

The Shifting Institutional Bases of Digital Asia Studies: Communication, Culture, and Governance in Asia

Introduction

EMMA BAULCH¹

Monash University Malaysia, Malaysia

TERRY FLEW

Queensland University of Technology, Australia

LUZHOU LI

Monash University, Australia

In recent years, several collections, books, events, journals, and dedicated publishing ventures on the digital in Asia have emerged, such that we can now speak of a body of digital Asia studies work. This introduction situates the Special Section on “Communication, Culture, and Governance in Asia,” coedited by Emma Baulch, Terry Flew, and Luzhou Li, within this broader body of work. It identifies three themes in digital Asia studies—infrastructure, political and civic engagement, and digitally equipped consumerism—and considers the Special Section’s contributions to each of these areas. The articles in the Special Section, most of which are authored by Asia-based scholars, point to a shift in anglophone digital media studies toward Asia-based institutions and networks.

Keywords: infrastructure, Asia, communicative assemblage, misinformation, parasocial, civic engagement, sociolegal, New Silk Road

In recent years a substantial body of work examining digital communications in Asia has emerged, providing scholars with perspectives on the social implications of digital uptake from beyond the established centers of communications research in Europe and North America. The last decade has witnessed the publication of seminal monographs (Hong 2017; Jin, 2016; Qiu, 2009; Wallis, 2013), edited collections (Athique & Baulch, 2019; Hjorth & Khoo; 2015; S. S. Lim, 2016; S. S. Lim & Soriano, 2016) journals

Emma Baulch: emma.baulch@monash.edu

Terry Flew: t.flew@qut.edu.au

Luzhou Li: Luzhou.li@monash.edu

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(*Asiascape: Digital Asia*), and special journal issues (Qiu & Thompson, 2007) as well as the founding of book series (Springer's *Mobile Communications in Asia: Local Insights, Global Implications*; and Routledge *Research in Digital Media and Culture in Asia*), not to mention an increasing number of articles on the digital in Asia appearing in leading communications journals. Cumulatively, this work points to an emerging Asian turn in communications research on the digital. Scholars of digital media in Asia are playing a leading role in what S. S. Lim and Soriano (2016) refer to as media studies' "internationalization imperative" (p. 4), following calls for such by Curran and Park (2000), Thussu (2009), and Goggin and McLelland (2009).

This Special Section on "Communication, Culture, and Governance in Asia," edited by Emma Baulch, Terry Flew, and Luzhou Li, seeks to contribute to this growing body of work. It has its genesis in a series of conferences on the theme of digital Asia held at the Queensland University of Technology's Creative Industries Faculty in 2016, 2017, and 2018 and organized by the three coeditors.² The conference organizers were inspired by growing calls for the internationalization of digital media studies and by developments within Asia that make scholarship on digital change in the region especially urgent. In particular, three developments warrant the turn toward Asia in communications' study of the digital. First, the spectacular rate of digital market expansion in the 21st century makes Asia a prime site for the study of a recent history of media change. Second, the region is emerging as a key site of digital content production and distribution (Chua & Jung, 2013; S. S. Lim & Goggin, 2014). And third, as well as boasting high rates of growth in digital uptake, large parts of the region still experience high rates of inequality of Internet access (World Bank Group, 2016). In this latter regard, Asia looks more like most of the globe—just under half of the world's populations still do not have Internet access—than societies of the global North, where media and communications theory was born. Therefore, studying Asian societies will better equip media and communications scholars to address one of the discipline's most pressing questions in the 21st century: What are the sociopolitical implications of enduring digital inequality, especially with regard to Internet access?

The cultural diversity and geographic vastness of the region, in addition to the multiplicity and constantly changing nature of digital technologies, present challenges to a project that examines the relationship between Asia and the digital. Scholars have entered this terrain from various disciplinary angles, including political science, sociology, and, more recently, cultural studies to tease out the different aspects of digital experiences in Asia. Broadly speaking, this growing corpus of work on digital media in Asia can be divided into three categories: infrastructure, political and civic engagement, and digitally equipped consumerism.

The first category explores the relationship between digital media and infrastructural development. Jin (2006, 2016) and J. Y. Lee (2009) have shown how the growth of Korean media and cultural industries were driven by digital innovations and economic liberalization when new modes and means of cultural production were released from the state to the market. Sharif and Baark (2008) document the Hong Kong government's development of legal frameworks to ensure safe and smooth commercial activities online, and similar cases have been documented across the region, where local governments adopt strategies to integrate digital technologies into their respective local economies (see Hong, 2017). Much of the work on

² Associate Professor Adrian Athique was also a co-organizer of the Digital Transactions conference held at the University of Queensland and Queensland University of Technology, August 8–10, 2017.

technology leapfrogging and bridging the digital divide in Asia—too abundant to be cited here—also falls within this body of work.

The second category, political and civic participation, includes studies exploring topics ranging from the online mobilization of pro-democracy movements (Abbott, 2013; M. Lim, 2003) to the use of digital technologies for civic engagement (Skoric, Zhu & Pang, 2016). As early as 1998, digital technologies were held to play a vital role in the overthrow of Indonesian President Suharto (M. Lim, 2003), and significant attention has been paid to the role of Facebook in the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement (F. Lee & Chan, 2018) as well as the gradual demise of Malaysia's longstanding ruling coalition, United Malays National Organisation (Liow & Pasuni, 2010; Suffian, 2010; Tapsell, 2018; Weiss, 2013).

The third category explores the market-led evolution of societies in a digital era. Abidin's (2016) work on online microcelebrity illustrates how individuals can manipulate their social media presentation by representing their consumption of certain brands and commodities. Although these individuals might be caught up in commodification (Abidin, 2016), digital platforms still provide what Albury (2015) describes as the "productive space for reshaping educational, legal, and policy conversations about media, sexuality, and gender" (p. 1742; see also Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018; Beta, 2019).

The Articles in This Special Section

In large part, the articles in this Special Section fall within these three categories. Three of the 10 articles attend to civic engagement. Abdul Rohman and Peng Hwa Ang show how mobile phones have helped Ambonese people prevent the flare-up of long-standing conflicts sparked by the spread of rumors. The article highlights a well-documented repurposing of digital technologies in Ambon's civil strife (Brauchler, 2003; Bubandt, 2008): Ambonese citizens use mobile phones to fact-check by cultivating small world networks and diversifying their sources of information, thereby stemming the circulation of violence-provoking rumor. Michael M. Skoric and Nan Zhang consider the evolution of civic participation in the context of an authoritarian regime. They find that Weibo use correlates strongly with environmental engagement in the form of green consumerism. And Trisha Lin finds that dual screening in Taiwan—the concurrence of "lean back" and "lean forward" activities, in which people consume media content on one device while seeking information or chatting on another—is strongly linked to a willingness to discuss civic issues.

Four of the articles here attend to infrastructure: those by Michael Keane and Haiqing Yu; Yu Hong and Jian Xu; Luzhou Li; and Cheryl R. Soriano. Keane and Yu consider the crucial role of the expansion of digital networks in China's empire building via the Belt and Road Initiative. This expansion entails improving network hardware and connectivity in Central Asia, Chinese platforms' heavy investment in Southeast Asian e-commerce, and the recent popularization of the Chinese video-sharing app TikTok as well as the development of artificial intelligence and Internet of Things technologies. Hong and Xu provide insights into the sociolegal infrastructure that is developing around the growth of Chinese platforms and in conversation with the country's membership in the World Trade Organization. Through a focus on the importance of platform immunity in lawsuits against Alibaba, Hong and Xu go "beyond the censorship imaginary" to highlight the complexity and fragmentation of China's Internet governance. Li's article serves as a backdrop to studies of the expansion and governance of Chinese digital networks. Li focuses on the

development of television industries—particularly the changing roles of the central state and provincial administrations in developing content since the 1990s. As recently as 2009, Chinese television experienced a “savage growth,” which manifested in the heightened production of television drama. Li’s discussion draws attention to complexities in China’s television industries that are similar to those identified by Hong and Xu in their article in this collection of platform governance. Television industries, too, contain many moving parts and tensions between the demands of the market and the ideological needs of the Chinese state.

Cheryll Ruth R. Soriano also refers to infrastructure; she employs the notion of “communicative assemblage” to conceptualize Internet engagements via the *pisinet* in Manila’s slums. Her article provides a distinct take on the development of digital infrastructure from the perspective of small-scale entrepreneurs in lower-class urban areas. Soriano’s concern with the local meanings of infrastructural elements highlights the important social and cultural implications of digital technologies’ embedding in specific Asian sites. Therefore, her study forms a bridge between the articles that explore infrastructural developments from the perspective of big platforms and the state and Julian Hopkins’s article, which examines the social effects of middle-class Malaysian women’s adoption of Silicon Valley platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Firmly situated within a broader literature considering the implications of a digitally equipped consumer economy for women’s labor, Hopkins examines the relationship between momblogging and women’s emancipation. Drawing attention to how the Malaysian mombloggers develop brands that valorize self-sacrifice and involve a considerable amount of free labor, Hopkins comes to a rather pessimistic conclusion: “Exploring mombloggers’ practices helps us understand how old inequalities are being perpetuated and new inequalities are emerging in a global digital economy.”

Terry Flew’s commentary brings together all the articles in the Special Section through the lens of trust in the age of platform economy. Flew notes a decline in trust toward modern institutions such as business, government, and the media (especially social media thanks to the circulation of “fake news,” misinformation, algorithms-driven ad targeting and social profiling, and misuse of personal data) in North America, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region. Associating growing distrust with the rise of populism and a backlash against globalization, Flew sees three elements as critical to managing the trust crisis: accountability, transparency, and the governance of digital platforms. Being experienced as both interpersonal and society-wide communication, the notion of trust intersects with all three categories structuring the Special Section: civic engagement, infrastructure, and Asian societies in a digital era. Rohman and Ang’s article, for example, addresses the political potentials of the “small world” networks of trust and reciprocity in the context of long-standing religious conflict on the Indonesian island of Ambon sparked by the spread of rumors. The articles by Hong and Xu and by Keane and Yu identify some of the characteristics of platform governance in China, which are in various ways driven by the trust question. For example, trust underpins concerns about e-commerce platforms such as Alibaba and how to regulate them. Similarly, in Hopkins’s description of the online word-of-mouth marketing in Malaysia, the trust question is no less significant. Social media influencers like mombloggers are more trusted than corporations.

One notable feature of this collection is that eight of the 10 articles (including the introduction) are authored by scholars based in institutions in Asia, and this reflects a broad shift in English-language scholarship about Asia. As digital technologies infuse the region, so are the institutional bases for conducting research on Asia changing. This point has not been discussed in existing reviews of the

emerging body of work on digital communications in Asia, but the changing role of a geopolitics of knowledge production in forming the corpus of scholarship on digital Asia is an interesting development. We do not suggest that work emerging from Asia-based centers of communication research unproblematically reveals "Asian" ways of doing things. As S. S. Lim and Soriano (2016) note,

by dint of their Anglophone bent, Asian scholars who write in English are likely to have been schooled in the West, thereby being more receptive towards Western theoretical concepts, more inclined to write in a manner that resonates with a Western audience, and seek international endorsement by publishing in high impact English journals. (p. 5)

However, Asian research perspectives also need to be taken into account when considering the future of digital communications studies. As more Asia-based institutions for anglophone digital communications studies emerge, seeking international endorsement will not only entail the pursuit of a Western scholarly audience. More likely, we will see the strengthening of regional networks around the existing prestigious Asia-based cores of research activity and training and the consolidation of an international media and communications research agenda.

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