Revisiting the Emancipatory Potential of Digital Media in Asia – Introduction to the Inaugural Issue of *Asiascape: Digital Asia*

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Abstract

This introduction to the inaugural issue of *Asiascape: Digital Asia* reviews the debates about the impact that digital media have on culture, society, economics, and politics. The ubiquity of digital technology in various parts of the world has prompted questions about whether the ability to connect on a near-global scale with potentially billions of users has an emancipatory or even democratizing effect. In other words: are personal computers, smartphones, tablet computers, mobile gaming devices, and the digital infrastructure of the Internet 'liberation technologies'? This introduction examines arguments by both optimists and pessimists, and argues that in order to overcome simple dichotomies in the study of digital media, we need to study such media in the diverse social and historical contexts in which they are situated. The review further showcases the five research papers that comprise this special issue of *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, each of which provides an insightful study of the diverse ways in which ICT have been deployed by citizens in different Asian contexts to profoundly shaped social, cultural, and political processes. What the discussion shows, is the need for academics to rethink how they can fruitfully explore the challenges and opportunities that digital media present in various contexts, and how they can contribute innovative theories, useful approaches, and much needed 'reality checks' to ongoing public discourse.

Keywords

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Over the past decade, new forms of information and communication technologies have had a dramatic impact on the way people in technologically advanced societies relate to each other, engage in social activities, conduct commerce, and participate in political processes. The inception of so-called Web 2.0 services such as Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006, introduced a degree of interactivity to communication processes far surpassing that of previous technologies. Numerous companies from around the world have since imitated the success of these large networking, video-sharing, and micro-blogging sites. The technologically-savvy societies of Asia have been especially vibrant in this respect. In China, for instance, where the major US companies remain banned from the national web, social media platforms such as Ren Ren or Sina Weibo have successfully taken their place. In Korea, services like Cyworld or me2day provide the youth with local platforms on which they can experiment with alternatives to mainstream Korean culture. Similar enterprises have been established in Japan, Singapore, and elsewhere in Asia. Around the world, digital media are increasingly allowing users to coordinate their actions, whether it is carpooling, sharing of user-generated entertainment content, or participating in political events.

The diversity and increasing pervasiveness of interactive digital media has meanwhile generated much debate regarding the impact that these media could have on culture, society, economics, and politics. In particular, the ubiquity of digital technology in various parts of the world has prompted questions about whether the ability to connect on a near-global scale with potentially billions of users has an emancipatory or even democratizing effect. In other words: are personal computers, smartphones, tablet computers, mobile gaming devices, and the digital infrastructure of the Internet 'liberation technologies' (Diamond 2010: 70)?

Advocates of the idea that digital media allow actors to change their world for the better emphasize the relative ease with which people use information and communication technologies to engage in social production and information exchange. Jay Rosen (2006), for instance, has argued that blogging empowers 'the people formerly known as the audience' to use their 'little First Amendment machines' to become citizen journalists and challenge the logic of the traditional mass-media system. Clay Shirky has similarly made the case that we are confronted with a 'tectonic shift' in communication processes that make it 'ridiculously easy' for diverse social groups to communicate (2008: 24 & 54). Not only does blogging software, with its 'button marked "publish"', allow potentially anyone with a computer and an Internet connection to circumvent the professional publishing industry and distribute user-generated

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content to other users (Shirky 2013: 602), but the ubiquity of mobile devices allows for near-instant media creation and dissemination on-the-go. Today, so Shirky argues, 'the chance that someone with a camera will come across an event of global significance is rapidly becoming the chance that such an event has any witnesses at all' (ibid.: 369).

Such optimism about digital media, as well as the libertarian arguments that often accompany it, has elicited strong criticism from those who regard these technological innovations as potentially exploitative, domineering, or damaging. In particular, the enthusiastic arguments among liberals in Europe and the US that Facebook and Twitter were bringing about democracy in the Middle-East seems to have been proven fallacious by the aftermaths of the 'Green Revolution' in Iran and the so-called 'Arab Spring', ostensibly confirming the suspicion of detractors that 'the revolution will not be tweeted' (Gladwell 2010). Considering the subsequent developments in Egypt and Syria, it seems premature for an advocate of IT-enabled social change like Shirky to declare that these events would prefigure a vision of 2020 in which 'the Chinese Communist Party will not be in control of China' (Shirky 2011). Radical futurities of this kind are surprisingly pervasive: UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown famously made the argument that the Internet should make future genocides impossible (cf. Viner 2009).

Re-awakening the critical politics that have characterized the modern discourse around utopianism, Evgeny Morozov has criticized such arguments as 'cyber-utopian', pointing out that authoritarian governments have made very effective use of digital technology to manage political discontent and control dissenters. In the case of Iran's 'Green Revolution', the availability of social media data seems to have enabled the government to identify and prosecute protesters, who might otherwise have remained anonymous. The Internet and its abundance of data, Morozov concludes, thus 'empowers the strong and disempowers the weak' (2011: 296). To Morozov, the optimism of digital media advocates is not simply misleading but actually harmful. In authoritarian countries, so he argues, such liberal hyperbole serves only to prompt draconian backlashes against activists. In democratic societies, on the other hand, such optimism allegedly encourages a world of ever-increasing productivity and efficiency goals – a digitally-constructed 'temple of modern-day Taylorism' (2013: 377). In this context, the collection and analysis of 'big data' in particular, criticized also by other media scholars (e.g. Boyd & Crawford 2012), seems to promote a worldview that sees only puzzles and their algorithmic solutions rather than societies of diverse humanity governed by complexity. If we are to believe Morozov (2013: 165), then these developments may well lead to new

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levels of totalitarian oppression that 'would make dissent not just impossible but possibly unthinkable'.

Morozov is not the only critic to sound such dystopian warnings; he is joined by those who are concerned about the impact that new interactive technologies could have on the physical and mental health of individuals and, by extension, on the fabric of the cultures and societies they inhabit. For instance, in a provocative reading of neuro-scientific research, Carr (2010) argues that the use of digital media leads to increased skimming of information and multi-tasking, at the expense of deep, critical engagement with complex issues. The Internet, in this view, heralds the end of the Enlightenment tradition. Sherry Turkle comes to similarly dark conclusions in her discussion of how social media are allegedly preventing users from engaging in face-to-face interaction, isolating them instead in a tethered network of weak social ties. A particularly severe threat, in Turkle's opinion, lies in the effect that digital media have on young people, whom she fears no longer pay attention in schools and universities (2011: 3191) but instead surf the web on their laptops or 'disappear into role-playing games they describe as "communities" and "worlds"' (ibid.: 3315).

Although the intensity of this debate is a sign of the tremendous importance of the issues, as well as of the powerful emotional resonance it commands, it is nevertheless unfortunate and not always helpful that the debate about digital media and their impact upon rapidly transforming societies has sometimes taken a turn towards polemic and polarized hyperbole. Indeed, many scholars have worked hard to add careful and nuanced observations that should give pause to both overly optimistic and exaggeratedly alarmist accounts. Mizuko Ito, for instance, has examined digital youth culture in a large-scale study that demonstrates how, 'contrary to adult perceptions, while hanging out online, youth are picking up basic social and technical skills they need to fully participate in contemporary society' (2008: 2). These findings support the arguments of media scholars like Henry Jenkins, who argues that social sharing and the 'remixing' of culture allows users to develop a sense of self-worth and of community (2008; cf. also Jenkins et al. 2013).

While many such studies focus on the American and European contexts, accounts from Asia similarly suggest that digital games and mobile technologies may indeed have diverse, complex effects in different cultural contexts, many (but certainly not all) of them positive. In Japan, for instance, public and intellectual debate has traversed the whole spectrum from moral panic, political intrigue, and through to utopian fantacising. At the end of the 1980s, the Miyazaki Tsutomu incident, in which a middle-aged 'otaku' (fan of digital, visual, and interactive media) abducted, mutilated, and murdered four young

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girls, shook Japanese society and its otherwise enthusiastic embrace of the technological revolution. This incident became central to high-level debates about the place of 'otaku' in society and their role in social, moral, and political change – such discussions reached their most provocative in the influential work of Azuma Hiroki, whose ideas about the 'databasification' of society, the 'animalization' of citizens, and the emergence of a realm of 'gamic realism' as a feature of contemporary, post-modern societies (especially Japan itself), have changed the research agenda for technologically-minded Japan-hands (Azuma 2001, 2007). As the moral panics subsided, recent years have seen the emergence of more optimistic work on the positive, socializing influence of hand-held video-games (especially as produced by Nintendo and Sony), which have sought to address the atomizing effects of video-game isolationism by requiring players to be in close proximity with each other (i.e. to be sitting around the same coffee table) or introducing elements of augmented reality that require players to be outside roaming the cities of Japan. While such innovations are extremely popular in Japan, Western markets show significant resistance to these moves.

One additional way in which the 'context' becomes evident and valuable is when scholars become willing and able to consider alternative locations for discourse about digital technologies. In Japan, for instance, there is a long and sophisticated tradition of debate about otaku as 'super-information processors' at the intersection with post- or trans-human futurities; this combines (often with spectacular effect) with expression through popular cultural and medial forms, such as video-games, anime, manga etc., where we see a lively tradition of technological utopianism. Followers of this kind of material are sometimes considered to comprise a social movement in themselves.

In terms of the political dynamics with which digital media are increasingly intertwined, social movements studies in particular suggest that digital media indeed reduce the costs and logistic efforts needed to mobilize, often deeply shaping political dynamics (Earl & Kimport 2011; Farrell 2012). This is not to say that established ways of organizing activism and protest are now out-dated or defunct, but rather that they have 'become joined by, interspersed with, and in some cases supplanted by personalized collective action formations in which digital media become integral organizational parts' (Bennett & Segerberg 2011: 760). Instead of assuming the kind of simple causal link that sceptics like Morozov rightly criticize (i.e. that digital technologies have intrinsic emancipatory or democratizing effects), scholars of digital media are increasingly following Yochai Benkler's argument that different kinds of digital technologies 'make different kinds of human action and interaction easier or harder to

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perform' (2006: 17). Digital media therefore do not create collective action automatically, but instead enable different ways to participate in organizational procedures (Bimber et al. 2012). In fact, Shirky makes a similar argument in his discussion of the political activism that swept the South Korean capital of Seoul in 2008, which ultimately culminated in the resignation of the cabinet: 'social media didn't cause the candlelight protests in South Korea . . . Those effects were created by citizens who wanted to change the way public conversation unfolded and found they had the opportunity to do so' (2013: 688).

In this view, digital technologies are only as benevolent or as sinister as the people who use them. They function as facilitators or inhibitors of already existing processes. The capacity to blog, for instance, does not itself create a vibrant space of egalitarian discussion, as studies of American political blogs have shown. When political blogging influences politics in the US, it is because it enables a small part of the political elite to target another small part of that elite with information and arguments that shift the agenda (Farrell & Drezner 2008). That such processes are far from egalitarian becomes clear from the significant demographic imbalance that marks these information exchanges: most American political bloggers are white, educated men (Hindman 2010). On a global level, questions of elitism, egalitarianism, and differential access/ use of digital media are even more sharply wrought.

As this example suggests, digital media need to be studied in the diverse social and historical contexts in which they are situated. In this they are no different from other media. As Benkler has pointed out with regard to technologies such as the radio and the telegraph, 'different nations absorbed and used these technologies differently, diverging in social and cultural habits, but also in institutional strategies for adoption – some more state-centric, others more market based; some more controlled, others less so' (2006: 131).

It is in this spirit that *Asiascape: Digital Asia* hopes to stimulate and showcase research and debate on digital media and ICT. Whether one agrees with the arguments made in the 'liberation technology' debate or not, the heated discussion at the very least highlights the need for academics to rethink how they can fruitfully explore the challenges and opportunities that digital media present in various contexts, and how they can contribute innovative theories, useful approaches, and much needed 'reality checks' to ongoing public discourse. As van Dijk and Poell (2013: 11) have put it, the goal should be neither to 'applaud the successes of these media nor to rally against their insidious affects', but instead to 'systematically analyze social media mechanisms as sources of transformation'.

For the launch of *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, we have therefore invited leading scholars of digital media in Asia specifically to confront the discussion on

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emancipatory media with research from their own respective fields. What this collection of insightful studies shows is that the diverse ways in which ICT have been deployed by citizens in different Asian contexts has profoundly shaped social, cultural, and political processes in those societies.

In his study of contentious politics in China, Liu Jun examines how protesters use mobile phones to organize and coordinate their activities. Drawing from interviews and text messages, Liu explores two cases of mass protest: the 2007 rallies against the construction of a chemical plant in Xiamen, and the 2008 protests in southwest China's Weng'an County, which revolved around the suspected murder of a young girl. By emphasizing how mobile communication is embedded in existing social networks, Liu shows that protest mobilization is a relational activity. The way that mobile phones mediate existing social ties profoundly affects how potential protesters are socialized to understand the respective contentious issue, how they take action without the knowledge of the authorities, and how they routinely leverage their social network to recruit others to their cause.

Larissa Hjorth also examines the potential of mobile technologies to empower users, though her analysis of South-Korean social mobile media shifts the focus from large-scale political activities to the everyday lives of women in Seoul. Through in-depth ethnographic research, Hjorth finds that women in South Korea creatively use the popular smartphone platform Kakao to share photos with their social circle, while simultaneously remaining critical of revealing their geo-location along with the images. As Hjorth shows, issues of intimacy, sociality, and place all feature heavily into these women's highly political decision of whether or not to digitally share sensitive personal information with others.

For the case of Taiwan, Bernard Hung analyses a recent case of mass-protest, asking to what degree digital technologies are creating opportunities for citizens to deepen Taiwan's young democracy. By carefully reconstructing the case of Hung Chung-chiu, a 24-year old Taiwanese soldier who died from abuse in military confinement, the author demonstrates how ICT are empowering and mediating a new form of civic movement in Taiwan, which cuts across traditional political divides. As the large-scale protests against Taiwan's military and its incumbent government illustrate, this digitally enabled form of civic engagement addresses major shortcomings in Taiwan's mass-media system and promotes awareness of citizen's rights in ways that these established media outlets have failed to do.

Turning our attention to Malaysia, John Postill brings together 15 years of ethnographic research to show how internet activism and social protest have evolved since the *reformasi* movement of 1998-1999. According to Postill,

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the 2008 electoral outcome in Malaysia and the 2011 Bersih 2.0 rallies should be understood both as episodes in a series of specifically Malaysian events and as part of broader, global trends to organize techno-political protests. Postill's critical historical research shows that simple categories like domination and emancipation do not capture the complex interactions between hackers, online journalists, technology lawyers, and ordinary citizens as they challenge similarly techno-enhanced police authorities and government officials.

Last but not least, Chris Goto-Jones explores the emancipatory potential of Japanese videogames by suggesting a new methodological approach to game research: the travelogue. By embracing the notions that space is a social construction and that the virtual worlds of some videogames constitute architectural spaces in a manner that is more than analogous to an urban space, he maintains that these constructed worlds are real places to visit, and hence that exploration within them is also real. Furthermore, the paper considers the ways in which travel in general, and travel in(to) videogames in particular, contributes to the experience of emancipation in technology-rich societies. Using the example of Japan (as one of the global powerhouses of videogame creation and consumption), Goto-Jones argues that the interaction and intersection of the virtual and the actual, in mutually enriching and liberating ways, needs to be viewed in terms of its social and political function. He also cautions about the ethics and politics of knowledge involved in the deployment of travel writing as a method in the interrogation of videogames, concluding with a methodological sketch for a way ahead.

What all of these contributions vividly demonstrate is that understanding the transformation processes that characterize 'network societies' (Castells 2009) requires innovative, transdisciplinary research that has the courage to take the complexity of the information age seriously, and that does not shy away from exploring the diverse realities in which this complexity plays out. As arts, humanities, social sciences, and computer sciences work their way through the 'digital turn', an important challenge will be to find adequate tools to interrogate digital media and communication. Scholars like Manovich (2013) have argued that digital media research should concern itself with software – with the code that underlies and shapes the way that communication and social production predominantly work – and should explore this object by allying the methods of social semiotics, actor-network approaches, political economy, and intellectual history to scripting and programming techniques. Others have suggested that scholars repurpose the digital tools that are readily available online, critically building research projects on top of the architecture

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that Google, Twitter, or Facebook provide, and using these 'digital methods' to understand digital media on their own terms (Rogers 2013). Yet others advocate approaches that successful 'digitize' academic traditions such as ethnography or survey work, moving them online (Kozinets 2010). And some go so far as to claim that the responsible analysis of digital media requires scholars to take seriously the possibility that such media must themselves be deployed as the medium of exegesis, suggesting that the academy's basic literacies should be reconsidered (Goto-Jones 2009). We have asked our contributors to reflect on the methods that have helped them answer their questions, and each article provides an example of how digital media can be analyzed in the context of Asian languages and cultures. In addition, we have included a book review of Richard Rogers' *Digital Methods*; an appeal to study digitally native content with digital tools.

Of course, the question of method is not one that can be answered in a single special issue, but is rather one that will accompany much of the research for which *Asiascape: Digital Asia* provides an outlet. With its peer-reviewed in-depth analyses, *Asiascape: Digital Asia* will keep readers abreast of both theoretical and empirical developments in the cyber cultures and digital networks of Asia. It will further provide two kinds of book reviews: those that introduce non-Asian related works to scholars in the area-studies community, and those that introduce research on Asia to the larger field of digital media and communication studies. In addition, *Asiascape: Digital Asia* reviews relevant conferences, and will include a digital media review, which focuses on digital platforms and media products from Asia, such as blog and microblogging services, social media websites, video sharing services, games, digital tools, etc. In this sense, this inaugural issue opens the floor to a wide range of debates, in the hope that its continuing discussion will contribute to what is quickly becoming a vibrant, maturing field of research.

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