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DIGITAL DEMOCRACY IN ASIA

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A pain point preventing some Asian countries from participating actively in discussions shaping digital democracy is the Eurocentric, Americentric perspective on what the “correct” practice of democracy should be. This article conducts a review of literature on digital democracy from Asia, covering how digital technologies have improved government service delivery, enhanced transparency, enabled wider political participation, and provided spaces for underrepresented voices. It also finds nuance in how different Asian publics—including within the same country—are engaging with politics online, with its practice varying based on history, cultures, political systems, and communities. For instance, even with the focus on developing e-government infrastructure across Asia, not all communities experience these services in the same way, resulting in a ‘democratic divide’.

INTRODUCTION

Technologies reflect the societies that use them, and in turn shape societies in their image. “Digital democracy” then is not just about the use of digital technologies to promote democracy, but about how the tools themselves are shaping our societies. In recent years, as open societies are confronted with both the promise and perils of online platforms, this relationship has been condensed into a two-part question, highlighted in the introductory essay by Irene Blasquez-Navarro: can democracies survive digital technologies? Can they survive without them? One such ouroboros-like relationship is that between digital tech and the public sphere. The democratization of access, which provides the average citizen a pulpit to voice their views, unmediated, seemed to be the ultimate realization of Habermas’ undistorted public sphere. The same access and (relative) affordability transformed these same platforms into echo chambers reflecting narrow, even harmful interests. How do we ensure that the geopolitical aspects of digital democracy do not come at the cost of creating echo chambers about what the “right” model looks like? In my paper with Jan Hornat for the 2021 Forum 2000, we highlighted one critical challenge: research and, by extension, agenda-setting power on digital democracy is concentrated in a handful of Atlantic countries.¹ The countries of Asia, each with their distinct political systems, peoples, and histories, therefore capture a variety of relationships between publics, governments, and online spaces.

This essay analyzes 25 papers on digital democracy, published between 2015 and 2022, focusing on East, Southeast and South Asia, and parses common themes stemming from their literature. Asia is home to some of the most rapidly growing online populations in the world: the people in its subregions are spending more time online, with larger portions of their lives being conducted in digital spaces, including forging social connections, e-commerce and entertainment, as well as politics and governance.

Table 1: Internet penetration rate (2014 vs. 2020) of selected countries in Asia²

Country	Internet users 2014 (% of population)	Internet users (% of population)
China	48	70
Japan	89	90
South Korea	88	97
Indonesia	17	54
Malaysia	64	90
Philippines	35	50
Singapore	82	92
Thailand	35	78
Vietnam	41	70
Bangladesh	12	25
India	14	43
Pakistan	10	25
Sri Lanka	11	35

Although internet connectivity varies considerably, with internet penetration ranging from a quarter of the population, up to nearly 100%, the sheer size of Asia's population means that even relatively "unconnected" populations still translate into large numbers. For instance, in 2020, of the 3.5 billion people online, 990 million were from South Asia.³

Digital democracy has been used to describe, at one level, the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance democratic governance and citizen participation in democratic processes: "E-Democracy refers to the processes and structures that encompass all forms of electronic interaction between the Government (elected) and the citizen (electorate)".⁴ Others have defined it as "the collection

of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space, and other physical conditions, using ICT or CMC instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional 'analogue' political practices".⁵ In other words, digital democracy is not just about how governments engage with citizens, but also a wider gamut of democratic features, such as a vibrant public sphere, and an active and politically-engaged citizenry.

More recently, digital democracy is often defined in opposition to digital authoritarianism, a model of the internet that "allows states to censor online speech on arbitrary grounds, using nebulous justifications like national security and social harmony. It also enables widespread surveillance and control of citizens."⁶ However, such a dichotomy supposes that democratic governments do not have "authoritarian" compulsions, and that democratic expression cannot exist under authoritarian regimes. At the 2021 Summit for Democracy, USAID Administrator Samantha Power stated that, "The abuse of technology and personal data to spread disinformation, to surveil citizens and violate their rights and to pit citizens against one another are problems that can start at our shores."⁷ In this volume as well, Jeremy Cliffe aptly notes, "the focus should be ... on bottom-up methods of encouraging democracy rather than top-down impositions, and on the underestimated art of persuasion rather than a them-and-us approach".

As mentioned earlier, the pasts and politics of each country are unique, presenting both challenges to the practice of digital democracy, and windows into the myriad ways in which digital democracy can be expressed. In Malaysia, for instance, "Despite early attempts to establish ideologically-based parties, the default mode of operation returned to racial identities...This was further reified by the establishment of the first ruling coalition represented by three major race-based parties set up under the pretext of ensuring the wellbeing of the major races of Peninsular Malaysia (the Malays, Chinese and Indians). This coalition, that would become known as Barisan Nasional (National Front), was in power for over 60 years before it was toppled in the GE14 by Pakatan Harapan that took over on 8 May 2018."⁸ This background implicates the policies, rules, systems, and algorithms of social media platforms and how they are used in political processes.

HOW ASIA SEES DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

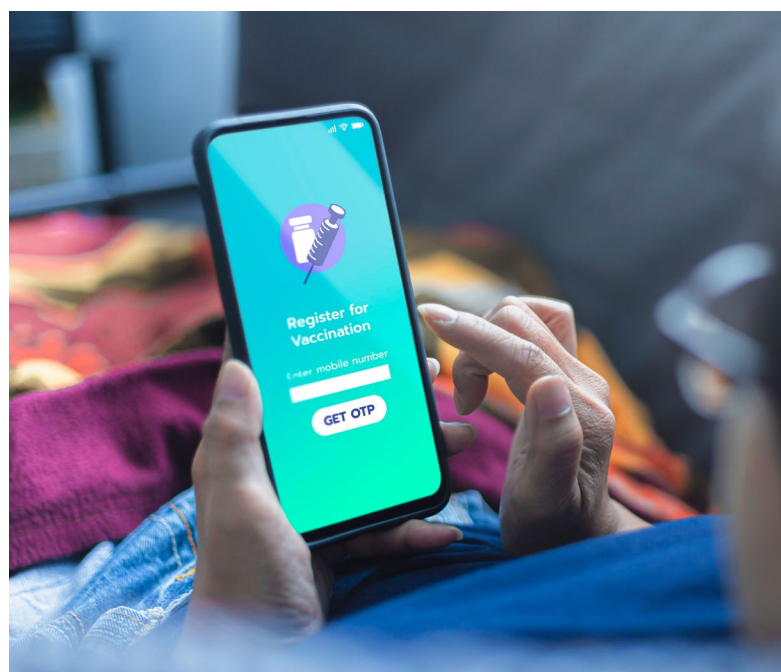
Digitally Transforming People's Lives

The most foundational way in which technologies aid democracy is through transparent, accountable and accessible government services. Indeed, as mentioned in the framing for this section, the early definitions of digital democracy were synonymous with e-government. E-government includes a panoply of uses of ICT to ease citizen engagement with government and enhance government operations, from e-registration of voters and provision of information on political candidates, to platforms that make it easier for residents and citizens to access social security and other critical services.

Many countries of Asia have undertaken measures to modernize governance, and the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an added impetus to digitize services. E-government readiness does, however, vary from country-to-country, depending on availability of capital, development of connectivity infrastructure, accessibility and cost of devices and services, among other factors.

Table 2: E-Government Development Index (EGDI) Rankings (2016 vs. 2022) of selected countries in Asia.⁹

Country	EGDI Rank (2016)	EGDI Rank (2022)
China	63	43
Japan	11	14
South Korea	3	3
Indonesia	116	77
Malaysia	60	53
Philippines	71	89
Singapore	4	12
Thailand	77	55
Vietnam	88	86
Bangladesh	124	111
India	107	105
Pakistan	159	150
Sri Lanka	79	95



The transformation of government service delivery through digital innovation is a recurrent theme in literature covering South Asia, a focus that is not wholly surprising given the immense demographic pressures in this sub-region. In 2020, South Asia accounted for nearly a quarter of the world's population, a figure likely to grow with India having overtaken China in April 2023 as the world's most populous country.¹⁰ The region must also overcome development challenges, including education and skilling for this growing population, healthcare, empowering women economically, among other social-structural issues. In a bid to address these challenges through a digital-led approach India has, for instance, successfully deployed Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), foundational infrastructure built for public good that “mediates the flow of people, money and information”.¹⁰ This includes a foundational biometric ID, a unified payments interface for seamless payments, and the ability to store, transmit and authenticate documents digitally for access to services. Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka all have digital transformation policies, predicated on techno-legal approaches that purport to ensure that benefits accrue to all.¹¹

“However,” as a World Bank report notes, “apart from India, innovation ecosystems in other South Asian countries are nascent”.¹²

Furthermore, the intersection of development challenges with pervasive social stratification has rendered the promise of e-democracy far from complete. There are several levels to the exclusion of communities from e-government: access to hardware, such as mobile phones or computers; skills and education needed to be able to engage meaningfully with these services; trust in e-government tools; and historical social divides, such as those based on ethnicity, gender, religion and race.¹³

One article on the experience of migrants in South Korea hypothesizes that the socio-political context in which systems are built exclude groups by design, implicitly if not explicitly:¹⁴ “[Several] government websites are devoted to migrants... However, this increase in the number of websites devoted to services for migrants did not necessarily enable service needs to be met or reduce barriers to access, as they were not designed with a migrant user in mind.” Similarly, an article on Bangladesh’s digitalization experience asserts that...“the leap into creating digital infrastructures has also engendered new vulnerabilities and reaffirmed power hierarchies within Bangladeshi society.”¹⁵ Thus, even with efforts to improve a country’s e-government infrastructure not all communities experience these services in the same way, resulting in a ‘democratic divide’, the contours of which are unique to each country’s history, politics and culture.

“Digital Pitfalls”:

Access vs. Control over Online Spaces

The initial promise of digital democracy was that the very nature of online spaces—decentralized, borderless—would challenge the dominion of the “weary giants of flesh and steel”, the brick-and-mortar institutions that held sway over the physical world. This vision was seemingly actualized during the Arab Spring, which demonstrated the power of online platforms to help mobilize vast swathes of people for a common cause. More recently, an effective opposition, paired with rapid dissemination of alternative information through peer-to-peer media like Whatsapp, was instrumental in regime change in Malaysia in 2018.¹⁶

Although presence in online spaces has been made easier with the advent and proliferation of cheap smartphones, this has not become a force for democracy in and of itself.

A temporary ‘democratization’ of the public sphere on the grounds of access alone cannot correct institutional problems, such as a weak Fourth Estate and lack of meaningful electoral competition.

This phenomenon was highlighted also in Malaysia: “[E]ven if the Malaysians’ access to online platforms are unfettered, the platforms are not accessed in the same way, nor do these platforms contain the same meaning for those accessing them due to differences in Internet literacies.”¹⁷

In Bangladesh, restrictions on traditional news media are mirrored in online spheres through heavy-handed government regulation.¹⁸ Concurrently, even when news media is relatively unrestricted, organized troll armies, leveraging social media algorithms, are able to limit the sphere of ideas, swaying public opinion in particular directions. “Online public opinion has been able to enter the offline domain because of the contextual hybridity and the emergence of a hybrid media system. These findings reflect the limitations of public opinion in the digital age.”¹⁹ In other words, social media is seen as the arbiter of public opinion, becoming the news source



rather than simply a space for discussion. This enables organized groups, including governments, to affect offline opinion and decision making in specific and pernicious ways under the guise of acting on public opinion. In this way, online platforms can help retrench rather than challenge political regimes.²⁰

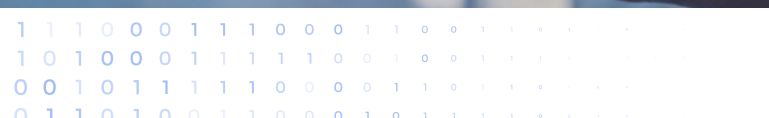
Finally, the question of who defines acceptable speech online remains hotly contested. On the one hand, there is a suspicion of content moderation on platforms, often conducted on the basis of rules and principles shaped by the “West”. On the other hand, where rule of law is weak, government-instituted content regulations—such as anti-fake news laws—can be abused by those in power to arbitrarily censor critical or dissenting voices.²¹ In Southeast Asia, the harshest controls are over speech criticizing the government, military, judiciary or the royal family (as is the case in Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand). The nature of the internet today allows information to spread quickly and across platforms, limiting state jurisdiction and resulting in governments defaulting to targeting individuals with harsh sentences.²²

Democracy by Any Other Name: Unconventional Expressions

In the course of scanning papers to select for this paper, civic engagement emerged, by far, as the most frequently-studied theme. Theoretically, social media platforms, blogs and other online “public spaces” that function as platforms for citizens to convene to talk about policies that affect them, and mobilize through both formal (i.e. through established institutions like elections) and informal (protests, petitions etc.) channels.²³

Some studies found that internet access was positively correlated with offline political activism, such as collective petitions, or contacting local governments to express dissatisfaction with policies or government officials.²⁴ There are caveats to the quality and effects of civic engagement, however. The first is fragmentation. In Singapore, for instance, despite relatively lower infrastructure barriers to participation in online spaces, certain social groups are more active than others, even when internet penetration is high.²⁵ In that sense, social media is not a true “public sphere” as communities continue to interact in discursive bubbles. Secondly, there is a significant relationship between the type of political system one lives in, the kinds of connections one makes online and their political participation. For instance, one study in East Asia found that young people in China “have more links to activists than those in Hong Kong and Taiwan”.²⁶

Concurrently, internet use in East Asia appears to “decrease electoral and increase activist participation. In an authoritarian context, they indicate a correlation between greater Internet usage and a preference for activist- over electoral-participation”.²⁷ Publics in non-democratic systems often need to get creative in how they express themselves in heavily-monitored/censored online spaces.²⁸ In 2018, as Chinese censors were battling the country’s flourishing #MeToo movement, users began using the rice and bunny emojis, pronounced “mi tu” in Mandarin, to subvert censorship.²⁹



CONCLUSION

Governments fear the destabilizing potential of online platforms in part because our understanding of digital democracy is still limited. There appears to be a growing consensus that the laissez-faire governance model that marked the early years of the internet will not work. At the same time, for any set of principles to become norms, they must be clear and consistent in their application. At the 2021 Summit for Democracy, Forum 2000, the Freedom Online Conference, and other such forums, a recurrent theme has been the absence of a unified model for digital democracy. This paper, by exploring, through a thematic analysis of existing literature, how different governments and publics in Asia are navigating online spaces, sought to nuance the binary framing that is present in our thinking on digital democracy. Three core themes emerged from this discussion.

The first is the use of digital platforms and services to enhance the interface between governments and people. Several countries in the region have, to varying degrees of success, sought to modernize their internal governance processes, build platforms for citizens and residents to find information on and avail government services. Availability does not, however, translate naturally to access, as several country case studies show. Who builds these platforms and how they are used, in addition to their interlinkages with the peculiar politics, histories and social dynamics in the country, result in ‘democratic divides’.

The first recommendation is that while there is no single pathway to inclusive digital transformation, it would be worth exploring what has worked in different Asian countries, and how these learnings could be applied in other geographies.

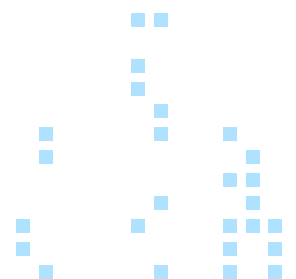
The second is the tension between unfettered access to social media platforms, and control over what constitutes acceptable speech in these spaces. Several Asian countries have the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly encoded in their constitutions, but also have exceptions on the grounds of public safety,

national security, defamation and diplomatic relations. Laws like China’s Computer Information Network and Internet Security, Protection and Management Regulations (1997), Malaysia’s Communications and Multimedia Act (1998), South Korea’s National Security Law, Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, and blasphemy and sedition laws, all contain such exceptions rooted in specific needs and historical contexts, but with wording that makes them prone to misuse by parties in power. Conversely, heavy-handed control has a chilling effect on the trust and ability of people to use online platforms. In a positive development, UNESCO has released “Guidelines for regulating digital platforms” which recommend principles for platform accountability and the ideal constitution of oversight mechanisms.³⁰ Platform governance is a global issue with hyperlocal implications:

A second recommendation is the need for independent assessments of the impact of platform controls on livelihoods and quality of life.

Any such new assessment tool must be multi-disciplinary, accounting for the differential impact these technologies will have on people of various genders, ethnicities, socio-economic status etc.

Third, publics in Asia, even those living under repressive regimes, use digital spaces in creative ways to air their aspirations and demands. Civic engagement is therefore the liveliest aspect of digital democracy in Asia and is expressed in atypical ways. How governments and citizens engage with digital technologies and online spaces in Asia falls along a spectrum. Democratic governments display authoritarian tendencies in online spaces, and publics in non-democratic states organize in inventive ways to thwart even the most restrictive government censors.



ENDNOTES

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