



# **Beyond nation-states: the Internet as democratic space in Southeast Asia**

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# ***What is the political significance of the Internet in Southeast Asia?***

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- **SOME ARGUMENTS**
  - **Conduit for free flow of information**
  - **Force for democratisation: ‘voice of the people’**
  - **Alternative space beyond national boundaries**
  - **Impact on real-world politics—no censorship, no control of media and information**
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# To what extent is the Internet politically significant in Southeast Asia?

- Some examples of the Internet as an alternative forum for the 'voice of the people':
  - Burma
  - Karen, Burma
  - Hmong
  - Laos
  - East Timor
  - Aceh

# What do these sites have in common?

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- Their domain names are all registered in the US.
  - They are all hosted on US-based servers.
  - <http://www.freeburma.org>
  - <http://www.karen.org/>
  - <http://www.hmongnet.org/>
  - <http://www.vientianetimes.com/Headlines.html>
  - <http://etan.org/ifet/>
  - <http://www.aceh.org/>
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# Recurrent feature of activist sites. Why?

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- Because the US provides the most effective and convenient means of organising on the Web.
  - You can register your domain name online with a credit card.
  - You can set up free or cheap Web sites online by just transferring your files to the server.
  - You can maintain your sites online.
  - You can do all this without even being in the US.
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# ***Democracy is not context-free.***

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- It is not free of real-world political constraints—e.g. constraints on the registration of domain names, Web sites, etc.
  - It is not free of technological constraints—e.g. the efficiency of servers, online maintenance, etc.
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# Direction of information flow

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- From greater constraint to greater freedom
  - Situations of moderate constraint e.g. Malaysia: possible to set up and maintain US-based Web sites from within one's own country, with people in the country able to access it.
  - Situations of high constraint e.g. Burma: difficult to smuggle information out (fax, email, file transfer, etc.) People in the country—also not able to access online information.
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# Example: Malaysia

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- Example of US-based Web site maintained from Malaysia is <http://www.malaysia.net>
  - It hosts the critical magazine [Aliran](#) online.
  - The site offers free email to ‘all Malaysians’—therefore accessible to them.
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# Example: Burma

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- Burma forbids individual dial-up access and email accounts.
  - Email messages to organisational addresses: censored by a government agency which faxes 'harmless' messages to recipients for steep annual and per message fee.
  - Therefore, Web sites that are critical of the military regime in Burma—set up by exiled activists, working outside the country.
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# Difference between the 2 examples

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- Difficult to get information out of sites of high constraint—e.g. Burma
  - Email, fax, post—hindered
  - Information physically brought out by couriers—e.g. foreign NGOs
  - Therefore, status of information on Web sites differs according to in-country flow of information
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# ***Market for democracy***

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- **Hosting of domain names and Web sites by US of dissident sites: indication of a market for democracy**
  - **Textual thickness on the Web in places of greater freedom**
  - **Textual thinness on the Web in places of greater constraint**
  - **Correlates with differentiation in the volume of paper publications in the real world**
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# Political constraints and technological constraints

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- **Political constraints—more important than technological constraints**
  - **Example of Aceh: like Burma, Web sites—set up and maintained by exiles. Reason: political constraints, not technological constraints.**
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# Real-world impact?

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- **Conduit for free flow of information?**  
**Freedom invites information, not *vice-versa***
  - **Force for democratisation: ‘voice of the people’? Alternative space beyond national boundaries? Outside the country: via US to rest of world**
  - **Impact on real-world politics—no censorship, no control of media and information?**  
**Governments can still try to control information access within national boundaries.**
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# ***Real-world constraints not explicitly stated on Web sites***

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- **Non-reflexive—sites do not explain their contexts and conditions**
  - **E.g. information about constraints on access to email and the Internet—not from any dissident site on Burma, but from online paper by librarian at Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore**
  - **Flatness and uni-dimensionality of dissident sites *versus* textured real world**
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# ***Significance for research***

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- **Information flow seems to be reversed with Internet.**
  - **Information now comes to the researcher through Web sites, instead of the researcher going out to the field to seek information.**
  - **But how is the quality of information to be evaluated?**
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# **New texts: instant archive of primary sources**

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- **Advent of Internet: never have so many people been able to publish their views so directly to so large a public**
  - **‘Old texts’: different categories of documents—diaries, letters, memoranda, newsletters, brochures, articles, essays, newspapers, magazines, journals, books, etc.—the stuff of critical analysis**
  - **‘New texts’: homogeneous, non-reflexive Web sites—critical analysis more urgently needed than ever**
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