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Subduing the Digital Dragon: Controlling the Internet in Asia

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ABSTRACT (return to index)

Governments and political leaders have tried to control the production and dissemination of news and information for hundreds of years. Even before Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1455, the Catholic Church, which was also the dominant political force in medieval Europe, strictly controlled access to information through its oversight of manuscript and book reproduction. After printing was mechanized, political and religious leaders in a number of countries issued lists of forbidden books and required printing operators to apply for licenses from the government before practicing their trade. In this way, the government could keep close tabs on the owners and operators of print technology and impose sanctions for real and perceived transgressions. This paper is about media control in several Asian countries with restrictive media environments. The analogies that can be drawn between sixteenth century England and the current situation in Singapore, China and Vietnam are quite remarkable. This paper attempts to discuss the phenomenon of media control as it relates to emerging new technologies in parts of Asia where governments do not embrace the Western liberal perspective of press freedom. It will attempt to answer, among other things, the question of how some Asian countries are responding to the quandaries presented by a global communications network.

.01 **Censorship in the West** (return to index)

News and information are inherently political because they have the potential to affect the way people think, feel and behave. Media exposés of corruption in government, for example, have resulted in significant shifts in public opinion and, in the case of Watergate, have even brought down an American president. Because of the potential power of mass communication, political leaders throughout history have struggled to control or contain the flow of news and information in their domain, especially when they believe that the content is socially, politically or economically disruptive. Kings, queens, popes, prime ministers, generals, presidents and their official representatives have gone to great lengths to make sure that dissenting voices were silenced and that those who helped disseminate views unfavorable to the ruling class were punished. Such attempts to control news and information long pre-date the printing press (mid-fifteenth century). Ostensibly to stamp out heresy, the Catholic Church tightly controlled the reproduction of books and manuscripts for centuries and restricted access to them to a relatively small group of clerics and scholars. In ancient times, some of the earliest libraries were constructed adjacent to or within temples and castles, presumably to link, both physically and metaphorically, the dual powers of government and knowledge.

During the first part of the sixteenth century, when mechanical printing was well underway, England's King Henry VIII imposed various forms of media control (e.g., an index of prohibited books, printer's licenses, prior restraint , etc.) on both the consumers and producers of news and information in an attempt to keep troublesome ideas from spreading through the relatively new technology of mechanical printing. More than any specific form of government-imposed restriction, however, the culture of self-censorship was (and continues to be) a powerful regulator of controversial speech, even in societies that profess to be democratic. In any repressive media

environment, there is a certain level of complicity among journalists and editors to avoid or tread gingerly around subjects that are politically contentious. Sometimes this caution is a practical if not reluctant act of survival; other times it is the result of socialization to (and acceptance of) an ideology that views the role of the journalist from a less liberal perspective.

.02 **Rogues and Rebels** (return to index)

Almost as long as there have been attempts to censor news and information, there also have been those who, sometimes at great personal and professional risk, have broken the rules. Printers have always found ways to circumvent censorship laws, and consumers, if they want something bad enough, will usually find ways to get it. In sixteenth century England, despite harsh printing laws, books were routinely published without official sanction both inside and outside of the country. Because printed books were becoming popular among the emerging middle class, those willing to risk punishment, fines or jail time (or worse) could make considerable sums of money in the illicit book trade. The American Colonial press had its share of rogues and rule breakers – including Benjamin Harris, James Franklin (older brother of Ben), and John Peter Zenger – all of whom challenged government authority in some form in their newspapers and helped plant the roots for a free press in what was to become the United States of America. A number of other newspapers, pamphlets, and other printed material were published without official approval and circulated among members of the public, triggering discourse and deliberation in the fledgling colonies. These publications often addressed issues that irritated Crown-appointed administrators, and they were censored when possible, but over time, governments with repressive mass media laws have usually found that they were ineffectual in trying to curb free speech. Rebellion and enlightenment helped liberalize the media environment in the West, paving the way for a "Liberal Normative" perspective (defined below) that opposes censorship and endorses freedom of speech.

.03 **Primer: What is Asia?** (return to index)

The broad subject of this paper is the mass media climate in Asia, but it is first necessary to stipulate that the many of the media systems in Asia are as different from each other as the countries in which they exist. The region that constitutes Asia is extraordinarily diverse; hence to use the word "Asian" as an adjective always invites the potential for gross overgeneralization. Asia is typically divided by scholars into at least four, sometimes more, sub-regions: East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia. These designations reflect a Western European point of view, the countries of East Asia being farthest to the east of Western Europe. Other terms used to classify this region are Far East, Middle East, and Near East. Regardless of classifications, the Asian region as commonly understood usually extends from the northernmost point of the Japanese peninsula, and then down south to the islands of Indonesia, and then west including everything south of Russia (but not anything on the African continent). The precise dividing line on this western end is nebulous but generally includes the former Soviet republics and the countries normally considered to be Middle Eastern states.

Of interest in this paper is the sub-region known as East Asia and Southeast Asia. Simply to list these countries by name without comment would be problematic. In East Asia, there is definitely China, Japan, North Korea, and South Korea. China does not consider Taiwan to be a legitimate autonomous nation-state, but it is widely regarded as one by the rest of the world, if not officially then at least unofficially. Hong Kong seems like its own nation-state but politically has been a part of China (called a Special Administrative Region of China) since July 1, 1997. Macao is also an SAR of China after having been a Portuguese colony for 442 years until December 20, 1999. In Southeast Asia there is Brunei, Myanmar (or Burma), Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. East Timor achieved independence on May 20, 2002 after a long and sometimes violent struggle with Indonesia. Tibet is an area that has long sought independence and autonomy — thus far unsuccessfully — from China. Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan have been referred to as "The Four Tigers" because their newly industrialized economies (NIEs) propelled them to rapid economic development in recent decades. Many nations in Asia have complex political histories because of colonization, war, ethnic conflict, poverty, religious struggle, and multiple forms of government.

These two sub-regions of Asia — East Asia and Southeast Asia — include countries that have different languages, cultures, histories, political systems, and so forth. They should not be mistaken for homogenous entities. Media systems within a country can also be diverse, with a mixture of private and state-owned entities in some cases.

.04 **Mass Media in Asia** (return to index)

In the U.S., much of the study of mass media focuses on developments in North America and Western Europe. This paper examines, in a necessarily limited way because of time and space, the politics of news and information in parts of Asia. While it would be impossible to do a comprehensive study of Asian mass media systems in a paper of this size, it is possible to look at a number of critical incidents and developments in selected Asian nations that have challenged the status quo where mass media and communication regulation are concerned.

A country's mass media system is a reflection of its political system. When a political system changes, the mass media system often changes with it. Likewise, the mass media can influence or help drive change in the political system. The mass media of the Philippines, for example, changed considerably after Ferdinand Marcos, who had declared martial law for more than a decade, was deposed as president in 1986. "Since the fall of the Marcos regime," wrote Vanden Heuvel and Dennis (1993), "the Philippine media have operated in an entirely new context — one in which the press enjoys more freedom than in any Asian country, except perhaps Japan" (p. 95).

Changes in government in other countries have had liberalizing effects on the media system. Radical political reforms in Taiwan and South Korea in the late 1980s, for example, relaxed those countries' hitherto restrictive media systems. The Thai print media are known to be candid and rambunctious. In May 1992, when the military fired on pro-democracy demonstrators in the

streets of Bangkok, killing and injuring dozens, newspapers there violated government orders and reported the violence promptly. Photographs and courageous reporting of this incident helped turn public opinion against the already unpopular military government. A new government was eventually installed, and the Thai newspapers helped usher in greater press freedoms as they doggedly pointed out the need for democratic reforms.

These examples should not suggest that the process leading to a more liberalized media system is linear and absolutely progressive. It is not. In all of the countries mentioned, there have been setbacks and contradictions where press freedom is concerned. The tension between government and the news media exists in all countries, and at some points in history those tensions result in a more restrictive media environment. In both Thailand and the Philippines, for example, different political leaders over the years have attempted to rein in the press when it felt the reporting was cutting too close to the bone. The test of press freedom is whether those attempts are effective and long-lasting. In those countries where a more liberal media environment have taken hold, the collective impetus to maintain a low level of press control perseveres despite setbacks.

Communication technologies such as the Internet and satellites may have the modern-day impact on Asian societies that the printing press had on European societies in the late-fifteenth century and beyond. They can help disseminate revolutionary ideas about society and justice as well as galvanize disparate groups in society to work toward a common goal. Social change requires mass communication to help people understand the issues, organize themselves, mobilize toward some kind of action, and affect social policy in one way or another. The change may not always be toward a more democratic society. When the Shah of Iran was forced to flee that country in January 1979, he was replaced by the Islamic fundamentalist cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a religious leader whose ideas had been circulating in the country through the "small media" of cassette tapes. His grassroots network of supporters was poised to support the Shah's overthrow, whose modernization policies upset many of the countries' conservatives. For the most part, however, a liberal media have facilitated liberal social changes.

The Internet, in particular, presents the most vexing challenge to countries with the most restrictive media systems. "Authoritarian regimes can no longer maintain a monopoly over news and censor what their people know," writes Hachten (1999, p. 182). "They cannot stop news from coming into their nation or from getting out. Shortwave radio, fax, Internet, telephones, and Comsats have changed all that and blunted the power of censorship" (p. 182). This paper engages in some informed speculation about how these technologies might affect parts of Asia in the years ahead.

The next section will provide an overview of Asian mass media systems, followed by sections on how some Asian governments are responding to the emergence of less controllable technologies in this fast-changing world of digitization and globalization. The discussion of this paper is predicated on three basic questions: 1) How would one characterize the current media environment in Asia? 2) What critical incidents or developments have occurred that challenge

existing media control structures? 3) Are there any trends or patterns that indicate changes in the Asian mass media landscape?

.05 **News and Information in Asia** (return to index)

Of course the "Asian news media" as a monolithic entity does not exist. The mass media systems of Asian countries such as China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Vietnam and others are different enough from each other in matters of organizational structure, philosophical underpinnings, and state control to defy gross generalizations, although admittedly "Asia" itself is sometimes perceived by non-Asians to be one big anomalous and amalgamated region. It would also be misleading to refer to a "European" mass media system, but at least through the mechanism of the European Union, and before that the European Community, there is slightly more justification for characterizing European mass media monolithically. Countries within the EU now have a shared history of trying to harmonize their audio-visual policy (such as the "The Television without Frontiers Directive" of 1989), and the supranational structure of the EU does have an impact on cross-national media and telecommunications policy and planning issues. Asian countries have no comparable mechanism or desire for a unifying transnational media policy.

Nevertheless, if one were to survey the Asian mass media system (and the news media in particular), there are some similarities that are noteworthy. With exceptions such as Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand, it would be safe to say that the majority of Asian mass media systems in the East and Southeast Asia region is more rigidly controlled by government forces than their Western counterparts. (The commercial mass media in the West have their own influences, of course.) This control may be direct and apparent, as in the state-run media of North Korea, China, and Laos, or indirect and subtle, such as the self-censorship practiced by "independent" or "private" news media in countries where government authorities have made it clear through words and action that those who criticize government leaders and official policies will be punished. Control of the media can also be linked to cronyism — where publishers and editors serve at the tacit discretion of political leaders. In such a milieu, the news media, though not directly controlled by government, are supportive of their "friends" in government.

Even Japan's news media model, which is arguably the most liberal and "Western" of all the Asian nations due to a number of historical and cultural factors, lacks the antagonistic bite of an aggressive watchdog press. This is in part due to the cozy relationship that develops between journalists and power elites in the long-standing Japanese press clubs — where news is gathered from government officials in a quasi-business, quasi-social environment — and in part due to Japanese culture and tradition where a particular decorum is expected in matters of human communication.

With the exceptions mentioned earlier, news organizations in much of East and Southeast Asia do not operate on the free press model. Whether this is good, bad, necessary, unnecessary, helpful, hurtful and so forth depends on who is doing the analysis. A review of the literature

suggests that perspectives tend to fall into three broad categories:

1) Liberal Normative*: A true democracy cannot exist without a free press, and it should be the goal of every nation to aspire to a liberal media environment. Basic human rights are intricately tied to freedom of speech, and when a nation represses this freedom it is not democratic.*

2) Cultural Relativist*: The media system employed should reflect the needs and values of the culture within which it exists. Concerns for social order and national security may require a more controlled media environment, especially in times of national development or social instability. Western democracy (and its obsession with freedom of speech) is not the ideal for all countries at all times.*

3) Delayed Progressive*: A free press is the desired long-term outcome, but there are stages of social and economic development that may precede that outcome. It is acceptable to have a restrictive media system in the interim, and as a nation matures and stabilizes, those restrictions will be eased. Democracy can exist and even be aided in a restrictive media system.*

Rather than argue over which one of these perspectives is the most universally sensible, it is more appropriate at this stage to acknowledge that — right, wrong or somewhere in between — these different perspectives exist and that a nation's mass media system is the result of a complex set of cultural, historical, political and other factors. One thing that can be learned from the history of mass media in general is that media systems change as the society in which they exist change, and media technology often plays an important role in social change.

Not many book-length publications about Asia's mass media system have been written. The task would probably strike most authors as being too daunting and complex. Two recent books include William Atkin's *The Politics of Southeast Asia's New Media* (2002) and Drew McDaniel's *Electronic Tigers of Southeast Asia: The Politics of Media, Technology, and National Development* (2002). As their titles imply, both of these books focus on Asian nations in the southeast Asian region, but they cover a range of contemporary issues that would be informative for those interested in a larger geographical area.

For a comprehensive treatment of 25 Asian mass media systems, the only book of its kind is the *Handbook of the Media in Asia* (2000), which is 721 pages long and edited by Shelton A. Gunaratne.

On a narrower but relevant topic, *Mass Media and Cultural Identity: Ethnic Reporting in Asia* (1999) (edited by Anura Goonasekera and Youichi Ito) deals with issues related to media and ethnic violence in Asia. William A. Hachten's *The World News Prism* (1999) does not focus specifically on Asia but covers press freedom issues in Asia as part of a larger discussion of changes in media worldwide.

Athough in need of an update, Jon Vanden Heuvel and Everette E. Dennis' *The Unfolding Lotus: East Asia's Changing Media* (1993) is still a good overview of the Asian media landscape. The book provides succinct case studies of South Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. The chapter on Hong Kong is one that most obviously needs to be updated.

At the risk of overgeneralization, it is possible to do a meta-analysis of the literature about Asian mass media systems — i.e., to analyze the analyses of these systems. For a more detailed treatment, specific books (those mentioned above, for example) should be consulted. Also, there are some country-specific books that are excellent. Ann Cooper-Chen's *Mass Communication in Japan* (1997) is an example of this. Other types of book on a single media system would be Chin-Chuan Lee's book called *Voices of China: The Interplay of Politics and Journalism* (1990), which features 19 contributors contemplating a single topic, and U Thaung's autobiographical work – *A Journalist, A General and An Army in Burma* (1995) — about his days as a journalist working under Burmese martial law.

It is perhaps unfair and centric to use the U.S. media system as a reference point for evaluating Asian mass media systems. Admittedly, many factors need to be taken into consideration when assessing any country's mass media system (history, culture, political stability, and so forth). What follows, then, is a continuum-based overview of mass media systems in Asia — an assessment of the degree of "restrictiveness" of the media environment in a particular country without a clear value judgment based on that assessment. It should be noted that no media system in the world, regardless of the region, is completely free of controls or restrictions.

If a high level of "press control" is based on the amount of direct and indirect government restrictions place on the news media in a country, and a low level of "press control" reflects a relatively free press without much direct or indirect government control, there are certain countries in Asia that can be said to have a low level of press control. Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand, as mentioned earlier, have a relatively free press these days. It is true that Thailand did issue an expulsion order against two foreign journalists in February 2002 for a *Far Eastern Economic Review* story that referred to contentions between the Thai prime minister and royal palace. But the amount of public criticism from within Thailand against the expulsion order was evidence that the country still had a great deal of press freedom. The Thai news media were not afraid to criticize the government's expulsion order, whereas in a more restrictive media environment, the press would likely have remained silent. (The foreign journalists' visas were eventually reinstated on appeal.) It is inappropriate in Thailand to criticize or speak ill of the royal family, and the domestic media observe this cultural mandate.

At the other end of the continuum, where the level of press control is very high, are countries with state- or military-controlled media systems such as China, North Korea, Burma, Laos, and Vietnam. These countries have authoritarian governments that have different ideas from the U.S. about the role that the news media should play in society. In tightly controlled media environments, the mass media often serve as an apparatus of government. The adversarial,

"watchdog" press is anathema in such a media system.

And in between these two extremes is an array of other countries that have varying levels of press control. Hong Kong had been preparing for stricter press controls for years prior to its reunification with China. Journalists there must walk a tightrope between maintaining a level of independence and not offending the Chinese government. Some observers say that the Hong Kong press is managing to strike that tricky balance but that has required a clear resort to self-censorship.

In April 2002, Hong Kong's top English newspaper *The South China Morning Post* fired its Beijing bureau chief, which led to suspicions that press freedoms were being curbed. The bureau chief had expressed his concerns earlier about having to tone down his reporting on subjects that China found controversial. The editor of *The South China Morning Post* has publicly denied his paper is kowtowing to Beijing. As of this writing, the future of the Hong Kong media environment is far from clear, but it is unlikely to become more liberal. More likely, it will maintain some degree of independence but, like some of its neighbors, also practice strategic self-censorship and withhold or water down criticism of the Chinese government. News stories involving Tibet, Taiwan, labor unrest and other controversial issues (in China's view) will no doubt present challenges to the Hong Kong media.

And yet there are anomalies to this presumption. Chinese government, which had blocked Internet access to a number of Western news sites, suddenly and without warning allowed access to them in mid-May 2002. Reuters, CNN, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, National Public Radio, and so on — all previously blocked — were unblocked. Then a few weeks later, the Chinese government said it was punishing three of the country's top web sites – sina.com, tom.com, and fm365.com – and admonishing others for undesirable content. The announcement came at the start of a three-month campaign to tighten control over the Internet. Coinciding with this act was the Chinese government's order in June 2002 to shut down 2,400 Internet cafes for "safety inspections." These cafes are supposed to be licensed, but only 200 of them were. One article stated that, according to Chinese officials, "Internet cafes are polluting the minds of children and teenagers with pornography and subversive material. Internet cafes are required to install special software to track which sites users visit, and thousands have been closed for failing to do so." The government has a hotline to report web sites that are "subversive." In late June 2002, Microsoft announced that it was going to invest $750 million over three years in China to help develop the country's education, research, and hardware manufacturing. Some see this as a precursor to Internet access liberalization; the Chinese government, however, says that Microsoft will help strengthen information security. Hence the situation in China and Hong Kong in regard to its digital media environment is really too schizophrenic to call as of this writing.

Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have a long history of being headed by strong — some would say "authoritarian" — leaders who have had a clear distrust of foreign media and a stern influence over domestic media. These nations are unlikely to greatly liberalize their media anytime

soon because of a fear that too much press freedom could de-stabilize an always-tenuous socio-political order. Singapore, in particular, has been in the news not only for it restrictive domestic journalism climate but for its treatment of foreign media. Those who follow Singapore's media controversies are familiar with that country's run-ins with domestic and foreign journalists. Lee Kuan Yew, the country's former prime minister and current senior minister or advisor, made no bones about who was running the country when he was in power. A political leader with an illustrious history leading his country from its uncertain days after national independence to a miraculous economic success story, his clashes with the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, *Time* magazine's Asian edition, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *Asiaweek* are legendary. When once question about his country's lack of press freedom, he calmly said, "You are trying to impose a mold on me which my past does not enable me to fill up comfortably. And I see no reason why I should."

Lee takes the Cultural Relativist perspective in that he believes his country will not benefit from the kind of Western democracy espoused by those who take the Liberal Normative perspective. The Singaporean people also do not seem particularly opposed to their restrictive media system. Lee is regarded by some as a "benevolent dictator," someone who cares passionately about his nation but rules through strict social discipline and a plethora of regulations. Yet, as he has pointed out many times in the past, Singaporeans have "freedom." Because they live in a society with rules of conduct that are enforced and meant to engender social harmony and respect, they have the freedom to walk out in the street late at night without fear of being victimized, and they have the freedom to live in a clean and orderly environment. More than in some industrialized nations, he argues, Singaporeans are "free." When East meets West, sometimes concepts such as these are difficult to wrap a definition around.

Many analysts believe that what mitigates authoritarianism in places like Singapore is a desire by that country to be a serious player in the global economy and a place where international businesses feel comfortable housing their Asian operations. Singapore, like Hong Kong, is considered by many to be a good place for international business. To name but a few advantages: People there speak English, the telecommunication infrastructure is advanced, the economy is robust, the crime rate is negligible, and the political system is relatively honest. It can be a comfortable place to roost for those accustomed to a relatively high standard of living. An overly repressive political system would discourage foreign interests from looking so favorably upon Singapore.

At the same time, the government has closely managed the country's development, including its media system. Lee Kuan Yew has been called a dictator; he counters by saying that the media in the West have controls on it as well from wealthy commercial interests that stifle media content. In an interview with the Japanese national public broadcaster NHK, Lee responds to criticism about his treatment of foreign journalists:

[W]e have not stopped the foreign press. What we have done — and this is also for our own press — is that if you publish something which is not accurate or something which is slanted

against the Singapore Government and you sell your paper or program in Singapore, we demand the right of reply. You must allow us a reply in the same prominent way. Now, they refused. So, we said, "Then, you can't sell." So, they agreed. Now that we have the right of reply, their misreporting, their slant in the stories have diminished because they know that we can reply in their columns and they will not appear so good. Is that muzzling the press? I don't think so. They can say what they want. We must have the right to defend ourselves. I think that's fair. We have not banned them.

Of course there are those who would disagree with Lee's rationalization, but his views about the news media have been remarkably consistent during his long tenure as prime minister and senior minister.

In other parts of Asia, the media may be in transition. Despite the financial crisis of 1997, many developing Asian countries are responding to the challenges of modernization and globalization in their own ways. Some of these responses will require a re-thinking of their media systems, especially in the Digital Age. The impact of the Internet, satellites, advanced telephone systems, international news services, and so forth will no doubt affect Asia's overall media environment. Other factors that also have to be considered when examining a country's media system are changes in society related to a country's economic development and increased international relations; the growth of a literate and consumptive middle class; the social activism of university students and others poised to fight for social reforms; the ingenuity of expatriates to circumvent local restrictions; and the "changing guard" in a country's political establishment. All of these factors and more need to be taken into consideration when speculating about how media systems in Asia may change in the years ahead.

In the next section, two Southeast Asian countries will be analyzed and discussed in terms of their response to the Internet. Singapore and Vietnam were chosen because they are different and similar at the same time. They are both in the same sub-region — Southeast Asia — and they both have high levels of press control. But their political systems, history, culture and state of technological advancement are very different. Yet, one could argue that if Vietnam's media environment were to liberalize in response to its modernization and urbanization aims, it would liberalize more to a Singaporean model than, say, a more liberal model in Asia like Japan, the Philippines, or Thailand. Singapore has presented itself as an interesting case study because it is a country that has modernized on its own terms — participating in the global capitalist system without yielding to foreign pressures to liberalize its media system.

.06 **Critical Incidents that Challenge Existing Media Control Structures**(return to index)

The number of Internet Service Providers in a country is not an accurate reflection of that country's control over its digital news and information environment, but it does provide some insight into how many entities exist in a country that can facilitate Internet access for individuals, families, businesses and so forth.

Here is a list of selected Asian countries, their populations, and the number of ISPs in the country presented here for comparison and discussion. The U.K. and U.S. are listed at the end of the list for comparison with two Western nations :

* China, population: 1.27 billion, 3 ISPs (2000)

* Hong Kong, population: 7.2 million, 17 ISPs (2000)

* Indonesia, population: 229 million, 24 ISPs (2000)

* Japan, population: 127 million, 73 ISPs (2000)

* Malaysia, population: 22 million, 7 ISPs (2000)

* Philippines, population: 83 million, 33 ISPs (2000)

* Singapore, population: 4.3 million, 9 ISPs (2000)

* South Korea, population: 48 million, 11 ISPs (2000)

* Taiwan, population: 22.4 million, 8 ISPs (2000)

* Thailand, population: 62 million, 15 ISPs (2000)

* Vietnam, population: 80 million, 5 ISPs (2000)

* United Kingdom: 60 million, 245 ISPs (2000)

* United States, population: 279 million, 7,800 ISPs (2000)

Some interesting but not too surprising figures appear above. First, the number of ISPs in China vis-à-vis its population is remarkably few. This is not surprising given that the fewer the number of ISPs in a country, the easier it is to control Internet access. Thailand, a country with a fairly open and liberal media system, has a smaller population than Vietnam, but three times the ISPs. (Of course, GDPs and relative state of economic and technological development should also be taken into consideration for a more comprehensive analysis.) The U.S. and U.K. have considerably higher numbers of ISPs, a situation that reflects their relatively hands-off approach to Internet communication and advanced state of economic and technological development. It is much easier to control three ISPs than 7,800.

Since Singapore and Vietnam will be used for a comparative analysis, some basic data about each country is helpful:

SINGAPORE   **VIETNAM**

	(2000)	(2000)
POPULATION	4,300,419	79,939,014
AREA	637.5 sq km	329,560 sq km
LITERACY	93.5%	93.7%
GDP	$26,500	$1,950
INTERNET USERS	1.7 million	121,000
TELEPHONE LINES	1.9 million	2.6 million
GOVT. TYPE	Communist	Parliamentary Republic
POVERTY	N/A	37% (1998 est.)

The population and landmass of Vietnam is vastly larger than Singapore, although their rates of literacy (the percentage of people 15 years and older who can read and write) are comparable. Singapore is a rich country if GDP is an indicator — in fact, it is considered one of the richest in the world. Vietnam, by comparison, is a relative poor country when GDP is used as a measure. There are significantly fewer Internet users in Vietnam, which should be viewed not only in absolute numbers but in relation to the overall population numbers for both countries. In Singapore, nearly 40% of the population were Internet users in 2000, compared to about 3% of the Vietnamese population.

Vietnam has a Communist government, and Singapore a Parliamentary Republic. There are negligible levels of poverty in Singapore, whereas in Vietnam those who live below the poverty level number about 37% of the population.

This is just a thumbnail sketch of each country's characteristics. Books mentioned in the Bibliography as well as reliable web sites on various countries of interest are good places to get more detailed and comprehensive information.

SINGAPORE (return to index)

On August 28, 1996, the U.S.-based Electronic Frontier Foundation issued the following press release . This was a time in history when the Internet was becoming a popular medium, largely because of the widespread use of graphical user interfaces that made navigating the Internet user-friendly. Technological advances also made the Internet more appealing to people who were not computer specialists or technologically savvy. This press release provides a good overview of what the Singaporean government's policy approach to monitoring the Internet was going to be in the years ahead:

The government of Singapore recently established strict controls on all Internet Service Providers and many World Wide Web pages. ISPs and content providers will be licensed, and required to adhere to a rigid set of content guidelines which apply to political speech, ethnic and religious remarks including satire, and public morals including "contents which propagate permissiveness or promiscuity."

We believe that the licensing policy and broad content guidelines will effectively chill the free flow of information not only in Singapore, but worldwide. Because the Internet is global, transcending geographical bounds, we are convinced that censorship within any nation or state, whether implicit or explicit, poses a threat to all users of the global network. We therefore encourage the government of Singapore, and other governments implementing or considering policies of content control, to stress education rather than regulation.

Singapore's approach, like the Communications Decency Act that was passed but quickly rescinded in the U.S., applies a broadcast regulatory standard to the Internet.

The application of broadcast-inspired, "one-to-many" regulation to this new *many-to-many* medium indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the Internet.

Unlike television and radio broadcasting, the Internet does not push material at the viewer, but simply makes material available on demand – not unlike a rapid inter-library loan. And unlike broadcasting, the Internet does not present the views of a limited few privileged speakers, but allows all participants to publish, comment on, and even refute, what they read.

Recognizing that every culture has its own standards regarding what is or is not appropriate, the undersigned organizations recommend that Singapore's government allow its citizens to use Internet filtering tools, with which they can block out any material that is offensive to them, rather than embark upon a closed-border approach that will cut Singapore off from the new global online library.

Support of individually customizable filtration services, instead of a broad top-down censorship effort, would enable Singapore to participate in a more positive and effective way in the evolution of this new open medium, and would indicate trust in the ability of Singaporeans to choose what is right for Singapore and for themselves.

This was an interesting campaign because it depicted another side of "globalization." In economic terms, globalization suggests the interconnection and liberalization of markets all over the world. In information terms, globalization suggests an interconnection of information opportunities, and when there is a weakness (i.e., government-imposed censorship) in one part of the network, the whole network suffers because of it, according to the EFF's rationale. There is an imperfect analogy that can be drawn between this situation and the advocacy argument for global trade. Those who support it want as many countries to be connected to the global trade

network — indeed, the more the better — but that also means these countries have to buy into an ideological premise underlying global trade and organizations such as the World Trade Organization. While the EFF may or may not support a global trade system, its argument as stated in the press release does assume a universal ideology of press freedom.

Singapore has never been shy about regulating its traditional mass media, so it is not surprising that it took a seemingly novel and clever approach to regulating the Internet. It RETROACTIVELY licensed ISPs, political parties that maintain web sites, groups and individuals who run discussion sites on politics and religion, and online newspapers. As licensed "broadcasters," they fell under the authority of the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA). One of the SBA's first actions in July 1996 was to remove — or rather, have removed — an Internet newsgroup posting that it felt was objectionable. According to one news article from 1996: "About 10 SBA officials will surf the net daily for objectionable material. A government-appointed panel of prominent citizens will decide what is objectionable… "

One example of objectionable material would be anti-government statements or, in the SBA's words, content that "tend(s) to bring the government into hatred or contempt, or which excite disaffection against the government." Other prohibited content (which was already banned from the traditional mass media in Singapore) included:

1) content that jeopardizes public security or national defense;

2) anything that ridicules racial or religious groups;

3) the promotion of religious deviations or occult practices;

4) the "gross exploitation" of violence, nudity, sex or horror;

5) the depiction of "sexual perversions" such as homosexuality.

One interesting case that tested this restrictive media environment involved a web site called Sintercom, founded by Tan Chong Kee. The site existed for years and offered "alternative views" on politics, including criticism of the Singaporean government. However, in August 2001, the founder, a Singaporean resident, decided to shut the site down. The SBA was asking him to register the site as a political web site. It would then have to abide by SBA guidelines or risk being fined. The site was enormously popular, attracting about 7,000 visitors per day, but to continue it would have been risky since, under SBA guidelines, content could not be against the public interest, public order or national harmony. The founder was deterred, or so it seemed.

Less than a year later, however, Sintercom was back, this time with an anonymous editor, and now called New Sintercom. The nom de plume being used by the editor (or editors, as the case may be) is "Mr. Kee Luan Few," a play on the former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew. The New Sintercom editor has vowed not to register as a political web site. Other sources of news and

information — in particular two newsgroups, SG-Daily and Singapore Forum — also appeared. The original founder of Sintercom commented in the Strait Times: "The result of SBA's policy of going after sites like Sintercom is not the conversion of such sites into ineffectual self-censoring ones, but that such sites will become anonymous and be hosted overseas."

Although Singapore has measures in place to crack down on what it considers to be undesirable content, there are myriad ways that dissidents can circumvent restrictions. Newsgroups and web sites can be created and shut down, but unlike newspapers and television stations, it is relatively easy to start up a new newsgroup and web site. If problems occur with local hosting (because the ISP is closely monitored by government authorities), newsgroups and web sites can be created overseas where the media environment is less restrictive (e.g., Australia, the U.S., the U.K.). Also, the Internet allows for anonymity and circuitous communication. People who wanted to criticize the government and even break sedition laws could do so with little chance of being caught if they are careful.

Interestingly, the case in Singapore is reminiscent of sixteenth century England. Singapore requires ISPs and content providers to be licensed. Political web sites must be registered. There is an index of forbidden content. Censors closely monitor content production and information traffic. Sanctions are imposed for rule violations. And as such, a culture of self- censorship develops to guard against offending authorities. However, there are also those who push the envelope and break or circumvent the rules at some risk to their security and pocketbooks. The difference is that it is much easier to break the rules with the Internet because of its anonymous and circuitous nature, making it difficult to track down and sanction offenders, or to keep people silent for very long before they re-emerge as a different web site or newsgroup. The ability to publish websites remotely is somewhat comparable to printing books in the sixteenth century in neighboring countries where printing laws were more lax, and then importing the books to be sold in countries where they were not being printed. The point is, regulating Internet content is not easy as long as people are willing and able to try and outsmart the regulators. It is well known that "Internet culture" is full of digital rogues, hackers, and rule-breakers. They exist in Asia as well, where the level of technological knowledge, especially among the educated youth, is rather high in many countries. These rebels are pushing the regulatory envelope.

VIETNAM (return to index)

Vietnam is considered to have one of the most restrictive media environments in Asia. A report by Reporters Sans Frontieres included Vietnam on a list with other countries one normally thinks of as being some of the most repressive in the world. These countries are said to totally or mostly control Internet access. Sharing this dubious limelight with Vietnam were Azerbaijan, Belarus, Burma, China, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Vietnam has been dealing with the Internet in similar ways to Singapore. In June 1996, the government of Vietnam required all Internet Service Providers to register with the government

and prohibit "data that can affect national security, social order, and safety or information that is not appropriate to the culture, morality, and traditional customs of the Vietnamese people." The government would determine what kind of information would fit under these categories.

Singapore's regulation had to catch up with the technology. Already a technologically advanced society, the Singaporean government (like many others in the world) had to create rules and regulations governing the Internet after they realized what a digital dragon had been released onto the global computer system. In Vietnam's case, perhaps learning from its neighbors, it laid down the rules before the country even had a connection to the Internet. Like other developing countries in Asia, however, it was caught between wanting to develop its telecommunications infrastructure to facilitate its modernization and urbanization aims and wanting to maintain a level of control over news and information flow. Because of the country's tumultuous political history, there are a lot of people outside of Vietnam (including Vietnamese refugees living in non-Communist countries) who would like to see Vietnam converted to a democratic state. They have set up websites expressing their views, and the Vietnamese government considers these ideas to be dangerous and corrosive. The government has tried its best to censor these sites and other Internet content through a strict regulatory framework that includes licensing, registration, and surveillance of assorted Internet-related activities.

This tight control over the Internet is accompanied by a loosening of control over its centralized economy. Not wanting to be left behind as other parts of East Asia and Southeast Asia link to a growing global economy, the Vietnamese government adopted a policy of "doi moi" (newness and change) in 1987 that set into motion a national initiative for economic reform. A move toward a market economy within a socialist framework (sometimes referred to as "market socialism") is part of the "doi moi" program, but change is to come gradually to preserve political and social stability and not raise the ire of orthodox politicians resistant to change. Currently, the development of Vietnam's telecommunications infrastructure is an important part of its overall transition toward modernization, and systematic urban planning is occurring to conceive and construct livable cities.

Vietnam was a relative latecomer to the world of global Internet connectivity, and it proceeded with extreme caution and vigilance. It was only in November 1997 that the country decided to allow comprehensive access to the Internet, although e-mail services had been available before then. In a country of 80 million people, only approximately 12,000 had access to the Internet when it was first launched. Part of this was due to the newness of the technology and need to develop a better telecommunications infrastructure, but another part was a serious desire to control and mitigate the unanticipated effects of having too much free news and information flow. The Internet is like an open door to the rest of the world in which information content can get out as well as get in. As Vietnam continued to pursue its development goals, it did not want to deal with the subversive elements that might be generated through electronic communication channels.

Vietnam has worked with both Singapore and the U.S. to improve its data communications,

allowing it better capacity to transmit information internationally through wired and wireless channels. South Korea's KT Corp has helped introduce ADSL technology to Vietnam, which will vastly improve the speed of Internet connectivity. As the country pursues its goals of economic development and urbanization, the robustness of its telecommunications network will be a key concern. The Vietnamese government is pursuing relationships with foreign companies to help it meet its development goals. Conversely, companies outside Vietnam are looking to the country for the potential outsourcing of services there as is already happening in parts of Asia. In July 2000, a historical event occurred when the U.S. and Vietnam signed a trade agreement that would pave the way for a more open trade relationship between the two countries. This came approximately six years after President Clinton lifted the trade embargo on Vietnam. The question is: As Vietnam develops its network capacity to allow for business relationships with foreign companies and governments, will it still be able to maintain a restrictive media environment and control over its civilian digital communications?

If one takes the case of Singapore, the answer is a tentative yes. But the next question remains: For how long? One writer suggests that it does not really matter whether the ordinary Vietnamese citizen gets access to foreign news and ideas designed to persuade them to think more along the lines of dissidents. "During the Vietnam War," writes Keith B. Richburg, "Hanoi's Communist leaders constantly warned people not to listen to shortwave radio broadcasts of Voice of America, the BBC and other foreign outlets considered subversive and potentially injurious to the war effort. Of course, Vietnamese did listen — and the North won the war anyway. " It is possible that official news may be more credible to people, regardless of what other views are out there.

In June 1996, however, the Vietnamese government was not about to take any chances. In response to concerns in the Communist Party that anti-communist or anti-government content on the Internet could undermine political stability, the country's telecommunications authority — Directorate General of Posts and Telecommunications (DGPT) made it clear it had full jurisdiction to control the Internet. All Internet users would have to register with the DGPT and Internet Service Providers would have to submit documents to the government explaining their systems so that the government would have an easier time regulating content. At the same time that this was occurring, organizations were already setting up web sites that would post uncensored and critical materials about Vietnam.

In June 2002, the Vietnamese Embassy in the U.S. featured an article on its website publicizing the favorable credit rating Vietnam received from a U.S.-based credit rating agency. The upgrade (from stable to positive) was in part due to the country's "renewed commitment to economic reforms" and "the ratification of its bilateral trade agreement with the U.S., as well as the implementation of its structural reform programmes supported by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)." An article released on the same day, however, showed that while Vietnam was making headway in developing a market economy, it was still a country rooted in Communist traditions. The article described the role of the Vietnamese press as helping with national construction and development: "In its capacity as the vanguard force in the cultural

and ideological front, the press has played an active role in discovering and encouraging cases of effective economic operation. It has also helped in the fight against corruption, negative phenomena, and social evils to purify the Party and administrative contingent." In effect, modernization in Vietnam does not necessarily mean Westernization. Like Singapore, Vietnam is trying to develop and reform on its own terms and in its own way.

.07 **The Future Mass Media Landscape in Asia** (return to index)

It is by no means clear what the mass media landscape in Asia will look like in the future. Very possibly it will be, as it is now, a mosaic of different media environments with varying degrees of press freedom and approaches to regulating the Internet. On one end of the so-called free press continuum, there will be Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand demonstrating the most tolerance for an open and unfettered media environment. On the other end of the spectrum will be countries such as China, Singapore and Vietnam. These countries have already shown a predilection for extending the strict media controls they have over traditional mass media into the digital media world. Even as Vietnam moves toward a more open market economy, it wants to maintain tight control over the production and dissemination of news and information.

On the other hand, another alternative is that as economic globalization continues to grow and affect the national policies of those countries that choose to be linked into such a system, a corresponding "information globalization" will occur that will encourage some harmonization of international information policies, perhaps starting with the need for reliable economic news to cross over national borders. If Vietnam is to fashion itself after Singapore, Hong Kong or other Asian Tigers, it will likely find many foreigners living within its borders. Providing for the information needs of these sojourners may require a liberalization of existing mass media controls. Moreover, a growing number of Vietnamese university students are studying abroad and returning to their home country after exposure to different ideas about press control. This, in itself, is no harbinger of press freedom – after all, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew studied law at Cambridge in England – but it does suggest that Vietnam's next generation of leaders may have ideological influences that are different from the current generation.

In the case of Singapore, there seems to be some recognition that while it is important to regulate the Internet, it is going to be difficult to do absolutely. Singapore has drawn the lines of acceptable reportage within its own borders for both domestic and foreign journalists, and it has maintained a hard-line stand against what it considers to be subversive reporting practices. At the same time, its society has prospered and flourished without complete press freedoms. Striking this balance has been tricky, but it seems, for the most part, to have allowed it to be restrictive in one sense but commercially robust in another.

Can Vietnam follow in that same vein? Comparisons between the two nations may or may not be useful, even as Vietnam continues a program of greater international relations and economic development. It is, after all, a Communist state, and its development goals are not necessarily closely aligned with Singapore's. However, if Vietnam were to succeed joining the other "Asian

Tigers" at some point, its media system is more likely to resemble the Singaporean model than, say, one of the more liberal systems mentioned above (i.e., Japan, the Philippines, or Thailand). Hence it has been instructive to examine both nations in juxtaposition. What Vietnam has learned from Singapore is that it is possible to adopt some elements of Western modernization while rejecting others. As its economy continues to grow, its middle class continues to expand, its telecommunications infrastructure continues to advance, and its youth become more educated and exposed to Western ideas and values, it is hard to say what changes will occur in that society. Already there are concerns that there are too many Western influences there — from Coca-Cola ads to Nike shoes. Now that their appetites have been whet, will the younger generations want more changes than their government leaders are prepared to deliver?

Whatever the outcome, at some point Asia's more authoritarian governments may find that for all their good intentions in regulating their old and new media technologies, the age of digital media systems — particularly the Internet and satellites — will usher in a period where regulation proves as difficult and frustrating as trying to regulate the technology of printing in a society hungry for knowledge and communication. Is a free press a culturally-biased value that can do more harm than good for some countries in Asia that are struggling to find their footing in a Western-dominated global political and economic system, or is it a universal right that all people and governments should embrace once they are "enlightened"? These are not idle ponderings. The deliberations that lead to their answers have the power to define the future.

ENDNOTES (return to index)

Pre-publication censorship. This typically involved having to submit a manuscript for approval by church or government authorities.

Scholars in the past have written about the different roles that journalists play in various societies. One of the best-known analyses in mass communications circles is Frederick S. Siebert's Four Theories of the Press, which is also published in a book (1956) by the same name. Siebert classified media systems into four categories: authoritarian, libertarian, Soviet, and social responsibility. Others have modified and updated his categories. One point that Siebert and his colleagues were trying to make was that the mass media system serves different purposes in different countries, largely depending on the dominant political system governing that country. In reality, Siebert's categories are not absolutely exclusive of each other. Media systems may exhibit characteristics from two or more of his categories. As such, his categorization scheme should be viewed as a broad but useful generality.

The countries that constitute Asia can be a matter of contention. Distinctions such as East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and North Asia help focus attention on geographical regions. The mass media systems discussed in this paper will come mainly from East and Southeast Asia.

This controversial directive put a quota on the amount of "foreign" programs that could be broadcast in the EC. Largely believed to be an attempt to curb the influx of American television

shows in the EC, this directive created international tensions between policy makers in the EC and trade officials and entertainment industry executives in the U.S.

Japan's media law and policy resembles the U.S. model by design. As part of the democratic reforms imposed by U.S. Occupation Forces in Japan after World War II, language pertaining to freedom of the press, at least in concept, was included in the Japanese Constitution.

The New York Times, May 8, 2002, p. A-10.

Technically it is called the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China, which it became on July 1, 1997.

Philip P. Pan, "Hong Kong Paper Fires Critical Journalist." *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2002, p. A-22.

Letter to the editor in *The Washington Post*, May 11, 2002, p. A-23, by Thomas Abraham, editor of the *South China Morning Post*. Abraham has addressed this issue in other forums as well, including an editorial in his own newspaper where he points out that the American news media practice self-censorship as well (May 19,2002, p. 10).

"China Lifts Blocks on Some Western News Sites; Without Comment, Beijing Drops Long-Standing Ban on Various Web Reports," *The Washington Post*, May 17, 2002, p. A-19.

Richard McGregor, "Websites punished as China acts to control content,"*Financial Times* (London), June 6, 2002, p. A-10.

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"Microsoft to Spend $750 million in China," CNN Interactive, June 28, 2002,http://asia.cnn.com/2002/TECH/industry/06/27/china.microsoft.reut/

From NHK transcript of interview with Lee Kuan Yew, December 18, 1999.

The CIA World Fact Book 2001. Accessible on the Internet at http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/

Ibid.

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newsitem.php3?datestamp=20020621111105.

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8 THOUGHTS ON "SUBDUING THE DIGITAL DRAGON: CONTROLLING THE INTERNET IN ASIA"

Noel Karaffa
on **January 31, 2014 at 11:48 AM** said:

This Blog is a total waste of time!

work from home billing and coding jobs
on **February 3, 2014 at 1:03 PM** said:

Thank you for the auspicious writeup. It in fact was
a amusement account it. Look advanced to more added
agreeable from you! By the way, how could we communicate?

Julianne
on **February 3, 2014 at 10:09 PM** said:

Heya i am for the primary time here. I came across this board and I in finding It
truly useful & it helped me out much. I hope to present something back and help others like
you aided me.

Kari
on **February 4, 2014 at 11:23 AM** said:

Can I simply say what a comfort to find somebody who really knows what
they're discussing on the internet. You certainly understand how to bring an issue to light
and make it important.
More and more people really need to look at this and understand this side of your story.
I was surprised you are not more popular because you surely have the
gift.

Alyce
on **February 4, 2014 at 6:57 PM** said:

It's actually a great and useful piece of info. I am happy that you simply
shared this useful info with us. Please keep us up to date like this.

Thank you for sharing.

Lesli
on **February 5, 2014 at 1:36 AM** said:

Aw, this was a really nice post. Taking the time and actual effort to
make a really good article… but what can I say… I put things off a whole lot and never
seem to get anything done.

Marta
on **February 5, 2014 at 4:27 AM** said:

The other day, while I was at work, my cousin stole my
iPad and tested to see if it can survive a 40 foot
drop, just so she can be a youtube sensation. My apple ipad is now broken and she has

83 views.

I know this is completely off topic but I had to share it
with someone!

Margarito
on **February 6, 2014 at 1:47 AM** said:

Every weekend i used to go to see this web site, as i wish for enjoyment, as this this
website conations
actually good funny stuff too.