Rhetoric and Reality. The Internet Challenge for Democracy in Asia

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Posted on April 1, 2005 by Editor

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Editor, Interface


The nature of collections of individual essays often is that they present a broad view but no unifying perspective. This work, however, has a strong editorial voice, a very useful introduction, and is part of a series with an overt purpose. The purpose is, as Banerjee states:

Everywhere in the world, the advent of the Internet has been seen as a new catalyst for political freedom and democracy. Scholars and pundits have acclaimed the birth of the Internet as a new dawn of global democracy and have hailed the Internet as an insurmountable threat to authoritarian regimes. This book constitutes a humble effort to assess the veracity of these claims in the Asian context. (p. 1)

The countries discussed, by highly accomplished local voices, include China, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Each of these chapters gives a marvelous perspective on the impact of the Internet in each country, focused sharply on the question of the consequences for the development of democracy.

The credentials of the authors vary, but most are either scholars who study the Internet professionally, or are in the legal profession of their respective states. One is a journalist, and most are prolific observers of their countries and the local impact of the Internet.

The authors’ findings, of course, vary, as do the histories, cultures, and current political economies of the nations themselves. But each chapter is well worth reading, whether one is interested in the impact of the Internet (Each chapter gives an introduction to the beginnings of
the Internet in the respective countries.) or in local political control over the Internet. Each chapter also gives an overview of the development of legal, and sometimes, extra-legal controls exercised by local governments.

We learn, for example, that although each of the countries’ governments tends to see the Internet as an opportunity for economic growth, they also see it as a threat to control or stability, and usually exercise a wide variety of subtle and not so subtle means of reining it in. India, although a mature democracy relative to other Asian states, has, for example, used tax investigations to punish particularly influential voices. Others, like China, attempt to control the distribution of and access to electronic materials.

The book has many worthwhile chapters, but the most important one is Banerjee’s introduction, “Internet and Democracy in Asia: A Critical Exploratory Journey.” It is particularly significant, I think, for American readers.

Americans will encounter here a very different perspective on the international development of democracy. One soon sees, for example, that Banerjee believes that democracy will take many forms in the future, and that he has some real doubts about the present directions of American democracy, seeing it as a “thin” or “plebiscite” democracy which has become more a process than a means of achieving equality and justice (p. 6). Accordingly, it is less than the full democracy he hopes will eventually take root in Asia.

Readers interested in either the international impact of the Internet, or in the larger question of how it will impact the development of democracy, can learn much from this work. Those anticipating doing business dependent upon electronic communications in all or part of Asia will also find it relevant.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Barlow

Editor, Interface

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