessed 18 July 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Tapsell, *Media Power in Indonesia*.

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TRS10\\_17%20\(002\).pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TRS10_17%20(002).pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Johanna Ballaran, "Online Filipinos Trust Social Media More Than Traditional Media—Poll", *Inquirer.net*, 29 August 2017, [http://technology.inquirer.net/66402/filipinos-online-trust-social-media-traditional-media-poll?utm\\_campaign=Echobox&utm\\_medium=Social&utm\\_source=Twitter#link\\_time=1503991006](http://technology.inquirer.net/66402/filipinos-online-trust-social-media-traditional-media-poll?utm_campaign=Echobox&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#link_time=1503991006) (accessed 1 October 2017).

surveys are good starting points, but we need also to understand why people are moving away from mainstream media and towards alternative sources of information. Below I propose and expand upon a few brief answers to this predicament.

A feature of the mainstream media in Indonesia is that politically motivated media owners encourage the production of highly partisan reports and reporting.<sup>15</sup> For example, on the night of the closely fought 2014 presidential election, TVOne owned by then Golkar Chief Aburizal Bakrie, acted as if the losing candidate (Prabowo Subianto, whom the network's owner had supported) had won, and even produced fake polls to back its claims. Golkar was part of Prabowo's coalition in 2014. Skewed coverage like this has led to a general belief that *all* mainstream media (and polling institutes) are partisan. Thus, in distrusting mainstream media declines, citizens turn to alternative sources which, in turn, are shaped by the increasingly ubiquitous social media.

In the Philippines, a new media ecosystem arrived with the prominence of numerous pro-Duterte bloggers. Mocha Uson, a popular singer and model, campaigned strongly for Duterte through her blog, which attracted 4 million likes and records around 1.2 million engagements each week. R.J. Nieto, with his blog *Thinking Pinoy* and with the high engagement of his 470,000 Facebook followers, claims to have been “kicking mainstream media’s arse” in terms of engagement with readers. “The tables have turned,” he wrote on his blog in 2017, “[and] social media has taken over the task of shaping public discourse”.<sup>16</sup> Martin Andanar’s *Martin’s Man Cave* podcast also grew in popularity. Duterte was a guest on the show as early as in June 2015, where Andanar introduced him as a “rockstar” and “one of the best local executives we have in the country”.<sup>17</sup> Sass Rogando Sasat (@senyora with 3.91 million

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<sup>15</sup> Tapsell, *Media Power in Indonesia*, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> R.J. Nieto, “Thinking Pinoy Blog”, 26 January 2017, <http://www.thinkingpinoy.net/2017/01/college-sorority-blog-rapplers-chay.html> (accessed 23 September 2017).

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3u3aYmf4fE>.



Twitter followers) became prominent interlocuters during the 2016 Presidential election campaign. Many Duterte supporters online attacked professional journalists and continued to decry the mainstream media as “biased”, allowing for alternative sources of information to become more popular.<sup>18</sup>

In Southeast Asia, it is clear that citizens are not particularly trustful of official sources. There are a number of conclusions we can draw from this. I have argued elsewhere that the legacy of authoritarianism and state-sponsored propaganda has a lasting impact in Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup> Put simply, when citizens grow up on a diet of slanted pro-government official information, they are more likely to turn to unofficial sources of information. This perhaps explains why young people in Southeast Asia often complain that their parents are sharing hoax news on WhatsApp groups and on Facebook. They may not always believe this themselves, but they do think that sharing information—whether it is accurate or not—is better than not sharing any information at all.

There is a cultural argument here too, which is that Southeast Asian society is shaped by a more open attitude about the sharing of information. Villagers in Southeast Asia will regularly ask each other “where are you going?” or “who are you meeting?” without it being considered rude or intrusive. In some ways, this culture of openly “sharing” and extensive chatter has simply moved online, explaining in part why Southeast Asians vigorously adopt social media at such high rates, while countries like Japan, where society is generally considered more “private”, have comparably lower levels of social media engagement.

Southeast Asia’s culture of sharing information widely and speculatively did not originate with digital technologies. In a 1994 article

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<sup>18</sup> Jason Vincent Cabanes and Jayeel Cornelio, “The Rise of Trolls in the Philippines (And What We Can Do About It)”, in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte’s Early Presidency*, edited by Nicole Curato (Ithaca; SEAP Publications, Cornell University Press, 2017), pp. 231–50.

<sup>19</sup> Ross Tapsell, “Disinformation and Democracy”, *New Mandala*, 12 January 2018, <https://www.newmandala.org/disinformation-democracy-indonesia/>.

on the role of rumour during Suharto's military dictatorship (1965–98) in Indonesia, anthropologist James Siegel wrote that “rumour is subversive in the New Order not when its content is directed against the government, but when the source is believed *not* to be the government”.<sup>20</sup> Under Suharto's authoritarian rule, the practice of passing on information, rumours, and gossip became part of being an Indonesian citizen—one who passes on the *extra* information. A non-government source, particularly if it is someone you trust, became more believable. As we have heard, in many ways this practice continues, and has simply moved online. Conversely, a Roy Morgan survey conducted in Australia found that Australians trust their independent, national broadcaster the most, and distrust Facebook the least.<sup>21</sup> The digital era is changing the avenues through which society receives produces, disseminates and receives news and information, but it does not necessarily change the cultural practices of information-gathering and sharing of news and views, especially in rural areas. We are only just beginning to understand the complexities involved in the way in which new technologies reshape political discourse.

## THE POLITICAL CONTEXT IN WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA SPREADS

A third set of issues scholars need to consider more deeply with regard to social media is understanding why some material that are disseminated on social media are widely believed, while other material are largely ignored. If political parties and candidates are increasingly hiring professional online campaigners to produce “hoax news” about their opponents, it becomes all the important to identify which “black campaign” and mudslinging sticks are created and why. Much of the

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<sup>20</sup> James Siegel, “I was not there, but ...”, *Archipel* 46 (1993): 59–65, [http://www.persee.fr/doc/arch\\_0044-8613\\_1993\\_num\\_46\\_1\\_2937](http://www.persee.fr/doc/arch_0044-8613_1993_num_46_1_2937).

<sup>21</sup> [www.roymorgan.com/findings/7641-media-net-trust-june-2018-201806260239](http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/7641-media-net-trust-june-2018-201806260239).

contemporary writing on social media and elections adopts the language of war—telling us in rather hyperbolic terminology that social media has been “weaponized” by “online armies”. The mainstream media has told us at significant length about the rise of paid social media campaigners who produce and disseminate politically skewed content.<sup>22</sup> In each country, these campaigners are identified through local terms: “trolls” in the Philippines, “buzzers” in Indonesia, and “cybertroopers” in Malaysia. These investigations and research are important, but they generally tell *how* disinformation is created and who pays for it (no doubt, the latter is more difficult to ascertain). Thus, the research conducted previously has been “top-down” in its approach, generally using aggregated social media data to show a large swathe of online campaigners creating and disseminating disinformation. Disinformation in the Philippines, for example that of the Oxford Internet Institute,<sup>23</sup> shows a rising trend of “bots” and paid fake accounts via Twitter. Scholarship in Indonesia and Malaysia examines the role of celebrity Instagram Muslim preachers, and how they are increasingly crucial in shaping political discourse.<sup>24</sup>

While understanding the modes of disinformation is important, there is a more pressing need to understand what narratives of disinformation are effective and why? The answer to the latter lies within political science explanations of “identity politics” that are increasingly prevalent during election campaigns. Broadly speaking, “identity politics campaigns” are where campaign professionals and politicians aim ethnic and religious

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<sup>22</sup> Cabanes and Cornelio, “The Rise of Trolls in the Philippines”; Manila Bughaw and Merlyna Lim, “Freedom to Hate: Social Media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia”, *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 411–27.

<sup>23</sup> Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard, “Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation”, The Computational Propaganda Project, Oxford Internet Institute Working Paper 12, 2012, <http://comprop.oi.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/07/Troops-Trolls-and-Troublemakers.pdf> (accessed 2 October 2017).

<sup>24</sup> See *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, vol. 5, issue 1-2 (2018), “Online Publics in Muslim Southeast Asia: In Between Religious Politics and Popular Pious Practices”.

narratives at voters. It is believed that narratives on identity politics are likely to have a more lasting effect on the decision to vote for a candidate or not, than specific policy platforms around health, education or climate change, for example. Another term more rampantly used is “post-truth”, the *Oxford Dictionary’s* word of the year for 2016. The Philippines election of 2016 fits into current debates surrounding “post-truth politics” campaigns that prioritize emotions over policy details. As Curato has observed “Duterte put on a spectacle that pushed the boundaries of traditional political practice”.<sup>25</sup> She further cites sociologist Randy David (2016) describing Duterte’s campaign as “pure theatre—a sensual experience rather than the rational application of ideas to society’s problems”.<sup>26</sup> Central to Duterte’s election campaign was the depiction of the Philippines as a “narco state”. At the start of the campaign, Duterte stated that the country would become a narco state due to illegal drugs. The key to the “narco state” message was the Duterte team’s ability to link the issue of drugs to the broader anxieties of crime, corruption and lack of faith in law enforcement in the Philippines.<sup>27</sup> In this regard, the “narco state” become something emotively large and cast Duterte as the outsider vigilante—a “Dirty Harry” authoritarian strong-man who could defeat the cronies of the “narco state”.

In Indonesia, the 2017 Jakarta election saw a highly febrile, sectarian campaign where voters were encouraged to ally themselves with candidates who shared their religious affiliation. There became two election campaigns: the official campaign where candidates talked of policies (such as education and entrepreneurship) and the more emotive “unofficial campaign” online (where material asked voters not to vote for the incumbent candidate—Basuki Tjahaja Purnama popularly referred

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<sup>25</sup> Nicole Curato, “Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 1 (2017): 104.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Nicole Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte’s Rise to Power”, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2016): 91–109.

as Ahok—because he had insulted the Quran, or more covertly, because he had Chinese heritage). For their part, victorious candidate Anies Baswedan’s team was also concerned with a “black campaign” against him such as memes or messages stating he was a Shia Muslim (90 per cent of Indonesians are Sunni Muslim), or that he wanted to introduce Sharia law. In the case of the Philippines and Indonesia, it seems social media do not support nuanced policy debates during election times, and thus, democratic discourses suffer.

Malaysia provides an interesting contrast to this argument. In the 2018 elections, the smartphone, Facebook and WhatsApp were used as “weapons of the weak” to question the legitimacy of the corrupt and increasingly authoritarian rule of Prime Minister Najib Razak, and to help undermine the rule of the semi-authoritarian Barisan Nasional government. When Malaysians discussed the election, they would invariably talk about Najib and the 1MDB wealth fund controversy. When subsequently asked where they got their information from (given that Malaysia’s mainstream media had largely avoided reporting on this issue), they would almost always say “Facebook” or “WhatsApp”. Details of Najib’s 1MDB scandal, repressed in the mainstream media, spread frequently on social media and messenger applications. While there was a general belief in Malaysia that the details of 1MDB were too complex to resonate in rural towns and villages, the message of government corruption was clearly widespread, in large part thanks to social media.<sup>28</sup> While Facebook and WhatsApp triumphantly undermined government-controlled mainstream media in semi-authoritarian Malaysia, at the same time these platforms were assisting in the declining trust in professional journalism in democratic countries like the Philippines and Indonesia.

How do we reconcile these different cases? Winning the “social media war” is not simply a matter of *amount* of official or disinformation campaign material being disseminated by political parties and their

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<sup>28</sup> Ross Tapsell, “The Smartphone as ‘Weapon of the Weak’: Assessing the Role of Communication Technologies in Malaysia’s Regime Change”, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* (December 2018).

social media professionals, but producing the *type* of content that makes citizens share it with their friends and family “organically”. Thus, we need more studies examining how it is that some disinformation tactics work and others do not, and in what political context, in order to fully understand when society may or may not be “threatened” by these new practices. Much depends on the political context and the level of media freedom already present in each society, the type and intention of the government constructing the laws, and the varying power and will of the institutions that implement them.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM CHANGES**

This final section analyses what role, if any, the platforms themselves may have in shaping social media discourse in 2020 and beyond. There is already considerable debate on the extent to which social media platforms like Facebook, Youtube and Twitter should regulate content, particularly political content. In 2019, this debate was heightened when Twitter decided to ban all political advertising on the platform, while Facebook defended its policy to run such content saying that it did not wish to stifle political speech. Of course, the business model for Facebook is so much more lucrative. It gives paying customers the power to target specific consumers and constituencies with, largely and freely, whatever product or message. Facebook’s advertising revenue grew from US\$4 billion in 2012 to US\$55 billion in 2018, and there is no doubt that political advertising contributed to this growth.

The prevalence of political advertising is visible everywhere from the United States to the Philippines, but the real problem is not such advertising by itself. Rather, it is the precision with which tech companies allow politicians, their allies and their secret surrogates to target voters. Combined with a belligerent and untrustworthy digital culture, social media are charged with content that is damaging to democracy. Political disinformation campaigners range from high-end million-dollar advertising companies to mid-range companies who hire young university students and young entrepreneurs. These groups understand the digital realm and they strategically create and pay Facebook to boost disinformation that have the potential to steer elections.

In Indonesia, the trend began in the Jakarta governor election of 2017. Once heralded as Twitter's capital city in terms of most posted tweets, Jakartan political campaigners used social media company data to locate constituents and appeal to their identity as Muslims through ads. Mass rallies of Muslims flooded the streets of the capital on numerous occasions, and the incumbent governor, a Chinese-Christian, was ousted and ultimately jailed for blasphemy. Social media discourse, and the ability of campaigners to target Muslim voters on their pages, was not the sole cause of this election campaign and its result, but it undoubtedly played a role. The 2019 Indonesian presidential election saw similar tactics where it grew common for politicians to hire social media campaigners to produce disinformation about their opponent.

Thus, it was in light of these worrying trends, in late October 2019 that Twitter banned political advertising on its platform. It received a lot of good publicity for doing so, given that Facebook had chosen not to. But Twitter needs to do more to reduce disinformation even beyond advertising, especially the manipulation of content through paid troll armies in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Keyboard warriors have been a growing feature of the region for more than six years, starting with the cybertroopers of Malaysia's 2013 election. Philippine trolls and prominent Indonesian buzzers are part of Twitter's polarized and belligerent discourse, driven by political campaign teams.

Rodrigo Duterte won the Philippines presidency in 2016 without significant mainstream media spending on ads. His campaign chief, Nic Gabunada, ran a campaign largely through social media, which turned out to be hugely successful. Throughout his presidency, Duterte's social media operations have expanded and his popularity has grown, while concurrently the country's democratic quality has rapidly declined. Earlier this year, Facebook shut down Gabunada's pages for "inauthentic behaviour", but the trend had been set. Disinformation campaigns on social media were prevalent nationwide in the Philippines 2019 mid-terms, from local district chiefs and mayors to senatorial campaigns.

Tech companies will say that their growth is central to the emerging digital economy: they will create jobs and therefore provide more potential for innovation and therefore more growth. This argument, along with their claiming to be advocates of free speech, convinced most

politicians to avoid regulating them. In Southeast Asia, tech companies and their founders are seen as saviours from a future economic downturn and market instability. Indonesia's richest digital entrepreneur, Nadiem Makarim, was recently appointed Minister for Education.

The ability of tech companies to microtarget customers, including by ethnic or religious group, is why they are valued so highly, not just for present purposes but for future gains as their algorithms become more advanced at locating—geographically and socio-politically—and selling to specific people and groups. But as Southeast Asia's "app economy" grows to include social networks, transport, dating, news, weather and more, they are able to use the information they gather, especially where people go and who they connect with, to sell consumers a product, including the product of a political campaign. Southeast Asia's "app industry" needs clearer and enforced regulation on what tech companies can do with its data and to what extent they can sell it to advertisers. These advertisers include, but are not limited to, politicians and political parties. Of course, this extends to locally based apps as well as the global behemoths like Facebook and Google. It is no longer enough for big tech companies or other global social media platforms, to espouse the virtues of economic growth in the United States, and not be held responsible for damages caused locally in the Southeast Asian region.

## CONCLUSION

The digital era is changing the avenues by which all of us receive and process information. Given the rising prominence of the smartphone in Southeast Asia, we should look to this region to see what these new "communities" look like, and how society is changing. The fields of political science and media studies, and social media studies in particular, have become excited by the possibilities "big data" analytics can bring. Quantitative studies of politics and social media are, as a result, plentiful in Western universities. But we need a wide range of scholarly fields to engage more deeply with the subject, not only through an analysis of "big data" algorithms. Anthropologists, historians, gender and cultural studies scholars, sociologists and other scholars of the humanities have much to contribute to the field. In general, the social media industry seems to



think that society's problems which social media have exacerbated can be solved by the very type of person who created the platforms in the first place; that manipulation of social media platforms simply needs computer scientists with better and faster algorithms to counteract. But each time an algorithm is created, disinformation producers find new ways to get around it. When citizens move away from Twitter because of too many buzzers and prefer Instagram instead, for example, campaigners sack their buzzers and begin to hire Instagram "click-farmers". The challenges are many, but given the ubiquitous use of social media platforms, there is no reason Southeast Asia cannot lead the world in finding solutions to these complex problems, instead of just waiting for instructions from Silicon Valley.

The trend for social media usage globally is towards less open engagement on platforms and far more engagement within platforms by private groups. Of course, the rise of WhatsApp in Indonesia and Malaysia has already signalled this trend, but Facebook too realizes that it needs to adapt to this rising demand from users to say things more privately amongst a closed group of friends.<sup>29</sup>

As Southeast Asian governments introduce new laws to (ideally) crack down on hoax news peddlers and disinformation producers, and as these laws become politicized or are used inappropriately (as they have been in Indonesia, for example), then citizens will be increasingly cautious of what they say publicly on social media platforms. They will revert to the safety of closed groups, in trust that their information will not be distributed. This has the potential for even greater echo chambers and filter bubbles of information, which scholars have previously identified as an important impact for social media. Closed groups also negate the potential for big data analysis. This means that the type of research and analysis that has dominated the digital research industry—notably big data obtained largely from Twitter—is

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/social-business/facebook-announces-all-pages-can-now-create-linked-groups>.

likely to be less relevant in understanding politics and societies. Rather, empirical and ethnographic research by scholars who have access to these communities and understand their needs and identities, are more likely to provide deeper insights on the impact of social media in the Southeast Asian region.

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