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# Youth, ICTs, and Civic Engagement in Asia

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(Special issue editors)

The articles collected in this special issue share a common focus: young adults' use of new media for civic engagement in South and Southeast Asia. Youth engagement problems are evident when established democracies witness a decline in youth participation in traditional civic activities (e.g., voting) compared to the participation levels of older generations. MacKinnon et al. (2007: v) stated, '[y]outh are turned off by the game of partisan politics and increasingly refuse to learn or apply the rules. In large measure, they are reinventing civic and political engagement.'

We began our project<sup>1</sup> with the observation that the youth in South and Southeast Asia demonstrate distinctive patterns of civic and political engagement, and we sought information about whether these patterns are a consequence of a generational shift or a result of contextual changes, such as those in political systems and media technologies. We examined two propositions that are often associated with youth engagement and new media. First, new media change the relationship between youth and existing political systems. Second, new media change the nature of civic engagement itself, especially for the youth.

As we inquired further, we found that using established democracies as our reference point might have been incorrect. The difference between the so-called young or semi-democracies and established or mature democracies is not that the former is an inadequate version of the latter. Instead, the political systems found in South and Southeast Asia have their own characteristics, and these systems cannot be simply classified as a lack of democratic components. The same thing can be said about new media. The difference between the region in question and other regions, such as North America and Europe, is not that the former lacks access to technologies that are common in the latter.

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Instead, the type and use of technologies in the region show unique patterns that cannot be simply defined as less advanced. When we refer to the region, we make no attempt to generate a singular discourse for all the countries involved. Instead, we are highly sensitive to the diversity presented in the individual cases that belong to the region in this study. The end product, therefore, becomes a juxtaposition of multiple reference points that can be not only compared to established democracies but also compared to the other countries in Asia. The juxtaposition of the findings (Chen, 2010; Chen and Chua, 2007) is indeed the most significant effort we made in this collection of articles, and it was made with the hope that the individual country findings can become references for the study of other regions, such as South America and Africa.

In order to make this comparison possible, this collection of studies shares a comparative research design (Livingstone, 2003) that combines a focus on a theoretically universal phenomenon (i.e., youth engagement via new media) and an approach to finding systematic relationships among prominent variables (e.g., young activists, political institutions, and technologies). Researchers from five countries (Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore) collected empirical data using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. A similar sampling strategy was shared: every study tried to recruit young people (age 18–30) who have access to new media, such as the Internet and mobile phones, which resulted in respondents who were mostly urban dwelling and educated. We also distinguished between young activists and average youth; however, the definition of activists is rather context-confined (e.g., the meaning of activists in Malaysia and Singapore often implies an opposition to the government). An interview/focus group discussion guide was also shared among the studies. Fundamental questions (e.g., what is civic engagement?) that are applicable to different countries were the main focuses, while the sensitivity to political context enabled individual countries to add their own questions to the research.

Using these research methods, we were able to report empirical findings that may serve as points of reference for future research. The Indian polity, characterized by its democratic features, did not appear to attract regular youth activism despite the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs). In the neighboring country of Bangladesh, ICTs opened an alternative avenue to become engaged for youth who reject traditional ideology-based party politics. Both Malaysia and Singapore are nations that enjoy rapid economic growth but lag behind in political liberalization. In Malaysia, video blogging has become a popular tool used to advocate for taboo issues, and in Singapore, ICTs are used to redefine young activists' identities, enabling them to reject the negative image that has been attached to them. The Philippines has a rich history of civic engagement, and young activists use ICTs to mobilize and engage their otherwise disengaged peers.

Since each of the articles deserves full attention, here we would like to summarize emerging trends that have been observed across the individual cases. The first two trends identify the changing relationship between the political system (i.e., media system and party system) and youth activism. The final two trends demonstrate the new types of engagement the youth tend to embrace.

The first common trend shows that the role of new media has to be understood against the backdrop of existing media systems. How new media function as alternative information sources and civic action venues depends on the existing media systems. In

heavily censored regimes, such as Malaysia and Singapore, new media are indeed critical for enabling the space of alternative opinions. However, it is these regimes that most threaten young activists who are crossing the political boundaries in virtual spaces. In the relatively free regimes, such as India and the Philippines, new media are useful additions to the tools young activists use to reach the traditional media and, ultimately, the public and the government.

The second trend, which focuses on the relationship between party systems and youth activism, shows that party politics is failing to encourage youth engagement. This is particularly prominent in Bangladesh, a country that suffers from violent conflicts among competing parties. The dissatisfaction with the political system's ability to enhance living conditions in countries where competitive parties are present (e.g., India and the Philippines) also discourages young activists' involvement in party politics. Even in countries where one dominant party almost always wins (e.g., Malaysia and Singapore), the youth do not see the effectiveness of challenging the authoritarian rule through party politics.

The third emerging trend could be considered a response to declining party politics and shows that young activists are increasingly attracted to community-level engagement. Instead of directly challenging the political system, young activists focus on using ICTs to address community issues. This issue-centered activism, the final trend we found across the individual cases, becomes the mobilizing structure that organizes the youth. The youth have become issue-activists rather than party-activists. Youth activism is motivated by both global (e.g., environmental issues) and local issues (e.g., natural disasters). In addition, even when the issues are local, a global dimension is often present, such as attempts to seek help from the international community through new media.

These empirical findings provide not only a description of the current state of youth activism in Southeast and South Asia, but they also provide a framework that can be used to analyze the complicated interactions between political systems, political actors (young activists in particular), and technologies. Like Voltmer (2006), we call for an interactionist approach for the analysis of media (see also Zhang, 2012; Zhang and Lim, 2012), especially new media. In other words, we should examine the interaction between macro-level conditions (such as election systems and media systems) and micro-level variables (such as the psychologies and behaviors of political actors, including politicians, journalists, activists, and citizens) and identify their roles in shaping political communication.

## Note

1. The Youth, ICTs, and Political Engagement in Asia project spanned over three years, from 2009 to 2012, and was officially completed on 15 November 2012. The study was funded by the International Development Research Center, Canada through Ideacorp Inc. in the Philippines after a competitive review process. A grant of SGD170,000 was utilized to conduct 143 in-depth interviews and 41 focus group discussions. About 35 researchers were recruited, trained, and organized to complete this project.

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