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?

- 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
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?

- 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/
Recurrent feature of activist sites. Why?

- 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.
Democracy is not context-free.

- 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.
Direction of information flow

- 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.
Example: Malaysia

- It hosts the critical magazine *Aliran* online.
- The site offers free email to ‘all Malaysians’—therefore accessible to them.
Example: Burma

- 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.
Difference between the 2 examples

- 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
Market for democracy

- 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
Political constraints and technological constraints

- Political constraints—more important than technological constraints
Real-world impact?

- 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.
Real-world constraints not explicitly stated on Web sites

- 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
Significance for research

- 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?
New texts: instant archive of primary sources

- 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