

Digital media and development: the challenges in Southeast Asia

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The news is partly good: the ITU's 2006 statistics show the developing world catching up a little with the developed world in using communication technology. The poorer countries are using mobile phones more, buying more computers and getting onto the internet more.¹ But that is not the whole story.

→ Indicators	1. Popu- lation estim- ates 2004 (mil- lion)	2. GNI per capita PPP (int'l \$) 2004	3. GDP grow- th rate per year, 2005	4. Rank in human devel- opment index, 2002	5. Second -ary school enroll- ment (f/m), 2002	6. Adult liter- acy rate (f/m), 2004	7. Mobile phone subscri- bers per 100 inhabs, 2001/ 2004	8. Inter- net users per 100 inhabs, 2001/ 2004
↓ Country*								
Cambodia	13.5	2,310	8.4	130	20/31	64/85	1.66/ 5.95	0.07/ 0.28
Indonesia	216.4	3,480	5.6	111	60/61	83/92	3.12/ 13.48	2.01/ 6.52
Lao PDR	5.8	1,880	7.2	135	37/50	61/77	0.55/ 3.53	0.19/ 0.36
Malaysia	25.6	9,720	5.3	59	74/67	85/92	30.9/ 57.12	26.56/ 38.62
Myanmar	54.3	N/A	12.2	132	38/40	86/94	0.04/ 0.17	0.02/ 0.12
Philippine s	83.5	4,950	5.1	83	88/80	93/93	15.54/ 39.85	2.56/ 5.32
Singapore	4.2	27,370	6.4	25	73/75 (1997)+	N/A	72.41/ 89.47	41.15/ 56.12
Thailand	64.2	7,930	4.5	76	77/77 (2003)	91/95	12.33/ 44.18	5.77/ 11.25
Vietnam	82.0	2,700	8.4	112	70/75	87/94	1.54/ 6.01	1.24/ 7.12

* B e c a u s e m a n y s e t s o f s t a t i s t i c s d o n o t i n c l u d e B r u n e i D a r u

ssalam and Timor-Leste (East Timor), apparently because of lack of data, these countries have not been included.

+This seems very low; the Singapore government gives a figure of 98% for both sexes for 2004.

Sources: Cols 1-6: ADB, World Bank, UN/UNICEF online statistics; cols 7-8: International Telecommunication Union, <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/>

There is certainly some good news in Southeast Asia. As can be seen from the table on the following page, every country in the region has increased its number of mobile phones and internet connections, some by three or four times, though from a very small base. Literacy and education are medium to high in the region, even in developing countries. But there is bad news too. The digital media, including the internet, are increasingly in danger of domination by large organisations.

Southeast Asia, unlike other regions, has generally avoided the control of transnational corporations, but instead governments are working hard to marginalise the voice of the individual. In parts of Southeast Asia, opportunities for individual access are being curbed even before they become widely available.

This is very much in keeping with the region's history. Several countries have kept the press very close to government: in Malaysia newspapers are owned and run by affiliates of the parties in power; in Singapore they come under government-owned corporations; in Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar they are government-owned, government-controlled or censored. Some countries have a flourishing commercial newspaper industry – Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia – but even in these places the press has a fairly small circulation and is mainly addressed to the elite and urban dwellers.

In all the countries of the region except the Philippines the broadcast sector started under the government and remains largely that way today. The whole region has long ranked low in western press freedom ratings. The latest Reporters Without Borders 2005 list² puts Cambodia highest, at number 90 out of 167 countries, with Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia in the low hundreds, while Freedom House's 2005 rankings place Thailand and Indonesia the highest, but only as 'partly free', and the rest as 'not free'.³ Both rankings put Singapore towards the bottom and Myanmar and Vietnam among the worst. The Philippines remains low because journalism is dangerous: 22 journalists were killed in the five years up to 2005.

Broadcasting: television

Television choice has broadened considerably since the advent of satellite TV, but early predictions that international broadcasting would arrive direct from the skies untouched by national governments proved wrong. Indeed, Indonesia was one of the first countries in the world to use satellite TV when the government sanctioned the launching of its Palapa satellites from the mid-1970s to bring national programming to its far-flung islands.

By the mid-1990s, satellites turned digital, and this allowed much better control of signals. International broadcasters were happy to do deals with local companies providing cable transmission or set-top boxes because that guaranteed an audience, and governments were able to pressure the big-name overseas broadcasters to tailor their content to local cultural and political sensitivities. Several countries of the region now have their own commercial satellites owned by interests close to governments and providing local-language programmes.

Malaysia and Indonesia can certainly boast that satellite television has reached rural areas that previously had little contact with the outside world, but access today is less and less direct-to-home and more often paid-for, with local-language programming very carefully controlled. The BBC and the Australian ABC have both tamed their international satellite broadcasts to the region: both are in essence commercial stations and stood to lose income from bans. Satellite and cable television concentrate today mainly on entertainment.

Broadcasting: radio

Radio also remains to a large extent in the hands of governments, though there are more exceptions than with television. The clandestine radio stations of the Cold War have disappeared, though there is a new entrant: the US-government's Radio Free Asia, which has been broadcasting local news in local languages to areas dominated by communist or authoritarian regimes since the mid-1990s. In Burma it is one of several illegal stations that oppose the military rulers, the other most prominent station being the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), run by Burmese exiles with the aid of the Norwegian government.

In Cambodia, however, RFA broadcasts openly via Beehive FM 105, a Phnom Penh station that is critical of the government, and is very popular. Voice of America and Radio France International also use Beehive, along with a US-funded local human-rights channel. There is a regional element here: the latter station has been given help and training by Radio News Agency 68H of Jakarta, an independent broadcaster set up in 1998 which, with the help of funding from international organisations and NGOs, supplies programming by satellite to more than 400

community stations in Indonesia.

Community radio became legal in Cambodia in 2002 after lobbying by media activists persuaded the government to include it in the broadcasting law passed that year. Thailand permitted community radio in 2000, since when 2,000 stations have appeared, many without the requisite licence. Two have been raided, ostensibly for not following broadcasting rules, but their operators claim it was because they were critical of the Thaksin Shinawatra government.

In Malaysia the Centre for Independent Journalism, which is funded by western NGOs and international organisations, set up Radiq Radio in 2001. The station, run by just two people, uploads programmes made by communities, NGOs and individuals and on its website as MP3 files for downloading by anyone with internet access. The Philippines is also developing community radio, but it is hardly a safe occupation: 17 of the 22 journalists killed in the last five years were broadcasters on local stations.

E-strategies and the internet

Singapore is the only country in the region in the top 20 of UNDP's Technology Achievement Index.⁴ The country is also one of the most advanced in terms of government online, but that is hardly surprising. The reason western media watchdogs criticise it is its strong grip on all means of communication. The government is the controlling or complete owner of all media, including the three ISPs, and insists that this is best for Singapore.

During the May 2006 elections, canvassing and political discussion over the internet were banned in the 10 days before polling day, scotching opposition blogs and plans to podcast rallies. The government requires bloggers to register, denying anonymity and exposing them to the government's main tool against critics, defamation suits. In 2005 two student bloggers were made to apologise to an official and a government body for critical remarks on their blogs, one of them under threat of legal action.

Malaysia's 'Multimedia Super Corridor', the spearhead of the government's effort to make the country a regional leader in ICTs, has not provided the same level of control, largely because of real conflict within the government. When then-prime minister Mahathir Mohamad sacked his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, in 1996, Anwar's followers took to the cyberworld. The government did not want to spoil its technology policy by banning their sites and instead countered with technological means, including hacking. One major news site, Malaysiakini, remains very active despite efforts to curb its influence, and a handful of others carry a critical view of the government.

UNDP identifies Indonesia and the Philippines as 'dynamic adopters' of ICTs, a term which describes countries with high-technology industries and technology hubs but large populations, low development indicators and uneven distribution of technology.⁵ Thailand, though it has a somewhat higher penetration of ICTS, can also be included in this category. It is likely that the ITU figures for internet use in these countries is understated because internet cafés are popular and represent large numbers of users. An official report from Thailand put the number there at 5,690 in 2004.

Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, formerly communist countries and still at low levels of development, all have nascent broadband networks, though again many cyber cafés. However, these are perhaps much used by international aid workers and visitors. Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are perhaps inhibited in their expansion mostly by lack of funds, though in the latter two cases also by government desire to keep control. In Cambodia, US aid was used to set up internet access points in most provincial capitals, though they are continuing as private operations.

The military government of Myanmar, the State Peace and Development Council, tightly controls the media through direct ownership and strict censorship. Access to the internet is allowed only via the Myanmar Wide Web, a kind of intranet. The local press reported that the number of internet users stood at 63,700 in late 2005, and that Public Access Centers (PACs) – government-registered internet cafés – had been set up in 12 townships, with plans to extend them to all 326 townships in Myanmar. It is reported that many unregistered ones exist as well.

Yet the internet also provides the space for the very active opposition media, based outside the country and accessible to the large exile communities. DVB has a website, and other major players are the US-funded Irrawaddy and Mizzima, supported from India, as well as several operating from the Thai border. These websites are, of course, off limits to those living in Myanmar.

The challenges facing Southeast Asia

The region encompasses both the two extremes and intervening levels of ICT advance, but provides clear illustration that the wide availability of advanced technology does not by itself confer the right to communicate on the average individual. Satellite television has reached many parts of Asia, even rural areas, but has been tamed by governments and business. Singapore and Malaysia have blazed a trail in commandeering the internet for government advantage, so that individuals who wish to use it for self-expression not only find opportunities limited, but risks high. Myanmar is learning from their example – as its ally China has done.

The middle-ranking countries are opening up both to the internet and community radio – though

the conflict inherent in the expression of multiple opinions can lead, in the Philippines in particular, to real danger. Powerful interests do not want to give up the control they have over the means of communication. E-strategies cannot work to bring about the Information Society without accompanying freedoms. Also needed are protection and encouragement for both access to and provision of information on the part of individuals and non-governmental groups.

For the poorer countries the biggest problem remains cost: in many areas local people do not even have the money to use internet cafés. It is difficult to make a business out of technology in these places, and governments, where they are not interested in controlling the sector, do not have the funds to fill the gap. The 'digital divide', while it is narrowing a little, remains a real hurdle in Southeast Asia.

International aid has come to the rescue in some cases by funding radio equipment and internet access centres, as well as giving moral support. This is often rather sensitive, since the sources of the funds or the countries they come from or the ideologies they represent may be disliked by governments, and the functions they are providing may encourage the articulation of opposition opinions.

Intra-Asian support could avoid these problems, but where it is happening it is doing so with outside help. Controversial though it is, international aid represents a means to start projects that pave the way to opening up communication technologies to all.

Notes

1. http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/wtdr_06/index.html
2. Reporters Sans Frontières (2005). Press freedom index http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=554
3. Freedom House (2005). Freedom of the press. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=16&year=2005>
4. Labelle, Richard (2005). ICT policy formulation and e-strategy development: a comprehensive guidebook, p. 10. New Delhi, Bangkok: Elsevier and UNDP-APDIP.
5. Labelle, Richard. Ibid. p. 15.

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