Citizen Journalists and New Media Technology in the ASEAN Region

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This paper discusses citizen journalism and related volunteer news co-creation activities in Southeast Asia in order to understand their implications. These implications include, in rising order of abstractness, the operations of news organizations, the ability of governments to influence domestic and international perspectives, the information resources of citizens, and the formulation of public policy.

The paper reviews a small number of case studies of citizen journalism activities from across the ASEAN region. The paper then suggests possible reasons why some endeavors were successful and others not. The paper next analyzes the relationship between citizen journalism activities and issues that are critical to the future of the region: freedom of information, human rights, self-determination, certification of professional journalists, democratic participation, security, and cultural harmony. The paper concludes by exploring likely future prospects for citizen journalism as region's social conditions and technological infrastructure rapidly change.

Keywords: *citizen journalism, new media technology, ASEAN journalism*

Citizen Journalism via new media is a recent but rapidly emerging area, the contours of which are only now becoming discernible. As yet, we could not find any systematic data sets that we could rely upon in order to examine this topic. Hence, to seek insight, my comments must be exploratory. The ideas I suggest to you today must draw only selectively from various data sources. Obviously, any conclusions must be provisional, and would serve as mere suggestions to later, more systematic investigations of the topic.

My aim is to examine the issue generally, discuss a small number of cases, and try to sketch some implications from them for the following areas: freedom of information; human rights and privacy; self-determination; certification of professional journalists; democratic participation; and security *vis-à-vis* cultural harmony.

We can begin by segregating tropes on journalism's role in society into two camps, or stories. First is the "happy story," which emphasizes the positive aspect of journalism's role in society, a story often told by journalists about themselves.

When the social role of journalism is explored from this viewpoint, the response is that journalists serve not only as important purveyors of good information to the public but also as guardians of the public interest. They are the alert defenders of the citizen, of the common person. Journalists stand on guard against abuse of public office, and are vigilant in securing probity and propriety in administration and governance.

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Journalists can thereby justify the special privileges they enjoy in many societies. These include access to leaders, preferential mailing rates for newspapers and media material, special freedom of speech protections, ability to ask questions of practically anyone they please, whether they are in government or outside of government and an often unrestrained ability to disseminate their findings. Even television and radio stations will often claim that they have an important service component to society that justifies their use of a scarce collective resource (that is, a portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, more commonly known as the airwaves).

All these flow onto the journalistic profession because of the important social role that journalists have come to occupy. Because journalists serve important purposes, they get these important privileges. This is the essence of what I have called the "happy story" which one finds enshrined in various national and international declarations and constitutions.

Another perspective could be called the "less-than-happy story." This story focuses on journalism as a business, much like any other, and which must find a way to be economically viable. Journalists need to earn a living, and those in larger enterprises have a system to pay employees and to produce content (e.g., for newspapers and television news shows).

How do they do this? From this story's more cynical perspective, the answer is that their work must be socially sanctioned by elites, and this often means the leaders of the government or other powerful forces. Journalism, as an enterprise, has to win a certain level of support; otherwise, it will not receive support. Again, in many cases, this means governmental support. Or, in a free enterprise or other semi-open context, media organizations must win the support of other sponsors. If the journalists are too critical, they will not receive advertising revenues from merchants or, if they are cause-sponsored journalists, as the case may be, they will not receive donations.

Understanding the infrastructure aspects of journalism and its linkage to social support is important. When it comes to mainstream journalism, it is expensive to produce news using old technologies. Therefore, it is important

that there be large investments and justifications for these investments. It can be for profit or for ideological service. For someone to come forward with the required resources, a profit model is needed. Even without the profit motive, resources are likely to only be directed towards journalistic production if some perspectives on a meaningful issue will be provided by the journalist.

Some interests will need to be served, even if served by neglecting a topic or issue rather than taking a particular slant on it. Sounding a critical note on the journalism process, one can argue that the press must find it extremely difficult to fulfill its claimed watchdog role, even to the extent it might want. Then, the result would be distorted viewpoints about what is truly happening. This realization should underlie any attempt to understand what is reflected in the reports of journalists.

It is certainly believed that circulation of newspapers is declining in developed countries and in the rest of the countries around the world. This is certainly true in the United States (U.S.), for instance. Yet, here are some data which I find very surprising: between 2001 and 2005, there had been a more than a 10% increase in the number of paid-for newspapers worldwide. Moreover, the worldwide circulation of paid-for daily newspapers has increased.

On Citizen Journalism

What these data tell me is that the projections on the death of newspapers and other news outlets are certainly premature. I do not have worldwide data more recent than 2005, and these trends may be reversing if one judges by the case of theU.S.. But I do not know of any direct evidence one way or the other. It could even be that the circulation is continuing to rise outside of the U.S.-Western Europe region.

Regardless of whether the number of newspapers is growing, or even if in a few cases their circulation is increasing, the fact remains that the means of producing news is ever-more reliant on Internet blogs and other formats, including mobile phones. Also, the rising levels of literacy around the globe are creating more opportunities for citizen journalists.

Therefore, the journalism profession is becoming increasingly viable as a way to produce news, if not necessarily as a way to make a living. At the same time, since a large portion of the costs of producing newspapers consists of the paper, printing and physical distribution, journalism as a career could still be more economically viable at the level of Citizen Journalism.

Let us turn our attention now to what Citizen Journalism is. Here is one definition: it is when individuals and groups attempt to report to audiences

about current events and conditions. Such individuals are independent of mainstream media and will tend to address specialized audiences. There is also a wide ambit of Citizen Journalist activities – everything from talking about local music to local cuisine.

What is of great interest here is the act of producing information about the local, political and governmental, as well as environment and business, scenes. The focus is there – where citizen journalists assert their position to mainstream media and have a claim that they can produce more insights into issues of money, power, secrecy and potential abuse. Thus, it becomes important to think about what the social role of the media is. How are they able to justify their ability to be outlets of the news and use the special protections generally accorded journalists?

These are some of the benefits of Citizen Journalism. Specifically, it can increase democratic participation, social stability and the responsiveness of government to local needs. It can also harness the power of the Internet in some surprising and highly effective ways. And, as claimed by Allen and other observers, it allows the sort of two-way "dialogic interaction" between the media and the audience.

The New Media and ASEAN

Now I will take a quick glance at what the Citizen Journalism backdrop on environment is in ASEAN countries. At the end of 2007, data on the populations of and Internet penetration in ASEAN countries show that countries such as Cambodia and Laos have very low Internet penetration; countries such as the Philippines have moderate; and countries such as Malaysia have quite high Internet penetration. The mean Internet penetration for the world is 28.2% while in the U.S., it is 71.4 percent. When mobile communication is compared to Internet connectivity, a similar profile emerges where the Philippines, for example, is quite high, and Laos and Myanmar are quite low.

What about blogging worldwide? I do not have figures just yet for the ASEAN region itself but, as you can see, there are more than 70 million blogs currently in existence, and 120,000 blogs are created each day. There are even fake blogs with spam, or fake news or fake information, and about 17 posts take place every second on these blogs. Japanese, English and Chinese are among the leading languages used on blogs.

While I was not able to pinpoint the number of blogs, a report in May 2008 about the Philippines says that there are about 2.3 million bloggers. It also says

that Indonesia and Malaysia have the highest number of bloggers in the region, and are certainly among the leaders in the world.

I do not have comprehensive information about blogging and Citizen Journalism in the U.S.. But to provide a point of contrast with ASEAN countries, I will mention the U.S..

One of the interesting points here is online-news readership by age. The critical point is that reading news blogs is not a young person's activity exclusively—overall, there is a very low variation in reading by age. This has important implications if the trend is consistent in ASEAN – that it is not localized just to one age segment but rather runs through the entire spectrum of the nation's demography, including people over 55 years old.

However, this is not all political news reading. Less than one quarter of the U.S. population reads political blogs. Based on the figures for just one quarter of the readers, only one-third of them read one blog, and the other two-thirds read a few more than that.

As I said, these are figures from the U.S.. I do not want to dwell too much on them, but I think they yield an important reference point for ASEAN. One question, though, is how accurate these blogs are. Once again, I do not have a definitive answer but I can share some data, once again from the U.S., pertaining to how much the readers of these blogs feel that the blogs are accurate.

About 30% feel that the blogs are more accurate than the mainstream media, which is an interesting figure. It is interesting because one would think that professional journalists would provide a strong cachet of accuracy but clearly that is not the case. In one respect, this lack of confidence in professional journalism in the U.S. might be due to the partisan leanings of professional journalists.

Specifically, members of the news media tend to belong to the Democratic Party as opposed to the Republican Party. This perception is reflected in the demographics of the survey respondents. Readers of blogs who are members of the Republican Party find blogs to be more accurate than the mainstream media.

Once again, I am not sure how comparable the situation is in ASEAN countries. But what the data suggest is that people who are not supportive of the political viewpoints of the mainstream media find a great deal of value in the alternative sources. I think that is probably a pretty consistent trend.

'Intensity Cycles' in the New Media

How much Citizen Journalism, blogging and reporting are going on? It is worth noting that when there is a widely recognized crisis or outpouring of hot news,

people tend to gravitate to the blogs and to give authoritative views. This can also be seen in the "intensity cycles" of blog posting over time.

Now I would like to discuss a few blogs from ASEAN countries. These are really examples to illustrate the various roles that Citizen Journalists can play. Chi-Hui Lai, a graduate student at Rutgers, and I contacted bloggers from ASEAN countries and asked them about their activities and their understanding of the situation in their respective countries. In between these, we interlaced some recent news stories about Citizen Journalism and blogging.

A recent study by Universal McCann found that 45% of the readers of Internet users in Thailand had their own blogs. There is a regime of Internet censorship in Thailand. Criticism of the government and the blasphemy of the Royal Family and other seditious comments can result in a jail sentence of up to 15 years.

There was a conflict between YouTube, the popular video service, and the government, in which a cartoon of the King was displayed showing him as a clown. The Thai Government asked YouTube to take it down off the Internet, but YouTube refused. So, the Thai authorities blocked YouTube access for the entire nation.

In general, we decry censorship. Yet, the case also highlights a vital question: is one person's freedom of expression something that offends somebody else's deeply held moral values or institutions, and if so, whose right should prevail? Can one person's satire be someone else's hate-speech? Certainly, one of the enduring questions that ASEAN countries in particular are going to have to engage is to what degree people should be allowed to express their views freely, even if they offend or hurt the feelings of other people. The point is even more pertinent when it comes to forms of reporting or speaking that strike at core cultural values.

The quote below is from CJ Henkai, a Thai blogger who is seeking a censorship-free Thailand. He addresses the important topic of self-censorship. This is an important concept. Self-censorship can be far more effective than direct censorship since it requires no direct effort on the part of the government; the government does not need to censor everybody. Henkai writes:

> Self-censorship is a far more effective way to control freedom of speech than to have authorities do case-by-case censoring. It is cultural self-censorship which impacts all facets of Thai intellectual life....all Thais know what can be expressed and what cannot. Therefore, almost no news about human rights and freedom of expression issues are ever used by the Thai press. Bloggers as citizen journalists are more unrestrained in expressing their views and unfettered by "objectivity." This means that more culturally sensitive issues are reaching both Thais and foreigners.

The power then of Citizen Journalism, according to Henkai, is the ability to circumvent the ordinary press (which is censored), and to not have to worry about the appearance of objectivity. Citizen Journalism can, instead, express its own views.

In addition, Henkai, as a blogger, argues that, "Creating an alternative space, namely the blogging of Citizen Journalists, in essence, raises the bar. It puts the government under constant pressure to reduce the constraints it places on freedom of expression." In other words, by having this on-going set of outlets, what can be considered acceptable speech is expanded over time.

Even though, on one hand, we are talking about self-censorship, on the other hand, we can consider the problem on another level. That level is the mere ability to have an alternative sphere in which these issues can be discussed; that is, already developed when the time comes and restrictions are lifted.

Moreover, there is the possibility of incremental changes. Bit by bit, blogging and similar activities, enabled by a digital communication infrastructure, can indirectly encourage self-expression and allow the airing of alternative views. Moreover, these blogs can become a pipeline of information to the outside world, affecting both local and the larger political climate.

This may be seen in the case of East Timor which has had a troubled relationship with Indonesia. East Timor has very few indigenous blogs but those it does have can command a lot of interest from the outside world. This interest extends to bloggers in Indonesia, who have criticized the cultural homogenization that is taking place there, and who are also concerned about the changing of the agricultural base of that society.

This is yet another example of how Citizen Journalists often tend to be critical of governmental policies and can stimulate attacks upon policies. This includes helping call worldwide attention to otherwise obscure activities and problems.

Alternative Venues

Even though it is statistically possible to expect the full range of viewpoints to be expressed by Citizen Journalists and bloggers, you tend to find largely critical ones rather than supportive ones. I think that is understandable since bloggers are looking for alternative ways to express their viewpoints.

Regarding the Philippines, I have a little bit of hesitation talking too much about blogging in this country, given that the audience consists of many Filipinos who are deeply familiar with, and probably are themselves, blogging. But here is a case where political pressure is put on authorities in Hong Kong to investigate actions in defense of a Filipina who died in their custody.

In another case, this one from the Philippines itself, we have the case of a Filipino soldier, Antonio Trillanes. He led a rebellion but even though he was put in jail, he was able to get elected to the Senate. Trillanes attributes this electoral success to the fact that he was supported by bloggers, primarily, and was even able to run a blog from inside the prison.

In Cambodia, blogger Preetam Rai believes that, in essence, rather than provoking direct action, the blogger can stimulate a social network of interaction among bloggers which can, at a future time, be used to promote social action:

> In a place with a very young population like Cambodia, blogs and social tools have helped people mobilise support for their causes. Blog or internet based activism may not help them get the desired result at the moment but it does help in spreading messages and building a community.

As highlighted in this quote, and as I have already alluded, what is being created is an environment in which viewpoints can be expressed and exchanged. Except in extreme cases, there tends not to be a direct attack by the government on the channels of communication *per se* but rather on content transmitted by those channels.

Yet, once the communication structures are in place, the content can be changed most rapidly. After all, the scroll across the bottom of the television screen can just as easily show stock price quotes as it can religious or revolutionary slogans. This, perhaps, is a covert aspect of the communication revolution, one that authoritarian governments can ignore only at their own peril.

In the quote below, a Vietnamese blogger talks about the importance of self-censorship and chooses just to focus on everyday life and activities—viewpoints rather than politics—once again, out of self-censorship, such as in this example:

> I do, however, stay away from the most controversial topics out of self-preservation. Self-censorship becomes a way of life. My story ideas and quotes come from my everyday interactions in Hanoi and my travels.

Here is another. This is a blogger from Vietnam who also talks about the idea that they cannot talk directly about politics but can talk around politics and can talk about the cultural scene and, perhaps, have a more indirect voice or indirect set of viewpoints about the cultural scene. As I say, these are indirect implications for governmental control, as follows:

As far as I know, blogging has more of an influence in the government-sanctioned areas, such as culture and music. Rock music is a big example, and I'm preparing to write an article on it in my blog and for the SE global magazine. Rock has been a mostly underground movement because of negative connotations in the minds of the older generation and, I assume, the government.

The situation in Myanmar helps us realize just how difficult things are over there. Yet, in our investigation, we did hear from a blogger in Myanmar, Burma. She points out that such words as "sue" cannot be used in blogging or e-mail messages because that implies or suggests the existence of one of the regime's opponents, whose name can only cause trouble.

Moreover, she cannot use the number "88" because the strike for democracy appeared in 1988. Of course, in Chinese and other numerology, "8" is a very good number but they have to be careful not to use that number. Once again, this notion of self-censorship, not only just direct criticism but even indirect invocations of certain ideas, is important.

We can next point to an example of a blogger in Malaysia who has been put in jail because of concern over what he has written. In fact, this Malaysian blogger is also a senator. He has said that:

Sheer numbers have made the use of blogs most powerful in influencing the thinking of Malaysians, especially concerning politics. Usage of blog sites has the most effective coverage of information dissemination, given the large number of Internet users who surf the Web and blog sites everyday.

There was a study by the University of Malaya's Media Department that said that 70 % of the people who voted in the recent election were influenced by information on blog sites. So, here is a statement, not by a blogger per se but by a senator who believes that the blogs are having a big effect on Malaysia.

On the other side of the coin, a Malaysian blogger was arrested for sedition because he suggested that the deputy prime minister was involved in the killing of a young woman. Because of his assertion, that blogger is now looking at up to three years in jail.

Apparently, in Indonesia, there is a great deal of freedom of expression. In fact, the bloggers are in competition with the newspapers to reveal corruption and other governmental misdeeds. This is an intriguing twist from the usual model seen in highly controlled societies. It implies that bloggers are challenging

the mainstream media to uncover issues that force the mainstream media to get ahead in identifying public problems. This also relates to my earlier point on the question of laziness and support of the status quo by the mainstream media.

Finally, I would like to touch on the idea of expatriate bloggers—people who are concerned about the situation of their home country but have left the home country and, therefore, are no longer within the easy reach of authorities of that country. A blogger from Myanmar writes:

> (The) role of bloggers in Myanmar are (*sic*) in bad position. You can hear about a blogger, Nay Phome Latt who (was) detained and jailed on 29 January 08 by (the) *junta*. It is for the fact that Nay Phome Latt published some photos of Saffron Revolution in September 2008. Now, he is in Insein Jail.

This blogger from Myanmar has, by the way, been able to gather and collect information about the situation there in 2007. What he was able to find out he sent on to the Western media and these media sources are putting pressure on the authorities of that country following the most recent natural disaster there.

At this point, having taken just a few quick snapshots of the situation around the ASEAN region, I will try to pull together some hypothesized consequences of Citizen Journalism and political news blogging. One of these is that journalism is becoming less a public lecture of sorts to engage in a dialogue. The sources of information become more diverse in the process of news blogging and Citizen Journalism. Readers are invited to comment and get involved in adding to, or modifying, the story.

In further support of this idea, I will mention a content analysis done recently in the U.S., and its findings may also be reflective of ASEAN countries. The study shows that online journalists rely on a much larger number of sources for their articles than do the mainstream media. This is a little bit surprising considering the narrative of professionalism and authority that the mainstream media often produces for themselves.

The Greatest Impact

I mentioned that the agenda of coverage has become modestly broader for the mainstream media because they have felt the need to respond to competition from other sources. It is worth at this point considering the conditions under which Citizen Journalists will have the most impact. I can speculate that, under conditions of low-civil freedom of expression, the impact of the blogs will be

low; under conditions of moderate controls of freedom of expression, the blogs will have their greatest impact.

Under the high-end of "great," when there is unfettered freedom of expression, their impact will actually be relatively lower than under the semi-controlled circumstances. The reason that impact will be high in moderately liberal conditions is because the relative impact of blogs will be more salient when compared to the high-freedom of expression context.

It will be low in the low-civil liberty context because it will be so difficult to get the information out to others, and others, in turn, will be unable to mobilize themselves in light of the information. Of course, this assertion is quite speculative at this point.

There are a couple of implications for journalism's social roles that I proposed at the beginning. I think the first point deserves some more explication, and it is that there is a relationship between human psychology and explanations. All things being equal, if you give somebody only one plausible explanation for a phenomenon, they tend to have more confidence in that explanation, whether it is about biological processes, about religious processes, or about political processes. Yet, the confidence someone has in any given explanation is eroded the more that person is given additional possible explanations. The more explanations that are provided to people, the less confidence they have in any one of those explanations.

You can see that leaders throughout history have appreciated the validity of this aspect of cognitive processing, in that almost all regimes at all times do their best to not encourage multiple explanations for phenomena. They want to have one explanation and see that that one explanation is propagated. Those who guide society recognize that the confidence that people have in any one explanation is reduced when there are more than one.

Therefore, the perceived truth value of any particular doctrine or authority figure's assertion is invariably reduced when there are competing explanations. One of the implications of this is that the more Citizen Journalism there is, the less authority the leading outlets of the media will have.

There is an economic dimension to all this as well. The mainstream media will now have to cover more issues, and cover them in more depth. The rise of Citizen Journalism means that mainstream media will be under greater pressure in terms of allocating resources at the very time when, because they have competition, the amount of resources they have will be reduced.

In terms of a journalist's social role, a continual question is that of certifying who is a journalist. This is an issue that has had long currency in discussions even in the United Nations, UNESCO and elsewhere. The idea is that if we

certify journalists and make them live up to a certain set of standards, then we can be sure that their social roles are being effectively carried out.

A lot of people are afraid, however, that the certification process will instead lead to abuse and put a government in control of who gets to be a journalist. This, of course, would do much to chill and suppress Citizen Journalism.

Implications on Social Stability

As Citizen Journalism takes hold, the authority of centralized political leadership will be relied upon less and it will be more difficult for political systems to arrive at decisions. On the other hand, it could be – and I emphasize "could be" – that resulting decisions will have greater legitimacy for long-term implications in support of social stability.

As an over-arching implication, it seems clear that throughout history, greater connectivity among citizens means greater democracy. By having information resources at their disposal, people are able to exercise greater influence over their own destiny. And so, with the advent of the Internet and proliferation of mobile phones, there is more person-to-person contact than ever before. These sorts of contacts will allow people to gain new control over their situation, while helping make a more democratic world.

For me, the greatest question that remains is whether or not emerging advanced forms of technology, such as data-mining, monitoring of individuals, radio-frequency identification tags, and hosts of the other new tools, including sniffing out words like "88" or "sue" in messages, can be used to actually turn the whole system upside-down. With the tools of technology, a few people can gain control over the networks, snuffing out the kind of freedom we see growing.

I suppose that is really the question that we have to face going forward. Yet, I also I think the power of the people to monitor the leadership created by the technology will make that possibility more remote. The sheer number of outlets and techniques will severely complicate any attempt to exercise centralized control. But beyond the proliferating modalities of technology is the public awareness of the power of these systems and the potential that they can be abused. This awareness, as much as anything, will protect freedom.

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