

Pseudo-democracy, the public sphere and web forums

The situation for on-line media in Southeast Asia

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The on-line environment of many a Southeast Asian country is a metaphor of the situation of politics in the particular country itself. While dictators are retiring, traditional guards are defending their status at all cost against or together with a newly rising class of media-related business sectors, and, in order to legitimize the status quo, citizens are given a few opportunities of »participation« in decision-making, coupled with an air of freedom, a touch of wealth, all of which consolidate a pseudo-democratic state of mind in the citizens amidst the prevailing global atmosphere of fear of terrorism. This is mirrored in the citizens' daily use of on-line media. In cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok or Jakarta, an ordinary citizen goes to one of the thousands of internet cafés scattered around the city, and pays some pennies for an hour to surf, search and chat surrounded by the unbearable noise of kids playing a videogame next to him. He can google and that gives him an idea of being informed, he can chat with anybody using his own identity or a totally new self, and these days, he can publish his thoughts daily via his own blog, post photos on MyPhoto and his video on YouTube,¹ and feel connected to the world in a personal way on Myspace. This daily life that has become the norm for Asian urban dwellers can be found even in Rangoon, under the most suppressive regime. And, even the marginally more enlightened citizens have this feeling of being more independent and individual in cyberspace, as it is in contrast with what's going on in the mass media, where a large section of the population is hooked on other pseudo-citizens-participatory TV programs, such as »Malaysian Idol«, »Indonesian Idol« and »Academy Fantasia«, which are presented by channels creating lucrative profits for the big players.

In this environment, slowly but steadily an increasing third force of NGOs and civil activists are striving to create Habermasian notions of public sphere and public space, which Asian activists have been yearning for, more and more in cyber space. In this article we will look at four on-line media from this region and examine their strategies to win public support, the problems that they are facing, and their future prospects.

1 In April this year, Thai telecom authorities blocked YouTube after a video mocking the Thai King Bhumibol was posted on it. The Thai authorities and YouTube are still negotiating to resolve the issue. At the time of writing this article, YouTube is still banned in Thailand.

»Midnight University« is an on-line education site based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. It came into being as a result of a series of educational public intervention activities by scholars of law, science, fine arts, political science, history and medical science from the Chiang Mai University in the late 1990s. After these scholars stirred up public dialogues and discussions in various situations and settings, they went on to occupy a space in television media for 3 years and at the same time started to explore cyber space. The on-line Midnight University (<http://www.midnightuniv.org>) was launched in 2000 with the motto of death of a daytime university (daytime university stands as a symbol of serving darkness, business and capital-centralism). It has published articles written by its members and translated articles serving various fields that help to strengthen civil society, with additional sections for an encyclopedia and web board. Indeed, the website, [midnightuniv.org](http://www.midnightuniv.org), with 200,000 IP signing in, 20,000 articles being downloaded, and continuous actions by the members, which keep inciting public debates – such as the performance in which 5 members tore up a mock new charter in protest at last year's coup – has become a political project in itself, of a type never seen before in this country with its long monarchical tradition. Midnight University has been shut down twice in the past, and each time that happened, strong support from the public and academic communities, at home and abroad, helped pressure the authorities to re-open it again in a short time.

In contrast, in Vietnam we find »talawas« (<http://www.talawas.org>), the on-line forum that illustrates the complex features of Southeast Asia perhaps more than any other on-line media in the region. Started in Germany in 2001, and still based in Berlin, it also presents us with a more encouraging picture of the future of Southeast Asia.

The web forum is the brainchild of Germany and Austria-based Vietnamese people, also referred to as »overseas Vietnamese«. Overseas Vietnamese people scattered around the world make up as much as 3 million of the world's population. Reflecting this demography, 10 editors of talawas work from Berlin, Baden-Württemberg, Paris, California, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City – all in different time zones. Theoretically, that would keep each editor working around-the-clock in order for him/her to work with the other editors. In reality, they say, yes, they hardly sleep.

What these sleepless editors do is to throw debate topics out to the people – both to the overseas Vietnamese and those back home, and to people in the North and South. Under different sections such as talaTi (thought and ideology), talArt (art), talaLit (literature), talaFe (feminism), talaSo (social comment) and talaPo (politics), topics such as »Representations of the American War in Vietnamese Song after 1975«; »Culture and Art in the South of Vietnam Under the American and Its Puppet's Regime or Socialist Art and Literature«(talArt); »Some Thoughts in the 1990s - Spiritual Life and Religious Consciousness«(talaTi), draw heated debates and as a consequence talawas is succeeding in connecting Vietnamese people across different borders via discussions about a particular topic. According to the California-based editor Hoai Phi, the most recent topics that triggered heated debates include the recent transfer of the two liberal deputy-editors of an

influential newspaper. Literature being the hallmark of talawas (the title, by the way, is a combination of the Vietnamese and German words that signify »What I am«), »Wolf Totem«, a Chinese novel translated into Vietnamese, which touches on the sensitive topic of the relationship between Vietnam and China, has also attracted a large number of responses and comments. Talawas's efforts to keep the past unforgotten are reflected in talaBo, which refers to »Bookcase«, the section that addresses South Vietnamese books banned since 1975.

Talawas was »officially« firewalled in 2004, yet, since then, the number of self-trained techno-savvy readers able to go through the firewall has increased dramatically. Hence, as a result of this, technical empowerment has become the unexpected by-product of this justifiably »national« on-line forum.

As we can see in the success of talawas, the defining feature of on-line magazines in post-dictatorial Southeast Asia is a web forum or a web board, providing it is sustained as an autonomous space. Even the simplest thread encourages people to comment, react, discuss and debate, and this habit is influencing citizens' behavior patterns. Topics that people had previously talked about only at home have been brought out in the public sphere, first in virtual space and then in to physical space. It is the public that has started »public discussions« in a public sphere, which is getting closer to Habermas' ideas. And, just like the region's democratic tradition, it is still young, it's in a trial-and-error period, and is prone to fall into banal traps such as personal attacks and burying the others, and result in a kind of »herding« together.

These are the matters that the editors of »kakiseni.com« (<http://www.kakiseni.com>), the Malaysian on-line art magazine, have been trying to solve for some time now. This on-line media, which was started in 2001 as an art listing and has grown to become the main source of information on art and culture events and on-line reviews for Malaysia, attracts an average of 800,000 pages viewed per month. In the last couple of years, however, the threads of commentaries had become a major headache for the editors. The editors, as well as some readers, have started to acknowledge that certain topics, such as an exhibition or theater play, provoke nasty bullish attacks on individuals. Does this mean that kakiseni.com has become a family that allows members to dub each other, or is it that it has soaked up the global net behavior? Or, is it simply the continuation of the pre-modern media of rumor-mongering and whisper tactics? The question may be made more problematic by the fact that threads tend to fade away rather quietly if they are on culture-specific topics which could provide impetus for discussions with large-scale participation, such as issues relating to »Merdeka« (independence) and art, Malaysian culture that is defined by the state, censorship, etc.

The article by one of its founders, Kathy Rowland, published in September 2004 for example, deals with a crucial aspect of the question »What is the Malaysian culture?« which has been traditionally defined not by people themselves but by the authorities – either governmental or religious. In the article, she refers to the National Culture Policy that the government set up in

1971, and analyzes the background, history, rationale and its implication in the present climate. And her conclusion is the following: »Today, 33 years after the NCP, and 16 years to 2020, we find ourselves in a kind of cultural no-man's land, bordered by the permissiveness of »Vision 2020«, and the cultural »industry« on one side, and the increasingly assertive voice of Islamic fundamentalism on the other«. ²

The reaction to this argument is rather somber reflections on the past by older generations, praising the lady's »tough« determination to fight on, and despite the fact that it was posted after Mahathir's retirement, the joyous explosion of freedom of being able to dig out the sensitive past and have a go at it is not registered in any of the threads.

In Southeast Asia where the authorities look for any weakness or inner-crack in independent media as a pretext for silencing the media – a rare vessel full of public voices and the window of public dissent – this internal vacillation within the media could cost it its life. In Thailand, political chat-rooms, web forums/boards are exercising various measures not to expose any fragility within their milieu for this very reason. »Prachatai« (<http://www.prachatai.com>), the on-line magazine in Thailand hailed as a truly independent media source by liberals and intellectuals for example, has been monitoring each message that comes in day and night since some other media were shut down because of messages that contained issues of monarchy. The »lèse majesté« law, which Thailand has a reputation of implementing very frequently, has been used as an ultra-effective weapon to push out enemies and dissidents, and it is the most effective pretext for the publicly supported part of censorship because of the demigod status of the present king. In the Islamic part of the region, fundamentalists are exercising the use of a similar weapon of divinity. There is no other method in the current circumstances but to self-censor in order for media activists to save the budding arena of public dialogues. In this still restricted environment, one common strategy being explored involves giving each article of local content global weight and resonance and then being more connected to the outside world content-wise. Kakiseni is experimenting with regional collaboration by exchanging articles with similar publications from the Philippines and Indonesia, while Prachatai has recently launched Prachatai English (<http://www.prachatai.com/english/>) marking the advent of the first Thai independent media source in English not catering only to expatriates.

If, as Kathy Rowland asserts, Southeast Asian countries, at least some of them, are suffering and lost in a cultural no-man's land in the midst of governmental controls, the presence of a deity, and public rumors, there are also attempts to gain an autonomous no-man's land of possibilities and to fill it with public actions and discourses.

2 Bukan Budaya Kita by Kathy Rowland published on kakiseni.com on 08. 09. 2004 (www.kakiseni.com/articles/features/NTU2.html#top); »Vision 2020« refers to the vision for Malaysia's future launched in 1991 by the Prime Minister at the time, Mahathir Bin Mohamad, c.f. <http://www.wawasan2020.com/vision/>